

EDWARD LEE

THE
MINOTAURESS



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: Wendy Brewer, Dave Barnett, Bob Strauss, Matt Johnson, Dustin La Valley, Monica Kuebler, Mark Justice, Tom Moran, Monica O'Rourke, Erik Wilson, Jeff Funk, Minh, Nanci Kalanta, Terry Tidwell, Michael Pearce, and Paul Legerski.

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For Mike Anthony and Michael Kennedy.

Let's see you make THIS into a movie...

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The Minotaure

(A Novella)

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Prologue

The mansion looked haunted, and was even rumored to be, though in truth the things which prowled its narrow halls at night, and occasionally peeked out the dark, heavily draped windows, were all too corporeal. The only ghosts here lurked in the mythic obsessions of the mansion's elderly owner. Since the old gentleman had occupied the house some forty years not once had a guest stayed the night...even though, in a sense, he'd had many guests...if you chose to call them that.

The mansion loomed from a desolate hill surrounded by high but sickly trees and other vegetation which seemed jaundiced, even deformed, this due according to further rumors to countless marked and unmarked graves that pocked the proximal land. And to nod toward an elemental cliché, there was an Indian scourge here in 1642, where Governor William Berkley had ordered armed colonists to slaughter over a hundred Powhatans most of whom were women and children. These unfortunate natives were then buried unceremoniously in a trench beside a brook which ran less than fifty yards from where the mansion's foundation would one day be laid. Periodically, over the next two hundred years, this land was additionally chosen to be the convenient resting place for lynching victims and the worst of condemned criminals, and more interestingly, there was a small fenced graveyard to the east of the house which included the bodies of eleven young women hanged for witchcraft by remnant Puritans in 1689. This graveyard, of course, was officially unconsecrated and so, too, were all of the unmarked graves amid the property.

The old man liked unconsecrated graves.

In fact, that's why he'd bought the house.

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The mansion itself? Three stories but narrow, a tower with a garret at the north corner, great bow windows, parapets, a circular tympanum of stained glass above the front door's stone arch whose glittering mosaic depicted the face of Alexander Seton the only alchemist in history to successfully transmute lead into gold. Sloping dormer windows topped the mansion's twin wings, and behind these windows more obscurely notorious likenesses could be viewed: stone busts of Count Cagliostro, Dr. Edward Kelly, Emmanuel Swedenborg, and Gilles de Rais. Tin gutters lined the friezes which framed each story, and paired flues sprouted from several chimneys, like horns. Iron cresting rimmed the top garret, and sometimes, in the garret's oculus, candlelight could be seen.

The mansion, like the land it sat upon, was a cliché, but then so was the old man who owned it. He craved seclusion and antiquities, black moonlit nights, and the paneled rooms within full of the most forbidden books.

The old man believed in those books, because he knew that the only true force in existence was faith.

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"Oh, dear," the old man muttered when he saw that the pallid naked girl had shat herself. It happened on occasion; at least half of the girls were heroin addicts. Morphine derivatives routinely caused constipation, but when the owners of said clogged intestines were terrorized enough, it would all come out at once.

The rich smell rose up in the room, like fog. The old man gagged.

Oh, God! He rushed to the door and called up the stairs: "Waldo! Come down here, quickly, please!"

I'm a scholar and a celebrated antiquary, he reminded himself. My station in life exists on too high a level to clean up...accidents such as this.

The old man looked genteel, like a retired professor or perhaps the owner of a high-end clothier's. Bald on top but neatly thick gray hair below the pate, a long but trimmed goatee, a Lord & Taylor white dress shirt and smart black slacks. Seventy years old but with eyes keen and bright as a

teenager's bright in their hunger for knowledge and their passion for life, and the things he was certain that awaited him after life.

He was working in the basement just now, though he referred to it as the temple, for in a manner of speaking it was indeed, a place of revered travail and worship. Facsimiles of Doric columns were present, and six arched doorways lined three of the brick walls; they'd been monumentally difficult to install, given the specifications. Each door showed stains of old brown blood and housed a single, pointed iron spike.

Several books lay opened on various reading-tables, the one he perused now being Tephramancy, by Christoff Deniere, Glastonbury Abbey Press, 1539. For those unaware, tephramancy was an occult science which involved the use of the ashes of burned human body parts as an activating ingredient of particularized metaphysical rituals.

Footfalls clunked down the stairs, the door squeaked open. Waldo Parkins had to duck to enter the basement er, the temple. He could've been a college senior linebacker...that is if he could raise his IQ enough to even get into college. The old man thought of still more cliches when he'd first engaged Waldo's services as manservant. It would've been better had he been named Igor...

He'd hired Waldo less than a year ago from local stock for youth brought the physical strength that the old man had lost. Digging graves and hefting bodies was harder than it appeared, and besides, all great warlocks had apprentices. Where would John Dee have been without Edward Kelly? the old man considered. Indeed, Waldo's 6'4" frame and accommodating musculature fit the bill just fine, that and the ever-crucial weak-mind. See, the weak-minded were much easier to control yet another cliché. Every thirteen days, the old man revitalized Waldo's Subservience Charm, whose ingredients and procedure he'd obtained while Slate-Writing one Candlemas Eve in a successful attempt to achieve otherworldly discourse with a long-dead French witch named Marguerite Lamy. Ms. Lamy had been burned at the stake in 1534 for casting spells upon the more comely nuns of the Convent of St. Brigitta and inducing them to consort with incubi.

"What'cha need, sir?" Waldo beamed. "I was upstairs packin' yer bags like ya tolt me." The boy paused, sniffed. "Whew! I smell Number Two..."

The old man winced when he noticed more feces oozing from the unconscious girl's buttocks. By now, so much had escaped her bowels that it looked like a long brown tail. "I'm terribly sorry, Waldo," the old man fidgeted, "but as you can see, our friend here has...had an accident, and I'm afraid I just don't have it in me to..."

Waldo smacked a grin. "Don't wanna clean up her shit, huh, sir?"

"Precisely. So if you don't mind..."

Waldo didn't mind at all, proof of the Subservience Charm's potency. He leaned over and scooped up the excreta in his bare hands, with no more concern than if he were scooping up popcorn. "What'cha want me to do with it, sir?"

Good Lord... The old man opened the iron hatch on the back wall. "In the crematory, if you please."

Waldo flapped the excrement into the fiery hatch, and continued doing so until it was all up. The old man fervently sprayed a can of Renuz-It Apple Cinnamon Home Fragrance around. Waldo whistled "Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses," then, as he happily mopped up the smears on the floor.

"Now I'd like you to wash her, please," the old man directed. "These girls are just so foul."

"Yer wish is my command, sir," Waldo chuckled. The old man shook his head.

Metal links clinked; Waldo yanked on the pulleyed chain and watched the morbidly naked girl rise in the air, her wrists being cuffed to one end of the chain. Beneath her dirty bare feet the broad-shouldered manservant slipped a washtub. Then he cranked on the faucet, hosed her down, soaped up a car sponge, and began to suds her off.

Gad, thought the old man. The girl was appalling, pudgy flesh the hue of vanilla ice cream, cellulite-dimpled, and peppered by needlemarks and scabs from abscesses. Her buttocks could've been two twenty-pound sacks of flour pushed together, her pubis a great swatch of dull brown hair that had begun to grow traceably down the insides of her thighs and trailed up to her navel. A preposterous tattoo across her belly read LOVE DEPOSIT in large cursive letters.

Waldo seemed rapt whilst thoroughly sudsing the caramel smears out of her rump's cleft. Fat, expansive breasts hung unevenly, and one nipple was as big around as a coffee cup's rim, the other but a small puckered oval. The navel looked like a deep finger-hole in raw dough.

The old man busied himself by arranging the retractors and saw, and securing the proper crucible. He'd already done this once before but he did it again nonetheless, to distract him from the vision of the unwholesome human hulk hanging from the chain. Next, from an armoire, he inspected the glittering surplice which he would wear during the rite: a simple black-dyed cotton smock stitched with sundry gemstones. The stones were worthless to a jeweler, but to a sorcerer?

They were more valuable than a bucket full of Faberge eggs.

The power of faith, the old man mused.

Content, he turned

"For goodness sake, Waldo!"

Waldo was kneeling now, performing fastidious cunnilingus on the suspended girl. The majora looked like a slice of baloney the "cotto" kind folded in half. At the old man's objection, Waldo glanced guiltily over his shoulder.

"What on earth are you doing?"

Waldo's brows rose. "Well, sir, I'se eatin' me some hair pie. It's a right fun, it is." Waldo's eyes widened in concern. "Ya wanna take a lick, sir? Bet it's been a whiles since ya et a splittail's gash, huh?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" the old man repeated, appalled. "Waldo, she's a prostitute! Do you have any idea how many filthy, immoral men have ejaculated in her orifice?"

"Orif Oh, you mean her joy-hole? Well, I guess quite a number but...so what?" His grin flashed back. "Say, sir, can I fuck her in the graveyard and bleed her some, like ya let me do with that last gal?"

"No, no, that was an oblatory rite, this is for a materialization...", but now the old man was getting a headache, and it was with further distaste that he noticed what Waldo had been doing while his tongue had ranged the abominable folds. His trousers were open, his hand wrapped around his penis which, like the rest of him, was overly large. This was one unfortunate side-effect of the Subservience Spell: accelerated libidiny.

"Please, Waldo, try to focus on your task. Don't succumb to diversions of the flesh."

Waldo's broad shoulders slumped. "Sorry, sir..." He stood up and forced the unsated erection back into his trousers. But suddenly a confusion lit in his eyes. "Sir? What'cha need the splittail fer if you're goin' on yer trip in the mornin'?"

"That's the surprise, Waldo."

"Surprise?"

"Yes. Now that you're done washing our sacrifiant, you can go back upstairs and finish packing my bags, and when you're done with that, you can pack your own. You see, Waldo, I've decided to take you to Toledo with me."

Waldo's face brightened in delight. "Aw, shucks, sir! I'se always wanted to go to Ohio!"

The old man groaned. "Spain, Waldo. Toledo, Spain. There's a broker of sensitive collectibles there, and I see him every year at this time. You've worked hard during your time under my employ, so I thought you'd enjoy a trip overseas."

"Shee-it-yeah, sir!" Waldo rejoiced. The boy's twenty-six years of redneck oblivion had never taken him across the Russell County line. "You're a super-cool boss, I'll tell ya!"

"Actually, Waldo, I'm morose, narcissistic, and boring, but thank you for the compliment." In truth, though, it was not any impression of reward that urged him to take Waldo along. This particular excursion would require him to venture into some of the cryptic city's back alleys which more and more were being overrun by a ruffian element. This year his broker had procured for him a blasphemous 15th Century codex supposedly owned by one of Vlad Tepes' concubines Canessa a prostitute and sorceress who had, at Vlad's order, infiltrated a Wallachian monastery and cast, among other things, a Bloodlusting Hex on all of its monks. The hex had proved a whopping success, turning the monastery's contingent of faithful friars into Satan-worshiping madmen who wound up draining the blood of several dozen local children before a tribunal from the Holy See had condemned them and ordered the monastery razed. The codex was a book of intercessions said to conjure a demon named Baalzephon. The old man would also be visiting another dealer his ossifist of choice to purchase the pelvic bone of one Saint Radegunde, whose tomb in Poitiers, France, had been plundered by professional grave-robbers-for-hire. The bones of saints, especially those known to have displayed stigmata, were of great value to occultists; when powdered or tinctured they could be used very effectively in smoke-divinations and automatic-writing trances.

"Run along now, Waldo, and when you're done with the packing you'd best get to sleep. It's a long drive to the airport in the morning."

"Hot dog, sir! You kin count on me!" And then he turned for the stairs. "I'se going ta Spain...!"

But before the young dope could fully exit the room, something sparked in his feeble brain. "Er, wait, sir. If I'se goin' with ya on yer trip...who's gonna keep an eye on the house and all yer val-
yer-bulls?"

"That's a good question, Waldo, and very astute of you." The old man's hand bid, first, the hanging girl and, second, the implements on the table.

"Ooooooh. I git it..."

"Um-hmm. And thank you for cleaning up the excreta."

Waldo's jaw dropped. "The what?"

"Just go finish packing."

Waldo tramped back up the steps, hooting more exuberance.

Sniffing apple-cinnamon now, the old man upped the crematory temperature and donned a plastic apron and gloves. That's when the dowdy drug addict regained consciousness. Her sty-flecked eyes fluttered, then shot open to show dulled whites. Dazedly she looked at the old man, then looked around to see herself suspended from the chain. She looked back at the old man and shrieked.

The old man winced. He deplored loud, sudden noises. "Please, miss. You won't benefit at all by that."

"You old fuck!" she protested. "You skinny piece of old shit!"

These protestations did not carry the typical southern accent the old man was used to; instead, it sounded more like Jersey or the Bronx. "Flattery will get you nowhere," he quipped.

"You tricked me! You were supposed to be a twenty-dollar trick! You-you-you..." The dull eyes blinked in the pudgy face. "You knocked me out!"

"I congratulate you on your perceptivity."

She wriggled uselessly on the chain, which only caused her to sway back and forth, pendulum-like. A pendulum of ungainly human flesh with a LOVE DEPOSIT tattoo on a belly busted out with stretchmarks from untold trick babies. "You spinach-chin motherfucker! I knew I shouldn't have gotten in the car with you! You look like my motherfucking grandfather, you dick-suck ass-lick psycho shit-suck ass-bag piss-slit ASS-motherfucking-HOLE!"

"You speak with the eloquence of queens, my dear."

"And-and...you fucked me already, didn't you, you gray-haired bald shit! My pussy doesn't feel right! You fucked me while I was knocked out, didn't you, you sick cock?"

The old man couldn't resist. "Young lady, I'd sooner admit my penis into the drain-hole of a ghetto dumpster than admit it into that horrific morass you call your vagina."

She paused in an attempt to comprehend his words, then gave up. "Just let me go, you shit-dick!"

The old man chuckled. "I would estimate that such an event presents a very low order of probability."

Her pasty bulk kept swinging. "Where're my clothes!"

The old man's fine leather shoes tapped across the room's cement floor. He opened the hatch of the Ener-Tek IV crematory, showing the rows of white-hot liquid-propane nozzles kicking out 2,200 degrees.

"Regrettably, your attire was consigned to the flames...along with what I would approximate to be your last dozen or so meals."

The girl shrieked again, so shrilly this time that the cords stood out in the old man's neck.

"Oh my God you crazy sick piece of shit! You're going to burn me alive!"

"Please, miss. I can't implore you more deeply. Be quiet. And, no offense intended" the old man shook his head ruefully "but your accent is killing me. And don't despair. I've no intention whatever of burning you alive," and then he closed the hatch.

Her terror dropped down a notch, her flip-flopping on the chain retarding. She blinked repeatedly, cogs turning in the spoiled brain. "Look, look lemme think. Er, look, mister, I'm sorry I called you bad names "

"Bad names?" The old man couldn't help but be amused. "That's putting it a bit mildly, I'd say. Your language could stop the Devil in his tracks "

"Look, look, listen..." For the first time, her eyes appeared half-enlivened. "I'll do anything you want, no shit. You ask any of those guys at the truck stop and they'll tell you I suck better cock than any girl working. I'll give you the best nut of your life just let me go."

"Please..."

"You wanna piss on me, shit on me?"

"I should think not."

"Oh, I get it, you're one of those guys. You want me to shit on you "

The old man grimly recalled the sheer volume of the feces that was now reduced to ash. "Trust me, miss, even if I did desire to be so debased, I'm sure you're not up to it at the moment."

"All right, all right," she hurried, desperately assessing possibilities. "I'll tongue your asshole and suck your balls at the same time how about that? Or hey! I'll put my big toe up your ass and sit on your dick. Think about it, mister. I can really do that."

The old man groaned. "Really, miss, I've no interest in your debauched delights, I assure you. Your being abducted by me and my associate is an example of ill-fortune, I'm afraid, but such are the pitfalls of your profession, hmm? There's a fair share of disturbed people out there, and, plying this trade of yours, you could fall victim to any one of them: psychopaths, rapists, the sexually monomaniac, the mentally ill. But at least you didn't fall into the clutches of one of them. Instead, consider yourself privileged. You've fallen into the clutches of an eccentric antiquary who also happens to be a sorcerer of some authority."

She squirmed more on the chain now, but then stalled. "Sorcerer? You're into, like, satanic shit, devil worship and all that?"

The old man's bushy gray brow rose. "Indeed."

"Well that's great because I've got five kids back at the projects. Shit, man I'll give 'em to you if you let me go. I mean, you satanic guys sacrifice kids all the time, right? And, shit, one of the little fuckers is only a month old. You can drink his blood. That's what you guys do, isn't it? Drink baby's blood and use it for rituals and shit?"

Oh, such a sad refrain... The old man pushed the girl toward the second of the six arched doorways. This was possible because the chain's ratcheted pulley was fixed to an overhead track which branched off to each door.

"What are you doing, you fuckwad!"

"Your time has almost been expended, my dear," he told her in a kindly voice. "I'd advise you to spend these last moments in prayer, because one thing I can tell you beyond all doubt is that in the course of my studies I've verified that there is indeed a God in Heaven and a Devil in Hell, not that I suspect any amount of repentance on your part could save you from meeting the latter..."

"You cock-lick dingleberry-eating piece of fuck!"

The old man re-opened the crematory's hatch.

"I knew it! A lying old shit-heap motherfucker!" she railed. "You said you weren't gonna burn me!"

As aforementioned, the wooden door in each archway had been fitted with a sharpened iron spike. The old man, next, grimaced when he placed both hands against the girl's flaccid breasts and pushed.

She tensed, then convulsed, gargling blood when the spike exited the hollow of her throat. The pale belly sucked in and out in horror, causing the atrocious LOVE DEPOSIT tattoo to sort of undulate. Her last words, though barely intelligible due to the puncture, were as thus:

"I never should've left Atlantic City..."

The retractors were out and ready; there was only the minor problem of separating the sternum from top to bottom. For this he used a simple branch-cutter. The sickle-like blades first cut up into the outer solar plexus, then eight or ten strokes on the tool clipped a reasonably straight line right up the sternum. The task never required as much strength as one would surmise, but that grisly clipping sound never failed to unnerve him.

The girl continued to tremor on the spike, blood seeping out nicely. She was still in a sense alive, and perhaps she even heard the old man when he said, "Have no fear, young lady. I'm not going to burn all of you, just your noxious heart," and then he applied the cardiac retractors and began to crank her rib cage open.

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ONE:

ADVENTS

ONE MONTH AGO

(I)

It was a fine summer day when twenty-year-old Richard "Dicky" Caudill dragged two large plastic bags across Main Street, as he did every day, into Pip Brothers Laundromat. This was July 24th, 1991, six full years before Dicky would meet his death by having his spinal column torn out of his rectal cavity at a place called Wroxeter Abbey. The official cause of death filed by the Russell County Sheriff's Department would be "Death by traumatic mutilation via an unknown mode," but there were plenty of folks who knew full well that he was actually killed by a legendary monster called The Bighead, but that was another story. This would occur in the

future, of course, as Dicky was alive and well just now, and what he had in the preposterously depressed town of Luntville was something many didn't: a job. Hence, the large plastic bags he was dragging into the laundromat. Dicky was fat, with a buzzcut, a symptomatic dopey redneck. The Caudill family went back a ways; in fact, his great, great, great grandfather was a Confederate general in the Civil War who had supposedly sold his soul to a demon named Anarazel, and who then allied himself with an industrialist named Harwood Gast...but that was another story as well. He also had another blood relative named Thibald Caudill: yet another story.

Dicky's T-shirt showed a flowing American flag and the words TRY BURNING THIS FLAG, FUCKER! but in truth he wasn't much of a patriot. A number of Luntville's young men had joined the Army and some of them had gotten maimed or killed in some place called Bosnia and right now there was this other war going on in one of those nutty sandbox countries called Iraq and the news was dubbing it Desert Storm. There was no way Dicky was going to go get his fat ass shot up in some place like that just for a paycheck and benefits. Besides, he already had a job.

And, to say it for the third time now, in a terribly undisciplined narration, he was dragging those two big plastic bags the first two of many into the laundry when he stopped at the door at the sound of footsteps. He looked up and saw a wiry fella with long hair, black goatee, and jeans coming down the sidewalk. The snapping footsteps came from a pair of beaten rawhide boots. The fella was wearing a John Deere hat, and he was eating what appeared to be chicken nuggets from a Wendy's bag.

Dicky blinked. Is that... "Balls?" he called out. "Tritt Balls Conner?"

The wiry fella stopped and stared, then his unpleasant face turned up in a sneering smile. "Dicky Caudill! Well shee-it my drawers!"

"I ain't seen you in, shee-it, two years I'll'se bet."

"That's 'cos I just got done doin' two years, in the county slam."

"Shee-it. What fer?"

Balls ate a few more nuggets. "Cop was hasslin' me one night, so's I'se beat his ass fierce, I did," Balls bragged, but actually this was a bold-faced lie. He'd received the two-year sentence for stealing a woman's purse in a Giant food store parking lot, but before he'd run off with the purse he'd felt up the woman's ten-year-old daughter. "Got out two days ago."

"Where's ya livin'?"

"My Daddy's house in Cotswold." Balls eyed a redneck woman probably in her forties walking into a pawn shop two storefronts down. He rubbed his crotch, thinking it might be fun to fuck up her hair with his sperm. "He died whiles I was in stir, some disease I never heard of called hepatitis," but he pronounced the word as "heppa-tat-iss."

"Dang, Balls. I'se sorry ta hear it."

"Fuck," Balls gruffed. "I'se glad the fucker's dead. All he ever done was beat my ass and lock me in closets whiles he was fuckin' a bunch'a whores. I done inherited the house'n all the shit in it, not that it were much."

It needs to be mentioned now that Balls and Dicky had been friends in their early teens, both having attended Clintwood Middle School, and they both would've gone to the same high school had they not dropped out in the seventh grade. The two went back a ways in a history of petty crime, willful auto-sexual malfeasance, and entry-level redneck hooliganism.

"So's what'cha doin' now?" Dicky asked.

Balls stood hands on hips. When a young pregnant woman rolled a baby carriage by across the street, he spat. The woman was Hispanic, and he thought it might be nice to cornhole her on her hands and knees and then pull out just in time to send his load into the carriage. That would serve the bitch right for violating immigration laws.

"Fuckin' pepper-belly immer-grints," he complained. "Their men take all our jobs fer cheaper, then all's they do is keep their women knocked up shittin' out them little spic babies'n goin' on welfare. Ain't right."

"No, it ain't."

Balls continued to eye the young woman. "Like ta squeeze the milk outa them fat tits, I would." He slapped Dicky on the back and laughed. "Bet it tastes like tacos!"

Dicky laughed out loud. "Bet it does, Balls! Bet it does!"

"But you ask me what I'se doin', I'se beatin' the street lookin' fer a job."

"Dang, man. Ain't much in the way'a work here these days. Most places're closed up, â€œcept the Wendy's."

"I know me that," Balls snapped and pointed at the pregnant Hispanic. "'Cos of them. Hard-workin' American fellas cain't git no work 'cos they take all the jobs."

"Most of the gals work in the sewin' shops, and the fellas work in the meat-packers," Dicky informed.

Balls pointed down to the corner, to the Wendy's. "Even that place is full up with 'em. I've asked fer a appler-kay-shun, but the spic manager jabbered somethin' at me shakin' his head."

"Ain't right, man, just plum ain't."

"What about that Jiffy Lube? It still here?"

"Yeah, but it's closed, and I heard the drug store don't hire ex-cons. But, ya know, Pappy Halm still owns that Qwik-Mart next to the Greyhound stop. Maybe he's'll give ya a job."

Balls frowned. "That old dog turd? No way. He caught me shopliftin' Neccos when I was a little kid, so's he told my Daddy and, a'course, my Daddy beat the shit outa me'n stuck a lit cigarette in my bag. So's then I went to Pappy Halm's house that night and shit on his car, and ya know what?"

"What?"

"He caught me doin' that, too. Called the poe-leece fer that one. My Daddy had to pay a fine on account I was a minor'n then he beat the shit out'a me again and sat my bare ass down on top'a the wood stove to teach me a lesson."

"Gawd dang!"

"Anyways, I need me a job to tide me over fer a month so's I kin eat, but after that I'll be just fine."

Dicky scratched his head. "What's happenin' in a month?"

Balls smiled again, the smile like a sneer. He lowered his voice. "I gots me a big score."

Dicky's jowls drooped. "A score as in a heist?"

"Sort of."

"Dang, Balls. You just got done gittin' outa the joint. Whys do somethin' that could git'cha right back in?"

"It's a shore thing, Dicky, but I gots to make me some kind'a money till then." He looked more intently at Dicky. "You got a job?"

"Dang straight," Dicky was proud to state. "I'se a...maintenance man."

"Maintenance? What kind?" but Balls pronounced the word as "kand."

Suddenly, Dicky was less enthused to talk about his position of employment. He kicked one of the plastic bags. "I do laundry'n stuff, cleanin'-up work."

"Yeah? Fer who?"

"Just a...a place across the street."

Balls looked across the street. He saw a liquor store, a thrift shop with a CLOSED sign, an ice-cream parlor with a CLOSED SIGN, another place whose sign read simply RELAX AT JUNES, and a shoe store with a CLOSED sign.

"Laundry, you say?" Balls questioned, confused. "Where â€™cross the street needs laundry done?"

Dicky shuffled his feet. "Aw, just a place, but the pay ain't bad five bucks'n hour under the table."

Balls raised a brow. "Righteous," but then he squinted across the street again. "So's...where do you work?"

"The place that says Relax At Junes," Dicky finally admitted, trying not to blush. "Ain't nothin' I brag about much. See, it's really a massage parlor. Ya pay twenty bucks fer a massage, then if ya tip the gal another twenty, she jerks ya off."

Balls shook his head. "Hail, a buck's a buck, I guess, but..." Balls squinted at the laundry bags. "Dicky, I still don't git the laundry part. Laundry? From a jack shack?"

Dicky opened one of the plastic bags, and out wafted a rich, stifling yet readily familiar scent that was turning into a stench.

"Ho-boy!" Balls exclaimed. He stepped back, fanning his hand before his face.

The bag was stuffed to bursting with white wash cloths. Dicky continued, "See, after the fella blows his load, the gal wipes it up with one'a these rags..."

Balls scratched his head, befuddled. "Hail, Dicky, I'se smelt cum before, shore, but I'll be damned

if I don't smell some shit in there too."

Dicky smirked. "Yeah, well, see, Balls, if ya tip the gal an extra twenty, she'll stick her finger up yer ass whiles she's jerkin' ya."

"Yer shittin' me," Balls replied. "Them gals workin' there...they ever lay any of that finger-action on you?"

"Fuck no!" Dicky assured his pal. "I don't want nothin' goin' up my asshole! I ain't no queer," and with that, Dicky stuffed the rags back down into the bag with a bare hand then twirled the bag closed again.

"Dicky, you just put'cher hand in a bag chock full'a cum-rags," Balls pointed out.

"Aw, shee-it, I ain't grossed out by touchin' 'em none. My Uncle Wally always said a little nut never hurt no one."

Balls reflected on the information. "Why would yer uncle tell ya that?"

Dicky faltered. "Oh, uh, no reason. Just somethin' he said once," he quickly excused.

Now Balls chuckled a bit. "So that's yer job, huh? Warshin' cum-rags from a jack shack?"

"Well, uh...yeah..."

Balls slapped Dicky on the back again. "Great job, Dicky-Boy!"

"Shee-it." Embarrassment drew tight lines in Dicky's corpulent face. "I knows it's a dumb-ass job, Balls, but, see, it's only temporary. You remember Randy Turcot?"

Balls sat down on a bench and struck a Thinker pose. "I know I've heard the name oh, yeah! That lowdown scumbag used to drive that shiny black El Camino 'round'n was always pickin' up the few decent-lookin' chicks in town. Anytime I'd git somethin' goin' with a splittail, he'd come along in that hot rod of his and next thing I knowed, the girl's ass was in the seat next to him. Always hated that cracker. He'n his brother used ta jack deer on my Daddy's land, and I've swear one time he sugared one'a our tractors. I hadda mind ta kill him, I did..."

Dicky snickered. "Well, some player beat'cha to it 'cos about a year ago he went ta Pulaski to buy dope'n the dealer pig-stuck him in some alley and took his green. Bled out right then'n there."

Balls' eyes beamed, and he hooted. "Well ain't that just grand! Dicky, that's the best news I heard

in years!"

Dicky nodded, continuing, "And that shiny black El Camino of his? I bought it off his daddy 'bout six months ago, and been fixin' it up somethin' fierce."

Balls looked astonished. "Shee-it, Dicky, that was the fastest car in the county's what I always heard."

"You heard right, but, see, it throwed a rod â€˜fore Turcot got shivved and that fucked the engine'n trannie all up. I done rebuilt the engine with what I make at the jack shack, but the trannie's blowed. Gotta get a new one and, see, I cain't just use any ole trannie, it gots ta be a M-22 Rock Crusher, and that's twelve hunnert bucks. But once I got the bread, I'll be droppin' that trannie in myself'n then I'll be drivin' the fastest car in the county, and that's when I kin git me a real job."

"What the fuck's a fast car got to do with a real job?"

Dicky sat down on the bench, whispering giddily. "Runnin' â€˜shine, man. Runnin' â€˜shine. Snot McKully'n Clyde Nale got more stills in these parts than anyone, and they'se always hirin' fellas with fast cars to run the hooch â€˜cross the state line to all them dry counties in Kentucky. They won't hire ya if ya ain't got the wheels, though, 'cos, see, you gotta have a rod that'll outrun the ATF boys and the state pursuit cars. But with my 427 â€˜Mino and a Rock Crusher? I'll blow the doors off anything on the road."

Balls nodded, eating a few more chicken nuggets. "I don't doubt it would, Dicky."

"And McKully's runners make a hunnert cash a day and that's only drivin' one run."

Balls was thinking again... "And with a partner helpin' ya out you could make two runs a day, and split it with yer partner..."

Dicky's expression soured. He could smell shit just as well as anyone. "Just 'cos we growed up together'n all that don't mean nothin'. You want me to cut you into my deal? You gots ta bring something to the table, brother."

Balls put his arm around Dicky. "Way I see it, Dicky-Boy, is you need somethin' a \$1200 transmission and I need somethin' a job fer a month "

"Why just a month?"

"I tolt ya," Balls reasserted. "In about a month, I got this score a big score but I don't wanna eat

garbage till then."

Dicky hemmed and hawed. "Well, dang, Balls, I don't want to see ya starve but I ain't gonna be able to run no moonshine fer six, eight months at least. Workin' this job?" Dicky pointed to the bloated plastic bags. "That's how long it'll take me to git up them twelve hunnert bucks."

Balls had a very characteristic grin: like a weasel's face morphed into the face of guy who sells "Rolexes" from the inside of a raincoat. "Just you listen, friend. I'se walkin' back to my Daddy's place now but you be sure ta meet me at the Crossroads at midnight tonight, ya hear?"

Dicky looked confused. Had Balls given up working him for a cut of his future moonshine-running job? "The Crossroads? What fer?"

"Fer a coupla beers" Balls winked "and fer you ta pick up the twelve hunnert bucks I'm gonna give you ta git that new trannie," and then Balls' boot heels snapped down the pavement as he headed for the side road out of town. He was tossing chicken nuggets from the Wendy's bag into the air and catching them in his mouth as he proceeded.

Well ain't that some shit? Dicky thought. Then he sighed and dragged the big plastic bags into the laundry...

(II)

Now I know how Roquentin felt in Sartre's NAUSEA, the Writer thought. The Greyhound rattled as it soared scarily around the backwoods bends. He'd gotten the seat in the very back it was his karma which even the bums didn't want. Used condoms had been stuffed in the window crack, while on the floor lay several used hypodermics.

The Writer had vast experiences on Greyhounds; he needed to travel, to follow the call of his Muse, and this was the cheapest way. Besides, he needed to see. He fancied himself as a seer, and, hence, a seeker.

And what was he seeking?

The verities of the human condition.

It was a very real world and often a beautiful one on the other side of those panoramic windows complete with the plaque that read PULL RED HANDLE UP TO ESCAPE.

The bus stank. That was the only part he could never get used to. It was the smell of life, yes, and in a sense the smell of truth indeed, of verity! which was what the Writer craved beyond all else.

Most people had personal mottos, like: Another Day, Another Dollar, or Today is the First Day of the Rest of My Life, or Every Day I'm Getting Better and Better in Every Way. But the Writer's motto was this:

How Powerful is the Power of Truth?

Not a motto as much as a universal query. It was the fuel for his existence...or the excuse.

The truth of what I write can only exist in its stark, denuded words, he recited to himself. Black ink on white paper...and the million subjectivities in between...

It was all he lived for as an artist, and most would credit him with having a noble goal.

Nevertheless, the bus stank. They all did, of course, but this was the worst. It was a smell he'd tried many times to delineate with words, and the best he could come up with was this: unwashed hair-oil mixed with unwashed armpit mixed with unwashed prostitute's vagina mixed with something vaguely sweet.

It was that sweetness he could never isolate and identify. Candied papaya chunks? Figs? Crystalized ginger?

It was something like that but like wasn't good enough. Not being able to define the smell was one of the Writer's innumerable failures, and though he viewed failure as something more important in his field than success, it was a particular failure that would always infuriate him.

He joggled in the seat as the bus rocked on. A woman of indeterminate race sat next to him, and she must've weighed three hundred pounds. The side of her arm pressing against his possessed the same girth as the Writer's leg. Every seat on the bus was full naturally. Off and on, he tried to read, either Visual Thinking by Rudolf Arnheim, or The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H. by George Steiner, but whenever he opened either book, the woman as if prodded by a Pavlovian trigger pulled out her one-pound bag of pistachios and started eating, quite noisily. Between the eating sounds, the overall not-quite-definable stink, and an encroaching claustrophobia that made him feel like a Girondin Royalist stuffed behind an oubliette during Robespierre's Reign of Terror, the Writer was at his wits' end. He looked at his watch, a Timex Indiglo, and saw that it was 6 p.m.

God knew when they'd be in Lexington.

On the plastic seatback in front of him, someone had magic marked: THE PERFECT MATCH: YOUR WIFE, MY KNIFE, and in worse script just below it: GANG BANG ALL WIMMIN TO DETH AND KILL ALL WHITE PEEPLE, NIGGERS, JEWS, MUZLUMS, INDIUNS AND

SPIKS!

Curious, the Writer thought. At least the Asian-Americans can rest easy...

The massive woman next to him had stopped eating and fallen asleep, her maw agape below the sagging face. The Writer couldn't resist; he extracted his Sharpie and applied a graffito of his own: NATURE, THOUGH AN APPEARANCE, IS NOT MERELY THE IMMANENT MIND'S ISSUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS BUT A MANIFESTATION IN ITS OWN RIGHT OF A SUB-TOPICAL SPIRITUAL REALITY.

There, the Writer thought.

Just then the threat of a potential symbology pressed to his face like a clammy hand. My watch! the thought, unbidden, occurred to him.

But why would he think that?

He looked again at his Timex Indiglo. On the back it read "8-Year Battery," and he knew he'd bought it eight years ago. Hmm, he thought.

What could that mean?

Time's up, he guessed.

Like when the narrator of that Bergman flick says "At midnight...the wolf howls." Did it mean something pontifical? A deep-seated literary allusion that was clear only to the most astute?

Or was it just pretentious poop?

The intercom crackled, then the driver's voice boomed, "Next stop, Luntville."

The Writer had never heard of the place, and was glad of that when he looked out the window. It reminded him of that show he'd seen on cable about an Appalachian family: rusted trailers, dilapidated houses that were visibly leaning, cars up on blocks. Many houses had CONDEMNED signs on their front doors while obviously still occupied. The road wound through wild woods with vast breaks of scrubby farmland pocked by tractors scarlet with rust. When they passed another ramshackle house, the Writer noticed an entire family sitting vacant-faced on the bowing front porch: an older man in overalls sipping clear liquid from a jar, an obese woman with a masculine face pulling leaves from a bag of Red Man, a teen daughter in cutoffs and stained white bra smoking something from a glass pipe, and a dirty tot sitting naked on the bare wood, shuddering as if from Parkinson's.

White Trash Gothic, the Writer mused.

Eventually the road drained into what was apparently the main drag of a township, this Luntville. Closed storefronts lined either side. The driver swore in some kind of an accent when the street's only stoplight turned red; the bus squealed to a halt like a train slamming its brakes.

No vehicles were seen in the perpendicular lane.

Then the thought sparked, a delicious aesthetic fire in the Writer's head. WHITE TRASH GOTHIC! Suddenly he wanted to cry out in joy.

That's my next book!

Hence, on the Greyhound bus, no less, his next creative calling had struck, a veritable lightning bolt of the truth that was his aesthetic blood. He'd left Ipswich on this self-same bus three days ago and prayed he'd leave his writer's-block as well. But a new book idea had never occurred to him.

Until now.

Oh my God... It will be my most genuine novel... I'll win the National Book Award!

In a split-second, then, like a death-flash, the entire novel appeared before his mind's eye...

Moments later the bus roared into the front of a convenience store. A tiny sign on a streetlamp read GREYHOUND DEPOT: LUNTVILLE.

One old man with a beard and white hair hobbled down the aisle. The Writer grabbed his two carry-ons and followed him, after, of course, the arduous task of asking the behemoth next to him to get up so he could squeeze by. The woman's walrus face fixed on him; she had a Big Dipper of moles on her forehead.

"I saw you writin' that dirty shit on the seat," mouthed the walrus-faced woman. Green pistachio-mush was caked between her inordinately large teeth.

"It's Wilhelm Leibniz," the Writer replied. "Pluralistic objective monadism."

When he tightrope-walked by, the driver said, "I thought you were going to Lexington," but the man pronounced the word as "Rexington." He was Asian-American.

"I've experienced a creative advent, a new variance of my Muse has arrived," the Writer replied. "And, I'm sorry to point out, your bus is too fetid."

The driver's slanted eyes looked cruxed. "Fetid?"

Someone from the seats cut in, "He means your bus stinks!"

"Oh..."

Next, a passenger with a more distinct voice appended, "Yes, it smells like B.O. mixed with the smell of dried apricots. You know, that uncanny way you taste the smell right as you're eating one? The sapor?"

The Writer stared back as if into a glittering chasm. The person who'd made the simile was a gaunt-faced man with spectacles and a slight malocclusion of the jaw. He looked about as happy to be on the bus as the Writer had been.

Thank you, sir! the Writer thought and hopped off the bus.

The Greyhound tore off in a deafening roar mere seconds after the door had flapped closed behind him. The Writer felt siphoned within a dervish of dust and noise; a final glance at the bus showed him a smear of faces, like apparitions, inducing him to recall Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." Like petals on a wet, black bough... The old man who'd gotten off with him fell down from the roaring vacuum drag.

The Writer helped him up. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Blammed dink driver!" the old man railed. "Bet'cha he was VC, I shorely do! Wants to get back at us fer blowin' his shit country up'n that Ho Chi Minh fucker!"

"Actually I think he was Japanese, but then...we blew their country up too."

The old man waved an irate fist in the air. "And I just had me some Hin-doo doctor at the hospital in Pulaski tell me I gots some blammed disease called dye-ur-beetees."

"Oh, sorry to hear that. Type 1 or 2?"

A cockeyed glare. "How the fuck do I know? I tolt ya, the fucker was Hin-doo, could barely understand his swami jabberin'.... A'course, maybe he wasn't Hin-doo on account he didn't have one'a them dots on his head. What's that make him, then? A fuckin' A-rab?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir."

"And looky there!" the old man continued pitching his fit. "I'se in a swivet, I am!" He pulled up a pant leg to show a swollen ankle purple as an eggplant skin.

Ew, the Writer thought.

"Swami fucker says I ain't got no cirkalayshun no more on account'a this dye-ur-beetees â€˜so's if I wanna live, I gots to have my fuckin' feet cut off! And ya knows what else? Says I gots ta pay him to do it! Eight hunnert bucks, and the fucker had the balls ta tell me that's the poverty discount!"

The Writer's heart went out to the old man...

Rheumy eyes peered back below bushy white brows. "You ain't from â€˜round these parts, are ya, boy?"

"No, sir. I'm from " but then the Writer faltered. I'm the man who came from nowhere, he answered in thought. He picked a random city in his head. "I'm from Milwaukee."

The old man tensed. "Same place that fella in the news is from?"

"Pardon me?"

"It's been on the blasted news the last three days straight!"

I've been on a Greyhound bus for the last three days straight... "I hadn't heard. Something happened in Milwaukee?"

"Dang straight. Cops caught some fella with dead bodies in his apartment, had cut-off heads in the fuckin' refrigerator. Said there was even a head in a lobster pot! One'a them homo fellas, probably chugged more cock than I'se chugged moonshine. And he hadda pair'a cut-off hands hangin' in his closet."

"How...macabre..."

Now the old man seemed to give the Writer a disapproving once-over. "What's a city boy like you doin' here?"

"I'm following my Muse, I guess you could say."

"The hail?"

"I'm a speculative novelist," the Writer said. "I infuse relatable modern fiction scenarios with character demonstrations of the existential condition. Allegorical symbology, it's called, rooted in various philosophical systems."

The old man smirked. "Fuck." Next, the rheumy eyes shot down to the Writer's sneakered feet. "Where'd ya git them shitty shoes, boy? K-Mart?"

The Writer was surprised. "Actually, yes."

"Well, they look like shit, son, and if you're a writer then you must have money "

The Writer laughed.

" so's you just come ta see me. I'm a mile off County Road One, take a left at the deadfall, the big â€œun. Jake Martin's the name, and I'se the best shoemaker in the county just as sure as rabbits can fuck. Just you come to see me fer some real shoes'n I'll give ya a deal."

The Writer was waylaid by the stunning irony. A shoemaker...soon to have no feet... "I'll be sure to look you up."

"You do that," and then the oldster began hobbling away.

"But if you could spare a minute, sir. Where might I find some suitable lodgings?"

A big black vein beat beneath the purple ankle. The bony hand pointed somewhere unfixed. "Ya might try Annie's bed â€œn' breakfast couple miles yonder, and then there's the Gilman House, but a fella with money like you a writer ain't gonna wanna stay there 'cos it's a shit-hole full'a dirty cunts." The bony hand pointed down the street. "Alls they charge is ten bucks a night so's how good kin the rooms be?"

That's my kind of price... "Thank you very much for your time, sir."

"Shee-it," the old man hobbled away, waving his arm.

My first significant verbal exchange with the local populace, the Writer realized. A block down he noticed a row of stores, most showing CLOSED signs, but one PIP BROTHERS LAUNDROMAT looked open for business because a young fat man with a buzzcut was dragging large plastic bags inside. The man didn't look happy yet the Writer couldn't have felt more relieved. Three days on a Greyhound, or three minutes it didn't matter. An obligatory

sanitizing was mandatory, and all the clothes he wore right now would have to be washed. Twice. More closed shops stood across the street from the laundry but one establishment (whose sign read merely RELAX AT JUNES) appeared to be open, for a man in a plaid shirt and cowboy hat exited the front door wearing quite a grin. A moment later, a woman in cutoffs and large breasts straining a halter came out the same door, then sat down on a bench to smoke. Did she inadvertently sniff her finger? Peculiar, thought the Writer. But what he noticed first was the misspelling on the sign. I should tell them, he considered. It needs to be possessive.

At the next intersection stood a Wendy's fast food restaurant, with only a few customers observable in the windows. He'd never been to a Wendy's. Someone had told him once that this chain served square hamburgers. Why not rhombuses? the Writer questioned the prejudice. Why not cordiforms and dodecagons?

Down the street in the opposite direction he spotted a rundown tavern. Thank God, a bar... No writer worth his ink didn't drink. Hemingway, Sartre and Beauvoir, Poe... Then he noted the tavern's wooden sign: THE CROSSROADS.

How curious...

The Writer couldn't count how many taverns he'd happened upon which bore the same name. It was a name rich with allegorical promise, and he liked that. He needed to be surrounded or even besieged by it...

But profound allegories can wait a moment or two, he prioritized. He needed some cigarettes and some food. Then, contemplating what the first word of his new novel would be, he grabbed his bags and trudged into the Qwik-Mart.

"We're closed," snapped the old crank of a proprietor behind the counter.

The Writer rechecked his 8-year-battery Timex. "Really? What kind of convenience store closes at 6 p.m.?"

"This one!"

The old crank had the face of an elderly Heinrich Himmler but wore overalls and a long sleeve shirt, and one of those visors like bankers wore in days of old. The Writer thought: Mr. Drucker, in Green Acres... There was a cane with a dog's head propped behind the counter.

"I don't mean to be an imposition, sir," the Writer began, "but I've just traveled a considerable distance in...less than savory conditions, and I really need some cigarettes and food. It would only take a minute of your time."

The old crank made a psst! sound, flapped a hand, and belted "Fuck! Go ahead! Ever-one else's shittin' on me today! Why not you too?"

An amiable old chap, I'll give him that. The Writer grabbed some instant coffee, sugar, and Saltines. The dinner of champions... Besides, he'd read somewhere that these three ingredients were primarily all that academic horror writer H. P. Lovecraft consumed for the majority of his career. (And what he hadn't read was that these same three ingredients had probably been the cause of the colon cancer that had killed him in 1937.) Back at the counter he asked for a carton of cigarettes as well, then withdrew his credit card from the velcro pouch he wore around his ankle whenever he traveled.

"You gotta be shittin' me!" the old crank wailed. "Does this look like New York City?"

What could I expect? He stooped again to retrieve cash from the pouch.

The register bell dinged as the proprietor rang up the sale. He looked as though he'd sipped straight lemon juice. "You must be the Writer I keep hearin' about."

The Writer stared, disbelieving.

"Word gits around. And I seed you just got into town, but if you got a sliver'a brain in yer head, boy, next thing on yer to-do list should be gittin' out of town."

The Writer was astonished. "You recommend the place that much..."

"Ain't nothin' but white trash'n immer-grints here, son. Meth-heads, drunks, fat cows on welfare, and enough dirty little kids that if ya put 'em all in the same place at once, the stink'd open a crack in the earth bigger'n the Grand Fuckin' Canyon. I got more crackers comin' in and out'a here tryin' to shoplift than to buy anything."

"So business has been better, I presume."

"Fuck. Today I got this one trailer cow named Sadie Fuller givin' me a ration of shit 'cos I won't sell her dog food on her food stamps, then I'se said 'Sadie, you ain't even got a fuckin' dog,' and she said 'I know, but I'se got eleven kids, and the money I'se save feedin' 'em dog food leaves me with more to buy steaks, then I'se trade the steaks fer moonshine.' Can ya believe it?"

The Writer struggled for response. "How...tragic."

"Aw, fuck, that ain't what I mean, ya moe-ron! Half the fuckin' population's on welfare! 'N by

the time a little girl's got some hair on her slit, her daddy knocks her up so's they kin git more food stamps! Only folks who buy anything in my store're the fuckin' wetbacks 'cos they'se the only ones who work! I sell more cans'a refried beans'n haller-peener peppers than I sell fuckin' Three Musketeers! What ever happened to America!"

This guy's more racist than the shoemaker, the Writer figured. "Paradise...lost, I'd say. The proverbial American Dream is just an illusion behind a prevarication."

The proprietor cracked! his cane on the floor. "Don't know what the fuck you're talkin' about but at this rate, it'll take me ten fuckin' years ta pay this place off! I'll be fuckin' eighty! What I fight the war for?"

"So...you're a World War Two veteran?" the Writer asked, if only to divert the sour conversation.

"No, Korea. The big one. We'se could always tell when we was in enemy territory anytime we found a pile'a shit."

The Writer looked bewildered. "I..."

"If the shit smelled like cabbage'n fish, we knowed there was commies nearby."

"Sounds very tactical to me..."

"Eisenhower should'a fuckin' nuked the whole kit'n caboodle. Fight my ass off fer my country and this is what I get. Redneck bitches who've been pregnant so many times their bellies look like fuckin' accordions, and enough dirty, snot-eatin' little kids ta fill a goddamn football stadium! Half of 'em got squashed heads 'cos their mommas live on corn liquor!" The proprietor snapped his dentures. "But I'll tell ya, boy, the minute I pay this shit-house off, I'll open me a new one in Agan's Point. Ain't no welfare trash there, and no pepper-bellies. You heard'a Agan's Point, ain't'cha?"

"Uh, no," the Writer admitted.

"Figures!"

The Writer finally got his change. He looked at his purchases on the counter. "Would you mind putting those in a bag for me, please?"

"Jesus ta pete!" He jammed the items in the bag. "Fifty cents!"

"For the bag?" the Writer protested.

"Fifty cents! What I look like, fuckin' Santa Claus?"

The Writer sighed and put two quarters down. This is too much work...

"The fuck you doin' here anyways?" Suddenly the proprietor's glare took on a scrutinizing gleam. "You writin' a book about this dog's dick of a town?"

"No, no," the Writer hurried. "It's a societal abstraction. The place is a symbol for a notion, or an idea that suggests a profundity."

The old crank cracked! his cane again and laughed. "I don't know what the fuck you're talkin' about but you oughta put me in yer blammed â€˜dickerlus book. I can be the unfriendly old codger who's lived in town his whole life'n warns the main character ta get out. A stock character's what they call that, ain't it?"

The Writer rose an involuntary brow. "Indeed it is..."

"There's yer fuckin' symbol, boy. Me. I'm the fuckin' notion!"

"Intriguing," the Writer said and almost laughed.

"Now get outa my store, and if ya got a sliver'a brain, get outa town."

The Writer fled the Qwik-Mart as if fleeing killers.

That was something...and I've only been in town a few minutes. On the street, he lit a cigarette and stood for a minute in a studied daze. What a rush profound yet...indefinable. He figured that first kick of nicotine-drenched smoke had to be as good as the opium Thomas de Quincey smoked when he wrote "Sighs from the Depths." Next, he walked down the vacant road, to the Gilman House Motel.

Â«Â« Â»Â»

The Writer rented his \$10-per-night room Room Six, the imperfect number, according to the Bible and the Koran from a stout, fiftyish woman with a face uncomfortably similar to Henry Kissinger's. "Oh, you must be the writer!" she enthused the instant he came through the seedy doorway. This continued to perplex him. The shoemaker with diabetes told people I was here? Impossible. He didn't talk to anyone...

Much to the woman's delight, he paid a month in advance. "Oh my word! I'll give you the best

room in the house! We've never had a bestselling author stay with us before."

The Writer smiled modestly. He didn't quite have it in him to point out that of all his dozens of published books, he'd never even come close to hitting a bestseller list, but of course, he wouldn't have wanted to. He despised all that was commercial, like Faulkner. The art of writing could never be about money. It had to be about the struggle for true art.

"Is that one'a them newfangled computers I keep hearin' about?" she asked of his second carry bag. He had associates who had solicited this new, corruptive technology, with things called RAM and kilobytes and five-inch floppies. My God! What would Samuel Coleridge think? "You can make revisions on the screen!" one peer, a frivolous high-fantasy writer, had celebrated. "No more Liquid Paper!" The Writer had calmly informed him that he'd own one of these infernal contraptions over his dead body. "The day I allow technology to come between my Muse and the sheet of paper is the day I hang myself at the foot of T.S. Eliot's grave. Indeed, the New Age of Creativity is becoming...pun intended...a Wasteland..." Liquid Paper and white-out tape were as crucial to the writer as oil paints were to Peter Paul Rubens. If there were no metal type bars striking a piece of paper rolled over a rubber platen, then it wasn't art one created, but something sorely less. Bells needed to ring! and keys needed to snap! The carriage needed to zip! back and forth as the writer's Muse fired from his mind to his fingertips and poured like blood onto the page. Without any of that?

Folly, the Writer knew. A lie...

"No, it's a typewriter," he told her. The woman's name, not surprisingly, was Mrs. Gilman, and it was the "Mrs." part that sent a bolt up the Writer's spine. He knew it wasn't compassionate but he couldn't help it. Some man actually married her that face, Henry Kissinger. "I keep it well-lubricated so it doesn't make a lot of noise. I hope no one's disturbed."

"By some noise?" The woman huffed a laugh like Aunt Bee on Andy Griffith. "You could probably tell this ain't exactly a flourishin' town, sir. I mostly rent by the hour, if ya know what I mean. A gal's gotta make a livin' just like anyone, hmm?"

The Writer wasn't disheartened. It was just more reality to nourish his Muse. Prostitution was certainly an integral facet of the human condition, and he thought at once of the monumental play by Sartre. My book needs to be REAL... "I understand completely, Mrs. Gilman."

Her voice lowered. "And if ya choose to indulge...ya might wanna wrap it, as they say."

"Oh, I won't be indulging, Mrs. Gilman. As an artist, my perceptions need to be keen. Angst from abstinence is converted to creative enlightenment."

What Mrs. Gilman dubbed The Best Room in the House was easily the worst room the Writer had ever checked into. Cockroach corpses lay scattered like broken brazil nut shells, and when he peeked under the bed, his vision was greeted by a petrified rat belly-up, little legs stiff in the air. The small, iron-railed bed had a great dip in the center, as if previously owned by someone who weighed half a ton. Peeling wallpaper was patterned by smoke-stained tulips and, in places, dirty handprints. Every handprint tells a story, he considered. A genuine Philco radio sat on an exhaust-blue dresser, though the Writer doubted he'd be opening any of the dresser's drawers. There was also a fan festooned by strings of dust, a metal waste can with, of all things, G.I. Joes on it, and a put-it-together-yourself writing desk and chair that had stickers on them reading DART DRUG. More dust-strings rounded the room's corners.

Not exactly a "Clean, Well-Lighted Room," eh? he ribbed himself and had to bite his lip not to laugh.

Get it?

A peek in the bathroom showed a rusted, claw-foot tub, a cracked mirror (was that blood in the cracks?) and wouldn't he know it? used condoms floating in the toilet. Mrs. Gilman was fluffing the pillows on his bed when he came back in, and that's when he noticed some irregularities on the wallpaper. Someone had drawn a bull's eye over the waste can. A yard back was what appeared to be a crayon mark on the floor. Closer inspection showed him lines of some dried starchy substance in or near the bull's eye.

My God, the Writer thought. Target practice...

"It ain't a fancy room, sir," the husky woman said, "but it's got..."

The Writer pointed a finger and smiled. "Character. It'll do fine, Mrs. Gilman."

"And if there's anythin' you need, you just come see me."

"Thank you. You're very hospitable."

From a pouch on her frumpy dress, she withdrew a plastic bag of something. "Try some. They're delicious!"

The Writer paled. It was a bag of dried apricots. "No. Thank you."

"Hope you enjoy your stay!" She beamed. "My goodness! We gots a real live writer stayin' with us!"

"Goodnight, Mrs. Gilman."

She left but stuck her head back in. She pointed to the clap-trap writing desk. "Oh, and you kin put'cher typewriter right there," but of course she pronounced typewriter as "tap-ratter." "You got a wonderful view!"

"I'll do that, Mrs. Gilman."

Finally she left. Wonderful view? He looked out the window and winced. It was a junkyard that extended back to a scrawny woodline. Old car hulks lay on their sides, and between two, a mangy dog was defecating. He kept convincing himself that the environment was a creative necessity. Henrik Ibsen would've LOVED this room. He could've written a sequel to "The Wild Duck" here... So if it was good enough for Ibsen, it was good enough for the Writer.

But the "view" would have to go. He pulled down the stained shade, then immediately saw some graffiti. IF THE SUN REFUSED TO SHINE, I WOULD STILL BE LOVING YOU LED ZEPPLIN, some redneck had scrawled. The Writer winced again. He whipped out his Sharpie and wrote HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE J.P. SARTRE.

There.

White Trash Gothic, the words ran round and round his head. The daze of his creative bliss returned as he set up his typewriter. It was a Remington Standard Typing-Machine No. 2, from 1874. He'd spent several thousand dollars refurbishing it. Many great writers had used this same model: Samuel Clemens, Joseph Conrad, Henry James. In fact, when Clemens aka Mark Twain had been the first fiction writer to officially submit a typed manuscript to a publisher, that manuscript had been prepared on an identical machine.

Hot water from the sink was sufficient for his instant coffee, and he arranged his ashtray in a nearly religious ceremony. He took one bite of a Saltine, frowned, then put the whole box in the G.I. Joe trash can when he read that the Sell By date was June 1980. The idea of taking it back and asking for a refund simply wasn't serviceable.

Music, he thought. Very light... He turned on the old radio:

"...in Milwaukee on North 25th Street, Building 1055, Unit 213, a gruesome scene unfolded before..."

"...may have evaded police for the last five years..."

"...when the employee of a chocolate factory was arrested by Milwaukee Police after a naked boy

in handcuffs reported his abduction and..."

"...confessed today that he lobotomized and even cannibalized many of his unsuspecting victims..."

What a world, he thought. Between the news of this serial killer, he stumbled upon unacceptable country and western and, worse, hard rock. His stomach hitched when he heard, "I'm a freeeeeeeeeeeeee biiiiiiiird..." Would he throw up in the G.I. Joe garbage can? Finally he found some layered violin work.

He creaked back in the chair and sighed. Ahhhhhh. Archanglo Corelli, Concerto #8...

Now, the Writer was ready.

He carefully rolled in a sheet of Eagle-brand 25-pound bond paper, and typed:

WHITE TRASH GOTHIC

CHAPTER ONE

He put his finger on the T key. It was unbidden, just as it needed to be. My Muse is flowing. Now...write the first sentence

There was a knock on the door. Oh, for pity's sake! he whined. His Muse collapsed.

"Yes?" he answered testily. Then he blinked and gulped.

A voluptuous girl with hair the color of corn silk stood hip-cocked and grinning in the doorway. Bare-foot and bare-legged, she wore a faded denim skirt and a painfully tight pink T-shirt that read LICK BUSH IN ~92!

"Hi!" she said, naturally pronouncing the word hi as "Haa!" "I'se Nancy. My ma tolt me you was here."

"You're...Mrs. Gilman's daughter?"

"That's right."

Staggering, he thought. Not only did some guy MARRY the woman who looks like Henry Kissinger, but he had SEX with her as well... But by the looks of this girl, she didn't get any of her mother's less complimentary genes. "Ah, well, it's very nice to meet you, Nancy, but, wow,

I'm very busy..."

"Oh, I'll only be a sec, see " She cocked her hip to the other side, offering a blushing smile. "I gotta question, but...shucks, you might think it's dumb..."

Oh, for pity's sake! But he felt he had to be a gentleman and a positive role model. "No question is petty or without value, Nancy, except for the question stifled by reluctance."

"Huh?"

He sighed. "What's your question?"

She rose up on her tiptoes for one bounce. "Can I blow you?"

The Writer was waylaid. "What?"

"Oh, and I mean fer free. We'se don't git busy æ~ round here till later noways "

Mrs. Gilman...tricks out her own daughter...

" and, gosh, I got this hankerin' ta suck yer willy on account of you're a famous writer "

The Writer rolled his eyes. "Really, I'm not that famous "

The insides of her knees rubbed as she cocked her hips back and forth, with the Naughty Schoolgirl grin. "See, I don't want ya ta think I'm trashy "

"Oh, I could never think that!"

" but, see, I'se'll just be all twisted up if I don't gets a chance to taste yer cum..."

The Writer glared. "Why on earth would you..."

"Just wanna know if a writer's jism tastes like regular."

This is bombast... But still, he considered the proposition for a blazing moment. After all, Stephen Crane's greatest creative influence had been a prostitute, and then he'd gone on to write *The Red Badge of Courage* and "The Open Boat." The Writer couldn't deny his gentility, a refinement born of erudition. "That's quite an offer, Nancy, but I'll have to turn it down. You must understand abstinence is crucial to the aesthetically inclined. Like boxers."

She was a redneck Venus alive in his doorway. "You shore?"

God in Heaven, would you PLEASE go away! Your body's KILLING me! "Really, Nancy, I'd love to. You're a very beautiful young woman, but "

Her grin widened, showing perfect teeth, a rarity in these parts. "And I gots me a beautiful cooter, too. Fellas always say so. Wanna see?"

"Oh, no, really "

She hitched up the denim skirt. The Writer glanced down.

He wanted to cry. It looked like fresh sourdough with a curl of pink taffy: a flawless sex-tart. My God... "I can say with authority, Nancy, your cooter should be displayed in the Louvre. Nevertheless, I'm terribly busy. Another time, perhaps."

Her cringing pose loosened. "Oh, all right. But you'll at least autograph my tittie, won't'cha?" and then up came the pink T-shirt.

The Writer slumped, and extracted his Sharpie.

The breasts were comely firm and full of the vitality of youth...and ruined by tattoos. The right was a Smiley Face black curve for a mouth, two circles for eyes, and a big pink nose while on the left had been branded a great eagle and the words FREE BIRD.

The Writer could've groaned. How could you vandalize yourself like that? "Which, uh, one?" he asked, pen poised.

"Smiley!"

He scribbled his signature right over the "eyes."

"I cain't wait ta show my friends!" she squealed.

Terrific...

She gave the Writer a big wet kiss, running her tongue between the seam of his lips. My God... She just licked my lips with the same tongue that's licked UNTOLD dirty, hayseed penises...

"Just you git back to work now!" she said cheerily.

"Yes, yes, thank you. Have a great...night..."

"Nightie-night..."

The Writer closed and locked the door, leaning against it in the exhaustion of his ire. The realization didn't set well. Men will inseminate her tonight...over MY signature. Flustered now, he returned to the desk, lit a cigarette, and stared at the page in the Remington.

Â«Â« Â»Â»

Hours later, he was still staring at the page in the Remington. Now the page looked like this:

WHITE TRASH GOTHIC

CHAPTER ONE

There was a knock at the door.

Writer's block again! he screamed at himself. It's HER fault!

The ashtray had become a pyramid of butts. Through the walls he could hear muffled and distorted sounds: creaking, giggles, rapid footfalls and doors slamming. A whorehouse, he chided himself. I'm trying to write the most important American novel of the Twentieth Century in a whorehouse... He'd believed the grim reality of the place and people would alight his deepest creative visions to saturate every page with human truth, but...

Just another subjective desert, a terra dementata not worthy of artistic interpretation. Or perhaps he was being too hard on himself. It was only his first night.

I pray God...

He needed to convert this experience into the genius of a Bergman film, with the insights of a Steinbeck novel, and the imagery of a Stevens poem.

He needed...something...

He opened the smudged shade before him, to be looked back at by a desolate night. A lopsided full moon hovered over the junkyard. He cracked the window to let in some air, then without conscious impulse looked at his watch.

It was midnight.

Outside, a wolf howled.

The Writer got up from the desk and sighed. I need a drink, he thought. Then he turned out the light and left the room.

(III)

Dicky stopped in his tracks at the Crossroads' front door. He looked up at the moon and could've sworn he heard a wolf howl. There ain't no wolves here...I hope... Inside, the loud bar was milling with ex-cons, fugitives, â€˜shine-runners, alkies, and sundry redneck scum. Dicky felt at home. When he scratched his nose, he took an inadvertent sniff and almost gagged. Dang! Dicky had neglected to wash his hands after dragging the last of the clean rags back to the massage parlor. The redolence of old sperm and excrement seemed imbued on his palms. He wended through the overall'd mass to the bathroom and scrubbed up. Probably wastin' my time. Balls is talking big bullshit sayin' he's gonna give me the green fer my new trannie. On the wall someone had written: THE BIGHEAD'LL GET YOU IF YOU DON'T WATCH OUT, but Dicky scoffed at the backwoods myth. Beneath it someone else had written, much more recently, THE EMERGENT EVOLUTION OF NATURE DEVELOPS BY ELEVATING LEVELS OF SPACE AND TIME THROUGH MATTER, THE END RESULT OF WHICH EQUALS GOD.

Dicky read it as best he could, got a headache, and left the bathroom.

Doreen, one of the bar's working girls, attempted to entice potential customers by playing Nine Ball with herself. She leaned over extra-long to take shots, allowing her low-cut top to droop so that anyone looking could see her breasts, but nobody ever looked. Poor stupid gal just don't get it, Dicky thought. Her breasts dangled like two stuffed white socks, with a cow teat at the end of each. Another prostitute, Cora Neller, was rack-skinny from meth and from the booze she chugged to take the edge off when she didn't have meth. Her legs looked like flesh-covered dowel-rods sticking out of her cut-off jeans. When she sat down and crossed her legs, patrons often groaned, for there was so much gap-space inside her cut-offs that her vagina could be fully viewed: flaccid lips surrounding a scary black hole, like a hundred-year-old man's agape mouth. "Hey, Cora!" someone yelled. "Don't'cha git too close to the pool table. Someone's liable ta mistake ya fer a cue stick!" The whole bar ripped laughter; in fact, Doreen laughed so hard, her dentures fell out and landed in the corner pocket. "Fuck all'a ya, ya queers!" Cora shouted back. "You's kin all suck my Daddy's ass-hair!"

"Yeah!" someone shouted back, "like you been doin' since you was four!"

This was the cream of the crop at the Crossroads.

Dicky plopped his girth on the stool right next to Balls.

"Hey, Balls."

"Shee-it, man. Yer late. Thought ya lost yer confer-dance in me."

"Naw, after I'se got off work 'bout six, I hadda take me a long nap "

"Shee-it. All that hard work warshin' cum-rags at the jack shack's got Dicky all wored out, but you ain't gonna have to work there no more." Then Balls cracked a sneering smile and slapped Dicky on the back.

"You got it?"

"I tolt ya I'd git it, didn't I?" Balls slipped an envelope over a fat envelope.

It took a few minutes but Dicky counted the money, his hands trembling. "Well shee-it in a picnic basket, Balls! I just cain't believe it!" There was twelve hundred dollars in the envelope, in mostly ratty fifties and twenties.

Balls nodded. "So's when'll you git'cha that new trannie?"

"I'll pick it up tomorrow'n have it dropped the next day."

"And then the day after that, you'n me'll be runnin' moonshine, right?"

"Right!"

"As partners." Balls shot Dicky a solemn glance. "Right?"

"Dang right, Balls!" Dicky was nearly crying in his joy. All that money in his hand? What a fine friend Balls was, and not three days out of the poky. That brand-spanking-new M-22 Rock Crusher would make his motorhead dreams come true. A 427 El Camino with a radical trans was just the ticket. That fucker will fly...

Dicky simmered down, as some logic seeped into the conversation. "Hey, Balls... If you're flat broke after gettin' out'a the joint...how'd you come up with twelve-hunnert bucks faster than shit through a buzzard?"

Balls grinned. "Aw, now, don't you worry 'bout that none, Dicky-Boy." Balls snapped his finger at an ancient barkeep in suspenders. He wore a ballcap with a patch that read: LIQUOR IN

FRONT, POKER IN BACK. "Hey, bartender! I gotta stand on my head'n flap my balls ta git a pitcher in this joint?"

The barkeep frowned his way over. "You look like a con, son. I gots ta see some green first."

"Shee-it," Balls muttered through his grin. He snapped a twenty down.

Then the barkeep noticed Dicky. "Aw, shee-it, Dicky, I didn't see ya walk in. Damn shame what happened at yer place."

Dicky scratched his head. "My place?"

"Yeah. June's jack shack. Ain't that where ya work?"

"Uh, well..."

"I guess ya ain't heard. 'bout seven o'clock, some fella walked in there and knocked the place over."

"Ya don't say?" Balls offered.

"Shore as shit," the keep replied. "Took the whole week's till, he did."

Dicky was astonished. "Yer shittin' me. Man, I was workin' there myself earlier."

"The fucker had a big gun too, and terrorized the livin' shit out'a all them poor girls. Made 'em all strip nekit so's he could gander their pussies'n tits."

"What a scumbag," Balls offered. "World's goin' ta shit, I'll tell ya."

The keep nodded in earnest. "And before he left, ya know what he done? He put his gun to poor June's head and made her stick her finger up his ass'n jerk him off."

"The lowdown bastard!" Balls offered.

"I cain't believe it," Dicky lamented. "And he cleaned the place out?"

"The whole week's till, like I said. Two grand's what June tolt me. Then he got clean away."

"Well, shee-it, with all them girls workin' there, they must've got a good description of the guy."

"Nope," assured the keep. "Dirty som-bitch were wearin a Wendy's bag on his head with eye-holes cut out. Don't that beat all?" and then the keep walked off to get them a pitcher.

Wait a min... Dicky's head slowly traversed on his fat neck to look right at Balls. "You?" he whispered.

Balls' grin flashed like a switch-blade in the sun. He nodded, and gestured his waist. He pulled his T-shirt up for just a second, and stuck in there under his belt was a big-ass pistol, a Webley .455.

"Jimminy Christmas, Balls!"

"Shhh. Some piece'a work, huh? I knew my Daddy'd be good fer somethin' one'a these days. See, this piece under my shirt's about the only thing he left me worth more than a pack'a butt pimples."

Dicky leaned over, keeping his voice low. "You pulled a heist in broad daylight?"

"Why ya think they call me Balls?"

The keep returned with their pitcher. Balls filled two mugs and slid one to Dicky. "Cheers, buddy."

Dicky raised his mug with a great pumpkin grin. "To our new partnership! Man, we are gonna make some money whens I get my rod on the road!"

Their glasses clinked.

Three fat young men with buzzcuts sat on the other side. "Hey, ya old putz!" one shouted to the barkeep. "Git us another pitcher, and don't make us wait till we're old as you. And also give us an order of Redneck Steak Tenders."

The barkeep smirked. "Comin' right up..."

Balls seemed cruxed. "Hey, Dicky...what the hail's Redneck Steak Tenders? I ain't never heard'a that."

"Cheapest thang on the menu."

"Yeah? Well why not we'se git us some? I'se love a good steak, â€˜specially if'n its cheap."

"Naw, Balls. Trust me." Dicky pointed to the keep, who threw a handful of soda crackers onto a paper plate. Then he shot a dash of A-1 Steak Sauce on each cracker. "There ya go, fellers," he said to the fat brothers.

"Awright!" one reveled.

"Yeah, I'se thank I'll pass on that," Balls said.

The barkeep wandered back over, and pointed up to the TV. "You boys been listenin' to this crazy shit on the TV? This feller in Wisconsin?"

"Naw," Balls said. "Ain't really seen TV fer a while."

Dicky rubbed his chin. "Ya know, I think I did hear somethin', some crazy guy or some such."

The keep leaned forward. "A serial killer they'se callin' him. Name's Dahmer, a queer-boy from up north. Kilt lots'a dudes they say."

"Kilt 'em?" Balls asked. "How?"

"Some'a the worst shit you can imagine, son. He'd go into one'a these faggot bars and start swish-talkin' with some feller, and aâ€ˆcourse, the feller thinks he's gonna get a fudge-packin' like they do but, see, what this Dahmer dude did was slip mickeys in their drinks ta git 'em all disoriented, then he'd take 'em back to his place."

"Yeah?" Balls goaded. "And then he fudge-packed 'em?"

"Aw, yeah, he shore did but not aâ€ˆfore doin' a shitload'a sick shit first. Lotta times he'd just plain kill 'em, and then pack their fudge. And other times he'd cut parts off 'em, and then he'd cook it and eat it. Cops found heads in the fridge, body parts all over the place, pair'a ears in a bread box."

"Shee-it!" Balls exclaimed.

Dicky smirked with distaste. "And you say he et parts of these fellas?"

"Damn straight. Admitted it. Ate a fella's whole bicep, he did, and some leg-meat cut right off the bone. Broiled it. Ate some'a their brains too."

"Fuck!" Balls exclaimed.

"And ya gotta figgure, if he ate brains, and he was queer, you know damn well he must've eaten some'a their peckers, too."

"Bet he slapped 'em right down on a grill'n cooked 'em like hot dogs," Dicky speculated.

"Bet he did," Balls added, intrigued.

The keep wagged a finger. "But that ain't the worst, boys. Some'a these fruiterers he'd pick up? He'd drill holes in their heads, to take the fight out of 'em so's he could butt-fuck 'em all night long sometimes fer even days and the feller couldn't do nothin' about it."

"Jay-sus," Dicky remarked.

The keep gave a curt nod. "Just goes ta show, boys. The devil comes in all shapes'n sizes," and then he wandered back to his beer taps.

Balls and Dicky stared up at the TV.

"Damn," Balls muttered. "He drilled holes in their heads. That's some cool shit, ain't it?"

Dicky looked aghast. "Cool? Balls, that's some right sick-in-the-head shit is what that is."

Balls raised a brow but said nothing, still staring up at the TV.

"But ya know what I don't git, Balls?" Dicky ventured. "What's a fudge-packin' murderer got to do with cereal?"

"Hmm. Don't rightly know. Maybe that's what he fed these fruiterers after he took the zing out of 'em with the drill."

A voice to their right cut in: "Actually a serial killer is a modern law-enforcement label that's used to differentiate from mass-murders and spree killers. The individual will kill a series of persons, generally over an extended period of time, functioning normally in between victims. It's not uncommon for serial killers to work everyday jobs, own homes, and even have families."

Balls and Dicky looked over at the guy who'd related the information: a clean-cut guy with brown hair, glasses, and a white shirt a nerd. He was drinking beer by himself.

"But ain't they all crazy?" Balls asked.

"Sometimes but not exclusively. Some serial killers even have high I.Q.'s. The frightening part is

they tend to not stand out. The average serial killer is typically a white male in his twenties or thirties, and he commits his crimes, often undetected for years like Ed Gein or Henry Lee Lucas to live out a deep-seated sexual fantasy born in some mode of dementia."

Balls leaned over to Dicky. "Wow, this fella knows some big words."

"That he does "

The guy continued, "The term was dubbed by FBI Agent Robert Ressler in the â€˜70s, during the plethora of national news coverage about Ted Bundy, who raped and murdered women and children in at least five states. He's right up there with Gein and Lucas, the Green River Killer, John Wayne Gacy, but this guy here Dahmer he may wind up being the most grotesque of the bunch."

"Dang," Dicky said. "There's some fucked up folks in this world."

Balls leaned over, to face the guy in the white shirt. "Hey, buddy? You seem to know a lot 'bout this kind'a stuff. Any idea why they do it?"

"They all have essentially the same answer," the guy said. "They do it because, to them, it's fun."

Balls leaned back down, thinking.

"Fun? Fuck all that shit, man." Dicky was growing ill at ease. "Eatin' folks, drillin' holes in their noggins shee-it. Let's not talk 'bout it no more it's givin' me the willies. Just let's us think about all that cash we'se gonna make when we's runnin' â€˜shine in a big block 427 with a Rock Crusher trans."

"Yeah," Balls said, but he seemed preoccupied now.

"And weren't there somethin' you was gonna tell me tonight?" Dicky reminded.

"Huh?"

Dicky lowered his voice further. "You said you had some score next month."

"Aw, yeah. Early September, right." Balls shook out of his bizarre daze. "It's pretty righteous and a shore thing. In fact, it just might be so good that we won't have to run no â€˜shine after that."

"The hail?"

"Dicky-Boy," Balls whispered. "This score could be so big that neither'a us'll have to worry 'bout cash again. Ever."

"I don't know, Balls."

"Bullshit, Dicky."

"A heist, ya mean?"

"Well, yeah, kind of. And it's risk-free, man. Now don't tell me you ain't in with me."

"Shee-it, Balls. It's your score. Ya don't have to cut me in."

Balls looked taken aback. "What'cha take me as? We'se partners. And we'se'll need yer â€Mino to pull the U-Haul."

"You gotta U-Haul?"

"No, but I will once I steal me one. Only a fool'd pass this up. You wanna be a fool?"

Dicky hemmed a bit. "Risk-free, you say?"

"Damn straight..."

Dicky's shoulders lowered. "All right, tell me about it..."

They huddled closer, Balls whispering. "The score's about this old guy named Crafter, gotta old house â€tween here'n Crick City, but it's like way out in the woods somewhere."

"Crafter," Dicky chewed on the name. "Ain't never heard of him."

"That's 'cos the guy's, like, a loner, don't go out much. And he's got a real fucked up first name, too," and then Balls took a slip of paper out of his wallet and read off it. "Ephriam Crafter. Ain't that somethin'? Ephriam? And he lives off some place called Governor's Bridge Road "

"Oh, I heard me'a that road," Dicky said, kindled. "Used ta drink beer on the bridge'n throw the bottles off."

"Well that kicks ass, Dicky, that you know where the road is and, see, this guy Crafter? He's like a collector of â€spensive stuff, like antiques'n old paintin's'n jewelry but, like, real old jewelry that we could fence in Pulaski or Roanoke. Big, big money in this house, Dicky."

Dicky hadn't been terribly enthused in the first place, but now he just frowned. "Some score, Balls. A fuckin' B&E? You'll git yourself caught, you will, or worse blowed away. Ever-body's got guns in this county, man."

Balls' eyes were glittering he was so torqued up. "No, man, 'cos, see, the guy won't be home, and he's got no wife or kids or anyone else in the house. Beginn'n' of every September, he goes out'a town fer a coupla weeks Spain, he goes to, wherever that is. So's the house is empty. All we gots to do is knock the place over'n fence the haul æfore he can git back ta report it missin'."

Dicky gave a strained expression. "I don't know, Balls. Ya could still git caught a mite easy. If this guy Crafter tolt ya he goes out'a town ever September, then he'll know it's you who done the job."

Balls was nearly giddy in excitement. "That's the best part, Dicky. I don't know the guy from Adam. Never met him, never talked to him."

"Then how you know so much 'bout him?"

"This guy tolt me, see?"

"This guy?"

Balls nodded. "'Bout a year ago this newbie con named Bud Tooler got dropped on our cellblock. Biggest, dumbest cracker you ever saw, and the poor rube got sent up twennie-five years on a rapo. Raped some gal in the back of a Good Humor truck, he did, after knockin' her out'n takin' the cash box, and the big cracker wouldn't'a even got caught æcept you know what he did? He went back to the truck a few minutes later and stole a box'a Tastee Pops."

"Shee-it!"

"The splittail were still unconscious but someone seed him takin' the fuckin' ice cream!"

"Fuckin'-A, man! That's dumber'n dogshit!"

"Yeah, man, fuckin' Bud Tooler, biggest dumbest rube you could ever meet'n yer life. Fucker's got dick fer brains."

Dicky joined Balls in some laughter, but then calmed down and squinted at a thought. "Hey, Balls? What's this rube Bud Tooler got to do with this old Crafter guy?"

"T'se tellin' ya, Dicky. See, Tooler had a job fer years, cuttin' this guy Crafter's lawn'n doin' his hedges'n shit, so's that's how he knowed that the guy goes away first week'a every September. And one time Crafter's sink got stopped up so's he let Tooler into the house ta fix it. Only time in all them years Tooler ever got asked in the house were that one time, but one were enough. He got a gander at all kinds'a â€˜spensive shit in there. So's after that Tooler got ta thinkin' he'd knock the place over himself when Crafter went on his next trip but then he got busted on that Good Humor rapo last week'a July," and, of course, Balls pronounced July as "Joo-lie."

"Hmm," Dicky murmured.

"Yeah. Hmm, brother."

"Crafter, you say his name is?"

"Yeah, man. Crafter. Ephriam Crafter and he's got a million bucks'a shit in his house just waitin' ta be cleaned out. If'n we don't pull this job, we'd be dumber than Tooler fer goin' back fer that box'a Tastee-Pops, am I right?"

Dicky's mental gears spun as best they could. "Ya know, Balls? Just you might be right 'bout that."

"So's it's settled, partner. Tomorrow you git'cher new trannie. Then till the first week'a September we'se rake in some cash runnin' shine. And after that " Balls raised his beer mug again "we' git pig-shit rich when we knock over Ephriam Crafter's house on Governor's Bridge Road."

"T'se'll drink ta that!" Dicky celebrated and clinked mugs.

They split another pitcher as the tavern's din rose. All the pool tables were full, and there wasn't an empty seat in the house. Doreen was seen slipping out of the men's room deftly replacing her dentures and wiping her mouth and then a second later a man came out as well. Meanwhile, Cora Neller had seen fit to get up on a table and dance, but when she pulled up her top showing death-camp breasts she got booed down.

Balls remained excited about his new business propositions, especially Crafter's house, which he knew in his heart was a done deal. But something else, on the periphery of his psyche, was bothering him.

"Hey, Dicky. â€˜Member when we was kids'n every so often we'd go over ta Mrs. Houser's house'n look in her winder'n watch her brush her hair nekit?"

"Aw, yeah!" Dicky recalled, a bit tipsy now. "And then she'd do jumpin' jacks and bendin'-over

exercises whiles we was watchin'!"

"Yeah, and â€˜member how we'se always had the idea she knew we was watchin' but she never did nothin'."

"Yer right, yer right! And then we'd beat off whiles we was watchin'!"

Balls nodded. "Yeah, yeah, and we'se were all pissed off 'cos we was too young ta squirt."

"Aw, yeah, man, we couldn't wait fer our peters ta start kickin' out juice like the older boys "

"And like in them old porno mags we found in that ravine behind the old Dart Drug." Balls peered intently at Dicky. "We knew that jism came out'a peckers when we saw that. â€˜Member?"

Dicky searched his not-very-elaborate memory. "Yeah! They was in a old suitcase! So's we'se crawled down that ravine thinkin' it was full'a money from a bank robbery or somethin' and thens we busted it open'n it was stuffed with old porno, and each page had some fella squirtin' a big ole load in some skanky chick's face or tits."

"Um-hmm, and that one mag had pregnant chicks that guys was fuckin' and comin' on, and we couldn't believe that shit "

"Oh, yeah!" Dicky's memory began to chug.

" and then that other mag with mostly black fellas with cocks on 'em like chunks'a radiator hose and they'se was cornholin' all these little skinny white junkies, and fer the life'a us we couldn't figure how somethin' that big could go into somethin' that small "

"Man, I'se forgot all about that, Balls!"

Balls lowered his voice. "And do ya remember that last mag in the suitcase, Dicky? That one we figgured must'a been from the '50s on account it were black'n white?"

Dicky's yap fell open as he searched his mind...

"â€˜Member that? It were these big brawny guys fuckin' the stuffin' out a bunch more junkie girls, and these fellas was spittin' in the gals' mouths'n blowin' their noses on 'em, and all kinds'a groaty stuff, and then one guy had his fist up a splittail's snatch coupla inches past the wrist, and then another fella stuck his whole foot in a girl..."

Dicky suddenly blanched at the recollections of pornographic imagery. "Aw, yeah, now I â€˜member. The mags with guys fuckin' girls and gittin' blowed were fine but that last one like ta turn my stomach. Made me fuckin' sick, it did..."

Balls seemed focused on some inner impulse. "But'cher forgettin' the last page, Dicky. â€˜Member the last page'a that black'n white mag?"

Dicky stared, then gulped.

"Had that fella with, like, a Beatles haircut stickin' a pistol barrel right up that girl's beaver, and theres was some blood comin' out her."

"Aw, man. That were some disgustin' shit, man. Didn't turn me on none, that's fer shore. It even killed my hankerin' ta beat off."

"Well that's just it, Dicky. Average person's probably of a mind that that sorta porn ain't fer no one but folks sick in the head."

Dicky gulped again, nauseated. "Fella'd have to be sick in the head ta git boned up lookin' at shit like that. A gun stickin' up a gal's bloody pussy? Shee-it."

"And, fuck, Dicky, we weren't no more'n ten years old when we'se found that old suitcase. But ya knows what? When I gots home that day...I did beat off, and I did on account of that last picture. Sick as the shit was, I had a boner somethin' fierce, I did, and once I got ta thinkin' 'bout that pistol in the gal's cooze, I beat off like there were no tomorrow, and even now, after all them years, I still got that picture locked in my head, and if'n I think about it, I get wood."

Dicky stared at him.

"So's I'm startin' ta think there's somethin' wrong with me, ya know? That I'm the one sick in the head."

This was getting too deep for Dicky. He scoffed, "Aw, shee-it, Balls, ferget it. Ain't nothin' but a picture of a bunch'a fucked up junkies."

Balls nodded with some contemplation. "Maybe, but gettin' back to what I was sayin' first? 'Bout Mrs. Houser?"

Dicky smiled, for this image was much more appealing than the previous. "She had tits on her bigger'n our blammed heads. And â€˜member that hair-pie she had?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but here's somethin' I never tolt ya," Balls went on, serious. "It was after me'n you dropped out'a that shit-hole junior high they bussed us to in Clintwood. Me'n you didn't see each other much after that 'cos we'se was workin' fer our Daddys, but, see, I kept goin' back ta Mrs. Houser's place at night ta jerk off whiles lookin' at her nekit, see?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I were thirteen, fourteen years old by then, and lemme tells ya, my dick was kickin' out some cum by that age..."

"Yeah, me too," Dicky hastily added. "I was shootin' it five, six feet at least."

Balls frowned. "Yeah, yeah, but, see, I went up there one night'n I was all boned up to begin with 'cos I'd been thinkin' about that picture'a the gal with the gun up her snatch, and then I get to Mrs. Houser's winder figgurin' I'll have me a good ole yank watchin' her doin' them bend-over exercises, but'cha know what?"

Dicky stared back. "What?"

"I look in that winder "

"Was she nekit? Was she?" Dicky prodded.

"Oh, she was nekit, all right, and so was the fella in there with her, but, see, Mrs. Houser, she was tied up, her ankles'n wrists was tied ta each corner of the bed, and she hadda gag in her mouth..."

Dicky's drunken eyes bloomed from the intrigue.

"And it was a big black fella in there with her, and this fella hadda cock on him like a tennis-ball can painted black is how big it was."

"Fuck," Dicky whispered.

"And he was layin' a right hard hand on Mrs. Houser, punchin' her in the breadbasket'n bitin' her belly'n tits, and he were slappin' his open hand across her pussy so hard it sounded like a horsewhip."

"Yer shittin' me!"

"Naw, not a bit, Dicky, and then he got ta slappin' her across the face, too, then he'd punch her up some more and then put a piller â€˜cross her face'n press down fer, like, a long time, man, and

then he'd take it off'n slap her awake again, and in between all this rough-housin', he'd fuck her a while with that giant cock'a his, then he'd stop'n bite her tits'n belly'n crack his hand to her pussy, like that, startin' the whole deal alls over. So's I'm thinkin' this fella busted into her house ta rip her off but figgured he might as well rape the livin' shit out'a her ta boot."

"Fuck, yeah. Must'a been what he was doin', I'd say."

"Uh-hmm, so's this voice in my head tells me ta run back to the house'n call the poe-leece'n tell 'em Mrs. Houser's bein' raped."

"Did the cops catch the black fella?" Dicky asked.

Balls paused, ruminating. "Naw, 'cos, see, I never called 'em. Just as I were about to run home, this other voice in my head tolt me ta stay..."

"Shee-it, Balls!"

"I know, man. That's low-down, but that's what I did. I stayed at that winder'n watched this guy fuck Mrs. Houser all up, and after a bit more fuckin' with that giant cock'a his, he sat on her belly'n wrapped a belt â€˜round her neck'n started chokin' her. She started flip-floppin' on the bed'n her face started turnin' pink, and this black fella's tightenin' up that belt with one hand'n strokin' his pole with the other, so then finally he gits his nut'n squirts it all over her face, and I swear, Dicky, it looked like an ant-eater pukin' Elmer's Glue, it did, and it was right then when I had me my own nut, and it's like the best nut'a my life, Dicky, watchin' this bad shit happenin' to Mrs. Houser. I cummed all over that winder."

Some silence stretched by, then Dicky blinked through something like dread and asked, "Balls, what happened next? Did that big player kill her?"

"Nope, but that's what I thought shore were gonna happen next. But ya know what he did instead? Shee-it. He untied her'n took off the gag, and then she gives him a big sloppy kiss'n says, â€˜Oh, baby, that was great! I love you so much!'"

"Well I'se'll just shake the shit out my drawers!" Dicky honked laughter. "So's she were one'a them kinky splittails who likes rough fuckin'."

"Guess so," Balls assumed. "The whole time, the joke was on me. Shee-it, I thought he was killin' Mrs. Houser, but ya know what? Just as soon as I kin see that they'se just playing around, I squeeze the rest'a the snot out my dick'n and start ta zip up when I look back in the winder, and there ain't no one there. I figgure they both went to the kitchen're somethin', after all that hard hobknobbin'."

"Must'a been," Dicky concluded.

Balls shook his head. "I turn around to go back home but that big black fella's standin' right behind me, and Mrs. Houser too, both nekit as jaybirds."

"What'cha...what'cha do, Balls?"

"Tried ta run, a'course, but that guy's hand landed in my hair and yanked me back like I was on a tow-line. He chicken wings me, see, holdin' me a dang foot off the ground, I'se swear, and he says, 'Just you watch, white boy,' so's I look and I see Mrs. Houser on her knees at the winder, and ya know what she's doin'? She's lickin' my fresh nut right off the shingles beneath the sill."

"Aw, man! That's some groaty shit!"

"Shore is, and once she's done eatin' all my load, she come over all grinnin' and she pulls down my drawers'n starts playin' with my peter whiles she's sayin' 'This little shit'n his friend've been beatin' their little-boy dicks at my window for a coupla years, they have, the dirty little fuckers,' and then she starts suckin' my peter, boy, and by now the black fella's got one hand 'round my neck, and whiles Mrs. Houser's suckin' my tool ta kingdom come, he whispers in my ear: 'I'm a-gonna snap yer little white neck right when you come, kid, and then I'm gonna whup your dead white ass till there ain't nothin' left but a mud hole,' and when he said that Mrs. Houser starts suckin' harder'n faster and, see, I'm more shit-scairt than I ever been in my life "

"Bet'cha were, Balls..."

"I'm all cryin' and shakin' and fuckin' terrified, but ya know what? And it's the strangest part of all, but even in spite'a bein' scairt shitless, my fourteen-year-old peter's rock hard."

"Shee-it, man, ya'd think it'd be limp as a dead man's dick "

"Yeah, that's what ya'd think, but I still had me the hardest boner ever. Anyways, in another second, I have me another nut'n this one goes right down Mrs. Houser's throat'n then she just starts gigglin' and lickin' her chops like a mutt with a bone."

"And-and...what 'bout that black fella?" Dicky asked. "Did he snap yer neck?"

Balls frowned. "No, ya A-hole! If he'd snapped my neck, I wouldn't be sittin' here tellin' ya the story, would I?"

"Uh, oh. No," Dicky said.

"The black fella lets me go'n starts laughin', sayin' 'Git on outa here, kid. You've had yer fun for the night. Don't be peepin' in folks windows no more. You're liable ta get shot.' I beat feet out'a there so fast I think I must'a run a mile in ten seconds, I did, but damn near every step'a the way I could hear them laughin' at me..."

Dicky stared through the next pause. "Shee-it, Balls. That's some story."

"Yeah, a fucked up story...and the mores I think about it," Balls cerebrated, "the more it tells me that I'm fucked up. That there's somethin' wrong with me."

Dicky's dim eyes fluttered. "You? Sounds ta me like the one there's somethin' wrong with is Mrs. Houser." Then he gave a nitwit chuckle. "Wantin' ta get beat up by black fellas'n eatin' jism off a wall don't sound exactly normal ta me."

"Naw, naw, Dicky," Balls complained with some aggravation. "You ain't gettin' what I'm sayin'. It ain't about her all women eat cum off the wall'n like ta get beat'n fucked by black fellas with giant dicks, just 'cos they'se all low-down dirty whores. I'm talkin' 'bout me. When I thunk she was really gettin' murdered...I stayed at the winder ta jerk off! And even now, most times when I'se havin' a wank...I'se still think about that picture of the guy with the Beatles haircut jamming that gun up the gal's bloody pussy. If'n I look at Playboy shee-it. That don't turn me on none at all. I think about the girl with the gun up her snatch. I don't think about regular stuff, I think about fuckin' girls up, and ya knows what? I don't care! If someone really was murderin' Mrs. Houser, I still wouldn't call the poe-leece. I'd be standin' at that winder beatin' my meat anyways."

Dicky's eyes rolled in the fat face. "Dang, Balls. You're one fucked up piece'a work," then he slapped Balls' back and laughed.

Balls smirked over his beer. "Beats the shit out'a me why I'se always think about shit that makes ever-one else sick."

Dicky's simple gray matter couldn't handle these subjectivities. "Aw, man, you's're just drunk forget 'bout all that."

"But I'se serious, Dicky. Average dude looks at a hot splittail, he thinks 'man I'd love to hump that hot bitch,' but I think 'man, I'd like to piss up her ass whiles I'm pushin' her head in a wood-chipper or string her up by the neck buck nekit and beat off whiles I'm watchin' her twitch.'"

Dicky just shook his head, in queasy disbelief. "Balls, as long you ain't really doin' it, it don't matter much 'bout thinkin' it. Now this crazy talk'a yours is damn uglier than my grandma's ass

when she had all them bed sores. We gots cool shit comin' our way, man. We got æ~shine ta run and that old guy's house ta knock over, and money to be made! And we'se only twennie! We'se gonna be bird-doggin' chicks'n bangin' beaver whiles our wallets're full'a cash. So forget 'bout all that other shit " Dicky smirked up at the TV "it's that dang homo psycher-path stuff on TV's got you all fucked up."

Balls shrugged uneasily. "Yeah, I guess yer right," and, of course, he pronounced right as "rat."

Dicky's girth rose from the stool. "Tse gonna go contribit to the Luntville water supply. Why'n'chew order us up another pitcher?"

"Shore..."

Dicky wobbled off. When Balls ordered another pitcher, he and the keep looked up at the television at the same time. It was a commercial: "Try the new Abiciser!" an attractive blond in a red bikini enthused. "If you don't have abs like these in thirty days, return it for a full refund!" and then the camera zoomed in on her flat, bare belly and slit-like navel. There was even some camel-toe printing against the bikini bottoms, the sight of which caused half the men in the bar to woop.

The keep chuckled. "Wouldn't mind fuckin' that æ~un till she's seein' stars, huh?"

Balls shrugged. Shee-it, I'd rather yank her intestines out her asshole with a gaff pole, then cut off her head'n fuck her neck...

The commercial ended, replaced by still more gruesome news of this ghastly killer in Milwaukee. "...when police first entered the apartment, they arrested Dahmer immediately after noticing a pair of severed hands wired together, hanging in a closet. Later, according to hazmat and fire officials, the partially dissolved remains of at least one victim were found in a fifty-seven-gallon industrial drum full of corrosives. In the bedroom, several more body parts were discovered lying on top of Dahmer's bed, which had been covered in plastic dropcloths..."

Dang, Balls thought. He just couldn't figure it. When he glanced right he noticed that dullard in the white shirt still sitting there, looking up at the TV. "Hey, buddy? They say anything 'bout what caused him ta be that way?"

The guy in the white shirt seemed thrilled that someone was talking to him. "Well, one forensic psychiatrist from John's Hopkins has already labeled Dahmer as a sexual-sociopath."

Balls smirked. "That must mean he's crazy, right? Only a crazy person could pull shit like that?"

"Actually, no. Some killers of this ilk display psychopathic symptoms, but that's not the case with this Dahmer man. While it's true that a number of serial killers become inclined toward sexually motivated homicide due to catastrophic childhoods rife with neglect, perversion, sexual abuse, and battery, others have had a childhood experience that would be deemed as normal. The verdict's still out on Dahmer, of course, but it is interesting. Experiences and observations, particularly in the formative and adolescent years, often have a dramatic impact on a young mind, which all leads to transitive behavior in adulthood. Naturally, negative experiences and observations will have a negative impact. So where does that leave the serial killer who enjoyed a positive childhood indoctrination?"

"Huh?"

The guy in the white shirt raised a finger. "There's just as much evidence that proves environment need not have any bearing on certain mind sets. In other words and this is just one of the current theories a certain percentage of these so-called serial killers are possessed of no psychological defect and experienced nothing deleterious while growing up. They become serial killers in adulthood simply because of a genetic predilection."

"Huh?" Balls repeated.

"It's an innate impulse, just as it's an innate impulse for a dog to chase a rabbit. These men, these monsters of the modern world, become serial killers purely and simply because it's in their nature."

To Balls, the dissertation was barely comprehensible, but he understood enough. Like a dog chasin' a rabbit... It's in their nature...

Further discourse was then severed when the barkeep re-appeared with another pitcher. Dicky returned presently, and noticed an immediate reversal in his partner's previous preoccupation with morbidity.

"Ya knows what, Dicky? I feel a shitload better right now."

"Well that's dang great, Balls."

"And it's 'cos'a that guy over there," and he pointed to the guy in the white shirt, who was lighting what was likely his twentieth cigarette of the night. Balls slapped a five down on the bar. "Barkeep! Get that Poindexter-lookin' dude in the white shirt over there a drink on me."

"Comin' right up."

White Shirt looked flattered. "Much obliged."

Balls raised his mug. "Here's to our natures..."

Dicky raised his. "And here's to makin' money!"

White Shirt raised his. "And here's to providence" he winked "and I don't mean Rhode Island..."

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PART two:

EPIPHANIES

ONE MONTH LATER

(I)

Snot McKully had stump-grinder breath and teeth the size and color of lima beans; he was technically the man who owned one of those old manual drills properly termed a "brace" drill. Not the kind that worked like an egg-beater; instead, it was shaped like a squared-off U with outward protrusions. The bit was set into one protrusion, a bearing'd palm-wheel was fixed on the other. The manufacture's name Stanley could still be detected beneath the tarnished steel, and locked into its chuck was an 8-inch long double-twist auger bit, 3/8th of an inch wide and, anyway, the sequence of events that led up to the instance of Tritt "Balls" Conner cranking that bit into the girl's head was multifarious and rich.

It belonged to Snot McKully, and it was made back when elbow grease was more accessible than electricity.

The idea had simply "occurred" to Balls when he'd seen the drill lying by the main fermentation tung. An epiphany?

Yes.

The tool was a psychic totem of sorts, the Angel of Dementia that whispered into Balls' ear just as surely as Gabriel had whispered into the ear of Christ's mother Mary.

This took place exactly one month after Balls had met up with Dicky in front of Pip Brothers Laundromat two days out of the clink, and given Dicky the money for the Rock Crusher transmission...and in a sense, the affair was an epiphany for Dicky as well. That El Camino was

now probably the fastest car in the county, and this is why he and Balls had been hired immediately to run illegal liquor from local stills into the "dry" sectors of Kentucky. It wasn't much of a work ethic but at least they were making money. The car, purely and simply, had gotten them the job.

Here's how it went...

Â«Â« Â»Â»

When Balls and Dicky got out of the â€Mino, the barefoot and overalled bulk of Snot McKully rose from a wood table on which he appeared to be playing checkers with himself. Snot wore a straw hat; his face, within an untrimmed beard, seemed inflated and red at the edges. Balls thought of a balloon with eyes, mouth, and nose drawn on, and rimmed with Brillo. McKully sneered, showing the aforementioned lima-bean teeth when the â€Mino pulled up.

"Don't talk shitty to him now, Balls," Dicky warned. "Snot don't take no shit, and remember, he is payin' us..."

Balls' eyes darkened below the John Deere hat, his black goatee tightening in some resentment. "Shee-it, Dicky, he's got tits bigger'n his wife's, and he ain't payin' us what we're worth."

Dicky seemed nervous, a trait that had been growing on him since he and Balls had become "partners" in this venture of commerce and other less-seemly ventures. "Yeah, well, Balls, ya know, a hunnert a week just fer five twennie-five gallon runs ain't bad "

"It's piss, Dicky. Clyde Nale lets us haul a hunnert gallons per run. Why not this guy? Don't never let a man take â€vantage of ya. That's the first thing I learnt my first day in the joint," and then Balls, Webley .455 stuck in his belt, walked determinedly across the clearing which housed McKully's largest operational still.

Balls liked the smell of a backwoods still: the sharp vapors of the diamond-clear liquor itself, and that tinge of burnt corn. Piles of corn lay about, and pyramids of empty gallon jugs. Coils of copper tube hopped from one tank to another, and beneath the main tank a hefty fire crackled.

Beside a chicken coop, a '64 Ford Fairlane station wagon sat up on blocks, its hood up. A man who looked like a 100-year-old version of Larry on the Three Stooges was idly scraping rust off the battery terminals with a stiff wire brush. A dirty little girl, early teens, filled plastic jugs with moonshine from a large drum standing on props. Greasy blonde hair hung over her face. Skinny legs and arms but a distended belly told Balls she was dirty in more ways than one. Beside her, a mangy baby sat into the dirt, in brown-stained diapers. When it began to cry, the girl leaned over and poured some moonshine into its mouth. "There, there, Little Snot, jest you have a nip. It'll

settle ya down," and then she went back to filling the jugs. But Balls' crotch stirred a bit when she'd leaned over, the baggy overalls drooping below her chest. Balls saw nipples like cherry tomatoes.

Dicky's belly jigged when he trotted up. "Howdy there, Mr. McKully!"

McKully glared. "Boys. Yer early. I like that," but he pronounced like as "lak."

"Aâ€~corse we'se early," Balls said. "'Cos we'se efficient'n reliable. Gotta be ta be the best â€~shine runners in the state."

McKully thumbed closed his left nostril, tilted his head, then fired a streamer of discolored mucus upward, and damn if he didn't hit a sparrow sitting on a limb. The bird chirped in surprise and fell, and as it tried to shake off its new, ungainly hood, McKully squashed it under his bare sole.

"We'se supposed ta be impressed there, Mr. McKully?" Balls laughed. "Killin' a pissant little bird?"

McKully jabbed a finger so hard into Balls' chest, Balls almost fell backward. Dicky winced, thinking Aw, no, Balls, now what'cha have to say that fer?

"I could tell even â€~fore you got outa the car that you got-cher dander up, boy," McKully's voice vibrated. His atrocious breath seemed to hang like fog. "I ain't got time fer punks "

"Aw, no, Mr. McKully, Balls, see, he were only jokin'," Dicky jabbered.

" and if you two baby-blowers are the best shine-runners in the state, I'll grow a square asshole and shit a television," McKully finished. He fired more snot out a nostril he did that a lot; that's why they called him Snot then he turned and lumbered back to the table. "You boys are fired. Get out'a here."

Dicky looked apoplectic. "Aw, jeez, sir, don't do that "

"I don't like yer buddy's attitude," McKully said. "Never did. Bad attitude means trouble in this business. I don't need fellas with bad attitudes. I just need fellas who're bad."

Dicky frowned at his friend. "Come on, let's git. You done fucked this all up."

"Dicky, trust me...and watch," Balls assured. He strode cockily to McKully's checkers table. "That's a right fucked-up of ya, Mister McKully."

Just as McKully would sit back down, he turned with a surprising agility and jabbed that big dirty finger right back into Balls' chest, smudging his t-shirt which read THE THREE COMMANDMENTS: TITS, CLITS, & ICE COLD SCHLITZ. "Well I don't rightly give a fuck if that's fucked up'a me, boy. I don't like yer face, so's I don't want-cha workin' fer me no more. Now git off my land" McKully jabbed the finger yet again "and if you don't like me jammin' my finger in ya...then do somethin' about it."

Balls grinned, hands on hips (a favorite pose). His eyes flicked down once very briefly in the direction of that big Webley pistol sticking in his belt.

McKully laughed. "And don't think I don't see that gun there, boy, but do I look worried? You go ahead and make a move. I'll bitch-slap you with that gun in less time than it takes me to spit. Then I'll pull yer dick off'n give it to my daughter's baby fer a fuckin' pacifier."

"Come on, Balls!" Dicky called out from safe distance. "Let's just go..."

The seat creaked when McKully sat back down.

Balls didn't move. "Just tell me man to man, sir, why you let us run but twennie-five gallons'a shine per run when Dicky's â€˜Mino'll hold a hunnert jugs easy?"

McKully wasn't even looking at Balls. He made a checker-move. "It's 'cos you guys ain't got the nuts."

Balls leaned forward, hands still on hips. "Uh, what's that?"

"You fellas ain't bad enough. Bad as in down'n dirty. That kind of bad. Get it?"

"No, sir, I shore as shit don't 'cos, see, me'n Dicky here? We'se the baddest motherfuckers in these here parts, and that you can take to the bank."

McKully waved a hand. "I couldn't take it to the fuckin' toilet," but he pronounced toilet as "toe-lit." "Talkin' it's one thing, boy, walkin' it's another. Shee-it, any asshole with a fast car can outrun the cops on these roads, but I need runners who can do the whole job."

"The whole job?"

"Yeah. Like when the shit hits the fan, I need boys who're willin' to do anythin' to get out of the jam and leave no witnesses."

"Aw, hail," Balls began. "Me'n Dicky, we'se can do "

McKully's fat hand shot out to silence Balls' protest. He moved another checker. "I need fellas who'll kill." McKully grinned up with the pale green smile. "Boy? You ever kill a man?"

"Shee-it, Mr. McKully. I'se killed me plenty'a men."

"Yeah? How's about women? You ever kilt a woman?"

"Aw, a bunch of times," Balls said, but in truth, at this particular point in Tritt "Balls" Conner's existence, he'd actually killed no one. He'd raped some girls, sure but they were all asking for it anyway and he'd jacked out a number of fellas for their green, and he'd even mugged a few old ladies. But the act of murder was one crime not yet on his list of achievements.

Snot honked another nose-shot of snot. "I think yer fulla shit, boy. But I'll'se give ya the benner-fit of the doubt. You lay a good ruckin' on a gal, and I'll hire ya back."

Balls scratched the top of his hat. "A...ruckin'? What's that?"

McKully glared up as if offended. "Shee-it, boy! Yer from the south'n you don't know what a ruckin' is?"

Balls didn't know what to say. "I'se lived my whole life here'n did two years in the Russell County slam, and I ain't never heard'a no ruckin'."

The obese moonshiner seemed disgusted. "Kids," he muttered to himself. "All right, I'll'se tell ya. A ruckin' is when ya snatch yerself a perfectly inner-cent woman and just fuck her all up'n then kill her, fer no reason. That's what a ruckin' is, son."

"Oh," Balls said.

"So that's my deal, boy. If you kill a perfectly inner-cent splittail, without so much as battin' an eye, and real down'n dirty-like, a real hardcore job...then I'll give you'n yer fat buddy a hunnert gallons of æ~shine to run four days a week...and quadruple yer pay."

Balls shrugged nonchalance. "I'll go do it right now and you'll read about it in the paper tomorrow "

Snot McKully belted a laugh. "Naw, naw, punk. You do it right now, wheres I can see ya do it. I needs you to show me the ruckin' so I know ya got the nuts fer it."

Balls blinked. "Uh, well, okay but...where's I gonna get a splittail?"

McKully whistled. "Pumpkin? Pull that skinny gal out the coop'n drag her over."

Like an automaton, the teenaged girl with greasy hair loped over to the chicken coop, baggy overalls flowing around her frame. She opened a wire-covered hatch, and suddenly Balls thought he heard a muffled mewling sound.

The fuck's he got in there anyways? Balls wondered. Dicky looked grimly on from the El Camino.

From the coop, out flopped an emaciated woman, nude, and with a black rat's nest for hair, wrists and ankles tied. She mewled through a gag of what appeared to be a pair of very soiled men's shorts. Her eyes were huge orbs of terror in the thin face, and she was so skinny her ribs were deep grooves in paste-white flesh. She was ankle-dragged into the center of the clearing by the young blond girl.

"There's yer splittail, son," McKully said.

"Who the fuck is it?" Balls asked.

"Just some gal an inner-cent gal we caught walkin' through the woods. Had no choice but ta nab her. Cain't have her tellin' the ATF I got a still here, ya know?"

Balls frowned at the trembling, skin-covered skeleton. "She a creeker or somethin'? How she get so dang skinny?"

"Aw, we caught her over a week ago," McKully explained. He took a slug of his own panther piss from a cliched glass jar. "Couldn't make my mind up what to do with her so's I stuffed her in the chicken coop. Ain't fed her nothin' 'cos I didn't want her shittin' in my coop." McKully fired yet another nose-loogie off to the side, a big one. The young blond girl was already back to filling more jugs, unconcerned by the event taking place.

"Well, boy?" McKully grinned. "Got the belly fer it, or don't'cha?"

"Shee-it..." Balls ruminated on his thoughts, and then it occurred to him that he didn't give jack-fuck about this unfortunate soul at his feet. Innocent? Absolutely! But could Balls really kill her kill her down and dirty-like? Could he lay a genuine "ruckin'" on her?

Balls' epiphany was now at hand.

"Dicky! Come gimme a hand!"

"Uh, uh, well "

"Just come on!"

Dicky moseyed over, hands in pockets.

Balls shook his head when an inadvertent glance showed him the baby eating McKully's jettisoned splat of mucus. These really are some crackers here, he thought. Then he whipped out his Buck knife and snapped! it open. He straddled the emaciated woman and cut off her gag.

She wheezed like a kazoo. "Jaysus, Mary'n Joseph lemme go my God please lemme go! I ain't gonna tell no one 'bout the still I'se swear!"

"Aâ€~corse yer not, honey," Balls said.

Starvation had melted her breasts down to nipples flaps. "Cut me loose I'se beggin' ya! I weren't doin' nothin' but walkin' through the woods! Please please please cut me loose!"

Balls cut the rope binding her ankles.

"Oh God bless ya bless ya bless ya!" she wheezed. "Nows cut my hands free'n git me away from that evil man!"

"Shore, baby," Balls said, but then he sat on her belly with his back toward her face. "Dicky! Spread them walkin' sticks wide as ya can!"

The woman shrieked, her body writhing in the dirt beneath Balls' weight. Dicky reluctantly grabbed her ankles and, struggling against an expected resistance, spread her legs.

A great mound of bristly black pubic hair sprouted at her crotch.

"Dang, Dicky. Looks like a hunk'a sod, don't it?"

"Uh, uh, yeah, Balls, it shore does but, ya know, maybe we shouldn't be doin' this," his friend suggested. "She ain't done nobody no harm. This ain't right."

"â€~A'course it ain't," and then began cutting down there with his Buck. He inscribed the knife tip around the hairy triangle. Now the woman was really screaming, and Balls found that he liked that sound very much. It seemed delicious and warm and delectable.

Just like the sugar rolls my grandma used to make...

You could say it was with considerable craft that Balls skinned the woman's pubic mound. He held the ragged triangle of fur up for McKully to see, then flung it away. Blood poured from the wound as if from a bucket, and now the woman, all eighty or so pounds of her, managed to buck so hard, the reflex lifted Balls a good six inches off the ground.

"Dang," Dicky muttered.

Balls faced Snot McKully. "Down'n dirty enough fer ya?"

McKully waved a hand. "Aw, that ain't nothin'. I've scalped gals' pussies before, lots of times. That's the kind'a shit I was doin' fer fun when I was a kid."

"Well I'm glad you said that, Mr. McKully, 'cos I'm just warmin' up," and then Balls strode over to the jugging table. A side glance showed him the young blonde now sitting on the ground with her baby, offering it one of those cherry-tomato nipples. The baby sucked like someone at the bottom of a milkshake.

"You shore ya want yer daughter and the baby watchin' this?" he asked McKully.

McKully just waved a dismissive hand.

Balls grabbed a jug of moonshine and strode back over. Now the woman was sort of pinwheeling in the dirt, her screams grinding down.

"Dicky, git me some rope out the â€˜Mino."

Dicky stood in half-shock. "What'cha, what'cha need that fer?"

"Just git it!"

Balls uncapped the jug, then SPLAP! dumped a plume of 200-proof grain alcohol on the woman's scalped pubis.

The woman shrieked so loud even Balls jumped back a foot.

So he wants a ruckin', huh? Down'n dirty-like, huh? Balls spotted something near a pile of broken planks next to a fermenter: an old-fashioned brace-style manual drill. He snatched it up, not realizing that he'd just been touched by something called innovation. He rolled his eyes

walking back to the scene, noticing now that the blond teenager was back to filling jugs, while her baby was playing with the pubic scalp.

Balls straddled the girl again. Her combination of kicks, flails, and screams filled the clearing with a unique dervish of pandemonium. Balls found that he enjoyed the aural effect. "Dicky! I needs ta get this â€”ho simmered down. Sit on her knees."

Dicky frowned but did as he was told. Now the poor girl was pinned to the ground. Balls put a knee on her cheek, squashing her other cheek into the dirt, and then he started cranking away on the brace-drill. It was tough going at first. That auger-bit turned like a barber pole, making a sound sort of like a meat-grinder, and when it finally ate through her skull, he cranked it into her raw brain about an inch. The girl's screams were extraordinary; they sounded more like a bad wheel bearing than any mode of human protestation. But once that bit sunk in an inch, the screams abated, and her maniacal flailings digressed down to a steady, low-grade convulsion.

Balls and Dicky stood up, looking down. Balls smiled. "That shore took some spark out of her, huh?"

"Ya done drilled a hole in her head," Dicky observed with a roiling gut. "But she ain't kicked the bucket. Where'd ya learn that trick?"

"â€”Member 'bout a month ago we'se was in the bar watchin' 'bout that Dahmer fella? He took the zing out'a some'a his victims the same way said so on the news. Figgure if it's good enough fer him, it's good enough fer me, and see?" Balls gestured an opened hand to the convulsant girl. "Works like a charm."

Dicky made every effort to keep his eyes from lingering too long on the girl. Her eyes looked up at them, darted back and forth, and her lips moved but uttered no sound. All she did was lie there and tremble. The 3/8th-inch hole in her head effused surprisingly little blood.

Now the baby, however toothless, was gnawing on the pubic scalp like hairy jerky.

Dicky's eyes beseeched Snot McKully. "How's that fer a ruckin', Mr. McKully?" hoping the fat moonshiner was satisfied by the demonstration.

McKully inspected the unfortunate girl from his seat. "Ain't bad but I've seen better."

Balls guffawed. "What? You think I'm done? Shee-it," and then Balls grabbed that battery brush from the old guy who looked like Larry, and was sitting on the girl's stomach. He tweezed a nipple between his fingers then began to vigorously scour at the flesh with the brush's stiff, iron bristles.

"How's that, baby? Feel good?"

The girl's convulsions heightened again, and Balls found that the sensation against his crotch was pleasurable indeed. When the first nipple had been essentially scoured off, he proceeded to the next. All the while, the girl never uttered a sound. She simply convulsed.

Balls brought his lips down to the bleeding abrasions and began to suck.

Dicky could only wince. "I think ya done rucked her up enough, Balls..."

"Naw. Ya kiddin' me?" Red-mouthed, then, Balls got back up and grabbed the rope that Dicky had brought from the vehicle. McKully watched raptly as the girl's ankles were tied to a nearby tree. Then Balls cut another length. "Git in the â€Mino and start her up, Dicky."

"Whuh what?"

"Go on!"

Dicky shuffled back to the El Camino and started up the hefty 427 big block.

Balls made a noose out of one end of the rope and secured it around the girl's neck, then secured the other end to the â€Mino's trailer hitch. She was still alive but beginning to bleed out.

"Okay, Dicky-Boy! Let the clutch out! Slow!"

The â€Mino's engine revved once, then Dicky slid the Hurst into first. The car chugged forward a few inches at a time, eventually taking up the rope's slack, and when there was no slack left at all, the girl's emaciated frame stretched fully out and rose from the ground.

"Keep goin', Dicky!" Balls called out over the engine-noise. "Nice'n slow!"

The girl's eye bugged, her frog-belly-white face going first pink, then heather- blue. Her tongue stuck straight out, then POP! a vertebra in her neck gave way. Dicky kept inching the â€Mino forward while the neck stretched like a column of pale taffy. Balls clapped, amused, when the neck stretched out past a foot. The baby watched with a mild curiosity, until

POP!

her head snapped off and her body thumped to the ground.

"Good job, Dicky! Shut â€˜er down!"

McKully nodded approval. "Gots to admit, boy. That there was a dang fine ruckin'."

Balls cut the corpse's ankles free with the Buck, then shot McKully an exaggerated look of dismay. "Well, Ise hope you don't think that's it, Mr. McKully. You don't think I went ta all this trouble to call it quits â€˜fore I have me some real fun, do ya?"

"Well, seein' that you just scalped her pussy, drilled a hole in her skull, and popped her head off, it don't look to me like there's much more you can do."

"Shee-it," Balls grinned.

Dicky leaned against the â€˜Mino's tailgate, his face going ever paler as he watched Balls flip the corpse over and part the very dead legs.

Balls dropped his jeans and found an erection hard as a glass-cutter sprouting from his groin. He got on his knees, spread the corpse's buttocks, and spat. When his penis sunk in, his eyes rolled back in the most potent wave of ecstasy, and he proceeded to hump the lifeless rectum with gusto. Aw, shit, that's good... His grin flashed back to McKully, who was actually raising a brow. "See, Mr. McKully, there cain't be no doubt in yer mind that we can do the job, see? I'm fuckin' a headless corpse in the ass, after all. That sounds pretty down'n dirty ta me."

"I ain't denyin' it, son."

"I mean, I want'ja to know that I walk it like I talk it."

"That you do..."

"I wouldn't want you ta have no reservations 'bout me'n Dicky not bein' bad enough ta work for ya."

"Ya done proved yer point, son," McKully said.

Yeah? Balls thought, and then on the next stroke, his orgasm stunned him. His own rectum felt like it was trying to take a breath as his penis dumped a half-dozen big belts of sperm.

Balls gulped and collapsed on the corpse's back, exhausted, and at once he felt the full force of his epiphany and the ultimate revelation of his newfound calling...

That was the best nut of my LIFE...

He pulled his jeans back up, then dusted off his hands. Now his grin toward McKully sharpened to a cunning glare. "Down'n dirty enough for ya, Mr. McKully?"

"Td say so."

"Hardcore enough?"

"All right, boy, now don't git cocky. I just done admitted ya proved me wrong. Yer badder than I thought. Yer hardcore."

"Good," Balls gloated. "So's just you watch this..."

Even McKully looked appalled now. Balls kneeled back between the corpse's legs and spread the buttocks wide. Then

"Aw, no, son!" McKully objected. "Don't do that! Ya done proved yer point!"

Balls wedged his face right into the corpse's ass-crack, guttering muffled laughter, and then planted his lips in a tight circle around the sullied rectum...

And sucked.

He sucked hard, good and hard.

Of course, the girl hadn't been fed in a week, so there wasn't much in the way of fecal matter down there, but there was plenty of pasty, tacky, revolting stink, and there was plenty of something else as well: Balls' semen.

Balls sucked it all out of her ass right into his mouth. McKully, Dicky, the blond girl, and even the baby stared open-mouthed.

Balls rose. He picked up the severed head, then spat his own sperm into the dead girl's lips.

He cast the head aside and grinned right at McKully.

"Now that, Mr. McKully, is how Tritt Balls Conner puts a ruckin' on a gal."

(II)

This is how much of his new novel the Writer had completed in a month's time:

WHITE TRASH GOTHIC

CHAPTER ONE

There was a knock at the door. When Nikoff Raskol opened it, he

That was it. The Writer stared at the lone page in the Remington Model No. 2, dismayed. One and a half damn sentences in a month? Robert Lewis Stevenson wrote Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in three days! But when the Writer scrutinized that sentence and a half really just one independent clause, and a prepositional clause, he saw no falseness in it. Time means nothing to true art, he reminded himself. He was one of a privileged lot: a full-time fiction writer. Percy Shelley didn't rush Prometheus Unbound, and Eliot didn't rush Prufrock... And wasn't it Flaubert who said that not only was it the author's luxury to spend the morning putting in a comma and the afternoon taking it out, it was also his obligation?

Yes, the Writer was certain of it.

"That's enough work for today," he talked to himself and stood up and stretched. He lit a cigarette, opening the shade to let his gaze plummet down to the moonlit junkyard. Small animals which he presumed were rats scurried about the debris, and he could swear the dog defecating next to a junked car was the same dog he's seen doing the same his very first night. A bum staggered about, then plopped down by a heap of trash, opened a bottle of something. After several chugs, he tilted his head, vomited, then continued to imbibe.

Real life, the Writer thought with some satisfaction. Ideology reduced to material elements and physiological addictions contrary to the ethereal pursuit. Biological mechanism versus determinism...

Of course, the word "addiction" was subject to interpretation.

He went to the bathroom, then, and considered his use of the name Nikoff Raskol the protagonist for his novel and wondered if it were too obvious a reversion of Dostoevsky's protagonist in Crime and Punishment, the greatest fictional work of existential enlightenment in the history of the written word. Might critics think it trite? The Writer urinated mightily. No. Of course not. Great painters often paid homage to their contemporaries by ingeminating authoritative themes. He flushed the toilet and smiled, knowing beyond all doubt that White Trash Gothic would herald him as the Dostoevsky of the modern age of literature.

He turned on the old radio, which always drifted off the only classical station he could find. "Jaysus WANTS you to drive fine cars!" an evangelist trumpeted, "because it's Jaysus who

rewards the faithful so long as you remember the importance of charity and leave those fine cars to the church in your wills!" The dial pushed through static, then he caught a snippet of moody slide guitars and a man singing, "I will fuck you until you die, bury you and kiss this town goodbye!" The Writer winced Graciously! finnicked further, then stumbled on insipid hard rock and some sports stations before he found the following manic voice-warble, asserting, "I could be Raskolnikov, but Mother Nature RIPPED me off!"

Portents in the wind, he thought, emboldened by the coincidence. Surely it's a sign of Dante's Sisters of the Heavenly Spring, whispering their approval in my ear...

Then:

I deserve a drink!

He left and locked his room, only to turn into a burst of commotion. "Gimme that, you â€˜ho!" a chubby blonde girl in holey lingerie snapped at a chubby brunette in holey lingerie: "Fuck you, Irene! It's mine!" and, of course, she pronounced mine as "man." The pair were playing tug-of-war with a box about the size of a box of aluminum foil. The Writer squinted, noticing the words AS SEEN ON TV! printed on the box.

"It ain't yers!" wailed the blonde. Her breasts and a belly of baby fat bounced. "It's both ours!"

"Well I'se usin' it now, so's you kin grow a dick'n blow yerself!" but then both girls looked with alarm at the Writer. Their eyes shot wide and their argument abated.

"Shhh!" whispered the blonde. "It's that famous writer fella! Mrs. Gilman said she'd kick any girl out the house if'n we disturb him."

"Oh, you're not disturbing me," the Writer ingratiated them. "But harsh words and un-civil gestures are no way to solve a disagreement. What is that, anyway?"

The blonde handed him the box, which the Writer took after a quick visual surveillance of the large and mostly visible breasts buoyed up in a lacy brassiere. Then he frowned uncomprehending as he turned the long box around in his hands. NOT AVAILABLE IN STORES! it claimed. The top read WONKO KITCHEN PRODUCTS: THERM-O-FRESH FOOD SAVING SYSTEM! It was one of those kitchen gadgets for keeping leftovers fresh for longer.

In the Writer's head he made a rare departure from his avoidance of profanity: Why the fuck are two backwoods hookers fighting over THIS? though he didn't feel inclined to ask. "Flipping a coin seems the most fair manner by which to solve your discrepancy, hmm?"

Both girls begrudgingly nodded.

The Writer produced a quarter. "You call it," he said to the blonde and flipped.

"Heads!" the blonde snapped.

"Aw, you poop-eater, Stacy," sniped the brunette when the Writer caught the coin and showed heads. She thumped off to another room.

The blonde had won the box. "Thanks!"

The Writer figured it out: She must have children, and wants to stretch her food budget by saving leftovers.

"So what'cha write about, Mr. Writer?" she asked in a bouncy enthusiasm.

The Writer tried not to groan. "Fluctuations of the human condition in an ever-evolving or de-evolving age. I symbolize the tenets of post-Sartrean existentialism in the lives of characters in fiction."

She looked crosseyed at him. "Is that, like, havin' folks in a story that's made up do real things like what folks in real life experience?"

"Well, actually, yes."

"Aw, cool! So if'n ever ya wanna fuck me 'cos ya got someone in a story fuckin' an' you cain't remember what that's like, just you knock on my door. And all I se'll charge ya is ten bucks!"

The Writer was flabbergasted. "Uh, well, I just might do that if I need to reflect that aspect of the human condition in my work."

"Good! â€˜Bye!" but, of course, she pronounced â€˜bye as "baa!"

Depressed now, the Writer left the house and proceeded at once to the Crossroads, to drink with the gusto of Hemingway...

(III)

Needless to say, McKully rehired Balls and Dicky, upped their twenty-five-gallon runs to a hundred, and quadrupled their pay and with the jaded event came the actualization the epiphany

that would forge the true meaning of their destinies. They ran liquor for another man, as well, a man named Clyde Nale. What they each earned on a weekly basis was a fair shake of money, solid remuneration for two young dropouts in an economically wasted town. Balls and Dicky, hence, were a unique pair in Luntville: they were successful.

But Balls, since the genesis of his epiphany, wasn't satisfied with one-dimensional success...

That night, the El Camino cruised smoothly down dark, winding roads. They'd just finished dropping off a load of moonshine in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and now it was time to relax. Each had a beer between their legs and a smile on their face.

"Dang good day, Dicky," Balls remarked, his long hair billowing in the breeze from the open window.

"That it was, Balls," Dicky replied.

Balls went to wipe a booger when Dicky wasn't looking, but after doing so his fingers touched a small pile of odd plastic strips under the Mino's seat. The hail? "Hey, Dicky? What're these here funny thangs?" and then he held one up. "Come ta think of it, they look familiar..."

"Huh?" Dicky replied, squinting over.

"Oh, I know what these are," Balls finally said. "They're Flex-Cuffs, ain't they?"

"Oh, yeah..."

Balls nodded in the moonlight as the stars streamed by the open window. "The bulls used these things on us whenever they'd transport convicts to another block." Next, Balls' lips pursed. "But, Dicky... What'choo need Flex-Cuffs fer?"

"Aw, see, my Uncle Marty works the state penn, he brings home boxes of 'em. It's always good ta have some in the car in case ya need ta pole-tie a deer. It's the fastest way ta truss 'em up if'n you're out poachin'."

Balls thought about that and found the idea to be quite innovative. But then, in a mental jag, it wasn't a deer he saw pole-tied in his mind's eye, it was a naked woman. Or better yet, Flex-Cuff her wrists'n hook 'em over a broken branch-end stickin' out of a tree. Then git ta workin' on her nice'n slow with the manual drill, right in the breadbasket...

Dicky was chuckling. "Shee-it, my Uncle Marty's got it made workin' up at that place."

"The state slam?"

"Aw, yeah, man. Decent pay and benner-fits, plus he's kin git a blowjob anytime he wants and alls it costs is a quarter."

Balls thought about that, eyes thinned. "Oh, you mean from the female cons on the women's block."

Dicky paused for a number of moments, then blurted. "A'course! What'cha think I meant? From dudes? Shee-it."

Balls wondered but dismissed it. Suddenly he was thinking what it would be like to stick a spoon down a woman's throat in order to make her vomit while simultaneously engaged in the act of intercourse...

"But'cha knows what?" Dicky blathered. "I was thinkin'. Since we'se been runnin' â€˜shine? I'll'se bet we make more scratch than dang near anyone in all'a Luntville."

In Balls' mind, he was now making the woman drown in the vomit... "Huh? Oh, yeah, Dicky, I'll bet we do, buts ya know we'se'll be makin' even more real soon. You ain't fergot 'bout Crafter's house, now have ya?"

Dicky thought behind the wheel. "Aw, yeah. That fella on Governor's Bridge Road."

"Right. And it ain't but a couple'a days â€˜fore he goes to Spain."

"Then we'se'll really be loaded, after heistin' all that fancy jewelry he's got."

"And other stuff, too, like really old statues'n furniture. Bud Tooler tolt me Crafter even had dinner plates made'a gold."

"Shee-it!" Dicky whispered.

"Yeah, man. So what's our schedule lookin' like?"

Dicky put on his Thinking Cap, which took a while. "Uh, let's see, I'se think tomorrow we got a full run for Clyde Nale, and day after a run'a piece for McKully'n Nale. And day after that...we'se off."

"That's dandier than a double-blowjob from underage twins, Dicky-Boy. So's figgure night after tomorrow, we do the job'n fence the shit in Pulaski the next day."

"Solid."

Dicky drove on through the wooded night, thinking sweet thoughts of all that money they'd have soon. Balls' thoughts, however, remained not so sweet. Now he dredged up the delicious memory of that rucking he'd pulled at McKully's, and recalled the accelerated intensity of his orgasm when he'd sodomized the hill girl once she was headless. He focused on the recollection, like a scientist focusing a powerful microscope, and he re-lived the rush he'd gotten whilst scalping her pubis. He relished the remembrance of the minute and indefinable sound that the battery brush had made when he'd been scouring off her nipples...

And a moment later his maladapted synapses were firing impulses into his libidinal system, and in less time than it would've taken him to say the word "pathological," his penis thudded within the confines of his jeans, painfully erect.

As he luxuriated in these thoughts, he was pap-pap-papping his homemade blackjack into an opened palm...

"What's that?" Dicky inquired.

Balls blinked out of his distraction. "Huh? Oh, this? Ain't nothin' but my jack. Found it in a box'a junk at my Daddy's house. I made it myself when I'se was a little kid, I did. Alls ya do is screw a fishing weight into the top of a screen-door spring, then ya wrap it up in æ~lecktrical tape." Pap-pap-pap. "Kind'a neat, I'd say. Figgure I'll carry it æ~round in case of a emergency."

Dicky's corpulent face screwed up. "What'cha need a dang blackjack fer when ya got that big ole pistol in yer belt?"

"A quiet-type of emergency, Dicky."

"Oh... But, hey, you ever really use it on anyone?"

Balls' cheeks billowed as he scoffed. "Shee-it, Dicky, you kiddin' me? I'se jacked dozens of fellas out with this here jack, and a lots of 'em was really big fellas too, I'se kin tell ya. Some turd give me a hard time? I just pop him one in the noggin and he's lights out. Then, a'course, I take his green."

"Wow," Dicky responded, impressed.

Naturally, everything Balls had said was a lie. He'd never struck anyone with his homemade blackjack only neighborhood cats as a child.

But now? Since his epiphany?

"Where we at now, Dicky?" Balls asked. The 'Mino was cruising through another drab, rundown little town. Most shops stood closed, and no other traffic could be seen.

"Waynesville. Don't'cha worry none, Balls. Won't be more'n ten minutes'n we'll be pullin' into the Crossroads."

Now, for some unidentifiable reason, Balls scanned the streets more intently, as if looking for something in particular... When they turned a corner, though, he saw a small, dented sedan parked in the front lot of a Peoples Drug Store. It was the only car in the lot, and in the back sat several young children. A haggard fortyish woman with a beehive hairdo was walking away from the store carrying two bags.

"Pull into this drug store, Dicky. I gots ta pee."

Dicky frowned. "Ya cain't wait ten minutes?"

"I ain't peed in two or three hours, man, and I'se already done drunk a six-pack. My piss-bag's full, brother. Just pull in."

Dicky did so, then Balls jumped out, but instead of heading toward the store...he headed toward the sedan. He leaned over and smiled into the back seat, where three little girls sat huddled.

"Howdy, girls! What'cha all doin' this fine night?"

The little girls exchanged wide-eyed glances, then one peeped, "We'se havin' a pajama party so's my ma's gettin' us some sodas and cheese doodles."

"Well, that sounds like a lot'a fun!"

Just then the woman rushed up to the car. "Who're you? What'choo doin' talkin' to my kids! Just you get out'a here!"

"Aw, ma'am, I'se was just sayin' hi," Balls replied and smack! hit her right in the forehead with his blackjack. She collapsed, instantly unconscious, while the little girls in the backseat burst into a round of ear-piercing shrieks.

Balls whipped out his penis and wasted no time in relieving the volume of his bladder. He fired the hot, yard-long stream right into the back seat, swaying back and forth across the horrified

little chipmunk faces. The little girls shrieked like referee whistles.

Balls zipped up quick, snagged the woman's purse and a bag of cheese doodles, then jogged back to the El Camino.

"Holy shit, Balls!" Dicky yelled when his cohort jumped back in. "What the fuck?"

"Drive, Dicky! Drive!"

Dicky dumped the â€˜Mino's clutch and pulled a 450-horsepower hole-shot out of the parking lot. Tires screamed, rubber burned, and the engine's roar fractured the night. Dicky careened out, then lead-footed it off the main drag.

Balls cackled laughter.

"Jaysus Chrast, Balls! You just jacked a lady out and peed on her kids!"

"Yeah. Cool, huh?"

Dicky's face darkened with rage. "Someone could'a seen! What if a cop drove by when you was pullin' that stunt?"

"Aw, shee-it, Dicky. The parkin' lot was empty and there weren't another car on the street. Relax."

"Relax?"

Dicky sped as far away from the incident as he could without dumping the car. Within minutes they were cruising through more winding, dark roads through the woods.

The dashboard lights tinted Balls' grinning face. He rooted through the woman's purse, snatched up some bills, then threw the rest out the window. "Dang! That beat bitch had sixty bucks on her."

"Fuck, Balls!" Dicky continued to bellow. "What the FUCK did'ja do that fer?"

Balls shook his head. "I don't rightly know, Dicky. It just come into my head to do it. â€˜Sides, I had ta pee bad and I've thought it might be interestin' to do it on them little girls."

"Interestin'! We could get throwed in jail fer that! And you's on fuckin' parole anyway!"

"Aw, ferget it." Balls busted open the bag. "Here. Have a cheese doodle."

"I don't want no fuckin' cheese doodle!" Dicky glared in disbelief. "You are crazy, man! Crazy!"

Balls sat back, munching contemplatively. "Naw, Dicky. I ain't crazy." He smiled out the window, into the endless night. "Ise just followin' my nature..."

(IV)

The Writer left the Crossroads fairly drunk in the vicinity of midnight. Just as he shuffled across the gravel parking lot, he was given a start by a sudden avalanche of noise, a great, clamorous chugging that reminded him of one of those ridiculous four-engine powerboats pulling up to a dock. But this was no boat, it was a vintage black El Camino. The Writer sighed in relief when the engine racket severed. It should be against the law for cars to be that loud... Two figures disembarked amid the shadows. The Writer heard some quick redneck dialect: "Aw, shee-it, Dicky! Yous should'a seen their faces when I'se was hosin' 'em down with my kidney juice! Oooo-eee!" Then the figures entered the bar.

Kidney juice? the Writer thought.

The moon watched him through gnarled trees when he took the narrow road out of the woods to the main street. Did he hear a wolf howl? No. Power of suggestion. Crickets trilled in a palpable throb; he thought of old Tangerine Dream records. Damn. Cigarettes, he reminded himself, and turned with some trepidation toward the Qwik-Mart. Out front a man in a suit and tie was getting into what appeared to be a Rolls Royce; the Writer immediately noted that the man had inadvertently placed his wallet on top of the car when he'd extracted his keys, then forgot to reclaim it when he got behind the wheel. He backed out and began to pull away, and the wallet slid off the car onto the pavement.

"Hey! Wait!" the Writer called out. He jogged over. At least a dozen credit cards and various ID's had slid out of the wallet as well. He scooped them all up and jogged over. The car idled at the exit, a man looking out.

"Yes?"

"You left your wallet on the car and it fell off."

The debonair-looking driver frowned at himself. "I must have left my wits at home today. How stupid of me."

"Some of your credit cards slipped out but I picked them up," the Writer said, and handed it all

over to the well-groomed older man.

"Honesty is such a rare commodity these days. You're one of a choice few, and you have my thanks." Then the man handed the Writer a \$100 bill.

"Oh, really, sir, I couldn't "

"Take it, with my compliments..." The man's face seemed to darken as he smiled. "What a tenuous power... The power of truth..."

The Writer stared as the Rolls Royce drove off.

The comment unnerved him, even though he knew it to be sheer coincidence. But then his shoulders slumped as he headed back for the store. A lone credit card lay in the parking lot. Damn, I missed one. The Rolls Royce was long gone now. He pocketed the card and resolved to call the 1-800 number on the back tomorrow.

In the store a tall young man with a shaved head was buying several cans of refried beans and jalapeno peppers. He wore a swastika earring, and had a tattoo on a bulging deltoid which read: ARYAN NATION. Was the man whistling "The Sound of Music" when he left?

"You again," the visored, old proprietor greeted. "The Writer."

"It's good to see you, sir."

"Shee-it. You 'bout done with this fancy book'a yers?"

I've only written one and a half sentences... "It's coming along. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know."

"Rome, huh? My brother fought the Germans in Italy. After they up'n killed everything that moved, they went on leave to fuckin' Rome. Said ya needed a clothespin on yer nose to fuck the whores."

"How...elucidating," the Writer remarked.

The proprietor snorted. "Said the whores in Rome were the hairiest whores he ever done seen. Even hairier than the krauts."

"Hmm. Hirsute prostitutes..."

The proprietor frowned. "Said they had so much hair under their arms you'd have thought they had the Black Panthers in a fuckin' headlock."

The Writer stood speechless.

"Ya ever read the shortest book ever written?"

"What's that?" the Writer had to ask.

"The History of Italian War Heroes!" and the proprietor slapped his knees and guffawed out loud. Then he began walking toward a rear door.

"Uh, sir?" The Writer raised a finger. "I was going to buy something, and I'm rather in a hurry..."

The proprietor glared. "I gotta take a shit! Do ya mind? Or I guess ya think that 'cos you're the customer, I gotta shit my pants 'cos you're rather in a hurry! Fuck!"

The man's cane tapped the floor as he disappeared.

I love this place, the Writer thought. He browsed the aisles, and took several Three Musketeers to the counter. A small television squawked next to the cigar rack. The Writer's eyes bloomed...

"Don't throw those leftovers away!" spoke an animated voiceover as a Donna Reed-looking housewife dumped a plate of food into a kitchen wastebasket. "Now you can save hundreds, even thousands of dollars a year with the amazing, new Therm-O-Fresh!" Now the housewife emptied another plate of food into a plastic bag. "You can freeze it, you can boil it, you can microwave it! Now your leftovers will taste as fresh as the day you bought them when you use the Therm-O-Fresh Food Saving System!" The housewife slipped a plastic tube into the bag, then pushed a button on a machine about the size of a box of aluminum foil. The plastic bag collapsed, as the tube sucked all the air out of it. "The Therm-O-Fresh patented one-touch vacuum instantly removes all the air from your valuable leftovers, then seals the storage bag in seconds." Next the edge of the bag was placed in a groove on the machine which heat-sealed it shut. Donna Reed was amazed.

That's the thing the two girls were fighting over at the motel, the Writer realized.

"Keep nuts, cookies, pretzels, even potato chips fresh as the day you bought them! The Therm-O-Fresh System includes five specially-designed jars with air-lock tops that you can use over and over again!" Now, the housewife stuck the tube into a valve of some sort on top of a jar full of popcorn. "Watch what our patented lifetime-guaranteed industrial-strength vacuum does to this popcorn!" She pushed the button and the popcorn collapsed like magic in the jar. "Not available

in stores! Call now while supplies last! Get the patented Therm-O-Fresh Food Saving System for just four easy payments of \$49.95. That's right, just \$49.95! And if you call within the next ten minutes, you'll receive a year's supply of patented Therm-O-Fresh vacuum bags absolutely free!"

"Ain't that some shit?" the proprietor returned, glaring at the TV. "Fuckin' Red China's buildin' a hunnert nukes a day to shoot at us, and all we're makin' is a bunch'a fuckin' Chia Pets'n these goddamn Cabbage Patch dolls'n some fuckin' shit called Windows 3.0! What's the country comin' to?"

"I couldn't hazard a speculation," the Writer said, "but I would like a carton of generic lights."

"Fuck! You could at least buy Marlboros..."

When the old crank rang up the purchase, the Writer handed him the \$100 bill from the Rolls Royce guy.

"Do I look like the fuckin' U.S. Treasury? I cain't break that!"

Now the Writer fumbled with his ankle-wallet, and put down a twenty.

"Shee-it." The proprietor slapped the change down on the counter.

The Writer sighed. I come in here every week... He slid two quarters over. "And a bag, please."

"Jesus! One dollar!"

The Writer winced but paid nonetheless. "Have a pleasant evening."

"A pleasant evening? You shittin' me? My hemorrhoids itch so bad I could run a fuckin' cactus through my crack!"

The Writer took long strides out of the store, just as a half-dozen Hispanics entered. The old man could be heard in the background even after the door closed. "What is this? The fuckin' Alamo?"

The Writer contemplated Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* as he walked back to the Gilman House. How clever of the Mississippi Nobel Prize winner to title his novel from a line in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The Writer recited the ironic lines with each step back to the whorehouse: Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing...

Indeed, the "idiot's" view of the world proved the most truthful...

The previous chorus of crickets was absent now, leaving dead-silence to hover through the night. At the front drive, he noticed Mrs. Gilman's mailbox hanging open; three long boxes were inside along with several envelopes. He gathered it all up and went inside.

"Well, hey there, Mr. Writer!" greeted if a bit loudly Mrs. Gilman behind the check-in desk. "How was your nightly walk?" but naturally she pronounced the word nightly as "nat-lee."

"It was wonderful, Mrs. Gilman..."

Three chunky prostitutes in lingerie stood up at the desk as well, a redhead, a blonde, and a brunette. They all had big silly grins on their faces.

"You mean yer nightly walk home from the bar, huh, Mr. Writer?" jibed the red-head.

"I must confess," the Writer chuckled, but only now did it occur to him that he must reek of beer-breath.

"Probably lookin' to git lucky," said the blonde, "but the Crossroads ain't no place to git lucky. All them skanky gals they got up there?"

The brunette batted her eyes. She would've had a great smile were it not for the missing incisor. "Right here's the place to git lucky, â€~specially fer a handsome, rich writer like you."

The Writer sighed. "Really, I'm not that "

"What's all that?" Mrs. Gilman asked, pointing to the parcels under his arm.

"Oh, the mail. I noticed the post box was full when I was walking up."

All three of the younger girls perked up when they noticed the three long boxes under his arm. "Any'a them boxes fer me?" asked the red-head. "Or me?" added the blonde. "Tse expectin' somethin'." "Me too!" exclaimed the brunette.

"Well, let's see," and the Writer began to read the address labels on each box. "Nyna Rhodes..."

The red-head's hand shot up. "That's me!"

"Anita Gonzales..."

The brunette beamed.

"Beatrice Mullins."

The blonde raised her hand, bouncing up and down. The Writer distributed the boxes, then gave Mrs. Gilman the rest of the mail. "Probably just bills for you, Mrs. Gilman."

"Like death'n taxes," but then she paused. "â€~Cept I don't really pay no taxes to speak of. But I reckon I'll be payin' lots more once this Arkansas shyster gets in the White House. Kin you believe the news says he's gonna win?"

"I'm an apolitical writer," the Writer said. "I have no opinion..."

The blonde and red-head ran up the stairs with their boxes, excited as children who'd just been given a surprise. The brunette remained, however, opening her box at the desk. "Oh, I just so hope this is it!" she gibbered.

The girl squealed with delight. The Writer did a double-take. The box read WONKO KITCHEN PRODUCTS: THERM-O-FRESH FOOD SAVING SYSTEM.

"T'se gonna go use mine right now, I am!" she celebrated and scampered up the stairs.

"These girls," Mrs. Gilman said, shaking her head with a smile.

The Writer looked hard at her. "Mrs. Gilman? Why on earth would girls such as these spend two hundred dollars apiece on those "

The phone rang, truncating the rest of the Writer's query.

"Oh hi, Doris, dear! And how are you today?"

The Writer could feel a long conversation coming so he drifted upstairs. He counted thirteen steps to the landing. What would happen if, say, tomorrow I walk up these same steps, but there are fourteen? And the next day fifteen? And sixteen the day after that?

It must be a slow night; very few bedsprings were heard, but he did hear someone say "Who's your daddy?" but he was sure it was a woman's voice.

He passed a door half-open, unconsciously looked in, then gaped.

"Haa! Come on in!"

It was Nancy, and the reason for the Writer's gape was due to the fact that Nancy was sitting

hunched on her bed, one hundred percent naked. Oh, dear, he thought.

Her perfect breasts, however badly tattooed, depended from the pose; she was leaning over painting her toenails. Every contour of her physique seemed to exist without perceptible defect. Redneck paragon... A physical pattern of excellence. Shakespeare could write a pastoral verse-sequence about her, in octosyllabic couplets...

"How do my toesies look?" she asked, then stuck her long legs out.

"Preeminent," the Writer droned.

"Does...that mean good?"

"Yes." Like slow syrup, his gaze drooled down the legs to the adorable bald triangle of creases betwixt them. Even inclined on her elbows, her stomach showed not even an inkling of a ridge.

Though touched upon previously, it must be stated in full now that the Writer was and had been for a number of years a self-imposed celibate. It was the sexual angst he craved, that strange edge of need unrelieved. He knew that it's what his Muse demanded: to stare into the promise of la petite-morte only to have it sift through his fingers like so much proverbial sand. Monks did it, priests did it, even Jesus Christ did it, and the Writer figured that if he could imitate just one facet of them, then his writing would be charged by the same verity that charged their systems of faith. But even in his abstinence, however, he was allowed to look. As a Writer, he was a seeker, and hence, a seer. If the human self was the only thing that could be known and therefore verified, everything that that same self saw was verifiable as well.

His penis swelled in his pants to the extent that it felt like a hamster that had died and entered rigor mortis.

"So what'cha doin' tonight?" she asked, rocking her feet.

His teeth ground as the realities bled through the ideal. The atrocious tattoos turned her into a desecrated icon. His autograph was still in plain sight above the "Smiley Face" with a nipple for a nose.

"I was doing my Dylan Thomas imitation," he said.

"Huh?"

"Drinking a lot."

She giggled. "Oh, I heard you hang out up the Crossroads." Her eyes went wide in a hopeful recollection. "I gang-banged ten fellas there once fer ten bucks a piece. Next time you're there, look fer the dark spot by the corner pocket. That's me."

The Writer stood speechless.

"So who's this villain yer talkin' 'bout? His name's Thomas?"

Whuh... "Oh, no, not villain. Dylan. Dylan Thomas. I was making a quip. He was arguably the century's greatest poet in the English language he wrote Deaths and Entrances. He was what they call a "biblical symbolist."

Nancy's angelic face showed recognition. "I gots me a step-brother who plays cymbals and drums, too."

"No, no, Dylan Thomas' best verse juxtaposed the exuberance of faith in God, with the cruciality of our need to redeem ourselves for our sexual sins."

Her peaches-and-cream tits bounced when she giggled again. "Oh. I guess I'se need ta read him!"

"But I was actually joking in my preliminary reference. He was a big drinker," the Writer explained. "I'm sure it was just an excuse for his alcoholism, but he would regularly contend no matter how much alcohol he consumed, he could prevent himself from getting drunk merely by thinking."

"Thankin'?" the prostitute queried.

"Yes. He believed that alcohol accelerated the quality of his creativity, so he would drink but by the force of his mind, not allow himself to get drunk." He was also an oaf and an oddball, who died from alcohol poisoning, but the Writer neglected to mention these facts.

"Just by thankin'," Nancy uttered amazed.

"Oh, yes. The human mind is quite a powerful thing, the sheer force of will."

"But'cha know?" Her face lit up. "T'se kin do somethin' with my mind! Wanna see?"

All those beers were finally sinking in. The Writer was wobbling a bit in place. "Uh, well, I really should be go "

"Just you watch!" she advised, and adjusted her pose. She leaned up on her arms, and parted her

creamy thighs with her knees bent over the bed's edge. "Watch my titties'n cunny..."

Well, I know what titties are, the Writer thought. And I presume that "cunny" is a vaginal reference... "Um, sure."

Nancy closed her eyes and leaned her head back. A delectable pink tongue glazed her lips, and she began taking slow, deep breaths through her nose. She was obviously concentrating on something with great focus. The trim stomach moved slowly in and out and, next, she was moaning ever so lightly.

The Writer's gaze switched from her breasts to her crotch, then back to her breasts. And what breasts they are, he had to note. His drunkenness began to struggle with his stubborn celibacy, as his loins began to percolate quite like a coffee pot. His gaze fixed on the nipples, pink as her tongue and roughly the size of silver dollars but then

Hmm...

The nipples began to increase in size, a fascinating transformation, like a dried sponge dropped in water, until they'd grown to a circumference of the bottom of a soup can. Even the breasts themselves seemed to gain girth, blood vessels presumably dilating by the command of her brain. Could he even see the gentle blue ghost-lines of veins pumping more blood into the coveted tissue? My God, the Writer thought. And not only did the areolae grow in circumference; they also grew in depth, until they stuck out like pink macaroons.

And when the Writer looked between her legs

Gracious!

The pea-sized clitoris has transmogrified into a drunkard's nose.

"There!" Nancy celebrated. "How ya like that?"

"You are woman not only of description-defying beauty, but one also of applaudable talent."

She unconsciously tweezed her papillas, which were now the size of those mini-marshmallows, strawberry-flavored, of course. "And I'se done it just by thankin'."

"Proof of the mind's power, indeed," but the Writer had to keep wincing away from the tumid attributes.

She grinned coyly. "Wanna know whats I was thankin' 'bout?"

"Uh, well..."

"I was thankin' 'bout you fistin' my cunny'n jerkin' yer peter off on my stomach, I was. Then just rubbin' all that warm cum all over my skin..."

"My, oh my..."

Now her bare foot trailed up the inside of the Writer's leg, and suddenly the toes were wriggling like an old Magic-Fingers over his crotch. The Writer felt his penis urp up an instantaneous effusion of pre-ejaculatory fluid.

"It's a real slow night," she pointed out. "And I ain't got another trick fer another half hour..."

The Writer knew an embarrassing wet spot was surely forming against his pants. He stepped back, careful not to stagger. "Really, I must be going."

"Aw, yeah," she said, disheartened. "Guess ya gots to git back to work on yer book "

"Yes, yes, but have a good n " and before he could bid her a good night, a side-glance showed him something familiar on her dresser.

It was a Therm-O-Fresh Food Saving System.

Very slowly, the Writer's gaze lolled back to the young prostitute. "Hey, Nancy. Why do you have that Therm-O-Fresh machine?"

"Aw, we'se all have one," she told him, nonchalant. "They're fer " but then, of course, the phone rang.

The Writer groaned.

"Oh, hi, Grandma," Nancy said cheerily into the phone. "Naw, kind'a slow tonight, only had three tricks so far, and two of 'em were blowjobs. But then there was this one fella comes in sometimes'n pays me fifty ta put it in my backside... Oh, yeah, but you'n ma was right this is a great way ta make a livin'. I'se so happy I took yer advice."

The Writer retreated from the room and closed the door.

His entire groin throbbed. How many years had it been since he'd masturbated? I cannot, I MUST NOT allow myself to succumb to primitivistic lust! he ordered himself. In order to be the best

writer I CAN be, I must deprive myself of this volition-stealing vice, just as Salvador Dali accelerated his creative visions by depriving himself of sleep... There was too much stimulus around here, all these pretty prostitutes. I don't need to see any more of them tonight.

Just as he would enter his room, the plush blonde from downstairs exited the adjacent room with a look of need on her face. Grapefruit breasts sat in fishnet bra-cups like dainty hammocks.

"Beatrice, isn't it?" the Writer recalled.

"Yeah, but see me'n Anita gotta share a room'n right now she's got a trick. You mind if I use yer bathroom?"

What could he say? It won't take long... "Of course, Beatrice. Come right in."

He watched the white rump bounce in see-through, black panties, and when she turned, the dark tuft of pubic hair was all-too-apparent, poofing out the sheer material of the front.

She giggled. "You kin watch if'n ya want," and then she strode briskly into the bathroom.

There was no logical reason to want to watch a woman go to the bathroom; nevertheless, the Writer much to his displeasure was hijacked by the primitive male curiosity that was probably a mental mechanism similar to that which causes people to peer at car wrecks or dead animals in the road. After a few moments of deliberation, and as delicately as possible, the Writer stepped into the bathroom.

What is he began.

Beatrice was not sitting on the toilet as one might expect. Instead, she lay on the floor, and jutted her shapely legs in the air in order to slip off her panties. And she'd brought something with her, but the Writer had been too busy visually assaying her physique to take note of that fact.

She'd brought her Therm-O-Fresh Food Storage System.

Just the unit itself, not the bags or jars. And she'd already taken the liberty of plugging it into the outlet where the Writer kept his electric toothbrush.

"A gal kin save a lot'a money with one'a these," she said, on her back and with her legs widely spread. She'd already liberally lubricated her vulva as well as the machine's vacuum tube with saliva, and now, as she explained, she gingerly worked the tube into her vagina. "Most all'a us got one now. See, whenevers we'se a week late on our period, nine times out'a ten" of course, she'd pronounced the word times as "tams" "it means we'se knocked up, so's we use the machine

ta git 'em out æfore they git too big. Ya git 'em early and I'se swear they ain't no bigger'n a popcorn kernel ya know before ya pop it. Mrs. Gilman showed us hows ta do it only tricky part is ya gots ta git the tube right up into this special place called a dang I'se cain't remember. She called it a servo? Or was it a servik "

Outraged, the Writer offered, "Your cervical canal?"

"Yeah!" she beamed. "That's it! Ya gots ta git the tube up in that'n then push a little," and all the while her fingers manipulated the tube until

"Uhh! I gots it!"

The Writer watched appalled, face sagging, as Beatrice turned on the Therm-O-Fresh vacuum machine. It hummed like a old-style aquarium pump, then seemed to admit a faint whine as if encountering resistance, and then

"There!" she announced.

In an eye's wink, the tube filled with blood. Beatrice turned the machine off, extracted the tube, and got up.

The Writer's face continued to sag in uncomprehending horror. The girl detached the other end of the tube, then held it over the sink. When the tube failed to empty, she blew into its clean end and splat!

something jettisoned into the sink, along with a modest spatter of blood.

"There it is. See?" She plucked something tiny up with her fingers and placed it in her palm. The Writer only ventured a second's glance, saw something like a blood clot with a disturbing configuration. A human spitball, he thought.

"Costs a lot less than goin' to a doctor," the blonde continued, "and it sure beats the hail out'a the hanger. And best part of all is it don't hurt none..."

The Writer gasped at a well of blood running down her thigh.

"Aw, that ain't nothin'," she assured. "The bleedin' stops right away. I'll just stick ta blowjobs'n ass-fuckin' tonight, and I'll'se be good as new tomorrow." She flapped her hand into the toilet, flushed it, rinsed the sink out, and then gathered up the machine. "Some'a the gals keep theirs "

"Kuk-kuh keep?" the Writer gasped.

"Yeah, they'se keep 'em in a jar'a alcohol. Jennie's got like almost twennie, and some of 'em are bigger than chickpeas. Oh, and, Marcy" she giggled, shaking her head "she even names hers. Ain't that just the silliest thing ya ever did hear?"

The Writer could only stare, utterly obfuscated.

"Well, thanks! Good luck workin' on yer book!" and then Beatrice bounced out of the room, pantiless and quite content.

The Writer collapsed on his bed, and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

(V)

Dicky pulled up in front of the ramshackle house left to Balls by the latter's departed white trash, walking shit-heap of a father: gray wood planks and a canted roof. Jeez, Dicky thought. The place sat back in the woods at the end of a quarter-mile drive, quite remote. Dicky smelled woodsmoke, however, and something cooking that smelled damn good. I'se could use a little somethin' in my breadbasket, he acknowledged. Today they'd be driving a hundred miles into Kentucky and back again. When he stepped onto the porch, it creaked to the point that he feared his sheer weight might snap the planks. He knocked and the knobless front door swung open.

"Hey, Dicky-Boy! Come on in! Beautiful mornin', ain't it?"

More floorboards creaked when Dicky's bulk entered. Balls sat at a kitchen table, reading over mail. "Shore is, Balls. Beautiful mornin' ta be runnin' moonshine."

"Yeah, man. Fer Clyde Nale today, right?"

"Yeah. He's a dang sight nicer'n Snot McKully."

Balls seemed to be addled by the mail. "Shee-it my drawers. Ain't nothin' good never comes in the fuckin' mail. Probation shit, bill-collector shit, and a bunch'a fuckin' bills my Daddy never paid. No wonder there ain't no æ~leck-tricity."

"Dang. Sucks."

Balls flapped another letter down in disgust. "And a county property tax bill! Four hunnert bucks! Fer this shit-house?"

"What'cher dander up fer, Balls? You'll have that and a shitload more once we make this run for Nale'n then clean out Crafter's place."

"You's right, Dicky," Balls calmed down. He cracked a laugh. "The fuck I care!" One last piece of mail remained, an ad flier. Balls squinted at it. It was a special offer for something called the Therm-O-Fresh Food Saving System. Balls just shook his head and threw it out, along with the rest of the mail.

Dicky sniffed the air, looking to and fro. The woodstove was off, and the thirty-year-old oven was dead. "I smell somethin' damn fine, Balls. What'choo cookin'?"

"Out back, Dicky. I'se steamin' a pot'a crawdads. Gotta creek out the woods that's loaded with 'em."

"I ain't had me crawdads in a coon's age!"

Balls rose and cracked his hands together. "Well then let's go eat 'em, then get on our way to Clyde Nale's. â€˜Sides, I gots one last chore ta do outside â€˜fore we leave."

But when Dicky turned toward the back door, he stopped. Clothes were strewn about clothes that clearly did not belong to Balls. A pair of drab brown slacks, a brown hat that said WENDY'S on it, and a shirt with a WENDY'S patch as well. There was also a pair of panties and a bra.

"What the hail? You gotta chick here?"

"Sort'a," Balls said and smiled.

Dicky noticed something else now. Some stains of some kind darkened the floor, and there seemed to be a minor litter of some little...curly things. One thing more: a pair of pliers and a ballpeen hammer.

Dicky stooped, picked up one of the curly things. "Balls? The fuck? This is a toenail!" he exclaimed and dropped it at once.

"Yeah. I'se pulled 'em out with the pliers, â€˜long with her fingernails, the little hosebag."

"Who?"

"One'a them illegal immer-grints," Balls sniped. "Big-tit jibber-jabber bitch she was. Last night after you's dropped me off, I walked down the drive to check the mail'n the bitch is walkin' up the main road. Guess she just got off a shift from Wendy's, and I'se sure she got the job 'cos she

works tax-free under the table fer cheap, so's good Americans don't git hired."

"Yeah. More likely as not," Dicky agreed. He picked a wallet up off the floor.

"Only had a couple bucks on her, the bitch. Probably on her way ta buy tamales or some shit."

In the wallet Dicky found a green laminated card that read RESIDENT ALIEN, THIS DOCUMENT CERTIFIES THAT MARIA SUAREZ IS REGISTERED WITH THE U.S. IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE AND IS PAYING TAXES IN ACCORDANCE WITH FEDERAL LAW. Dicky, however, wasn't really much of a reader.

"Anyways," Balls went on. "Last night I'se checkin' the mailbox'n she walks by'n starts cussin' at me a mile'a minute, she did, callin' me all kinds'a nasty things, fer no reason at all."

"The dirty bitch," Balls offered. "What she call ya?"

"Shee-it, she called me a hola, and a buenos noches, and " Balls paused to think back. "Aw, yeah, and she called me a cã³mo se llama usted! Can ya believe that shit?"

Dicky shook his head. "Bitch's got no right to be talkin' ta you like that." Dicky blinked. "But, Balls? What's all that stuff mean?"

"Aw, shee-it, Dicky, I don't speak Spic, but ya know damn well it was bad. Probably motherfucker, cocksucker, asshole shit like that."

"Yeah, I'se sure yer right." But then more of his observations sunk in. "So...did'ja kill her?"

"Naw, but I'se put a ruckin' like you wouldn't believe on the æ~ho. Assed her four times, I did'n in between I worked on her with the pliers, pulled her ears off'n shit and collarboned her with a ballpeen so's she couldn't move much whiles I was rearrangin' her shit with my peter oh and I knee-capped her too with my Daddy's big Webley." Balls pointed to the inordinately large pistol sitting on the table.

"Fuck, Balls." Dicky blinked again. "So, if ya didn't kill her...where is she?"

"Out back," Balls replied and led the way.

Birds chirped cheerily when they stepped into Balls' shitty, overgrown back yard. Some old appliances lay on their sides along with a wasteland of empty whiskey bottles. Looks ta me like Balls' daddy did hisself a tad'a drinkin', Dicky reasoned. There was also a pile of dirt a couple feet high, next to a collapsed cord of wood.

A wood-fire crackled faintly in the middle of the yard, over which hung a big can of crawdads attached to a hook.

"Smells great, don't it?" Balls said. He took the can down with an oven mitt on which had been embroidered GOOD MORNING SUNSHINE! He drained the can, then emptied it into a bucket to cool. Steam poured off the pile of bright-red crustaceans.

Indeed, they did smell good, but Dicky was curious now. He looked about the yard. "So, Balls... Where's this immer-grint chick?"

"Right over there." He pointed to the pile of dirt.

Dicky walked over, half-reluctant. Ooo, he thought when he looked on the other side of the dirt pile and saw a shallow grave. At the bottom lay a naked Hispanic woman with no ears. Both knees looked like plops of raw burger, and her arms lay shuddering at her sides, barely mobile. When she saw Dicky, she began to quake, her eyes widening as if to fire out of their sockets.

A terrified voice twisted out as if by pressure. "AyÃ°deme! Por favor!" Her shrieks hitched up and up. "Aquel hombre es loco! En nombre de Dios, ayÃ°deme!"

"Shee-it," Balls sputtered down at her. "This is America, honey. Ya gots to speak American if'n ya wanna be understood."

"Pleese! That man heese crazy!"

"There ya go bad-mouthin' my friend again," Dicky chided her.

Horror and pain bloated her face. "Heese loco! Hee-elp Ã©l es un malo hombre!"

Dicky heard footsteps, then saw Balls appear with a shovel full of red-hot coals from the camp fire. "Let's see if'n this puts a hair up yer ass," and then

FLUMP!

Balls dumped the coals right on her feet.

The woman lurched six inches off the bottom of the grave, emitting a scream now that sounded like her throat tearing.

"Noisy little dickens, ain't she?" Balls chuckled. He returned with another shovelful and dumped

it on her belly.

The next vocal protests sounded more animal than human. In the grave, she jerked and jiggled and flipped and flopped.

"A reg-lar Mexican jumpin' bean!" Balls bellowed.

The last shovelful went on her face, and the woman's screams descended to a low, fleshy grind.

Balls looked back down and seemed to disapprove of something. "Dang. Not quite as spek-tackler as I'd'a thunk," and then he started dropping in pieces of cordwood

THUNK, THUNK..THUNK...THUNK!

until the hole was mostly full. It could be said that the laugh which exploded next from his throat had a devilish treatment to it, as he squirted half a can of lighter fluid into the grave and watched the flames gust.

"Dang," Dicky commented, stepping back from the heat.

"That should be a lesson to ya, la kookoo-ratchah!" Balls yelled down into the pit. "Don't talk shitty to Americans in America!"

All that came from the grave now were a few fading mewls.

Balls slapped Dicky on the back. "Come on, partner! Let's eat us some crawdaddies on ours way ta Clyde Nale's."

"Sounds fine ta me, Balls," but as they walked away, Dicky took a final uneasy glance back at the crackling grave and the corroding mewls that seemed to issue off its smoke. Yessir. That dude really IS crazy...

Balls grabbed Dicky's arm, as if alarmed. "Dicky!"

"What?" Dicky snapped back, alarmed himself. "What is it, Balls? You hear someone comin'?" The sudden surprise left Dicky one tremble short of emptying his bowels in his pants.

"Naw, but is that..." Balls sniffed the air, intent on something critical. "Is that... an-cher-ladas I smell cookin'?" and then he roared more laughter as he and Dicky went back in the house.

Â«Â« Â»Â»

Balls and Dicky loaded their hundred-gallon run into the Mino's back deck, then snapped the tarp down over the entire load. Each gallon was sold to the middlemen aka "distributors" in Kentucky for fifteen dollars, after which they were marked up and sold to the consumer. Dicky and Balls got a buck for each jug they delivered, and it was also their duty to bring back the purchasing price, minus their cut, and give it to the "manufacturer," who in this case was a tired, skinny, whiskery guy in his fifties named Clyde Nale, the Number Two moonshine producer in the county. But it was solid bread that social rejects like Dicky and Balls were earning, so one had to at least give them the benefit of the doubt for having a work ethic. No welfare for these industrious young men...

"We'se loaded up'n ready ta roll out'a here, Clyde," Dicky called over to the man who checked a thermometer in a cork float by the main vat. Various other "staff members" came in and out of the hidden clearing, engaged in their tasks: jugging, shucking, stoking the big fire beneath the vats. Clyde Nale lumbered over to them, straining as if he had bad knees. He wore a floppy canvas hat and a stained jumpsuit like a mechanic. Shee-it, Balls thought, about to get in the car. One cracker after another in these parts. He was ready for something new, and after tonight After we'se empty out old man Crafter's house full'a val-yer-bulls he just might get it.

"Don't leave just yet, boys," Clyde spake, wiping his hands off on his chest. "Got a Hock Party goin' on up the house, five-dollar ante. You fellas are in, ain't'cha?"

Dicky's mouth took a configuration as if he'd just tasted something wholly unpleasant. "Naw, Clyde, thanks, but we'se wanna git this run done."

But Balls had paused at the car door. "A what party?"

"Hock Party, son. It's a roarin' good time, it is," Nale tried to entice. "Five bucks a head? Come on, boys. Ya got touch'a the kike or what?"

"Td like ta see me this Hock Party," Balls spoke up, always curious and willing to broaden his life's fund of knowledge.

"Balls," Dicky complained. "Let's just git "

"Winner gets half the pot," Nale prodded, "and the pot's up ta damn near a hunnert."

Balls liked a good gamble. He whipped out two five-spots and pushed it to Nale. "Come on, Dicky. Like it or not, we'se in. Let's check it out."

They followed Nale up the short road to his weathered, gray farmhouse, and before they were

even there, Balls could hear something of a commotion around the back. Balls asked Dicky aside, "It's what? a spittin' contest, right? Which ever fella spits the farthest wins?"

Dicky smirked. "No, Balls. It's not...that..."

Clyde Nale just laughed.

But Balls saw what it was a moment later as he came around the house. Tarnations... This is some show!

A barefoot girl with lank-brown hair so greasy it looked like black udon noodles sat tensed in a fold-down lawn chair. Probably thirty but beat. She was skinny yet with what looked like ample breasts pressing the front flap of the standard farmer's overalls she wore. Twenty feet in front of her was a line drawn in the dirt, and behind the line stood roughly twenty hillbillies of all ages and sizes. They were taking turns...

"Come on, Jedder!" someone yelled.

"Give it'cher best spit!"

"Open wiiiiiiiide, Ida, honey!"

The hayseed with the unlikely name of Jedder stepped to the line, took a few moments to loudly clear his throat, then hauled back and spit in the air.

The girl sat, head craned back and wincing, eyes squeezed shut. She stretched her mouth wide open.

"Aw, fuck!" Jedder's expectoration hit the girl's upper arm. Balls, meanwhile, took note that the girl's overalls were daubed by dark spots which, on closer examination, turned out to be wads of phlegm.

Balls turned to Clyde Nale. "You mean "

"First fella to get a loogie right in her mouth gets a blowjob from Ida and wins half the pot."

Groaty, Balls thought. But I LIKE it. "And the chick gits the other half."

Nale smirked as if slighted. "Naw, son. The house gits the other half. Ida gits paid in free moonshine. A hardcore alkey's what she is."

"Dang, Clyde. Who's got a touch'a the kike? A gallon'a shine don't cost you more'n few bucks to make."

"Not a gallon, a pint," Nale corrected, shaking his head.

"Shee-it," Balls chuckled. "That's low-down....," but, he finished in thought. I LIKE it.

Nale clapped his hands, rallying. "Come on, fellas! Drag up some dark ones! Make it fun!"

Alas, many slang-forms existed which were much more interesting than such clinical terms as "expectorant," "sputum," and "congestion": Loogies, Goobers, "lungers," Irish Oysters, Chest Pudding and, the author's personal favorite, Redneck Custard. This is what the next four dutiful contestants went to exerted and quite audible efforts to cull from their lungs, each with the verve of racing dogs waiting to chase that rabbit. One by one, then, they took their turns...spitting...

"Aw, shit..."

"Dang..."

"Ain't that a kick in the dick?"

"Closest one yet! Chew see that 'un, Clyde?"

Regrettably, three of the next four "shots" arched short, splatting Ida's thighs or shins, while the fourth creamed her cheek.

"This ain't horseshoes, Tucker!" Nale guffawed. "Nice try, though," and, of course, he pronounced the word nice as "nass."

Balls watched, arms crossed, reflecting to Nale, "Ya know, Clyde. That's harder'n it looks, I'll'se bet."

"You bet right."

"If'n a fella does manage ta drop one in her pie-hole, seems right he should get ta fuck her instead'a settlin' fer just a blowjob."

Nale cast an admonishing glance. "Son? Would you wanna fuck a hill girl covered with hillbilly spit?"

Balls chewed the question. "On second thought..."

"Yeah."

Nale clapped harder now it was Dicky's turn. The hesitant, overweight rube stepped to the line, then feebly cleared his throat.

"Come on, Dicky!" Balls encouraged. "Dig up a deep one, boy! Make yer mamma proud!"

"You's heard him, Dicky!" Nale appended. "Pretend yer diggin' fer clams..."

Dicky's throat grated a few more times until he had a mouthful of something substantial enough to give it the All American Try, then—

P-tooie!

But, lo, Dicky's effort fell a yard short of Ida's feet; the crowd cracked up laughing.

"Aw, Dicky! Ya wussy," Balls complained.

The girl, however, lolled her head dismally toward Nale. She looked exhausted as if she'd just climbed a tree with a knapsack full of bricks "Fer fuck's sake, Clyde. We'se goin' on the sixth round..."

"Cain't back out now, Ida," Nale scolded. "You's the one who vollern-teered the boys'll spit till there's a winner. Just be glad you wasn't poor Verna coupla weeks ago." He looked to Balls. "Was windy that day. Fuckin' party went on four hours, it did, æfore Jimmy Jack Wallace finally put one in. Verna didn't have a dry spot on her. Had ta use a squeegee ta git all the hock off." Then Nale nodded sternly. "Your turn, son."

"All's right, lemme show non-hockin' lightweights how ta spit inna gal's mouth."

Balls posed at the line, and dredged up a deep one.

P-tooie!

The crowd hushed as Balls' expectoration which looked like a mouthful of condensed cream of asparagus soup arced high in the air. All eyes rose up, then trailed down, like spectators at a tennis match.

Splap!

The formidable aggregation of "Chest Pudding" landed right in Ida's left eye.

"Close!" Nale barked. "But no cigar!"

The girl, with an understandable expression of disfavour, scooped the matter out with a curled index finger and flapped it away.

"Shee-it," Balls muttered. "Almost got â€œer in there."

"Balls, let's just go," Dicky implored. "This shit's grossin' me out, and, â€œsides, we gotta long ride ahead'a us."

"Yeah, guess'n yer right." Balls shook his head, chuckling, at the phlegm-pelted girl. "It's a good thing she ain't standin' in a steel drum 'cos by the time this here party's over, she'd be belly-deep in hock."

Balls' comment had been overheard by a cocky, gaunt redneck who stood hunch-shouldered. He had severely bucked teeth and hair like that Carrot Top guy only brown. "You thank so, Led Zepplin?"

Balls smirked at the implication about the length of his hair. "Yeah, I do, toilet-brush."

Buckled teeth showed through a grin. "Just you watch..."

This gentleman's effort to disgorge some suitable wares came louder and longer than anyone yet. It sounded like someone trying to pull-start a boat motor that wasn't quite turning over. Nale informed, "Billy-O's no slouch he's won four times in the past. Seems he's always got himself a cold or the flu or some shit."

"Ya don't say?" Balls replied.

Now, Billy-O's cheeks were stuffed as a squirrel's full of acorns. He eyed the seated girl twenty feet away with the focus of a dart player. The stuffed cheeks seemed to throb, then he slowly leaned back, held a moment, and shot his head forward:

Kuuuuuuuuuuuur-HOCK!

It could've been an ice-cream scoop full of brown yogurt that launched from Billy-O's mouth. He'd lined up straight and wisely put a high angle on it, and his follow-through?

Perfect.

The shivering wad fell right smack dab into Ida's mouth.

The crowd roared in applause. Ida, eyes thinned in disgust, leaned up, moaning. The mass just sat there in her cranked-open mouth, and just as she was about to spit it out

"There's no hooch if'n ya do that, girl!" Nale warned. "You know the rules. Ya gots ta swaller it."

Poor Ida's shoulders slumped. Her eyes squeezed shut so hard, her face reddened. Then
gulp...

More applause rose in the yard.

Nale nodded in pride, and happily turned over half the pot to Billy-O. "Good job, son. See ya next week."

"Yeah, man!" The skinny cracker pocketed his winnings, then strode rather bow-legged toward a none-too-pleased Ida. "Now I'se gonna have me my blowjob! Git ready, Ida! Here comes dessert!"

All the boys gathered round to watch...

Nale walked back to the â€Mino with Balls and Dicky.

"Hard workin' boys deserves ta let off some steam," the elder man said.

"Dang straight," Balls agreed.

"â€Course, there was that one time when we'se caught a squatter gal millin' â€round the yard stealin' corn, so's we tore her clothes of'n slapped her up some, then each fucked her'n afters that we slapped her up some more'n each gave her one in the tail."

"Only proper. Any gal who steals deserves ta git the blocks put to her," Balls pitched in.

"Yeah, but after we'se was all done puttin' some spunk up her dirty ass...you know what we done next?"

"What's that, Clyde?"

Nale smiled grimly. "We tied her to the chair."

Dicky looked perplexed, as he often did. "Tied her?"

"Shore did, and what else we did is we forced her mouth open with a wooden peg" Nale clapped and hooted "and then we all just took ta hockin' in her mouth one after another fer a good half hour, we did. I'll tell ya, boys. That was fun. Then â€˜fore we let her go, we each fucked her one more time, and ya know what? That squatter gal never stole corn from me again."

"I'll bet she didn't, Clyde!" Balls joined the man's laughter.

The idea appealed to Balls, very much so. And to Dicky? Well, not so much.

Nale's tone took on a serious edge. "Fun'n games aside, boys, you's both be careful after ya drop off yer run. Ever now'n then coupla creekers other side'a the line'll wait till a runner's offloaded his hooch'n picked up the cash, then they'se'll try ta bushwhack 'em on their way out."

Balls grinned. "Ain't no one gonna bushwhack us, Clyde, 'cos if'n they do?" He pulled up his shirt, showing the old Webley .455. "They'll whistle when the wind blows."

"I like fellas who're prepared ta git tough when they'se gotta." Nale winked. "See you boys tonight."

Dicky still looked a bit pale as he and Balls approached the car. "Shee-it, Balls. We didn't need ta stay fer that shit. â€˜Member, after we git back from this run, we'se gonna hit that guy Crafter's house."

"Relax, Dicky. We got it all covered. I kind'a enjoyed that Hock Party good, clean fun, ya know? Shee-it. When fellas in the city git together, they watch fuckin' football on TV. Cain't think'a nothin' more boring than that. And ya know what else? When that last loogie fell in the â€˜ho's yap...I don't mind tellin' ya I got a bit hard."

Dicky stared. "Jaysus..."

They double-checked the tarp covering their load, then started to get in the car.

"Hey!" a voice whined. "You fellas! Wait up, will ya?"

Balls and Dicky turned to see Ida scampering down the hill after them. Her overalls looked polka-dotted with phlegm. She carried a pint-jar of moonshine with her.

"Aw, what's she want?" Dicky complained.

The stalwart girl caught up, huffing, and asked, "Kin you fellas give me a ride to town?" and, of course, she'd pronounced the word ride as "rad."

Balls peeked down into a formidable cleavage. "Well I don't see why not."

"Ain't no way, girl!" Dicky complained. "You ain't gittin' in my damn-near mint condition 1969 El Camino all covered with hock!"

Balls' right brow rose. "He's got a point there, hon," he said to her. "But now if ya throwed them snotty overalls in the back and rode nek-it, then that'd be fine."

Ida sighed. "Awright...", and she began to peel off the sullied garment.

Dicky and Balls got in.

"Shee-it," Dicky griped. "What'cha go'n do that fer? She probably stinks worse'n a dog's ass."

"Aw, that ain't very neighborly of ya, Dicky," Balls replied with some mirth. "But I wouldn't mind havin' me a gander at her tits'n cooter, ya know?"

"Shee-it..."

Balls whispered, elbowing his friend. "And just ya watch. Ten ta one I talk her inta givin' us each a blowjob."

"I don't want my dick in her mouth, Balls. It's dirty as a cat box."

Balls chuckled. "Dicky, yous need ta relax. We got time ta make our run and hit Crafter's house aaaaaaaaand get blowjobs from this alkey hosebag. Bet'cha I kin talk her inta it." He slapped Dicky on the back. "Life's fer livin', man! Ya gots ta go with it."

When Ida slid in next to Balls on the â€˜Mino's long black bench seat, she did indeed smell something roughly akin to a dog's ass. But what she was sporting in addition to her nudity were two pleasingly distended breasts and nipples like pink baby pacifiers. Yet there was something else rather distended about her as well.

Her stomach.

"Thanks, fellas," she obliged and quickly closed the door. Her hands trembled as she unscrewed the jar of clear liquor and took a good hearty chug. Then she leaned back, sighing. "Aw, fuck,

yeah. That hits the spot..."

Balls marveled at the physical proof of the girl's fecundity, not that he knew what fecundity meant. "Well, dang, girl. I'd say you shore as shit got yerself a bun cookin' in that oven down there."

"Aw, fuck, I know. Somebody preggered me up fierce'n I don't even know who," she replied. "Figgure I'm four or five months..." Her breasts vibrated nicely when Dicky turned over the big 427 and got on the road. "Just what I fuckin' need, huh? At least my food stamps'll go up. Gots me three crumb-snatchers already."

Now Balls was gazing appreciably at the amble outgrowth of black thatch between her legs.

Her hands shook a bit less now, when she took another hit off the jar and smacked her lips. Balls thought oddly of all that high-octane alcohol mixing with that skinny dude's hock and semen...

Dicky leaned over behind the wheel, shooting her an alarmed glance. "Say, honey, you ain't supposed ta be drinkin' if'n yer knocked up, ya know? It fucks the kid up whiles he's growin' in yer gut."

Ida cast back a look of skepticism. "Aw, that ain't nothin' but a bunch'a what my mama used ta call codswallop. She drank æ~shine whole time she were pregnant with me, and I turned out all right."

Balls shot Dicky a quick smile.

"You don't mind if I sort'a...feel yer belly, do ya?" Balls asked next.

Ida frowned, then shrugged, letting the liquor take the edge off her need.

Balls smoothed his hand over the stretched, white stomach and popped-out bellybutton. That's what I'se call a belly FULL'a white trash, he thought. In his demented mind's eye, he saw himself fucking her hard as someone plunging a toilet, trying to bop the little critter's head with his knob. I'd give it a face full, I shore would. He wasn't sure but he thought he could actually feel the blood in her belly beating. Next, he asked, "Well, hon, ya know that's a damn fine set'a jugs you got hangin' on ya. How's 'bout if I have me a feel?"

"Shore, go ahead," she said with no interest in the least.

Balls plucked the meaty, pink nipples, then squeezed. The breasts cumulatively felt like hot water balloons. "If I, like, sucked 'em...would milk come out?"

"Oh, yeah, it don't stop when you're pregnant all the time," she informed.

"Well...how 'bouts if I take me a suck?"

Ida rolled her eyes. "Aw, go ahead. You's are givin' me a ride, after all."

Dicky frowned aside as Balls leaned over and planted a lip-lock on the left areola. When he applied some hard suction, the papilla swelled up like a salty gumdrop, and then

There she blows...

Hot milk eddied out and filled his mouth. Was it his imagination or did it taste like it had been cut with moonshine? He switched back and forth, letting it all trickle down his throat. South of the belt, things began to stir.

I got me a load ta bust, he realized, and then he unbuckled his jeans.

"What'choo thank yer doin'?" came her immediate objection.

Balls answered in complete honesty. "I'se whippin' my dick out so's you kin suck it."

"I ain't doin' no such thing!" Now she was getting nasty. "What kind'a girl you think I am, anyway?"

Again, Balls answered in complete honesty. "You're a creeker fuck-dump who lets twennie rednecks spit in her mouth fer a pint'a hooch. In others words...you're a whore."

"Yeah? Well, whores get paid, asshole, and I don't see no money in yer hand," she sniped back.

Balls didn't like to be called asshole. That's what his father had called him damn near every day of his life.

He tapped her in the head with the blackjack, which put her lights half out.

"Find a clearin', Dicky," he ordered. "And pull â€˜er over. Ain't no splittail calls me a asshole'n gits away with it."

"Aw, come on, Balls," came Dicky's wearied reply. "Just push the â€˜ho out the car'n let's go."

"Nots till we put a ruckin' on the bitch. Now... Pull over."

Dicky groaned to himself and slowed the â€Mino. Meantime, Balls sucked a nipple into his mouth, waited till more milk flowed, then bit down hard. Half-unconscious, Ida shrieked. Balls chewed alternately, as if on tough steak, then, for formality, he let his front teeth clip down on the inverted nub of navel. The girl sort of vibrated from the pain. Balls was trying hard to bite the nub clean off but he never quite got there.

The Camino chugged into a small clearing off the road.

"Just leave her here'n let's git on our run," Dicky practically begged. "You've rucked her up enough."

"Shee-it," Balls muttered. He opened the door, grabbed a handful of greasy hair, and dragged her out of the car.

Here we go again, Dicky thought to himself. He watched Balls drag the girl into the woods until they disappeared.

(VI)

It was the most satisfying dream of his life...

At first.

As the Writer lay back naked on the bed, the activity commencing about him could only be called a "Seven-Girl Tongue-Bath." Hot tongues and sucking mouths ranged his flesh. Any errant glance showed him beautiful bare butts in the air, breasts in his face, swollen nipples brushing his lips. Wedges of smooth white flesh shifted all around him as these voluptuous servitors constantly traded positions to lave every square inch of his body er, almost every square inch. His groinal area was deliberately neglected, to only incite him more.

What a great dream, he thought in the dream.

"Okay, girls," spoke a hot, syrupy voice. "Let's really work him over now..."

Bedsprings squeaked as his group of lovely attendants changed positions yet again, but this time it seemed as though they were assigned locations, and as this ensued, the Writer noticed Beatrice, Anita, Nyna, and several other of Mrs. Gilman's working stable, along with last but not least, Nancy.

Fuck, the Writer thought in a rare departure from his avoidance of profanity. Beatrice sucked his

tongue. Two more girls sucked each of his nipples. Hot hands pulled his knees back toward his shoulders, and next thing he knew his right testicle was in Anita's mouth, while his left was being suckled by Nyna. A sixth girl slowly and very wetly laved his anus, and Nancy...

Sucked his dick.

It was Naked Twister, and the Writer sufficed as the mat.

Somewhere, a clock struck midnight...

And beyond the window...a wolf howled.

Every sensation of pleasure that his physicality was capable of feeling was stimulated and, hence, let loose. It built up from the Writer's brain to his groin, making him abstract that his penis was something like a Super Giant oil pool that had just been tapped. One eye managed to glance between both of Beatrice's sensational breasts just as Nancy was pulling an upstroke: the Writer's penis was so stuffed with lust-driven blood that it looked alien, it looked so much bigger than what he was used to seeing that he thought, Where did THAT hoagie come from?

Then Beatrice adjusted her position to suck his tongue more intently, and the view was severed. It was just luxuriant pillows of flesh now...

I'd like to see D.H. Lawrence write about THIS...

The sucking grew more precise at every area, save for his penis. Nancy had withdrawn the Mouth That Would've Launched a Thousand Ships. Though the Writer couldn't see, he could feel, and what she was doing now was clear: she'd made a tight ring with her thumb and index finger and had taken to stroking the spit-lubricated shaft with a finesse that seemed to draw every nerve-charged sensation in the Writer's body slowly to the vicinity of his groin. A handjob, he thought, executed with the adeptness of Dali's brush-strokes in SUEZ, or the prosecraft of Gore Vidal... Then, an even more titillating sensation blossomed at the very tip of his member. Holy smokes, that's good, he thought. Whatever it is.

"Time to take his business," Nancy announced next and began to shuck that spitty "ring" up and down much faster.

The Writer's entire body clenched; he was at the brink one more shuck then This makes aesthetic celibacy worth it! he was there.

That's when he heard a sound that seemed suspiciously similar to an old aquarium pump. Two and two were put together quite quickly, and in a lurch he pushed Beatrice off and looked down

appalled to see Nancy slipping the vacuum tube to her Therm-O-Fresh Food Saving System several inches into his penis just as his ejaculation unloosed. Sperm filled a foot of the tube in one second, then the machine continued to suck. Beatrice sat on his neck to pin him down, while Nancy chuckled in a manner that was witchlike. She kept the tube in long after the Writer's orgasm had ended. Clicking was heard next, as if someone had turned the machine's motor to High, and then the Writer trembled in place, feeling more than mere sperm being hoovered from his reproductive tract.

"Yeah, now we're gonna take all'a this fucker's business," and all the girls laughed after that. Quite like witches.

The tube was kept in place for what seemed hours, and finally, when he was let up amid still more echoic, witchlike cackling the Writer looked down in the most abject horror and saw that the tube was actually dozens of feet long, and full of blood and pinkish testicular pulp.

Oh my God! Oh my God! the Writer lamented, and when he reached down to feel his scrotum, he found himself holding an empty sack...

That's when he woke up.

So convincing were the details of this dream and the clarity of its imagery that the first thing he did once his mind started clicking was reach down to his scrotum. Thank God, he thought when his testicles were still in evidence (not that, as a celibate, he actually needed them for anything). Then he groaned, thinking, What a TERRIBLE dream! Obviously it was just a spurt of Neo-Freudian symbology. The more desirable the woman, the more effectively her desirability emasculates men, he knew. A drifting hand told him with some distaste that the dream had been of the "wet" variety his first in years.

A guillotine blade of sunlight carved into the room from the gap in the shade; it lay directly across his eyes, firing a headache of legendary proportions. I'm SO hungover, he realized. Last night at the bar he'd consumed much probably as much as Dylan Thomas on a good night. He moaned out of bed in his underwear, preparing to head for the shower, when something caught his eye...

It was on the shade over the window.

Someone must've been in my room last night, he thought, but then rejected the conclusion when he found the door locked.

A new graffito, however, had been added to the others on the shade. It read as thus:

You live alone. You

dial your number by mistake

and someone answers.

It appeared to be written in the ink of his own black Sharpie, and Hmm. Is that my handwriting? He thought so. The haiku was properly seventeen syllables and possessed the correct five-seven-five beat. Ultimately, though...

Why would I write that? he wondered. Well... Faulkner wrote parts of THE FABLE on his wall. Why can't I write a haiku on a dirty shade?

The problem was he didn't remember writing it. And if he'd written that?

The Writer scratched his shorts.

What else might he have written that he didn't recall?

He rushed to the Remington Model No. 2 and fixed his eyes on the page that had been hanging out of the platen for a month.

WHITE TRASH GOTHIC

CHAPTER ONE

There was a knock at the door. When Nikoff Raskol opened it, he espied a baleful purview of imprecations, an apophysis of dolorous spiritum perforce: the Nietzschean Abyss. He'd dreamed of utter blackness, of dripping sounds, and screams, and it was all those things that he found himself looking at beyond the transom of his solitary motel room. The blackness that was somehow fulgent, in which traversed the fallow masses with faces like poultices and acuminated grins. His heart beat in mordant rubato when the gracile hand certainly that of some outerworldly woman reached out from the festering clough and took his own. He thought of light's absence in the flesh, he thought of ataxia undiluted.

Indeed, he thought of lost worlds.

The hand tightened about his. He was beseeched by eyes wide and lambent as diminutive moons, and the voice resounded as if from the highest precipice of the earth, to offer, "Come. Come with me...and see..."

Nikoff Raskol, then, followed her out of the room into the living dark.

The Writer's mouth fell open in a gag of joy. He nearly collapsed. "It's brilliant," he croaked. "It's Francois Truffaut and Thomas Hart Benton and James Joyce all rolled up into one, with a pinch of Sartre and a dash of Hegel. It's Descartes' proof that the mind is independent of the body, and Locke's affirmation that the test of truth is the comparison of thought and fact!" Tears formed in the Writer's eyes, and he fell to his knees. "My God... It's better than the opening of Kafka's Metamorphosis..."

The Writer was charged now, he was kindled by a creative fire that in all his years of writing had never burned him so intensely. His writer's block was over now. This was the leap that had hoisted him over humanity's hurdles to drop him headlong into the rich, hot blood of his Art. Now, the rest of the book was as easy to see as his own shadow.

Dylan Thomas was right, the thought arrived quite like an epiphany. I wrote this last night the finest opening of my career and I was DRUNK!

He showered and dressed, his mind reeling in the exuberance that comes with sheer genius. He knew that he could sit right down this instant and keep going, probably bang out thirty or forty pages by tomorrow.

But he didn't do that.

Instead, he went straight to the bar.

To celebrate!

(VII)

Dang, the old ones take fer-ever ta git their peter's off! Cora Neller thought, mouth stuffed. She looked munchkin-faced there on her knees in the little cubby outside. It was next to the room where they stored the beer kegs. She knew that's what they kept in there because she blew the beer-delivery guy every Tuesday when he was filling the next week's order. At least the beer-guy always came quick (just with a bit more volume than she cared for) but the old barkeep whose name nobody knew? The old fuck's probably seventy! she suspected. Bet I'se been tootin' his old pipe twennie fuckin' minutes! Nevertheless, she continued to suck because the old stick slipped her free drinks every so often, and looked the other way when she cruised the bar for johns. His penis wasn't stuck in her mouth, it was sort of just laying there as she drew her lips back and forth over its ancient meat. She thought of a rubber full of pudding but covered with raw chicken skin. Keeping her mouth full of a sufficient ration of saliva was a problem, too. Cora was a meth-head and clinical alcoholic, the former being her vice of choice, but it had the regrettable

contraindication of debilitating the activity of her saliva ducts. In addition and at less than ninety pounds she didn't eat much. Poor nutrition equals poor saliva production. And, if truth be told, Cora consumed more calories in human semen per day than in food.

"Jaysus, Cora," the barkeep's voice creaked from above. "This is damn near the worst cock-suck I've ever had. My fuckin' dead grandmother could blow me better'n you."

She wanted to bite down on the sodden tube of flesh but thankfully thought the better of it. Don't piss the old fuck off, she warned herself. 'Cos if'n you do he's'll never let'cha turn tricks here again...

Anyway, as aforementioned, she was a meth-head and a drunk. Way she worked it is she'd play the bar till closing, hitting up the tighter customers for ten-dollar blowjobs and booze. Doreen, the other bar-whore, got fifteen, the little shit. But Cora would get shit-faced to take the teeth out of the meth-withdrawal, then after closing she'd score. The kick in the ass was that prices were going up now. Fuckin' inflation! she thought, still chugging away. A bag of Snort was fifteen bucks now, and Ice was twenty. It's that fuckin' George Bush, she knew. Keepin' us good junkies down. First Reagan and then THAT asshole! Cora wasn't terribly politically minded, of course, but she overheard the bar-talk all the time. There was some new guy going to run for President next term a Democrat and not only was he from the South, he was handsome. Hilton? she quizzed herself. Naw, it's Clinton! she finally got it. I shore hope he wins. She'd seen him on TV once, and she knew in a glance that she'd clean out his pipes any time he wanted, and for free even.

"Aw, shee-it, Cora!" the barkeep griped and slid the floppy penis out. "It'll take you a hunnert years ta git me off." He turned around quickly and next thing poor Cora knew, his withered ass was in her face. There were moles on it that looked like hairy Raisinettes. "Just give my asshole a tonguin' whiles I jerk off."

Cora was appalled. "Aw, come on! That ain't right!"

"It's that â€œer no booze, sweetie. Yer choice."

Cora sighed, then thumbed open the crease-ridden crack and began to lick.

"Yeah. We'se finally found somethin' you do right," said the keep, naturally pronouncing the word right as "rat." Cora's face felt as though it were trying shrink behind her skull. To make the circumstance worse, the barkeep wasn't much for washing, nor she could now attest firsthand was he particularly thorough about the manner in which he wiped. She could hear his masturbation, a sound like someone flapping a raw steak repeatedly on a table.

Her tongue roved through a creamy glaze and other less seemly debris. Bumps of some kind, too, seemed to encircle the puckered anus. In actuality, they were rectal warts, but it was all for the best that Cora didn't know that. At any rate, this was just a day in the life of a backwoods whore. No big deal. And as she continued, she did find solace in one consolation: "Least I won't have ta taste the old fucker's dick-snot.

Just as Cora had thought that, the barkeep spun around and jammed the now three-fourths erect penis into her mouth where he deposited an appreciable amount of semen.

"Ummmm... That's the ticket. Not a bad load fer an old man, huh, hon?"

Cora's eyes locked shut and she leaned back and let the penile slime slide down her throat.

"From now on, we'se'll do it that way ever' time, Cora," he informed, buckling his trousers. "Now I'd best git back inside. The Harkins boys'll set fire to the bar if'n their mugs're empty more'n five minutes," and then he loped back inside.

The smirk on Cora's face felt like a clay mask that had been baked on. Like that familiar emblem denoting drama: one smiling mask tilted next to one frowning. Cora was the frowning one, and probably would be for a while. The smell coming off her lips made her tempted to cut off her nose.

She stood up and dusted herself off. The knobby knees on bone-thin legs looked like banged up faces. But at least some drinks were covered now. It was still early, but with a little luck she'd be able to pull a couple of tricks before last call, then she could score some snort or ice.

She jerked her head at the sound of crunching gravel. Headlights swept the trees behind the bar, then in rattled an old beat-to-holy-hell pickup truck the color of tomato juice. It parked clumsily along the back, pulling a U-Haul trailer.

Please! Cora begged the Fates. Be a young guy!

An old guy got out of the truck: workboots, overalls, and a plaid shirt with sleeves and collar buttoned. His face was nebulous: another old generic redneck. His boots crunched up toward the rear entrance.

"Well, howdy there, darlin'!" came a spirited greeting.

Cora tried to sound as spirited, "Hey, there! My name's Cora! What's yers?"

"Lud. Pleased ta meet'cha."

Cora tried to stand cutesy-style, hoping the barkeep's ass-smell wasn't wafting far off her lips. "Ain't never seen you here before."

"That's 'cos I ain't never been. Not much inta drinkin' establishments, but, see, each year I'se take a road trip from Maryland ta Georgia'n back, tryin' ta bring folks ta the call."

"The call?" Cora had no idea.

"God's call, hon "

Aw, FUCK! A holy roller...

" and I ain't et all day so's I were hopin' I could git me some food ta go. They serve food here, hon?"

By now, Cora's interest had grown non-existent. "Well, they gots burgers mixed with deer meat that's real good."

The old man's eyes sparkled. "That couldn't be dandier. I'll get me a ta-go burger'n be on my way but, hey?"

Cora was about to go back in. This old Bible-thumper ain't gonna want a ten-dollar cock-suck...

"I ain't in that much of a hurry," he continued. "What say you tell me what'cher doin' out back here all's by yer purdy l'il lonesome?"

"You ain't gonna be interested, mister," she said. Why not just go and say it? "I'se lookin' fer a fella who wants ta pay me ten bucks ta suck his dick or twennie no, fifteen fer a fuckin'."

The old man's face lit up with enthusiasm. "Is that all? Well, my word, hon. I'd say you got yerself a deal. In fact, as purdy as you is? I'll pay ya forty."

Cora's heart fluttered. He called me purdy! And, boy, had she gotten this guy's number wrong. Some holy roller, soliciting prostitutes. But Cora nearly had tears in her eyes. Not only had the old goat complimented her an event quite rare in her life these days but she hadn't bagged forty bucks on a solo trick...ever.

"Well, let's go, sugar!" she said and grabbed his large, work-callused hand. "We'se kin git cozy in yer truck'n I'll'se make yer balls clap together they'll be so happy."

The old man laughed good naturedly. "But the trailer's bigger inside, and I've got a bed back there. That okay with you?"

She gave his crotch a rub and hugged him. "Anything you want," and wouldn't you know it? She'd pronounced the word anything as "enna-thang."

This man Lud pulled a metal latch on the trailer's door up and out. From a loop on his belt he produced a metal flashlight, and even the most inept reader now will deduce that said flashlight would soon be introduced to the back of Cora's skull.

Whew! the emaciated prostitute thought when the trailer door swung open. It smelled gross inside.

"Take a looky, hon," the man said and shined the flashlight in, but when Cora leaned forward to do so, one big callused hand came around the side of her face and sealed her mouth shut.

Inside, she saw a naked woman bound, gagged, and disturbingly motionless. In the flashlight beam this woman's skin looked gray as modeling clay.

Also in the trailer lay two severed legs and two severed arms. And a case of Shasta Cola.

When Cora screamed, of course, the sound was stifled by the old man's hand. Then she heard his voice, which seemed echoic, like in a movie where gods were delivering dialog.

"God gave us brains to determine our purpose by His will, sweetie, and he is a mite forgivin' God. Hear me now, and æmember that we've all been born in original sin since Eve bit that blammed apple, which covered the world with darkness and were took over by the fallen angel Lucifer. But God, see, is the light we've use ta see through that devilish darkness."

The man's grip held Cora off her feet. She reeled in the air, useless breath gusting into the rugged palm.

"Put yer trust in the Lord, hon. Though you's shore as heck a harlot'n mighty sinner...I shall redeem thee..."

(VIII)

The Writer felt as competent as Samuel Johnson when he sat at the corner stool. The bar around him hustled and bustled in the usual redneck chicanery though this did not distract the Writer from his relevant ponderings. The book, he thought. The book will be brilliant. No, he still did not remember writing that devastating opening passage last night, but that was fine, too. Niccolo

Paganini wrote Moto Perpetuo in a drunken blackout...and that's the best violin piece in history.

My novel, the Writer felt sure, will be the fictional equivalent. White Trash Gothic...

Rednecks clacked balls at the table, sinking impressive shots. In the corner more rednecks howled at a wrestling match on TV. One man, with a hairlip and mullet-style haircut griped, "Fuckin' Sting! Rips off the Nature Boy again!" and then he bit a chunk out of his beer mug. Doreen, the prostitute with breasts like stuffed socks, waltzed out of the men's room and spat something on the floor. A man in a cowboy hat soon followed. Several brothers giggled as they engaged in a slap-fight.

Fascinating human interaction on a sub-societal level, the Writer thought. It would all go into the book...

Because it's real.

How powerful was the power of truth? His book would be the literary definition.

Yet another redneck sitting across from him was scratching a steel plate in his head. When the Writer glanced down at an ashtray, he noticed several teeth sitting in it, like big pills. "No, lie," the barkeep was explaining to some patrons. "Licked my ass clean, she did. Then swallowed my nut like a champ. She ain't like Doreen, who spits. Fastest way ta tell a gal's got no class is when she spits out yer cock-hock." "Dang straight," someone consented.

Yes. Fascinating, the Writer thought.

An errant glance at the TV overhead showed him still more coverage of this Dahmer man in Wisconsin. "...was only eighteen years of age when he committed his first mutilation-murder in the township of Bath, Ohio, in 1978..."

Him again, the Writer thought. He had little interest. Evil was relative, and the evils of the world were not what his book should be about.

Not the evils. The verities.

He smoked and drank, quite contentedly sorting the nomenclature of his literary bullshit, when an overalled old man with a button shirt took the stool next to him. "Howdy," he said.

"Good evening, sir," the Writer replied.

After the man ordered a carry-out burger and soda water, it looked like he was about to say

something more to the Writer when the redneck with the plate in his head blared, "Hey, Doreen! Don't'cha know a whore ain't got no class if'n she don't swaller the nut!"

Other patrons hooted. Doreen showed him her middle finger and stuck out her tongue, which was smeared with semen.

"Ye of little faith," the old man muttered, shaking his head.

"I don't think Saint Matthew can save any of this crowd," the Writer said.

"Hmm." The old man seemed impressed. "Then who said this: 'Thy faith hath saved thee.'"

The Writer stalled over his cigarette. "You've stumped me, sir."

Did the man chuckle? "Interestin' choice'a words!"

"Pardon me?"

"Aw, nothin'. But I'll se give ya a hint. He was the best writer of the Gospel authors."

An uncanny bar conversation. "I'm not an expert on Scripture, but..." The best writer of the four Gospels? Then the Writer smiled. "Saint Luke, of course."

"Good! So see? Ever-one can be saved...with faith."

The Writer considered himself an existential Christian which, depending on interpretation, could be viewed as contradictory. He didn't feel like talking now, though. He felt like thinking. About his book. He caught himself staring at one of the billiard games, and suddenly found himself with tunnel-vision. It reminded him of Kant's Eight-Ball Theory, the landmark philosophical tenet that disproved the constancy of causality.

"What'choo thinkin' 'bout, son?" the old man asked. "Looks like yer contemplatin' the whole universe," but he'd pronounced universe as "you-ner-vorse."

In a sense, I am, the Writer surmised, for his novel would surely define an elemental fragment of it. "Well, sir, you probably won't have any idea what I'm talking about, but since you asked... I'm thinking about the laws of cause and effect. That pool table there, for instance. When the cue ball hits the eight ball, is the cue ball really the cause? And is the eight ball necessarily the effect? The most sophisticated intellectual thesis says no."

The old man gave a knowing nod. "Just as six plus six don't ness-ur-sarah-ly equal twelve. But

one thing it always equals is six plus six. What'cher talkin' 'bout, son, is Immanuel Kant's Eight-Ball Theory."

The Writer's jaw dropped.

"Aw, yeah, I'se know. You's thinkin' what's this old backwoods rube doin' knowin' 'bout that sort'a stuff, but the truth is, son, I'se been a student'a philoss-er-fee fer about forty years. And as fer Immanuel Kant, I gotta hand it ta the Prussian dingbat. He were a screw-loose, shore, but probably the greatest metaphysical thinker in history, â€cept fer maybe Descartes or Hume, and a'course, Aquinas."

The Writer almost fell off his stool.

"Me, though? I'se go more fer Kierkegaard: man cain't escape the dismal-ness of his exister-ence without the presupper-zishun'a free will fer a higher duty."

The Writer still sat stunned; he was a big Kierkegaard fan. "He espoused that all truth is subjective and unlike space and time, which are merely shaded forms of intuition. And when you combine that with Kant's theorem on God "

The old man astonishingly took the words right out of the Writer's mouth: "That logic proves the exister-ence of God because mather-matics equals logic, when you mix that with Kierkegaard's proof that truth is subjecter-ive, then what do ya got?"

"Incontestible evidence that God exists and means to lift humans from their naturalistic existence into a heavenly essence where salvation is achievable."

"Good, good, son," the old man sanctioned. "You sound like you knows almost as much 'bout philosser-fee as me "

I LOVE this guy! the Writer thought.

" and ain't it a dang shame that yer average dupe don't care no ways 'bout any of it? We gots the Sooner-ees'n the Sheer-ytes killin' each other over who's the proper descender-ent'a Muhammad, we gots the Or-ther-dox Serbs killin' the Moos-lim Bosnerians 'cos fer five hunnert years it were the Moos-lim Bosnerians killin' the Or-ther-dox Serbs, and ya gots the soul-dead commie Buddhists killin' the anarchistic friggin' Buddhists 'cos they cain't even decide who the first friggin' Buddha was."

"It's madness," the Writer agreed.

"Even when they'se got the proof right there in the works'a Kierkegaard'n Kant. The Great Tribber-layshun is shorely on its way."

The Writer nodded, astounded. "Yet even Sartre in his existential atheism proposed that salvation was attainable through an objectification of morality."

Now the old man seemed to scoff. "Aw, son, that may be fine'n dandy but chew do yerself a favor'n fergit about that fat French fag. He wouldn't'a had nothin' ta write about noways if'n it weren't fer Kierkegaard'n Kant. He was dang near a teller-oller-gist!"

The Writer laughed along with the old man.

"There ain't nothin' out there, son, â€cept fer the notion'a sacrifice "

"The sacrifice of accepted morals for a higher morality in itself," the Writer added.

"A'course, son, and any pea-brain kin see that."

The Writer couldn't help but continue to be waylaid, and he thought, in a rare departure from his avoidance of profanity, This old fucker might be right. He probably DOES understand philosophy more precisely than I do.

"The name's Lud, by the way," the old man said, offering his hand.

The Writer shook it, stating his own mysterious name, then offered, "Sir. I'd consider it an honor to buy you a drink."

"Well now, son. That's a mite generous'a ya but I'se surprised ya offered."

"To buy you a drink?"

"Based on the fact that we'se both probably smarter than anyone else in this whole blammed state, and considerin' what we just got done jackin' our jaws about, I knows what you are."

The Writer was baffled. "Sir?"

"You's a Christian existentialist."

Amazing... "Well, yes, that's actually what I've always thought of myself as."

This old man Lud nodded. "That's what you are. But what am I?"

The Writer focused. "A Christian empiricist?"

The old man frowned and flapped a hand. "Naw. Come on, son. You's kin do better'n that."

"A Christian solipsicist?"

The old man tossed a shoulder. "Closer."

The Writer pointed his finger like a gun. "A Christian phenomenalist!"

"There ya go!" the old man cracked. "So if I'se a Christian phenomenalist, then that means I'se already done took Kierkegaard's existential leap of faith, right?"

"Of course."

"I'se already pree-ser-posed my empirister-kul free will to acknowledge the sacrifice I'se gotta make includin' a rejection'a traditional morality in orders ta attain my grace before God'n Christ on High. That's why Sartre was chock full'a dog-doo, son. Existence don't precede essence unless you accept the essence offered by the God Kant and Descartes already done proved exists."

"I understand," the Writer said. "But what's this got to do with me buying you a drink?"

"'Cos I don't imbibe! Ta reach God, ya gotta be like God. My body's a temple'a the Lord, therefore, son, I don't drink."

The Writer laughed. "You really are an amazing man, Lud."

"It's just more'a the Eight-Ball Theory if'n ya think about it hard enough. If there ain't no cause'n effect, it's like, say, you leave yer house'n go somewhere else, then you go to a pay phone ta, say, call a friend'a yers? But'cha dial yer own number by accident."

The Writer's skin began to crawl.

"And someone answers," Lud continued. "And the fella who answers is...?"

The Writer gulped. "Me..."

"Right. Since truth is subjecter-tive, and morality ain't constant 'cos it ain't nothin' but a abstraction...who's ta say that couldn't happen?" and then Lud ordered another soda water from the keep.

That's almost impossible, the Writer thought in a creepy rush. What he just said...is like that haiku I wrote on the shade last night when I was drunk...

Now Lud scoffed, pointing up to the TV where more news blathered on about the serial killer. "This up here ain't nothin' but naturalistic evil. It's okay ta reject socially grounded morality when it conflicts with God's laws. But ya have to turn it into somethin' else which follows Kierkegaard's rule. This fella up here He dang shore didn't do that. If what'cha do don't change yer purpose ta somethin' that serves God, then ya ain't nothin' but a pissant acker-lye'a the devil."

It's unbelievable how deeply this man can COGITATE, the Writer thought. He was even...mildly jealous.

"It's a dang good thing fer men like us ta run inta each other'n talk above the masses, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Ain't nothin' more important than findin' yer purpose as defined by God," and the old man pronounced the word defined as "duh-fanned." "Nots many folks do that no more don't care, none of 'em. Alls they'se care about're these dickerliss rock stars and the next John Truh-volter movie."

"You're absolutely right," the Writer agreed. "Especially when the proof is right there. Truth is subjective, therefore God transcends truth empirically by offering salvation through sequent purpose."

"Um-hmm. And I knows I found my purpose, son. It's by helpin' others sinners mind ya find theirs, and " The old man made a mocking smile. "I say, how long does it take fer these fellas here ta cook a burger ta go? I'll'se be back in a minute, son, and we'se can talk a few minutes more æfore I gotta be on my way. See, ya gots ta excuse me, unless I wanna die like Tycho Brahe." The old man smiled through a pause. "Ya know who Tycho Brahe was, son?"

But the Writer was already chuckling. "The famous Danish astronomer and philosopher who refined all of Copernicus' discoveries. Brahe died because he couldn't get to the bathroom fast enough, and his bladder ruptured."

"Good, good. Now where's the pee-pot in this heck-hole?"

"Back there, sir," the Writer pointed.

"But let's me tell ya a joke first," Lud said. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"What'cha reckon Sartre said a second after he up'n died?"

"What?"

"â€œOops. I gone ta Hell!'"

Both men laughed so uproariously that every redneck in the place gaped at them. Then Lud slapped the Writer on the back and loped to the rest room.

I still can hardly believe it. I've just had the most elucidating intellectual conversation in my life...and it was with a redneck in his sixties who looks like Uncle Jed on the Beverly Hillbillies... The Writer ordered another beer, still marveling at the coincidence.

But then there was that other coincidence, too, wasn't there?

The haiku, he thought, that I don't remember writing but I MUST HAVE. When the barkeep wasn't nearby, the Writer whipped out his Sharpie and quickly scribbled on the bar:

You live alone. You

dial your number by mistake

and someone answers.

It was uncanny how Lud used an almost identical abstraction to compare to Kant's Theory of the rejection of causality.

Incredible. A completely explicable coincidence, yes, but still...

Incredible.

The barkeep brought over another beer. "Who was that wacky codger?"

That wacky codger probably understands philosophy better than most professors and theologians. "Just some man passing through."

"He the one who ordered a burger ta go?"

"I believe so."

"Well I'se hope he don't mind a little possum meat mixed with the ground beef."

The Writer was only half-listening. "Uh, possum? Really?"

The barkeep sputtered. "Jeez, fella! I'se just jokin'!"

The Writer feigned a smile. He subconsciously felt for change in his pocket. "Say, is there a pay phone on the premise?"

"Don't rightly know where the premise is, fella. What's that? Some restaurant in Pulaski?"

The Writer sighed. "Is there a pay phone here, sir?"

"Oh, shore." He pointed. "Right out back. If'n ya see Cora, tell her the ice in her drink's meltin'." The barkeep astonishingly pronounced the word ice as "ass."

"I will," the Writer agreed and headed for the back door.

Why not? he asked himself. He knew it was stupid but...so what? He believed in portents, or at least he liked to think so...

Or was it just more self-absorbed bullshit?

Nightsounds throbbed out back. The only vehicle parked in the narrow access was a beat-to-holy-hell red pickup truck with a U-Haul on the back. And beyond that? A fathomless forest.

His fingers poised before the payphone just before they would drop in change. Someone had scratched into the chrome plate over the coinbox: THE BIGHEAD WAS HERE. He'd seen that a lot lately.

The coins fell and he dialed the number to his room back at the Gilman House.

"Hello?"

It was a peppy woman's voice.

"Uh... Is this room Six?"

"Naw, it's room Three." A pause. "Hey! I reck-a-nize yer voice! Yer the Writer, ain't'cha?"

Dimwit! I dialed the wrong number! "Uh...yes, actually..."

"This is Nancy! Haa!"

"Hi, Nancy," he greeted, trying not to groan. "I apologize for the intrusion. I seemed to have dialed incorrectly."

"Aw, that's okay. I'se always like talkin' ta you. Somethin' 'bout yer citified voice..." A giggle. "Gits me all runnin' with honey..."

The Writer sighed. But it would be rude to just hang up. "So... How has your night been?"

"Suckin' dicks'n takin' no names, as my grandma used ta say. I'se in between jobs right now. But kin you believe it? Coupla hours ago? A fella from Waynesville paid me thirty dollars ta give him a enema.... And earlier another fella had me stick a Ken Doll in his butt whiles I blowed him and he even brought the doll hisself! Lots'a fellas inta havin' stuff done ta their rears, I'll'se tell ya. But they all say they's afraid to ask their wives to do it 'cos they might think 'em queer."

The Writer was speechless.

"Tonight I had me my reg-lar foot guy 'bout seven but he's gone, so's I'se just sittin' â€˜round till my next appointment. Got me a four-top at midnight some real randy fellas lawyers," but, lo, she'd pronounced the word lawyers as "lah-yuhs." "They'se from Pulaski'n they comes ta see me ever week 'cos I give 'em some good butt-play. They'se rich; they'se pay fifty apiece and ain't none of 'em comes much just li'l dribbles mostly, not like some'a these guys who come so much it's like someone stompin' on a large-size tube'a toothpaste."

The Writer was boggled. "That's...wonderful." Ken Doll? "I've got to run now, Nancy. But I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow "

"Oh! Oh!" she interjected. "Wanna know somethin', Mr. Writer?"

The Writer hoped his frown could not be detected through the phone line. "Sure, Nancy."

Her voice turned rich and warm, like a delectable broth. "I'se had a dream 'bout you last night..."

Was that...a portent? "Really? Well, I'd love to hear all about it but I've got to "

"I dreamed you was fuckin' me fierce, and, like my Daddy used ta say, I come like a cement truck with no brakes! And then...then... You'n me, we had a baby!"

"Oh, wow," the Writer babbled, disturbed now. "But I've got to "

More precocious giggling that was somehow unpleasant and erotic simultaneously. "But'cha knows what? The baby didn't have a baby-type head. It hadda li'l bull's head."

"Yes oh. Talk to you soon â€˜bye!" and then he slammed the phone down. Bull's head? Jesus! My existence is definitely preceding my essence right now. He dropped in more coins and this time dialed the right number.

"Hello?"

A man's voice.

The Writer held the phone to his ear, eyes wide as if propped open by toothpicks. "Is this..."

"Room Six?" the voice snapped testily. "Your room? Yeah. You dialed it, didn't you?"

The Writer gulped. "Who...are you?"

"For Christ's sake. If you don't know who this is, why are you calling me?"

The Writer, of course, recognized the voice as his own.

But I do not believe in doppelgangers, he told himself at once. "I called...because...well, it was an exercise in abstraction, I suppose."

He heard his own voice laugh at him.

"What a load of shit! Buddy? I wrote the haiku on the shade last night, not you."

The Writer gulped a rock.

"And I'm glad you called. I'm working on the novel. I'm shaping it up pretty well, if I might say so."

This is impossible...

"One thing, though. The title sucks. I'll change it to something more serviceable."

Impossible or not, the Writer was outraged. "You'll do no such thing! The title's great! It's better than Grapes of Wrath!"

"Oh, man. You really are fucked up with all that literary ballyhoo. White Trash Gothic? It's pretentious shit. You need something that's symbolic and enlightening at the same time."

"You leave my title alone, you!" the Writer bellowed.

"Don't worry about it. When you get back this morning...you'll see."

The Writer stared. "This morning... What, the motel? I'm coming back tonight, not this morning."

"Negative."

The Writer took deep breaths now, and counted ten. "I'm hanging up because this is impossible."

"It's existentially impossible, you're damn right. But I hate to tell you this, pal, existentialism is a no-dick philosophy."

Anger locked the Writer up in rigor.

"It's just an excuse for smarter than average losers to justify their existence. Social basket cases like Sartre and Kierkegaard and Heidegger and fuckin' Camus "

"I would never say fuckin' Camus!" the Writer almost bellowed.

" and all those other socially paralyzed misfits."

The Writer steeled himself. "I'll ask you again... Who are you?"

"Jesus, man. You're a published novelist, aren't you?"

"Of course!"

"And didn't you graduate from Yale's English Lit Department with a 4.0?"

The Writer bristled. "Harvard," the word ground out of his breath.

"Did you every really read Conrad, or did you just skim the Cliff Notes?"

This was mortifying. "You're impossible, so I'm hanging up," he informed the phantom voice but now

The line was dead.

The Writer was left to stand, phone to ear. He could see his own reflection, however scratched, in the chrome box-face. Calm down, he told himself. This is just an alcohol-induced hallucination, nothing more. I'm simply going to go back to my room and go to bed. There's no doppelganger there, no "double," no metaphorical twin. This is just job-stress and too much drinking...

But he did decide to have one more beer before he left. His ruminations, however, stalled him before he could go back inside. Nancy having a sexual dream about him last night was disturbing, of course, because he'd had one about her as well. But that was coincidental, and, as good-looking as she was? Who WOULDN'T have sexual dreams about her? The bull's head on the baby? Now that duped him; the Writer hated Greek Mythology. But it was the hallucinotic phone-voice that puzzled him more. It came from MY subconscious so...how come I don't get it? It was clearly a reference to Joseph Conrad, the acclaimed English writer whose Heart of Darkness proved perhaps the greatest fictional work of applicable modern nihilism ever written, not just the dark heart of Africa but the dark heart of Man.

What could that...have to do with...

Then the Writer recalled his own personal favorite of Conrad's: "The Secret-Sharer."

The story of a merchant sailor, and the man sleeping in the bunk above him...is himself...

His better half...

THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK! he heard next, and jumped at the start.

It sounded like someone kicking a metal door, and beside him, indeed, was a metal door which appeared to be a walk-in refrigerator room for beer. But

THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK!

It wasn't coming from there. It's coming from..., and the Writer turned his head toward the back lot.

That U-Haul?

Gravel crunched as he walked over, measuring careful steps to off-set his drunkenness. Probably another hallucination, he deduced, but he almost shrieked right after he tapped on the U-Haul's door and was immediately answered by:

THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK! and also a muffled squeal.

Someone gagged, kicking and screaming...

He jerked around at the sound of more crunching footsteps. It was Lud, carrying a shuck-and-jive smile.

"There ya are. I was wonderin' where ya got to, son. And can ya believe it? My carry-out burger still ain't ready! Thought I'd come out fer some fresh air whiles I wait "

"Sir!" the Writer exclaimed. "I think there's someone being held against their will in the U-Haul!"

The wise old man chuckled. "An ab-duck-sheer-un, huh? Son, you been watchin' too much'a the news all 'bout that crazy homer-sex-shul fella up north. Ain't nothin' in the U-Haul â€˜cept a billy goat I'se driven up ta my sister's place in Crisfield."

The Writer's heart beat down in relief. "Oh, thank God, Lud. Guess I'm a little drunk now I thought sure I heard a human in there."

"Looky here, son. I'll'se show ya," and then Lud withdrew a flashlight and opened the U-Haul door.

CLACK!

| |

PART THREE:

ACTUALIZATIONS

(I)

Dicky and Balls returned from their run for Clyde Nale at about 10 p.m. that night. They drove back from their Kentucky distro point with silent smiles on their faces smiles not so much stemmed in the fact that they'd earned solid money but instead in the knowledge that tomorrow at this time with any luck they'd be sitting on much more money. They had no way of knowing that the most paramount actualization of their lives was about to unfold in fact, they didn't even know what actualization meant.

They stopped back at Dicky's house briefly for a beer, then got back on the road. It was a Van Gogh night blooming overhead. Moonlight dusted the winding asphalt like queer frost.

Eventually Dicky broke the content silence as the â€Mino barreled onward.

"What time ya figure we should get ta Crafter's house?"

"I reckon we'd best wait till midnight," Balls said and, of all things, he'd pronounced the word midnight as "mid-nat." "T'se like that time. The witchin' hour'n all."

"Shore. It ain't far ta Governor's Bridge Road, so's what'cha wanna do fer the next two hours?"

Balls rubbed his hands together. "After a hard day'a runnin' shine? I'd say we'se could use a coupl'a cold ones at the Crossroads."

Dicky nodded and drove on. It sounded cool to him, and why not? After transporting illegal liquor across state lines and laying a momentous "ruckin'" on an innocent woman...that's Miller Time.

Ah-ha...

Attentive readers will recall Ida, the unfortunate and very pregnant volunteer at Clyde Nale's Hock Party, and they will likely be curious as to what happened to her (while less attentive readers or, more regrettably, readers now interminably bored by a convoluted narrative structure, won't care), but as previously conveyed, poor Ida was dragged naked and barely conscious from the â€Mino before Dicky and Balls had proceeded to Kentucky. After all, she'd called Balls an "asshole," and this was not a prudent thing for a woman to call him. So Dicky had pulled into a convenient wooded clearing as were rife in these parts and Balls wasted no time restricting her mobility. Her wrists he'd Flex-Cuffed together and then lashed to the base of a tree while her ankles had been separately cuffed and tent-staked to the ground in a manner which forced her legs apart. The naked woman was now an awesome sight to any practiced sociopath: skin white as proverbial parchment and beaded with cold sweat, eyes bugging, black pubic thatch strained and pushing outward below the five-months-pregnant belly. Balls took several more chugs off those swollen breasts, marveling at the flavor and texture of the sweet, liquor-tinged milk.

"Dang that's good!" he celebrated. "Dicky, you needs ta take a hit. Ain't nothin' like it."

Reluctant as ever, though, Dicky declined but did find the attendant imagery stimulating enough to extract his member and masturbate.

Meanwhile, Balls weighed some thoughts. So taken was he by Ida's milk-gorged breasts and conical nipples that he knew he just had to give her a good old fashioned Tittie Fuck, but, alas....

Her stomach was too big to accommodate the required position.

Dicky's face twisted up as his own belly jiggled during his act of masturbation. He stomped his heels twice, grunted "Uh!" once very loudly, and ejaculated onto a tree. The viscid emission seemed to resemble a proofreader's mark for New Paragraph.

It was a satisfying climax for Dicky. He shucked the last of it out, then flapped some spillage off his hand. When he looked toward Balls, however

"Aw, come on, Balls! Ya don't need ta be pullin' more'a that crazy shit! We gots ta get on the road!"

Balls wouldn't hear of it. "Just keep yer shirt on, Dicky. This tramp's set'a knockers are just so primo, I ain't gonna be happy till I have me a Tittie Fuck. So that stomach on her's just got ta go..."

See, while Dicky had been slaking himself, Balls had gone to the car to fetch the Stanley-brand manual brace-drill that he'd used so effectively on that scarecrow with tits at Spit McKully's not too long ago.

When Ida caught her first dazed glimpse of the tool, her semi-consciousness broke and then she heaved against her bonds to scream so loud every bird within a quarter mile lifted off from the trees.

Balls was horny a "gittin' right down ta business" kind of guy. No drama, in other words, no drawing out the anticipation like taffy just for fun. He knelt and promptly put the end of that 8-inch long double-twist auger bit right into the little kernel of Ida's popped-inside-out navel and began to crank on the drill...

Her screams corroded to deep, annoying howls as she watched the bit's barber-pole-like action. Balls twisted fast and hard, and in only seconds the bit had churned down to the chuck.

"See what'cha git fer callin' me a asshole?" he pointed out.

Ida shuddered, back-arching as if to snap. Only one simple line of blood leaked out of the wound, running straight down one side of the tremoring belly. When Balls reversed the long bit back out

"Holy Moly, Dicky! Would'ja lookit that!"

Ida's vagina expanded spectacularly and then her womb spontaneously miscarried, expelled a five-month-old bloody mess right out onto the ground between her legs. Balls glanced uninterested at the glistening pile of fetus, umbilicus, and placental mass.

The obstructing stomach, now, was gone. Balls yanked off his jeans, straddled Ida's vibrating chest, and got down to the task...

So much for the flashback. In a movie, for instance, the ploy would be much more effective than when executed in narrative prose. As for Ida and her gored child it was a boy! their corpses were left as they lay, food for the night varmints that would surely be along. And Balls' orgasm?

It had proved just dandy.

But the event was long behind them now, at 10 p.m. All Balls could ponder was the loot that surely awaited in the house they would soon be breaking into. Not just cash and jewels, but priceless antique furniture and old paintings and sculptures, a veritable treasure trove. But then

"Fuck me and my dead Daddy ta boot!" Balls cursed and smacked his thigh in anger.

"What, Balls?"

"Aw, shee-it, I plum fergot! We need a blammed U-Haul â€˜fore we'se knock over Crafter's house."

Dicky scratched his gut. "Uh...yeah, I'se guess yer right, less'n ya wanna just go fer smaller stuff'n put it in the back. We'se'll cover it with the tarp."

"Naw, naw, Dicky. There's â€˜spensive furniture'n shit in the house. That's what Bud Tooler tolt me."

"Well...maybe we'se should just say ta hail with the furniture, just go fer the jewels'n silver. Furniture's a pain in the ass."

Balls shook his head, disgusted. "Naw, naw, Dicky, ya don't understand. This ain't just reg-lar furniture. It's hair-looms. We'd make a killin' hockin' it all to the antique dealer's."

"Wow. Hair-looms..."

"Yeah, man, but damn. Where we gonna find a U-Haul ta pinch at this hour?" Balls asked aloud just as Dicky pulled the â€˜Mino into the back lot of the Crossroads...

They both stared astonished at the object now lit up in the â€˜Mino's headlights: a beat-to-holy-hell red pickup truck with a U-Haul hooked to the back.

Dicky said in a hush: "Dang, Balls. You must be cyclic."

"Dang straight. Now you just pull right alongside that pickup...while's I hitch that U-Haul up to our back bumper..."

Â«Â« Â»Â»

It was a shame about the fellow in the white shirt. Lud had enjoyed the man's conversation to no end. Not quite sure what to do with him now...

But ole Lud knew he'd think of something that would help the man find his true purpose in life his Kantian actualization of self and the Godly heart within his existenz.

Lud finally did get his carry-out burger (which, by the way, was composed of fifty percent ground beef and the rest a combination of ground possum and deer), and now it was time to get back up to Maryland and return to the business of his work for God on High. He paid his tab amongst the tavern's riffraff and exited out the back door with his bagged burger.

Well ain't that a fine how-do-ya-do? Lud thought, stopping in his tracks. His beat-to-holy-hell red pickup truck was still there, but the U-Haul connected to it was missing.

Indeed, God worked in strange ways. Lud was not thwarted, for the U-Haul could not be traced to him. But I wish I could see the look on the face of whoever stole it, once he opens the back.

Lud got in the truck and drove away.

(II)

Was it a dream? The Writer wasn't sure, rocking and becloaked in spongelike blackness. He was dreaming of a stench something gone to rot and the stench, somehow, was proof of existentialism's utter failure as a true philosophy. There was no Kierkegaardian "leap of faith," no confrontation of existence to unveil essence. It was all just rotten meat...

In the dream the Writer struggled against bindings at his wrists and ankles, and could only make choking sounds when he tried to call out, for a gag had been tied through his teeth. All the while the darkness jostled around him. He considered his symbolic function in the dream: he the human intellectual unit straining against the strictures of a naturalistic environment. Can't move, can't see, can't speak. My God, I'm like Kafka's "Hunger Artist!" My free will has been suppressed!

And, hence, so had his innate impulse to seek actualization. In the dream, the Writer, now, was a living symbol.

Which, of course, was all bullshit. There was no philosophical symbology, for God's sake. There was no meaning that existed behind objective truths. Nor was the Writer in the grip of a dream. He was in the back of a stolen U-Haul and he'd been knocked unconscious and tied up by a psychopath who, in years to come, would be dubbed by the police as "Mr. Torso." This, however, he could have no way of knowing yet, nor could he know that said U-Haul, by an ironic happenstance worthy of Jean Paul Sartre's "The Wall," had been stolen yet again by two more psychopaths named Balls Conner and Dicky Caudill.

The Writer would find out in due time what the rotten smell really was...

(III)

"Dang," Dicky complained at the traffic light that would take them onto Governor's Bridge Road. "What's that fuckin' smell?"

Balls leaned his head out the â€Mino's window and sniffed. His lips puckered within the redneck goatee. "Shee-it, Dicky. Damned if I know." He narrowed his eyes through a rumbling pause. "You thank it's comin' from the U-Haul?"

"Naw. Probably a deer're somethin' died in the woods. But nows that ya mention it...I wonder what's in the U-Haul..."

The light changed, then Dicky turned the â€Mino onto a forest-lined road which seemed to plummet.

"Didn't feel like there were much in it when I'se hitched it up ta our ball," Balls offered. He sniffed the air again and made a face in the dashlight-tinged dark. "But it don't make no difference what's in it. We'se'll dump it all at Crafter's house ta make room fer what we pinch."

"Yeah," came Dicky's sophisticated concurrence.

The narrow road could've been an abstractive esophagus which was swallowing them into darkness that just kept getting darker. The night was digesting them. Balls snuck a crotch-squeeze when Dicky wasn't looking. For some reason the recollection of cranking the manual drill into Ida's pregnant gut still had him all hot'n bothered. I'se gonna have to do that again, he told himself. Drillin' pregnant chicks in the belly's a damn sight more fun than playin' cards. "Man, Dicky, I'm chompin' at the bit ta see what Crafter's got. How far ya thank his house is?"

The â€Mino slowed at the conclusion of Balls' query. The headlights illumined a barely visible turn-off, and there stood a mailbox peppered with buckshot holes. E. CRAFTER read the little

sign atop. Dicky grinned. "Here we are, brother."

They pulled in to find themselves driving up a steep incline through woods even more dense. An owl hooted, and they could see fireflies dotting the forest on either side. Finally, then, the road emptied at the top of a massive hill, and there sat the house. Dicky idled the car toward the front door, then cut the big engine.

The night sounds amplified, engulfing them. Balls and Dicky stared upward.

"Shee-it," Dicky muttered.

"You got that right."

The house stood as a narrow, three-story ruin that looked like it might fall over. The paint had long since blistered off its plank walls, showing only weathered gray wood. A front porch, if you wanted to call it that, had actually collapsed at one end, while the screens that had once enclosed it hung in tatters. The many trees around the house were gnarled, overly twisted, and appeared to be dying.

Balls shook his head. "This place makes my Daddy's shack look like fuckin' Graceland. What a dump."

"Ain't no one been livin' in there fer years by the looks of it. Your buddy Tooler was pullin' yer leg."

"Guess yer right but shee-it Bud Tooler? Man, he was a straight up guy, had his head on straight. Ain't no reason fer him ta lie or git his info so fucked up."

Dicky smirked. "Head on straight? I thought you said this guy raped a chick in a Good Humor truck'n got caught 'cos he went back ta steal ice cream cones."

"Tastee-Pops," Balls corrected. "You know, the things that push out the cardboard tube? But, yeah, I guess Tooler's full'a shit."

They both got out before the monstrosity of a house. The moon glowed a sickly mucus-yellow right behind it. Balls passed Dicky a flashlight. "We gots ta have a look anyways, I guess."

"Cain't hurt."

Balls looked over his shoulder. "Aw, but let's empty the U-Haul first."

"Shore."

When Balls unfixed the latch and swung the U-Haul's door open

"Holy fuck!" Dicky yelled, gagging at the stench.

It slammed Balls in the face like tear gas. "Smells worse than a pile'a dead buzzards in there "

The first thing they noticed was a woman's leg right by the door. Balls grabbed it, expecting to pull out a dead woman.

Instead, all he pulled out was a leg.

They he pulled out two severed arms and another leg. All of the limbs were beginning to decompose.

"That there's some fucked up shit, Balls!" Dicky exclaimed.

"Ya gots ta be shittin' me..."

Then Dicky gulped. He shined his light into the back of the haul. "Balls. Ain't just arms'n legs in there."

"Huh?"

"Looks like three bodies too."

Balls shined his own light in and made the same observation. Two women and a man, it appeared, all bound and gagged. Balls took a breath against the stench and hauled the first woman out by the ankles.

"Fuck."

The body flopped to the ground. A brunette in her twenties apparently, cut-off shorts and a halter. She would've been a looker...if she hadn't been dead for several hours. Her skin had turned to the hue of spoiled cream, while the undersides of her arms and legs were a disturbing purple-black.

"That there's a waste'a prime splittail," Balls related. He pulled the corpse's top up to gander the breasts and blue nipples, just for good measure. "But I'se wonder what the fuck's this all about."

"Looks like we picked the wrong U-Haul ta rip off," Dicky offered. "Shee-it, I thought it'd be

full'a old junk or something. Instead, it's full'a dead bodies."

"Not quite dead," a muffled voice floated out from the dark compartment.

Dicky and Balls nearly keeled over.

"The fuck!" Dicky yelled.

Balls hauled the next body out onto the ground.

FLUMP!

A man in a white shirt and glasses sluggishly churned on the ground, wrists and ankles twisting against rope bonds. He'd managed to half-remove his gag by the force of his tongue. Balls whipped out his Buck knife and cut the gag fully off.

"Thank God!" the man wheezed.

"You look familiar," Dicky remarked.

"Yeah," Balls added. "Shee-it, you're that dude hangs out at the Crossroads. Barkeep tolt me you was a Writer."

The Writer nodded, face smudged. "That's me, and thank you for rescuing us."

"Us?"

"There's another woman inside. I think she's still alive."

Balls yanked out the third occupant of the U-Haul.

FLUMP!

"Dang!" Dicky railed. "It's that bar â€˜ho "

"Cora!" Balls finished.

All ninety pounds of her squirmed in the dirt. Her eyes bugged above her gag, which Balls, too, cut off.

"Balls! Dicky! Ya saved us from that awful man!" Her voice shrilled. Balls, Dicky, and the

Writer as well all flinched at the tenor of her voice. Nails across slate would've been less annoying.

"What man?" Balls asked.

"Some old philosophical psychopath named æ~Lud," the Writer said. "He conked us both out behind the bar, then tossed us inside. But...when this happened, the U-Haul was hooked up to a red pickup truck."

"It was until we stolt it," Dicky said.

The Writer peered. "Why...would you steal it?"

Balls was wholly aggravated by this new monkey wrench. "We stolt it ta clean out that house," he pointed upward. "But lookin' at the dump now, I doubt there's anything inside to steal."

The Writer took a long look at the Crafter house. "Interesting."

"What's that, Writer?" Balls snapped.

"Well, did you ever read æ~The Purloined Letter' by Edgar Allan Poe?"

"No."

The Writer frowned. "The moral of the story is that things of the most value can be effectively hidden in plain sight. That house, for instance."

"What about it, Writer?" Dicky urged.

"From the outside, indeed, it appears to be an abandoned dump. But aren't the windows curious? They look brand-new. Why install brand-new windows in an uninhabitable hulk?"

Balls and Dicky peered. Then they cut the bonds at the Writer's and Cora's ankles, hoisted them up, and they all approached the leaning house.

"Damn if he ain't got good eyes," Dicky said, studying a bow window with his flashlight. "It does look brand-new." He squinted at the corner. "Some winder company named Lexan."

The Writer laughed. "It's not a company, it's a composite material bullet-proof glass, in other words. It's indestructible, which proves even more curious. Lexan windows are as effective as iron bars, and very expensive. The owner of this property obviously wants people to think it's not

worth breaking into, yet he installs Lexan to insure that they don't."

Balls muttered, "Indestructer-able?" and then the Writer jumped back and Cora shrieked when Balls pulled the big Webley pistol from his belt. "Ain't nothin' indestructer-able if'n I say it ain't!"

BAM!

Everyone jumped an inch, and Cora shrieked even more annoyingly loud. When the smoke cleared...

"Dang," Dicky muttered, scratching at the window pane. The big bullet barely scuffed the surface.

"Looks like the Writer's right," Balls admitted.

Then Cora shrieked again.

"Shut up, girl!" Balls yelled.

"L-look! There's a face lookin' at us in the next winder!"

They walked over, if a bit cautiously. Balls shined his light.

"Ain't no face. It's a "

"A bust," the Writer said.

"Bust?" Dicky scoffed. "Ya mean like titties?"

"No, no..."

The curtains of every window in the house had been drawn but this one sported an overlooked gap, and in the gap, indeed, a face peered out. A marble face.

"Think of it as a statue head," the Writer said. "It's propped up behind the window, for decoration." When he looked closer, he went "Hmmm..."

"What'choo, hmmin' about?" Balls demanded.

"It appears to be Italian marble. Very expensive."

"Well hot dog!" Balls hooted. "Tooler weren't lyin'!"

The Writer said, "But even more curious is the brass plate beneath the bust. It says Phillipe Marquand, 1674-1728. Marquand, if I remember correctly, was a famous French medium who is said to have been able to communicate with the dead."

Balls, Dicky, and Cora all gaped at him.

"And this, over here," and the Writer led them up the front steps onto the ruined porch. "I almost didn't notice it, due to the torn screens. Shine your light up there, sir."

Balls did, and almost gasped.

Above the front door was a half-circle composed of ornate stained glass.

"It's called a tympanum. See the face?"

They all squinted further.

"Well, dang if'n he ain't right," Cora said.

"Don't that beat all?" Dicky added.

The mosaic formed a face below which ornate letters read ALEXANDER SETON.

"Who the fuck's he?" Balls asked.

"The most notorious of all alchemists," the Writer explained. "In 1604, Seton is said to have turned lead into gold."

"Bullshit," Balls scoffed, but after another moment of staring at the puzzle-piece face, he turned away.

The Writer smiled, amused. "Looks like the house you gentlemen picked to break into...belongs to a dedicated occultist."

"Occult?" Dicky asked, a spike in his voice. "You mean, like, devil-worship'n shit like that?"

"Um-hmm..."

"Fuck this, let's leave!" Cora shrieked again. "And, Balls. Come on! Untie my hands!"

"I'd appreciate the same," the Writer said.

"Stay here, both'a ya," Balls ordered, and took Dicky down off the porch out of earshot.

Dicky's bulbous face was pink with stress. "Shee-it, Balls, this caper's gone all fucked up."

"Tell me about it, Dicky. Just our luck to rip off a fuckin' U-Haul that's got two people in it who can identifier-fy us."

"And this fuckin' house, man. What's this guy talkin' 'bout devil-worshipers' turnin' lead into gold'n shit? I can't make heads'ner tails'a this."

"Neither can I, Dicky." Balls rubbed his hands together. "But at least we're gonna make a score. You heard that Writer dude. Italian marble," but oh, goodness, he'd pronounced the word Italian as "Eye-taller-un." "Bet Crafter's house is set up with it, so's we're gonna take it off his hands, and shit knows what else's in there."

"Yeah, man, shore, but " Dicky cast a fretting glance toward the porch. "What we gonna do with them two?"

"Well, I reckon we'll make 'em help us load the U-Haul, and then I reckon we'll kill 'em."

(IV)

The Writer found his existential resolve being tested, yet at the same time he found he had passed the test. The fact was, by the greatest fluke, he'd been accidentally commandeered by two redneck thieves in the process of committing a criminal act; hence, his future looked rather dim, for more than likely once the criminal act was completed, these two characters would have little choice but to dispose of him.

On spiritual grounds, the Writer was...okay with that, for he'd lived a full and aesthetically enriched life. His only regret?

I'll never be able to finish White Trash Gothic...

"Those two crackers are gonna up'n kill us," Cora whispered to him.

"Believe me, miss. Even the most brief reflection has illuminated me to that probability."

Suddenly, the skinny wreck of a girl looked doleful. "Ya know? I gotta step sister turns tricks up

in bumfuck South Dakota where the meth is all over the fuckin' place and cheap. She told me I could come up there'n turn tricks with her'n we'd have a great time, man. But I never went." She looked around, more at the predicament than the location. "Shore as shit wish I did."

"Let's look at the glass as though it were half full, not half empty, Miss," the Writer advised.

"Whuh what glass?"

The Writer sighed. "Let's not give up hope. We may be able to get out of this."

The skinny girl frowned. "What we gonna do?"

"It seems logical to me that for as long as we make ourselves useful to them, we extend our lives, and in that time...an opportunity for escape may strike."

She fidgeted in place. "Aw, man, I fuckin' hope so 'cos if I don't get me some crystal soon, I'll start throwin' up my brains..."

The comment shocked the Writer. "Let's, uh...hope that doesn't happen."

"That's what jones-ing from meth feels like, man. Ya start upchuckin'â€”it feels like yer brains're gonna fly out'cher mouth, and ya wish they would 'cos it's so bad, ya wish ya could just up'n die."

"Ah...how regrettable..."

As the Writer tried to think of a possible solution, something nicked his attention: the door-knocker. It had been mounted on the ornate door's center stile, an oval of tarnished bronze depicting a morose half-formed face. Just two eyes, no mouth, no other features. He at once considered the potential literary symbol: Man, human features eroded by a corrupt universe, leaving him speechless. The existential mask...

"And who was that awful guy who knocked us out in the first place?"

The Writer blinked away the abstraction, feeling spiritually drained. "Oh, the old man at the bar, â€”Lud? He's a Christian phenomenalist, if you can believe it."

"Huh?"

"Shhh. Here they come."

The one called Dicky trudged up the porch steps, poker-faced, while the one called Balls...came bearing a long, stout piece of polished wood.

"Step aside, Writer. I'se gonna bust that front door down with this here hickory pick-handle. It's one'a the few things my shit-head Daddy left to me that weren't worth less than a rummie's shorts." Balls poised the handle with authority. "Oughta have that door open in 'bout two swipes."

Forty swipes later, and after an undo cacophony, the door finally split down the middle. The Writer winced at the noise, then winced harder when he noticed tufts of hair sticking out of Cora's armpits. He couldn't decide which was more annoying.

"Jaysus!" Dicky exclaimed. "That's one tough door!"

"Shee-it," Balls muttered. He sat down against the porch rail, to rest after the exertion.

"More of the same," the Writer offered. "The deception of appearances: a security door on a house that looks worthless." The Writer looked directly at Balls. "You might want to pause to take heed."

"What'cha mean?"

The Writer shrugged. "Expensive windows and an equally expensive security door? The owner may well have more precautions waiting inside."

"Ya mean like maybe a security guard or somethin'?" Dicky's pea-brain speculated.

"Sure. Or some other counter-measure."

Balls wasn't affected by the possibility. One hand hefted the pick-handle, the other hefted the pistol. "Here's yer counter-measures, Writer. Now... Inside. You two first."

The Writer and Cora led on, Dicky and Balls backing them up with flashlights. One of them flicked a wall switch but nothing happened.

"Shee-it. Crafter must'a had the æ~leck-tricity turnt off."

Flashlight beams crisscrossed over the ornate foyer and sitting room, carving slices of more statues and busts, and brooding faces that seemed to scowl at them from framed paintings.

"This place is creepy as shit!" Cora whined. "And...I need some meth!"

"Shut up," Balls told her.

"There are plenty of candles," the Writer observed of the many globed candle sticks along a spacious fireplace mantle and various wall sconces.

"Daggit!" Balls complained. "I ain't got a lighter."

"Me's neither," Dicky admitted.

The Writer sighed through a cringing hope. "Well, it just so happens that I do and, Mr. Balls? I would be forever in your debt if you'd cut my bonds. Naturally I give you my word I won't try to escape. I'd be more than thrilled to light all these candles and to be perfectly honest, sir?" The Writer's shoulders slumped. "I'm dying for a cigarette."

Evidently Balls appreciated being addressed as "mister" and "sir." He snapped open his Buck and cut the Writer's lashes.

"You have my unflagged gratitude."

Balls grinned, showed the pistol again. "Any funny business and I'll blow a hole in yer back bigger than Dicky's head."

The Writer nodded. "I have virtually no doubts as to your credulity."

"I like the way he talks, huh, Dicky?" Balls noted.

"Dang straight. Must'a gone ta collerge."

"Harvard," the Writer elucidated. "Not just any college." He lit a cigarette, then proceeded to light the candles about the sumptuous room.

"Do mine now, please!" Cora pleaded. She was hopping up and down with her back to Balls, showing her lashed wrists. "Please, Mr. Balls, sir! Pretty please!"

"Shut up," Balls smirked, then rammed his bootsole against her rump and sent her toppling across the room. "And quit whinin' else I'll sit on yer face'n shit in yer mouth while's I'se crankin' holes in yer belly with my manual drill."

Dicky blurted a laugh.

Once the Writer had lit a dozen or so candles, all eyes roved the sitting-room, in awe.

Someone said, "Shee-it my drawers."

The room's candle-lit darkness seemed alive with glittering. Several chandeliers hung overhead, catching the light, while from nooks and shelves sat more crisp-cut crystal. Many of the candlesticks were of silver and gold, and much of the furniture hundreds of years old was inlaid with more shiny gems. Even some of the Iranian throw rugs were stitched with myriad gemstones.

"It's all of Crafter's hair-looms," Dicky whispered.

"Just like Tooler said was here..."

Even Cora, dragging herself up with her hands behind her back, looked stunned at all the treasures about the room.

"This Crafter man," said the Writer. "He's quite a collector." He stooped to inspect a William and Mary table, and several armoires and rare-wood chairs. Many pieces were crafted from inlaid satinwood, mahogany, and teak. Half-tables and vase stands sported neoclassical motifs and fine hand-carved tracteries. A serpentine settee that should've been in a museum sat mid-room, and along the walls were window seats with scrolled arms and tiny servant bells dangling. "Most of the furniture's Hepplewhite and Sheraton. There's a fortune in this room alone," and next the Writer perused more of the busts and paintings. "Hmmm."

"What's that, Writer?" Balls asked.

"Just like outside. Alexander Seton and Phillipe Marquand are in appropriate company. Two different portraits of Cagliostro, one of de Sade, busts of Ludwig of Flanders and Cristoph Vocolai all well-known practitioners of the occult arts: satanism, black magic, sorcery."

Balls frowned through the following hush, which was then severed by still another loud whine on the part of Cora, "Let's get out'a this shitty place! It looks haunted."

Balls pointed a finger. "Cora. If'n ya say one more thing, I'll punch ya in yer peter-sucker."

"But "

WHAP!

Balls' fist smacked Cora right in the lips. She squealed and went reeling.

"That means keep it shut."

Dicky's big pumpkin face looked around with some apprehension. "This joint is kind'a creepy, Balls."

"You, too? Shee-it," Balls smirked. "I don't give a rat's dick 'bout a bunch'a paintings'n statue heads. Let's git ta work, and you " He reached down toward Cora. "Git off yer ass and help."

Cora lay dazed and bloody-mouthed at the foot of the fireplace. She kind of flopped there with her hands behind her back, but then Balls grabbed one of her tit-flaps through her halter and, using it as a handle of sorts, lifted her to her feet.

Cora squealed again.

"Guess we should check the rest'a this floor, then look upstairs."

"And out back, too, I'd advise," the Writer said, peeking out a heavily draped window. "Looks like a garage in the back property and, well, naturally a creepy-looking graveyard."

"A...graveyard?" Dicky muttered.

Balls' glare seemed to even take the scowling portraits aback. "I don't care 'bout no graveyards or no creepy houses. All's I want is a nice paycheck fer a night's work. Dicky you and the Writer go check outside " The girl mewled when Balls pinched her nipple and twisted hard. "I'll keep an eye on this stringbean with a pussy, and check the rest'a down here."

Cora opened her mouth to object, then thought better of it. "Come on, Writer," Dicky said and shoved the Writer toward the back door.

They both stepped out into the night. The moon was so bright they scarcely needed their flashlights. Now's my chance, the Writer realized. I can brain this ignoramus with my flashlight and head for the hills, but then he laughed to himself. Who am I kidding? I'm a writer. Writers don't have balls like that...

"So's yer a writer, huh? What'cha write? Like, books'n shit?"

The Writer gave his stock answer. "I'm a speculative novelist. I infuse relatable modern fiction scenarios with charactorial demonstrations of the existential condition. Allegorical symbology, it's called, rooted in various philosophical systems."

Dicky nodded with approval. "That's what I thunk. I read a book once, see? They made us in school. It was kind'a dumb though. A retard watchin' golf balls or some shit."

The Writer nearly howled. Absalom, Absalom!

They wended through tilted gravestones, some with crudely etched dates going back to the late 1700s. Toward the rear of the yard, near the treeline, a newer building, like a garage, grew larger.

"Maybe Crafter's got a bunch'a fancy cars in that there garage," Dicky speculated.

"Perhaps. But what do you know about this man Crafter?"

"Nothin'. Just that he's some old weirdo who's got a house full'a â€˜spensive junk."

"I wouldn't call him merely an old weirdo." The Writer looked at Dicky. "He's an old weirdo who also happens to be a student of the black arts."

Dicky remained silent. When an owl hooted, he flinched. The garage was unlocked. They both went in, flashlights beaming. No cars were in evidence, but there was a riding lawn mower, various tools, and a dozen tanks of liquid propane. "Check that barrel there," Dicky ordered in a feeble attempt at authority. "Might be full'a gold or jewels."

Greedy of filthy lucre, the Writer quoted the first letter of Timothy. He pried off the barrel's lid and found it curiously full of

"No gold or jewels, Mr. Dicky. Just...salt."

"Salt? The hail?"

"Not table salt, either." The Writer tasted it. "Uniodized. It doesn't snow this far south, does it?"

"Naw. Why's the old coot gotta a barrel full'a salt?"

"I couldn't guess. And that's quite a load of propane. I didn't see a grill out back anywhere."

Next the Writer looked in a metal can.

"What'cha got there? Jewels?"

The Writer shook his head. "Try dead frogs."

Dicky looked in. "Yer shittin' me!"

The can was full of petrified bullfrogs. The Writer noted an even odder anomaly. "It looks like all of their toes have been cut off. Then they were just tossed in here to die."

"Shee-it..."

Another can was full of desiccated newts, all missing their eyes. "Eye of newt, toe of frog," the Writer's voice echoed in the dark.

"This is right fucked up. We'se leavin'."

Back outside the Writer combed his light behind them. "Let's go look at those graves."

"The fuck for?"

"I detect an incongruence."

"Huh?"

The Writer smiled and walked over. "How curious..."

"A half-dug hole? Big deal."

Indeed, there were several areas in their proximity that had been dug down to about a foot, trenches, in a sense, about six feet long.

"What's that on the ground? Cement?"

"Crude cement. It's called tabby," the Writer explained. "You know what this place is, Mr. Dicky? It's an unconsecrated graveyard."

"Shee-it..."

"The more normal stones in the area have dates from the 17 and 1800's, but these..."

They weren't grave markers at the foot of each trench but simply splotches of old cement in which someone had inscribed a name and date with their fingers. "Back in the day, common criminals were buried in unconsecrated ground. Relatives would come in later, pour some quick tabby and render an inscription. Look at this one."

An old finger-scrrawl in the cement read ELSBETH - 1689.

The Writer eyed Dicky. "Or I should say, common criminals and witches."

"Fuck..."

"Or warlocks. Anyone accused of soliciting the Devil."

Dicky gulped. "Witches'n warlocks are buried here?"

"It would seem so. And...what on earth..." The Writer strode off several yards, to the edge of the woodline. He aimed the flashlight down.

A simple wooden post stuck out of the ground about two feet, and nailed to it was a crucifix.

"A cross," Dicky observed.

"Not just one cross..." The Writer shined his flashlight to either side. The entire woodline had a similar post and cross every six feet or so. It's almost like a fence...of crosses. A...barrier...

"If Crafter's a satanist, how come them crosses ain't upside-down?" Dicky made a surprising query.

But the Writer didn't answer, for now he noticed something else. "How do you like that?"

Dicky looked down. "What's that? A line'a sand?"

"A line of salt, Mr. Dicky. Let's follow it."

Flashlights down, they followed the line of salt which oddly ran unbroken just inside the cross-mounted posts. In a few minutes they were in the front of the house, and could see the salt and crosses continuing on.

"The salt and the crosses completely encircle the property," the Writer said. He lowered the light to the driveway which, too, was crossed by a line of salt. "Now that's interesting."

"Ise don't get it."

"Ancient metaphysics, Mr. Dicky. Salt was once more valuable than gold, and it eventually became a favorite constituent in alchemy, divination, and spells."

"Spells," Dicky intoned with some trepidation.

"This Mr. Crafter fellow seems to have deliberately enclosed his property with two powerful totemic symbols."

"Totemic," Dicky intoned.

"And to respond to your previous query, I suspect the crosses aren't inverted for that very reason. Between the salt and the cruciforms, Crafter seems to be covering his bases."

Dicky made yet another astute remark. "A magical fence?"

The Writer nodded, impressed. "I think so."

"To keep bad stuff from getting in?"

The Writer lit another cigarette, and sighed smoke as he looked down at more crosses and salt. "The crosses are facing toward the house, Mr. Dicky. So it would seem that Crafter's intentions are just the opposite. He wants to keep 'bad stuff' from getting out," and then they both slowly turned their gazes back toward the house.

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"We'se gonna be rich men, Dicky-Boy," Balls enthused when the Writer and the more globose redneck went back inside. Balls already had several boxes full of gold and silver gimcracks set aside on the William and Mary table. "The dinin' room alone's chock full."

"Cool," Dicky tried to sound excited.

Balls caught the downcast tone of voice. "S'matter with you?"

"Aw, nothin'. Just kind'a weird outside."

"The premise is surrounded by an occult barrier," the Writer baldly stated. "Crafter obviously has some overtly ritualistic beliefs."

"Don't know what'cher talkin' 'bout, don't care," Balls ignored him. "Now git yer writer-ass in gear 'fore I start kickin' it. Find a box and start loadin' it up with 'sensitive-lookin' loot."

"Where's Cora?" Dicky asked.

Balls pointed to the other side of the room where, in the candlelight, Cora could be seen lying unconscious. "Punched her a tad too hard last time she started runnin' her yap again. Leave the â€˜ho be. She'll just get in the way."

They made several trips to the U-Haul, depositing a few of the valuables from the dining room, but back inside, the Writer suggested, "Shouldn't we check the rest of the house first? Since you gentlemen are thieves, it might be more efficient to identify the most valuable booty initially, and that's just one reason."

Balls paused, carrying in a silver service tray. "One reason? Gimme another?"

"Well...to discern beyond all doubt that the house is, indeed, unoccupied."

Balls and Dicky traded uneasy glances but then Balls scoffed. "There ain't no one else here, Writer. My buddy Bud Tooler tolt me so."

"So this Mr. Tooler his knowledge of the house is unimpeachable?"

Balls shot the Writer a funky look, which would be the first of many such looks. "What? Peaches?"

"What if this Mr. Tooler happens to be incorrect?" the Writer posed, "and there's someone upstairs right this very moment, calling the police?"

Balls and Dicky traded another uneasy glance. "He's gotta point there, Balls," Dicky said.

But Balls shook his head. "Look, Crafter ain't married and he ain't got no kids or reller-tives. I'se know for a fact there ain't no one else in this house."

Just then, quite loudly, a television clicked on upstairs.

"This is CNN Headline News," a woman was saying, "and this is Lynn Russell reporting on all of the nation's up to the minute headlines. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, today alleged serial-killer Jeffery Dahmer was arraigned on six counts of capital murder..."

Balls pulled the other two aside, into a dim hall beside another door with, of all things, a cross on it.

Now here's a cross INSIDE, the Writer reflected. Crafter's obviously no Christian, so why would he mount a cross on THIS door?

Balls and Dicky weren't the least bit interested. All of their faces glowed eerily in the candlelight.

"Keep yer voices down," Balls whispered. "There's someone upstairs watchin' fuckin' television. Whoever it is...we gots ta get rid of 'em so's we can finish the haul."

"But who is upstairs?" Dicky whispered after huddling closer.

No answers were forthcoming.

All the while, the Writer considered: How can a TELEVISION be on when the power's cut off? But he did not give voice to this curiosity.

"Yer buddy Tooler fucked up," Dicky sniped. "Crafter didn't go to fuckin' Spain. It's probably Crafter hisself sittin' upstairs, waitin' fer the police."

Against the wall, a mahogany stand inlaid with crisp amethysts stood with a phone on top. The Writer picked up the phone and listened. "No dial-tone. Crafter probably did go on this trip of his and had his phone turned off. So whoever is upstairs couldn't have called anyone."

"Good thinkin'," Balls said. He tiptoed across the expansive sitting room and straddled Cora. He slapped her face several times till she roused, then pressed a palm across her lips. "'Shhh. Not a word. Someone else is in the house, upstairs..."

He helped her up and led her back to the hall.

Cora's objection was a whining whisper. "Someone else in the fuckin' house? You're fuckin' shittin' me! We gotta get out'a here!"

"Only person goin' anywhere is you," Balls informed her. "Upstairs."

"My fuckin' ass," Cora illustriously stated.

Balls' face set. "Listen, Cora. I'll se make a deal with ya. We needs ta know what we're up against, so you go upstairs and take a peek, see who's up there, then come right back down. You do that, and I'll untie yer wrists and let'cha go." Then Balls cocked a brow. "And if'n you don't do that, I'll cut'cher head off and piss out'cher mouth, then I'll scalp yer dirty pussy'n wipe my ass with it next time I take a corn-shit."

The Writer had to chuckle. "Not exactly an affable alternative, hmm?"

"Shut up." Balls whipped out his Buck knife and flicked it open, eyeing Cora.

Cora sighed. "I should'a never offered that old man a blow job back at the bar." She blinked, took a deep breath, then began to walk very slow up the plushly carpeted steps.

From upstairs, they could hear the TV channels being changed. CNN switched off, replaced by some man with a German accent saying, "But...this room has other qualities in 1436 it was here that Prince and Princess Von Hart had their throats cut while they were sleeping." A woman's voice: "Their throats cut?" The German man: "Yes, madam, but that was in 1436. Will you excuse me?" and then the channel switched to a baseball game, "David Cone has just won his next shut-out for the Yankees! What another tremendous acquisition by George Steinbrenner, folks!" and next, a commercial, "Not available in stores! Call now while supplies last! Get the patented Therm-O-Fresh Food Saving System for just four easy payments of \$49.95. That's right, just \$49.95!"

The Writer rolled his eyes.

Then the TV switched off.

Had Cora been discovered by the unknown sentinel? Balls pulled out his pistol, and Dicky very courageously suggested, "Fuck it, let's just leave her, Balls. We'se can git out'a here while Cora's still upstairs."

"No way, Dicky. You seen the loot in this joint. We ain't splittin' till our kick is full up."

The three of them waited, pinned by shadows against the wall. A clock ticked somewhere. The Writer noticed again the other door behind him, with the cross on it, and without thinking he opened it. Cinderblock steps descended into darkness, and an awful smell assailed his nostrils.

"Shee-it, what's that stink?" Balls complained.

"It's coming from down there, presumably a basement."

Dicky saw the cross. "Just like the ones outside goin' 'round the whole yard."

"It's interesting," the Writer reflected. "An occult aficionado...using crosses as some kind of transitive emblem."

Balls shot the Writer a funky look. "Close that fuckin' door. The stink's pissin' me off."

The Writer quietly reclosed the door, then went back to listening for any noises from upstairs. Then

Tiny footfalls were heard padding fast down the stairs carpet.

Cora ducked around the hall. She looked more perplexed than anything.

"Well?" Balls asked. "You see who's up there?"

"It's a gal, weird-lookin'," the addict-prostitute enlightened them.

"A gal? Old, you mean?"

"Naw, don't thank so." Cora's eyes thinned. "And she looked weird 'cos she was all, like, black."

"A colored gal, you mean," Dicky presumed.

"Guess Crafter's got a maid," Balls supposed.

The Writer frowned.

"Naw, naw," Cora insisted. "I mean she was all black and wet. Like she been painted with black paint. And she was buck nekit."

Balls sighed. "A nekit woman painted black, huh? Shee-it. What else could I expect from a meth-head? You're seein' things, ya asshole."

"I am not!" Cora objected, almost too loud. "She was painted black, she was all wet'n shiny. And I don't mean black like a nigruh. I mean black like...black. Like road tar or somethin'. And she were layin' on a big fluffy bed, friggin' herself."

"What?" Balls asked for reiteration.

"She was playin' with herself. Feelin' herself up'n rubbin' her cooter. That's what I seed when I looked in. The first bedroom. She were workin' herself up into a swivet, too, and just 'fore I come back down it looked like she was tryin' ta stick her whole fist in herself. That's what I saw."

Balls sputtered through a frown. "A gal painted black fistin' her own cooze. You're high, Cora. You've sucked so much dick ya got jizz fer brains."

"If'n ya don't believe me, go look fer yourself!" she countered. "But first ya best keep your end'a the bargain. Untie me'n lemme git out'a here, like ya promised."

"Shore, baby "

WHAP!

Balls bopped her in the back of the head with his homemade blackjack, and once again Cora collapsed.

Balls jerked his head toward the stairs. "Dicky, git upstairs'n take care of this. Don't know what the fuck Cora's talkin' 'bout but I'se guess there really is a chick up there. So's you go punch her lights out'n tie her up."

Dicky's jaw dropped. "Why me, Balls?"

"'Cos I said so. What, you's afraid of a splittail?"

"Naw, but... It's dark up there, and "

"Just git on up there like I tolt ya."

Dicky's hooded eyes shot to the Writer. "Send him!"

"Shee-it, Dicky. He's a writer. Writer's are pussies."

The Writer interjected, "I'll admit, I am to use your colloquialism a pussy, but please know that not all writers are. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, was a boxer, a combatant in the Spanish Civil War, and a certified bull fighter. More recently, I'll mention the indisputable machismo of popular literary novelist John Irving. He would read Shakespeare and Percy Shelley in redneck bars, and when the patrons laughed at him? He'd give them all quite a pranging."

Balls stared. "Shut up. And Dicky? Git'cher ass upstairs and take care'a that splittail now."

"Aw, but, Balls..."

"Be a man, goddamn it!" then

FWUMP!

Balls gave Dicky a hard kick to the pants.

"Awright, awright!" Dicky hurried for the stairs.

"And be quick about it. I'se don't wanna be here all night "

Dicky, however reluctantly, disappeared up the stairs.

Balls gave the Writer a shove. "Come on, Writer. Let's git more loot loaded up."

(V)

Ain't fair, Dicky thought. It should'a been the Writer... His flashlight played over the wall, but then he quickly turned it off when he noticed the wedge of light in the gap of an opened door. That must be it...

Dicky mounted the landing as quietly as a clumsy fat redneck slob could, then edged toward the door.

A clock kept ticking but along with it he heard moaning, or at least he thought he did. Could Cora be right? Was there really a naked woman in there, masturbating? He didn't know what to make of the "painted black" part but

I'se'll just barge right in there and bust her in the chops, he resolved. Dicky was, for the most part, a monumental coward, but he wanted to make Balls proud. I'll show him I'se got what it takes, too...

But before he could summon the courage to actually do it, a voice seemed to float out of the room, a quiet yet wanton woman's voice...

Come in, young man, and bestow me...

Dicky really didn't know what "bestow" meant, nor was he terribly convinced by the nature of the voice. It was more like words in a dream, not words actually detected by his ears.

How could this be?

Bestow me with your youth...and your surging virility...

Dicky froze against the wall.

I can smell your manfulness, I can smell your sperm...

Dicky didn't realize it but the bizarre flutter of psychic vocalization had put him into a trance. Like a fat zombie, then, he pushed the door open and stepped in.

Lamp light raved, overly bright, like the bulbs burning too hot, and of course it never occurred to Dicky now in his half-wit trance that there could be no lamp light in a house with the power shut off.

I am the Night-Mother and the Queen of the Labyrinth, a shadow rising from the bed informed him. My cunt beats with your paltry heart, and your soulless lust and my evil are predestined to fuck...

Kind of an odd thing for a maid to say, but then Dicky saw that it was no maid that rose smokelike from the high, four-poster bed. But it was a woman, all right, as voluptuous a woman as he'd ever seen, even in Hustler. High melon breasts; protruding, poker-chip nipples; a flawless hourglass contour. Long sleek legs rose to a hairless pubis dark and shiny as chocolate icing, and the flat stomach seemed to shiver around the slit-like navel. Yes, like the body of a Hustler centerfold save for one quirk:

She was as black and shiny as newly poured road tar.

Dicky could sense more than see her face; it was more of a symbol an enigmagram something that existed in an unglimpsable state. Hair just as black and wet as her skin seemed to radiate that same blackness.

It has been eons since my infernal womb has gulped human seed, the voice flowed.

As she moved gingerly from the bed across the room, the electric lamp on the Edwardian nightstand began to dim, but as this took place, her blackness seemed to glow within itself, as though she were composed not of flesh but electrified darkness.

I need to be filled. A sleek hand that was hot and cold at the same time traced Dicky's fat cheek. He began to blubber like a baby, and with no volition on his part he dropped his dungarees to reveal a thumping, prong-like erection that felt so insanely hard he feared it might split like a hotdog in a microwave.

Give me succor, the voice fluttered in his head. Let my night-cunt be the vessel for your lust, and then Dicky seemed to float backwards to the floor, levitating, until he lay on his back, his erection spiring.

When the black woman sighed, the walls seemed to buckle. The cleft of her pubis parted as if by a specialized musculature until it gaped, and then she sat right down on Dicky's groin. His spectrally hard penis sunk deep.

This otherworldly intercourse generated sensations that Dicky would never have thought possible. To him, a nut was a nut the old Southern Boy Credo and they all pretty much felt the same, whether he was raping a hot sixteen-year-old, having a go in a cowbackside, getting fellated by his uncle, or jerking off. But this?

His brain seemed to turn to baby food from the intensity of the sensations: it was like a hundred wet, hot tongue-tips cocooning his penis simultaneously as the cocoon slowly rose up and down. When he looked up bug-eyed at his unlikely lover, he saw that her desire seemed to gorge her breasts even more, pushing the nipples out till their tips leaked a glistening black fluid. All the while more fluids at her groin gushed.

My name is Pasiphae...

Her breast lowered to his chest, then she rolled him over onto her, the black legs spreading wider to invite deeper penetration.

Fill me now, fill me to the brim...

Dicky's body froze up and his jaw locked open. His fat stomach heaved and then his eyes seemed to roll all the way back in their sockets until he was looking at his brain. He gibbered as he came, sperm rocketing up out of his penis as if by a hand-pump. The orgasm did not abate but instead magnified; it was as though he were taking a long hard beer-piss but with sperm instead of urine. His rotund body continued to quiver on top of her as his glands kept kicking his semen down into the hot satchel of her sex. Eventually he caught a glimpse of her eyes but saw only lidded holes through which could be glimpsed an insane, smoking city which smoldered beneath a red sky and black sickle moon, and when her lips parted to release a final blissful sigh, Dicky saw only a sparkling black chasm that went on without end. Black crystalline drool trickled from the corner of her lips, and then a black tongue lolled.

Her soft hands gently pressed up against his fat-cushioned chest, and

THUNK!

she shoved him off of her body as though he weighed no more than a straw dummy. He collided with the wall. A painting of a woman named Elizabeth Bathory fell down and hit him in the head. Dazed, he looked on...

Now she lay painfully spread-eagled, her tight buttocks actually arched up off the floor several inches as she masturbated fervently. Wet, slick clicking sounds filled the room as her black fingers plied the sexual fissure. More sighs of desperate pleasure rose up and up, until Dicky thought he could actually see those sighs, like rampant spirits amid the impossible black light...

Good Gawd! Dicky thought.

He scrabbled around on the floor, pants still down, until he found his flashlight and snapped it on. He shined it on the mysterious woman...

The desperate masturbation continued, her hand a blur at her genitals. At a critical moment, then, her pelvis tensed as two fingers V'd open the abominable vagina, then the swollen black vulva puckered like grouper lips and began to spit out foot-long loops of some viscid fluid.

She's comin', Dicky observed in the utmost shock, but like a dude!

Indeed, the ejaculatory spurts did not abate until at least a dozen had transpired, collecting in a great glistening splotch between her legs.

The woman's body tremored one more time, then fell still.

Now I can die again, flowed the voice. Again and again and again...

The room fell into utter darkness and for a moment was filled with a sound like a hundred rattlesnakes.

She lay limp and quite dead, her sink-hole eyes half-opened and black tongue still aloft from the dead mouth.

Dicky dragged himself up, shaking, his penis shriveled to a mushroom stem from the toll that his abyssal orgasm had exacted. When he'd retrieved his breath, he took a closer look at what the woman's genitals had expelled on the rug: what had to be several gallons of sperm-marbled slop.

The fuck in tarnations is goin' on?

The woman's body began to erode in the air, until it had disappeared completely.

Dicky didn't even pull his pants all the way back up when he barged out of the room.

(VI)

The Writer and Balls both froze with boxes in their hands when Dicky plunged down the stairs into the mire of candlelight.

"You bust her up, Dicky?" Balls asked.

"I "

Balls smirked at Dicky's half-pulled-up jeans and limp-as-a-the-pinkie-finger-of-a-rubber-glove penis.

"What the fuck you doin' standin' there with yer dick out? You punch the maid's ticket or not?"

"I-I Well, ya won't believe it, Balls," Dicky jabbered, "but Cora were right, there was a nekit lady up there so's I-I-I "

"You what?" Balls yelled.

"I fucked her..."

Balls frowned.

"And then-then-then she got's ta playin' with her pussy a mite fierce, and when she got herself off, she-she-she "

"She what?"

Dicky's eyes bloomed. "She æ~jacker-lated..."

"The fuck!"

"Tse swear, Balls! While's she were comin', her pussy was squirtin' out a bunch-a goo "

"Goo?" Balls infuriated.

"No lie. She come just like a fella, only with her cooze. Squirted a giant nut out on the carpet there's a big puddle of it."

"A puddle of what?"

Dicky fidgeted. "Well, it looked like all'a my cum mixed up with a bunch of this black...goo."

Balls frowned harder. The Writer thought: This is some high-brow crew.

"Writer? Balls stood with his arms crossed. "Git upstairs'n see what the hail Dicky's talkin' 'bout. Shee-it. This here is gettin' blammed ree-dicker-luss."

"Oh! Oh!" Dicky exclaimed. "She tol't me her name!"

"Yeah?" Balls challenged. "Lemme guess. Everclear?"

"Her name's...Pasiphae," Dicky blurted.

"Pasiphae, huh? You're more fucked up than that meth-whore with the hairy armpits." Balls' glare dug into the Writer. "Git on up there æfore I start carvin' me some college-ed-jur-kated cold cuts."

But the Writer had been taken aback. By the name Dicky had mentioned:

Pasiphae.

"Go on!" Balls' knife snapped open. "Git!"

"As you wish, Mr. Balls," and with that the Writer mounted the steps.

Pasiphae, he thought, climbing. Greek mythology. He thought briefly of Nancy's phone conversation earlier, the mentioning of a dream-baby with a bull's head.

But why would a rube like Dicky make such a reference?

The Writer couldn't hypothesize.

His hand slid up the bannister as he moved toward the second-floor landing, the darkness seeming to magnify as he ascended. On his palm he felt odd but regular bumps in the vanished wood, and when he shined his flashlight, he frowned, noticing triplets of sixes finely engraved. Lucifer's cliché, he thought. The first thing he noted upstairs was an exquisite oil painting, tinged by age and very Rembrandtesque in its style: horned demons with skin spotted like slugs pushing aside the boulder which sealed Christ's tomb on Golgotha, as peasants moaned. Yeah, Crafter's really got the occult bug. The Writer found it amusing. The only supernaturalism that truly exists is math, he knew. But Crafter's trite fanaticism notwithstanding, the Writer found it uncanny how the man could fill the disguised house with priceless antiques, busts, and art but not have a single bookshelf in view. Crafter was a cliché in and of himself; surely an "occultist" especially one with money would have a veritable library full of pricey occult tomes.

Yet he'd seen none since they'd entered the house.

Perhaps upstairs...

The first bedroom he slipped into was obviously the one where Dicky had experienced his calamity. The flashlight revealed a bed chamber that went hand in hand with the rest of the house: a mini-museum of various archaic styles, save of course for the television sitting upon the Writer winced a genuine Robert Gillow half-table made of Brazilian rosewood and well over three hundred years old. I wonder where Crafter gets all his money? but then he laughed. Probably a pact with the Devil.

The room smelled funny: a meaty, musky scent that was close to foul. No woman in black paint lay on the bed, though the sheets and blankets on the finely crafted poster were disarrayed. Then he shined the flash down to the fabulous hand-woven carpet and was surprised to discover Dicky's aforementioned "goo."

It looked like black gelatin surrounded by another gel-like substance that was clear but milkily lined. The Writer was mystified. Alcohol or cerebral defect obviously accounted for the younger man's account of this woman's ejaculating after her intercourse with him. Nevertheless...

What on earth could this substance be?

It lay in a gelatinous puddle, shimmering in the light.

Finally! A book! Another sweep of the flash revealed a night-table with a small book on it. The Writer scanned the cover, intrigued: THE ACCOUNT OF THE INCUBI OF VASR MONASTERY BY THE REV. M. BARI. The spine crinkled when he opened to the copyright page. London, 1787.

"Incubi, huh?" the Writer mocked aloud.

Nevertheless he stuck the book in his back pocket. It was probably worth some money...

Nothing here except some crap on the floor, some...goo, he deduced and turned to leave, but he stopped at the door as his light raked the carpet.

He shined it down and stared.

How peculiar...

The inchoate mass of black and clear gunk was now not so inchoate. How did I miss that when I first looked? It seemed to take on a configuration that he hadn't noted previously: something akin to a starfish shape, and the top "arm" possessed two small protrusions, like hooks.

The Writer fixed his gaze.

All five arms slowly extended.

You know what? the Writer posed to himself. I don't think I'm seeing things. I think that slop is really moving, and with that, he made his exit and hastily rejoined Balls and Dicky downstairs.

"Well?" Balls demanded.

The Writer lit a cigarette. "There's good news and there's bad news. The good news is there's no woman wearing black paint "

"I done told ya she weren't there no more!" Dicky raged. "She disappeared after she cum'd all that spunk'n goo on the floor!"

The Writer looked more resolutely at Balls. "I'm in concurrence with, at least, the latter component of Dicky's statement."

Balls shot him a funky look. "Huh?"

"There is indeed an odd substance on the floor that no manner of speculation on my part can account for."

"I told ya!" Dicky cut in again. "It's my load all mixed up with some black shit in her cunt, and then it all squirted out while's I were watchin'."

"Shee-it," Balls snapped. "I don't know which one'a yawl's more fucked up in the head! Guess I gotta see fer myself!"

But before Balls could bound up the stairs, the Writer interjected, "Mr. Balls? It's my deduction that we can go up and down those stairs all night, and we won't find any answers to our questions. However, I have an inclination er, I should say I have a hunch...that there is a more likely place in this house where we will find those answers."

Balls smirked his irritation. "Where?"

The Writer pointed. "The basement."

"The fuckin' place stinks. Why there?"

"Because, as I've said, I have an inclination."

Balls and Dicky paused. "All right," Balls said. "Let's go. Dicky bring that dirty cum-dump and drag her ass down with us."

The Writer led the way, steeling himself against the rotten aroma coming up the cinderblock steps. Balls swore behind him, gagging. Dicky trudged down, too, with the still-unconscious Cora slung across his back.

The stench thickened once downstairs. The flashlights lit up circles of strange doors, tables, and yes! shelves of books. The Writer flicked his Bic to light numerous sconce-set candles, and then

The low-ceilinged room was alive now in squirming light. Dicky, Balls, and the Writer all stared speechless at the same thing.

"No fuckin' wonder the joint stinks," Balls muttered.

"Jaysus Chrast!" Dicky exclaimed, and in his disconcertion actually dropped poor Cora on to the cement floor.

"This place looks more like a temple than a basement," the Writer noted, "and how appropriate... A sacrificial temple."

Three of the room's walls were ornamented by Doric pillars, however short, and between them were a total of six shoddy wood-plank doors hung within keystone arches. But it was what hung in one of these arches that flagged their concern:

A naked woman's corpse.

Only the Writer dared to approach, to register details. A rive had been made from navel to throat, separating two flaccid breasts the color of oatmeal. A pair of surgical retractors remained in place on her chest, which forced the rive open, much like double doors, to expose the cardiac cavity. Said cavity was empty.

"Now that's what I call a ruckin'," Balls remarked with a crook in his voice.

"Looks like someone...sacker-ficed her," Dicky contributed.

"Indeed, her heart's gone," the Writer told them, then shined his light on various areas about the room. "And by the looks of that crucible, that crematory, and that old book on tephramancy, I'd say she was sacrificed in grand style. Look. See these ashes?" The Writer gestured the smear of ashes over the door's stone transom. "Tephramancy is an occult science which utilizes the ashes

of a sacrifice victim for a variety of dark arts, including incarnation."

"You're talkin' more'a that satanic shit, like what Crafter's into, ain't'cha?" Balls needed clarification.

"Oh, yes. This man Crafter has quite a hobby."

Dicky fidgeted at the sight of the girl. "What's that big college word you just used?"

"Incarnation? It means 'to make flesh,' in other words, Crafter solicited this tephramanic ritual to summon a netherwordly spirit or even...a demon."

Balls and Dicky stood silent.

The Writer lit another cigarette and made a closer inspection. The unfortunate woman had been hung on the door by means of a sharpened iron spike sunk directly through the hollow of her throat. Much blood was in evidence, naturally, running down her pallid body and cellulite-pocked legs, to pool at the floor. The blood was dry and browning. Her feet and lower legs were a murky blue. "I'd say she's been dead a day or two," the Writer estimated. "The decomposition of the body is not yet acute, and I'd also say...she's not the first to suffer such a fate in this room." Now his flashlight tracked along the floor. More splotches of dried blood existed before each of the six wood-plank doors in the bizarre room.

The Writer opened the door to which the girl had been impaled. There was nothing behind it except for crudely lain bricks.

"The fuck's that all about?" Balls asked. "If Crafter did all this devil's jazz to get a demon here, a hallway to hell's what should be behind that door, not just bricks, right?"

The Writer chuckled. "While the ritual is active, yes, but of course only in Crafter's mind. There are no real doorways to Hell or demons, Mr. Balls."

"Yeah?"

"Let's not get carried away here, gentlemen. Crafter is an occult fanatic. He believes himself to be a retainer for the Devil, by serving him in such ways. But the notion is actually no different from someone rubbing a rabbit's foot for good luck, or avoiding cracks on the sidewalk. It's superstition. Crafter is probably just delusional, and thinks he's summoning demons or whatever, but it's really just hoopla."

Dicky squinted. "Hoopla?"

"You know. Ballyhoo."

"What's ballyhoo?" Balls asked.

The Writer slumped. "It's bullshit, gentlemen! Occult science does not exist. It's not functional. Its supporters merely believe it is."

"Oh." Balls stroked his goatee.

"But if it's all bullshit," Dicky posed, "then you's mean the chick Ise fucked upstairs all painted black who dumped all that slop out her pussy...wasn't a demon?"

"No, Mr. Dicky," the Writer insured. "She was a hallucination. The kariolytic fumes from this corpse made you and Cora see the woman and made me see that growing starfish shape upstairs. Or something along those lines. Let me make myself perfectly clear. Have you guys even heard of Emmanuel Kant?"

"No," Balls and Dicky answered in unison.

Ask a silly question... The Writer thought of a way to dumb things down. "Kant was the greatest philosopher to ever live. He disproved every philosophy and in this disproof he thereby proved something else: that mankind must have been created by a higher being God, in other words. He proved this with mathematical theorems. It's incontestible. The only entity that can possibly exist beyond man is God. There's no room for anything else, including the Devil, demons, Hell, etc. For God and the Devil to exist simultaneously, then human volition would have to be teleologic and we know that this cannot be. It's all math."

Balls' eyes seemed mistrustful. "So God ain't nothin' but a bunch'a numbers?"

"In a sense, yes. He exists by means of a never-ending equation that created everything, and God is the beginning of the equation. Understand?"

"No," Balls and Dicky answered in unison.

The Writer sighed smoke. "Listen, just trust me. Crafter didn't bring any demons here he merely thinks he did."

"Then what's that writin' on that little plate over the door, above the dead chick's head?" Balls pointed.

The Writer squinted. "Oh, I didn't see that." He shined his light right up.

And stared.

A tiny brass plate had been mounted in the keystone, and engraved upon it was were several Greek letters.

The Writer made a rare departure from his avoidance of profanity. "Holy shit..."

"What is it?" Balls urged, impatient.

"It's Greek..."

"You speak Greek?"

The Writer rolled his eyes. "Of course."

"Then what the fuck's it say?"

After a difficult pause, the Writer told him.

"It says 'Πασίφαιε'."

«Πασίφαιε»

The Writer tried to assess every conceivable angle of the situation. Dicky had said this "woman" had called herself Pasiphae. How could he make that up? These two guys are white trash, not scholars of myth. Still, the Writer had to ask.

"Gentlemen, if I may. Are either of you familiar with the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur?"

Balls and Dicky looked at him cockeyed.

"That's what I thought." The Writer sat down at the table full of books and instruments. "I'm trying to reckon a conclusion: how Dicky could have heard the name Pasiphae upstairs earlier, and then we come down here to find the name written in its original Greek on the transom of that door. So when you gentlemen were children, in school, you never learned any Greek mythology?"

"Writer," Balls began an honest answer, "when we was kids, we was cuttin' class, stealin' hubcaps, and peepin' inta chicks winders so's we could gander some hair pie'n beat off. We didn't

learn no Greek shit."

"You talkin' 'bout stuff like Herck-a-lees?" Dicky ventured.

Eureka! The Writer cracked his hands together. "Yes! This is a story along similar lines. Greek mythology comprises the first stories of sophistication in the history of mankind. The first genuine allegories. Thousands of years ago, it is said, the great god Poseidon gave Minos, the king of Crete, a splendid white bull to be sacrificed, but before that could take place, Minos' wife...became, uh, attracted to the bull and, well, she decided to have sex with it."

Dicky stared, mouth open. Balls frowned. "The chick fucked the bull, you mean?"

"Actually, yes, Mr. Balls. The chick...fucked the bull, a bull that was intended to be sacrificed to the gods. By circumventing Poseidon's will, big trouble would ensue. Minos' wife later gave birth to the product of her aberrant union: a terrifying creature stronger than Hercules himself, a creature called the Minotaur. This beast was, for all intents and purposes, a demon. It possessed the body of a man and the head of a bull." Then the Writer glanced at Balls and Dicky for effect.

Balls slammed his fist down on the table. "What kind of a a-hole are you? We'se got some serious whacked out shit goin' on here and you're blabberin' 'bout some king's squeeze who got the blocks put to her by a fuckin' bull! What the fuck are we'se supposed to do with that?"

The Writer half-smiled. "The king's 'squeeze' was a woman of untold beauty, and her name was Pasiphae."

Balls' anger dissipated, giving over to puzzlement.

"That's what the splittail upstairs tolt me her name was," Dicky re-clarified, "â€œFore I'se fucked her and then she started squirtin' "

"Yes, yes," the Writer severed the viscid retelling. "I'm simply trying to find a way to justify the coincidence."

Balls gave a mirthful laugh. "So's this time, instead'a fuckin' a bull, she fucked Dicky?"

Dicky laughed back. "Well, I'm damn near hung like one!"

"Yeah, well your mamma tolt me she'd seen bigger cigarettes."

"Yeah? Well your Daddy tolt me when you's were a baby you spent more time suckin' his dick than suckin' your momma's tittie!"

What am I going to do with these guys? "Gentlemen, gentlemen, please. We're in a conundrum here, and we need to take some action." The Writer gestured the floppy breasted corpse hanging on the door. "Crafter's occult delusions are obviously of a very extreme nature, and whether you believe in the occult or not, a murder has been committed. Our most logical course of action is to leave without delay. If we get caught in this house, or are seen by passersby anywhere in its proximity, we could be accused of this murder."

Dicky responded to the Writer's logic by posing the most illogical question. "So's what was all that spunky lookin' goo that this Pasiphae gal spat out her pussy all over the rug upstairs?"

The Writer rubbed his temples. "You're missing my point, Mr. Dicky. I don't believe that Pasiphae ever was upstairs "

"But Dicky seed her with his own two eyes," Balls interjected, "and so did Cora."

" nor do I believe there was ever any æ~goo' on the carpet upstairs."

Balls' face screwed up. "But you done said ya saw it yer own self!"

"No, I said I believe that everything any of us think we saw was an hallucination," the Writer reasserted. "A stressful situation, a sinister house, an unknown set of circumstances, plus the fumes of human decomposition. I believe that all these elements have aggregated and caused us to have a manner of shared hallucinations a mirage, so to speak." He pinched his chin. "The only thing I can't figure out is how Dicky believed this imaginary woman referred to herself as Pasiphae when he was previously unfamiliar with the mythology..."

"Then maybe you're fuckin' wrong," Balls suggested. "Maybe it ain't a hallucination. Maybe it's all real, somethin' from Crafter's devil-worship'n shit." Now Balls struck the most contemplative look of his life. "So's far, all of us've seen somethin' in this house æ~cept me..."

"Ah, you've harnessed your powers of deductive reasoning," the Writer enthused. "Therefore?"

Balls rubbed his hands together. "Guess it's time fer me go upstairs'n check it out myself..."

(VII)

Balls mounted with steps up with confidence. What I got to be afraid of? Some crazy black chick? Bunch'a shit on a floor? Gun in belt, hickory pick handle in one hand and flashlight in the other, Balls reflected his current state of actualization: I ain't afraid'a nothin'.

He yelped when he turned on the landing and saw a figure facing him, which turned out to be a decorative suit of armor. Shee-it... He closed the basement door behind him, ill at ease, for some reason, by the look of the cross hanging on it. Candlelight shifted over the walls, and for a moment he thought he could see faces forming...but he knew that couldn't be. When he looked up the stairwell to the second floor, a depthless black void looked back at him. Don't be a pussy! he yelled at himself, and then he patted his pistol for good measure and began to climb the steps.

The boards beneath the carpet creaked like old ladies laughing. Each step up seemed noticeably higher than the previous. The flashlight bored through darkness thick as insulation, and once he set foot on the landing, he froze, startled, at a strange thumping sound but then smirked when he realized it was his own heart.

He turned into the first room and snapped the light to all corners. This must be it, he knew by the smell. Smells like cum'n pussy in here. A fancy bed with mussed covers sat against the wall; then he shined his flashlight down and stared.

The indescribable starfish-shaped goo lay there...moving. I don't care WHAT that writer saysâ€”this ain't no halluci-fuckin'-ation... Each elongation of the milk-marbled configuration seemed to grow like a slow trickle. Whatever this stuff was, though, Balls could not construe it as a threat.

Waste'a time. We should be loadin' up the haul... Disgruntled, he checked the other rooms, which offered more of the same: old-style furniture, old paintings and the like.

Fuck this. Time to git back to work'n git out'a this freaky joint. He headed back toward the stairs but paused. Something unbidden made him hesitate...and he peeked back in the first room...

The muck on the floor was beginning to...get up, two of the viscid configuration's extensions serving as legs. A vague tumescence misted about the room, and even some of the bulbs in the lamps flickered as though the rising thing carried some inexplicable static electricity with it. Balls couldn't know, of course, that this phenomenon came from the flux of its Death Force, the residue of which carried over from its genetic origins which were rooted not of this earth but of the Labyrinthine District of Hell. Soon the spindle-form mass stood upright and close to six feet in height. Balls' sensibilities were now essentially high-jacked by his witness of what was taking place: a Para-Planar Birth.

He just stood and stared as the featureless stick-figure began to evolve before his eyes.

A crush of sounds percolated about the room, something like hardboiled eggs being peeled, and rushing sewage, and emphysematic respiration. The clock he'd heard ticking previously now seemed to tick ten times faster, all the while the thing before him growing in girth and taking on

more details, until

Balls' breath locked in his chest.

The thing stood complete: a beautiful nude woman with large, high-riding breasts, indefectable curves, and a plump, hairless pubis. Her skin shone fresh, poreless, and alabaster-white.

And one last detail: this "woman" had the head of a bull.

It appeared to be of the Angus variety, with shimmering black hair flowing down the arched muscular neck, then over the woman's sleek shoulders. Eyes green as backlit emeralds glittered in the small round sockets. But of this entire being this monstrous crossbreed the most notable feature was the pair of long, curved horns sprouting from its head.

It stood for several moments, seeming to stare at Balls as if uncomprehending. Then its delicate white hands caressed the burgeoning bosom. Thumb and index fingers teased the puckered dark-pink nipples, then the hands slid down over the flat abdomen and glided over the pubis. Then

It looked again to Balls, snorted, and charged.

Balls came out of his stasis fast enough to yell, leap backward out of the room, and slam to the door. A bang and a crunching sound were heard immediately thereafter, and instantly two splintering holes appeared in the door through which jutted the tips of the entity's horns.

Balls fumbled for the pistol, then

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM!

Six .455 bullet-holes tracked up the center of the door, right between the horn-points. Balls stood wide-eyed in the sequent silence, waving away smoke. No way in fuckin' holy hail I missed, he thought.

The door exploded, splintery shards flying, and the unfathomable creature stepped through, jerked its head, and snorted a string of mucus.

Balls had a half-second to notice the six bullet-holes in the back bedroom wall, then he ran down the stairs as fast as he'd ever run in his life.

(VIII)

During Balls excursion upstairs, Cora remained unconscious on the floor while Dicky meandered

around the strange room of bookshelves, Doric columns, and old doors. The Writer continued to smoke as he examined the pile of very old books set around the table.

Every second that transpired felt more like a minute. Dicky kept looking up at the ceiling. "What's takin' him so long?"

"Relax, Mr. Dicky. He seems like a pretty thorough man."

"But what if... What if the black chick came back and now now she's fuckin' Balls?"

"I have every confidence that that's not the case."

Dicky groped for any distraction. "What's with all them books?"

"These are some very interesting books indeed, Mr. Dicky," the Writer said. "Hundreds of years old, and more proof of Crafter's devotion to his satanic delusion." There were a number of tomes that Crafter had obviously taken down off his shelves for the ritual he'd engaged in. One wasn't a book at all but a yellowed manuscript which the Writer was leafing through now. "But this holograph is the most interesting of all. They're hand-written notes by an infamous astrologer and occult translator named Dr. John Dee. Evidently he compiled these missives between May and December of 1581; he was translating ritualistic techniques from various sources, for his own use. This passage here " The Writer pointed to the yellowed sheet of vellum. "It was translated from an older book, thought to no longer exist, called the Magnum Maleficarum, originally penned in Old Latin. The passage copied here is entitled 'The Proper Procedure and Use of Eibon Wood.'

"Never heard of him."

"It's not a him, Mr. Dicky. It's a type of conditioned wood, and you may be intrigued when I explain what's written here. It tells of how wooden planks can be ritualistically conditioned by burying them in a graveyard of unconsecrated ground that served as the final resting place for condemned witches."

Dicky's brain could almost be heard clicking. "The graveyard we seed outside! Lots of 'em were half dug into."

"Precisely. It's a solid bet that the wooden planks that Crafter used to make the six doors in this room are made of such wood. Each plank was buried over the graves for a total of 666 days; then they were nailed together and used to fashion the door-faces. This manuscript here is quite concise. Dee calls these doors a 'Talismanic Traversal Bridle.'"

"Huh?"

"Think of it this way. Each door is a magic door, Mr. Dicky. They've been ritually charged with an occult power to close off the passage to a netherworldly domain six such passages, I'd say. And when the proper ritual is enacted...that barrier that bridle comes down, and the door opens to a predesignated supernatural realm." Again the Writer's eyes gestured the corpse hanging by the spike through its neck. "Lowering this barrier, of course, must involve a human sacrifice. Before Crafter left on his trip, it's clear he engaged in such a task, and that poor girl was the fodder for the rite."

Dicky whispered, eyes wide. "He opened that there door to some place full'a demons..."

"A place, yes. A realm, obviously one that's associated with the damned demonness known as Pasiphae. In defying Poseidon and falling in love with her own hellish offspring the Minotaur she was eternally condemned."

"So that's how the shiny black chick got here through that door," Dicky figured.

"Well, Crafter believes that, yes. But I don't, and you shouldn't either. It's all part of his delusion nonsense, ultimately. It is funny, though. We were astounded by how Crafter could leave a house full of treasures virtually unprotected. Perhaps he thought that summoning Pasiphae would serve as his alarm system..."

"All's right," Dicky insisted. "But let's just say that it is true, and that this Pasiphae gal come out that door when Crafter kilt the girl... What about these other doors? It say what they are in them papers?"

"Not in these papers, but in this," and then the Writer held up a very old book with metal hinges and faded gold gilding. "The Incarnologie Daemorium, translated into English in 1839 by Rev. Montague Thomas Alexander in Wales. The author is quite a sinister chap who went by the name of Comte Michel Lemoine Willirmoz, who had been burned at the stake in St. Claude, France, in 1680 for black magic and molestation. He was reportedly a lithomancer, that is he practiced magic through stones. If you look carefully, the keystone of each door, just above each brass plate, has been set with various stones."

Dicky peered and indeed noticed the tiny stone chips of myriad colors, affixed to each center block. "They diamonds'n rubies'n shit?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Dicky. They're only semi-precious stones, such as amethyst, onyx, galena, quartz no monetary value but to a lithomancer, they're the source of his magic." Next the writer pointed to an odd smock-like garment hanging inside an opened armoire. It looked made of black

sack cloth, yet the garment dazzled, for into its fabric had been stitched hundreds more semi-precious stones. "No doubt Crafter wore that tunic there during the rite...his sorcerer's surplice. All magicians and warlocks wore such cloaks when practicing their art."

"Dang. A magic jacket?"

"Precisely." The Writer turned back to the Incarnologie Daemorium. "Willirmoz was black magic's most notorious sorcerer, and in this priceless grimoire, he specifically identifies each of the six supernatural domains he was able to supposedly access. Door One we already know: the domain of Pasiphae. Door Two accesses a creature from pre-Islamic folklore known as a ghala but what is better known as a ghoul. Door Three? The Lycanthrope, otherwise known as a werewolf. Door Four opens to the realm of the Nosferatu, or vampire. Door Five: the Khmoc, which is an Asian version of a zombie that predates voodoo by thousands of years. And Door Six reveals a creature I'm not familiar with, something called a Spermatogoye, which, according to this book, hails from a region in Hell called the Flesh District." The Writer raised his brows over the thing's official name. "I have no idea what that could be, but I can hazard a guess that it's got something to do with semen."

Dicky jerked his gaze. "Ya mean, like, man-batter? Petersnot? Dick loogie?"

The Writer slumped. "Uh, yes. Dick loogie..."

Dicky scratched his overhanging beer belly, then cast the Writer a more suspicious expression. "How you know so much 'bout all this devil shit?"

"Only from a few history of metaphysics courses I took in college to accommodate my double major in Philosophy. It's really no different from any manner of folklore; we don't study it because we believe in it, we study it to analyze an aspect of our intellectual evolvement. Before mankind was smart enough to think rationally, we made up stories and superstitions to explain the things about our existence we didn't understand. It's all quite silly when you get right down to it. It makes the human race look like a bunch of buffoons."

"A bunch'a balloons?" Dicky questioned.

"Never mind..."

A groan resounded from the corner. Cora was rousing. She blinked, shaking her head, and managed to hitch herself up to sit against the wall. "The hail? That mean fucker knock me out again?"

"Shore did, Cora," Dicky told her. "Balls don't like it when chicks talk too much."

"Fucker," she muttered, blinking out the rest of the stars. "And where is he anyway?"

"Upstairs, checkin' things out."

Only now did the malnourished prostitute notice the foul stench. "Aw, shit. Smells like " and then she shrieked when she saw the dead woman hanging on the door.

Dicky and the Writer both ground their teeth and clapped their hands over their ears.

"What the hail is this? A horror dungeon're somethin'?"

"A modern equivalent, you could say," the Writer replied.

"What's goin' on down here?" she pleaded. "I can't stand this! Dicky, please! Cut my wrists loose!"

Dicky hemmed and hawed. "Aw, shee-it, Cora. I cain't do that."

"Why!"

"Aw, ya know... Balls'd get a right pissed."

"Fuck him!" she spat. "Let me go! Ain't right fer you ta keep me tied up like this! And that stink is killin' me! Let's all get out'a here! Lemme go!"

"Just be patient, Cora. Balls'll let'cha go soon."

The girl squirmed where she sat, trying but failing to snap her bonds. Then she began to sob.

"She's harmless, Mr. Dicky," the Writer suggested. "It can't hurt to untie her."

"Naw. Balls'd pitch a fit, he would."

Now she was panting, "Dicky! Dicky! Lemme go and I'll'se let'cha fuck me..."

Dicky shuffled his feet. Aw, naw..."

"Look, look," and then Cora was clumsily pulling her shorts down from behind. "Just you take a look at my beautiful pussy and then you'll'se be dyin' ta fuck it!" and with that promise, she squirmed some more and managed to get the shorts down to mid-thigh. "Take a look at that!"

Ain't that just a scrumptious-lookin' cunt?"

Dicky and the Writer both nearly howled at the sight.

"Dang, Cora, that's the blammed ugliest snatch I ever saw!" Dicky complained. "Looks like two dead rats pushed together. Don't be flashin' that shit."

"Well then...how's 'bout my ass?" she tried next. "You's kin fuck it ta high heaven! Take a look!" and then she rolled over and stuck her bare rump in the air.

This time Dicky and the Writer did howl. Cora's buttocks strained open, revealing an anus that looked more like a clot of steel wool...with a hole in it. Hair grew rampant in the rank cleft, tracing all the way up past her tail bone.

Dicky yelled, "Fuck, girl! Pull them shorts back up or I'll kill ya! Ya done fucked up my sex drive fer a year!"

Cora collapsed to more sobs. The Writer sighed in relief, now that he didn't have to look at the ghastly cleft. I'll bet she doesn't make very much as a prostitute....

Cora bawled for several more minutes, hitching the shorts back up but eventually her eyes roved back to the pallid corpse on the door. She stared, her mouth falling open. "My fuckin' gosh I know that bitch..."

"Ya do?" Dicky said.

"Aw, yeah, I used ta see her a lot back when I were turnin' tricks up the truck stop. She kicked my ass one night 'cos I was low-ballin' truckers fer blowjobs...the bitch."

Dicky laughed. "So's she's a whore, too?"

The Writer looked closer this time. "Given the obvious heroin needlemarks and the LOVE DEPOSIT tattoo, it's probably safe to say that she's not a church organist."

"But what the fuck happened to the dirty skank?" Cora queried.

Dicky was all too proud to explain. "A sorcerer sacker-ficed her to the Devil, so's he could open a doorway to places where demons hang out. That's where that black chick upstairs come from."

The Writer winced yet again. "Actually, Mr. Dicky, it's just superstitious nonsense of Crafter's. No demons really came through that door, no woman painted black. Like I postulated previously,

we think we all saw something supernatural but in truth it was just an example of shared hallucinations."

Then, from upstairs:

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM!

Cora shrieked.

The Writer ground his teeth again.

Dicky pissed his pants and yelled, "Balls is plum shootin' someone!"

They could hear the mad footsteps thundering downward, then the fist banging on the door.

"Dickyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy! Open the fuckin' door!"

Dicky froze in place, but the Writer raced up the basement steps and opened the door to let a petrified Balls burst in and fall all the way down the stairs. In the second or two before the Writer reclosed the door, his eyes reached out unto the candle-lit sitting-room where he thought he saw a sleek shadow diced by snatches of white bare skin. He caught a half-glimpse of pre-eminent breasts, a half-glimpse of a flat female abdomen, and even a quarter-glimpse of a bald, plump, beauteous pubis with a seraphic pink twist of flesh peeking through the bifurcation.

And a one-eighth-glimpse of a Black Angus bull's head complete with horns.

The Writer slammed and barred the door just as the shadow would be at the threshold, and with the slam, he heard an animal-like howl...

The Writer trembled back down the steps and at once lit a cigarette.

Dicky was helping Balls up, the latter appearing just as shaken as the Writer.

"Balls!" Dicky exclaimed. "Who's were ya shootin' at?"

"I hit it, I know I hit it!" Balls yelled. "Couldn't'a missed in a million years, but then I seed the bullet-holes in the back wall..."

The Writer sat down and took a deep breath. "Mr. Balls. What exactly did you see upstairs?"

"Bet it was that weirdo chick painted black," Dicky said. "She come back, ain't she?"

Balls looked at his cohort with befuddlement. "Naw, Dicky. It was a white chick with a body that'd make the Pope kick out a stained-glass winder, and-and-and "

"A bull's head?" the Writer asked.

"You saw it too?"

"Yes." The Writer spewed smoke. I'd sell my soul right now for just one drink. "A Minotaur, the offspring of Pasiphae."

"And you see the tits on that brick shit-house?"

Tits, the Writer thought obscurely. "I did, Mr. Balls. I actually saw a bull's head on a female body, so I guess that could only be a Minotaur." He shook his head, however, convinced of his resolve. "But just as before, I insist, it was not real "

The inhuman howl resounded again from upstairs, shaking the house.

"Not real, huh? Then what the fuck was that? One'a yer fuckin' â€œlucina-shun-uns?"

"I contend it was exactly that. The duress we're all under, along with the macabre circumstances " He gestured the sacrificed corpse. "It's all simply reinforcing the power of suggestion and creating a mode of multiple hallucinations."

"Aw fuck you'n yer bullshit, man!" Balls dismissed. "You're the asshole who says there ain't no Devil or demons and God's a bunch'a â€œrithmetic! Well, I'll tell you one thing, Writer. That thing upstairs shore as shit's a demon."

"If it were a demon, Mr. Balls, then why didn't it break the door down and come down here?"

"Cos of the cross on the door, ya dick-head!" Balls answered without missing a beat.

The Writer could think of no argument. My existential actualization has now met its greatest challenge, he deemed. He thought of Sartre's protagonist in "The Wall," who faced a similar challenge by submitting to the firing squad...

"I'll prove Emmanuel Kant's theory that God is the only supernatural entity that can exist," and then the Writer got up and headed for the steps.

"Take the gun!" Balls implored. "Er well, strike that. I shot the bitch point blank and the slugs

went right through it."

"I won't need a gun, Mr. Balls, nor will I have any utility for any means of defense because I am certain that there is nothing upstairs I need to defend myself against. All that is upstairs is a figment of mind that can't hurt any of us."

Balls smirked a grin. "That big-tit bitch is gonna nail your college ass to the fuckin' wall with them horns. Don't be a moe-ron."

"Don't go! Don't go!" Cora shrieked.

The Writer winced, then mounted the steps.

Only faith can save me now, he thought and smiled.

He took the bar off the door and swung it boldly open. He stepped out, turned, then without hesitation strode into the sitting-room and its cloak of flickering candlelight.

The Minotauress stood in the opposite corner. Ropes of bull-snot flew when it jerked its great head toward him.

The Writer forced himself to stare, forced his gaze to slowly draw upward along the creature's provocative physique and then stop at the beastly, horned head.

"You are not the incarnation of demonic offspring," the Writer spoke right up to it. "You are nothing but the product of hallucination. I'm going to blink now, and when the blink is completed, you will be gone, because for that to not be the case is to reject all that I believe to be true. There is no power greater than the power of truth."

The Writer closed his eyes.

Sheer consternation followed: the hellish snorting, the ungodly mewls, and the blur of impossible mass rushing forward, perfect human breasts riding up and down as the animal-head lowered to advance its deadly horns. The Writer opened his eyes again, just as the thing slammed into him, causing the house to tremor. The horns just missed goring him, instead pinning him from either side under his arms. Plaster fell from the walls amid the impact, paintings popped off, and marble busts toppled. The Writer liberally urinated in his pants, and he couldn't be sure but it seemed the impossible bull-face was smiling at him.

Shouting, he shot his arms up, slipped out of the brace of horns, and ran blubbering back to the basement door. In the background he heard the Minotauress yank its horns from the wall, snort

again, and tear after him, screaming.

The Writer leapt into the black stairwell and slammed the door behind him. All the hairs on the back of his neck stood up at the creature's bellow of objection.

Dejected even more than he was terrified, he came back down the steps.

Balls, Dicky, and Cora all looked at him.

"I guess...Emmanuel Kant was wrong," the Writer admitted. He slumped down in a chair. "And...I seem to have wet my pants."

"Don't feel bad," Balls laughed. "So did I."

"Me, too," Dicky admitted.

"What're we gonna do?" Cora squealed. "That thing ain't gonna let us get out'a here!"

"We-we can wait till Crafter gets back," Dicky stammered.

"You got pig turds fer brains," Balls remarked. "He ain't comin' back fer a week, and all he'd probably do is use us fer sacker-ficin'."

"But won't the thing upstairs kill him when he comes in the house?" Cora asked.

"More than likely not," the Writer said. "In demonic incarnation which I suppose I believe in now that which is summoned can not harm the summoner. The Minotauress born to such an incarnation: Pasiphae."

"Pasiphae," Balls muttered, searching for a chronology. "Crafter brought her here from Hell by killin' that fat chick on the door?"

"I have no choice at this point but to say yes," the Writer said.

"Then she fucked Dicky, dropped all that spooge'n slop on the floor, and that's what turned into that bitch with the bull's head?"

"Yes."

"And it were a good nut, too," Dicky offered. "Dang good, it was."

"Shut up," Balls said. Now he was staring at the unfortunate dead woman. "And all this shit's hittin' the fan 'cos â€˜fore Crafter left, he sacker-ficed that butt-ugly â€˜ho on the door."

The Writer nodded, opening a hand to the implements on the table. "By using the ritual instructions found in these books and undertaking a particularized ritual invocation known as tephramancy."

"The fuck is that exactly?"

"He impaled her on the chosen door the Traversal Bridle removed her heart by means of those branch-cutters and surgical retractors, put the heart in that crucible, it would seem, and then reduced it to ash in the crematory. After that, he applied the ashes to the transom stones over the door and then...the Bridle was lowered and Pasiphae's domain in Hell was opened to this room long enough for her to emerge."

Dicky picked his nose. Cora sniffled. The Writer lit another cigarette and wished he could down a couple of pitchers real fast. But Balls set his chin atop the tips of his fingers, thinking...

"And the Writer here says that what a warlock brings through them doors his own self cain't hurt him..." Balls' eyes caught the Writer's.

"You're thinking that if we initiated our own invocation, we could use what we summoned to kill the Minotauress "

"Yeah! And then we can high-tail it out's this fuckin' place!" Balls rallied. "Why not! Crafter done it so's why cain't we?"

The Writer chuckled smoke. "Mr. Balls the process would require one of us to be sacrificed."

Silence.

Very slowly, then, Balls and Dicky turned their gazes to Cora.

The Writer thought: Oh, dear...

Cora flailed against her bonds. "Why the fuck you rednecks lookin' at me?"

Balls shrugged. "Well, see, me'n Dicky still got a haul to make, and the Writer here, he's got the smarts, but you, Cora? You don't bring much to the table, in fact the way I see it, you're about as useful as a dick on a cow..."

"Let me go, you fucker!" she squealed.

POP!

Balls' fist made short work of Cora's protestations. She slumped over again, out cold.

"It's murder," the Writer reminded them. "It's a capital offense."

"Does it look like I care?" Balls retorted. "Shee-it. We'll just summon ourselves our own demon, then we can get out'a here and still walk off with a shitload's Crafter's hair-looms."

"That's purdy dang good thankin', Balls," Dicky said.

The Writer struggled for any idea to thwart the plan. "Tephramancy requires human ashes; that's why Crafter has his own crematory. It probably won't even work with all the power shut off."

Dicky's minuscule intuition fired up. "But that thing runs on gas, don't it? We done seed all them propane tanks outside."

Balls stalked right up to the idle machine, pushed the ON button, and

POOF!

the pilot flared from the surge of propane.

"So much fer that, Writer!" Balls turned the knob to high. "Looks like we're ready to have ourselves our very own demoneric sacker-fice!"

And then the dirty-work began.

(IX)

The Writer felt ultimately responsible but then poor Cora didn't have much of a life to begin with. At least her travails and the pain of her addictions is at an end, he tried to rationalize.

Balls didn't need much instruction; he and Dicky, first, picked up Cora's unconscious form, and

CRUNCH...

impaled her throat on the iron spike of the last wooden door. Her junkie eyes sprang open; she flipped feebly on the spike, whose tip exited the hollow of her throat. Then she began to gargle

foamy blood.

Balls looked to the first corpse, then to the Writer. "She gotta be nekit?"

Queasy, the Writer reeled at the gargling sound. "It doesn't say so specifically in these tomes but naked sacrifice victims do seem to support the time-held cliché. Nakedness begets lust, and lust offends God. By soliciting a demonic source, you pay tribute to it by offering a naked sacrificant."

Balls' Buck knife cut off Cora's tube-top. He frowned at the irregularly nipples breasts that were flat as proverbial beer coasters. "Shee-it. I seen bigger lumps in pancake batter. Hope her cooze looks a right better than them little skin-bags she's got fer tits."

"It don't," Dicky assured.

Balls hauled the cutoff shorts off her dirty legs and feet. "Oww! You gotta be shittin' me, man!" he howled in objection at the woman's groin. "Is that groaty or what? Her cunt looks like a fuckin' baby gorilla!"

Neither the Writer nor Dicky even looked this time. Balls' expression puckered as he grabbed the branch-cutters. "Any gal with a pussy that ugly deserves ta be sacker-ficed...", and without delay he hooked the cutter's lower blade into her navel, pushed, and

crack! crack! crack!

began to clip a rive from her upper abdomen to her neck. Dark, disease-rife blood poured from the opening.

"Er, let's see now... Dicky, grab me that metal frame-lookin' thing off the other æ~ho right, Writer?"

The Writer sighed in place. "Yes. It'll be necessary to widen the chest cavity enough to access her heart."

Balls figured it out by intuition. He sunk the retractor's prongs into the wound, then turned each of its two knobs. Each crank divided the severed ribcage in increments. Balls reached right in and manually spread the tainted, pink-black lungs, to reveal a quivering white sac.

"Wow, it's white. I'd always thunk hearts were red."

Dismally, the Writer informed, "The white mass is actually the pericardium which surrounds the heart. I'm afraid you'll have to cut both out."

The mass was still barely beating. Balls grabbed it and yanked, then with surprising finesse severed the aortic arch with the razor-sharp Buck knife.

After doing so, an inch-thick plume of blood vaulted out and hit Dicky right in the face.

"Dang, Balls! Aw, man!"

Balls chuckled. "Sorry, Dicky. Don't swaller none. Bet it's loaded with the AIDS and everthang."

Dicky spat, frantically flapping the blood off his face, while Balls twisted the sac and severed the pulmonary trunk, superior and inferior vena cava, and all the other meaty connections.

"Like cuttin' fuckin' steak." Eventually he unseated it all. Cora hung limp now, eyes still open in a look that seemed accusory, tongue sticking out. Never again would she have to suck dirty redneck penises for meth money. Her bladder voided like a pregnant woman breaking her water.

"Hope she don't shit, too," Dicky fretted.

"Naw. All she eats is fellas' cum. Bet she ain't taken a solid shit in five years. Cum don't turn to turds, I don't imagine."

The Writer blanched.

Balls turned with the severed heart in a red hand. "So's now I gotta..."

"Put it in the crucible, then put the crucible in the crematory," the Writer droned. "Use the tongs. It's probably close to 2000 degrees in there."

Balls followed the instructions, and opened the crematory hatch. Heat flooded the room at once. Balls' shadow moved meticulously on the wall when he placed the crucible inside, removed the tongs, and closed the hatch.

"There. Purdy dang easy, I gotta say." He wiped his hands off on Cora's tube top. Then he walked to the door on which Cora's regrettable corpse hung, and opened it.

All that filled the doorway were bricks.

"The hail? There's supposed ta be a demon in there now!"

"No, no, Mr. Balls," the Writer corrected. "In tephramancy, the heart must first be reverted to ash,

then the ashes must be spread over the gems in the door. It'll take a while for that heart to burn down. Oh, and now that I think of it, it can't hurt for you to put on that surplice."

"Put on the what?"

"This here," Dicky said and grabbed the stone-studded smock. "It's like a magic jacket that warlocks gotta wear."

"Yeah?" Balls slipped it on. The hundreds of semi-precious stones glittered like a disco ball. "Cool! Look at me I'se a genuine warlock!"

Dicky chuckled. "Look more like a Fire Island fag."

"Shut up!" Balls huffed, and again addressed the Writer. "Hadn't even thunk of it before, but just what kind'a demon are we summonin'?"

"The door you chose according to this written index supposedly opens to an accessway in Hell that is in proximity to the domain of the Spermatogoye."

Balls shot his now familiar funky look. "Say again?"

The Writer held out his hands. "That's what it says in the book and on that brass plate. I have no idea what it is," and after he'd responded he had to wonder.

Would anything really come through that door?

No, he felt certain. Even after everything I've witnessed tonight...I simply can't believe it.

"Did'ju say sperm? Like man-batter, petersnot, dick-loogie?"

"Spermatogoye," the Writer repeated. "I can only presume it's some sort of fertility demon."

"Well, will it be tough enough ta whup that bitch upstairs with the bull's head?"

"All we can do is hope so..."

Balls stroked his goatee in further contemplation. "And, hail, should we be reading some kinda incanter-ray-shun or some shit?"

Another dejected sigh. "I'm a speculative novelist, not a sorcerer. I don't know. It does support the folklore: prayers, intercessions, hymns of praise to the Devil. It's been recorded that vocal

incantations often accompany such rites, but...there are no such prerequisites mentioned in any of Crafter's notes or sources."

"Guess we just sit tight, and wait," but, lo, Balls pronounced the word tight as "tat" The heat in the room grew, which only worsened the death-stench from the first corpse. The three of them sat around sweating, fidgeting, tapping their feet. None of them said anything on occasions when the Minotauress bellowed or snorted upstairs. Every so often a crash could be heard when it knocked something over. Its footfalls paced back and forth along the hall by the basement door.

It's waiting for us to make a move, the Writer presumed.

An hour later, Balls checked the crucible. "Looks like ash ta me!"

"Now carefully pour the ashes on that sheet of slate," the Writer advised. "You'll have to let them cool before you can proceed with the rest."

Balls shot the cuffs of his sorcerer's surplice, and did as he was told. He gently fanned the ashes with one of the books, then said, "Dicky, put'cher hand in them ashes ta see if they'se cool."

"Kiss my ass, Balls!"

Balls chuckled. "Ya know? I kind'a dig this warlock shit. Might even take it up as a hobby."

"In another time," the Writer informed, "you would be burned alive or disemboweled for saying such a thing. Black magic was considered the worst crime a person could commit. Worse than murder, worse than rape and child molestation."

"Yeah? Well I done all's that without no problem. Why not this, too?"

"Aw, Balls," Dicky pointed out. "You should stick ta runnin' â€˜shine. If ya wanna be a full-time warlock, ya gots to wear that magic jacket a lot. Folks'll think ya turned into Liberace."

"Oh... Yeah..."

Eventually, the ashes had cooled to the touch. "All's right, Writer. Now all I gotta do is spread these here ashes over the door?"

"Over the keystone in the archway."

"With my blammed hand?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Balls grabbed a fistful of the ash, then spread it across the jeweled keystone above Cora's very dead head.

"What now?"

The Writer shrugged. "Open the door."

"Here goes..." Balls took hold of the door's iron latch. He thumbed down the release, paused, took a deep breath...

Dicky shivered, but the Writer only looked on in the certainty that nothing but bricks would be found behind the door.

Balls' thumb slowly lowered, raising the latch, and

the rickety door swung open on its own.

Down went the Writer's jaw. The brick wall behind the door no longer existed, but in its place stood a black gulf. Greenish-gray fog slowly eddied into the room along with still more humid heat. Sounds could be heard as if at a great distance: wind, the mad clatter of metal, and layered screams. The Writer, Balls, and Dicky sat or stood frozen in shock.

And another noise much closer could be heard coming from the arcane passageway.

Footsteps? the Writer wondered.

A series of wet, slapping thuds. Balls stood closest to the open Bridle. His eyes widened as they detected the approach of something, and he slowly stepped back, aghast.

"You guys ain't gonna believe what's walkin' out'a there..."

A queerly shaped shadow crossed the floor as the arranged mass of muscular flesh stepped into the room. It possessed bare arms and legs that could be described as humanish rather than human: stout, corded but with more girth, more muscle than a human being could have. Hands large as dinner plates, hairy knuckled, and splayed bare feet that were large and thick, which the Writer could only think of as like that of an ogre. The arms were connected directly atop the legs, and it was from this fleshy apex that the creature's "body" sprouted. Not a trunk, thorax, or anything that could be called a mid-section. The thing's body, instead, was a yard-long, eight-inch-thick human penile erection.

"That's the demon?" Dicky stammered, unbelieving.

Balls seemed more angry now than shocked. "A demon's supposed to have horns and a pointed tail'n shit that ain't no demon. It's a giant dick!"

Indeed, an enormous erection with arms and legs but also...a face.

Long slit-like eyes blinked at them: red irises and white pupils, and below them protruded a great pug nose the size of a pine cone. No mouth could be detected, but now it must be said where this face was located: at the top of a dangling scrotum as big as a grocery bag, which encapsulated two melon-sized testicles. The great crinkled sack of scrotal flesh was rife with long wiry black hairs.

Balls sat down, irate. "That's the damn stupidest-lookin' thing I ever seen!"

"It ain't nothin' but a big dick," Dicky offered.

"Dang straight, and we're shore as shit gonna need somethin' more than a big dick to kill that thing upstairs."

So this, the Writer thought, is a Spermatogoye. "You may be right, but we've got no choice but to try."

By now, the Bridle had raised again; only bricks filled the egress. Meanwhile, the Spermatogoye glanced around as if curious, or even surprised by the three men staring back at it.

The Writer ventured, "Perhaps we're as ridiculous-looking to it as it is to us."

"Shee-it," Balls sputtered.

The stout legs hunkered up and down as the creature plodded about the room. It seemed to glance at the books on the table, then turned toward Balls in his glittering smock.

The Spermatogoye bowed.

"It's paying you reverence," the Writer told him. "It's thanking you for bringing it out of its domain in Hell."

Balls stared, appalled. "Well yer fuckin' welcome, ya big dick..."

Morbid curiosity forced the Writer to take a closer look at the heinous entity. The great column of penile meat was beating, and beneath the flag-sized swath of flesh that covered the erection, veins fat as garden hose throbbed. The hood of the foreskin hung limp over the tip, but then the brawny hands reached up and pulled it back over a corona like the top of a bald man's head...but with a hole in it that more resembled the deep doughy navel of the dead prostitute on the first door. Stranger still, the thing seemed to be displaying the ghastly glans to Balls in particular. And then

"Aw, man!" Balls complained.

The beastly hands lowered down the fat shaft and began to stroke up and down...

"It's jerkin' itself off!" Dicky marveled.

The Writer lit another cigarette and sighed.

As the stroking continued, the scrotum began to tighten and the infernally large testes drew up. The ponderous legs flexed as the hands quickened their pace, and in a few more moments the creature was actually thumping up and down on its callused heels, in apparent excitement.

When the action of the hands reached a fever-pitch, the creature tipped its entire penile body toward the floor and

"Aw, good Gawd!" Balls exclaimed.

The opening in the glans widened like an empty eye socket, and out poured a dozen gushes of thick, globular sperm. When the climax had concluded a virtual five-pound pile of the stuff lay on the floor.

"That's just fuckin' great," Balls muttered.

The thing regained its composure, stepped back, and bowed once more, to Balls.

"Act ingratiated," the Writer suggested.

"Huh?"

"Say thank you. In its act of masturbation, it's paying homage to you. It's offering you a gift, Mr. Balls. The gift of its infernal seed."

Balls looked cockeyed at the Writer. "You're tellin' me to thank a giant dick fer comin' on the

floor?"

"It would be a good idea. It needs to know that it's pleased its master you. Then it will serve you more effectively."

Balls turned a smirking gaze to the Spermatogoye. "Thanks fer the pile'a cum..."

The beast nodded.

"And though it may not look formidable against an incarnation such as the Minotauress," the Writer surmised further, "we may be surprised. We have no idea to the extent of its powers, and it will obey your every command."

"Yeah? Hmm..." Balls looked right in the thing's scarlet eyes. "Uh, see, what I'd like fer ya to do is sort'a...show us what'cha kin do. Give us like a demonstration of some'a yer demon powers."

The creature tensed its muscular arms and legs and then reached down and scooped up a handful of the voided semen.

The matter looked similar to human sperm but was much thicker, akin to frog eggs. It plodded over to the first door where the pudgy prostitute hung in mid-stages of decomposition. The Spermatogoye rubbed the handful of sperm up between the dead woman's legs.

"Aw, gross," Dicky said.

"It's rubbin' its cum in the dead chick's snatch!" Balls protested. "What kind'a fuckin' demon power is that?"

"Be patient," the Writer observed.

Now, with a fingertip, the Spermatogoye wrote an invisible word on the dead woman's stomach, as if finger-painting, but with semen instead of paint.

"A cabalistic inscription, no doubt," the Writer supposed.

Then the creature stepped back..and watched.

The dead girl's stretchmark-streaked belly began to inflate.

"It knocked her up!" Dicky railed.

The belly continued to distend, the LOVE DEPOSIT tattoo growing until it was warped. When the stomach looked fit to burst

SPLAT!

an evil-smelling liquid spilled out, then

plop...

The stomach deflated, after squeezing something irregular and brown onto the floor, maybe nine inches long and six in girth.

"It made her have a baby!" Dicky cried.

Then they all did a double-take. "That ain't no baby," Balls noted. "Looks like a giant lump'a shit..."

The Writer summoned his bravado. He picked up the odd brown lump, wiped off some post-natal slime. "No " and then he pulled the object apart with his hands. He showed it to everyone.

"I thought so. It's a loaf of pumpernickel."

Dicky gawped.

"A fuckin' loaf'a bread?" Balls questioned. "I'se supposed ta be impressed by that? Shee-it! That ain't no power. I wanna see some real magic."

The Spermatogoye seemed to sense its master's displeasure. It slopped another handful of sperm up betwixt the dead woman's legs, fingered another word on her belly, and

"Plum knocked the bitch up again!" Dicky exclaimed.

The previous process repeated: the belly swelled, and

CLUNK!

Something much more substantial hit the floor this time: a severed human head.

"How's that for magic?" the Writer asked.

Dicky gulped. "A dude's head..."

This time Balls appeared rattled. He nudged the head with his boot, turned it face up. The head's eyes looked propped open in rage, and its lips moved, agitated.

"That ain't just any dude's head," Balls admitted in a low drone. "That's my dead Daddy's head..."

A hush filled the room.

"It's alive," Dicky whispered. "It's tryin' ta talk, but ain't no words comin' out."

"No vocal cords," the Writer assumed.

"Never did like the prick." Balls picked the head up by slimy hair. "Spent my whole childhood listenin' to him call me asshole'n shit-head'n white trash..." He opened the crematory hatch. The head's lips silently shouted, Asshole! Shit-head! White trash! and then Balls lobbed it in and reclosed the hatch. "Fuck him."

"That were amazin'!" Dicky applauded. "But look..."

"Our denizen doesn't appear to be finished with its magic show," the Writer noted.

The Spermatogoye held up a stout finger to flag Balls' attention, then it scooped more sperm off the floor, two handfuls this time.

"What's it doin' now?" Balls asked.

"Continuing the demonstration you demanded," the Writer assumed.

The beast hunkered over now to where Cora's corpse hung. A slick wet sound clicked in all their ears as the thing spread the demonic sperm all over Cora's dead body until she shined as if shellacked. Again it inscribed some invisible occult word, but this time on her forehead.

And then

Cora's eyes fluttered, and she began to move...

"Tse don't believe it!" Dicky posed. "It's magic dick-loogie!"

"Dang thing's spunk done brought Cora back ta life!" Balls yelled.

Cora's skinny arms raised like a sleepwalker's, and she began to squirm lethargically on the spike

through her throat.

Her lips moved feebly. "I...I..." Finally the ruined voice croaked, "I need some fuckin' meth..."

"Well...shee-it," Balls remarked.

The Writer was dumbfounded by what he knew his own eyes had just seen. "That's some serious sorcerial science, gentlemen. You're not impressed?"

"Yeah," Balls reluctantly agreed. "I guess any demon who can do all'a that must know his business."

"I'd say that our erect friend is quite the metaphysician," the Writer complimented. "But now... I think it's time to unleash it upon the Minotauress."

The ceiling shook as the Minotauress howled upstairs.

"So far the Writer's been right 'bout everythang," Dicky observed.

Balls nodded snidely. "And he better be right 'bout this...'cos if he ain't, he'll be the next one who gets sacker-ficed."

The Writer gulped.

Balls stepped right up to the Spermatogoye. "What I want'cha ta do is git on upstairs and take care'a the Minner-tortise "

"Minotauress," the Writer corrected.

"Whatever. You think ya kin handle it, Mr. Dick-Monster?"

The Spermatogoye bowed in obedience one more time, then turned and thunked up the steps.

The Writer, Balls, and Dicky all looked uneasily at one another, but it was the Writer who broke the silence:

"Gentlemen? I don't think this is something we can miss."

The Writer went up the brick steps, right behind the Spermatogoye. Balls and Dicky paused, then followed.

They could hear the vicious snorting through the door. The Writer had the impression that the Minotauress knew an adversary was in its midst. I'm following...a giant penis up the stairs, he thought. Hemingway himself couldn't have asked for more adventure.

The Spermatogoye opened the door with no reluctance and plodded right out into the hall on its big, splayed feet.

The candlelight moved like a luminous veil over the walls. Much of the first floor was a shambles now, the Minotauress having had a heyday of vandalism. The voluptuous-bodied demon stood in the background, its perfect breasts heaving, the eyes in its bovine head strained open in what the Writer thought could only be fear. With horns like that, he wondered, why would this thing be afraid of a ridiculous giant penis on two legs?

Once again, the Spermatogoye began to masturbate, brawny hands stroking its elephantine body...

The Minotauress bellowed, snot flying, then turned and fled down another hall. The Spermatogoye thunked after it.

"What's it gonna do?" Dicky asked. "Looks likes its jerkin' off again."

"Maybe it's fixin' ta dick-spank her," Balls ventured.

Thrashing and more bellows could be heard in the rear hall. When they looked down, the Writer was amazed to witness the Minotauress cowering terrified in the corner. The Spermatogoye's hands stroked its body more frenetically now, hose-like veins tensing.

"I believe we're about to witness an anointment the likes of which have yet to be espied on God's green earth," the Writer said.

What followed next had little to do with the earth or God. The penile demon shuddered, veins standing out beneath its sheath of flesh, and then its second inhuman ejaculation transpired. This time the puckered hole atop its glans seemed to vomit another massive pile of sperm. The first gout splattered the Minotuaress' head, while subsequent gouts ran over the impeccable physique until it was cocooned in the thick, semi-translucent slop.

The house shook as the Minotauress, teary-eyed now, gave up one last, pitiable howl and then fell limp to a bout of harmless shivering, as the Spermatogoye finger-wrote another supernaturally charged word on her belly...

"Dang!" Dicky exclaimed.

"That's what Ise call hosin' a bitch down hard," Balls added. Their flashlights beamed on the quivering, sperm-cloaked form. "Is it dead?"

"No," the Writer ventured. "The potent brew of supernatural sperm seems to have subdued the Minotauress to a comatose state. I can only presume that the word our ally wrote on her abdomen triggered some sort of paresis spell."

The Spermatogoye stepped back as if winded, then bowed to Balls in veneration. The bastard daughter of Pasiphae had been rendered innocuous.

The Writer seized the moment for a metaphysical summation. "The ultimate allegorical showdown between male and female: virility versus fertility. As in quality speculative fiction, the themes become tangible living things. It's clear that in the realm of the occult, abstractions such as symbolism are as concrete and objective as the physical in our realm. Notions are represented by sentient entities."

"That's the reason the big dick's cum took the wind out'a the bitch's sails?" Dicky asked, confused.

"No doubt, Mr. Dicky. The symbol of masculinity reigns supreme."

Balls shot the Writer a funky look. "That's the dumbest-ass thing I ever heard!"

The Writer lit a cigarette and shrugged. Sounded good to me...

Balls opened the front door. "You done great," he said to the ludicrous bipedal sex organ. "Go have yerself a run around the yard. You deserve it."

Enthused, the Spermatagoye leapt through the doorway to revel in the twilit night.

"What now, Balls?" Dicky asked.

"Finish loadin' Crafter's shit in the U-Haul and split, I reckon."

"What a night of great adventure," the Writer commented. "And now, it would seem, great profit for you gentlemen."

But Balls seemed seized by a contemplation. He scratched his goatee, looking down at the incapacitated Minotauress. "Shee-it, guys..."

"A conjecture, Mr. Balls?"

"Dicky! Go out ta the car'n fetch some'a them Flex-Cuffs you gots from yer uncle."

"What'cha need them fer?"

"Just git 'em..."

Dicky lumbered out the door and returned momentarily with said Flex-Cuffs.

Now Balls walked eagerly about the candle-lit room, rubbing his hands. "Ya know what's worth more than all the â€˜sensitive shit in this house, Dicky?"

"What, Balls?"

"That," and Balls pointed down to the afflicted Minotauress. He quickly Flex-Cuffed the creature's ankles and wrists. "We'se gonna be millionaires!"

"Yeah?"

"Shee-it, Dicky! Use yer noggin! We'se gonna sell this big-tit bitch to a circus or zoo or somethin', make a fortune!"

"Quite an industrious endeavor," the Writer said. "Or perhaps start your own exhibition, traveling from city to city to sell tickets to the public. I suspect people would pay handsomely to see such a spectacle."

"Hail yeah!" Balls whooped. "And ya knows what, Writer? We ain't even gonna kill you now! Dicky and me? We're gonna make you a partner!"

"My gratitude knows no constraint," the Writer said.

"Come on, boys! Lets get this bull-headed â€˜ho loaded!"

The three of them pitched in to carry the spermatically enslimed Minotauress outside to the U-Haul. Balls secured the latch, and the sound of the door closing echoed through the night. The Writer glanced errantly into the back property and saw the Spermatogoye chasing squirrels amongst the gravestones.

"Time ta blow this pop-stand!" Balls celebrated.

Dicky got behind the wheel while the Writer squeezed in next to Balls. The big engine revved, fracturing the night's stillness; then Dicky put the Hurst in first and drove out the front gate.

The car passed fine but as soon as its back bumper cleared the entrance

"The hail?" Dicky remarked.

The El Camino stopped short as if it had run into a wall.

Balls glared. "Don't tell me you just dumped yer brand-new trannie â€˜fore we'se can even get out'a here!"

Dicky tried to continue forward but the hot-rod only spun its wheels.

"I know what the problem is," the Writer volunteered. "The salt."

"The what?" Balls questioned.

"What we observed previously. The property is completely surrounded by a line of hexed salt, what an occultist would refer to as a warding barrier or a totemic boundary. Presumably anything hellborn can't cross it. That's why the car stopped. The salt functions as a force field, so to speak. Once it detected the presence of the Minotauress in back, the field activated, causing the creature's mass to be repulsed."

"Well what the hail we gonna do now?" Balls complained.

"Mr. Dicky? Back the car up, please. I'll be right back." The Writer disembarked, and when the vehicle had backed up past the salt-line, he got down on his knees and pushed the salt back with his hands. "Try driving through now," he called out.

The car rumbled past the gate, encountering no preternatural resistance. The Writer quickly redistributed the salt back across the entrance and hopped back in the car.

"I think that should do it," the Writer announced.

Dicky paused before pulling off. "Hey, wait a minute... What about the dick-demon?"

They all looked over their shoulders and saw the Spermatogoye continuing its romp through the graveyard. It was masturbating itself once again.

"Dang. How many times can that thing beat off?" Dicky posed.

Balls' arched a brow. "Wants ta bust another pile'a demon jizz, looks like."

Intrigued, the Writer watched. Dicky asked, "Think we ought'a take it with us? That way we'd have two demons in our road show."

Balls seemed to mull the prospect over. "Naw, leave that â€˜un be. I've had me about enough'a that wacky peter."

"Shore," Dicky agreed. "But I wouldn't mind seein' the look on Crafter's face when he comes home."

Balls chuckled. "Yeah. The old geezer's gonna pull up to find a big dick runnin' â€˜round his yard."

Dicky laughed and pulled off. The Writer continued to watch out the back window as they cruised down the lane. Now the Spermatogoyles were heaping still more sperm, this time onto one of the unconsecrated graves. Would the infernal seed seep down through the soil to resurrect the cursed corpse beneath?

The Writer preferred not to speculate.

Â«Â« Â»Â»

The car sped around winding, tree-lined roads, cruising through the dim night. They were on their way back to Luntville. But what would happen now?

"How â€˜actly do we go into the freakshow business?" Dicky raised the issue.

"Dang, Dicky. I don't know." Balls looked to the Writer. "You's the one with all the brains. Thank'a somethin'."

"Oh, I'm confident that with a solid business plan, we'll be making money in no time. Just let me do a little marketing research, find some carnival schedules, etcetera."

"Et what?"

The Writer smiled. "Leave it to me."

Of course the Writer had no true intention of going into the freakshow business. I'm a novelist, not a carnival barker. He'd simply go along with the plan until he could escape these two dimwits

and get back to his work in progress. Yes, he thought with an unsurpassed creative elation. White Trash Gothic...

Next, Dicky scratched his head in another contemplation. "I was just thankin'. What we gonna do if that dick-demon's cum...you know...wears off, and maybe that special word it wrote on the bull-gal's belly loses its kick?"

The Paresis Spell, the Writer mused. And it was a good question. How long would it keep the Minotauress subdued? "I can't say with any authority, but you men did seem to secure her sufficiently. Plus, I'd imagine the latch and hinges on the U-Haul are quite sturdy."

"Aw, shee-it," Balls dismissed. "You boy's are worryin' like a couple'a chicks. Dicky, them Flex-Cuffs are as good as steel cable. Even if the big dick's mumbo-jumbo does wear off, ain't no way that bitch'll snap those cuffs."

Dicky seemed pacified by the response, but then his face turned concerned in the dim dashboard light. "Dang. We ain't doin' squat less'n we get some gas, and I se mean like right now."

Balls glanced down. "What'cha got fer a brain, Dicky? The tank's on E!"

"Yeah, sorry. I were so excited 'bout knocking over Crafter's place, I didn't check it."

"Man, you're about as smart as the loaf'a pumpernickel that dead æ~ho popped out her pussy! We ain't even halfway back to town yet!"

"Relax, gentlemen," the Writer cut in. "There's a filling station right there."

CRICK CITY EXXON, the glowing sign read. OPEN 24 HOURS!

Dicky pulled in. "Fuck, I left our cut from Clyde Nale's run at the house. You got any dough?"

Balls fished in his jeans' pocket. "Dang. I got's nothin' neither." He nudged the Writer. "Don't tell me you're broke too."

The Writer checked his pockets and ankle belt. "I'm afraid I spent the last of my cash at the bar "

"Fuck!"

"But take heart, gentlemen. I do have my credit card."

"Come on, let's go "

"Hey, git me a bag'a Funyuns while's yer in there," Dicky called after them. "And a Mr. Pibb, but not that diet stuff."

Dicky, lo and behold, had pronounced the word diet as "dat."

Balls and the Writer approached the pump, but a sign told them: PAY INSIDE AFTER 10 P.M. A bell rang when they entered the brightly lit mini-mart. Balls parted at once to pull several bags of Funyuns off the shelf, and get drinks. The Writer's eyes slid across a magazine rack comprised mostly by x-rated fare, with names like Poppin' Mammias! and Gobblin' Grannies! and Tinkle Drinkers! Next, he noticed a revolving rack of used paperbacks and he perused the titles, hoping for a gem. Satan's Lovechild, Nazi Nuns in Heat, Lusty Lesbo Love Party. The Writer nearly shrieked when he saw one of his own books, The Red Confession, next to a book entitled, Farm Girls Just Want To Have Fun.

He looked over his shoulder, then quickly placed his book on the top of the rack.

"Can I help you?" asked a drab, pimply faced young man behind the bulletproof cubby.

"Yes, please. We'd like to fill it on Pump 1," and then passed his credit card through the slot. "And, also, my friend's getting some snacks."

The boy ran the card through the machine, then passed it back.

"You can start pumping now."

"Thank you."

The Writer went back outside into the humid night, reflecting all that he'd experienced. He fumbled with the pump, not well-versed in such procedures, put the nozzle in the hole, then squeezed, but nothing happened. Am I doing something wrong here? he wondered. When he looked back up at the pump, the tiny screen read: SEE CASHIER.

The Writer walked back inside. Balls stood at the magazine rack, thumbing through a glossy publication with the odd title, Crazy For Crackers!

"Hey, Writer? You like graham crackers?"

The Writer stalled. "Why, yes, I supposed so...though it's been some time since I've had any. Why do you ask?"

"Check it out," and then Balls showed him a page in the magazine. A naked woman grinned over her shoulder as her hands reached back to spread her superior buttocks. She was expertly expelling a long dribble of semen from her anus, under which another naked woman held a graham cracker.

"Bet'cha wouldn't eat that graham cracker, huh?" Balls chuckled.

The Writer's face ballooned in disgust; he rushed back to the cashier and told Pimple Face, "I seem to be having some trouble with the pump."

"Oh, yeah. The credit card machine's down..."

Balls sneered over. "Come on, hoss! Git'cher shit together. We're in a hurry."

"Don't worry, it happens all the time. Just wait a few minutes and then try the pump again."

Technology, the Writer thought and went back outside. He waited, leaning against the car and staring at the U-Haul in tow. No one would ever believe what's inside there...

Had he been more observant, he would've noticed the lit sign just a block down the road, CRICK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT, but there was also something else he was unaware of:

He'd given the pimply faced guy a credit card bearing the name Reginald Hildreth, which was not the Writer's name.

Balls walked outside, smirking.

"That thing workin' yet?"

The Writer squeezed the pump handle again. Nothing happened. "Not yet, but I'm sure it will be shortly..."

(X)

There's got to be more to police work than this, Sergeant Stu Cummings thought and audibly groaned. The midnight shift in THIS hick town?

"What'choo moanin' and groanin' about, Stu?" Courtney asked. "You do that a lot, ya know."

"Tell me about it."

Courtney was the Crick City Police Department's night dispatcher. She was also if the rumors were genuine the chief's secret paramour on occasion. Her face beamed like a beautiful beacon, in spite of the 200-pound body and 5'4" frame. She'd made a play for Stu himself once or twice, but...

I didn't leave the city for that shit, he thought. It was all the same everywhere, he supposed. His idealism hadn't worn off yet. "Courtney, I've been here two years and I still haven't solved a crime more major than a domestic dispute or drunk driving. I'm turning to porridge in this town."

"Well, you could'a been a cop in the Big Apple but then...you'd probably be dead by now. That or on the take."

Not me, he thought. "I just want some real police work, you know? This redneck stuff is boring me shitless."

"Watch that, cutie. Rednecks got their good points too," and then she grinned rather salaciously and winked. "End of our shift, you'n me, why we'se could grab a bottle'a shine, check in ta the no-tell motel'n have ourselves a fine ole time...real redneck style."

Stu just laughed and shook his head.

He looked around the drab booking room, eyed the wall calendar, and then the clock. It was past two in the morning. Six more hours of sitting around, came the grim realization. I just want to make a difference, but that's not ever going to happen here, not in this hayseed burg... Then, without thinking, he reached under his desk and knocked on wood.

"You do that a lot, too. Bet'cha don't even realize it."

"What oh, knocking on wood?"

"Yeah. I'se know what'cher knockin' for, and don't worry, I didn't tell the chief you up'n applied to another department. Ain't heard back yet?"

Stu shook his head. Two months ago he'd submitted an application for transfer, to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. He'd go from this boring Gomer-Pyle duty to busting gun-runners and pulling stings on radical militia groups. That's real police work...

"Nope," he finally answered. "And you know what bites me in the ass hardest? I aced the exam, then they called me in for three interviews and they all went great. The recruitment officer told me there was a ninety-percent chance I'd get hired. The only hold up was federal quotas or some shit like that. Said I'd know in two weeks if I was in."

Courtney flipped a page of some soap opera magazine. "When was that?"

Stu sighed. "A damn month ago."

"Hate to tell ya this, Stu, but most'a those ATF guys? Mostly all they do is bust stills and chase â€˜shine runners."

"Sure, Courtney, but half of those guys transporting illegal liquor also transport drugs. I'm dying to bust drug dealers. And if you do a good job, they promote you to the even more important duty, like investigating skinhead militias and dropping the boom on gun-runners that supply arms to terrorists."

Courtney smiled the way a mother might at a naive child. "You're such a boy scout, Stu, and that's a good thing. But I also hate to tell ya that a lot'a them ATF guys are on the take."

Stu's face hardened on her. "I will never go on the take, Courtney. Never."

Courtney decided not to push it. "Well, at least yer on the list, sweetie. You'll get hired eventually."

"God, I hope so."

She giggled. "â€˜Course, when that happens, you'll break the hearts'a ever gal in Crick City...mine included."

Stu smiled. "Believe me, Courtney," he lied. "If I wasn't dating Kathy, I'd be all over you like a cheap suit."

"Don't tease me like that, City Boy!" she laughed.

He struggled to change the subject. "Hey, day-shift said the chief was all pissed off about something today."

"Oh, yeah, his dang tickets. He thinks someone stole 'em."

Stu lit a Blue Devil cigarette, then kicked his feet up on the desk. "Tickets?"

"The Annual Big Stone Gap Testicle Festival "

"What?" Stu gaped.

"They'se real hard ta get, but the chief pulled some strings and got on the invite list "

"Courtney! What the hell is a testicle festival?"

"Oh, a'course, you're from the city. Ever heard'a Smoky Mountain Oysters?"

Stu winced at once. "Oh, shit, you mean like fried goat balls?"

"Yeah. Only these are bull balls, and they'se dang good, too, I've had 'em a bunch'a times. They dip 'em in corn batter and deep-fry 'em in a big kettle. Taste sort'a like meatballs only a little crunchy."

"Jesus," Stu muttered at the thought.

"Anyway, ever two years they have this big whupdeedo in the fairgrounds near the Gap. It's a privilege ta be on the guest list 'cos five thousand people show up."

Stu blanched. "That's a lot of bull balls."

Courtney giggled. "Yeah, I guess it is. Tickets are, like forty bucks, but the county exec gets ten free ones and invites a few folks. That's why the chief's so bent out'a shape. He's all set ta hob-knob at the festival with the county exec and his cronies."

Stu didn't get it. "If he got invited, what's he pissed off about?"

"'Cos he ain't got his tickets yet. He thinks someone stolt 'em out the mailbox."

"For God's sake," Stu sputtered. "See what I mean, Courtney? We got a world full of drug dealers, rapists, child molesters, and murderers, and all our chief cares about are his tickets to a bull-ball party so he can be seen rubbing elbows with a bunch of redneck politicians. Jesus..."

Courtney closed her magazine and got up. "Come to think of it, I plum fergot ta bring in the mail today. Maybe his tickets come in," and then she waddled out the station door.

Stu rubbed his face, depressed. I should've just joined the Army...

When the phone rang, he picked it up before the end of the first ring. A call! Finally! Please, be something hot...

"Sergeant Cummings, Crick City Police," he answered.

"Hey, Stu?" came a guarded male tone. "This is Corky, over at the Exxon."

Shit! A robbery! He stood right up, reaching for his keys. "Someone sticking the place up?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I just got this guy here trying to fill up, but when I ran his credit card, they said it's been reported as lost or stolen..."

Stu exhaled dismally. Shit. That's all? "Did he run off with the card?"

"No, no, that's just it. I jived him about the machine being slow..."

"Good thinking, Corky. Keep stalling the guy and I'll be right there."

Stu hung up and jogged outside for the town cruiser. Courtney's large breasts joggled in her bra as she walked back up toward the station.

"You get a call, Stu?"

"Yeah," he said getting into the car. "Might be a stolen credit card beef up at the Exxon. I'll be back in a few."

"Be careful!"

Stu drove off. He lead-footed it down the street, headlights out, and squealed Adam-12 style into the gas station. God, that was fun...

Parked at the pump was a close-to-mint '69 El Camino with a U-Haul hooked up to it. Damn nice car, Stu couldn't help but think. When his cruiser had fishtailed into the lot, two guys leaning against the car looked over in dismay.

Stu got out and hit the thumb-snap on his holster. You never know...

A geeky looking guy in a white button-down shirt and glasses stood next to another guy with long hair, a John Deere hat, a redneck goatee, jeans, and shit-kicker boots. What's wrong with this picture? Stu thought. The two were an odd couple, indeed.

Stu's steel-toed police shoes snapped on the pavement as he approached.

"Good evening, Officer," greeted the guy in the white shirt. "Is something amiss?"

"Amiss?" Stu spoke with authority. "You tell me." He gave them both the dead-eye. "Both of you. Keep your hands in plain view, and don't make any sudden movements." He shot a harder eye to the Long-Hair. "Tell your buddy to get out of the car. Slow."

He looks like a convict, was Stu's first impression. Nevertheless, Long-Hair did as he was told, stiff-upper-lipped. No, no, I definitely don't like this guy's face...

A dopey, fat neck with a buzzcut got out and stood with his cohorts. "Huh-huh-howdy, sir. We-we-we ain't done nothin' wrong."

Stu let them see his hand on his holster. "This your car?"

"Yes, sir, it shore is."

"What's gonna happen one minute from now when I run the plates?"

"Nothin', sir. I gots my insurance'n registration right here..."

Stu studied the three of them. "Which one of you used the stolen credit card?"

Oddly, the two rednecks both looked to White Shirt.

"Stolen?" White Shirt whispered.

"Make it quick, guys. If I hear one word that sounds like bullshit...I'm busting all three of you."

Silence.

"Sir, there's been mistake," White Shirt stepped up. "I used the credit card." Next, he looked at it with a puzzled expression. Then he sighed. "And you know what? This one's not mine. I know what happened, Officer. About a month ago, I found a man's wallet in the parking lot of the Qwik-Mart in Luntville, and I returned it to him immediately. It was a man in a Rolls Royce, and he even gave me a \$100 bill as a reward for returning the wallet. But after he drove away, I discovered that one of his cards had fallen out of it..."

"And you've been using it ever since," Stu said.

"Oh, no, that's not the case at all, sir. I had every intention of calling the credit card company the next day to report it misplaced but I simply forgot."

Stu tapped his foot. "And I'm supposed to believe that?"

"I assure you, sir. I'm not prevaricating in the least."

"Prevaricating, huh?" This was starting to stink. Stu glared at Long-Hair and Fattie. "You two guys looks like townies " Then he glared at White Shirt. " and you look like a librarian. Something's not right here. You three guys know each other?"

"Actually, no, sir, not really," White Shirt stepped right up again. "I was walking home tonight and these gentlemen kindly offered me a ride, and in their generosity, I thought it only fair for me to buy them some gas."

"With a stolen credit card?"

"No, sir," he said, slightly weary now. "I intended to use my own card but I used this one by mistake." He raised the card in emphasis. "This card, that I found and intended to report lost."

"But forgot to?"

"Precisely."

Stu's eyes flicked back to the rednecks. "Is that true?"

"Aw, yeah, it shore is...sir," answered Long-Hair. "We'se just offered him a ride's all."

"Don't really know him," Fattie said. "We'se was just bein' neighborly."

Stu ruminated further. I don't have probable cause to bust the rednecks or do a search. "Mind telling me what's in the U-Haul?"

"Just some old furniture'n stuff we'se movin' to my Daddy's house down the way," Long-Hair said.

Hmm. Stu kept tapping his foot. Make the decision. "You," he said to White Shirt. "Turn around, hands behind your back."

He took the credit card, did a quick pat-down, and cuffed the guy. "Don't move," he ordered. He walked right up to Long-Hair till their faces were an inch apart.

"You look like a con," he said.

Long-Hair didn't bat an eye. "I don't know what'cha mean...sir. All I been doin' tonight is mindin'

my own business..."

I don't know what's wrong here, Stu realized, but I don't have anything to take them in for. "You boys be on your way." He started back toward White Shirt but paused to take one last glance at the shining El Camino. "Nice car, by the way."

"Why-why thank ya, sir!" Fattie enthused. "Just you have a good night!"

Stu walked White Shirt to the cruiser. "In the car, and " He pulled a small, very old book out of the guy's back pocket. He looked at the title, bewildered.

"The Account of the Incubi of Vaser Monastery? London, 1787? What the hell is this?"

"It's a grimoire, Officer, since you asked. For your information, I'm a Harvard graduate, and one of my fields of study involves antiquarian literature. I'm also a nationally published novelist. Perhaps you've heard of me. My name is "

"Just get in the car," Stu said, and pushed the guy in back.

He drove back to the station, disappointed. "I'm going to have to arrest you for the credit card. When we get to the station, I'll read you your rights and give you a piece of paper to sign stating that you understand your rights."

"That's fine with me, sir," the guy said, quite cheerily.

Stu lit a cigarette. Still. There's something funny. "So what have I got? A Harvard grad with a two-hundred-year-old book in his pocket hanging out with two redneck deadbeats in a hotrod at two in the morning?"

Oddly, White Shirt seemed relieved. "Well, since you're arresting me, I guess I'll have my day in court."

"Yeah, you will. And you know what else? You don't seem to care in the least that you're going to jail."

The guy smiled in the rearview. "Perhaps it's my predestination. All experience is life, Officer, and all of life is experience, and the truth of that experience is what I crave, to infuse into my novels. My books allegorically bid the question: How Powerful Is The Power Of Truth?"

Great. A wack-job...

The man rambled on. "I don't mind the experience of arrest, for I've never been arrested before. It's something I can later write about...in truth; and I'm certain I'll be exonerated once I have some discourse with the judge. As for the personages I was cavorting with previously?" The man paused, smiling meditatively. "Good or bad, all people are part of the truth of the world, sir. An unlikely trio indeed, I'll admit. But as a writer, I learn from everybody."

Stu was sick of the chatter. "I guess on that note I'll remind you that you have the right to remain silent."

"Of course, but one last thing, if I may, in response to your query. Isn't it possible that people, good or bad, can be symbols for something else, something much more esoteric, even daedalic? Almost like characters in a work of fiction, but fiction with a meaning extant between the lines. You can only hope that it's a worthy work, hmm? See, I'm a writer but in a much deeper sense, I'm a seer. What I long for more than all else is to see. And, alas, I've seen much tonight, and for that I give great thanks...to God."

"Are you on drugs? You don't look the type but if you are, things will be easier on you if you let me know in advance."

"The only drug I'm on, sir, is one that's quite legal."

"Yeah?"

"Irony..."

Stu smirked as he pulled into the station. "I think you're a weirdo, and you're getting on my nerves. I need you to be quiet."

White Shirt said nothing more, but that subtle smile never left his face, almost as though it were part of his spirit.

Courtney looked up, alarmed, when Stu gently shoved the guy into the booking room.

"Well what have we here?" the woman enthused. "You shore don't look like a bad guy."

"I'm a speculative novelist," the man said.

"Shut up," Stu ordered. "And sit down."

"What he do, Stu?"

"Ripped off a credit card and tried to buy gas with it."

White Shirt opened his mouth to object, but Stu pointed at him.

White Shirt closed his mouth.

"Oh," Courtney added, "and look. The chief's tickets to the Testicle Festival were in the mail."

"Good." Stu stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. "Now he'll be in a good mood tomorrow, and a better mood when he sees that I got a bust. Shit, I haven't had a solid arrest in a month."

"Good work, Stu..." But Courtney, now, seemed to be looking at White Shirt with some scrutiny. "Ain't I seen you before, on TV? Some show on one'a them weird cable channels?"

White Shirt beamed. "The Signatures show, on Ovation Channel, yes! I was interviewed last year about my most recent novel, *The NEW American Tragedy*."

Stu paused between puffs, looking cockeyed at the guy.

"This guy's a famous book writer, Stu "

"Not actually famous in the popular sense but critically acclaimed," the man interrupted. "Raymond Carver wasn't terribly popular either; nevertheless, he remains perhaps the great American prose writer of the century, modernity's answer to, say, Sherwood Anderson."

"Shut up," Stu told him again. He rubbed his temples. Maybe this guy ISN'T bullshitting. Stu looked right at him. "What the hell is a critically acclaimed novelist doing in Redneckland?"

"Searching for errant truths, Officer. See, I infuse relatable modern fiction scenarios with character demonstrations of the existential condition. Allegorical symbology, it's called, rooted in various philosophical systems."

Both Stu and Courtney stared.

The guy kept it zipped as Stu rolled an arrest report in the typewriter but before he could even begin to ask the prelim questions, Courtney peeped, "Uh, Stu?"

"Yeah?" he grumbled.

"I gots somethin' ta tell ya..."

Stu frowned at her. "What?"

She seemed sheepish. "Them Testicle Festival tickets weren't the only thing that come in today's mail..."

Stu snapped his gaze on her. She was holding up an envelope.

He gulped dryly. "Is it..."

"For Sergeant Stewart Cummings, from the Richmond Field Office of the Bureau of Alcoholic, Tobacco, and Firearms..."

"Speaking of tobacco," White Shirt interrupted again, "would it be all right if I smoked?"

"Be quiet!" Stu yelled but kept his gaze horned in on Courtney. "Aw, shit, I'm sure it's the rejection letter. If ATF was going to hire me, I would've known weeks ago," and then his hand reached over to take the letter.

But she didn't give it to him. "Stu? Don't be mad, but "

"But what!"

"I, uh, well, see... I was so curious...I opened it..."

Stu's face reddened. "You had no right "

Her broad peaches-and-cream face broke into a grin. "They hired ya, Stu..."

Stu snapped the letter away, read it, then jumped up and shot his hands to the air. His chair flew back against the wall, and he shouted, "I'm finally out of this no-horse town! I'm finally going to be a REAL cop!" Maniacally, he ran to Courtney and gave her a big wet sloppy kiss.

"Hate ta see ya go, Stu," she said, tearing up, "but I'm happy for ya."

"Thanks, Courtney!"

White Shirt offered a warm smile. "Congratulations, Officer. I'm sure you'll make an exemplary federal agent, and I share in your exuberance."

Stu continued to hoot and holler, doing an awkward moonwalk about the booking room. Then he stopped abruptly and stared at White Shirt.

"You! Stand up!"

White Shirt did so, and Stu took off his handcuffs.

"Hit the road!"

The man turned. "Thank you very, very much, Officer..."

Stu pumped his fist in the air and did a Rebel Yell worthy of any redneck this side of the Mississippi. "Courtney? Gimme the key to the chief's office! He's got a bottle of Jack in there, and you and me are SURE AS SHIT gonna party tonight!"

White Shirt lit a cigarette and quietly left the station.

(XI)

"We gotta get out'a here and dump this U-Haul æfore that cop comes back," Dicky panicked in the front seat. He dug in his pocket and pulled up some change. "I gots seven cents! How much you got?"

"Fuck me and the horse my mamma rode in on!" Balls yammered, searching his own pockets. "Shee-it, look! Two quarters on the floor!"

"That's enough to get us out'a here!"

Balls ran in, paid, and pumped fifty-seven cents worth of regular unleaded into the car.

Dicky hauled out of the lot, engine screaming. "I cain't believe that shit, man! Of all the fucked up thangs!"

"Fuckin'-A..."

"We gotta bury this U-Haul in the woods somewhere deep, Balls! Can you imagine if he'd opened it up and seed that thing back there?"

"Ya ain't gotta tell me, brother. But ya know..." Suddenly a calm settled into Balls. "I ak-shure-lee don't thank we got anything ta worry 'bout."

Dicky slowed down, staring. "What'cha mean? The Writer's gonna finger us to that cop!"

Balls stroked the goatee. "Naw, Dicky, I bet he don't...'cos it ain't lodger-kul."

"We abductor'd him, man, and we was fixin' ta kill him! We made him help us rob a house and then he watched us sacker-fice Cora! That's murder, Balls! We'se'll get the death penalty!"

"Ain't gonna happen, Dicky."

"How ya figgure that?"

Balls let his long black redneck hair blow serenely out the window. "If the Writer was gonna finger us, he would'a done it right in front of the cop. He would'a showed him what's in the U-Haul and he would'a sung like a canary 'bout Crafter's house. But he didn't do none'a that."

Dicky seemed to chew on the speculation.

"Instead? He took the credit card rap and let hisself git arrested so's we could get away."

"Well...yeah," Dicky said in a slow drawl. "Now that I thank about it, I reckon yer right."

"Ya know, Dicky? The Writer's a geek and a tubesteak but he's also a stand-up guy."

"Dang straight "

CLANK!

Dicky weaved in startlement. The sudden sound caused them both to flinch.

"Did you just throw a fuckin' rod?" Balls asked.

"Naw, man " Dicky looked over his shoulder. "Sounded like it come from the back."

"Somethin' must'a falled over in the U-Haul. Pull'er over..."

Dicky idled the Mino to the shoulder and cut the big engine. They both jumped out and ran back

They stood.

They stared.

They slumped.

The U-Haul's door had been busted open from the inside, its steel latch bent and unseated. Inside, there was no sign of the Minotaure.

"That magic cum-spell must'a wore off!" Dicky exclaimed.

Behind them, in the woods, they heard a thrashing laced by vicious snorts. The sounds seemed to dim and eventually disappear as their source receded.

"There goes our million bucks," Balls lamented, hands on hips. He half-laughed to Dicky, then said, "Ain't that just a great big kick in the behind?"

But Balls had pronounced the word behind as "bee-hand."

â€” | |

Epilogue

It took the Writer two hours to walk back to downtown Luntville, yet he did so with a lively step and a studied joy on his face. The warm night's caress accompanied him, along with the gibbous moon and the aural sweep of crickets. Along the way, he pondered everything that had happened to him today and realized that the entire ordeal nearly existed as an allegorical masterpiece. Yes... Intrigue and adventures, epiphanies and a resultant actualization, all wrapped up in an ever-important anti-climax. All necessary ingredients for fiction of literary worth especially the latter component. Like Pope's Rape of the Lock, Melville's Bartleby, Lewis' Main Street, and the best always last Sartre's monumental "The Wall..." A gentle satisfaction swept the Writer, because he knew that the truth of his own life reflected the greatness of classic fiction along the same lines as A Tale of Two Cities and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn... Back at the Gilman House, he stepped into proverbial pin-drop silence. He thought of Poe's quintessential protagonist stepping across the threshold of the brooding House of Usher...

Up the stairs, then. Was there a bizarre vibe in the air? On the darkened landing, he paused at a barely audible hum. It was coming from behind one of the girls' doors. A marital aid? he suggested to himself, but then a feisty young-voiced woman yelled, "Git out'a there, ya little bugger! Git out!" and he thought he had a pretty good idea what the sound was. Behind another door, bedsprings creaked insanely, and a crotchety man's voice railed, "Aw jeezus-ta-pete! Kilt a dozen commies in Korea'n now I can't even get a load'a jism off! Ain't good fer nothin' â€cept sellin' tater chips ta immer-grints'n crackers! What I fight the war for?"

The Writer had a pretty good idea who the client was.

Another door clicked open deeper in the hall. It was darker back there; the Writer could barely see.

"Is someone th " he began, but the formation of a figure began to sharpen. Must be one of the girls, he reasoned. The semi-silhouette took more shape: a stunningly curvaceous woman but with

God help me...

a peculiar V spreading wide from atop her head...like horns.

The Writer's heart seemed to stop.

"Haa!" came the chirpy voice, and finally the rear-hall's darkness disgorged the woman and her identifiable features. It was Nancy.

The Writer made a rare departure from his avoidance of profanity. "Nancy. You scared the living shit out of me."

She cracked a hick laugh. "You're afraid'a l'il ole me?" and then she came close enough to be seen.

All she wore was her exquisite nakedness. Even in the murky light, that young, raw beauty raved, so intensely that the Writer's knees nearly went out. The ripe breasts and sleek, perfect flesh left him helpless and in awe.

I could...marry her, the outrageous thought swept halo-like round his head, and scarier still was the immediacy with which the impression had arrived.

But then the oddity registered in his brain. On her head she wore a facsimile of bunny ears, which he'd first feared were the horns of the dread Minotauress.

"What's that on your head?"

Her eyes bloomed at the afterthought. "Oh, tarnations! I plum fergot ta take 'em off after my last trick. The fella likes me to wear bunny ears 'cos he said his daughter was a Playboy Bunny long time ago, and I'se guess he wants ta pretend that I'm... Well, you know."

"Ah, yes." There's aberration everywhere, like evil, but after another moment's thought, he added, but also like good. Certainly mankind's sin must pave the prospect for its redemption. Kierkegaard proved that. The hope of the surmise brought him an instant well-being.

Downstairs, the clock tolled three. "Dang, it's so late," the nude girl commented. "Don't seem like it, though."

"Time is simply a form of intuition, relative to space. It's not so much time that passes with each tick of the clock but experience and, hence, truth."

Her adorable little nose scrunched up. "Huh?"

"Sorry, I'm philosophizing. But how was your evening?"

She glowed. "Aw, it was just dandy, it was. Got me over a dozen tricks'n made probably five hunnert bucks!"

"That's superb. You're quite industrious, Nancy, and quite the entrepreneur."

She took another step closer. "And how was your evenin'?"

"Wonderful," he breathed. "It was an evening of advents and revelation, of anticlimaxes and dichotomies. Indeed...an evening of signs and wonders."

The remark fuddled her. "Well we'se could all hear ya typin' away in yer room all night long. You must'a got a lot'a yer book wrote tonight."

Strange, he thought. I barely wrote a word today, and I've been out of the house for hours. She probably heard the air-conditioner rattling. "The book's coming along just fine," he bluffed.

She took another step... The Writer's eyes continued to shudder over the immaculate physique. Moments of silence passed, the two of them gazing at each other.

Suddenly, he wanted to weep. "My God, Nancy..."

"Yeah?" she giggled.

"You're so beautiful it's killing me..."

At last the space between them collapsed, and that warm, paragonic body was pressing him against the wall. Feminine heat and redneck perfume blanketed him; it seeped into his nostrils and through his pores like the most indulgent narcotic. When her hands slid up his chest, he felt pleasantly electrocuted. He moaned, then, nearly convulsing when she licked up his neck, sucked his earlobe, then stuck her hand inside his shirt to his bare skin. "I just got such a fixin' fer you,

I'se all in a tizzy," she whispered. She'd opened his shirt fully now, and pressed her bare breasts against him. The sensation catalyzed him in a rapport of euphoria that he could only describe as heavenly. Her nipples seemed to sweetly brand him and then she licked along his neck again, giggled, and finessed a delectable tongue into his mouth. The Writer's arms wrapped around her as if holding onto an abstraction that would prevent him from plummeting to his death a death that he might even welcome in the midst of this ephemeral bliss.

Suction pulled his tongue into her mouth. Her hand cradled his crotch, squeezing in pulses and inciting an erection that was suddenly so hard it hurt. Carry me away, he thought to the Fates. He convulsed in the gentle jaws of this penultimate contradiction Evanescent permanence, he mused. Cacophonous silence. Fleeting immortality...

"I belong to you body'n soul," a delicious whisper twanged in his ear.

She's Thomas Pynchon's V, he knew. She's the woman I want the most but, alas, the woman I can never have, because to have her is to beckon chaos.

The Writer could barely breathe as he gingerly pushed away from her and the rest of her world-tainted perfection.

"You're the woman of my dreams, Nancy," he returned her whisper, "and that is the reason I must go now..."

Her smile lit up every corner of his psyche as she daintily backed away, bunny ears pitching. "I'll se get you one'a these days..."

"I know," he croaked. "Goodnight..."

"See ya tomorrow, Mr. Writer!" she said and slipped back into her room, and yes! she'd pronounced the word writer as "ratter."

Shuddering, his mind a schism now, the Writer entered his own room and turned in the feeble light.

Did a shadow move?

A ghost, perhaps?

After a night such as this, could his spirit now be a beacon for apparitions?

No, I'm just tired and exhilarated at the same time. So much happened tonight: portents, marvels,

the sheer unfathomable...

His lighter stalled beneath the cigarette he'd just put in his mouth. He was staring down at his desk. Beside the Remington Standard Typing-Machine No. 2 was a veritable stack of paper.

A drone filled his head when he picked it up. Three hundred pages at least, and every single one filled with type-written words.

My God, my novel... He stared further, as if over a cliff. It's finished...

He looked at the first page and gulped. The original title, WHITE TRASH GOTHIC, had been typed over with X's, and a line below it, a mysterious new title had been typed. The new title was this: THE MINOTAURESS.

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The Horn-Cranker

(A Novella)

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Prologue

The high sun beamed in the sleepy South Dakota summer, and its light painted the boy's already well-tanned arms. This was all part of him, part of his rich and hardy upbringing. The grazeland scent, the whipping wind, and the sun.

The day's beauty sang across the endless land.

"Their horns are their power, son," the boy's father warned. Rugged, overalled. Kind-eyed but resolute. "So ya gotta take that power, take it right away from 'em. Otherwise, they'll gore ya; they'll ram their horns right up your ass. I seen it happen to a man once, and it weren't pretty. He died like a dog 'cos his shit mixed all up with his blood."

Wow! the young boy thought. Shit...mixed with blood!

"He got to pukin' too, throwin' up his own shit right there in the cattle-gate."

Wuh WOW!

The boy was but nine years old at the time of this crucial indoctrination. He didn't know what dick hair was, nor sex, nor did he even know what the infrequent hardening of this dinger meant. It was just something that happened. The boy was innocence unspoiled. Until now.

"So here's what'cha do " The boy's father grabbed the instrument called a torque-plier and raised it in the sun. "Handy as a pocket on a shirt, boy this here pair'a horn-crankers." He took a strong, hard huff, and fit the queer tool's clamps over the steer's horn.

Then twisted for all he was worth.

The act begot the strangest sound, like a hinge squeaking, then wood splintering:

kreeeee-CRUNCH!

"Eeee-YEAH!" the boy's father grunted with earnest effort, and simultaneously the wicked tool in his hands successfully yanked the left horn out of the 1,900-pound Black Angus gelding's skull.

The steer, understandably, howled.

The young boy looked into the hole that had been caused by this rude and cruel extraction. A gritty, wet hole in the skull now replaced the once-proud horn. Pinpoints of blood began to appear inside.

Wow! the boy thought. A hole in its head!

The mammoth beast bucked in its steel gate, still howling, snot flying away in ropes. Metal clattered, hooves pounded the earth.

"If it could get out of there, son, it'd gore us lickety-split. It'd kill every thing that moved."

The boy peered closer at the huge trapped beast. Yeah, but it CAN'T get out! It CAN'T! Then came a fit of giggling.

Next, the boy's father wrenched out poor beast's second horn.

kreeeee-CRUNCH!

The steer, again, howled. Its howl trumpeted over the farm's vast expanse like a vociferation from hell...

"There ya go."

The two horns lay in the dust now, between the boy's high-top Keds.

"See? That's all it takes to turn this mean-ass creature into a harmless pud. " The man set down the infernal instrument, then put his arm around his son. "And one day, boy, you'll be a horn-cranker too, just like me and my father before me..."

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One

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, 1999

When it wasn't raining, the entire city of Seattle sighed in relief. Which wasn't often. No, God saw fit to tinkle liberally on this city 280 days per year. Hence the floods, the washed out roads, the houses sliding off hillsides, and the highest suicide rate of any national metropolis came as little surprise, forging a dismal inclement cement shit-house with a candyass monorail, a ripoff "Underground," and a piercingly ugly Space Needle that most residents hoped would fall over onto 5th Avenue rush hour. Tourists were in for a big surprise should they venture past the scenic "Waterfront," for then they would see what the city was really about: derelict vomit splattered on every sidewalk and buses that smelled worse than the shit-hoppers at a compost dump. Seattle was a wino-loogie-pasted rain bucket which attracted too many fish-belly-white "Goths" who thought it "chic" to live in environs bereft of sunlight, too many women with knapsacks and unshaved legs, bums, drunks, and homeless crack addicts (because showers, here, were free), and police kicked off of every major city on the West Coast (because what qualified officer would want to work here if he could get a job anywhere else in America?) Teeming rain ruled, as did people blowing off their heads due to protracted Vitamin-D deficiency and Seasonal Affect Disorder.

In a city as fucked up as this? Who knew what other "disorders" might be percolating? Who knew what other slow-burning sicknesses were beginning to smolder in unsuspecting heads?

Who knew?

Â«Â« Â»Â»

When Dean Lohan's wife pulled up at the corner of 4th and Virginia, Dean just stood there a moment, looking at her face behind the half-opened driver's side window. Pert, classy, with penetrating indigo eyes, Daphne's beauty only seemed to evolve since their marriage three years ago. They both had jobs in the city, rode to and from work together, had lunch together every day... Well, not every day; lately Daphne was having to skip her own lunch hour for important

work meetings. She worked for a national clothing distributor, was moving fast up the ranks, working hard for the marriage. She's my life, Dean thought as he stood looking at her. The image and the thought nearly brought him to tears She's my very world...

"I'm going to Ajax's to drink beer," he said to her. "I need the car."

Daphne, with a creased expression, rolled the window down the rest of the way. "What?"

Dean's voice was already honing its edge of impatience. "I'm going to Ajax's to drink," he repeated. "You deaf? Get out of the car."

Daphne's model-face froze, then went lax as she laughed. It was a joke, of course. Dean joked around all the time.

"Think it's a joke?" he said. He yanked open the car door. Then he grabbed her, not by the collar and not by the hair, but by the face, and hauled her shrieking out of the Honda Accord.

"What's wrong with you?" came her shrill and flabbergasted objection.

"I'm thirsty. I need a beer."

Daphne stood stiffly on the sidewalk, her fists at her side. "How am I going to get home?"

Dean grabbed her again, not by the hair but by the face and shoved her toward the bus stop. She nearly lost her footing, nearly fell into the street.

"Take the fuckin' bus," Dean said.

as the drone rang in his head, he couldn't move, he couldn't

"...mind taking the bus?"

and Dean's mind jiggled, then jagged, and he snapped out of the waking dream. He was standing on the corner of 4th and Virginia, looking at his beautiful wife behind the wheel of their car.

"Honey?" Daphne asked through the open window. "Are you all right?"

Reality slammed back. "I'm sorry, honey," he said once he recomposed himself. "Forgot to change the air in my head today."

Daphne seemed concerned. "You looked like you were in a trance. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fit as a fiddle, however fit that is," Dean tried to joke. "Seriously, how fit are fiddles? What's that you were saying?"

Her profuse lashes blinked at him. She looked depressed. "Mr. Thron called a work meeting tonight. Quarterly inventory."

"Bosses do that," Dean tossed it off.

"The meeting's now. Would you mind taking the bus home?"

"No biggie," Dean said. "I enjoy busses, actually. You might even call me a bus-loving man."

"I knew you'd understand." She batted her big eyes again. "Kiss-kiss."

"Ah, of course." Dean leaned over and kissed wife on the lips.

"Love you," Daphne whispered.

"I love you more..."

"Do not."

"Do too."

Dean grinned, stepping back. He could stand there and kiss her forever, and that would be fine with him. But then she'd miss her meeting!

"Oh, and I might be late," Daphne added, slipping the car into gear. "So don't wait up."

The love in Dean's eyes shone like hot embers as he watched Daphne drive off. He thought nothing of the fact her office was south yet she was driving north. It didn't even register.

Dean looked at the Metro bus stop, less than enthused about the hour-and-a-half ride back home. Hell, it's Friday night, he thought. A minute later, he was on the pay phone.

"Ajax, it's Dean. What say we have a few beers?"

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Ajax, like Dean, was not a true Seattlelite. He'd moved here from the east coast to pursue the

more bountiful employment opportunities. He stuffed envelopes for a national survey corporation and was quite proud to make a living at it not that many would call his existence a living.

Ajax looked like Rush Limbaugh with a beard, and possessed similar political sentiments. Well, make that Rush Limbaugh with a beard who dressed like a pan-handler. He and Dean had met quite by accident, at a Fremont tavern called THE DUBLINER during the last game of the World Series. They'd been the only two cheering when the Yankees had won. Since then, both never fitting into the Seattle grunge-goth-Left Coast-shaven-headed-everyone-has-a-fucking-knapsack scene, they became fast friends.

Ajax' surname was Jackson, and his parents had absurdly dubbed him with the first name Andrew. In his bent political persuasions, however, he regarded the seventh president of the United States as the nation's first "pinko," a closet separatist who boldly killed unarmed Indians while the rest of the Continental Army was fighting the well-trained British, and who "lucked out" at the Battle of New Orleans because his drinking habits forced subordinate officers to lead the battle. Hence, Ajax didn't like his name, so he insisted he be called Ajax.

Ajax was also a bit of a pervert.

"Man," he said, "I'd like to pee on her back."

Dean frowned at the table.

With this comment, Ajax had been referring to the zombie-shuffling waitress who'd just brought them their beers. She was rack-skinny, straight black hair like a mortician wig, with unbra'd tits pushing against her black PIERCE ME! T-shirt like a couple of under-ripe peaches. Tattoos of skeleton hands crawled up her neck to strangle her, and she had something in her lower lip that looked like a shower-curtain ring.

"Shit," Ajax appended, "that tramp's probably had more abortions than I've had beers. Bet she gargles biker piss like Listerine. Pops empty Jim Beam bottles out of her pussy for parlor tricks and has an asshole bigger than the drydock for a Nimitz-class carrier."

Dean blanched.

"Yeah, I'd yank that bitch's reins bigtime; she'd whinny like a horse, " Ajax went on, his eyes fogged in fantasy as he stared after the vapid barmaid. She moved like one of the cast of Cemetery Man. "I'd fist-fuck her entire large intestine, then piss on her so hard her Ozzy Osborne tattoos would wash off." Dean blocked out his friend's pornographic rant. God he's so sexist! No wonder women don't go out with him.

Full of reeking bums eating their own boogers, bovine-faced bald lesbians, and a man with a beard and large breast implants God Bless Seattle! the Rte. 25 bus had brought Dean here from downtown here being a tavern called THE WHARF which sat one street away from beautiful Lake Union, or not so beautiful when one considered the lake's history. For a hundred years, a coal-oil processing plant had dumped its petro-chemical effluence into the lake's pristine depths. Swimming was strictly prohibited, and if you ate a fish caught in Union's waters, any sequent offspring would more than likely be born with flippers. As for THE WHARF itself, it was an actual murder site: A number of years ago, a local "businessman" was shot in the head with a small-caliber weapon, evidently for running up too lofty a marker with other local "businessmen." Ajax and Dean sat at the self-same table.

The tavern made a garbage pit look well-appointed. Some entrepreneur took a couple of double-wide trailers, smacked them together, and that was it. That was the bar. The clientele fit right in, West Coast rednecks to the max. Heavy metal blared from the juke, billiard balls clacked in the back. A giant projection TV in the corner sported Monster Truck races.

Ajax sipped his Redhook ESB and winced. "So the wife let you out of the cage tonight, huh? Let me guess. Work meeting?"

Dean squirted lemon juice into his Pyramid Hefeweizen. "How'd you know?"

"Duh. What is this, like the eighth Friday night in a row she's had a work meeting?"

Dean grinned triumph against the ceaseless implication. "No, it's the sixth, smart guy."

"Oh, that's right. The other two work meetings were on Saturday nights. And you don't think that's odd."

"Why should I?" Dean retorted. "She's in an odd business. Clothing distribution isn't like working at a bank, you know. Most of their invoices go out on weekends."

"Whatever you say..."

For as long as they'd been friends, Ajax had always intimated that Daphne might be cheating on Dean, the prospect of which Dean viewed as preposterous. We're in love! he thought. He doesn't understand true love.

"How often do you drop wax?" Ajax asked.

"What?"

Ajax rolled his eyes. "How often do you fuck her? Let me guess once every two weeks?"

Dean was taken aback. "Well, not quite that often. Once a month or so." Actually, it was more like once every two months...but why quibble?

Ajax laughed. "Christ, my grandparents fuck more than that."

"Marriage isn't about sex," Dean explained. "It's about a spiritual bond, an everlasting one. It's about commitment and total faith. It's about sharing your life with someone else. It's about love, Ajax," and at that precise moment an uncharacteristic selection switched on over the juke: "All You Need Is Love," by The Beatles.

"See that!" Dean clapped at the coincidence.

The side of Ajax's bearded face flopped into his palm. "You're hopeless. You live your life by advice from The Beatles."

"The Beatles were monumental," Dean defended. "The most important musical assembly in history."

"They were a bunch of acid-head hippie pinko guru-loving junkie shit-heads "

Dean was long used to Ajax's rather conservative nature. Best to change the subject as quickly as possible. "We were talking about the reality of marriage, Ajax. Sex becomes faddish, much less important."

Ajax grinned. "Faddish?"

"Statistically, sex amongst happily married couple drops drastically after the second year."

"Not into the toilet," Ajax said. "Shit, man. If I was married to a woman as good-looking as your wife, I wouldn't even care if she was cheating on me. But I'd sure as shit be busting my nut up her cooze twice a day. No, with her? Make that three times. I'd be hosing her down like a fuckin' fire truck."

There was no arguing with him. He just doesn't understand, Dean realized. He's never been truly in love. Best to just leave it lie.

But even though Ajax was a weirdo, pervert, and asshole, he was also Dean's friend. And true friends were always there when you needed them. "Look, Ajax, I've got a problem. Do you know anything about "

Ajax was rubbing his hands together at an image. "Yeah, I'd be dick-spanking that tramp every night. I'd be coring her asshole and dropping big peter-tracks on her back. Shit, I'd whittle my dick down to pencil-width and fuck her nose "

"Ajax!" Dean was disgusted. "That's my wife you're talking about!"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. I was just....abstracting."

Dean simmered. "I was asking if you knew anything about psychology."

Ajax sipped his beer, then winced. "Does the pope have nocturnal emissions? Fuck, yes, I know about psychology. Shit, I majored in psych...before I quit college."

"Well, see, I've been having these "

"Nocturnal emissions?"

"No," Dean said.

"So what's the problem, partner?"

"Sometimes I think..." How could he say it? "I have these...dreams. I call them the Jig-Jags, 'cos that's how my mind feels. It's like vertigo or something; my brain jigs and jags, and then it's like I'm someone else."

"Dreams, huh?"

"Well, no, it doesn't happen when I'm asleep. It's more like a day dream."

"The Jig-Jags? Sounds like lucid dreaming to me," Ajax said. "Let me guess. When this happens, you see yourself doing something you'd never do in real life."

"Exactly!" Dean excitedly replied. "Like today, I was standing there, and I saw myself grab Daphne by the face and yank her out of the car."

"By the face I like it," Ajax remarked. "And if you ask me, you should've done it for real, the way the bitch treats you."

Dean scowled.

"It's called non-REM imagery, waking fantasy construction," Ajax went on. "Freud wrote all about it. The strictures of society repress everyone to an extent, but some people get squeezed harder."

"What strictures?" Dean asked. "Society doesn't impose any strictures on me."

"Don't be a dope; of course it does. Everything that's made mankind civilized can be viewed as a stricture. Progress is a stricture. Part of us, in our psyches, will always be cavemen. It's in our genetic code. Raping cavewoman pussy, eating raw meat, and shitting in the woods. Then 'civility' comes along, and we gotta shit in shiny white bowls and wipe our asses with toilet paper. We don't eat raw meat, we eat a 'balanced diet' consisting of the four major food groups. When our dicks get hard, we don't drag a bitch by the hair into the nearest cave and stick her; now we gotta date 'em first, hold hands in the park and buy 'em roses. Shit, we gotta take 'em out to dinner before we come in their pies. Cavemen didn't do any of that shit! When they got horny they just spit on their dicks and stuck it in, and if the bitch didn't like it, she'd get her head cracked with a rock. In a sense, the modernization of society wages war with our true primordial selves. Get it?"

"No," Dean said.

"Domestication is one of those strictures, nimrod. Relationships. Pair-bonding." Ajax winked. "Marriage."

"I don't believe it," Dean attested. "You're talking like human love is an aberration but it's not. It's part of how your primordial cavemen evolved," and then, at that precise moment, another uncharacteristic song switched on to the jukebox: "Love Me Tender" by the King.

"See!" Dean clapped at the coincidence.

"First The Beatles, now Elvis."

"What's wrong with Elvis? He was the most monumental vocalist in "

"He was a fat drug-addicted cracker who never wrote a song in his life and died on a toilet seat."

Dean grit his teeth at such blasphemy. "Let's stick to the point, huh?"

"And the point is, you've got these 'Jig-Jags,' and I'm telling you why. Non-REM Imagery Syndrome is commonly experienced by people who've undergone a drastic change in their lives. And look at you. You spent the first twenty-five years of your life growing up in a rural environment, then BAM you move to a big city. Three years later, you're married and you're

damn near having hallucinations. Something ain't right in the gearbox, Dean. And I know what it is: your wife."

"No it's not "

"Come on, you just told me you had a waking fantasy about being violent to Daphne. She's the common denominator in what's not working in your life. Face it, she treats you like shit "

"She does not treat me like shit," Dean had to rebel. "She "

"She walks all over you. She makes you clean the house, cook dinner, wash the dishes. Last year when you fell off the ladder and broke your arm, you had to drive yourself to the damn hospital because she refused to."

"That's only because...she wasn't feeling well."

"Christ almighty!" Ajax railed. "She won't even let you have a dog "

"Well, they do leave lots of hair on the carpet "

"At home, all she does is yell at you "

"Well, I'm kind of lazy, I need yelling at sometimes "

" and I'll bet my ass she's cheating on you," Ajax finished his avalanche.

Dean tempered himself. "She is not cheat "

Ajax shook his head right along with his words. "And all you do is keep making excuses for her. I'm telling you, man. The reason you're having these Jig-Jags, these waking dreams, is because of her. First you move here drastic enough of a change then you marry her. Too much change at once, too much shock-repression. She's turned you into something you're not, and now your psyche is rebelling. No offense, pal, but she's turned you into a pussy-whipped putz."

"Thanks," Dean said through the frown.

"Non-REM Imagery Syndrome is no joke, Dean," Ajax cautioned. He sipped his beer and winced. "Next step is Multiple-Personality Disorder. These Jig-Jags are telling you something, paisan. You better listen."

Dean let the foam in the bottom of his glass slide into his mouth. "Fine, Mr. Freud. What are they

telling me?"

"Get back to your true nature. These fantasy images? It's the real you, the genuine primordial you, struggling to get away from what you've become since you got married."

"The caveman, huh?"

"That's right. It's your Id trying to bust out of the cement your wife has poured over you. Everything about your life now is the polar opposite of what your life was."

Dean's eyes narrowed. "What my life was?"

"Sure. Come on! You grew up in bumfuck South Dakota, on a ranch. You've told me all the stories. You were a rough and tumble rancher kicking ass in roadhouse bars, bird-dogging chicks and banging beaver. Shit, you were getting laid when you were twelve!"

Dean's shoulders flinched at the volume of Ajax's last exclamation. "Tell the whole bar why don't you?"

"Fuck the bar," Ajax came back. "Talk about black to white. No wonder you're hallucinating. Everything your psyche meant for you to be has been turned inside out. Do yourself a favor. Get back to your roots. Get back to being what you were: a tobacco-chewing, gash-busting, hard-knocking, give-a-shit son of a bitch."

Dean didn't buy a word of Ajax's advice, but it was true in the past, he'd been all those things and more. And getting laid at age twelve? True. "You don't understand anything," he said. "All those things I used to be that's why I moved here, to get away from that."

"Bullshit," Ajax put it bluntly. "Consciously you believe that, but this is your psyche screaming to get out." Ajax lit a cigarette, sucked smoke like it was syrup. "You used to be a hardcore redneck motherfucker. Look at you now."

Hardcore, Dean thought.

Ajax continued to enthuse, "Man, you used to artificially inseminate cows. You'd stick your arm all the way down the cow's cooze. Now that's hardcore."

Dean thought about it. Ajax had a point. Being married in Seattle was definitely different from what he'd been used to.

"When the cattle got abscesses, you'd stick your hand right in their mouths and pop out the puss."

That's hardcore."

Back on the farm, Dean had discharged that duty too watching the ranch dogs scuffle to eat the wads of pus and now that he thought about it... It was kind of...fun...

"Yes sir, a hardcore farmboy motherfucker," Ajax said. He drained the last of his beer, then winced.

"Hey, Ajax," Dean asked. "How come you wince every time you take a sip of beer?"

"Because the beer sucks. All this candyass Northwest microbrew bullshit?" Ajax waved a dismissive hand. "It's garbage, taste like fruit."

"Then why do you drink it?"

"Cos it's all they got here."

Dean shook his head. "All right, then if you don't like the beer, why do you come here?"

"Are you kidding?" Ajax seemed dismayed. "I love looking at these tramp Goth waitresses. They put wood in my shorts." Then he raised his hand, signaled the girl who'd waited on them. "Hey, toots? When you get a chance?"

She shuffled over like a corpse on tranquilizers. Her nose ring swung like a doorknocker. "My name's not toots," she informed him.

"Aw, gee, I'm sorry," Ajax apologized. "Just a figure of speech, you know? So what is your name?"

"Vermillia."

Ajax bit his lip in order to stifle an outburst. "Another round, please...Vermillia."

She shuffled away. The back of her PIERCE ME! T-shirt read I HAD MY CLIT SPLIT AT THE DEVIL DAN'S TATTOO AND PIERCING PARLOR!

"Jeeeesus Christ," Ajax murmured. "That fruitcake bitch? I'd stick my head all the way up her gash and suck her cervix."

Dean shook his head.

"Oh, and speaking of hardcore," Ajax tacked on. "What was that other thing you did back on the ranch, the thing you won the statewide championship for?"

Did Dean's eyes actually sparkle for a moment?

"Horn-cranking," he answered more to himself. "And I wasn't just the state champ. I was the best horn-cranker in the world..."

| |

Two

When most seventeen-year-olds were playing sandlot baseball, contemplating their futures, driving their first car, Dean Lohan was inserting his arm up cow "coozes" all the way to the shoulder, to properly place the frozen semen pellet. But actually it wasn't just one arm, it was both. His other arm, also to the shoulder, slid up the rectal tract, to dilate the spermatic inlet through the intestinal wall. This meant that young Dean's right cheek was firmly placed against the ungainly area of space that existed between the cow's anus and vagina. And Dean performed this less than eloquent procedure thousands of times.

Pretty hardcore.

And so too: When most fifteen-year-olds were delivering newspapers or mowing yards, Dean Lohan was, without an official work-permit, employed at the Johnson Meat-Packing Plant: gutting cattle summarily, often when they weren't quite dead; hauling out bovine innards like loops of rope and then squeezing out the grassy cream of excrement with his bare hands; and hosing out the rendering gutters flowing deep with offal, blood, and skin. Young Dean never so much as flinched. And when batches of ground beef went bad, it was Dean's job wash off the slime and then mix it with the good ground beef, which was later sold to local fast-food restaurants and retirement homes at a cut rate that provided a kick-back to the plant manager.

And when most twelve-year-olds were watching Scooby Doo and playing with army men, Dean Lohan, was squirting his first seminal drops into the mouth of a rather precocious honey-haired girl named Marthie, who was two years his senior. Marthie, who had evidently learned well from a number of relatives including her father, swallowed without so much as a frown. Dean's young penis, too, delved deep the depths of Marthie's vaginal barrel on many an occasion.

And little Marthie came like a fucking freight train each and every time.

Even when he was too young to really know what sex was, Dean Lohan was a sex machine.

He was also the school-yard bully, sending many a classmate home crying through black eyes. Why? For the hell of it.

He'd partaken in his first "titty-fuck" at age thirteen, his first act of sodomy at fourteen (which had left a young lass with bloody stool for a week), and at sixteen he was copulating with two girls at a time, then three, then four.

Handsome, endowed, and tough as the earth he'd stomped on his father's ranch, Dean Lohan became the man every woman wanted in DeSmet, South Dakota, even before he was legally a man at all.

Whatever it was that lit a fire under a girl's ass, Dean did it right. And there was something else he did right something, in fact, he did better than anyone else not only in South Dakota but in the entire world.

Dean Lohan could crank a horn out of a steer's head faster than other men could spit. And he performed this act with no remorse and with no hesitation whatever on not hundreds but on thousands of farm-raised steers.

The strange sound was as familiar to him as the sound of summer rain to normal boys...

kreeeee-CRUNCH!

and out that horn came, like pulling a sweet potato from moist earth.

Dean didn't care. Not about the animal, not about the pain, not about the torment nor the objective cruelty of the act. He just did it. He cranked those horns out of those steer heads a mile a minute. It was his job, and Dean Lohan quailed at no task.

He was a horn-cranker.

Some towns had oyster-shucking contests, or pie eating contests, but DeSmet, South Dakota, had something far more unique. In 1988, at the age of eighteen, Dean entered the annual state horn-cranking contest, not only competing against the best in the land but against the very man who'd come in First Place in this esteemed competition for nine years in a row.

His very own father.

Muscles bulging, mind set, and torque-plier in hand, Dean had embarked on this gladiatorial event. The most horns cranked fully out of their seats within a one-minute time-limit would be declared the victor. The previous record was forty-three.

That's a lot of horns to crank.

The sun blazed and the crowd cheered, and the day was split open by the hellish howls of the steers being de-horned.

Spittle-speckled and arms gorged with blood, the end of the day found Dean the easy winner. The coveted trophy two genuine gold-plated horns was passed to him by a teary-eyed woman in a red, white, and blue swimsuit and a MISS HORN-CRANKER banner as the audience went mad in their applause.

Dean not only won this year's state contest, he also set a world record. In sixty seconds he had expertly divorced an even fifty horns from the steer-heads they'd naturally grown in.

Hence, Dean would have his name in Guinness for some time to come decades, in fact. His father, teary-eyed himself, embraced Dean after the match. "Boy," he sobbed. "Would you lookit that pile of horns? My God, you've made me the proudest father to ever walk the earth."

Exuberance surged through Dean's chest. He shed a tear or two himself, seeing his father so happy, and when he turned to the crowd and waved, their applause threatened to rock the entire county.

I'm the best horn-cranker...in the world, he realized.

Later, he fucked the dog-shit out of MISS HORN-CRANKER. Indeed, he fucked her so hard she fully lost consciousness in the backseat of Dean's finely rebuilt '72 Mustang Fastback. Then he swigged a beer, pinched some Skoal, and fucked her again.

For the hell of it.

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"What the hell is this!"

Dean grunted, then slowly opened his eyes. He'd fallen asleep on the couch, hadn't he? Yes, after a few shots of Johnny Black to mellow out. And now

"What the hell is this!"

his beautiful wife Daphne was screaming in his face.

"What the hell is what?" he griped. "Christ your voice is louder than a truck horn."

"This!" It was a disk she held between her fingers, the size of a hockey puck.

A can of Skoal.

"It was on the coffee table!" she continued to yell, "next to your whiskey!"

Still groggy, Dean shrugged on the couch. "It's a can of dip. So what? What are you bitching about?"

"So what? Is that what you said to me?" Rage pinkened her face, her eyes bulging like a cartoon. "Bitching?" She threw the can at him; it bounced off his chest. "You promised me that you'd never use that shit again! You promised me when we got married! It's filthy! It's dirty! Only rednecks and slobs use that stuff! It's "

"It's time for you to shaddap," Dean replied, and in a reflex like instinct, he

CRACK!

slammed his fist into the side of her face. Daphne flew backwards, turning, her Bally shoes flying off her feet. As the inertia transferred from fist to face, Dean saw her eyeballs criss-cross. She thumped to the floor, unconscious.

Yadduh yadduh yadduh, Dean thought. That's all they do, run their mouths, bellyache, bitch. He poured another shot of Johnny B., slugged it back. That he'd just knocked his wife unconscious didn't faze him, nor did the potential assault and battery charges. "Fuck it. Women." He picked up his can of Skoal, put a pinch between his lip and gum.

There it is! he thought.

Nicotine rush abuzz, he looked down at his very unconscious wife. In her fall, she'd landed on her belly, her classy creped black skirt flipped up. Beneath the see-through pantyhose, her ass sat there like a pair of succulent dumplings.

"Fuck it," Dean said to himself.

Back in the old days, back on the ranch in DeSmet, Dean's far larger than average reproductive member had taken up residency in many a backdoor. But he'd never done "the anal thing" with Daphne. He'd never even broached the subject, knowing his wife regarded the act as unnatural and degrading.

"Fuck it."

He knelt, yanked the pantyhose right off like peeling a condom. Saliva tinted brown with high-grade nicotine dribbled from his mouth and fell precisely into the furrow of her creamy buttocks.

Dean plugged The Captain right in, and plunged her "star" but good. Spitting in her ass-crack seemed sufficient foreplay all any woman deserved he just went to town for a quick one. After all, the bitch hadn't put out in two months!

Dean's spooze drained in volume. He thought of squeezing the innards out of a fat lizard's mouth.

"There's one for ya, sweetheart." He wiped his sullied cock off on the pantyhose, then leaned back against the coffee table and took another hit of the good Mr. Black. Eventually Daphne revived, raised her head sluggishly, and brought an errant hand back to her buttocks.

"What... What did you do?" her words slipped out, incredulous.

"You looked like you were running a fever," Dean replied, then ejected a thread-thin stream of tobacco juice between his teeth. The stream landed on the plush beige carpet. "So I took your temperature. With a big thermometer."

Her words wheezed with her breath. "You-you-you SODOMIZED me! How-how-how COULD you?"

"Easy. My dick was hard and your ass was on the floor."

She began to crawl up, teary and outraged. "I'm-I'm-I'm gonna call my father, I'm gonna call the police, I'm gonna press charges "

Dean just calmly shook his head. Sometimes they just don't get it, do they?

He grabbed her not by the hair but by the face, taking a handful of already bruised cheek, and lifted her to her feet. She squealed like a mouse in a vice the whole way up. "No," he said, "the only thing your gonna do is cook me some dinner. Now." He shoved her recklessly into the kitchen. "Something good, otherwise I'll have to get violent"

and then it happened again, the cacophonous drone in his head like water pouring into a sewer inlet and his vision shifting through cloud-blossom blurs and his heart like a water balloon about to pop

again

again

here they were.

The Jig-Jags.

"What the hell is this?"

Dean was staring at her. He'd fallen asleep on the couch, waiting for Daphne to get home from her meeting, and he'd wakened when she entered. He was just staring at her. My God, he thought.

"You promised me that you'd never use that shit again! You promised me when we got married! It's filthy! It's dirty! Only rednecks and slobs use that stuff! It's disgusting!"

Dean sat in turmoil, his consciousness revolving like a ferris wheel on high-speed. I didn't buy that can of Skoal...did I?

"How can you betray me like this!" Daphne's soprano shriek continued to unwind. "How many other promises have you broken?"

"Honey, I "

"Don't lie to me, you bastard!"

"Honey, I "

"Christ in Heaven, I work my ass off day in and day out while you sit in here chewing tobacco like some common redneck! You're not in South Fucking Dakota anymore, Dean! The joyride's over! We agreed! I pull the weight around here, I make the money! We can't depend on your pissant salary! You're the one who's supposed to keep this place cleaned up."

Dean's hands spread. "It's clean "

"It's a SHITHOLE!" Daphne cracked. "It's FILTHY. Ever heard of a vacuum cleaner? Ever heard of a mop?"

"Sweetheart, I "

"Just shut up! My God, I'm doing everything I possibly can to make this pitiful marriage work!"

Her voice raced around the room like a mad ferret. "It would really be nice if JUST ONCE, you'd help me out! But, no! You're too busy sleeping on the fucking couch and chewing that goddamn redneck tobacco!"

Daphne stormed off down the hall. Dean, entrapped by terror, raced after her. "Honey, please! I'm sorry! I'll clean the house better tomorrow, I promise! And I swear to God I don't know where that can of "

The bedroom door slammed in his face so hard the entire house shook.

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DESMET, SOUTH DAKOTA

"Name?"

Arianne's skin crawled. "Arianne."

The fat-faced cop scowled. "Last name?"

"Zausner."

"Current place of residence?"

That was a good one. "Uh... I used to live at the Callisto-Brownsroad Trailer Court."

"Current place of residence?" the fat cop repeated

"My car!" Arianne blurted and just thought Fuck... I'm fucked now.

The desk sergeant, whose name tag displayed A.T. LASS, filled out the rest of the booking report. This would be her third bust for solicitation it didn't matter that the johns had ripped her off. She was crazy; whenever she smoked a piece of ice, she went out of her mind.

Her memory felt like a sheet of skin shorn by razors; she could only see through the minute red lines. She'd pulled up at the GORTYN'S WOODLAND TAVERN, swearing to herself No ice tonight, no ice. I'll just have a few beers and turn a few blowjobs. The promise had corroded as quickly as her future. Her first john had offered her a piece of ice in trade, and that had been it. Next thing she knew she was flying. She was on her back in the woods behind the tavern with her feet jacked up in the air and a line of men standing in wait, each with a sawbuck in their hand. By the end of the train her pussy felt like an overflowing sauce pan full of Sperm Stew, and

her purse was empty as chuckles faded through the trees. That's when the police had found her. A fat line of semen ran down the inside of her leg when she was hauled up, covered with a raincoat, and Mirandized. They let her sit in the tank for eighteen hours (that's how good the ice was around here; the Callisto-Brownsroad Court was the location of the town's biggest meth lab, and it was real funny how the cops had never busted the place), then she lay for a few more, wracked in withdrawal. If she'd had a gun in her hand, she would've blown her brains out onto the cell wall, no hesitation.

"Three-Time Loser now, Arianne," the sergeant reminded her. "Three strikes and you're out. No more PBJ, no more court leniency because of your past. You're up for thirty months, no parole, no good behavior. The county slam, honey. It ain't no joovie hall and it ain't Club Med."

Arianne's drawn face fell into her lap. Her tears plipped onto the floor. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she sobbed. "I can't stop, I just can't..."

The following silence smothered her. She thought of the same silence within a buried coffin. That's what she needed: to be dead, to be buried.

"You know," the bulbous sergeant remarked, "I remember you. I'd only been on the force three years when you graduated from DeSmet Senior High. You were top of the bill, honey. Top of the honor roll, 4.0 student, valedictorian, prom queen, and scholarship offers from Harvard, UCLA, and Georgetown." Rancor ran steep in his voice. "You had it all, you had what no one from this pinch-of-dung town ever had. And look what you did with it."

Kill me, just kill me, she thought. Death seemed so much less cruel than living like this. There was no way out, though. She couldn't stop.

"What happened?" the sergeant asked. "What turned you into a meth-head whore?"

Dean, she thought. Dean's what happened.

"I don't know if I can do the dry-out," she croaked into her knees. "I don't think I can make it."

"Look."

Her spine felt like a creaking board as she raised up, blinked, and looked at the booking sergeant. His fat fingers spun the arrest report around for her to read.

He hadn't filled it out.

"One more chance," he said.

Then he dropped a plastic bag full of chunks of crystal methamphetamine on top of the blank report.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"But nothing's free, you know?" He stood up and lowered his starched-blue police trousers. "You know the game, right?"

Nodding, she stood up, came around the desk, and got on her knees. His little dick looked like the end of someone's nose in a nest. But then he turned around, bent over, and spread his buttocks.

"Rim job first, okay?"

"Sure," Arianne said and slowly slid her practiced tongue up the hairy crack until it found the puckered aperture. She pressed the cheeks further apart and began to suck.

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And as Arianne commenced with the indecorous task of sucking dirty police ass tasting spoiled tints of Burger King and grape-jelly donuts a few miles away, a shadow slouched in the dark, an outrage beyond description, beyond cogitation. It tasted smidgens of consternation and ancient blasphemy.

A breeze slipped across her subcorporeal face like spirits whispering.

The world just got worse she understood that now after so long a gentle slumber. She could not imagine...

She was beautiful in her skein-weave of darkness. She was made of darkness. It was darkness which flowed through her veins of ghostly dust. It was darkness that filled her eye sockets.

And when she thought of what she would do as she'd just done, in fact it was darkness that dripped like ichor from her dark goddess cunt.

The breeze, over the night air, continued to sigh. Messages from her world? Chatterings from the overseers of the dead?

Her name was Pasiphae, the Slut Mother.

Her pretty, bare feet were but a dark fog, her cunt a night-smile. In her excitement, black milk shed from her ebon bosom.

In the shit-pocked dust, the sentry lay, his odd garb pulled down. As his glorious cock had plumbed her long-dead loins, she'd sucked out his eyes, swallowed them as sweet white-chocolate buds. He'd still been quivering, still been alive, as she sucked out his sperm, then sucked out his gorgeous balls. Later, sated, she'd pressed her unreal lips to an empty eye socket and sucked out his brain.

The meat fell richly into her gut, made her more real.

Soon she'd be real enough to call out...

Outrage for outrage. That's how it was and how it had always been.

Her bottomless gaze surveyed the sentry's corpse a last time. Seeing him like that, splayed and ravaged and dead, left her cringing. Pasiphae's nebulous hand touched her clitoris a small nugget of coal and she could actually feel solidity burgeoning, smoke turning to slime. What would the slime become tomorrow? Gel? And the day after that?

Then she could conjure up her son through the same threshold of horror that had summoned her.

She left the corpse, sauntered her nightness through the night, ghost-feet stepping daintily between the hideous scatterings of horns the horns which lay like so many curled fetuses in the dirt, aborted for some meager mortal's indulgence like the tiny lives kicked, clubbed, or cut from innocent wombs by wine-drunk Athenian soldiers.

Black tears bled from Pasiphae's cosmic eyes.

Some things, some horrors, could even bring dead gods back to life.

| |

Three

"You're kidding me, right?" Ajax asked

Dean fidgeted over his halibut fish and chips. "Well, I mean, it's reasonable. After all, I only make twenty-five a year at the credit union, Daphne makes three times that. She brings home more money so it's only fair that I take care of the house. And I guess I have been a bit negligent in my chores. The house was a little dirty."

Ajax'd met him for lunch at Anthony's Fish Bar on the waterfront. He put his face in his hand, shook his head. "And what time did she get home?"

"Like, one in the morning," Dean told him.

"One in the morning from a work meeting?"

"Like I told you, she's in a hectic business. It's non-stop."

"Right, those quarterly inventories," Ajax droned. "Till one in the morning. And now she's gone off to Las Vegas? For a work convention?"

Dean knew what he was getting at. "Ever heard of the Las Vegas Convention Center, smart guy?"

"Yeah, and she left her wedding ring on the bathroom sink." Ajax crunched into a pile of fried clams. "How long does it take you to realize that two plus two equals infidelity?"

"She's not cheating on me for Christ's sake," Dean insisted. "And the ring?" He'd noticed it this morning, after driving her to the airport. "Simple explanation. You take your ring off to wash your hands, then you forget to put it back on."

"Yep, simple explanation." Ajax ate some more clams in order to avoid chuckling. "But you had another Jig-Jag. Isn't that what you said on the phone?"

Dean nodded as if in dread. "This one was really bad. In my mind...I actually saw myself "he gulped in shame "doing violence to her. Then I...kind of like...raped her."

"Kind of like?" Now Ajax laughed out loud. "That's like saying you 'kind of like' took a shit. You either dropped a steamer or you didn't."

Well then...I guess I did. "It was horrible because it seemed so real," Dean drew on. "Then I snapped out of it, and there she is for real, bawling me out for not cleaning the house and for having a can of Skoal."

"I thought she made you give that stuff up."

"She didn't make me," Dean clarified through a frown. "It's a bad habit, it's bad for my health, so I cut it loose."

"She made you give it up 'cos she knows she's got you wrapped around her finger " Suddenly

Ajax craned his gaze as an attractive, busty blond traipsed by on mile-long legs and high heels, smirking in self-confidence. "Man, I'd like to fry that smug bimbo's clam, and I've got some super special tartar sauce to put in that pouty face. I'd ass-fuck her so hard her colon would bust then she'd really have something to smirk about."

"Come on, Ajax," Dean complained. "I'm trying to talk to you about something."

"Yeah, sorry." Ajax dragged his gaze off the sauntering blonde. "Where were we oh, yeah, Skoal. If you gave it up, why'd you buy it?"

"That's the craziest part. I didn't er, at least I don't remember buying it."

"Not good." For once, Ajax appeared serious. "First, you're having spells of Non-REM Imagery Syndrome, and now you're having blackouts."

"Blackouts?"

"The fuckin' can of tobacco probably didn't walk into the house, and unless the Good Fairy put it there, you must've bought it in an unsentient state. That's what shrinks call it. It's like sleepwalking during the day."

Dean chewed his lip, considering this.

"You might want to think about seeing a shrink," Ajax added.

Oh, man, Dean thought. I'm not crazy, am I?

"So what did you do with the Skoal? Stuff it all into your yap for a taste of the old days?"

"Hell, no. I threw it out."

"Really? Not one little pinch?"

"Nope."

"But I'll bet you wanted to, huh?"

Dean's fortitude crashed. "Well, yeah, I did want to. And I almost did...but I threw it out instead."

"Good boy. So back to the Jig-Jag. You saw yourself beating her up and raping her. You never did stuff like that in the past, did you? Back in South Dakota?"

"No, I never raped anyone," Dean hastened. "Christ, what do you take me as?"

"You didn't answer the entire question." Now Ajax was flicking clam crumbs off his plate. "You ever beat up any girlfriends?"

Dean calculated an answer. "Well, I didn't exactly beat them...but I guess you could say I slapped some of 'em around a little."

Ajax grinned in shock. "You guess I could say, huh? How many?"

"How many what?"

"How many past girlfriends did you ~slap around?"

Dean cast a sheepish look. "All of them," he admitted. "But I swear, half of 'em like it anyway "

"Don't change the subject." Now Ajax looked studied as a pro chess player. "Why? You catch them cheating on you?"

"Naw. They couldn't have cheated on me if they wanted to," Dean said, fully uncomfortable now. "I was the horn-cranking champ and, well, I was kind of a bad-ass back then. I beat the shit out of dozens of guys, never lost a fight. Shit, I'd send guys to the hospital for just looking at one of my girls."

"Hardcore," Ajax said in awe.

"I'm not proud of it. I admit it, I was an asshole back in DeSmet. I was a redneck rancher, getting drunk in bars every night, slapping my girlfriends around for no reason, cheating on them whenever I felt like it. I was a prick, I was a bastard."

Ajax stared, amazed. "Young, dumb, and full'a cum."

"That was me."

"But...you look like a frat boy," Ajax couldn't get over it.

Short hair, conservative clothes, good manners. Dean had to agree that that was the appearance he gave people, and that's the appearance he wanted. "This is what I used to look like, before I moved to Seattle." He slipped an old photo out of his wallet. It was a snapshot of himself with his arm around one of his droves of girlfriends.

Ajax spat out a mouthful of Diet Coke when he looked at the picture. "You gotta be shitting me! This is you?"

"I was about twenty-five when that was taken. Couple months later, I blew town, moved here, started my life over."

Ajax was aghast; the picture showed a sun-bronzed stud in a muscle shirt, hair down to his shoulders and a goatee. His arms bulged like a power-lifter's. Ajax repeatedly switched glances between Dean and the photograph. "Unbelievable. Talk about Jekyll and Hyde. This is incredible. And " Ajax reglanced at the photo and gulped. "And who's the brick shit-house piece of box standing next to you?"

"Arianne," Dean revealed with remorse in his throat. "She was my last girlfriend in DeSmet. I dated her for three years...and cheated on her for three years. I treated that poor girl like total dog shit."

"Why?"

Dean shrugged. "â€˜Cos, like I was telling you, I was an asshole." The memory sunk in his gut. "Arianne loved me bigtime, and all I did was shit on her. She had a scholarship to Harvard but I wouldn't let her go. Told her we'd get married, have kids, all that, but I never meant a word of it. I just strung her along till I got sick of the whole town, my whole life. One day I told her I was going out to pick up a can of Skoal, but I went to the airport instead. I split, left her cold. Never spoke to her again." Dean's guts just sank and sank. "She was so depressed when I dumped her, she just went off the deep-end. Now she's a street whore, turning twenty-dollar tricks to support a drug habit."

Ajax just sat there with his mouth hanging open. "Man, you were a Grade-A Number One low-down motherfucker! What a scumbag!"

"I know, and I don't feel too good about it."

Dean didn't feel like talking anymore, and Ajax could tell. Dark clouds slipped in over Elliot Bay, and the wind gusted up. "Shit, man, it's Saturday. You've got the car, your wife's out of town it's settled."

"What's settled?"

Ajax put his cigarette out in his tartar sauce cup. "We're going to your place."

"Why not?" Dean said. "You can help me vacuum the carpet."

Ajax laughed as they walked away. He eye-balled several girls getting off the Waterfront Street Car, uttering typical sexist comments. But as he and Dean waited for the WALK sign, Ajax said, "Hey, what did you say you did with that can of Skoal?"

"I threw it out," Dean said.

"You sure?"

Dean cocked a brow. "Yeah."

"Then I guess that's a can of lark's tongues in aspic sticking out in your back pocket."

Huh? Dean's hand padded back to the rear pocket of his jeans. His hand froze.

Then he withdrew another can of Skoal.

"You're putting me on, right?" Ajax asked. "You're making all this shit up just to jerk me."

"I wish I was." Dean's eyes fixed wide on the inexplicable can. "This is really creeping me out."

He looked at the can some more. His mouth began to water. And then:

"Fuck it."

Dean opened the can, and took a big dip.

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"What the damn bloody fuck?" exclaimed the first cop.

The second cop squinted. "What's that...hangin' out of his..."

"Dick?" the third cop finished.

The third cop would be one Sergeant Alphonse Taylor Lass, the DeSmet Police Department's ranking officer. He was essentially the chief, having only to answer to the town counsel and the mayor. His asshole and cock still felt radiant from the whore's first-class butt-suck and blow job back at the station. Fine indeed. But the recollection turned to rot at what he was looking at now in the hard streams of three police Mag-Lites.

It was the security guard who lay at their feet.

Pants down.

Eyes gone.

And

Jesus! Sergeant Lass thought.

The kid's nuts were hanging out of his dead dick, from tender threads tracing back through his peehole.

"Jesus!" Sergeant Lass said aloud.

Eventually the county coroner who was also the county recorder of deeds, the county magistrate, and the county's official notary would transfer the perplexing corpus delectus to the Office of the South Dakota Medical Examiner where it would be properly autopsied and found to have had the entirety of its brain aspirated through the right ocular cavity.

This unfortunate security guard would not only prove to be the most bizarre murder to ever take place in DeSmet, South Dakota.

It would be the only murder to take place in DeSmet, South Dakota.

Sergeant Lass glared at his two accompanying constables. "For fuck's sake! Isn't anybody gonna say anything? This guy's lying here with no eyes and his fuckin' balls hanging out of his dick!"

The first officer only stared, jaw jacked open. The second officer had already fainted.

Lass scratched his head, idly glanced up at the massive wooden sign erected above the cattle coves behind them. The sign read:

WELCOME TO THE LOHAN RANCH

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"Let me ask you something?" Ajax was examining the gold-plated trophy. "How much did you get paid to crank the horns out of bulls?"

"Steers, not bulls. And I didn't get paid anything. I worked on my father's ranch. It was just one of the chores, like taking out the garbage."

Ajax wheezed laughter, slapping his thighs. "Cranking horns off of magnificent spectacles of nature is the same thing as taking out the garbage?"

"You pansy city boys take out the garbage, farm boys crank horns," Dean elaborated.

Ajax continued to wheeze as they set down the case of Tsing Tao beer, which they'd picked up at the Ballard Market on their way over. Ajax was on an oriental-beer kick. Dean didn't care. He spat tobacco juice in the sink.

"That's the spirit," Ajax observed, then looked around the quaint split-level. "Guess you cleaned the place up since your wife had her conniption fit."

"Well, no," Dean said.

"But the place is immaculate!"

"Not really. It could use a vacuuming, and a dusting."

"Man, you are whipped. Daphne's turned you into a slave." Ajax cracked open two Tsing Tao's, passed one to Dean. "She should be doing that shit. I'll bet you even do the cooking."

"Yeah, but only because I like to cook."

"Um-hmm." Ajax wasn't convinced as he browsed around with his beer. It was a modest but nice new house, appointed in light tones and new furniture. "Decent crib," he approved. But when he turned back around, Dean was walking away up the dark stairs.

Some host. Ajax followed. "Ah, the love den," he observed when he found Dean standing in the bedroom. "So this is where you get it on with your beautiful wife...once a month?"

Dean wasn't listening. He rummaged for something in the opened closet, his back to Ajax. "You got me remembering," he murmured.

"What?"

Dean pulled out a moving box full of books, sat down on the bed with it. He swigged more beer, then began to search through the books.

"Let me ask you something," Ajax said. "How the hell can you chew that funky tobacco and drink beer at the same time?"

"Fifteen years of experience, that's how. Every day from age ten to twenty-five, I pinched a can a day."

"Back in the old days, huh?" Ajax grinned. "The horn-crankin' days."

"Any rancher with balls eats and drinks with a lip full of Skoal. Only pussies don't."

"I'm edified," Ajax remarked. "And what are you looking for?"

"Just...something..."

"You're acting weird, man. I like it." Something in the back of the closet caught his eye, something long that reminded him of a giant pair of pliers. He walked over, pulled it out, then weighed it heavily in his hands. Parallel steel handles, two-feet long, intersected at the business-end, sporting twin half-circles lined with sharpened serrations that interlocked when you drew the handles apart. "What the hell is this thing?"

Dean looked up, disinterested. "My torque-plier."

"What the hell's a "

"My horn-cranker," Dean corrected.

Ajax' eyes widened on the tool as if knowing what it was gave it some strange heat. "So this is the thing you used to tear the horns out of innocent bulls."

"Steers," Dean corrected. "A young gelding. They're not full-grown; the horns are pretty much just nubs about three to six inches long."

"And you just yank 'em out like teeth." Ajax hefted the tool in his hands. "Say, do you ever go back the DeSmet to defend your championship?"

"Hell no. They don't even have a state horn-cranking competition anymore. It's not like the old days now. Everything's automated. Now they have these mechanical things on rails that move down the cattle-gate line and extract the horns automatically. Just pops 'em out one right after another."

"Progress sucks, huh?"

Ajax put the torque-plier back. "Come on, admit it. You miss all that shit at least a little, don't you?"

Dean didn't answer.

"Come on? The old days on the ranch? Cranking horns and chewing Skoal? Humping any and all available pussy? Gettin' pissy drunk in the bars every night and slapping your bitches around?"

Dean didn't answer.

Ajax nosed around while Dean continued flipping through his books. He noticed a half opened dresser drawer. Hmm, he thought. Then Oh, Christmas!

The drawer was full of lacy women's under garments a la Victoria's Secret. Tough stuff! Ajax thought. He ran his fingers over the smooth, shiny garments. A quick glance over his shoulder, then he deftly grabbed a pair of devil-red panties trimmed in black lace, and stuffed them in his pants. Hell, she'll never miss 'em. Then he plucked another pair out cornflower-blue and crotchless and held them up. "Holy shit, man. I can't imagine a prettier picture in the world than Daphne walking around in these."

Dean glanced over, shrugged, then got back to his books. "It gets dull after a while."

Ajax gaped. "Yeah, you're acting weird, all right. A woman with Daphne's bod walking around in these can never be dull. It's perpetual wood, man. It's Hard-On City."

"Let me tell you something, Ajax," Dean said aside. "Show me the best-looking woman in the world and I'll show you a guy who's sick of fucking her."

Ajax gaped. He almost choked on his Tsing Tao. "You're telling me...you're sick of fucking Daphne?"

"That's right. Sick to death. She's a bossy, prissy bitch. She never wants to have sex anyway and, between you and I, that's fine with me. I'd rather fuck a pumpkin than stick my cock in her hole again."

Ajax gaped.

"Ah, here it is." Dean pulled out a black-covered hard-back book entitled Incubi by some chump author named Edward Lee.

Ajax squinted. "What's that, a horror novel? Only idiots read that stuff. People who take drugs and shit."

Dean had opened the book. "Here's one box I never got sick of fucking." The inside of the book had been cut out, creating a secret compartment. Inside lay a stack of polaroids. He flipped through the photos, then passed them to Ajax.

Ajax...gaped. And got wood. The dozen or so polaroids showed different poses of the same girl. Beautiful. Stark naked. Pert breasts with nipples sticking out like rose-pink thumb-ends, long honey-nut hair and ocean-blue eyes, a tight flat stomach and a perfectly shaved

"Man oh man," Ajax muttered. "This is the same chick you showed me at Anthony's. Your last ex in DeSmet."

Each lewd pose punched him in the eye like glaring pornography. Lying on a bed with her long legs straight up, fingers squeezing her cherry-sized clitoris. Hands and knees, grinning wickedly over her shoulder, perfect ass upthrust. Lounging on her side with a dildo the size of a gourd stuck up in her to the end. And much, much more.

"Arianne," Dean whispered.

Ajax was shaking his head back and forth over and over, pressed by disbelief. "This girl's hotter than a rock in a campfire...and you dumped her?"

"Didn't just dump her," Dean reminded. "I cheated on her, treated her like shit, and beat the crap out of her. More times than I can count."

Ajax' gaze widened on Dean. "You're fuckin' nuts. This girl's even hotter than Daphne. Ten times hotter."

"And ten times hotter in bed. Arianne had a pussy that would suck your cock like a mouth. Every time we changed positions, she'd give me head. And she had an asshole so tight, you'd think you were fucking a puppy. She was the best lay of my life. She'd fuck my brains out every day and fall asleep with my dick in her mouth every night."

"Hardcore," Ajax muttered, still eyeing the pictures and pitching an uncomfortable tent. "Your wife ever let you take pix of her like this?"

"Aw, fuck no. That fickle cunt? She wouldn't be caught dead. If I even suggested it, she'd make me see a counselor. Look, I know you think Daphne's cheating on me, but here's why I know she's not. She's a fussy prude, she's frigid. I know I'm good in the sack. Just ask any girl in

DeSmet. But Daphne? She could care less about sex. She acts like she's doing me a fucking favor every two months when she puts out. But I'll tell you, whenever I fuck that snitty hosebag...I pretend she's Arianne. Arianne was the ultimate hot number, and she really loved me. Christ, she'd fuck my balls dry, wash my clothes, clean the apartment, cook my meals shit, she did everything for me."

"And you cheated on her, beat her up, and dumped her," Ajax added.

Dean solemnly nodded.

"You're whacked, brother. I don't care how good-looking Daphne is, this Arianne chick is hotter, and she didn't jerk you around. Daphne treats you like a bad dog."

At that moment, the phone rang.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Ajax asked.

"Hell no. It's her."

The phone rang a few more times, then the answering machine kicked on. "It's me," Daphne said. "Just thought you might want to know that I got to Vegas safely. Obviously you're not home, probably out drinking with that dingleberry Ajax. Honestly, Dean, can't you cultivate some friends who aren't useless detriments to society? And make sure that goddamn house is clean when I get back, or there'll be hell to pay."

click

Dean and Ajax traded glances.

"Sorry," Dean said.

"I'm delighted to be so highly thought of by the lady of the house."

"Don't feel bad. She hates anybody I know."

Ajax finished his beer, set in on the dresser. "Look, I don't care if your wife thinks I'm a dingleberry and a useless detriment to society. My question is how can you let her treat you like that?"

Dean silently shook his head.

"That's love? That's respect?"

"No," Dean admitted.

"You gotta listen to shit like that till death do you part?"

"It's fucked up."

"So why the hell did you get married?"

Dean sat limp on the bed. "My old life... It just seemed wrong. That's why I cut bait and moved here. I felt I needed to change."

Ajax sighed. "Dean, seasons change, tides change, baseball lineups change, but people don't change. I am who I am, and you are who you are. It's not change you're talking about, it's adaptation. You're trying to adapt to Daphne's way of life because you think that's the right thing to do. You've got this idea in your head that the way you used to be was bad."

"It was bad," Dean countered. "Fighting in bars every night, hot-rodding, drinking enough beer and whiskey to fill Lake Union, and abusing the only woman who every really loved me? That's not the way it's supposed to be. I needed to change."

"No," Ajax said, "you needed to modify some aspects of your life. There's a difference." When Dean wasn't looking, Ajax slipped one of the polaroids into his pants. What the fuck? he thought. Then he continued, "You left your home and got married for all the wrong reasons."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "I know."

"And there's a bigger problem right now," Ajax added.

"What's that?"

"This is a textbook gradual degradation of your every day persona." Even Ajax was astonished. "Non-REM Imagery Syndrome is one thing, but I hate to say it, buddy. You're displaying some far worse symptoms."

"Symptoms of what?"

"Full-scale multiple-personality disorder."

"That's a crock of shit," Dean sluffed.

"Is it? A couple of hours ago, you were making every excuse in the book for Daphne. Any time I've ever suggested that she's a lousy wife and treats you like shit, you cover for her, you deny it, you blame yourself for what's not right about the marriage. But now it's the absolute polar opposite. You tell me you're sick of fucking her, you tell me she's a 'bossy prissy bitch' and a 'snitty hosebag.' You're talking like you hate her."

"I don't hate her," Dean elucidated. "I'm just so goddamn sick of her that I could bend over and throw up all over the carpet I have to vacuum every day."

By now, Ajax almost wished he hadn't dropped out of his psych major. "You're two different people, Dean. You're Good Dean and Bad Dean. Good Dean is the subservient pussy-whipped butt-kissing wimp I've known since we first met. But tonight Bad Dean has finally stuck his head out of the sand, chewing tobacco and bad-mouthing his wife. And what's the catalyst? Me asking you details of your past. You're longing for your past, and your inability to retrieve it is what's causing these manifestations."

Good Dean, Bad Dean... Dean thought about this and felt flustered as a result. "But I hate my past. I was disgusted with it."

"That may be what you consciously believe, but we're talking about the subconscious, and that's a different animal. It's what we were talking about yesterday: strictures. Social strictures, environmental strictures, strictures based on experience, and then all the potential counter-strictures too." Ajax seemed intent, urgently focused, which was unusual for him. Evidently, some of his past was coming back too: the collegiate interests that he'd later dumped to become a slovenly envelope-stuffer. "We're talking about Freudian denial mechanisms, unsystematized causal demand characteristics, and full-blown personality transposition."

Dean looked askance, irritated. "I don't want to hear a bunch of high-brow California psycho-babble." Then he spat a stream of tobacco juice on the plush beige carpet. "I just want to know why I'm so fucked up all of a sudden."

Shocked, Ajax looked at the indelible stain on the carpet. "That's what I'm trying to tell you!"

"Fine. What's the bottom line?"

"Like I said. You need to see a shrink. But in the meantime, you should probably look into some therapy of a more available sort."

"And what would that be?"

"Have another beer," Ajax advised to the best of his clinical expertise.

"Sounds like a good idea." Dean followed Ajax out of the bedroom, but before he fully left, he eyed the framed wedding photo of himself and Daphne.

And spat tobacco juice on it.

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Four

In this modern age, the fabric of decency was not safe even in down-home rural America, the land of hard work, an honest buck, and apple pie towns such as DeSmet, South Dakota. In fact, even here, that same fabric had become as sullied as the ass-rag of Babylon's Whore. Dwindling was the notion of the American Work Ethic, replaced by welfare. Scarce were the wise grandmothers in front-porch rocking chairs, replaced by barred windows. And gone was the universal ideal that honesty was the best policy, replaced by meth labs and domestic brutality. Indeed, even the once-quaint DeSmet had spiraled downward into the domain of Jerry Springer.

And worse.

Little Scotty Nash was only ten years old by the time he'd had sexual congress with four girls not including his Mom and though this was clearly sexual congress of the forced variety, Scotty was too young to know the actual entails of the crime called rape. All he knew was that if he dragged a girl behind the school and put his wiener in her, it would feel good. He liked it. He'd learned how to do it just by watching his step-daddy and Mom. These were grown-ups, and Scotty wanted to do what grown-ups did. He wanted to be a Man, just like his step-daddy. He wanted to punch girls in the face and stick his diggler in 'em, lots of 'em. That's what girls were for; the music said so.

The girls he'd done this to never ratted because they knew they'd get whapped, and they'd all been broken in anyway, probably by their daddies. Plus, he told the bitches he'd kill 'em if they told, he'd bust a cap in their heads. He'd pull a Boo-Yah on the bitches!

Scotty's Walkman headset blared the latest rap: "I'se got demons in my semen, yo white bitch! You'll be screamin' while I'm reamin', how ya like the itch!" Scotty listened to Schooly D., Tupac, R.U. 2 Kuul 4 U., and Badd Blacque Busta Kapp, even though his face was as white as the Lincoln Memorial. He loved the lingo: duh bitches, duh â€˜hos, kill duh poe-leece. "Hey White boy, what can I say? Gonna kill yo' white ass wiff my AK." Scotty got the rap and dressed the scene, in unlaced pump-up Nikes with blinking lights on the heels, a backward Yankees cap, and pants ten sizes too big for him.

He got it down. Yeah. He tripped it Ice-T style just like a take-no-shit street player, just like a bro' in duh â€˜hood. Indeed, and as clear as the proof of Newton's Third Law of Motion and his Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy, Scotty Nash was the first ten-year-old white gangsta niggah to ever hip the hop down Rural Route 2 in DeSmet, South Dakota. Jivin', stepping it out. Bustin' moves.

He didn't have pubic hair yet, but Scotty knew what happened when a grown-up cock busted a â€˜ho's pussy. It squirted spunk into her. Of course, Scotty was too young to shoot spunk but he could sure come. He found that out at age four, the first time his Mom jerked his pee-pee off. By five he was doing it himself several times a day. It felt good but what felt better was sticking it in a real live girl, same way his Mom had let him when she was high on crank between tricks. Scotty couldn't wait till he got the dick hair and the juice. The Little Man would just have to wait a few more years till he was a Big Man. Then he'd be jammin'...

"You bring yo' jive into my space, I'll se bust a cap in yo' white face," his Walkman rapped.

"Lick it!" Scotty yelled in his cracked pre-pubescent voice. He had his willy out in front of Dawnie Weller, a nine-year-old with a nougat-brown ponytail from Vista View Park. She'd been walking home from the QWIK-MART tonight when Scotty'd spied her in her little shorts and titless top, marching back to her 14' by 72' Silver Stream. Her bag of groceries fell apart when he'd yanked her behind the PROPOSED LAND-USE ACTION sign posted on the vacant lot between Paduana's Guitar Shop and Cooper's Adult Goods. Rats scattered from the pile of garbage he threw her on. He twisted her hair till she squealed like his baby brother Danny the time their step-daddy put a Marlboro out in his belly button. Dawnie's knees scuffed in garbage and dirt; she was crying. "Lick it, â€˜ho," he repeated, but the excitement had already hardened him to his full three inches, and over his Walkman headset, he could hear the revered words of his hero Badd Blacque Busta Kapp: "Lick it, â€˜ho! Then lick my crack! Once you go black, you never go back!"

Sobbing, she began to lick the macadamia-nut-sized glans as snot glistened from her nose. Scotty's legs began to tremble with the music beating in his ears. His little grape-sized balls constricted.

"Yo' momma's a â€˜ho, yo' daddy slams, I se fuck yo' li'l sister and start to jam!"

But Scotty didn't want to have his dry orgasm just yet. He wanted to have it in her little bald pie. Next her legs were flailing as he pulled off her shorts. Shit fell out she was so scared...but shit didn't bother Scotty, considering how much time he'd spent sitting in it as a baby. Her bare legs were shiny with pee; it reminded him of the water fountain at school, the way the pee was looping from her gash.

"Hey white bitch, you my â€˜ho now," his headset rocked, "wanna be top dro', I'll se show ya how!"

Yeah, Scotty thought. Right now he was Badd Blacque Busta Kapp, and he was gonna show this nine-year-old white bitch just how it was done, get her turned, get her on the right track fo' the â€˜hood. In fact, this was his destiny! Scotty was breaking in some fresh â€˜ho, then she'd sell her ass on the street and she'd give him the money. He could be a pimp, just like Ice-T and Big Mistah K!

He'd be Superfly!

Dawnie began to upchuck now, wriggling in the dirt. Her upchuck smelled like Pop Tarts. Long as an adult's pinkie now, Scotty's dick throbbed hard. He was just about to drop his baggy pants and stick it in the bitch's pie when...

From behind, hands smoothed slowly up his back. Scotty went rigid. Dah pigs! he thought. Dah poe-leece! Where my AK just like Dr. Dre?

But that couldn't be right because the hands slid around his waist across his stomach. Then down.

They were soft, hot hands, and suddenly there was a cooing in his ears. He pulled off the Walkman headset.

"Honey? Honey?" a voice like a babbling brook issued behind him. "Let me."

Scotty was lovingly turned around, his pre-pubescent dick sticking out like a flesh-colored piece of chalk. Behind him, little Dawnie Weller ran away, a trail of her pee following her.

But Scotty was enraptured now. Every inch of his Little Gangsta Man skin felt electric, like the time his Mom had been high and stuck his finger into the light socket when he'd been bawling louder than a maternity ward only this didn't hurt, this felt good.

It felt even better when the soft, warm hands played with his little apricot-pit nuts. Scotty's eyes were squeezed shut, but then some minuscule sense of logic occurred to him: Who was doing this? Who was playing with his marbles?

He opened his eyes.

In the deep shadow of the LAND USE sign, he saw...a woman. A black woman but she wasn't black like an African American, she was...just...black.

Black, he thought, eyes pried open.

She was as black as the shadow thrown by the big sign. In fact, she was a shadow.

That's what she was made of. Shadows.

But she was full-grown, like his Mom.

"Come here, baby." Her voice sounded like wind through the trees in autumn. "Let me make you feel good..."

Scotty could say nothing as the shadow-woman took his little boner into her mouth. Back and forth, she sucked it, while her black fingers played with his tiny testicles, and after just a few back-and-forths, Scotty went up on his tip-toes and had his semenless orgasm.

It was the best he'd ever had. Better than the little girls, better than jerking himself, and better than his Mom's hot, hairy pie.

When he was done, the woman smiled. He couldn't see the smile because the smile was darker than the dark. But, somehow, he could feel it.

"Did that feel good, baby?"

"Yuh-yuh-yeah."

"Come on, baby," her voice slithered. Her hand played with his slackened dick. "Come with me. I have a little boy just like you. Would you like to meet him?"

"Yuh-yuh-yeah."

"I knew you would."

She was more than a woman. She was the mother he'd never really had, not a meth-whore but someone who loved him. She was his nurturing Night-Mother, his Angel of Shadows, and now she was leading him by the hand, as he hitched up his baggy gangsta pants, further into the darkness, and from the earphones draped at his neckline, he could hear Badd Blacque Busta Kapp rapping: "How bad you are, you just a clown. â€˜Cos it gonna be a bitch who take the player down..."

Darkness, darkness...

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Aw, Jesus, Arianne thought. But she wasn't thinking long before she was fellating. Kermit Crole's penis was indeed the largest she'd seen in her life, and after so many years on the street, that was a lot of penises. Instantly, she was gagging as his callused hands guided her head, by grasps of hair, up and down in his lap in the front seat of his candy-apple red Ranchero.

She wasn't blowing him, he was fucking her throat. Deep.

Air raced through her nostrils. He grabbed her tremoring hand and placed it on his balls, things the size of Silly-Putty eggs. He humped her stretched mouth harder, then, just as Arianne thought she'd suffocate, he came copiously down her throat. When some of the semen slid into her epiglottis, she wheezed, jerked her mouth off, and involuntarily coughed a spatter of fresh sperm onto the inside of the broad windshield.

"Ain't ya got no manners, whore?" He cracked his fist into her chin so hard her teeth rattled. "This ride cost me thirty grand, ya dirty spunk-bucket, and here you are spitting my cum on the glass." He punched her just as hard in the belly, and all her wind slipped out. Arianne couldn't breathe. "Shit, whore, I kin smell yer dirty pussy through yer shorts, damn! Smells worse than the bottom of the gut can at the slaughter house." Then his big paw hands grabbed her breasts and pinched like two pair of vice-grips. "Ya stupid whore. Spitting cum in my truck? I oughta twist these little tits rights off, and what're you gonna do about it? Tell the cops?" Kermit Crole's throat jacked laughter. He pinched her nipples so hard blood came out, then he popped the passenger door, and

WHACK!

literally punched her out of the truck.

Arianne's head collided with the gravel-lined parking lot. Her scalp sliced. Then she rolled over to stare at the stars.

Like bird-shot, more gravel sprayed against the side of her face as the Ranchero peeled off.

There's got to be a better way to earn ten bucks than this, she thought.

Then, for the briefest moment, as her gaze remained stuck on the cosmos, she thought she saw, somewhere in Orion's Belt, a glittering facsimile of the face of the only man she'd ever loved.

Dean Lohan.

Why did you leave me, Dean? she wondered as tears formed. Why?

She dragged herself up, sharp stones cutting her knees, and remnant seed falling from her lips. Not much else she could do except shuffle back into Gortyn's Woodland Tavern and try to tag another trick.

She was dizzy, she was sick. Nevertheless, her feet shuffled back toward the door, and that's when she heard the high braying sound of police sirens off toward Main Street.

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The night watchman's body wasn't even cold before DeSmet Police Sergeant A.T. Lass was called out yet again. This one was worse. This was a kid.

"Christ, A.T.," his blanched partner, Hoiter, quailed. "It's Scotty Nash from down the Route. Shit, we must'a busted his mother a hundred times."

Fuck, Lass thought. He didn't give a shit about the kid, just the fact that it was a kid. Can't have kids gettin' killed in DeSmet! Makes me look bad!

Where young Scotty's abdominal wall should have been was now simply a gnawed evacuation of flesh. The boy's innards had been removed, and with not much finesse; his belly looked roto-tilled. What could do something like that? But an even more logical question struck Lass as he stood in the flashlight-painted darkness behind the old Stoddard Mill.

"What happened to the punk's insides?" he mouthed aloud.

"Must'a been some kind of animal attack," Hoiter suggested. "A wolf or a coyote."

"Yeah, must'a been."

The kid's baggy pants hung around his ankles, his NIGGUZS ROOL 4 U T-shirt bunched up. One of those dumbass Walkman things hung around his neck by a wire connected to a set of earphones. Hoiter picked it up, switched it on.

"I gots the motherfuckin' herpes, I don't give a shit! Need a bottle'a fuckin' Mickey's, yo white bitch!"

"Turn that crap off," Lass griped.

"Oh, wow, it's Badd Blacque," his partner remarked. "It's good stuff."

"It's a bunch of ghetto home-boy horse-shit, sounds worse than a busted chainsaw. Christ, the idiots just pick any word that rhymes."

"To the contrary, A.T. Rap and Hip-Hop is the Shakespeare of the modern African-American culture. It's the poetry of their times, their language of art. Listen."

Hoiter switched it back on. "Zippadee motherfuckin' doo-dah, zippadee motherfuckin' yay. My oh my what a motherfuckin' wonderful day yo white bitch!"

Lass snatched the Walkman away, shut it off. "Quit fuckin' around! What's that on the punk's chest? Gunshot wounds?"

Hoiter leaned over with the flashlight and pulled up the decedent's T-shirt past his nipples. Indeed, two marks were present, two holes spaced a foot apart.

"See? What the fuck is that?" Lass questioned. "Somebody shoot the punk with a couple of deer-slugs?"

"I know what it is," Hoiter replied in a darkened tone. "Ain't no deer-slugs, A.T. This boy's been gored."

"Gored?"

"That's right, boss. Gored. As in by a bull."

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Five

The scream shrilled through the house, but not a scream of horror or pain. A scream of outrage.

Then the voice cracked and boomed like cannon-fire. "DEAN! GET YOUR ASS IN HERE NOW!"

Dean climbed off the couch, where'd he'd slept instead of the bed, and headed for the bedroom, scratching his balls through his shorts. "What?" he said.

Daphne, having just placed her Samsonites on the bed, twirled. Her face was beet-red. "That's TOBACCO JUICE on the floor, isn't it?"

Dean glanced at the long shit-colored stain in the beige carpet. "Yeah," he said. "That's tobacco juice, all right."

"You reckless inconsiderate REDNECK!" Daphne wailed in her smart Givenchy off-shoulder organdy dress. "You SPIT on the floor!"

"Yup."

"That's it! The more I try, the worse you get! I want a divorce!"

"You got it," Dean agreed, still scratching his balls. "How about a quick blow-job before we sign the papers?"

Enraged, she picked up her carry-on bag and threw it at him. Dean ducked, and it sailed overhead.

"That was a mistake," he calmly informed her.

He broke the bedside lamp over her head, wrapped its cord around her neck and, by the cord, dragged her out of the room. Her ass thunked down the stairs. She gagged, kicking as he dragged her further into the dining room. The dining room was perfect the big bay window. Then he grabbed her not by the hair but by the face, and propped her up in front of the multiple panes.

"Have your lawyer give me a call," he suggested and punched her in the face so hard she flew back as if jerked by a towline. The bay window exploded and out Daphne went, landing on her back in the front yard amongst flecks of broken glass.

Dean scratched his balls again, and loped for the kitchen

and shifted and jiggled and jagged and

"Oh no," Dean croaked.

There he stood, in the bedroom, as Daphne, in the same Givenchy off-shoulder organdy, railed at the all-too-obvious evidence of tobacco juice on the carpet.

Her face burned at him, a rigid mask of contempt. "I KNOW what that is on the floor! And you WILL clean it up!" Daphne's bellow threatened to beat plaster-dust from the ceiling. "You'll shampoo this rug, TODAY!"

"But-but-but, honey? It's Sunday. There's no place open where I can rent a carpet cleaner "

"You'll do it by HAND, on your KNEES!" came her next bellow. "Jesus CHRIST, Dean! The harder I work, the lazier you get! That convention in Vegas was HARD work! And for the whole time you're sitting here on your ass drinking with that dingleberry Ajax and SPITTING on the FLOOR!"

"Honey, please "

"Shut up, you redneck slob. Christ, all I've done for you, and this is how you repay me? You're not back at the ranch anymore, shoveling cow shit and hosing down the stalls! We're in the CITY now, we're CITY PEOPLE! And you better start acting like it!"

Dean stood slack as a Gumby doll. "I'm sorry, honey. I don't know what came over me. I "

"Shut up!" she repeated. "Get out of my sight! And start getting this SHIT-HOLE cleaned up! Oh, and you were supposed to roll up that GODDAMN hose in the front yard a fucking WEEK ago! So roll it up so I don't have to TRIP over it anymore!"

"Yes, honey, I'm sorry, honey," Dean blathered and backed out of the bedroom. He wasn't scratching his balls now; in fact, at this precise moment, he felt like he didn't have any balls at all. Daphne might as well have been wearing them for earrings.

What the hell happened? he thought in the utmost distress. His brain felt like overcooked meatloaf. Did I really spit chaw on the rug?

Yes. He remembered that much, at least. Last night Ajax had come over. They'd gotten â€˜faced. Ajax had taken the late 194 home, leaving Dean to chug whiskey and pass out on the couch.

But I didn't really spit on the rug, did I?

The answer was plain, unless Santa Claus had been in here last night six months early with a lip full of Skoal.

Oh, man. What's happening to me?

All too suddenly, Ajax' unconvincing psycho-babble didn't sound quite so unconvincing any more.

Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm really two people, divided between my ideals. Maybe I really do have a genuine split personality...

"And get the fucking newspaper!" Daphne shouted down from upstairs. "It's been sitting out in the middle of the GODDAMN driveway all morning!"

"Yes, sweetheart!" he raised his voice back. "I was just about to do that."

Dean pulled on his jeans, which were strewn across the coffee table. He stumbled out the front door, into raving sunlight, then stumbled again and tripped over a coil of unrolled garden hose that lay stretched across the sidewalk like a trip-wire.

Dean fell flat on his chin.

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Six

Within a week, six more DeSmet children were found dead within proximity to the long-closed Stoddard's Mill. All were found in the same disrepair: gastro-intestinal organs evacuated through a ragged aperture. All appeared to have been gored in the chest.

As if by a bull.

Sergeant A.T. Lass was sufficiently apeshit, and so were the residents of DeSmet.

"My baby boy got killed! Where were you!" shrieked Janice Stumore when Lass went to pick up his "pad." Janice lived at the Callisto-Brownsroad Trailer Court with her common-law hubby Leonard. Leonard had a masters in organic chemistry from M.I.T.; he was also a meth-head who'd gravitated to DeSmet after escaping the correctional custody of the Massachusetts State Police Narcotics Unit. Here, Leonard ran the biggest ice lab in the county, and in order to continue to operate, certain payments needed to be made to certain constables of the law. One day, Lass knew, this trailer and a third of the park would go up in a minor mushroom cloud when Leonard fired up a pipe too close to the solvent.

"Here ya go, Adam-12," Leonard said through his Fu Manchu beard. Greasy hair hung like black worms. "Always a pleasure." Then he slapped five century notes into Lass' fat paw. Janice's mad bellowing ripped through the paper-thin walls.

"Guess she's taking it pretty hard," Lass, not much in the way of smarts, deducted.

Leonard put his thick black glasses on, squinting at a triple-beam balance as he weighed product. "Sure. Her kid's ground chuck in the morgue."

"Come on. Her kid was a retard with a head shaped like a pinto bean," Lass pointed out. "Christ, she had him turning tricks on Main Street for chickenhawk pervs." This much was true. Kevvy Stumore, thirteen years old, had every learning disability known to the American Journal of Psychiatry, and a malformed cranial vault due to maladapted fissural calcium formation during the first trimester, thanks to his mother's chronic speed use during pregnancy. Kevvy was a trick baby to a meth-whore. He was all fucked up.

Perv homos paid the little mutant ten bucks for front-seat blowjobs. The way Lass saw it, the world was a teensy bit better without him.

"Look, I gotta bust one," Lass informed because, see, the first part of the deal was hush-money. But Lass was also entitled to partake of Janice's sexual flesh whenever the urge rose that was the second part of the deal. "She's sounding kind of crazy now "

Leonard got up from his make-shift lab table, walked out to the "living" room. "My poor little baby boy got butchered while that fat cop piece of shit was eating donuts, Leonard!" Spit gusted from her lips. "My beautiful baby boy!"

Leonard promptly kicked her in the side of the head, which put an end to her agitation but fast. One of her few remaining teeth flew out. "She's all yours, Officer," Leonard told Lass. "Go to town." Then he walked back to his lab and closed the door.

Fuck. Janice was thirty-five but looked fifty-five. She certainly wasn't busy now; that's why Lass never saw any harm. Her dirty feet stuck up as he pulled her dirty jeans off her dirty legs. Looking at her split junkie beaver, his far-less-than-average-sized penis rocked in his pants. Aw, shit! By the time he got his trooper trousers down, there was no time to sink it in her. Two quick shucks with his hand and he was squirting all over her. Oh well, he thought at the waves of sensation. The droplets of sperm glittered off her corpse-white skin. Lass beat out the last and sighed.

That's what I call good lovemaking, he thought. He stuffed his putty dick back in his pants as his heart raced down.

Janice looked dead lying there. Perhaps she was dead, but that would be no biggie. One less meth-head whore in the world was almost as good as one less lawyer.

"Sorry about your kid," he muttered and left. But even Lass could not have guessed that as his sperm dried on Janice's face and fried-egg junkie tits, yet another DeSmet, South Dakota, child was gored, mauled, and eaten only a few miles away.

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Dean's mouth sucked to hers. Their bodies entwined, and their tongues roved over one another. Each stroke into the hot cup of her sex brought an intractable bliss, and she cried into his mouth. She came for fifteen minutes, and when she could come no further, she pushed him off, then sucked him off. Dean spent himself in volume down her tongue. She swallowed without hesitation.

Dean lolled over, exhausted. She massaged his spent balls with one hand, caressed his face with the other....

"Why did you leave me, why did you leave me?"

Leave? Dean thought. "Daphne, I would never le "

Blackish liquid began to trickle from her nostrils and corners of her mouth; simultaneously, a stench rose so foul that Dean audibly gagged. His eyes burned like riot gas. But he recognized the stench at once it was rendering bilge and when he looked between her legs, more of the noxious liquid oozed from her sex.

"Why, honey? Why? I loved you...."

Moonlight blazed on her face. It was not Daphne. It was Arianne.

"We could have had everything," she sobbed. Even her tears were bilge. Then she vomited in a plume directly into his face. Not puke. Rendering bilge.

The Baby Ben alarm clock rattled like an annoying toy. Dean woke up in an empty bed, flinging off imaginary bilge.

Holy shit...

The nightmare left him bolt upright, shivering. His hand padded sideward and found nothing but cold sheets where his wife should be. Then he remembered: she'd left yesterday for a design show in Chicago.

God in heaven, he thought.

Dean sat up, wearing only boxers. He scratched his balls and fell into nebulous thought as a long sigh stretched across his mind.

He saw his life now, in its utter disappointment, and then he saw his old life, in its crude, earthy glory. I was somebody back then, he realized. I was somebody special.

Good Dean, Bad Dean, he thought. Blackouts, split-personality, and now nightmares about rendering bilge.

Dean wondered if he could be any more fucked up...and doubted it.

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"What the fuck is rendering bilge?" Ajax asked.

"Liquefied waste from dead cattle," Dean explained from the bar stool. "Drippings. Organic flux." He'd asked Ajax to meet him at THE WHARF after work, curious to the point of anxiety as to how his friend would interpret the nightmare.

"Sounds lovely." Ajax chewed a contemplative lip. "And I'm wondering..."

"Yeah?"

"In what manner does this...bilge...reflect the inner-workings of Dean Lohan's tumultuous subconscious mind? How can it be applied to the symbology of your soul?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," Dean asserted.

"I need a drink...to help me think." Ajax frowned down the long bar. "Christ, do I gotta scalp myself to get the barmaid's attention? What's a guy gotta do to get a beer in this out-house?"

"Scalping is fine, but that's kind of messy," the barmaid said, appearing from nowhere. 38 double-D's looked like twin duckpin balls stretching a make-shift black halter-top that read DEMONOID PHENOMENON in dripping white letters. Pewter skulls clinked, dangling from the ends of Kool-Aid-pink corn-rows. "Just hang yourself. That'll get my attention for sure."

Ajax slumped, embarrassed at being overheard. Dean chuckled.

"A Redhook and a Hefeweizen," Ajax ordered.

The barmaid stared. "Excuse me? What's the magic word?"

Ajax's face smoldered. "Uh, please?"

The barmaid trounced off for the taps, tits rocking.

"What a hostile goth bitch," Ajax remarked under his breath. "I think I'm in love. Christ, I could spend the rest of my life just checking her for lumps."

"Back to the topic, please," Dean said.

"The topic? Her tits? Yeah, man, she doesn't even need air bags in her car. I wish I was her kid I'd breast-feed till I was forty."

"The topic is my nightmare," Dean frustratingly reminded. "My...dilemma."

"Not a dilemma. You're way past dilemma, pal. You're one egg-shell crunch away from a full-scale schizophrenic episode."

The barmaid returned, thunked Ajax' Redhook before him. "Here ya go, Meat Loaf." Then she leaned forward and glanced at the sufficient beer-belly occupying Ajax' lap. "Eat much? Or is that just the swollen liver from the chronic alcoholism?"

Ajax's mouth opened to make a comeback, but nothing managed to come out.

"Yours is on me...cutie," she said to Dean. Then she winked and sauntered off, her ass, like orbs of ripe fruit, riding up and down in her black cut-off shorts.

"Meat Loaf, huh?" Ajax simpered. "Gee, I wonder if she likes me?"

"What's the matter? Can't take it like you dish it out?"

"No," Ajax blustered. "Life ain't fair, I'll tell ya. You've got a drop-dead gorgeous wife and this big-tit Rob-Zombie bitch hot for you. You're gonna ask her out, right?"

"Hell, no," Dean testified. "I'm married, and I love my wife."

Ajax peered longingly at the barmaid who was now at the other end of the bar. "You should be gelded. I'm so horny I could spit on the floor and fuck the spit, and you've got this hot fuck-package winking at you. But you're not gonna go for it 'cos your married? Gimme a break, Bishop Lohan."

Dean sipped his beer with resolve. "Marriage is a sacrament, it's a contract of life-long love and fidelity."

"Yeah? And every time your wife goes out of town to some work convention, she conveniently forgets her wedding ring, not to mention three times a week she's coming home late from work meetings because she's probably having affairs with her boss and every other guy at the office."

Dean didn't even need to think. Something took him over, something possessed him as effectively as a demon, and next thing he knew the entire bar fell silent as Dean had stood up, grabbed Ajax by the throat, and lifted him several inches off the ground.

"You know what?" Dean said. "I'm really getting tired of your implications."

Ajax's hands roved empty air. He was trying to talk but only gags came out. His face began to redden.

What am I doing! a voice shouted in Dean's head. Immediately, he let Ajax down. "Shit, man! I'm sorry! I-I-I don't know what came over me."

Ajax wheezed to get his breath back, slumped back to his stool. "Man, you really are fucked up. You're a walking time-bomb."

"I'm sorry," Dean repeated. "Something...just "

"Snapped?"

"Yeah, that's right," Dean admitted.

Ajax regained his composure, slugged on his beer. At the end of the bar, the barmaid was laughing. Several moments passed, then the tavern returned to its typical revelry. Dean felt foolish, bewildered.

"Right now? Right this instant?" Ajax continued, "I'm looking at Good Dean. But a minute ago when you were holding me off the ground by my throat "

"That was...Bad Dean," Dean surmised.

"Uh-huh, and I'm telling you, it's getting worse every day. You're telling me you love your wife?"

"Well, yeah," Dean felt assured.

"And a few nights ago you...what were you calling your beloved wife?"

Dean felt walked on by an elephant. "A fussy prude, a fickle "

"cunt," Ajax added all too quickly, "who you're sick of having sex with. In fact, when you do have sex with Daphne, you pretend she's who?"

"Arianne," Dean's throat grated.

Ajax finished his beer, nodding. "And now this nightmare. Nightmares can be very revealing as to a person's true, deep-seated emotions...." His discourse trailed off, then he waved his index finger at the barmaid. She waved her middle finger back.

"How do you like that insolent devil-tattooed cum-dumpster?" Ajax complained at the treatment. "Watch me. I'm ready for her this time."

The barmaid returned, thunked Ajax' beer down. "I didn't know Curly had kids."

"Where'd ya get all that extra tit, bitch? Some doctor lipo-suck your brain and pump it all into your bags?"

"No, they lipo-sucked point-one-one percent of your body fat. Thanks for the contribution." She drew her hands up her sides, then caressed the sumptuous breasts.

Ajax frowned. "How's the herpes? Does it hurt much?"

"I got it from riding your mother's bike, but, no, it just itches sometimes. Then I get a big dick to scratch it." Her face blankened at Ajax. "I guess that leaves you out, huh, Pinkie?" Next, she placed another beer before Dean. "Your money's no good while I'm working." The tip of her pierced tongue glided across her upper lip, and she slipped him a piece of paper with her phone number on it. "Call me soon. Baby, you can lock me in a cage, and I'll be your pet forever."

"You fuckin' pretty-boy stud," Ajax complained when the barmaid left. "Jesus Christ. Next she'll be offering you money. How can you say no to that walking brick shit-house?"

"Easy. The spiritual bonds of matrimony are far more important than blatant one-night stands."

Ajax gawped after her. "With me, it'd be a one-century stand. I'd suck the lentil seeds and Safeway sushi out of her death-metal asshole just to give her a big brown kiss."

"Probably ain't gonna happen, Ajax. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think she digs you."

"Yeah, well, fuck her. I'd slop my jizz right on her Marilyn Manson lipstick, and pee on her back for good measure. How do you like that whore talking to me like that?"

"Please," Dean urged. "Back to the point?"

"Yeah, the nightmare. Liquefied cattle waste." He gazed into his beer glass as if it were a crystal ball. "Tell me more about the details."

The details? Dean wondered. "Well, when you work on a ranch, cattle die. Sometimes disease, sometimes natural causes, sometimes accidents like that. And sometimes wow sometimes they'd die out in the grazelands, and we wouldn't know for several days. By the time we'd find them, they'd be bloated up like balloons."

"Balloons full of dead-cow gas."

"That's right. They'd balloon up in the sun to the size of VW's. And when the fork-lift'd scoop 'em up, they'd break wind. Man, it's the worse smell in the world."

"So what happened then?"

"Well, there are laws state health department, Department of Agriculture, DNR. If you're a rancher and one of your cattle dies, you have to report it to the government, send in blood samples to check for anthrax and hoof and mouth, then you have to call a rendering company to take the carcass away for proper disposal. But the thing is, these rendering plants charge, like, ten cents a pound, and when you're talking about an animal that weighs up to a ton and a half, that can work out to a lot of money. So we had our ways of...lowering the pickup cost."

Ajax seemed fascinated. "Ways?"

"Well," Dean admitted, "we'd use our own fork lifts and tractors to bring 'em back to the ranch but, then we'd take 'em to a special warehouse loaded with racks and draining trays, and we'd let them sit for a few days after...scoring their sides with a knife...and letting them...drain."

Ajax made a face.

"We'd let 'em rot for a few more days, and a lot of their bilge would drain off. Then we'd take the carcasses back out to the field, dump 'em, and call the rendering plant. They'd send a crew out to pick the carcass up, but by then it would weigh "

"A lot less," Ajax reasoned. "â€~Cos all that "

" liquefied rot would drain out of the animal," Dean went on. "We'd save fifty to a hundred bucks per carcass doing it this way. Independent ranchers have it hard enough. If the government can

cut legal spending corners by charging \$600 for Pentagon toilet seats and \$130,000 for custom leather couches on Air Force One so Bill Clinton can get comfortable blowjobs, hard-working ranchers can goddamn cut a few corners to stay afloat."

Ajax slapped the bar-top. "I like what I'm hearing! And all this time I thought you were a pinko lib!"

"Fuck Bill Clinton and his tax-and-spend democrat abortion," Dean declared. "It's the farmers and the ranchers that keep the United States the best-fed country in the world. The only President who didn't fuck us in the ass was Ronald Reagan."

"I like it!"

"Now we've got Bill Clinton and his clandestine regime urging U.S. farms and ranches to file bankruptcy so he can buy imported beef and farm goods from fucking Communist China in an under-the-table deal in exchange for political contributions to the Democratic National Committee."

Ajax stared bulge-eyed.

Dean waved a slack hand. "But that's all beside the point. We're not talking about Bill Clinton selling out his country. If it was a Republican president sexually exploiting a young White House employee and jerking off on her dress in the Oval Office library, the feminist movements would go apeshit and the press would bury him. But not Bill Clinton. He just made a simple error in judgment, so everything's okay. Never mind the ex-girlfriends who all wound up dead by 'suicide.' Never mind the Tyson Food scams, and never mind that Paula Jones passed a battery of polygraphs. It's all okay because it's Bill. It's all okay because inflation is low."

Ajax continued to stare bulge-eyed. "I-I-I...like it!"

"And that's not even to mention Vince Foster, who had a documented affair with Clinton's wife, and who was found conveniently dead in Fort Marcy Park with a revolver in his right hand but he was left-handed. That's not to mention NBC news deliberately cutting out the interview clips of Susan McDougal admitting to a sexual relationship with Bill, nor to the same liberal news blackout of Roger Clinton admitting that he was Bill's major coke supplier, who later referred to him as a 'Hoover vacuum' whenever cocaine arrived at the governor's mansion. But that's all beside the point, and so is MeÃ±a Airport and all the Arkansas State Troopers who passed repeated polygraph tests and Charlie Trie and Castle-Grande and the Lippo Group and no security clearances for Clinton's White House staff and Travel Gate and David Hale and 700 FBI files with Bill's fingerprints on them, and Whitewater records with Hillary's fingerprints on them, and all the other shit the press swept under the carpet. No, this isn't about any of that. This is

about my nightmare."

Ajax was dumbstruck. "See? More of the real Dean coming out."

Dean pushed the notion back. "The dream, Ajax. The nightmare."

Ajax took another hefty sip of the beer, winced. Then "This place you were talking about, where you drained the dead cows "

"Well, not just cows. Steers and bulls too. Whatever died in the field."

"Fine, fine. So where was this place?"

"On the ranch. It was just a processing warehouse, like any other. But this one was...secret."

"â€˜Cos you didn't want the authorities to know what you were doing in there. Letting the cattle rot a few more days, letting them drain, so you wouldn't have to pay full price to the rendering company."

"Right. We called it â€˜The Dump' and â€˜The Slop-Shop.' It was pretty gross. Sometimes you couldn't even walk in there without a gas-mask 'cos the air was so toxic."

"The Slop-Shop." Ajax reflected. "A place where you deliberately drained â€˜rendering bilge' from dead cattle." Then he drank more. "Can you remember the first time you saw the Slop-Shop? I mean, the very first time?"

"Well, yeah," Dean answered. "I was sixteen. I'd heard about it from some of the other field hands, so one day I simply decided to check it out for myself."

Ajax nodded, looking at him. "You were alone when you did this?"

"Well " Dean's thoughts ticked back. "No, no I wasn't. I took my girlfriend at the time."

"And would this girlfriend's name be Arianne?"

Dean's further thoughts stopped short. He gulped. "Yeah."

Ajax held his hands up as if full of mystical answers. "Then the answer's easy. Your nightmare was a classic symbol of systematized, reactive loss. Intervential and dissociative. It's textbook, man. It's in the DSM-III, the modern field guide for diagnostic and statistical mental disorders. You're a walking, talking case, Dean!"

Dean was not quite so elated. "Great. But what's it mean? What's my nightmare mean, Mr. Freud?"

"It's a calling back," Dean insisted as if it were obvious. "Your current domestic misery collided with the fruits of your past. The ultimate psychological inner struggle the real you fighting to break out of the encapsulation of urban life and conventional domestic order! Don't you see?"

"No," Dean said.

"You dreamed of rendering bilge pouring out of Arianne's pussy! The rendering bilge is the target-symbol of subconscious connectivity to your true love! Arianne!"

Was it? Wow, Dean thought.

"She was with you the first time you saw the bilge, and she was with you the first time you fell in love. She was the final common-denominator of the direction of your real life. Then you move away, and it all falls apart. You're sitting in the middle of the pieces every day."

Am I? Dean thought. Ajax was a long-haired, drunken fat slob...but this made sense.

"Want another beer, Porky?" the barmaid asked Ajax, "since you drained that one in what? Two minutes?"

"How about I drain my gila monster in your East African Rift cleavage?"

"Don't turn me on for nothing. You ain't got a gila monster, just a newt."

"You sure about that, Lydia Lunch? My dick's got teeth, baby, and it'd bite all that silly metal shit off your dumbass goth zombie lesbo commie face and fill up my nail box. Why don't you get a life instead of another skull tattoo and another pile of coke up your giant peninsula-sized nose? You oughta shake some of that yeast out of your satanic pussy and start your own microbrew."

"Hey, Knuckles!" the barmaid shouted over them. In one second, a four-hundred-pound bearded golem appeared, wearing a stained T-shirt that read I EAT AFTER-BIRTH FOR BREAKFAST.

"You know what I eat for breakfast, Abdullah?" Ajax posed. "Your mother. Bet I sucked out a couple of your brothers and sisters and swallowed 'em like aspirins. But what the hell? Fewer crack babies is a good thing, right?"

Ajax was grabbed by the collar and the back of the belt, and thrown out of the bar. Dean slapped

money onto the counter and followed the fracas out. On the street, he helped Ajax up. The wind of Lake Union abraded their faces.

"You really are the life of the party," Dean said once Ajax got back to his feet.

"Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke," Ajax murmured. "And that big-tit, pink-haired Ho chi Minh cum-guzzler? I wouldn't fuck her with a dead man's dick."

"Right, Ajax..."

"But I wouldn't mind peeing on her back."

"I hear ya."

They stumbled down the street, the water shimmering. "Let's go to another bar," Ajax suggested. "The Dubliner! They got a red-haired commie cooze in there waiting tables who's as skinny as a white stringbean. You know who I'm talking about. She looks like Scully...only skinnier. Man, I'd suck the venereal warts right off her cervical wall."

"I think it'd be better if I just drove you home now," Dean suggested.

"Whatever."

Eventually Dean guided Ajax to his car.

"Hey," Ajax drunkenly recalled. "There's one thing I forgot to ask you."

"And what might that be?" Dean asked.

"What did you do with the slop?"

"Huh?"

"The rendering bilge." Ajax wobbled against the passenger door. "All those gallons and gallons of putrefied waste, pus, discharge, and rancid blood? What the hell did you do with it? You had to get rid of it somewhere, didn't you?"

Dean stood stock-still by the driver's door, keys hanging on his finger. It didn't even sound like his own voice when he answered:

"We dumped it. Down the old gypsum mine. Right behind "

Seven

" right behind Stoddard's Mill!" the old biddy wailed. "That's where I saw it. This woman, buck nekit and black as the night, and she were standing there leadin' this monster by the hand! She were leadin' this monster down into the old mine shaft behind Stoddard's Mill. I knows it sure as I knows I saw my husband lose his legs in that tredder accident!"

"Now, now, Mrs. Codder," Sergeant A.T. Lass appealed, patting the old woman's bony shoulder. "We'll investigate thoroughly. Don't you worry one bit."

"Well ya better!" she cracked back in her split-timber voice. "â€˜Cos there's somethin'...there's somethin' a blammed fucked up going on out there behind Stoddard's Mill!"

"We'll check it out presently, ma'am," Lass' partner tonight, Oly Dodell, assured.

They left the wily old woman on the front step of her 14 x 64 Mini-Lux trailer, then stomped back to the DeSmet patrol car.

Dodell's crooked-toothed grin gaped over the top of the patrol car. "What'cha think, Sarge? Ya think ya could fuck the old bitch in a pinch?"

Lass shot an outraged expression right back at Dodell. "Come on, man! She's pushing ninety! Fuck, she looks like Granny on the Beverly Hillbillies."

"Yeah," Dodell agreed over the dopey shucks grin. "But could ya fuck her? Like in a real pinch?"

Lass was an officer of the law, and the last people he needed to be lying to were his own men. He traced his hand up his crotch. "Well...shit. Yeah, I guess I could. You know. In a pinch. I guess gash is pretty much gash when you get right down to it. One hairy hole is pretty much the same as another."

"Damn right, Sarge, and I'm glad ya pointed that out." Dodell slid into the passenger seat. They pulled away from the trailer. "It's all about comin', not about what'cha come in, right?"

Lass cruised past rows of rusted trailers and tiny yards filled with junk. "Well, yeah, I guess you could say that."

"I ain't ashamed to admit, I've fucked a sheep or two in my time. You?"

"Of course not!" Lass replied, but this was a bold-faced lie. He'd spent his whole growin'-up days getting his willy off in any manner of farm animal. But there were some secrets that were personal, so denying it wasn't really a lie, not as far as A.T. Lass saw it. "I ain't no pervert, Dodell."

"But it's like you were just sayin', one hole's the same as another. Your dick don't give a shit, long as it gets ta squirt." Dodell shrugged lackadaisically. "Shit, I ain't ashamed ta say I've fucked a few fellas in my time, too. No difference between a man's ass and a gal's. I mean, don't get me wrong, I ain't no homo, but if there ain't no pussy around, a man's bungler gets the job done just as pretty as you please."

Lass' face crinkled up. "You're shitting me?"

"Sure am not, Sarge. And I ain't ashamed. I've fucked men and I've been fucked by men. And I've had balls across my nose on more than several occasions. A mouth's a mouth, and a hole to put your dick in is a hole to put your dick in." Another shrug. "It ain't a queer thing, it's a reciprocal kind of thing."

"Reciprocal? What the hell are you talking about?" Lass demanded.

"Just friends takin' care of each other. Like last year's Alfalfa Festival Bull Roast. I went with my pal Kit Nuller. We had a ol' good time, good food, good beer, but by the end of it, there weren't no chicks left to pick up. But we were both horny as dogs so we said fuck it. I blew him, he blew me, no big deal. A friendship thing. One guy helpin' another guy out in his time of need."

Lass didn't like where this conversation was going. "You get your shift report written up? Don't forget the old lady."

"Sure, Sarge, but like I was sayin', comin' is comin'. For instance, if there weren't no available pussy and you were hard, I wouldn't have no problem with you fuckin' me in the ass, long as ya gave me a reach around. And if ya needed a quick blow job to take the edge off a hard day's work, why, I'd be happy to oblige."

"Look, Dodell, what you do in your private life is your business," Lass pointed out. "But I don't care how horny I was, the last thing I'd ever want to do is put my dick up your ass. Now shut up with that stuff. If any shit gets packed up my piss-hole, it ain't gonna be yours. It's gonna be a gal's."

"Well how about head? You know what they say about head, don't you?"

Lass scowled. "No, Dodell. What? What do they say about head?"

"Men give head better than women any day of the week, and it stands to reason. How can a woman know the best way to suck a dick when she ain't got one herself? Shit, I've had many a lousy blow job from gals but ain't never had a bad one from a guy. Half the time, gals don't know what the hell they're doin', rubbin' their teeth against your dick-skin, too much time on the knob but not enough on the pole, and they'll never suck your balls unless ya tell 'em too. But a guy? Think about it, Sarge. A guy knows. Shit, you don't know what a good blow job is, not till you've had your cock in a man's mouth. Don't knock it till you've tried it. Pretend it's a chick doin' it. Then you know ya ain't really queer."

Lass gnawed the inside of his cheek as he drove down Rural Route 2. He considered Dodell's points, and come to think of it, Lass was pretty horny. And there was no way Dodell would tell anyone Lass was his boss.

"All right," Lass said. "What the hell? A mouth's a mouth."

Dodell grinned in the dark car. "Knew you'd see it my way, Sarge."

Lass unbuckled his police pants, pulled out his dick. "You suck, I drive."

"That's a big 10-4, Sarge..."

Lass raised a quick brow once Dodell got to work. Dodell sucked hard and slow, with a mouthful of spit; Lass' knees wobbled. Damn, he thought. Then: Shit. Then: Holy fuck. Dodell gives some damn good head.

Dodell paused for a minute to suck his senior watch-commander's testicles, first one, then the other, then both. He picked up the tempo once he got back to the main course. Rhythmic sucking sounds filled the cruiser's interior as Lass' hips clenched, and then

"Aw-aw-aw...FUCK!"

he came in his subordinate's mouth.

Dodell took his time with the denouement, wringing out the final drops with expertise. Lass' cock turned to meat-putty.

"I stand corrected," Lass admitted, wiping his brow. "That was the best blow job of my life."

Dodell slipped his mouth off, then swallowed in a loud gulp. "Told ya. And nut don't taste nearly

as bad as ya'd think. You get used to it."

I'll bet you do.

Lass pulled over at the next turn, and suddenly gravel was popping under the tires. In the darkness, Stoddard's Mill loomed like a stark black-marble ruin. Seven dead kids they'd found thus far in the vicinity. What would they find tonight?

Lass stuffed his wet dick back in his pants and zipped up. "Grab the flashlights. Let's check this out."

Dodell babbled in disbelief. "Uh, wuh-well, Sarge?"

"What?"

"Ain't you got something to take care of first?" Dodell had his penis out. "Like we said? Reciprocal? Fellas takin' care of each other in their time of need?"

Lass laughed out loud. "Fuck you, ya goddamn homo. You think I'm gonna suck your dick, you're even dumber than I thought. You tell anyone, they'll never believe you, and I'll make goddamn sure you never work in law enforcement again. Shit, you won't even be able to get a job swabbing the floors at Barnett's Diner. Now put your dick back in your pants and grab the flashlights like I told you, you cum-swallowing dick-sucking queen."

"Aw, Jesus, Sarge!" Dodell rebelled. "That ain't right! I do for you, you do for me that was the deal!"

"The only deal is you suck my dick any time I tell you to, and you don't say shit. Homo. Fruitbar. Now get the goddamn flashlights unless you want your queer ass kicked from here clear to Canada."

"That's blackmail!" Dodell shouted.

"Yeah. Don't like it, do something about it." Lass' heavy chest rattled from the laughter. "Unass this car, Suzy. We've got work to do."

Lass got out, looking into the darkness. Dodell clumped out himself, flashlights clinking. He passed one to Lass.

"That's low-down, Sarge. That's a scumbag thing ta do."

"Uh-huh," Lass agreed. "And look at it this way, Liberace. The sooner we get this check-out finished, the sooner my dick's gonna be back in your yap."

Lass' big size-12 shoes crunched forward, gravel popping. Dodell followed. Ahead of them, the long-closed Stoddard's Mill seemed to grow as they approached, its silo tower spearing the night. They walked around behind the drooping edifice, and Lass scanned his Mag-Lite to and fro over the range where they'd previously found seven dead, gutted children.

Nothing tonight.

"Thank, God," Lass mumbled.

"What's that, Sarge?" Dodell asked.

"Shut up, queercakes. And keep your hand out of your pants. That old shriveled bitch Mrs. Codder said something about way behind the mill, near the old mine."

"She said she saw a monster," Dodell reminded.

"That's right, Elton. So let's check it out. Probably just a rummie cooping in the trees. We'll find him and beat his ass black and blue and be on our way. Go check around the right. I'll check the left."

They both parted. Their bright flashlight beams roved through the darkness. The woods rose before Lass. Lass stopped, cock throbbing.

Fuck. That was one doozy of a head job, he thought. He rubbed his crotch in recollection. I might have ta, I might

Lass was too aroused. He needed another nut bigtime. The follow-through and all that. Second nut's always better than the first. Dodell's footsteps could be heard crunching away.

No one would know.

Lass whipped it out in the dark, not thinking of Rachel Welch or Pamela Anderson but of Private Dodell's hot, balls-of-fire mouth. He shucked his stiff meat back and forth like skin on a fresh pork sausage, then raised up on his police tip-toes and

"Ooooooooo!"

He squirted his restless seed deep out into the night.

Man! he thought.

But no sooner had he replaced his penis into his trousers...he heard the smacking sound.

"The fuck?"

He switched his Mag back on, roved it to the left.

And stared.

What he was staring at was not another dead child but a veritable pile of dead children.

And, if the flashlight beam could be trusted, the child on the top a boy was still alive.

Quivering. Shuddering. Convulsing.

But still alive.

"Hold on, son!" Lass proclaimed. "I'll help ya!"

It was then, though, that Lass noticed just exactly where his plume of sperm had landed: in the boy's mouth.

"Aw, Jesus, kid. I'm sorry..."

The apology was hardly needed; the boy died a moment later, smacking Lass' sperm. He'd been gutted and gored, and so had the six other children who lay there between twin oak trees, stacked neatly as bags of heifer feed. This is DAMN fucked up! he thought. What the hell am I gonna do! I can't keep all these dead kids out of the papers!"

Dead kids were bad enough. But what about a dead cop?

That's what Lass found when he tromped off to the other side of the mill's rear. An old track-trail led down the cleared path, toward the head shaft of the gypsum mine that had been closed decades ago. Lass' bright flashlight scoured the space between the rusted rails, and he saw

Footprints? he wondered.

They were footprints, all right. But not human. They were

Hoofprints, he discerned. Like a bull's.

Ten feet further down the tracks, Lass found Dodell's body sprawled in the dirt. The best cocksuck in town was dead. The younger officer's chest had been ripped open, gored.

Lass was too scared to scream. Mindless, now, he turned and ran back to the cruiser, certain he would hear the manic hoofbeats following him. By the time he'd returned to the front of the mill, he was shaking feces out of his pant legs. He drove off, spinning wheels in gravel, and sitting in his own hot shit.

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Pasiphae exhaled the rich darkness, watching the idiot constable flee. Such fools, she thought. What has happened over the ages, to turn the world into this...folly? She was back now, that's all that mattered, and for however long, she would turn her hatred into blood, into screams, into the same wreckage that had summoned her return.

She drifted through the woods, a voluptuous oil slick, not moving around the trees but through them. Her footfalls made no sound, and not even the most minute branch snapped beneath her feet, not even a crisped leaf. But she was flesh too, she was real. She could smell and taste and feel, and in this she rejoiced.

Before her lay the pile of freshly dead children. As if to verify what she already knew that she was real she ran her slender black hand through the tilled gut of the child who lay on top. Her hand came away wet, and slicked with cooling blood. Her fingers fondled the small shriveled genitals, and then, out of the strangest curiosity, she leaned over and sucked on the little penis. Perhaps her own reality would bring the sprig of flesh back to life but, lo, that didn't happen. The thing remained tiny in her unearthly mouth, and all that it gave up were a few suckings of stale urine. Pasiphae spat it out.

No, here, in this domain, the dead stayed dead. But from hers?

Gods and goddesses never quite died. They just slept.

Pasiphae was fully awake now. And so was her son.

She traipsed back to the opening of the pit, its foulness wafting up like honeysuckles in a warm breeze. Moonlight shifted through the forest. In the entry stood her son, darkness snorting from his fierce nostrils, his manly naked body corded with muscle, glistening in pungent sweat. His cock stood up hard.

There was love in the monster's eyes.

She knelt before the monument of her own womb, and the grand seed of Minos. Then she lay back and spread her legs of night, gasping as her beloved snorted and humped her in the dirt. Her obsidian flesh clenched in orgasm, and then her hot beast-son drained his loins in her, jet after jet of semi-god sperm drooling into her midnight cunt.

When it was over, she embraced him, a black tear of joy in her eye. The huge flap of tongue lolled against her cheek. She stroked the muscled buttocks.

"Tomorrow, my son," Pasiphae whispered endearingly. "Tomorrow you'll have more food, and I'll have more death. Both of us will feast."

Then she kissed each of her son's great horns and sighed into the twilight.

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Eight

"I thought I told you to clean this dump!"

Daphne stood appalled in the open doorway, her bags in hand.

"I cleaned it," Dean said, lounging with his feet up on the couch.

Daphne dropped her bag. "It's a FUCKIN' SHIT-HOLE!" she bellowed. She left her luggage in the doorway, stomped upstairs.

Women, Dean thought. What pains in the ass. He glanced around. Dishes piled a foot high in the sink, the garbage can overflowing, empty beer bottles littering the floor. Looks clean to me, he thought and shrugged. Guess I better go straighten her out.

He swigged the last of his Hefeweizen, pitched the empty bottle to the floor, then went upstairs. "How was Chicago?" he asked. Steam poured out of the bathroom; the shower hissed.

"Huh?" Dean stuck his head in. "How was Chicago?"

"Leave me alone!" she yelled from the stall. "Clean the house!"

"How come you're taking a shower now? You just got home."

"I've got a regional merchandise meeting in an hour!" she wailed back. "I gotta pay the bills, remember? Now leave me alone and go clean the house!"

Dean nodded. That was about enough. He stomped into the bathroom, threw back the curtain, and grabbed Daphne not by the hair but by the face, and hauled her out of the stall. Water flew off her perfect-white skin, and her equally perfect breasts bobbed in terror. Her first shriek pierced his ears, but Dean put an end to that noise fast, with two solid right-crosses to the mouth. Whap-whap! Her pretty eyes went cockeyed, and now she was murmuring manically with blood smeared at her lips.

"So the house needs to be cleaned?" Dean asked, throwing his naked wife to the floor. "Well, how about the toilet? Let's see if it's dirty."

He got on his knees, then shoved her head into the commode. Gurgling noises spat upward.

"How's it look, honey? Clean or dirty?"

Her arms and legs flailed as she blew bubbles of terror in the toilet water. Dean's hand vised in her hair, holding her down.

"Think maybe you should lick it? That'd get it nice and clean, wouldn't it, sweetheart?"

He shoved her head in harder, with both hands now. The bubbles were literary bursting now; it looked like a full-tilt hot tub down there.

But then the bubbles stopped, and her naked body fell slack.

"Oopsie!" Dean remarked. "Goodness gracious what have I done?"

Daphne lay dead, her head hanging in the commode. Dean considered giving her a last poke but then said to hell with it. He'd been sick of that pussy a week after the honeymoon.

So instead of fucking her he simply pissed on her head, flushed the toilet, and went back downstairs for another brewsky

" it's a FUCKIN' SHIT-HOLE!" Daphne bellowed so hard little veins bulged at her temples. Dean was staring at her from the couch. He looked around and noticed the house was clean.

Just not clean enough, evidently.

By the time Dean's mind surfaced from this next and worst Jig-Jag, Daphne had already stormed

upstairs. But Dean remained frozen on the couch: in the Jig-Jag, he'd

I killed her, he recalled. I killed my loving wife!

He couldn't imagine what could spur such thoughts, but then he remembered all the things Ajax had told him. More and more, it seemed to all be true.

I guess I really need to get some help...

He made to get up, go and talk to Daphne, when the phone rang

"Hello?"

"Dean, this is Ajax. You need to "

"Ajax! I gotta tell you something," Dean rushed in. "I think maybe you're right about a lot of this. I just had the worst "

"Forget about all that," Ajax insisted. "Turn on CNN, right now!"

Dean kept the phone to his ear and he punched up the remote control.

A blond newscaster reeled off the short news-clip, " say authorities in the ranch town of DeSmet, South Dakota. Thus far, thirteen children have been found mutilated, along with a police officer and security guard "

"What the hell!" Dean declared.

"That's the place you grew up, isn't it?" Ajax said over the line. "DeSmet?"

"Yeah..."

Next, a video clip showed

"That's the old Stoddard Mill!" Dean exclaimed.

" in the vicinity of the old Stoddard Mill," the newscaster went on, "which officially closed in the early eighties. All of the bodies of the children have been found here as well as the body of the police officer. The first shocking murder, however, occurred when a security guard was found similarly mutilated on the property of DeSmet's largest cattle ranch " The next clip showed a place much familiar to Dean: the great sign in high sunlight which read WELCOME TO THE

LOHAN RANCH

"That's my dad's ranch!" Dean exclaimed.

"All of the deceased seemed to be victims of some kind of bizarre animal attack. State authorities will be stepping in to aid in this brutal crisis, which far surpasses the resources and capabilities of the modest, six-man DeSmet department headed by veteran sergeant A.T. Lass." On the screen, Lass' plump face appeared, his mouth like two twisting worms as he attempted to assert authority. "It's a horrible, horrible tragedy we got goin' here in our good town, but my department will do everything in its power to assist the state investigation squad which should be arriving shortly." Lass, then, inadvertently picked his nose before the TV news camera. "But one thing I need to impress upon folks is that this is a police matter, and the last thing any of us needs is citizens runnin' off and tryin' to kill the varmint on their own. It's an accident waitin' to happen, and we can't have a bunch of good ol' boys shooting at each other's shadows in the woods. This needs to be left to the proper authorities." The screen switched back to the blond newscaster. "After last night's grim discovery, rumors have abounded that male residents are in the process of arming themselves and venturing out into the woods to hunt down the vicious animal "

Dean sat locked in rigor as the shocking newscast ended.

"Ain't that some weird shit?" Ajax asked over the phone.

"I'll talk to you later," Dean stammered and hung up. Gotta call dad, his thoughts rushed. Gotta find out what's going on out there... He quickly dialed his father's number in South Dakota, but it wasn't Dean's father who picked up; it was Shirley, the Lohan housekeeper for the last thirty years.

Dean spoke, identified himself and asked about his father, but Shirley was hysterical, could not be understood through the gibberish of sobs.

"Shirley, please!" Dean insisted. "Get a grip on yourself! What's wrong?"

Eventually the woman became comprehensible. Choking back tears, she revealed, "Oh dear Dean it only happened a little while ago! Your wonderful father...he's in the hospital!"

Dean was gripped in dread. "The hospital? What for?"

"He's in a coma, Dean! They say he's going to die! Come home at once!"

No! Not Dad! Dean felt frantic, confused, shattered. "I'm grabbing the first flight out!" he told Shirley and hung up. Next he raced up the stairs, taking three steps at a time, barged into the

bedroom and began throwing clothes into a suitcase. Steam poured out of the bathroom; the shower hissed. Dean stuck his head in.

"Sweetheart? I'm-I'm sorry but " His lower lip trembled "I'm not going to be able to clean the house "

"Why not!" she shouted from behind the shower curtain.

"My dad's in a coma."

Her voice turned regretful. "Oh, Dean, honey. I'm so sorry."

"So I have to go back to DeSmet. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"Okay, honey. Have a good trip," she said and continued with her shower.

What a woman! Dean beamed. I knew she'd understand!

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Still rattled by the sight of his dead deputy Dodell (and the loss of a pre-eminent source of fellation), Sergeant A.T. Lass cruised down night-shrouded Main Street, frowning at its new-found desolation. Any other time, Main Street would be abuzz with hookers and dealers at this hour. But not tonight, he complained to himself. Everyone's off the street, sitting at home with their doors bolted. All afraid of the big bad wolf.

Diligent law-enforcement officers would approve of this sudden lack of skell, whores, and scumbags prowling the streets but less-than-diligent officers, such as Lass, saw it from a different angle. He wanted those dealers on their street selling their wares; he wanted those hookers turning twenty tricks a night because the first thing they did with their trick money was buy more crystal-meth. Lass had his fingers in those profits, and it was a big pie.

How am I gonna pay for my new Cherokee and pool table if this shit keeps up? he wondered.

That blond bitch newscaster didn't help improve his mood much, either. Made me look like a damn fool, he thought. Tellin' folks we need the damn state fuzz in here 'cos of our limited â€˜resources.' The fuckin' bitch!

That was the last thing Lass needed. To hell with the dead kids. Bunch'a state investigators got in here nosing around, they might easily find out about some of Lass' less than dutiful involvements.

Yeah, the blond bitch... Lass wouldn't mind taking her skinny ass around back behind the station and breaking up her pussy face with his billy. Then she'd be too ugly to be on TV. He could toss her to a pimp who'd have her ass turned in one day, out on the street earning cash.

Bitch, he thought a last time.

Couple of kids die in this shit-pit town and once it makes the national news, the whole country's going nuts. And only 'cos it's kids, Lass thought bitterly. And they don't give a hoot that each and every one of 'em wasn't nothin' but trailer park skell no ways. Bunch'a little white â€žgers raping ten-year-olds on the playground, quittin' school in the fourth grade to steal hub caps and CD players and prance around in their ball caps and baggy pants listening to that rap shit. Lass didn't get this Rap business, no matter what that pussy suck-face Hoiter said. To Lass it just sounded like a bunch of shit; all these players did was make up words that rhymed.

Lass, come to think of it, needed some real music now. Like some Reba or Bonnie Rait, or some of the good â€žol Dolly. He flicked on the console radio:

"Got the big dick itch, dig a motherfuckin' ditch, then my AOL glitch yo white bitch!"

Lass snapped it off, clacking his teeth. Obviously, Hoiter had fucked up all of Lass' pre-set stations. I'll fix his ass tomorrow. See how he likes scrubbing all the bum puke out of the drunk tank.

He idled down the back streets now. No action here, either. Just house after house and trailer after trailer with their shades drawn. Shut in. Scared.

Bad for business.

And now, to top it all off, those damn hayseed ranchers had to go out and get their asses killed too. I warned 'em, Lass congratulated himself. I warned 'em not to go fuckin' around out there. And look what happens.

Eight of them had met at Lohan's Ranch, and old Jake Lohan himself had been the one to rile them all up with shit like if the police couldn't protect their kids, they'd have to do it themselves. So they'd all grabbed their guns and run off in the woods like a bunch of perfect asses. Couple hours later, the rescue squad was hauling them out of the trees behind Stoddard's Mill in body bags. They'd all been gored right through their hearts.

The only one of them that lived was Jake Lohan but he was in a coma and looking like he'd be cold by morning.

I told 'em so, the dickbrains.

Lass cruised down more dark streets. This wasn't exactly routine patrol, of course. The main reason he was out tonight transcended his law-enforcement obligations. Lass needed a nut in a bad way. And it damn sure pissed him off that none of the whores were out plying their trade like they should be. Ordinarily, any time Lass got horny, all he had to do was pluck a gal off the street and pull it out. They weren't stupid, and they'd always swallow. To tell the truth, though, what Lass really wanted was another hum-dinger cocksuck from that closet-fairy Oly Dodell but there was no way that would be happening tonight, not unless Lass went to the morgue and opened Dodell's drawer.

Christ! Lass pawed his crotch. I need to get off!

His plight took him deeper and deeper into DeSmet's more remote roads. He turned at the corner of 38th Avenue and Auburn Street, thinking: Please, please! Just one fuckin' whore!

And by the time he'd finished the turn, his plea was answered.

Lass grinned. It was Arianne Zausner, the meth-freak who'd sucked his ass last week. Lass measured a woman's right to exist not by her contribution to society, nor her intelligence, but by her ability to suck ass. And Arianne Zausner got the highest mark in town.

He pulled over, stopped, and flipped open the passenger door.

"Aw, shit," she said. Her wan face looked half-dead already. "You're busting me again?"

"Simmer down, sweetie. Your good old Uncle A.T. isn't gonna arrest your dirty ass. It's just time to pay a little street toll. Don't forget about that break I gave you last week."

"Yeah, some break," she came back. "I got to lick the shit out of your asshole."

Lass' jaw set. He wasn't in the mood for back-talk, especially from a skinny dope-addict. "Don't make this hard, hon. You can get in and pay the toll, or maybe the next time you fire up a pipe, you'll get a lump of ammonia instead of ice."

The girl slumped into the cruiser, shut the door.

"That's a smart girl. And all this time I thought you had cum for brains."

She sat with her arms tightly crossed, chin down. Her bare legs sticking out of the faded cut-off

shorts looked white as a grouper-belly in the moonlight. "I need to cop bad," she admitted, shivering. "I need some ice. Like really bad."

"Well, I can't help ya there, baby," Lass announced from behind the wheel. "What happened to that bag I gave ya last week?"

"That was gone in two days."

"Not my problem." Lass found one of his hide-outs, a little snip of an old haulage trail. What didn't occur to him, however, was that this long-disused haulage trail was once an auxiliary access lane to the gypsum mine behind Stoddard's Mill.

He parked, let the car idle.

"I'll need twenty for this," she peeped a demand.

Lass laughed. "Honeybunch, you seem to be forgetting something. I don't pay for blowjobs. I'm The Man. I'm John Law. You suck my dick for free whenever I tell you to."

"Okay, a ten!" she nearly shrieked. "I need to cop some ice!"

"Well then I guess you need to walk your dirty ass to Callisto and buy some from Leonard."

She shrieked again, "I can't buy with no money."

"Then I guess you need to peddle that junkie fuck-hole of yours a little harder, huh?"

"There's no johns out! There's no tricks! Nobody's cruising the strip because of the killings! Goddamn you! I need to score!"

Lass nodded in consideration. "Okay, I'll give you ten, but this is the only time, understand?"

Suddenly her hands were on him, she was practically panting. "Yes, yes! Thank you "

"Here's five," he said placidly, and then jerked around and punched her in the face. The collision of his fist to her cheek sounded like wet-leather snapping. "And here's another five..." A second blow caught her right up under the chin. Her head bobbed like a ball on a spring.

"There's your ten, whore," he said. He unzipped his fly, pulled out his cock and balls. "Now, unless you want your skinny body to be found by hunters five years from now, you make nice to Big Mack and the Twins."

He forced her face to his groin. Frothing blood, she replied, "That looks like a penis...only smaller. Big Mack and the Twins, huh? More like Little Twig and the Peas."

Lass frowned. What was wrong with people? Was everyone crazy? His right hand grabbed her throat and squeezed down as effectively as a hose clamp. She convulsed; no gagging sounds could be heard for the force with which he choked her. Her thin faced darkened very quickly, robbed of all blood, and then he forced her head to his lap. The action spurred a spontaneous erection; with his left hand, then, he masturbated. His chest heaved. It didn't take long. Soon his sperm was smearing her mulberry-dark face.

When he was done coming, he released her throat. Arianne flinched back in the seat, her desperate inhalations literally shrieking into her throat.

"See what happens when you sass the Law, young lady?"

She continued to suck the life-breath back into her.

"But, see, some of you cum-pots are just too damn ungrateful for your own good," Lass continued. "You don't know no manners and never will. So what I'm sayin', hon, is that you are one stinky junkie this town can sure as shit do without. Think of it as a public service " and with that, Lass' fist turned in her hair and grabbed a handful. He dragged her squealing from the car, dragged her around in the dirt and rocks awhile, then slipped out his black-walnut billy club with his free hand. "Time to turn your head into Kibbles â€˜N' Bits, snookums. Don't worry, someone'll find your skeleton someday. â€˜Oh, what a tragedy! Local prostitute killed by drug dealers! What a mean, nasty world! Bad bad world!""

As Lass had been pulling the girl from the car, however, her foot had inadvertently hit the radio knob, snapping it on.

"A damn fine day, what can I say? Killed some motherfuckin' cops wiff my AK "

Lass raised his nightstick, prepared to first crush the bridge of her nose and then whip her junkie brain to puree

The radio blared on: "Dah motherfuckin' cops, bunch'a motherfuckin' clowns, put the white motherfuckers deep underground!"

The music beat on but before Lass could land his first blow, a maniac blur rushed him, and suddenly he was screaming blood like a water fountain out of his mouth. Some monstrous shape had rushed him, rammed him, and next he was hoisted high off his feet by what felt like a pair of

stainless-steel meat-hooks sunk deep in his chest. Lass' arms and legs pinwheeled in mid-air as more blood fountained outward, splattering, and some final thread of reasoning left in his brain deduced that he'd just been gored by a very large bull.

Lass dangled limp. A moment before he died, he looked down and saw that the bull stood on two legs.

| |

Nine

Harney Peak, the state's highest mountainous peak, drifted below the 737's oval window. Dean peered out in something like awe. Of course, he'd seen it before many times but somehow it felt different now. As he continued to gaze out the minuscule window, Dean felt home whispering to him, an eerie notion since home was the place he'd fled with the utmost determination not so many years ago.

Beside him sat Ajax, complaining about not being able to smoke. Given all that Dean had psychologically experienced over the last week, he needed Ajax' counsel for the trip; that's why Dean had sprung for the extra round-trip fare for his sullied friend.

"Don't you own any decent clothes?" Dean asked, smirking at Ajax' holey jeans, beat loafers, and the stained, Wermacht-gray jacket with rips down the inner sleeves,

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Ajax asked, truly dismayed.

"Never mind."

"But thanks for bringing me along. I need a vacation."

"This isn't a vacation, Ajax. My father might be dying. Something really strange is happening in town, and considering the really strange things that have been happening to me, lately, I need you."

"Consider me your personal psycho-therapist," Ajax assured. Then he rubbed his face in aggravation. "Since when can't you smoke on planes?"

"Since about fifteen years ago."

"Fascists. Some free country. I'll bet Bill Clinton smokes on Air Force One while some subjugated and thoroughly exploited female White House aide smokes his "

"That's enough, Ajax."

The three-hour flight passed in what seemed minutes, along with the beautiful landscapes below. Dean's eyes kept dragging back to the window. It wasn't so much the landscapes he was seeing as much as it was his past. He wondered what else he'd be seeing once he got

Home, he thought.

They landed in Sioux Falls, rented a 4x4, and several hours later were pulling into the visitor's lot at DeSmet General Hospital.

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The heart-monitor beeped all too slowly. When he stepped into the wanly lit room and parted the privacy curtain, Dean's heart slowed to a rate less than the monitor's when he looked down. The figure on the bed looked dead already.

"Dad?" he choked out the single, simple word. Indeed, Dean thought that his father must be dead, until he remembered the heart monitor. Gray whiskers speckled his father's chin; long grayer hair sprawled over the pillow. Long lines from dangling IV bags drooped to a variety of needles sunk into his bone-thin arm. The worst sight, though, were the great swathes of bandages plastered across the entirety of Jake Lohan's chest.

Dean stared for a long time.

Gored, he thought. That's what the ward nurse had told him. "They're saying it was a mad bull out in the woods," she'd clarified. "Your daddy was the only survivor of the entire shooting party. Combination of initial blood-loss and shock's what put him in the coma. God forbid, if your daddy dies...no one'll ever know what really happened out there."

The rest of the information was just as sketchy. His father and several other local men had gone out to the vicinity where over a dozen children's bodies had been found, around Stoddard's Mill. They'd gone out there with guns and were all crack shots. All their ammunition had been expended yet no "wild bull" had been recovered. Just a bunch of dead men and one man Dean's father clinging to life.

The whole thing was crazy. Dean couldn't imagine it. The nurse had also told him that his father had not yet surfaced from the coma, and that there was a fair chance he never would.

He's dying, Dean reasoned, a tear in his eye. He's as good as dead now.

Dean didn't know how long he stood there looking. "Dad? Dad?" he kept saying over and over again. "It's me, it's Dean. I'm home," but the only reply was the faltering beep of the monitor.

"I'm sorry but visiting hours are over," the nurse came in and said. "Try to wrap it up in a few minutes, okay, hon? You can come back tomorrow at eleven." Then she'd left as quickly as she'd arrived, kind enough to give him a few more minutes.

"It's me, Dad," he repeated to the still, sheeted figure. "I'm home."

Nothing. His last minutes ticked by, then Dean turned to leave.

"You're home," a voice rattled behind him.

"Dad!" Dean rushed to the bed, hovering, gripping his father's hand. "I'm here! Let me get the nurse! You're going to be all right!"

"No time." Jake Lohan's mouth barely moved as the words leaked out. "Something's here "

"I know, they told me. Stoddard's Mill "

"No!" the old man cracked in a gust. He winced in pain. "Behind Stoddard's Mill..."

Behind? Dean thought. "But, Dad, there's nothing behind the mill except " Then he caught himself, remembering his childhood. Dean and his friends, as kids, had regularly escaped behind Stoddard's Mill to flip through their stash of Playboy's and chew tobacco and talk about girls. Yes, Dean and Kit and Darrell and Boner. And come to think of it

The old gypsum mine, he remembered now. More memories flashed back. The old mine had been closed for longer than he could remember, but no one had ever boarded up the gaping entry to the main shaft.

The mouth of the old gypsum mine had been the secret place where they'd illegally dumped all of the ranch's rendering bilge. They'd even dumped whole dead cattle down there when they could get away with it.

"The mine," Dean said to his father.

Jake Lohan squeezed his son's hand in acknowledgment, nodding feebly. Then the parchment-dry voice creaked on: "My boy. My fine strong son finally come back to the roots of his blood."

"Never mind that, Dad," Dean whispered fiercely. "What happened? You've got to tell me what happened out there!"

"Evil," his father croaked like a frog. "That's what's happenin' out there, son. I've a mind to tell ya to catch the next plane and git your ass out'a here."

"I can't do that, Dad. Not while you're like this. And what did you say about "

A pained cough ripped from Jake Lohan's bandaged chest. "It's blammed fuckin' evil is what' I'm sayin', son. I know it is...'cos I saw it."

Dean leaned closer. "What, Dad? What did you see?"

But his father was already fading back out, his grip loosening. Then, in a course exhalation that was nearly inaudible, he said, "Only you can save us, son..."

Jake Lohan fell back into the smothering embrace of his coma, perhaps forever.

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"Sorry about your dad, man," Ajax said on the ride back.

Dean didn't reply, keeping his eye on the darkening road. He didn't want to talk, not now. He was too confused, and Ajax seemed to understand this. What Dean needed was distraction, not focus, and like magic Ajax provided it, when a souped '72 Chevelle soared by in the oncoming lane.

"Oh, man!" Ajax railed. "Did you see the blond hunk'a box in that Chevelle?"

"That was Judy Nesher," Dean remarked aside.

Ajax shot a funky glance. "You know her?"

"Know her? I fucked her in high school. Does the term 'screamer' mean anything to you?"

"Shit, man! You fucked that piece of work? And you left this town?"

Dean shrugged. "She's a pig. I'd only fuck her when I didn't feel like jerking off."

"What a fuckin' stud!"

"Actually, her mother's a lot hotter."

"You fucked her mother?"

"Yeah," Dean admitted as though it were an inconsequential matter. "A threesome fucked both their brains out on the kitchen table where Mrs. Nesher was making deviled eggs for the homecoming party. Shit, between the two of 'em, I don't know which was louder: Judy, her mom, or a rock in a gearbox."

"What a fuckin' stud!" Ajax repeated in awe.

After a quick glance, Dean decelerated, then pulled a screeching U-turn. Next, the 4x4 was pulling into the gravel parking lot of a long roadside bar. A gaudy neon sign blinked: GORTYN'S WOODLAND TAVERN.

"Gorty's," Dean said under his breath. He idled around the parking lot, then backed into a distance space.

"Dynamite," Ajax celebrated. "I could use a beer but...why are you parking way over here?"

"We're not going in. I just want to see who's here."

Ajax flicked a cigarette out the window and lit another. "Earth to Dean's brain? Best way to see who's inside is duh to walk inside."

"You don't understand," Dean sniped back. "I can't just walk into Gorty's and have a beer."

"Why?"

"I'm Dean Lohan," Dean said. "That's why."

Ajax frowned at the reply but before he could say anything, he caught a glimpse of another hot blond walking toward the front door. "Shit! Look at that slice of meat "

"That's Mary Cotten."

"A brick motherfuckin' shit-house "

"I fucked her," Dean admitted. "But then I shit-canned her the next day 'cos she shaves her pussy."

Ajax gawped at him. "You "

"I don't like all that shaved shit, and that racing-stripe shit. I wanna fucking fistful of hair down there. I want sod." Dean paused, pointing at the long tavern window. "See the tall redhead, in the Danzig T-shirt?"

"Oh, you mean the one right there stacked like Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Yeah. That's Chrissy Croner. I fucked her."

Ajax was flabbergasted.

"She was an ass-fuck freak. She'd give herself an enema every time I came over."

"How long did you date her?"

Dean's face crinkled in objection. "I didn't date her, I just fucked her in the ass a bunch of times. I'd never date a girl like that. She wears too much makeup."

"Are you shitting me, man? Hell, I'd eat her makeup!"

"She's a trailer hog. I ain't got time to hold hands in the fuckin' park." Dean whipped out a can of Skoal and dipped a pinch. "All these girls out here? They're skoads."

"Skoads?"

"They're fuck-pigs, Ajax "

"Oink, oink "

"And they ain't worth a guy's time except the time it takes to punch their holes and slam the door in their whiny faces." He pointed again. "See the brunette over there by the pool table?"

Ajax squinted. "Yeah...and I just came in my pants. Let me guess? You fucked her."

"I fucked her," Dean said. "I'd pin her feet back behind her ears and fuck her so hard she'd sound like a dog-toy being stepped on. She was a good nut...but then I got sick of listening to her talk. She wouldn't get the message, so I started beating the shit out of her...but she still wouldn't leave. Said she loved me, said I was the best thing to ever happen to her. One night I kicked her in the head so hard she was out cold for the next twelve hours. When she came to, she sucked my dick."

Ajax could do nothing gawp at him.

"Women are fucked up," Dean continued. "The harder you kick their asses, the more they love you. See that life-support for a pussy hanging by the bowling machine? That's Tina Blacker "

"She's hotter than the lid on a wood stove," Ajax drooled.

"Yeah, and she had a pussy tighter than a frog's ass. But she got too clingy, you know what I mean?"

"No," Ajax said.

"And she was a motor-mouth; she wouldn't shut up. One night when I was â€˜faced, I just got sick of it and broke a plank over her head. When she got out of the hospital, did she press charges? Fuck no. She begged me to marry her, threatened to kill herself if I said no."

"What did you say?"

"No," Dean said. "I didn't have time for all that lovey-dovey psycho-tramp bullshit. I told her if she killed herself, I'd go to her funeral...if I wasn't busy."

"What a motherfucker!" Ajax proclaimed.

"That's right. Feel 'em, fuck 'em, and forget 'em. That was my philosophy back in the old days. So two months later, Tina calls me up and says she's pregnant, says it's mine, but I know she's been fucking my best friend Paul for the expressed purpose of getting knocked up and trying to tag me with it. So I tell her to stick an ice-pick up her hole and prick the kid out into the toilet, then she starts screaming and cuts her wrists. The only bad part is she didn't die. Spent a couple years in the state ward, and here she is back again, trawling for cock at the bar."

Ajax looked exhausted from the shock of what he was hearing. "Man, you fuckin' ranch-boys are hardcore woman-hating pieces of shit."

"Yeah...and I was the biggest piece of shit of them all," Dean said. "So now you understand why we can't go into the bar. Half the girls in there would want to kill me, the other half would want to marry me. That's just the way it is. I ain't just some guy walking the street in DeSmet. I'm Dean Lohan. And that name is bad news in this berg, buddy."

Ajax's astonished stared never lightened. It took full minutes for him to speak again. He cast a last hard squint at the tavern windows. "Let me guess," he said. "You've fucked every girl in that bar."

Dean roved his own squint across the windows. "Yeah."

"What a fuckin' stud!"

Dean started the engine back up, then pulled out of the parking lot. "They all look real good," he said, "sure. But after a couple of pops, they ain't nothing but wet slits. Upside down in the snow, it all looks the same. It's just a hot hole attached to a yammering mouth that won't shut up. Fuck it. Who needs the headache?" Dean paused to spit out the window. "Here's a question: What's the best way to make a woman have an orgasm?"

"What?"

"Who cares?" Dean laughed aloud. He tromped the gas and spun wheels out of the lot.

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The first tints of dusk were touching the sky when Dean turned off onto the long familiar service road lined by perfect endless hedge-rows. The grasslands beyond shimmered a deep, fecund green, wavering in breezes which skimmed up the rolling hills. The road wound upward, and soon the perfect hedge-rows gave over to perfectly spaced sassafras trees a hundred feet high.

"This is some scenery," Ajax remarked, gazing out past the road. By now his gawp had practically become a permanent facial feature.

"It's beautiful land, and about forty thousand acres of it belong to us."

"Jesus. That's a shitload of real estate."

Eventually the road led up to the highest hill and Dean was pulling around a plush cul-de-sac appointed with statues, a fountain, and more meticulously trimmed hedges.

"Here's my old digs," Dean said and parked.

Before them loomed the Lohan mansion.

"Digs?" Ajax remarked. "It looks like something on Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. You never told me you were a millionaire's kid."

They got out and carried their luggage to the house, passing the gushing marble fountain. "The Lohan Ranch is the biggest and most productive ranch in the entire state," Dean said. "My father had the mansion built in 1980. He made five million in net profit that year."

Ajax just gasped.

Great stone columns, like those of a southern plantation house, fronted the wide three-story edifice whose outer brick walls were now almost festooned completely with sheets of ivy. Higher, cement verandas jutted from the mansion's face, and warm light glowed behind high casement windows. Slate-topped steps led to the wide double doors sided by polished-granite blocks which gave perch for lazing stone lions.

When Dean opened the ornate front doors, he was at once greeted by a bosomy, well-rounded woman of indeterminate age wearing a bland housedress and with long ink-black hair streaked with gray.

"Oh, Dean, it's so wonderful to have you back!" she gushed and hugged him unmercifully.

"Hi, Shirley," Dean hugged back. "We've just come from the hospital "

"How is he?"

"In and out, I guess," came Dean's dispirited reply. "Oh, this is Ajax, my friend from Seattle. Ajax, Shirley. She keeps the house in order."

"Nice to meet you," Ajax said, his eyes struggling away from the woman's packed bosom. Her big tits wobbled beneath her top when she shook Ajax' hand.

Did the woman wink? "Very nice to meet you. Such fine boys, both of you. Why don't you get yourselves settled, while I tend to dinner."

They parted in the sumptuous foyer, Ajax carrying the suitcases behind Dean. Dark cherrywood paneling, genuine Persian carpets, and antique furniture filled the mansion's interior. A high chandelier threw sparkles of warm light as Dean led Ajax up the wide, curving stairwell.

"Did you catch that?" Ajax whispered.

"Catch what?"

"Shirley winked at me. She thinks I'm hot."

Dean winced. "Ajax, she's in her sixties. It would be like fucking your grandmother."

"If my grandmother had tits like that...I'd fuck her."

"You've got to be the most perverted person I've ever known," Dean commented on the second-floor landing.

"Perverted? Me?" Ajax countered.

"You want to fuck an old lady, you want to pee on girls' backs, and the other night you stuck a pair of my wife's panties into your pants."

Ajax scratched his chin in genuine contemplation. "Yeah? So what's the perverted part?"

"Here's your room." Dean showed him in. A four-posted bed, framed oil paintings hundreds of years old, dormer doors which opened to a high veranda.

"Jesus. It's the Lincoln Bedroom. Do I gotta give you campaign funds to sleep here?"

"My room's right next door. Let's get cleaned up for dinner."

"Great, I'm starving. I could eat a well, I could eat your housekeeper if you want to know the truth."

"In that case, I don't want to know the truth."

"Hey " Suddenly Ajax looked quizzical as he prepared to pass Dean his suitcase. "You got cinderblocks in here? This suitcase is heavy as a motherfucker."

"All I packed was some clothes." Dean hefted the suitcase with a look of dismay. "You're right, it is heavy," he concurred. Then he shook it and heard a heavy clack. "What the..." He opened the suitcase on the bed, fished through his clothes, then slowly pulled out

"What the hell did you bring that for?" Ajax asked.

Dean was holding his old pair of horn-crankers. He looked wide-eyed to Ajax and admitted in a slow drone, "I honestly don't remember putting them in the suitcase."

"Terrific," Ajax complained. "More memory blackouts. Shit, I thought sure that would all stop once you got back home."

"But why on earth would I bring my horn-crankers?"

"Something in your subconscious," Ajax posited. "Or I should say something in your fucked-up

subconscious."

Dean felt an itch of dread in his gut. This was getting serious. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should see a shrink."

"No maybes about it."

"Maybe I should call Daphne "

Ajax's face went creased in a scowl. "That's the dumbest thing you could do. If she's the catalyst to your fragmenting personality, the only way to know for sure is to avoid contact with her and see what happens."

"But-but," Dean stammered. "She'll be worried about me, she'll be "

"Forget it," Ajax said. "Besides, she's probably at a work meeting right now."

But before Dean could further object, Shirley's distant voice called out from downstairs: "Boys! Boys! Come right away! More children have disappeared!"

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The 54-inch Magnavox television screen filled the darkened parlor with throbs of color. The three of them stood aghast as the local news channel related the latest details of the crisis. "...as another name is added to the otherwise quiet town's staggering body count," a brunette in a smart burgundy coatdress spoke stoically into a microphone. Behind her, state police investigators milled about in the woods, making way for a pair of EMT's bearing a covered stretcher. "Veteran DeSmet Police Sergeant A.T. Lass was found dead early this morning in a wooded clearing off Auburn Street and 38th Avenue, the victim of what local medical officials can only describe as a 'goring' by a wild, horned animal. Thus far, eight men and thirteen children have been found dead by the same brutal means."

"Jesus," Ajax muttered.

The brunette newscaster continued, "But what baffles investigators further is that nearly all of the dead children appear to have been abducted before meeting their death, which seems to connect some manner of human involvement with the animal attacks. And to make matters compoundedly worse, local single mother Mitzy Rundstedt of the Callisto-Brownsroad Trailer Park, hysterically reported to state police that her infant twins, Ryan and Geoff, disappeared from her home earlier this afternoon. The Rundstedt Twins are only ten months old. Tune in at ten o'clock for updates of this terrible tragedy. From DeSmet, South Dakota, this is Laura Von

Paulus, KSKY News."

Shirley gripped Ajax' arm. "What a horrible thing! Those poor adorable little twins!"

Ajax put a consoling arm around the buxom housemaid. "We can only hope the police'll find them before "

"Before it's too late," Dean finished. He changed channels, searching for more coverage, then found another quick clip on CNN: " described as the worst tragedy to befall the unassuming town of DeSmet, South Dakota," a narrator was saying. First came a still photo of the Rundstedt Twins, smiling up toothlessly and wielding rattles from their cribs. Then a clip of the mother, pallid, tears streaming down her thin meth-tramp face: "My poor little babies! Please, bring back my babies!" and lastly a live cut to the most recent crime scene where the fine and upstanding Sergeant Lass had been found gored and crushed. A white van was parked before the trees, and men roamed about in windbreakers that read STATE POLICE FORENSICS UNIT on their backs. The narrator returned, "Today, police crime-scene examiners were dispatched to search for clues but, as bad luck would have it, tonight's impending thunderstorm will likely wash away any tangible evidence "

Dean turned off the set, horrified himself by what was taking place in his hometown. His mind whirled with names, places, sights, and sounds which all melded together to form the picture of the DeSmet he'd always known. But now the picture was different, soiled and flecked with dirt.

Shirley, in her grief, didn't seem to notice the distance that Ajax' hand had traveled down her back. "It's like some evil spirit has infected our goodly town," she half-sobbed. "A devil. God in Heaven, who could do such a thing? Who could ever want to bring harm to those lovely babies?"

Evil, Dean recanted in his mind. A devil. But she was right, something had come to DeSmet and was taking bites out of it. A maniac seething in insanity? A pagan cult sacrificing children to some imagined horned deity? A real devil, if such things could be real? It didn't matter which. They were all the same.

"Shirley, don't bother fixing dinner for us," Dean announced. "We're going out there, right now."

"We are?" Ajax asked, with more complaint in his voice than query.

"But, Dean!" Shirley gibbered away. "You can't! It's too dangerous!"

"We'll be fine, Shirley," Dean assured, drawing out the car keys. "I just want to check the place out before the storm rolls in. Come on, Ajax."

Ajax reluctantly withdrew his consoling arm from around Shirley.

"Be careful, boys!" Shirley's big tits wobbled as she waved after them.

Dean and Ajax went out the front door and down the slate-topped steps to the cul-de-sac. "Aw, man," Ajax griped. "I was getting wood. She thinks I'm hot. I was moving my hand down her ass and all she did was squeeze me tighter."

"Ajax, we're here on business," Dean reminded. "You're not supposed to be feeling up the housekeeper."

"I wasn't feeling her up. I was consoling her. I was imparting solace to her obvious state of unease."

"The only thing you were imparting was your hand up her ass." Dean unlocked the 4x4. "You were pawing on her like she was a prom date. For God's sake, Ajax. She's an old lady."

"An old lady's head on Shannon Tweed's body. Fuck. My dick's leaking."

They got in and drove back out the service road, Ajax shaking his head all the way. "And what's this shit about a storm? The sky was crystal clear when we drove up."

Over the next hill, thunder rumbled. "Welcome to South Dakota," Dean said. "Storms sneak up fast. You can be out working the fields with the sun beating on your back, and five minutes later it's pouring rain and you're dodging lightning." Even as he spoke, churning black thunderheads, like an abyssal surf, began to consume the twilight.

"So where are we going?" Ajax asked. "Your dad's ranch?"

"No. The woods along Stoddard's Mill, where the cop was killed last night. 38th and Auburn that's what they said on the news."

"Fine, but what are we gonna do?"

"I just...want to...see something," Dean cryptically replied.

Twenty minutes later, they were there, idling slowly down the unlit street. Trailers and salt-box houses lined the left side of Auburn, while all that flanked the right side was the forest. Dean kept his eyes peeled as Ajax smoked. At the corner of 38th, Dean pulled to a stop.

"Just as I thought," he murmured.

"What? The woods?"

Nudged into the woods, a small clearing could be seen, and woven within it, yellow police cordons flapped in the rising wind. "That's where they found the cop's body," Dean projected.

"Uh-huh. But that still doesn't explain why we're sitting here instead of having a nice home-cooked meal at your mansion."

"All of the dead kids were found near Stoddard's Mill," Dean explained. He pointed. "That's just east of here."

"Fine. East of here ain't here," Ajax reasoned.

"At the hospital my father said something. He said that he was attacked near the old gypsum mine, which is right behind Stoddard's Mill."

That seemed to ring a bell even in Ajax' nicotine-sodden, sex-crazed brain. "What a minute. The night we got kicked out of the bar "

"We didn't get kicked out of the bar," Dean refreshed his friend's memory. "You got kicked out of the bar."

"Right, but that night, didn't you tell me that you used to dump the rendering bilge from dead cattle into "

"The gypsum mine, yes. Hell, if a cow or steer died at night, we'd throw the whole carcass down there. Must be thousands of gallons of rancid bilge down that shaft, and hundreds of rotten cattle. We'd even dump the extracted horns down the mine. Thousands of them, tens of thousands."

"Sweet. But I still don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Don't you think it's a little odd?" Dean asked.

"I think it's a little odd that we're sitting here on the brink of a thunderstorm when we should be chowing down at your pad and I could be goosing your housemaid."

Dean smirked at his friend's incognizance. "You're telling me it's coincidence? Eight men and over a dozen kids, all gored to death by an animal with horns. All near the old gypsum mine, and the old gypsum mine just happens to be the illegal depository for...what?"

"Dead cattle, dead cattle bilge, and dead cattle horns," Ajax calculated.

"Right. And that bothers me."

Ajax looked at him askance. "What do you mean?"

Dean felt his teeth grinding together. What did he mean? It was just something that bothered him, not by any avenue of logic. It was deeper than that. It was a ghost's whisper, or an idea seen on the surface of a rippling brook. It was an abstraction he could not decrypt. Yeah, he thought. All this from a guy who's probably got a split-personality. He wearily rubbed his face, and when his gaze inched back up the windshield

His bones turned to ice. "FUCK!" he shouted. "LOOK!"

"WHAT!" Ajax shouted in startlement.

"Right there! Look! A woman!" Then Dean jumped out of the vehicle and crazily dashed into the woods. Ajax huffed after him.

"I saw her! Right here!" Dean was nearly shrieking when Ajax caught up. They stood just a few yard beyond the dell, amongst stands of pine and maple trees.

"You saw who?" Ajax asked.

Dean simmered down, pressing his fists to his thighs. "A woman," he said more calmly. "She was standing right here, looking right at us."

"Uh-huh. A woman. Standing in the woods." Ajax lit another cigarette, spewed smoke. "Well, what did this woman look like?"

"She " Dean's thoughts stumbled. How could he say it? "She was...dark."

"Dark? A black woman, you mean."

"No. Dark like...smoke. Like wood-smoke."

Ajax gave him a long look.

"But she was real!" Dean insisted. "Fictile darkness, tangible black ether something from the cosmos, I think."

Ajax' long look got longer fast.

"She was naked, grinning at us as she ran her hands up her breasts. But her eyes glowed, like smudge-pots. She was she was...a personification of evil."

Ajax nodded, stroking his beard. "Uh...huh."

"And then I ran right up to her and...she disappeared."

"Got'cha."

Dean grimaced. It was no use. He knew how crazy he must sound but damn it! he also knew what he saw.

"Look Dean, you're under a lot of stress with your dad being in the hospital and all, and "

Before Ajax could go on, though, the rumbling storm clouds overhead broke wide open, and an instant later, rain fell in sheets. They ran back to the 4x4 and fell into it, drenched. The vehicle rocked when they slammed the doors shut.

Ajax didn't say anything; he just shook his head, the wet cigarette still sticking out of his mouth.

"I know it sounds crazy," Dean confirmed, "but that's what I saw. There was a woman in the woods."

"Yeah, fictile darkness. Tangible black ether from the cosmos. Why, she was even the very personification of evil.... You know, Dean. They have medication for things like this. Now...can we just go home?"

Dean pulled off, the wipers thumping. The rain fell so hard it diluted all view out the windshield. Dean could only accelerate a few miles per hour to keep from driving off the road. The only saving grace was the lightning, which alternately illuminated the roadway with its fulgent whiplashes of light. The rain fell so hard, in fact, that it was nearly deafening inside the cab.

When Dean turned the corner onto Main Street

"FUCK! LOOK!"

he slammed the brakes and fishtailed to a stop on the gleaming asphalt.

"What now?" Ajax bellowed.

"There...was a woman in the road," Dean said.

"And let me guess. She was fictile darkness, she was tangible black ether "

"No, no," Dean said. "Just a woman, lying in the road." He jumped out of the truck. This time Ajax didn't bother getting out. Why waste another perfectly good cigarette? But ahead of him, in the deluge, he could see Dean bending over in the headlight beams, as if to pick something up in the road. And a moment later he trudged back, popped the back door, and slid something into the seat.

Ajax turned on the dome light, then craned around and looked into the back seat. "Holy shit! It is a woman," he saw.

It was a woman indeed who lay across the seat, sodden with rain, shoes long gone, lank hair hanging in drenched strings over her face. Skinny legs and wet cut-off jeans, lemon tits beneath the trashy colorless halter. She looked emaciated, white as an embalmed corpse.

"Is she dead?" Ajax asked.

Dean pressed two fingers to her throat. "No, thank God. She's got a pulse."

Then Dean pushed the wet clots of hair out of her face. He gasped.

"Oh holy Christ," he guttered, his eyes wide as an owl's. "It's Arianne."

| |

Ten

Pasiphae slipped through the teeming night, the cleansing rain running in rivulets down her stygian breasts. More rivulets tickled her underworld pussy, and summoned radiant sensations right up through her subcarnate guts. She passed through the trees, indeed, like smoke, yet any living thing she passed bugs, tree frogs, small mammals died in her poisoned wake.

She couldn't help it, her daedelic hand set an elegant finger into the groove of her cunt, and rubbed. Each further supernal step touched off effusive, drooling orgasms as she progressed back toward her son's beautifully foul demense.

Children for my child, she thought. Babies for my baby...

The wares of her orgasms slickened her long black legs. Desire filled her shadow-black tits, and her nipples stood out to delicious pinpoints.

She was winning, wasn't she? She was bringing recompense with a terrible, swift blow. Her eyes burned out into the night, and her smile felt like fire in her mouth.

Pasiphae was ecstatic, for tonight she had seen him.

Tonight she had seen the malefactor.

Oh, yes...

Moments later, she stood pretty and lissome at the gaping black mouth of the labyrinth. Its foulness wafted up strong as Pluto's breath of the excrement of eons. It was a rich perfume in her nostrils, and on her tongue, it tasted sweet as licking the skin of a sweetsop. Beyond the labyrinth's entry, she could hear the fervid grunts of her son in rut. This brought joy to her dead heart, such that she lost control. She sat down promptly in the wet detritus of the woods and masturbated to a frenzy, her black fingers blurring over the tender flesh of her black sex. When she came a final time, the sensations evacuated her. She leaned over and vomited in the same way a man might ejaculate, pumping up a bellyful of wonderful hatred and glorious despair onto the sopping ground. One plume after another, until her gut was empty.

She sighed in bliss.

Now there was room for more. Lots more.

Pashiphae couldn't wait to get her fill.

Yes, the malefactor had returned, the nemesis. And

Tonight, she decided, I think we'll send him a little welcoming party.

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"Oh, the poor dear!" Shirley fretted.

"Arianne? Arianne?" Dean gently patted her cheek. "Can you hear me?"

They'd come back to the mansion and lain her across the tea-leaf-tan pleated flounce antique couch that most collectors would kill for. It had taken them two hours to creep back home in the blinding rain. Even now, the rain beat against the house in noisy sheets, and the thunder cracked

in the sky. Once back, Dean and Ajax had hustled a very unconscious Arianne in the paneled parlor.

"Shit, maybe we should've taken her to the hospital," Dean suggested.

"In this weather?" Ajax reminded. "We'd crash before we got there."

Outside, the storm cracked and boomed. Dean looked down worriedly. "What do you think's wrong with her?"

"Well, just for starters, let's try severe malnutrition, dehydration, chronic substance withdrawal, and oh did I say severe malnutrition?"

"What should we do!" Dean yelled.

"Keep her warm. A warm bath would be good. Hell, I'd be happy to get her in the tub "

"I'll do that," Dean insisted. "What else?"

"Some sustenance. Solid food would probably be too obstructive. Soup or something."

"I'll go make the poor dear some hot soup," Shirley volunteered and hurried away in her nightgown.

"She's shivering," Dean stammered. "I better go run a bath."

"On second thought," Ajax remembered. "That might not be such a good idea; they say you shouldn't take a bath during a lightning storm. If the lightning hits the house, it could electrocute anyone in the tub. Put a blanket over her for now."

Dean looked around frantically, saw no blankets, then yanked up the Herat 19th Century throw rug off the parlor floor and wrapped it around her. Ajax remarked, "You just wrapped a dirty wet junkie up in a piece of carpet that probably costs fifty grand."

"She's not a junkie! Don't call her that!" Dean objected. "She's a victim of society, taken advantage of by a hostile environment!"

"Whatever..."

"Arianne? Please, be all right!" Dean pleaded with the fates. He patted her cheek some more, hugged her in her new warm cloak of Persian carpet.

Eventually, her smudged eyes fluttered open. They shot wide.

"Dean?" she cried. "No, no, it can't be you. It's just another horrible dream "

"It's me, I'm here! We're at my father's mansion! You're safe now!"

She exhaled long and hard, her eyes closed in relief. "You'd never believe it," she whispered thinly. "You'd never believe what I saw."

"The smoke-woman," Dean said abruptly. "And something something...about the cattle."

Her little mouth fell open, as it had no doubt fallen open to admit hundreds no, thousands of penises. But there was no penis in wait this time. Dean recognized that she somehow knew what he meant.

"It was...the worst thing I've ever seen," she whimpered.

"What?" Dean begged. "What did you see?"

Her face went blank in the recollection. "A monster..."

"A monster? A monster with horns?"

"Yes..."

"Was it anywhere near the old mine shaft behind Stoddard's Mill?"

"Yes," her voice grated again like stones rubbing.

Big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown, Shirley returned with a steaming bowl of chowder. When she leaned over, Ajax cringed at the sight of her state-of-the-art cleavage. "You should try some of this, honey," she offered to Arianne.

One whiff and Arianne made a face like she'd puke. "Get that shit away from me! It'll make me sick!"

Shirley recoiled. "But, honey, you need some nutrition."

"Fuck food! I need to cop! Somebody get me a piece of rock!"

Dean and Ajax exchanged raised glances. Dean held her hand and implored, "Arianne, you've got to straighten up. You've got to tell me what you saw."

Her small face quivered. She closed her eyes to force remembrance but could only continue to sob in response. At the same time, another crack of thunder exploded in the sky. The mansion shook, then

"Great, that's just great," Ajax bellyached.

the lights went out.

"Oh, dear!" Shirley exclaimed.

"Don't worry," Dean said. "The generator will kick on in a second..."

They stood in the dark. After several minutes, Dean said, "Damn it. I'll bet the generator's out of fuel. I better go check."

"Don't leave me alone in the dark!" Arianne pleaded.

"I'll go," Ajax volunteered. "Shirley, would you mind showing me where it is?"

"Oh, I'd be delighted!" Big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown, Shirley retrieved some flashlights from an antique highboy, then she took Ajax' arm. "Right this way, young man," and she led him out of the dark parlor for the basement.

Dean switched on his flashlight, then briefly traversed the room lighting candles. He wanted to make Arianne at ease. She took his hand when he sat beside her on the couch. "Oh, Dean, I've missed you so much..."

Dean wanted to say that he missed her too...but he couldn't. I'm married, he reminded himself. I'm married to a loving woman. "Jesus, Arianne, how could you let yourself go like this?"

"I couldn't help it," she sniffled. "After you left, I had nothing to live for."

"Come on, Arianne. There are plenty of guys in town you could be happy with."

"No there aren't. The only real man in this town was you. The rest are just a bunch of little boys." More sniffles in the dark. "You're the only man to ever make me come."

Dean raised his brow in pride, in spite of himself. "You've got to get yourself straightened out,

Arianne. You'll die if you keep this up."

"If I can't have you, I want to die."

"Don't say that "

She shrugged out of the carpet, tiny and wan in the flashlight beam. "Make love to me, Dean."

"No. I'm married now. I'm in love with someone else."

"Well...then just kiss me."

"No."

She put her hand on his leg. "Let me blow you."

"No."

"I'll suck your balls "

"No."

"Rim job?"

"No."

"Punch me in the face, then beat off on a Twinkie and make me eat it?"

Dean had to give that one some thought. "No. I told you, I'm happily married. Now stop this "

She pounced on him, a ravenous little animal, groping, crying, pleading. "But I still love you! Let me prove it!"

Dean struggled at the sudden fury of junkie passion.

"Don't you still care about me at all?" she pleaded. She quickly peeled off the ratty little cut-off shorts. "Baby, please! I know you still care! Fuck me hard like you used to "

"NO!" Dean shouted, and that was it. He lost control. Next thing he knew he was standing, having grabbed her by the throat with his left hand. Meanwhile, his right hand, balled into a tight fist, slammed into her mouth.

The exchange of inertia caused Arianne to somersault backwards and crash into a spread of Hummel knickknacks arranged on a gold-leaf-trimmed mahogany 18th-Century Demilune table. The table cracked like tinders.

Dean gaped in horror.

This was no Jig-Jag. He'd really done it, he'd struck her, and that was putting it mildly. He'd hit her nearly as hard as if he'd done it with a baseball bat.

Just like the old days.

Nearly in tears, he rushed to her in the candle-lit dark. She was out cold. He carried her back to the couch, touching her face and mumbling incomprehensible apologies.

My God! What's wrong with me! he screamed at himself.

Eventually she came to in his arms

"Arianne, I'm so so sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you "

Her skinny junkie head leaned up. She smiled, drooling blood, and took his hand. "I knew it," she whispered in a sated contentedness. "I knew you still cared for me..."

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Big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown, Shirley led Ajax to the basement. Ajax had wood. Sixty years old be damned, he thought. This woman is one hunka-hunka slab of fuck-flesh.

Every so often, the side of a big wobbling tit brushed his arm. Ajax began to leak. Their flashlights bobbed as they descended the wood stairs. "It's right down here, hon. Thank the Lord I've got a man with me. Women don't know about mechanical things and such."

"Leave the generator to me," Ajax assured. "I'll have this place glowing in no time."

"That's not the only thing you've got glowing "

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing. The generator's right over there."

Ajax wielded his flashlight with authority. Thank Christ it was dark; the boner in his pants was concealed. He unscrewed the tank lid on the generator and shined the light in. Sure enough, just as Dean had said, the tank was empty.

"There's a can of gasoline on the shelf," Shirley pointed out, her big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown. Ajax' own flash stalled a moment on tremendous bosom. Holy shit! Those tits could put wood on an entire Catholic seminary! But, cognizant as always, he sniffed the open fuel cell. "This generator runs on diesel," he said, "not gas."

"Such a smart young man," Shirley complimented. "I would never have considered that. There are some other cans on the top."

Ajax' flashlight beam lingered a moment more on Shirley's abundant mammalian carriage. Her nipples are as big a round Big Gulp lids! He found a jerry-can of diesel fuel on the shelf and poured it into the generator. All it took after that was one yank on the starting cord, and the generator fired up with a steady rumble. Lights snapped on at once.

"Piece of cake," Ajax bragged. Then he turned back around.

Shirley was sitting up on a work table, her nightgown hiked back, her legs jacked back in the air. Her big hairy seasoned pussy stared at Ajax like a knowing face.

"Hon," she said, "that generator tank ain't the only thing around here in need of a filling."

Ajax gulped. Looks like I'm going to get laid this year after all. He pulled it out, stepped right up, and stuck it in. Fuckin'-A. That big wet pussy felt like a hot peach pie, and Ajax had just broken the crust. He stroked in and out a few times

"Ooo, honey. Give an old woman a break. Don't bust me all up inside!"

The compliment only brought him closer. Two more strokes, and Ajax' eyes were going crossed. Fuck, my dick hasn't been in her five seconds and I'm ready to spooge.

Fucking her sounded like someone eating spaghetti...loudly. "Aw, shit, Shirley," he guffed. "I'm sorry but I think I'm gonna, I'm think I'm gonna "

"Don't you worry one bit, you sweet thing," she said and stroked his cheek. She pushed back on his beer gut, easing out his cock. "First one can be quick, that ain't no matter. You can take care'a me with the second."

Ajax's cock throbbed to bust, like nuking a hot dog on high in the microwave. When it slipped out, it made a sound like someone slurping soup. She turned him around, got on her knees.

Her big tits wobbled beneath the sheer nightgown.

With excruciating slowness, she sucked his cock into her mouth. Ajax's face screwed up like Shemp's. Soon she had every whopping inch all six of them sheathed in her hot, drooly mouth. She kept sucking forward as if she were about to begin eating his entire groin, but then, just as slowly, she retracted. After a liquid pop, her mouth was off, and Ajax stood cringing on his tiptoes, his dick a glimmering Monte Cristo cigar.

"Just let it all out, baby," she cooed, and then her hand slid rapidly back and forth over the spitty pole. "Go ahead and bust it. Bust it right out. Let me see it all shoot out, sugar "

Ajax busted it quite promptly. Just a couple of shucks on his spit-wet dick, and he was jettisoning sperm over her shoulder.

"Ah-ah-ah," he moaned at each pump. He could swear he felt his balls shrink with each release. His tongue clogged between his lips as more semen vaulted out of him, each spasm shooting feet over Shirley's shoulder. But even as he came, amidst what was clearly the greatest orgasm of his life, he couldn't help but notice several of his seminal plumes fall directly into still-opened fuel tank on the generator.

"Holy shit, Shirley!" he exclaimed. "You just jacked me off in the generator!"

Dismayed, Shirley glanced behind her, big tits wobbling in the sheer nightgown. Several strings of sperm seemed to hang out of the open fuel egress. "Oh, dear," she remarked. "Do you think that will "

The generator chugged and sputtered and stopped. Then all the lights went out again.

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"What the hell happened?" Dean complained when Ajax and Shirley returned to the candle-lit parlor. "The lights came back on for thirty seconds, then they went back out."

"Don't remind me," Ajax muttered.

"What?"

Ajax spoke with more volume. "I think something's clogging your fuel filter. You really need to

maintain these things, you know."

"Damn it," Dean cursed.

Shirley's big tits wobbled beneath the sheer nightgown. She noticed Arianne's ratty cut-off shorts on the floor. "I guess it's none of my business." But, next, she noticed the broken Demilune table. "What happened here?"

"None of your business," Dean said. Arianne sat cuddled up next to him on the couch, asleep, the fur of her pubic hair glistening in candle light.

"At least she's calmed down," Shirley observed.

"What a stud!" Ajax made his own conclusion. "You slipped her the high hard one for old time's sake! Stuck it to her to the balls!"

"I did not," Dean countered.

"Oh? Then how come she's not wearing anything but halter-top smaller than the average handkerchief?"

"None of your business," Dean murmured, his arm tight about her shoulder. But before any more questions could be asked, or any more insinuations declared, the house shuddered at a loud, heavy

CRUNK!

Dean, Ajax, and Shirley all jumped in their places.

"The fuck was that?" Ajax shouted.

"Something hit the front of the house!" Shirley exclaimed.

Dean sat rigid. "It sounded like "

CRUNK!

The house shuddered again. Then

CRUNK! CRUNK-CRUNK! CRUNK!

It sounded as though the front of the mansion were being assailed by random wrecking balls. Several more impacts ensued, and plaster began to sift from the ceiling.

Dean rushed to the window. At first, he could see nothing, but after the next crack of lightning

My God!

He easily saw that the Lohan mansion was...under attack.

"Shirley!" he commanded. "Break open the gun cabinet!"

Shirley's big tits wobbled beneath the sheer night gown as she rushed to do so. Ajax inquired with a shout: "What the hell's going on?"

"They're trying to break into the house."

"Who?"

Dean's mouth froze before he could actually give voice to the reply. "Cattle!"

CRUNK-CRUNK-CRUNK! CRUNK-CRUNK!

Ajax went to the window, peered out. "You gotta be shitting me!"

But, lo, no one was shitting Ajax at all. When he glanced out the window, in the lightning-veined dark, he could see dozens of longhorned cattle rushing the mansion, ramming their brick heads against the outer walls. Dean knew that the oxen had brains that were little more than synaptic dish rags, but at this rate it was equally clear: it wouldn't take them long to break into the house.

"What happens if they break in?" Ajax moronically asked.

"Then we're all kabob!" Dean answered. "See those horns? Think they're sharp?"

Shirley re-entered the parlor with an armful of shotguns. "Here, boys!"

"Keep loading us up, Shirley!" Dean shouted. "This might take a while!" Dean and Ajax both racked rounds, then broke open the window panes. They aimed at the veritable morass of cattle charging the house and opened fire.

One blast after the next, they fired into the rainy night. Ox heads blew apart like piñatas, only it was not candy and toys which erupted from each gunshot, it was wet nuggets of brain. Ox faces

exploded, blowing chunks of cud. Cattle bellies burst. Blood flew in sheets as innards uncoiled, and the sound was cacophonous: the desolate moos of psycho cattle dying in the night.

Dean and Ajax fired frenetically, popping a round, then jacking in the next, and Shirley, her big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown, expertly cycled reloaded shotguns back to them. But even in this death-wave of double-00 buckshot, the oxen kept charging. Even when the killed beasts lay in piles before the house, more charged forward, ramming their great horned heads against outer walls. Each time the lightning flashed, Dean could see dozens more thundering up the hill to the mansion.

How many could they kill before one crashed through a window?

The killing went on for a solid hour, blast after blast after blast, gunsmoke stinging their nostrils, their eyes full of spots from muzzle-flash. But when it seemed to be over

"Holy motherfucking shit," Ajax sighed.

Dean couldn't believe what he saw beyond his white-hot gun barrel. The vast hill which rose up to the Lohan Mansion lay heaped with dead and dying cattle corpses.

"Oh, man," Ajax exclaimed. "That's a lot of fucking Quarter Pounders."

"Did'ja get 'em all?" Shirley asked, her big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown.

"I think so, Shirley. Christ. What's happening here?" But even as Dean asked the question, something abstract and camouflaged deep in his spirit thought he already knew.

And he knew it wasn't over yet.

Dean glanced over his shoulder, to make sure Arianne was safe; she still lay asleep on the couch. Ajax glanced over his shoulder, to make sure that Shirley's big tits were still wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown.

They were.

"I-I think we did it," Ajax sighed in relief, but just as he'd said it

Thuh-RUNK-thuh-RUNK-thuh-RUNK...

The trampling sound could easily be heard by them both. Suddenly the house was vibrating again. Dean looked out the front bay window and at first saw nothing.

Then the lightning flashed.

"Oh, no..." he whispered.

"What?" Ajax yelled.

"Four Black Gertrudis are charging the house."

"Four what?"

"Four bulls," Dean further croaked. "The biggest species in the country. Four thousand pounds apiece..."

"Oh, that's just terrific!"

The windows exploded as if grenaded. Glass flew like shrapnel and, soon, so did bull snot, flying in long thin ropes as the four horned beasts crashed their way inside. Dean and Ajax stood back to back, facing the monstrous animals down. Their nostrils flared like turbine ducts opening and closing. But when Dean looked into their eyes, he saw the glow of something...evil.

"Fire!" Dean wailed.

Ajax pumped two rounds into the first bull's head. It exploded after the second impact. Dean killed the next two with four quick jerks of the shotgun's slide. The fourth two-fuckin'-ton bull leveled its possessed gaze and scuffed its front hoofs on the carpet.

"I got him," Ajax said. He raised the shotgun and squeezed the trigger

click

"Fuck!" he yelled. His weapon empty, Ajax promptly saturated his pants with urine. The fourth bull began to charge

"Oh SHIT!"

BAM!

Shirley's big tits wobbled beneath the sheer nightgown as she plugged the demon-possessed bull right between the eyes with a Remington 870P chock full of big-ball buck. The animal's head flew apart, splaying brains, blood, and mucus onto the fine avacado-and butternut wallpaper.

"Great shot, Shirley," Ajax wheezed. "What a fuckin' battle."

Dean felt a strange static crawl over his skin. "The battle might not be over yet," he said.

Thuh-RUNK, thuh-RUNK-thuh-RUNK...

"Oh no!"

They looked out the window and saw not four but six more two-ton Black Gertrudis monsters charging up the hill.

"Shit!" Ajax yelled. "Shirley! More guns!"

Shirley shrieked the final revelation. "Oh my God, boys! We're plumb out of ammo!"

Ajax liberally filled the back of his jeans with his last meal, but Dean

"Dean, what are you "

Dean dropped his empty gun and ran away, fleeing up the stairs.

"Thanks a lot, buddy!" Ajax shouted. He glanced quickly to Arianne, still asleep on the couch, then glanced to Shirley. Fuck that dirty skinny junkie, he thought. He grabbed Shirley, tried to haul her out of the room, but

CRASH!

it was too late.

Suddenly the room was full of crazy sharp-horned oxen. The beasts were as big as cars, and horns stretched nearly a yard wide, their points sharp as awls.

Shirley's big tits wobbled beneath the sheer nightgown. "Oh, Lord!" she cried. "We're gonna die, ain't we?"

Ajax kissed her on the lips. "Yes," he said. He hugged her tight. "But it won't hurt for long."

The lead bull stared at Ajax, its devil-red eyes like hot coals. Ropes of snot dangled from the silver-dollar-sized nostrils. Its front hoofs scuffed...then it began to charge

"It won't hurt for long," Ajax whispered again and hugged Shirley tighter.

They squeezed their eyes shut, grit their teeth and waited for the end, but

Ajax opened his eyes. The bull had stopped in its tracks, its deadly horn-tips a full foot away from Ajax' belly.

As a shadow grew before him, the bull reluctantly backed up. Ajax thought he heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

Dean stepped in front of them.

"Dean!" Shirley shouted in glee.

Dean walked confidently between the crazed bull and Ajax and Shirley. The bull kept backing up.

The bull was...scared.

Ajax wasn't sure but it seemed that the most vague lime-green light glowed off of Dean's head. There was one thing, though, that he was sure about: what Dean held in his hands, like a branch-cutter, was his rusty pair of horn-crankers.

He pointed them at the first bull. "I'm the best there is, the best there was, and the best there ever will be," he told the bull. Then, for effect, he clacked the horn-crankers a few times. "I'll dehorn you like pulling toothpicks out of cocktail fruit, so go back to your evil mama." Dean's voice resonated, not a man's voice now but something almost godlike. He held the horn-cranker upward, a demented Moses raising his holy staff.

"Fuck with me," he said to the bull. "I dare ya."

The giant bull whinnied, jerked its huge head to and fro then it jumped back out the window from whence it came. The other bulls followed suit, thrashing their mammoth bodies out the windows, exploding the frames, and disappearing into the teeming, thundering storm.

"God be praised!" Shirley said. "It's over!"

Ajax whooped it up. "Man, you've got some kind of magic! Those big motherfuckin' things just took one look at you and they were heading for the hills!"

But Dean stood agitated in the candle light. His horn-crankers the nexus of his power hung limp

from one hand.

"Something something's wrong," he sensed. Then he looked at the couch.

Arianne was gone.

| |

eleven

"You two! Halt!"

Dean and Ajax stopped cold at the muddy trail which wound down from behind Stoddard's Mill to the opening of the mine. They'd driven here posthaste in the rented Blazer, and were fortunate that the storm had blown over shortly after their wholesale slaughter of the demon-possessed cattle back at the mansion. Before they'd left, Shirley had managed to scrounge up a few more rounds for the shotguns. Then she'd waved teary-eyed as they'd driven off, her big tits wobbling beneath the sheer nightgown.

Dean had only one thing on his mind: saving Arianne. And he was well aware now of the supernatural intricacies draped around all that was happening.

He knew things now.

He knew who the smoke-woman was. He knew that she'd used her evil will to possess the cattle back at the mansion. And he knew that she'd been the one who'd abducted Arianne. She'd been the one responsible for all of the recent abductions about town. Dean could taste the answers in his brain. He could smell them.

But when he and Ajax had arrived at the trail to the mine, a uniformed state police officer in foul-weather gear had stopped them at once, gun drawn.

"I said halt!" he ordered through the pouring rain. "And drop those shotguns!"

Dean and Ajax obeyed, and held their hands up. "Great idea, hoss," Ajax muttered. "He probably thinks we're involved in the abductions and killings."

"I didn't know cops were out here. They weren't here before."

"This is a crime scene," the cop reminded them. "What are you doing here?"

Ajax stepped right up. "We're just concerned citizens, officer. We'd heard about the horrible things that've happened out here, so we wanted to come out and try to get the culprit ourselves." He could see five other cops surveying the perimeter around the mine entrance. "But since you fine officers are out, there's no reason for us to be here. So we'll just be on our way, sir."

"You'll be on your way to the back seat of my patrol car," the cop informed him. "You're both under arrest. I'm taking you in for questioning. Start moving " but no sooner had the cop given the order, his colleagues at the mine began to shout. Several shots rang out. "Stay here!" he commanded to Dean and Ajax. "Don't move!"

Dean and Ajax froze with their hands up, watched the cop run off into the dripping woods. "We're leaving now, right?" Ajax asked. "We can get back to the Blazer and be the fuck out of here before he can catch us "

More gunshots rang out, then screams.

"Grab the guns!" Dean yelled. "They need help!"

Ajax stalled as more screams resounded. "Fuck those guys. Let's go back to your mansion and have a beer."

"Come on!"

They retrieved their shotguns Ajax however reluctantly and ran toward the skirmish. More screams sprang through the dark, after the gunfire died. By the time Dean and Ajax arrived at the wood-propped portal to the mine...

The six poncho'd police officers lay dead in the mud, gored to death, the high horn-holes still seeping blood.

"Fuck," Dean uttered.

"Yeah, fuck as in let's get the fuck out of here, like now!" Ajax hotly suggested.

As he stared at the mine entry, Dean's voice sounded like bricks scraping together. "Arianne's down there somewhere."

"You don't know that!" Ajax contested. "She could be dead in the woods somewhere! She could be lying dead behind the mansion for all you know!"

"She's down there," Dean corrected, staring at the entry with his new-found psychic vision. "I'm

not leaving here till I get her back."

"Well that's your gig, man! You want to stick your neck out so your head'll be lopped off, that's your business! Me no way!"

"Fine..." Dean walked into the mine's wide egress; Ajax, without much faith, followed. Their flashlights beamed dead ahead: dirt walls propped up by heavy wooden stulls like railroad ties. Railroad tracks led them down further, until...

"Damn," Dean muttered.

The entry ramp stopped at a four-tined fork which led further down into multitudinous branches and off-shoots: tunnels within tunnels.

"It's a fuckin' maze!" Ajax complained. "We'll never find our way through this shit!"

"Yes we will," Dean croaked back in assurance. "Follow me...back to the entry."

They both stomped back to the entrance of the mine. "You got a knife?" Dean asked.

"Well, yeah," Ajax replied. "You wanna butter some bread?"

"Start cutting," Dean ordered. He whipped out his own knife and began...cutting open the abdominal vaults of the dead police officers. From the rents, he yanked out long tubes of the small intestine. Like yanking yarn from the belly of a stuffed doll.

"Yank! Yank!" he shouted.

Confused, Ajax thought what the hell, and he cut open another dead cop's belly and began yanking out intestines. Got nothin' much else to do right now, he considered.

Soon six piles of pink-gray intestinal whirls lay at their feet. "Cut each loop off at the end," Dean instructed. "Then tie each end together."

"Say what?" Ajax inquired.

"Just do it!" Dean yelled. "You saw the mine! It's a labyrinth! If I'm going down there, I need to be able to find my way out."

Ajax seethed in his distaste, but he did it just the same. The human small intestine was twenty-four to thirty-two feet long. Ajax snipped off each end with his knife, then tied the ends together

by way of a sheet-bend knot, connecting each end as effectively as possible. Shit squeezed out of each end, which set Ajax' face long. I'm handling police officer excrement, he thought. He flapped each wad off his hand like slabs of warm brown clay. But by then, at least, he was beginning to get it...when Dean tied the last end to his back belt loop.

A guideline, Ajax thought.

"Come on," Dean said, shotgun in one hand, flashlight in the other. "I'm going down there...to get Arianne out."

Ajax didn't argue. He followed Dean deep into the front mine stope, to the area which branched out into four different corridors. Ajax dropped the 150-foot reel of intestines to the dirt floor and kept his end tied about his wrist.

"I'll try one at a time," Dean said. "If I shout...pull me back."

"Got'cha," Ajax understood.

Dean took a deep breath. Then he began to lower himself into the first egress.

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This eats dick, Dean thought, plodding forward. The earth-formed corridor wound ever downward. The deeper Dean descended, the harder the stench wafted up.

The foulest stench to ever assail his nose, which stood to reason: it was into the main shaft of this very mine that they'd dumped hundreds of dead cattle and probably enough rendering bilge to fill a community swimming pool.

Some of the corridors were manways barely wide enough to squeeze through while others were haulage passages. Some, he knew, would lead to the main shaft, others to dead ends. Eventually, the corridor he now occupied ended at a great pile of rubble. Damn... Frustrated, Dean followed the life-line of intestines back to entry.

"No luck," he told Ajax. "A dead end."

"Maybe they're all dead ends," Ajax pointed out. "Maybe she's not even here."

"I know she's here," Dean felt assured. He couldn't explain how he knew, he just knew. This place was full of archaic evil, and it was some equally archaic benevolence that whispered its secrets to him, emboldened him with its supereal wisdom. "Arianne's in there somewhere, and so

is the hellish mother and son who've been tearing this town a new asshole."

"How do you know?" Ajax countered.

"I just do. And I know why they're here, I know what summoned them vengeance."

"Vengeance? For what?"

"It's me they want. They've brought their horror here as vengeance against what I've done."

Ajax smirked as though the words were ridiculous. "And what's that?"

Dean's voice grated out as if confessing to murder. "I've cranked more horns out of more cattle heads than anyone in history."

Dean checked the second set of passages, then the third. Both were clueless dead ends. "This one," he said of the fourth, "has got to be it."

He stepped in as if entering the esophagus of an immense dead beast, then began moving toward its belly.

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When Arianne awoke she thought she must be drowning in filth; she didn't breathe as much as gulp great mouthfuls of air. She hung naked, suspended by her wrists, in some low cavern of beslimed wet rock. The old mine, she realized. I'm at the bottom of the mine. No source of light could be detected yet she could see the entails of her surroundings as if through some sort of filter, as if evil had a light of its own. Arianne knew at least that much: it was evil that had brought her to this foul place.

Before her lay piles of dead cattle, some corpses mummified to twisted sacks of leather, others bloated by rot and putrefactive gas, while still more seemed to have melted down to puddles of nameless slop in which maggots churned voraciously. But what stretched beyond was even more vile: a veritable lake of befoulment, as though all the waste of hell had been dumped here. Indeed, this was the place where the Devil emptied his bowels.

And it was from this lake that the woman emerged. Arianne had seen her before, on the night she was nearly killed by Sergeant Lass: a woman who existed not as a being of flesh but a being of darkness, a woman made solid by every evil thought and loathsome desire generated by humankind. She was the lust behind every rape, child-molestation, and act of incest. She was the erection at the groin of every Serbian torturer. She was the synapse which triggered every finger

to ever drop napalm on women and children, and the blood that pumped in the hearts of every SS death-camp guard. She was Pasiphae.

She traipsed knee-deep through the liquid filth, bringing her black smile ever closer. Arianne just hung there, watching.

"Not quite the Harlot of Sodom, hmm?" The spectral queen's voice echoed like words cast out in a mountain range. "All the power you could have over men, and look what you've done with it. You've given it away, and now you are ruled by them."

"Got any crank? Got any cokesmoke?" Arianne asked. "I'm stringing out."

"Not a real woman at all but just a silly little piece of meat for men to drain their loins in."

"Guess not," Arianne muttered in dejection. "So fuck you."

"So it's only fitting that you shall be the bait for your paramour."

"My power mower? Bitch, what the fuck're you talking about? Hey, I'll eat your pussy for twenty bucks."

"And he'll be here soon," the dark woman promised. "I can taste him in the air."

"All right, ten bucks. Shit."

A hand of purified darkness touched Arianne's nearly breastless bosom, then glided down the rest of her pale dirty skinny junkie body. "Then my son and I shall feast. You'll be the appetizer, of course. And as for the entrÃ©e?" Her black hands came away and then reached into a crevice. "This pair of fresh, fat dumplings " and from the crevice she withdrew two chubby naked infants.

The Rundstedt Twins! Arianne recognized at once.

"Yes, these two should provide an excellent main course," the woman remarked, holding the babies to her ebon bosom. They made cute goo-goo-ga-ga noises.

Even Arianne was disgusted. "You are one whacked-out sick-in-the-head bitch, you know that? What kind of demon-goddess are you, anyway? They're just babies, for God's sake. Leave 'em alone."

"Oh, we'll leave them alone...after my son and I have sucked their tender innards from their mouths, gobbled their baby-fat, and inhaled their blood."

"What an asshole," Arianne complained. "Only assholes fuck with babies and little kids. If that's all you can do, you better throw in the towel."

Pasiphae paused as if offended. "But we'll be saving the best for last," she promised haughtily. "Dessert shall be your paramour, this Thesean malefactor, the destroyer who's gone unpunished for far too long."

There she went with the power mower again. "Are you talking about my ex-boyfriend Dean? The all-time world horn-cranking champion?"

"Yes!" the woman's voice thundered in timeless anger. "My son and I will pick him apart a speck at a time until nothing remains!"

Arianne laughed. "In your dreams, lady. Dean'll wear your ass out. He'll kick you in the twat so hard you'll be coughing up your fuckin' uterus. He's the toughest guy in town, and no pissant little baby-killer is gonna take him down."

"What my son does to your lover will make Procrustes seem harmless as a shrew."

"Who the fuck's Crusty? And where's this son you keep yacking about?"

Pasiphae's whisper licked Arianne's cheek like a snake tongue. "You shall meet him now."

In an instant, the foul air grew fouler, and something huge came trudging through the lake of muck. Arianne, now in the grips of full drug withdrawal, didn't much care. It was the monster she'd seen the other night, and it stood before her now: seven feet tall, its slime-streaked body corded in muscle, the nostrils of its snout flaring. Button-black eyes appraised her insanely. The two great horns jutting from its skull raised to flawless points.

"Aw, big deal," Arianne scoffed. "A man with a bull's head. Looks more like a Fire Island pansy to me. I'll bet he drinks pink champagne and eats quiche. What a flamer."

"I'm weary of your levity," the dark woman's voice grew stern. "My son will now work up his appetite...by raping you half to death."

The monster drooled, stepping closer on its human feet and rearing its inhuman head. Meaty hands pushed Arianne's knees up to her chin, and then the vicious netherworld rape began...

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Flashlight taped to the barrel of his shotgun, Dean squeezed through the most narrow manway yet. Soon, he knew, he'd run out of intestines, which would leave only a pair of choices: untie the loop from his belt and continue, or return without Arianne.

No way I'm going back, he determined.

As he squeezed further, the skin of his face began to tingle. A warm draft seemed to eddy up the manway, and though its odor was abominable, Dean viewed this as a good sign. He was getting closer to the main shaft.

"Please, God, please," he prayed aloud. "Let me find her..."

Just as the guideline began to tauten, the barely passable corridor emptied out into a larger cavern. Just feet ahead of him, he could see the great gaping hole of the main shaft. Dean's prayers were answered. He untied the loop of gut at his belt. Rails of an old personnel ladder could be seen rising over the lip of the main shaft's maw.

No time like the present, he supposed. He dipped a pinch of Skoal and began to climb down the ladder.

Into the stench of hell.

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began the vicious netherworld rape...which ended precisely two seconds later. The monster stepped back, huffing, satisfaction and victory stamped onto its animal face.

Arianne rolled her eyes. "Whatâ€”that's it? Jesus Christ, I thought you said you were gonna rape me half to death. You didn't even get me wet, you asshole." Arianne frowned, half disappointed, half pissed-off. "Buddy, I've had better sex with pickles. Let me give you some advice next time you rape a girl, make it last more than two seconds."

The creature seemed shocked at these words. It looked questioningly at its infernal mother.

"Damn your mouth, whore!" the goddess blared to Arianne. "How dare you speak to my son like that!"

Arianne laughed. "Your son's uglier than a baboon's ass, and he can't fuck for shit. Hell, I'll bet those babies could give me a better fuck than that ugly bull-headed motherfucker. And the babies've got bigger dicks."

The monster mewled at the insult. "Stop it!" his mother shrieked. "You'll hurt his feelings!"

"And I'll tell you something else " Arianne grinned. "Dean got me off every time. Now there's a real man. None of this two-second bullshit; that man can fuck." She shot a glance to the beast's genitals and chuckled. "And his dick makes yours look like a tadpole. Dean's big as a fuckin' beer bottle."

Pasiphae shuddered in rage as the beast...began to cry. "There, there, honey," she consoled, hugging her son's giant ox-head. "Don't listen to that mean nasty whore. You're a wonderful lover "

Arianne cackled laughter from where she hung. "He's a big sissy, lady. A big sissy with a tiny dick."

The beast blubbered and sobbed, blubbered and sobbed.

"Harlot!" The demoness glared, grinding obsidian teeth. "Your death will be an exercise in agony," she seethed. "And we'll not wait for your paramour. Better that he come all this way to find you in shreds." Then, to the beast: "Go, my son. Eat her skin off, in tiny bites."

The monster shook out of the despair of his wounded ego, then giantly approached Arianne

"I don't think so," a voice echoed in the low cavern.

Arianne's eyes popped wide. She shrieked in glee, her skinny junkie legs flailing.

It was Dean!

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Dean dropped down the last few rungs, landing squarely on his feet. He looked at the monster and didn't flinch. Then he racked a round into the shotgun. "Party's over," he said.

"Oh, no," the shadow woman cooed. "It's only just begun."

Dean aimed and fired, pumping all five magnum shotgun rounds into the beast's huge head. The reports cracked within the cavern: positively ear-splitting bangs. But when the smoke cleared, the woman made of darkness laughed.

The beasts stood unharmed.

"Your puny weapons don't work against us," Pasiphae guttered. "We're older than eons. And it will take a weapon older than eons to defeat us."

Dean spat tobacco juice and shrugged. "I took that possibility into account," he said. "And brought...this..."

He reached around and withdrew something hooked to the back of his belt. He held it up into the evil supernatural light for all to see.

His torque-plier, his...horn-crankers.

The beast continued to mewl in terror, and even its mother paused in hesitation.

"Come and get it, Bessie," Dean said.

"Kill him!" the woman shouted at her son. "Charge him and use your mighty horns to dig his guts out!"

But the beast cowered, stepping back.

"Just as I thought," Dean commented. He twirled the horn-crankers in his hands, clicking, like a fancy butterfly knife. "You're only the big bad-ass monster when it comes to killing kids. Ain't got the balls to take on a real man."

It boo-hoo'd further, tears streaming, looking at its mother for comfort.

"KILL HIM!" the goddess shouted. "What are you? A EUNUCH?"

The beast shook its great oxen head, snot flying. Then it lowered its awl-sharp horns and charged.

Dean laughed with gusto, took one step to the left, and landed the plier onto a horn. With the greatest of ease, then

kreeeee-CRUNCH!

he cranked the horn out of the man-animal's head.

"NOOOOO!" the woman shrieked.

"Yes," Dean retorted. He clapped the horn-crankers, and the horn dropped to the filth-carpeted

floor. The half-human thing continued to sob outright, cowering back into a corner of rock, the minuscule penis voiding piss in sheer terror.

"WAIT!" Pasiphae shouted. "Spare my son I beg thee!"

"Tongue my balls," Dean retorted.

"I'll offer a bargain." Her dead-black eyes somehow glowed. "I will trade you your lover in exchange for my son. And as further incentive...I'll give you these." Her bone-shadowed figure fluttered backward, then seemed to pluck something from the rock's cragged face. She pulled out two naked babies the missing Rundstedt Twins. "Your lover and the babies for my son."

Dean sucked his wad of Skoal, thinking. "Naaaa."

"Dean!" Arianne shouted.

"Relax, hon," Dean assured. "I'll get you out of here and the twins, and I'll put the drop on this bitch and her pug-ugly bull-looking kid." He grinned at Pasiphae. "I know the secret now."

Pasiphae held the twins aloft. They rowed their chubby arms and legs in the air, goo-gooing and ga-ga-ing. "I'll kill these babies!" she warned.

"No you won't," Dean attested, "because you'll be dead before you can even think about it."

"What makes you so sure," her bottomless voice inquired.

"Because, like I said, I know the secret now."

"And what secret is that?"

Indeed, Dean remembered, some twenty years hence: the bright morning on the ranch and his father showing him how it was done. Their horns are their power, son, he'd told the very young Dean Lohan. So ya gotta take that power, take it right away from 'em...

"Its horns are its power," Dean repeated to the obsidian bitch. "But they're your power too, aren't they?"

The shadow-woman just stood there, holding the twins up high. She made no answer.

In a movement too rapid to be properly recorded by the naked eye, Dean twirled in a blur, slapped the horn-crankers on the monster's remaining horn, and

kreeeee-CRUNCH!

tugged it out as easily as a candle from a cupcake. Suddenly the lake of filth began to bubble...and Pasiphae began to shriek.

The Minotaur died at once; dehorned now, it shivered in its corner, and in the wink of an eye, it was nothing but a black puddle on the floor. Its atrocious mother took a bit longer, her black scream bursting forth as she melted to a puddle of filth herself. When it was over, the two naked babies waddled gleefully in her stinking liquid remains.

I'd say that does the trick. Dean slipped his horn-crankers back on his belt, then took Arianne down off her hook.

She wept tears of joy. "I love you," she said.

Dean smirked. "Grab the kids, jizz-pot. Let's get the fuck out of this slime bowl."

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Twelve

By the time Dean emerged from the mine, it was day-break. Camera crews stood in wait. It didn't take long before Dean Lohan was a national hero, thanks to CNN and wire services.

The Rundstedt Twins were happily returned to their redneck mother at the trailer park. Arianne was saved (though still bitching for ice), and the murder spree in DeSmet, South Dakota though it could never be fully explained ended as abruptly as it started. Soon johns were cruising main street every night for tricks, and the steady commerce of crystal-meth resumed.

All was back to rights.

Dean, Ajax, and Arianne lounged back on the plush Edgewood sofa of the Lohan Mansion's elegantly paneled den. Mr. Jake Lohan, by the way, remained in the hospital in stable condition but was expected to fully recover in a matter of weeks. During his stay, however, he'd decided to retire from the ranching business, and signed all of his wealth, property, and business over to his dutiful son Dean.

"Hey, Shirley!" Dean cracked. "Sometime before Christmas, huh? Where're them beers?"

The three of them sat with their feet up on the 18th Century black japanned coffee table, its

invaluable finish stained by many previous beer rings. Shirley rushed back in with the beverages, then plopped right down next to Ajax, placing a hand on his leg. Ajax smiled...and got wood.

"Here it is, it's coming up," Arianne exclaimed, pointing at the big television.

The familiar brunette in the same burgundy coatdress stood in front of the mine opening behind Stoddard's Mill, speaking stoically into a microphone: "...can now breathe a collective sigh of relief in the aftermath of the terrible slew of abductions and murders which have cursed the town for the last week. The most recent, and clearly the most horrific, tragedy the abduction of the Rundstedt Twins was foiled this morning by DeSmet native Dean Lohan, who braved the mine's deep depths and saved the twins..."

A video clip showed Dean emerging from the mine's portal, holding both of the Rundstedt Twins in his arms.

"You're a movie star!" Ajax shouted.

"He's always been my star," Arianne added.

"Dean Lohan," the newscaster continued, "moved to Seattle several years ago, and had returned just two days ago to see his father, Jack, the owner of the largest cattle ranch in the state, who was recently injured by whatever wild animal it was plaguing the otherwise quiet town. Nevertheless, it was Dean who bravely ventured into the long-closed and very dangerous gypsum mine and saved the twins when he heard the babies crying from within." Another quick video clip of Dean passing the babies back to their sobbing mother. "Yes, Dean Lohan, the hero of a town, and the hero of a nation. From DeSmet, South Dakota, this is Laura Von Paulus, KSKY News."

Ajax, Arianne, and Shirley applauded, whooping it up. Dean blushed. "What a man!" Ajax exclaimed. "Our hero!" Arianne added. Then, Shirley, whose big tits wobbled beneath her blouse: "We should have a party! A celebration! Invite the whole town!"

It sounded like a great idea to Dean, but... "I can't," he regretted. "I have to go back to Seattle, but I'll be back soon. Ajax, how would you like to quit stuffing envelopes and live here at the mansion, as Shirley's assistant?"

"Sounds good to me," Ajax said, swigging beer. "To tell you the truth, I'm damn sick of that goth commie nipple-pierced pinko save-the-whales rain-hole. And I'd love to be Shirley's assistant."

Shirley gave Ajax a tight hug and restrained the urge to shove her hand down his pants. "I have all kinds of things you can assist me with, honey," she said.

"And Arianne," Dean said next, "I'll be sending you to the best rehab center in the state. But I'm off now, folks. I'll be back in a few days, with my loving wife!"

Dean stalked off to the front door; Arianne followed, grabbed his arm before he could leave. "Dean," she pleaded, tears in her eyes. "I can't make it without you."

"There, there," he attempted.

"I love you!"

"Arianne, I've already told you, I'm married. I'm in love with someone else now, and I'll be bringing her back to the mansion to live with me. If I weren't married, it'd be you," he lied. "But I am married." He consolingly touched her skinny junkie cheek. "So that's the way it has to be."

Arianne nodded dejectedly. "Sure you don't want to fuck my brains out on the floor one last time, for old time's sake?"

"No, really, Arianne "

"One last blowjob? I'll swallow."

"No, I "

"Knock my teeth loose and shit on my head?"

Dean's brow jittered. "We'll always be friends, Arianne. I promise." Then he briefly kissed her on the cheek and walked off for the Blazer.

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By sundown, Dean was landing at Sea-Tac International airport, and not fifteen minutes later, he was pulling up into his own driveway. There's no place like home, he thought with the widest of grins. He grabbed his suitcase and charged into the house, his heart racing to see his loving wife once again.

"Honey! I'm home!" he shouted with glee in the foyer. He checked the kitchen, the TV room, but Daphne wasn't there. Upstairs, he deduced, and ran up. "Honey? Did you see me on TV?" Then he barged into the bedroom, his smile a beacon of love.

He looked at the bed but it was not Daphne who lay there in wait for him.

"Who the fuck are you?" Dean asked.

It was a tall, naked man who lay on the bed, his head shaved, a satanic goatee around his chin, devil tattoos all over his skin. He was smoking marijuana and reading a comic book called Grub Girl.

"Who the fuck are you?" the man snidely replied.

Dean dropped his suitcase, aghast. "Well, pardon me, but I just happen to be Dean Lohan and I live here!"

The bald man's face crinkled. "What? Daphne's married?"

"Damn right she is! To me!"

The man shrugged. "Muff is muff, so don't get your dander up." He toked more of his joint, flipped the next page of the comic. "She never told me she was hitched, so I ain't doing nothin' wrong."

There's a naked tattooed bald guy in my bed! Dean finally got the full brunt. "Who the FUCK are you!"

"I'm Thron," the man said.

Dean gawped. "You? You're...Mr. Thron?"

"Yeah."

"You're my wife's boss?"

"Yeah."

"BULLSHIT!" Dean railed. "Guys with shaved heads and devil tattoos don't own high-end clothing companies!"

Thron cocked a funky brow. "Clothing company? I run a fuckin' outcall whorehouse, pal. And your wife's one my whores."

Dean's eyeballs felt as though they'd jettison from his head. "Whuh-whuh-what?"

"Magic Fingers Escorts," Thron related, not taking his gaze off the comic.

It must've been a good comic.

"Look it up in the phone book," Thron suggested. "I'm not ashamed of what I do. Any decent-looking woman with a working pussy is stupid if she doesn't sell it. Money's what makes the world go 'round, and Daphne's slapping on some extra spin, let me tell ya. She's a real trooper, she takes all the kinks you know, the scat guys, the enemas, the guys who like to wear diapers. Daphne's something. And as you well know she's hot. She begs to fuck me. What am I gonna say? No?"

Dean's eyeballs had not quite yet jettisoned, but they were getting close. It was disconcerting enough to walk into your own bedroom and find a naked, bald, tattooed guy lounging casually in your marriage bed. The cum-stains were disconcerting too. But worse was that Thron penis, however deflated, looked like a fuckin' roll of bratwurst, sheened shiny with what could only be the vaginal fluids of Dean's wife.

Just then the bathroom door clicked open, and out walked an unsuspecting and very naked Daphne. "I'm a fuckin' goat today, darling," she said clearly to Thron. "I gotta have it again."

"Come on," Thron complained. "Four times in an hour? Give a guy a break. Besides, I think your hubby might want to have a word with you, and thanks very much for telling me you were married." Before the words fully registered, Daphne's gaze slowly turned. Then she saw Dean standing there.

"Dean...honey! I "

Dean just stared. No words were necessary...yet.

"I-I-I "

Ajax was right. She's been cheating on me at every opportunity and then, finally, the Good Dean metamorphosed into the Bad Dean, something which had not yet fully happened but something that was now totally in order.

"I've been Mr. Nice Guy too long," Dean uttered. He didn't open his suitcase, he ripped it apart, and a second later, he was holding his pair of horn-crankers.

In less time than it took to an average person to cough, Dean whipped the horn-crankers down and expertly had Thron's cock in their grips.

"Hey, man!" Thron reasoned. "Your beef isn't with me!" His groin shuddered, inches of limp dick laying over the horn-crankers' jaws. "It ain't my fault your cock-crazy wife came on to me and never told me she was married! Pussy's pussy! When it's in your face, you take it! What natural man wouldn't?"

Dean looked insane as the horn-cranker's jaw closed on Thron's cock. It would be so easy to yank it all out by the root...and it would be fun. But even Bad Dean retained some fund of reason. Everything Ajax had said was right, and everything Thron was saying now was just as correct.

Dean opened the horn-crankers, pulled them away. Thron's fat cock remained intact. Then Dean faced Daphne.

"Dean! Honey!" she stammered. "I love you! He's lying! He-he-he...raped me! I swear!"

Dean grinned at her. He began to step forward.

"No, honey! Please! Please don't kill me!" she begged.

Dean kept stepping forward. "Oh, darling, I'd never do anything like that. I'm not going to kill you, I'm just gonna...shove you around a little " He grabbed her not by the hair but by the face, and slammed her hard against the wall. Flecks of sheetrock blew out. Then he punched her in the face, punched her in the stomach, one after another, alternately: the face, the stomach, the face, the stomach, for a good ten minutes. She shit on the floor and urine sprayed freely from her vaginal cleft. A final blow to her cheek shot several teeth out of her mouth. A final blow to her stomach made her vomit.

Daphne lolled in the corner, her face a cross-eyed bruise. Her pleas of mercy continued but all that surfaced were big bubbles of spit and blood.

"I'd fuck you one last time but...you're not worth the energy it take to pop a load," he said. "Shit, I'd rather fuck a box of frogs."

Her pleading blubbered more blood and drool. Several more teeth fell out onto the floor, like big white pills.

"Take care of yourself, honey," he said and began to walk out. But then he stopped short. "Oh, I forgot something."

Daphne, barely conscious, looked up as if to ask What?

"This," he said, and forcefully kicked her one last time in the gut. Bile and vomit sprayed the

wall. Then he gave her an additional kick square in the vulva, for what he perceived of as good measure. "Happy trails," he bid.

Wreathed in relief, Dean walked out. "Later," he said to the bald man, who remained naked on the bed reading his comic. "She's all yours."

"Thanks," Thron replied. "Have a good one, buddy. And don't feel bad, she was getting crusty if you want to know the truth. Stretched out."

Dean loped happily out of the house, pinching a dip of Skoal and casting an errant spit into the bushes. He got into the car and drove back to the airport. Back to his life, and back to his true love.

Back to his true self.

| |

Thirteen

Happily ever after. That's what awaited him when he returned to the Lohan Mansion. His father recovered from his wounds, and counseled Dean in the running of the ranch. Cash poured in, and in very short order, Dean Lohan was the richest redneck in the entirety of the state of South Dakota. He grew his beard back, let his hair fall to his shoulders, and was seldom seen dressed in anything other than faded blue jeans and black METALLICA T-shirts.

He dipped a full can of Skoal per day.

Ajax gratefully became the estate's new groundskeeper, while his new wife, Shirley, continued to run the house and willingly offered herself up as a living sperm depository for Ajax' throbbing need. Her big tits wobbled...everywhere.

But Dean had a new wife too: Arianne. It was a wonderful life by both of their standards. Dean got laid or got his dick sucked whenever he pleased, and Arianne had her man. The true heart was enough, in fact. Now that Dean was back with her, she kicked her drug habit without a hitch. But Arianne's drug habit wasn't the only thing that was kicked.

Arianne's ass was kicked just as thoroughly. Some women liked it rough, and this skinny little tramp was the epitome of the notion. It was a woman's secret, of course: a man's love was never proven until he demonstrated the promptitude with which he was willing to slap the snot out of the woman he adored.

"Where's my beer, bitch?" Dean demanded on a lazy summer day when the sun was high and the grasslands of his lucrative ranch swayed deep-green in the northern breeze. He was watching a Yankees game on the television.

"Your beer's in the fuckin' refrigerator, dick-shit," she replied. "What am I? Your fuckin' maid?"

Dean got up and punched her hard in the mouth. The sound of the wet smack echoed about the mansion.

Arianne blinked out the stars, got her husband's beer, and brought it to him. She even opened it for him, then cuddled up close to his strong warm body and smiled with blood smearing her lips.

"I love you, baby," she whispered and kissed him on the cheek. The kiss left a print of blood.

"Yeah, yeah," he replied and swigged his beer. "Let me watch my game. Clemens is pitching."

She hugged him tight, then dozed comfortably against his muscled shoulder.

No, life couldn't be more perfect.

And standing in the cluttered dark, in a disused coat closet in the foyer, was the rusting pair of horn-crankers.

They would never be picked up again.

THE END

Edward Lee (seen here with his new electronic cigarette) has had more than 40 books published in the horror and suspense field, including CITY INFERNAL, THE GOLEM, and BLACK TRAIN. His movie, HEADER was released on DVD by Synapse Films, in June, 2009. Recent releases include the stories, "You Are My Everything" and "The Cyesologniac," the Lovecraftian novella "Trolley No. 1852," and the hardcore novel HAUNTER OF THE THRESHOLD. Currently, Lee is working on HEADER 3. Lee lives on Florida's St. Pete Beach. Visit him online at:

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