

BEWARE
OF THE DOG

jonathan wesley bell



beware of the dog

a most wanton novel

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NEW YORK CITY, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1983

Doorbell. That old timey alarm propels me into lift off right here in my recliner. Sends *The Times* slipping off my lap. I'll not stop it. Bye bye headline.

50 Years Ago the Reichstag Fire Changed the World.

Another article I'll never read. Ancient history. Reichstag fire, Nazis too. Those antiques are no more than a made-for-TV entertainment. They gravitate down to the luxury of my ABC carpet.

Ringin's going gang busters. What is it, Russians nuking the Queensboro Bridge? Mormons at the door?

Ringin persists, pierces out, filling our hollow winter's day. Is it the Keigers? Not a chance. Our quaint German landlord and landlady give abrupt, humble burps of the bell to catch our attention. Nothing *fascisti* like this. Amusing accents, yes, but no National Socialism.

In Long Island City doorbells are redundant. We don't need one. This is the first time since we moved in that I've even heard ours. Greeks and Italians don't know how to use them. They honk their horns and/or scream like castrati being ravaged.

Damn, somebody down at the street door is really leaning on our buzzer. Fuck 'em. 20F, wind chill factor of minus 10. Let 'em freeze.

We of course don't know a soul in Long Island City. Who would want to. Our Manhattan friends won't venture into the outer Boroughs, the same to them as a two week vacation in North Dakota.

Noon sky roils. It fills the nearest window frame turgid and sinister. Grim ode to Guernica. Fascists and Commies at every turn.

Bell shows every intention of ringing forever and ever. World without end.

Here in the living room it almost obliterates what The Rolling Stones are singing. Not quite, I know the words. An heretical, un-American anthem that stirs my upper class blood.

You can't always get what you wa-unt.

You can't always get what you wah - - unt.

“Randy!” Screams Prudence. Down the apartment hallway I spy her sitting alone in the kitchen, looking at me looking at her. Our mutual stupified expressions may be more alarming than the alarm. Alarm bell ruckus rumples the air about her into a microwave Statue of Liberty crown. She’s going lyrical with anxiety.

More and more Pru speaks in exclamation marks. I speak only in question marks.

My Prudence summons me forth from out of my Mick Jagger trance.

Her seven-month tummy swells to the table edge. Prudence is one knocked up Virgin of Guadeloupe with a radioactive glow blessing the holiest of melons. Well do I know who zapped it into her.

Prudence does her Kegel exercises, clenching her pussy in a daze of maternal devotion. The Kegels, a drill of 25 now with 25 more before bedtime, call up a mimicking tremor from the bottom of my balls to the rim of my navel—a mildly erotic, paternal thrill.

All comes clear when the grass hits the frontal lobe. I find meaning in the phenomenon of our raging doorbell. The bag of Colombian lies on the living room carpet in easy reach and oddly juxtaposed to the Reichstag fire headline. An anodyne for modernity. Already had one joint, not sure I still have the dexterity to roll another.

Randall Peyton Purcell. How clever you are. Without moving you can analyze anything-- that *Times* article ignored on the floor, this

city of New York, The Rolling Stones, an ill-omened sky--even yourself, which only 1% can do.

You, Randy, are so emblematic of this new age. Weltanschauung. A trim and handsome economic analyst sprawled on Italian designer furniture. Analytical of all. Mildly sedated, pleasantly aroused.

Warning. Warning. Doorbell's not succumbing to metal fatigue.

I ought to go down to see who's there. I'm already dressed to impress. Faded *PENN* crewing sweat, old green sweatpants, new New Balance running shoes, no underwear. Stretching my legs wide I hang loose as nakedness. Roomy enough for a 25% erection.

Far better to lie back here half blotto and drifty. To feel good, in other words and not give a fuck.

This streetscape comes to mind, what waits for me downstairs. Reinforcement of my antagonism to movement. Plaster Madonnas in the too-tiny yards of the too many two-story two-family residences. In plan and shape from the 1920s, exactly like this one where we live.

Many are recently clad in aluminum siding, a special as seen on TV. They stand in a row embarrassingly close encumbered with heavy bars, locks, fences. They have identical Beware Of The Dog signs.

Our building, though, is apart from much of Long Island City. It retains the original stone pineapples, cynical symbols of welcome. One atop each corner of the roof, looking to me like funeral urns, or amphora's if you're feeling jolly. There's no siding here, no Madonna. Also our building has no dog. I couldn't live here otherwise. No demand for a sign to beware of one. No *cave canem*. I will never like dogs.

Am I an elitist snob? Damn right. What else could I be, Brentwood School, Choate, Penn, Wharton. I've never ridden on a bus in my life.

Before this unfortunate doorbell intrusion the New York City noises had ebbed far far away. Noises of money making, of social decay, sounds of the immigrants in this school of money making.

The remaining, living factories of Long Island City, of western Queens, the city's last bastion of 19th Century industrialism, are closed today.

On a Sunday, in winter, this weary Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area is catching its breath.

"Randy!" howls Prudence from the kitchen. "It's smoking."

Down the hall I spy a thin jet-stream of smoke spiraling from the bell box above her beautiful head. The box hangs ten feet up the kitchen wall, canary yellow and big as my thigh.

Agreed, something is amiss. The bell goes on and on, ear splitting, heart stopping. Should I be recalling the whereabouts of my Rolex and my wallet pregnant with cards? Is the National Guard on the way to evacuate us? Will our future residence be on cots in the William Cullen Bryant High School gymnasium?

Now why can't Prudence enlarge upon her woman's duties by breaking off her Kegels and going down to deal with whomever? The stairs would be another good pregnancy exercise for her.

"Stuck!" advises Prudence in a profound reasoning. Her take-shelter voice-over pops in the effort to get my attention.

"I don't think anyone's down there. It just went off by itself."

That's her irritated-with-Randy voice. Clearly, the ringing is antagonizing her. But will she lift a finger to help? She hasn't even lost count of her Kegels.

Smoke's still rising. Doorbell's ring ring ringing.

Prudence chastises me with that fix it or you aren't a man pucker around the mouth, a mouth as tight as her clenched pussy.

She's staring accusingly at a section of kitchen wall tile. Our Keiger-decorated kitchen with its hundreds of blinding white tiles does resemble a lab, or the Lincoln Tunnel, depending.

"Alright, let's have ourselves a merry Jin Dynasty fire drill." I thunder at her, already up and lurching to the rescue. No wonder women outlive us by 2.5 years.

Out the door I'm going. Now the trick is to prance on tiptoe down this eyesore of a stairs runner, stealthily yet rapidly, through

the entrance way, out to the street door, all without bringing the Keigers into this domestic farce.

While the old folks might ignore the bell, loud as it is, I'm sure Elfreda would be electrified by the sound of running feet on her stairs.

Don't want any Keigers today. Gottfried would turn this into a marathon babble, bungling with wires, coils and circuits. For the rest of the afternoon I'd be Cheetah-grinning at him. Acting like I understand his English.

Humiliating to be sneaking deviantly on their stairs. Screwdriver in hand, baseball bat at my side. Bat for life insurance. In New York you never know.

*But if you try sometimes well you might find
You get what you need.*

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"Good afternoon, Mister Purcell," Mrs. Keiger pants, nothing less than a winded Valkyrie out stumping the sidewalk for skewered warriors.

Our East River blasts Canadian air into my running pants. Shock of the new. It's whipping an abundance of Elfreda's gray thatch all over our faces.

"Have you seen the \$1,000 dog?"

Soprano voice lilts in a sneak attack, coming at me from the wrong direction, from the street. It's English rendered like bar maid Lieders. It should have a happy-face bouncing ball over the words.

What to do with the screwdriver? The bat that's sticking provocatively from between my legs? The dangling buzzer box? The accusing, pubic-hair wire? How do I hide silence?

Cover up with a smile, what else, like in Nixon's farewell at the copter door. Just turn and zap the old landlady with your most profound, philosophic, Huck Finn grin. Keep thinking of a crew cut and the wealth of our military industrial complex.

Seems Elfreda has in fact been running, or at least attempting to, for her it would be jog-geling. At 65 or so, five feet, 150 lbs, it would be a Teutonic tits and belly act. Her cheeks glow a diabetic crimson. Those blue eyes dart in wild excitement-- what a picturesque old knuddelpuddel.

Yes, my grin already aches. Doesn't seem she's impressed by it-- nor by the screwdriver for that matter. Elfreda joggles to a halt on the sidewalk just on the other side of the Keiger's wire mesh fence. Her circa-1962 Jackyesque winter coat billows open over that enormous bosom, which is still joggling. It could give solace to an entire race.

The cereal bowl she holds ceremonially like a chalice. Why should there be an entire can of dog food up-ended in that bowl, unspoilt in its can shape, a timbale of blood-colored goo? Why is it pointing at me?

She's offering me some? An old country delicacy?

The contrary urge of the moment is to plunge the screwdriver into the dog food, like throwing Excalibur into the run-off from an Iowa slaughter house. No, I'm wagging in welcome. What else is there to do? Anything to avoid a bewitching by those awesome breasts.

Gottfried charges up behind her. He's a native bearer with a leash draped over his shoulders. Stocky, barrel-chested old fellow, or ancient little boy, whichever. He's always excited about something. Always ashen and gray.

"Ya, ya. He gott de red hunkerchef on der neck. He do tricks on de top of de fire hydrants . . . Ya." Gottfried twitching like a boy of 12 at mama's heels.

What a juicy fellow--Prudence thinks he's still getting it up everyday. His nose must run 7 - 24. His filmy, yellowish eyes are brimming over. His spit comes thick as sperm with his broken English. As usual, Elfreda translates.

"Yes, he is that trick dog. And the newspaper says he is in many movies, even on TV. The man will give \$1,000 to have him back."

"Mrs. Keiger . . . Mr. Keiger." My landlord and landlady routine includes a little bow, something faintly Prussian to please them.

These old people do bring out the gentleman in me. Nothing subservient, since they do the family-retainer act, which I think I understand. I see it in their eyes when they talk to me.

They admire my 6'2" frame, my blond hair, blue eyes and Anglo jib. They approve of my cleanliness. I'm something of the local gentry to them. Doesn't hurt that I always pay the rent on time. In the flesh I'm the excuse for having lost two wars to America.

"Just checking the doorbell," I chirp. "It was stuck." Ha, ha, merry me —what a twerpy giggle.

"The \$1,000 dog. Ya, I seen him," Gottfried squints suspiciously at the screwdriver.

Not Elfreda. She's shooting binocular glances up and down 38th Street, inspecting the dismal stretch for the Holy Grail unobtrusively abiding in the arms of one of the Virgin Maries.

"My husband, he saw the dog yesterday," she says, hopping a tiny step forward, the crusade calling her on. "We are looking for him for two hours already. We have the picture of him from the newspaper."

"The bell was smoking . . ." I blunder sideways, trying to nod, having discovered how much they like frequent nodding. Keep grinning, keep nodding. I grave another joint.

"Ach, but Mister Purcell, he don't read the *News*. He read only der *Times*. Das right, ya." Gottfried pins me to the spot with those swimming, strangely insightful eyes. Makes me feel like he has a file on me, on us, Prudence and our baby-to-be. As usual he's standing too close. Well inside a person's comfort zone. When a pearl of snot drips from his nose it lands on my sleeve.

"Wunderbar, I see you like baseball. Me too. I use to bat de ball wit my son. Ve should practice sometime in the backyard."

The scouting parade abruptly gears into motion, moving on down the block. Already Elfreda's almost to the next row of garbage cans. Her buttocks, monster jugs and dog food are off shaking like the

Dream Whip factory in an earthquake. Gottfried will have to run to catch up. Bet he gets a scolding.

"Look out your vindow, Mister Purcell," he calls back to me. "Ya, do dat for me please . . . Tell me ven you see der \$1,000 dog." The old man frisks off, loose leash trailing, a lost puppy himself. "Und leave dat doorbell to me. Ya, danke."

Keynes, I say, was absolutely right, "New fears and hopes *do* without warning take charge of human conduct."

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"They're off in search of Frederick Barbarossa's tomb armed with dog food and leash." Prudence turns a mute look to my drollery. I fear the fetus is consuming her humor alive.

"How did you manage that?" sneers Prudence, looking very large-with-child in the peace and quiet of the kitchen--the 'manage' meaning the peace and quiet, which she seems to be accepting as a gift.

Damn it she should, it is. To flick off the radio she turns with that ungainly pregnant-woman swivel, awkward yet ravishing in its Quattrocento serenity.

Silence has become truth for Prudence, for her like febrile dreams of Fabian promiscuity and nostril flaring Anarchists.

She snaps off "Silly Little Love Songs" without even flinching.

What a beautiful woman my Prudence is, shiny black hair and bewitching olive-shaped eyes. If it weren't for the fact that her father teaches such imperatives as Sir Gawain and The Green Knight at Michigan State you'd think her a gypsy.

"Do you really find it amusing, two lonely old people half mad with materialism out chasing some phantom dog? I think it's depressing."

Prudence reigns in adoration and full iconography. She has the current issue of *Dissent Magazine* balanced on the remnant of her lap. On the floor by her swollen ankles there's *The New York Review*

of Books, which I'm expected to retrieve for her. At her elbow on the Marimekko table cloth a glass of milk and the last of the Pepperidge Farm Chocolate-Chocolate Chip cookies.

"Oh, I disconnected a wire . . ." Seems like I ought to get more credit for something akin to bearing home a giant sloth on my shoulder.

Prudence, excessively egalitarian, forgets how much attention a man needs. I'd love to have that cookie. Not snatching it away from her makes me feel fatherly--my sacrifice to the kid. She sits there oblivious.

"Today we're going to do the Lamaze exercises *before* you start drinking, right?" She declares in ancient woman-speak, 'I'm right, you're wrong' thing. Instructions for using such talk and for the Lamaze, with news that I'm required to join her daily in at least one set of exercises, arrived inside her Bloomingdale's pregnancy kit.

"Randy, did you know that 'Keiger' means warrior in German? I'd remember that before you become too condescending."

Prudence, Prudence, you're taking me for granted these days. I did live a year in the Penn German Haus. Instead of looking at her I'm getting even by staring out the window while stuffing that last cookie into my mouth.

No blue jays in the Keiger's feeder, no squirrel dancing along the power line that drapes like a circus high wire over their backyard. Long winter shadows from the neighboring buildings reduce their garden to a depressing pit--dead vines, shrubs, flower stalks.

Hard to believe how it looked at the end of summer. When we moved in last August it steamed at us, dense as a jungle. We laughed in delight at the sight of it, dazed from years of Manhattan concrete, wondering how so many plants could fit into such a postage stamp backyard.

Now Mr. Keiger's homemade statuary--a cement frog, a cement rabbit, a cement birdbath shaped like an ogre--stand stark to view. You can see all of his toolshed too, the dwarfish wooden structure with a drooping tarpaper roof.

In summer when the grapevines envelope it Frau and Herr Keiger spend their evenings there perched on cement mushrooms. Prudence calls their backyard the Englischer Garten and the white toolshed their summer Dacha.

Prudence has a lot of imagination, too much most of the time, although I suppose that's why she's such a hot shot direct mail copywriter.

I just think the scene's dumpy. Damn, wish there was another cookie.

"There's an article in here you should read."

Prudence is after me again to read something--our fundamental dispute on culture: Her and her books, articles, Puccini, French movies and vitamin C versus me and my computer, dope, beer, Rolling Stones and TV.

"It's a decent introduction to the Greensboro Massacre. Good overview, nothing profound."

On days like this, Prudence, you are a bore. To keep her invisible I'm considering what I can see of the street behind us. That's 37th Street. LIC is very creative.

To do this I overlook two rinky-dink backyards--the Englischer Garten sandwiched back to back with that of the the Italians, with their hideous yellow-house and miserable vegetable patch. Further on I have a good view of the playground-cum-parking lot for Most Precious Blood R.C. Church and School. Both are faux gothic horrors.

No, Long Island City is not pretty.

This Sunday afternoon, the playground/parking lot hosts a hockey game on roller-skates for two tribes of pre-pubescent boys. There are even some miniature cheerleaders involved, with MPB glitzing on their red windbreakers.

Along the sidelines a throng of mamas and papas is something to behold --polyglot of plump immigrants costumed in excessively bright and cheerful oriental textiles.

The market for clothing does make a classic study. The West began to die over textiles. Something Prudence doesn't consider when she mocks my Italian suits.

Hockey team is getting blessed, by an elderly priest in a black cassock--these immigrant parishes in the outer boroughs never progress beyond Pope Pius.

Most Precious Blood hemorrhages belief while Prudence behind me seethes with social injustices and apostasy. I'm the one and only rational spot on the map of this sorry neighborhood. Perhaps in all of Queens.

Two figures trot by in front of the hockey game. Yes, that's our very own Mr. and Mrs. Keiger. Elfreda is still ahead. At this distance, those two look like demented children charging on without a glance for Most Precious Blood, the hockey team, the old priest and a younger one skulking in the crowd of textiles with a hand in his pants.

Even from here I see Elfreda's fulsome bosom parting the way like a giant foam bumper. Will it too be blessed?

I wonder if the dog food passes uneaten? I'm sure it's beyond its expiration date. I see that the leash trails away empty. For some reason, the scene leaves me a little uneasy, seems we are all dashed by a Coleridge sea and menaced by the beaks of albatrosses.

"Has Baby moved today?" I ask, to make peace.

Prudence murmurs reassurance, whether to me or the baby is uncertain. The gurgle of her love for once makes me flinch.

"Randy, there's a chocolate cookie crumb on your lip. Better eat it quick before someone steals it." But she smiles and all again is well.

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"Fifteen Seconds . . ." I have a good voice, and I take pains to articulate clearly, like the used car spokesman after the late movie knowing his audience is either retarded or stoned.

Evening, our best time together. No sexual contest, no tendentious beliefs, no class warfare or polemic on ethnic cleansing. We are as one in the kitchen, knee to knee, ticking off the seconds while she pants and strokes her tummy. For me we're an econometric function and modeling in one.

What I dislike is the staring. It is also part of Lamaze. This staring, for Prudence, carries some sort of physical/spiritual significance that is absolutely embarrassing. Soulful staring distorts time, corrupts the work ethic, confuses the new American system of value--it isn't entertaining. It isn't love, it's ocular warfare. I'm not at all surprised Dr. Lamaze got his school of natural child birth from the Soviets.

"Thirty Seconds . . ." To defuse the staring, I smile. Prudence gets irate over that. "Don't smile," she complains afterwards. "It makes you look like a used car salesman on TV." At least I'm not sitting bug-eyed and panting like a dehydrated Pekinese.

"Forty-five Seconds . . ."

Sometimes, during a Lamaze set I must gulp down a laugh. Seems like NASA is in countdown for baby's blastoff. What keeps me quiet is the knowledge that if I dared Prudence wouldn't let me diddle her for a week although diddling becomes ever less frequent, more gymnastic too.

Sharp rapping startle us. It comes upon our hall door. We stall in place, eyes locked.

I know that well-bred proletarian knock. Mr. Keiger has something to tell me. Prudence holds steady. Saying in silence 'Don't even think about it. Let him wait.'

"Contraction Ends" I murmur. On cue Prudence takes her closing breath, exhales, abstract of mint, sweetly ignorant of the fact that I just cheated her by clipping 10 seconds off the exercise. Imagine what would become of the species if men began to worry about doing Lamaze exercises every time they approached ejaculation.

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Mr. Keiger bides his time on the landing under the skylight. A small gray smudge of a man under a big scary smudge of a night time skylight. The stairway and Gottfried go well together.

Single stairway light is on. Dreary low watt emanation. To help out I leave our apartment door open. Let your wealth shine forth.

He hums something vague. Maybe Deutschland Uber Alles.

Elfreda does not permit smoking in their apartment so he resorts to various alternatives including tenant conferences on the stairs. Landing's already gone fog thick with his smoke.

Characteristically he's balancing a lit unfiltered cigarette between middle finger and index. One of Prudence's not-so-healthy giant jungle plants serves him for an ashtray.

Along the stairwell hang the old man's very own primitive paintings. The five paintings make an odd, kindergarten exhibition. They are a messy rendering of some pre-war skyline hoary with age.

They smack of Lutheranism, anti-industrialism, of romanticism, of fantasy and self-indulgence. Constable without fingers.

Of course, Prudence likes the paintings. She says they're the people expressing themselves despite centuries of social and economic brutalization. She says they have the same kind of natural genius and character as an El Greco.

Myself, I think both painters suffer from astigmatism. Economists must be realists, I tell Prudence, or someone help us all.

"Ach, Mister Purcell," Gottfried flicks an inch of ash --prerogative of the landlord --onto the nearest plant. "I come up to show you dis."

The hallway smells of lemon oil and Gottfried--the latter something moist and yeasty, recalling that Mr. Keiger, until he retired, was a baker in Yorkville.

The old man sidles up to stand stolidly before me. He does like to snuggle close. To jab a thick finger at your chest for emphasis. Frothing your face with his breath. He's one torrid, keyed up geezer.

I tower above his head and see he hasn't lost a hair. The proud old worker knows his place, and sure wouldn't give up an inch of it either. He's eagerly gabbing away to my nipples.

"Since you only read de *Times*, here it is."

Again, I'm irritated that he should assume I only read the *Times*, just as when he guessed our furniture all came from Conran's--none does. I do feel a need to crush him with the truth, that in our post-literate age I read nothing at all, not even the *Economist*. Nothing at all but print outs, census tracts, trending indicators, abstracts, porn.

It would also be strangely warming to nonchalantly show him the receipt for our Roche Bobois couch or better yet direct his attention to our small Warhol.

"Oh yes, about that dog, right? Did you see him again?" This to forestall Herr Keiger from asking how much the Warhol cost. It was a bargain.

"How much dat cost you, Mister Purcell?" He indicates the Warhol lithograph framed in our open door. "I paint too did you know. I paint a lot better den dat. I give you one of mine for free."

I think that to practice your citizenship just watch a lot of TV it's a free Dale Carnegie course. In stark contrast to canned laughter I have not once caught Mr. Keiger smiling. Perhaps his teeth are rotten. Unimportant, peasant deference and Saxon efficiency are also forms of salesmanship.

"Ya, ya, about dat \$1,000 dog. No, ve did not see him today. My wife, she is too tired now to look. She is not vell since our son married. She has a sickness."

What sickness goes unasked, dull little mysteries surrounding these old world oldtimers. Like their son who apparently never comes to visit them, "Ya, my son he is busy, a dentist you know."

"Sorry to hear that," I counter, easing down the throttle on the smile for a second, urging him as it were to be courageous. TV preachers have this particular technique down pat--we could all learn

meaningful lessons about manipulation and successful deceit from the Sunday morning tube.

"No need to be sorry for him. Dose dentists do real good. He don't rent. He own. Like me." Mr. Keiger vociferously pounds his chest. Sounds like concrete. I doubt his mannerisms have changed much since his days as a young private in the Wehrmacht.

He extinguishes his burning cigarette between finger tips. A serious deliberation, on the nature of pain? Both fingers I note are charred from countless similar mortifications. The butt is pocketed with a sideways glance. For thieves?

"Ya, she take a step and for her it just like valking on sand. She say dat, like trying to valk at Brighton Beach, vere all de Jews go."

Gottfried imparts this with one of his favorite mannerisms, a slow tapping of a charred fingernail to the side of his nose sprinkled with buds of coarse black hairs. It's tempting for me to blurt, 'yea, and that walking in sand sensation is one of the five symptoms of a nervous breakdown.'

"Dis dog, he is a trick dog." Gottfried, so excited, almost humps me on the stairs.

"He stand up on his hind legs. He vear a red kerchief, a real cutie. He is a star. They lost him at de Astoria Studios. At dose big movie studios ve got down there.

"Ya, dat so. Dose studios are only two blocks away--you know dat? My vife saw Robert Redford once, at the corner. She saw him blowing his nose. Dey catch de cold just like us."

I'll be able to report to Prudence that all here is pure urban mythology and with one less mystery, the \$1,000 dog did after all have some reason to exist and be lurking in Long Island City.

"The man put his telephone number in the newspaper. He did dat, ya. It says \$1,000 for return of dog. But ve gott to catch him first."

Gottfried always slams out 'got'. It's his core word. He makes it ring. Gott. Gott Fried. Mein Gott. Gotterdammerung. Gott seems significant.

Got and get should be enshrined. 'Get more' ought to be on our money. 'In Get We Trust' will become our national motto. It might make us recession proof.

"Now you gott nice views up here, front room, kitchen. Views even of the Empire State Building." Sounds like his apartment-for-rent ad we saw in the *Queens Chronicle* one morning in Manhattan over a fateful brunch.

"Den, Mister Purcell, vhy don't you use those views for looking for dis dog. Ya, that vould be good . . Und den... "

Turning sharply he gives me his profile--one ghastly, tapioca pudding eyeball, Mount Rushmore features in the landing shade. He's also giving me a cock-thick finger jab to the chest, an old baker's dough-gouging gesture.

"Den, when you see dis dog you tell me. I catch the dog und call dis man. He give me \$1,000 und you vill get no rent for half a month. Half a month. How about dat."

I'd estimate that only 1 in 10 educated Americans, meaning some junior college, would understand a word of Mr. Keiger's speeches. Prudence, for example, writer and dreamer that she is, MA Bryn Mawr with Honors in sociology, for which I'm elected to pay off her student loans, can't fathom him at all. I can though, and am rather pleased by the ability. It's like having a rapport with children or dogs --some have it, some don't.

"Sure thing, Mr. Keiger. Yes sir. That's a good idea. If we see that dog ve'll, I mean we'll let you know." Smile, nod. I'm sing-singing along. Oh do da day.

"Was there a photo in the paper? That might help." Adding the point about the photo was a great windup—glinting eyes tell me he's happy,

Prudence makes a mistake feeling so aggrieved for these people. She forgets that not only the nation but our whole culture is founded on peasant avarice.

Old man eyes me as narrowly as his trade school manners permit. The dog-food stained newsprint flutters by never easing

from his grip. He knows a hot item when he's Gott it. That's how these immigrants survive.

His fabled creature does wear a bandana for a collar. It's a medium-sized mongrel perched on a fireplug. That's all I can gather.

In parting, Gottfried gives me his characteristic arm in the air farewell. Not a Sieg Heil, but close enough to be endearing.

"I von't keep you. Goodnight and Gott bless." Reminds me of Edward R. Murrow in London with the lights going out.

Amazing how Gottfried Keiger can disappear down these stairs. He's off and gone in two seconds spry as a Bavarian youth pursuing his sweet Oom-pa-pa through the edelweiss.

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"What did he say about the Reichstag fire?" asks Prudence, welcoming me back to the kitchen with a mouth full of strawberry yogurt.

Women do savor derailing a man's thoughts. I know I was just thinking of something, perhaps quintessential, and now it's gone. Women, I think, are the base element of chaos in the universe, a contributing factor to entropy, bank runs, even devaluation.

"Fire? What fire." Just some friendly needling to keep Pru happy. "Nothing about a fire. He just wants us to believe in his \$1,000 dog."

Prudence regards with an almighty wisdom the empty depths of a Danone container, a creamy red smear on the tip of her nose. Pregnant women are marvels of consumption. Madison Avenue must have a secret, quasi-Masonic cult dedicated to their worship.

"It's momentous, the Nazi's torching the Reichstag. That was tonight, right now! Of course they would blame it on the Communists."

To reaffirm my authority I'm opening my first Heinekens of the evening directly under Prudence's turned up nose. Crack crack fizz fizz, oh what a relief it is. To thee my love.

Ever a gentleman I kindly refrain from alluding to the 6 hour time difference between New York and Berlin, nor that it happened 50 years ago when folks hauled Marks in wheelbarrows to pay for toilet paper. Instead I interrupt her with gusto, my best econometric tone.

"Contraction Begins. . ." Clearly it is my male role to guide us back to reality and common sense.

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Instead of sleeping why am I standing here in the darkened apartment in my underwear past 11:00 of a Sunday night? I'm at the trio of front room windows trying to hypnotize the dark.

Is it because of our ever eroding U.S. productivity--the loss of 800,000 jobs in New York City in 10 years--the fear that two young blacks are going to come crashing through the skylight and rape our home?

Is it anxiety over pending fatherhood? No, I want that. Or Prudence turning her back tonight? Because of rat fear, plague fear, nuclear fear – of AIDS, herpes, Legionnaire's Disease, Toxic Shock, Delayed Shock, all our communal syndromes, El Salvador, scary ghettos, serial killers, gas chambers, assassinations, the Jim Jones cult . . . lethal Kool-Aid? Kool- Aid! What nightmare corruptions of Capitalism hath we wrought.

Or something else like that of which we have yet to dream. Am I here, awake and brooding, because of the whimsy of the \$1,000 dog? Who knows why. Too many reasons.

But I'm not the only one up and alone. Through the sinister gloom of the creaking building, I hear the tinkle of a piano. Mrs. Keiger sits directly below serenading me from their own front room.

Tonight it began with "Blue Moon," went on to "Moon River," then "Shine On, Shine On Harvest Moon"--Elfreda in a reverie of moon music. She plays their Whitney upright exactly like she speaks, dulcet and tentative. She's treating me now to "Moonlight on the Wabash."

Gottfried I see out under a streetlight. His flashlight sweeps up and down the gutters. And I know what he's searching for.

To encourage him Elfreda thumps out "When the Moon Hits Your Eye Like a Big Pizza Pie, It's Amore." The giant fronds of Prudence's beloved philodendron tickle my thighs as I lean forward to spy the better on the street scene below. The night seems oddly pensive. I'm at a Queens Ashram of silence and prayer .

Four beers, a joint, three hours of TV, normally the routine would bring anyone to a slap-happy edge of incoherency. The way I choose to end my weekends. Not tonight.

I'm to the point of sneaking another beer, finishing the joint, jacking off into the philodendron--anything to tranquilize my unruly brain. How much easier it would be, to be as simple as these working class immigrants. Or a philodendron.

No miracle tonight. The street lies dark and drear, except for the moving beam of Gottfried's flashlight, to which he adds the tiny oculus of his volcanic cigarette.

In the distance a captive dog howls, animal distress blanketed by space and time. A siren falls sharply away along Steinway Street. Somewhere else in Long Island City, on some other look-alike block, a car alarm erupts into a metronome madness driving others around to a murderous rage.

All here is signifying nothing. For the most part the immigrants have curled up together. Their Sunday nights are a time of quaint preparations. Their last bit of calm before the onward rush of work sweeps them helplessly forward. How strange to be living here among them. This is a theme park, Immigrant Land.

We are here because Prudence had sickened of what she denoted as miasmatic Manhattan. She demanded a move. She clamored to have her baby among the proletariat. She also wanted her own study.

I had to handle it. I did a good job of it too. Just applied my principles of Location Theory and presto. We are suddenly here, of all places, at 3254 38th Street, Long Island City.

One dim streetlight, five doors down, blesses the street with an illusion of cleanliness, order and prosperity—as if the city too were shiny and new.

On a night like this I understand how the immigrants can still believe in work, success, God and miracles. In Captain America and Capitalism. It would be cruel to disenchant them.

If Prudence were up and sharing this with me I'd say "see, why not let them sleep? Why, wake them up?" Pru would counter with, "but we're a private club and they'll never be members." True.

Elfreda tippy-toes through John Thompson's Fifth Grade version of "The Moonlight Sonata"--eliding a few unnecessary notes. Higher up, a full moon blurts out of the obscurity in all its splendor through sea clouds blown in from the empty harbor, shipping tonnage is down to zero, night clouds putting it out almost as soon as it's appears.

We've breathing the last gasp of the great age of manufacturing. The thousands and thousands of sleepers around me are already relics of the past. What's neat is they don't know it.

This monumental New York SMSA lies bright and glittering, a jewel of an urban area, and I'm feeling like a poet of in-put, out-put analysis. Tomorrow morning, in the office, I'll be able to reduce the jewel to a new set of factors, a new run-through in the model, a fresh printout. The world reduced to statistics. The world reduced to sets of sensible indicators. Reduction is not only essential, it's a thrill. It's power. My power.

Outside, Herr Keiger's search ends without issue. He's come up with only old Dr. Levine, our resident Chinese scholar who I'm told lives out of boxes in the basement. I see Dr. Levine and Gottfried bidding each other goodnight, stiffly courteous and no more. Theirs is a curious relationship, rather puzzling to us up here. They seem to share a tragic memory or a relic of belief, who knows or cares.

Elfreda stops playing in mid-stride. She too must be creeping at the window, peeking and listening--a grand old Teuton tiptoeing through the moonlight.

No dog for them tonight. No \$1,000 jackpot. Nothing to commemorate the Reichstag fire. Nothing at all other than Dr. Levine coming home from his Chinese Literary Society.

Such a magnificent night. Centuries and ideologies colliding around these people like blind monsters. Scientists, engineers, economists--we few who keep the power on for them, we should be sure to take our daily sustenance from a drugged sleep.

Such deep thinking makes me recall Lucretius from my Latin classes at Choate, of how after a thousand years the Dark Ages snuffed him out like an extraneous candle.

"There is nothing that exists so great or marvelous that over time mankind does not admire it less and less." Oh yes, Lucretius.

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"Pru . . . guess what, I think I just saw . . . *The Dog*." Prudence isn't speaking much this morning. Unlike me, she doesn't care for Mondays. Nor does she really appreciate the high state of my physical well being, how I can run naked in place here in the living room and shout coherent sentences to her louder than the radio.

She's listening to WBGO, Blues from Newark, of all places, to give the morning a third world bar and grill atmosphere. By mutual agreement, Prudence may have her week day jazz, while I'm permitted my heavy metal rock in the evenings.

"The Greek kids, two doors down have a loose dog cornered between the garbage cans." Prudence does her moping in her study, down the hall, seated at her desk. I think she's in the throes of an identity pinch. That very room, for example, her 'study' as we've called it since moving here, is soon to be metamorphosed into Baby's Room.

The eviction process has already begun, with the crib up in one corner and a changing table and dresser crowding her to the windows. Poor Prudence. I imagine her angrily trying to take her

latest direct mail project seriously, a keening for a Baptist orphanage in Vanuatu.

Maternity is hard on Prudence. She not only looks funny, she must feel funny, torn between radical indignation and the gut fact that 30% of our family income and half of our IRS deductions come from her doing her bit for the all-American shell game--making money through the U.S. Mail.

Will Prudence embitter herself with ironies? No, when the baby comes it will pass. The kid will put some sugar back in her. I certainly am not planning on any cut in our income. She'll find a way to write her way around the baby shit.

"That dog, what I could see of him, he does have a handkerchief around his neck."

I'm leaning provocatively, contrapposto, in her doorway, slightly out of breath, a large and friendly frontal nude. Yes, I function well on Monday mornings. It's a pleasure, getting in gear, watching the economic colossus stir grudgingly to life around me, from sea to shining sea.

Squeaky, squeaky, squeak. The telltale rodent scream coming from the Englischer Garten is actually just another part of the Monday morning rite of passage. Elfreda hangs up her wash in the backyard, the pulleys complaining. Soon the line will be billowing with a dozen or so pairs of Frau Keiger's undies--large as battle flags. Herr Keiger's long johns will follow, crotches a happy yellow.

Every Monday it's the same, the old woman washing every piece of material she can lay hand on. Clothes, sheets, pillow cases, curtains, table cloths--all of it goes sailing out over the Englischer Garten floor. Good thing I wash out my own underwear. Some day I expect to see Gottfried hanging there.

Prudence isn't looking at me, which hurts my feelings. More than one woman has told me I have a very nice body. "I don't hear any commotion downstairs," I continue, undaunted. "Guess the old folks haven't done their neighborhood watch yet. Think maybe I should run down and tell them?"

Admittedly, this is a silly question. I know that Prudence doesn't give a damn, and also I'll of course go ahead and do whatever I think best. But I do try to run a modern family. Enlightened, proudly so.

Even the secretaries at work admire my open mindedness toward them. Especially when I sell them the sack lunch I don't want at discount. For that matter, I know they think I'm hot.

"Yes sir Mr. Randall Peyton Purcell strut down there bare assed and give 'em a thrill. Can't be much fun for you with just me and the Koreans for an audience."

The unfairness of this attack goes to show you how clumsily Prudence handles gestation. True, those oriental people in the neighboring apartment, at level with ours, can peep through windows darkly into our apartment. I know because I peep into theirs. But at sensitive moments I'm careful to streak through our rooms giving them no more than a tantalizing white blur to ponder. I only slow down when Pru's not around.

"Alright, that crack just cost you half a month's rent." I say on my way to fetch my bathrobe. "I saw the dog. I'm going down. I get to spend the money all by myself."

I ought to be more tolerant of Prudence. But I'm the one here with an MBA. Unbeknownst to her I'm also the one who's a well endowed trust fund baby. About which Prudence is and shall remain ignorant as per the strict instructions to my lawyer.

"You're late for work," snorts she.

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"Sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Keiger." To get this over with, I'm going fast.

"Ach, Mister Purcell," warbles Elfreda. Her cheeks take two layers of paint off the downstairs hall, sunshine in her eyes. The beaming dear feigns surprise at the sight of me, my tightly synched bathrobe, the blond hair on the tops of my feet.

"I just looked out the window upstairs, there's a dog in the backyard where the Greek . . ."

Clasping a soapy, strudel-shaped fist to her mouth, her eyes pop wide. Frau Keiger erupts into a blitzkrieg of German. German echoes loudly through the stillness of their apartment. As usual it smells of disinfectant. What I can see of their muted sweet home through the open door, around Elfreda's Stonehenge shape, glows like Martin Luther agitating to candlelight.

Mrs. Keiger's high pitched alarm triggers a gruff reply, a sleepy troll-like grunting from beyond their bedroom door. Sure enough, Mr. Keiger comes stumbling into the entryway, too wrought-up to say 'gut morgen.' He's fastening his pants on the run, shirtless and sockless. His chest hair may be gray, but those are real muscles he's got strung about his suspenders.

What an amazing old timer he is. The leashes drape his bare shoulders. He's toting along the bowl of dog food too, which is beginning to look rendered.

Without hesitating, he zips by me and Elfreda, charging down the hall toward freezing weather.

"Ya, ya . . . wait for me, I'm comink." He calls back to us.

Never mind, I'm a little bewildered myself. Vaguely uneasy too, perhaps because Prudence is right again, I will be late to work.

Elfreda throws herself forward, jaw set, to join her man at the front. She too thunders for the street door.

This scene might have cheered Prudence up, if she'd not missed it in a pout. How nice it is to make these elderly people happy. Nice and so easy. Ok, Randy, so what are you really going to do with that free half month's rent?

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I knew this evening would not end without a report from the Keigers. Gottfried came knocking on our door to lure me down.

He's preceded me to the bottom of the stairs betrayed by a pall of cigarette smoke in the dead air.

Halfway down the stairs and I'm about to fall forward into chaos. This is no joke, Randy, he might have planted a trip wire to break your neck on the stairs, retribution for D-Day?

Somewhere behind him I sense a furtive movement in a tunnel of murk. Gives me pause. I smell raw meat and maggots in the air.

Gottfried flicks on the downstairs hall light. Adjusting to the 60 watt blast of the modern I begin to see, vaguely. Yes, it is a dog.

Groveling on a leash. Burrowed into the corner beside the street door. The mutt's pressed itself into an anonymous heap. A rolled up rug by the radiator.

It's genuine alright. Ears back to his head he shows his fangs. Without warning It goes lunging on the leash straight for the old man's Achilles heel.

"Be kind mein hund," whispers Gottfried hopping a few inches to safety. Then to me, in solto voce, "He still scared. Dose Greek kids was beating him."

The need for conspiracy theory whispering, besides me the only other creature about is the dog who is currently lustily lapping its anus, is both irritating and alarming.

"Und my vife, she fell down vhen ve run after him. She got the scabs on both knees. Frau Keiger she is in bed. Ve used up all the dog food. He broke one leash. Und den he bit me, ya. "

Gottfried hikes a pant leg to display a purplish blot. At this the beast suddenly displays a maw of yellow fangs sharp as shrapnel.

"See dat, this dog is a good biter." First time ever I hear the old man give a chuckle. Gottfried snaps the leash up tight forcing the dog to scramble to its feet.

"Mr. Purcell, please to be introduced to Herr Johann Sebastian Bark."

For the first time here the odor of unkempt canine arises. Rank or just earthy? It wafts invisibly, threateningly, snaking up the stair steps toward our apartment.

Whatever ye be, beast, to me you have the head of a baboon and the body of a gargoyle.

"Ya, he vas hungry. Poor pup."

"That's *the dog*?" I fail to swallow the note of dismay in my voice, to which Mr. Keiger throws back his shoulders.

'Ve clean him up tomorrow. Ve teach him not to shit on the kitchen floor. Ve be real good to him. I tell my vife, he vill be a vatchdog. Ve need a vatchdog in this house."

I can't help pointing to the ragged bandana, still tied at the dog's throat. "So you're going to keep him? What about the \$1,000?"

Gottfried nods. "Ya. vell, I called dat number in the paper." He suddenly shrugs, looks Johann full in the eyes. "A Jew . . ." lowering his voice.

For a moment I'm wondering if the old man might be referring to the dog. A Jewish dog? The dog stares up at me golden eyes stabbing like knives. How odd being stared down by a dog with extreme halitosis.

"Then he's not the \$1,000 dog." I suggest, beginning to tire of the whole thing.

"No, vell maybe. Who knows." Gottfried taps his nose. "Maybe dat Jew don't vant to give up the money. You know how it is." The old man looks down at the dog, which now returns a cunning expression--he and the dog seem to be communing. It's a game of volleyball stares.

"The man, he say, 'Yea, you think you gott my dog? So vhat, the phone rings off the vall. Everybody in New York think they gott my dog.'

"Und me, I never like that kind of voice, so I say, 'Vell, this here dog look like the picture in the *News* and he gott him a red hunkerchef. So the man say, 'OK, give the dog the test. Say to him 'Do like the ladies of Paree,' then tell me vhat he does.'"

Mrs. Keiger opens their apartment door to smile at us. White bandages on her knees give her a war casualty look. She warms up the hallway, rosy as ever, happy as a new grandmother.

"Do you like our puppy's name, Mister Purcell?" she titters. "I thought it up myself." She pulls her apron up over her face.

"Ya, Johann Sebastian Bach," booms Gottfried inflecting 'yaaaa' with a spirited glissando that mists his face, and mine, in spittle. "He vas a gggggggreat Gerrrrrrrrrman composer. I know dat. Johann Sebastian Bark. It is a good joke." Frau Keiger pops her eyes over her apron hem. Suddenly the hall pervades with noxious dog fart.

To the stink Mrs. Keiger murmurs. To the stink Mr. Keiger stares blankly, as if he were alone on another planet.

The old man whispers, "Ve had to eat dogs in Russia. Man's best friend, terrible, terrible."

"Gottfried!" admonishes Mrs. Keiger.

She drops the apron to toy nervously with her lower lip. Something just went over my head here. I feel like a kid listening at a key hole. I'm also feeling trapped, caught talking with the landlord, landlady and Johann-- Johann! Must I already dignify him with a name, Johann Sebastian Bark, and at 10:00 on a Monday night. There ought to be a meter running on how much time you can spend on such idiocy.

"Yes, and then what happened when you said 'do like the ladies of Paris?'" I urge, trying to get us moving.

"Ach, ya." Mr. Keiger shakes himself. "So. The man on the phone keep saying 'vhat's happening, vhat he doing now?' Und I say, 'he's licking what dogs like to lick.'

"The man he say, 'that ain't my dog.' So I say, 'hold on mister, vhat vas he suppose to do anyway.' Dat Jew say, 'he vas suppose to roll over on his back, spread his legs and viggie.'"

The apron just flew back over Mrs. Keiger's face. Gottfried is even smiling. With a powerful jerk, Johann Sebastian Bark lunges, trying to throw himself to freedom through the glass of the street door. Maybe to escape from us? Or from his own fart?

Fuck, so much for the myth of the \$1,000 dog.

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Damn. This dog of theirs is well named. In only these few days what began in a loud broken-spirited quiet emanating from below has fortissimo-ed into aggressive, loud-mouthed, nonstop barking off.

Prudence already murmurs complaints, although only to me. Today she was really pissed off when I came home from work. Tolerant Prudence has no tolerance for intrusions on her territory. Living in New York is thus difficult for her and more than once led me to warn her sternly when we lived in Manhattan.

‘You can’t argue with the cabby honking at the light. You can’t yell at people talking in the hallway. You can’t berate our neighbors over their loud fights or parties that we weren’t invited to. You can’t argue with waiters about their choice for Borough president’ To no avail, and none of her Bolshie candidates won anyway.

It came to me to lead us to the promised land of Queens.

Unfortunately, in Long Island City quiet has become something important to both of us. And it wasn't even a location factor when I chose Queens--Prudence wanted to move to the Bronx for an experience in black-white-Puerto Rican relationships.

So inured were we to 24 hour sirens, alarms and assorted screechings that we were deaf to the endless shuffle of traffic on Central Park West, radios, stereos, to all the noise pollution of Manhattan.

I can proudly add I got it right. Long Island City possesses quiet, at least it does here on 38th Street.

We do hear an occasional jet coming in to La Guardia. A hard rain will set the car alarms off. On weekend nights the local alcoholics cram into Roger Casement’s Bar up at the corner, on Broadway and whenever the door opens it’s a blast of Dolly Parton singing “9 to 5.”

But, all in all, other than Elfreda's piano playing and Gottfried on his hammer and saw, 3254 is--has been—quiet, quiet as a coma ward. I've even wondered if we were making too much noise, up here in our high-tech abode.

Silence then became a pleasure for us. Much like our odd bouts of recreational coke or valium popping. Without meaning to, we've come to depend on it.

"The dog will calm down," I tell Prudence. "He's probably not been indoors for a while. He's still excited. The Keiger's will train him. They like it nice and quiet. You'll see. They don't want a loud dog."

I'm good at talking up the calmer side of life.

"If this God damn dog doesn't shut up I'm going to scream." Prudence doesn't seem impressed by my forbearance. A pregnant woman screaming would however be a crisis.

"Let's not make too big a deal out of it. We don't want to alienate the Keigers. Old people are touchy about some things. We can't move now, not with baby coming. Here, take a puff off my joint. Relax . . ."

Prudence huddles in her chair, huddles as best she can with a tummy big as a prize winning pumpkin. The barking, and not my Norman Vincent Peale address, seems to be driving her deeper and deeper into our \$700 John Stuart armchair. Her lovely mouth just worked itself into what I'd call a snarl--although the word would not be judicious at the moment.

Through the smoke of my joint, the barking doesn't sound all that bad. We ought to be more sympathetic. What Prudence is suffering from is the seven-months jitters.

Johann Sebastian Bark must be capering about with the old folks. They may be playing games together. Ring around the bone? I'm imagining a jolly scene down there. Johann's teaching them sniff-my-butt.

"You don't have to sit up here all day listening to that shit." she sputters.

Ever slightly febrile Prudence at the moment is ravishing, her black curls tangle in a fine line of perspiration. Her Grace Slick voice trembles in fury. She's so upset she's forgotten the Lamaze.

A silence hits us again, teasing us to hope it will last. No more romping. doggie's worn out. From nosing Elfreda's leg? Bet they're

all tucked out down there. Maybe a red rubber ball gooey with fang marks and dog drool just rolled out of reach under the couch?

Perhaps what's eating at Prudence is the randomness of the outbursts. The barking does erupt at the oddest moments, catching you by surprise. I, of course, can ignore it, but to dear sensitive Prudence with her books and poetry, her meditations on motherhood and breach of the social contract, it must be nerve wracking.

Silence holds. Only slowly does Prudence uncoil. It's a tentative motion. Apprehension still wires her taut.

"Hey," I pat the cushion beside me and beckon her to the couch, "Come over here and give Daddy some attention." Oh Randal Peyton Purcell, you're so good at this.

Prudence comes, on cue, hesitantly, true, and somewhat suspicious. But I pat her head. There, there. Good girl.

I slide my left arm over her head and down across her shoulder. Round goes my little finger. Round and round, till that most delightful of rosebuds stands erect. As do I.

Under my right hand the baby also moves, a sly welcoming gesture. Soon, I think, Daddy and baby are both going to be inside of mother. Already, Prudence has that doped look turned-on women get, lips slightly parted, eyes misty and coy. Here we go, sailing off into love land. And love too has an economic impact--a big one.

"Woof--slurp." screams Johann Sebastian Bark. "Yip. Warf. Glurp." Maybe after all they hid the rubber ball between Elfreda's breaded thighs?

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No, Johann does not like Dr. Levine. That must make for a bit of interesting drama downstairs as Dr. Levine's basement apartment opens directly onto the Englischer Garten, from below the steps to the Keiger's backdoor.

Dr. Levine comes and goes around the corner of the house, up the side walkway-- the narrow passage between the Keiger's

windows and the high fence that surrounds their property. It's a squeezed, shadowy walkway, with next door built too close.

When inside their apartment Johann tracks the elderly scholar as he sidles in or out, dashing from window to window, yapping directly against the panes. The little fellow chews up the glass into slivers of canine hatred and spits it into Dr. Levine's back.

If by chance, Johann lurks outside when the good doctor wishes to leave or is returning laden with library books, then it's a real comedy down there. The gentle old man baby-talks his way forward, proffering his hand in friendship, saying 'now pup, now good doggy, let us have peace.'

This has not worked well so instead the doctor has gone to carrying a wad of newspaper which he throws behind him. When Johann races off to skin it alive he skedaddles for his door.

I have spied on this scene a few times from my crows nest vantage point. I admit there's a degree of blood lust in my interest. I'm waiting for Johann to tear into Dr. Levine, to shred the elderly gentleman's trouser leg, to run off slobbering with a bloodied volume of 3,000 year old classic Chinese poetry in his slavering jaws.

This I call the battle for Johann's soul. Prudence looks daggers whenever I mention it. Yet truly, it is so. The Classical Age versus the Invading Tribes, no contest, decline and fall reenacted almost daily below our windows.

To date somewhat to my disappointment Dr. Levine has not been bitten, the books remain intact, while undeterred Johann barks on.

This morning I've already been standing here at bedroom windows for a good ten minutes, sipping the last of my coffee, juggling the fun of watching for something critical to happen below against the knowledge that I must be on the Steinway Street platform in 16 minutes flat.

But something unusual is unfolding down there this morning. Too bad I can't see Elfreda, even pressed as I am against the glass, just hear her voice. Dr. Levine's bony and naked skull holds steady in full

view. Johann skulks near one of Gottfried's cement frogs--hair bristling, scraggly tail straight up to prove just what an asshole he is.

"Mister Levine," yodels Mrs. Keiger, her higher notes somewhat sour for once. "Kindly do not feed our Johann. My husband says we must train him ourselves. So please, do not give him any more of those crackers."

She's shifting gears again, sweetening up. "Johann is such a naughty boy, naughty naughty." Now she's actually dripping with affection. "You chewed up one of mama's best shoes last night, didn't you. Bad Johann. Also, why are you littering our walkway? This is not a parade, Professor. Please pick up what you drop."

Dr. Levine looks up, perhaps sensing that some intelligence studies him from above, perhaps searching for the forgiveness of Jehovah in our gray sky. Of course I pull back from the window, breathless with that childish dread of getting caught. Not before I glimpse a rather plaintive, somewhat lonely expression on the old timer's refined and life-beaten face.

By coincidence, I suppose, and it makes for a great scene, at that same moment Johann also looks up. The dog gives the heavens a brutish, unenlightened glare, snout sniffing. Before abandoning my vantage to the usual subway rout Johann shifts to stare directly up at me. He locks me eye to eye, growls and shoots me one loud, defiant sneeze.

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Prudence is staring in dismay at the plate glass of the Salvation Army Showroom, hormone drugged I think. She's ignoring me. We are having a terrible fight, the worst ever. A real dog fight.

Why she 's stopped here to stare I don't understand. The glass is filthy and the store is an obscurity of jumbles. I call it our neighborhood burial ground, where the unprepossessing furniture of old Italian, Greek and Puerto Rican widows goes to die.

Maybe we're arguing because I induced her to share a joint with me on the E train. She never could handle dope very well. Perhaps

this is due to my innocent comment that there are no black folks in LIC. Whatever, it's spoiling our triumphal return from shopping in Manhattan.

"You are such a prick!"

In a flash of anger at this injustice I stalk on blindly toward home, leaving the Bloomingdale's bags for her to carry. They're heavy too.

"Philistine!" shrieks Prudence. She's sulks ten paces behind me dragging the bags along as best she can.

"I'm going to watch you from now on, babe," I yell. "Know what I'm going to do? I'm going to take one of those maternity leaves just so I can stay home and watch you! You don't think I will? Wait!"

I'm not going to bother looking back at Prudence. I know she's following. Heel, girl. You can give a woman some freedom, you can play modern and enlightened with her, but when the time comes you better be ready to lead her home on a leash.

"You . . . you cold blooded analytical bastard!"

I can feel her staring into my back, into the bone. That stare. It's an X-ray. I don't know this fanatic woman screaming at me in broad day light.

"I'm getting 11 weeks maternity leave, Prudence! You hear me! I'm going to be sitting home with you like a prison guard! I'll be watching every move you make! Me and Johann together!"

Taking the turn at the corner to 38th Street, I march sharp as a trooper. Shoulders back, buttocks taut, giving her my erect male self, cold and unloving.

"You, Randal Payton Purcell, know who you sound like! Just like that God damn Johann Sebastian Bark!" This is unusual. We're emoting to one another today in a furor of exclamation marks.

Ah, at last I hear the tears in her voice. That's good. Guess me and old Johann can both get to Prudence.

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38th Street. What's that awaiting our return? Something in the near distance to catch the heart on an off beat. Something where nothing was before. From three doors down the sign is clearly visible, same garish eloquence of those for Atomic Fallout shelters.

"Fuck," exclaims Prudence, uncharacteristically profane.

"Hush," command I. Stymied for further commentary.

Clearly Mr. Keiger has just done this.

It's hung well. It hangs behind the wire mesh in the middle of the gate up near the top. He wired it thoroughly. Same wiring that protects his two, highly-prized, zinc coated garbage cans.

Sign grates on the fence, shriek of chalk on blackboard. Day-glow capital letters declare its message in white against an orange background.

The message stings.

I know Prudence thinks this warning is meant for her and the baby. She'll equate it with demon septicemia.

Sign reads BEWARE OF THE DOG.

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Our first day of blissful weather and all the apartment windows are sealed tight. For good measure Prudence just toured round, window to window, locking them shut. I clutch my throat for a minute or so pretending to gasp for air. She ignores me.

Pru is now in the back bedroom reading Marx with first-class airline plugs in her ears. These days I follow her every move. Day by day I watch her becoming not only bigger but more and more radicalized.

The Italian kids are dragging tin cans along the front fence. It's Vivaldi with piercing, gang war screams for counterpoint.

Barking incessantly Johann is in mass murderer mode. He's barked for more than two hours, ever since the Keigers went out for their regular Sunday afternoon drive.

First, Johann barked when the old people left--Mrs. Keiger in what I take to be her best, a Viennese waltz of a floral print, hoisting herself with great dignity into the Chevy's backseat. Alone up front Herr Keiger shaved and combed for once, sat behind the wheel in a blue leisure suit.

Like them the Keiger's 1954 Chevrolet Bel Air is in mint condition. What a beauty, silver with white trim, not a scratch on it. As they drove off, Elfreda waved goodbye to Johann. She was wearing a Mamie Eisenhower hat and white gloves.

Then Johann trotted back to bark at the sparrows bathing in the Englischer Garten. He barked at a real live squirrel. He barked at the budding crocuses.

Later Johann barked at the cement bullfrog, the cement mushrooms, at the door to the summer Dacha. He's barked at the sky, the sun, the thin air. After a brief rest he's done some practice growling. Then he spent some time just barking at himself.

For the past half hour he has given his best performance in barking at the children. Essence of canine drips in a frappe from the chain link fence.

The children love it. In turn, they have been taunting him with their freedom, their screeches and of course the tin cans, while poking their sticks at him when they feel courageous.

All along the fence he rages at them maniacally. Back and forth he gallops denouncing them with all his might. Pausing only to gnaw helplessly on the fence, shaking it with discolored fangs.

Myself, I must admit that Johann's barks--high pitched, frenzied, incessant--are quite eloquent. They say over and over again 'I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you.' You can hear him going for the gorge of half a dozen nine-year olds.

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"I'm going to get that horrid little storm trooper," Prudence announces.

Oops. This is real trouble. Prudence waddles on the run from the kitchen. She's heaving along the dutch oven. The same dutch oven that has been soaking in the kitchen sink for the past three days.

Basically, Prudence gave up doing the dishes for motherhood. She lets them pile up for days before doing anything about it.

Since there's no one else to do them I happen to know what this dutch oven contains. It hosts the remnants of a dinner party for Manhattan acquaintances still up for the whimsical adventure of slumming in Queens.

That means at least three inches of congealed Carolina Brand White Rice, soft as mud, submerge in a gallon of brackish dish water, spotted with circles of festering mold and a topping of green LUX.

"Prudence. I wouldn't do that, honey. No!"

Too late. She's managed to unlock and open the window. Her tummy hangs out the window. Dutch oven is poised in mid air. She gives it a telltale grimace of effort. Flip. Swoosh.

All of it goes. The water, the small feast of soggy rice, the burnt-black curds at the bottom. The mold.

One horrified yelp from below tells me that Prudence took careful aim. In Te Deum she raises the empty dutch oven on high. At least she didn't brain him with that.

"Now you've done it" I'm gasping, I've grown to like indignation. "What are we suppose to tell the Keigers. He's a Mardi Gras float? For this they will kick us out on the street."

Prudence isn't paying any attention to me. She turns smiling from the window. She could be the Virgin Mary just after the Annunciation. A man's reason, no matter how trained and assured, just can't cope with a woman's inscrutable self satisfaction. Prudence shimmers in the sunshine, alight with schadenfreude.

What makes me really angry is that I myself am peeking out the window. No, I've never been witness to a whimpering dog sopping in a mess of mold and rice.

“Sure, just quote them something on tolerance from Fromm or Bettelheim. They’ll love that. Or, you can blame it on our Koreans neighbors.” I’ve come to like sputtering too.

Before I can even start pitching my cruelest exegesis ever at her she says with infuriating jollity, “Randy, shut up.”

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The Keigers have returned. The Bel Air sits so high and ponderous I can see its top from half way down the block, rising lordly above the line of Japanese cars.

My only defense is the quart of milk and six pack of Heinekens I’m bringing home from Steinway Gardens. For cheer I whistle Time Is On My Side.

Gottfried keeps the Chevrolet down the block, in some mysterious garage. Returning from wherever it is the old couple go, he stops out front long enough for the 'wife' to plop out on the street, slamming her door heartily. The Chevy can take whatever Elfreda has to dish out.

Not today. Evidently, Mr. Keiger left the Bel Air in pandemonium. It slants imprecisely one front tire over the curb. Back passenger door hangs wide open.

Stepping in at our gate I pause for a bit of acting, inspecting with mock surprise the half dried puddle on the cement, flecks of rice trailing off to the corner of the building.

This miming is for Elfreda's benefit, who is always watching me as I come and go, no more than a flutter in the lace curtains that adorn their front windows. Old world lace with each panel featuring a large cupid, distorted by time to resemble a naked man who missed his puberty.

Looking up abruptly and sure enough there she is. By the time I've unlocked all three front door locks, the old folks are waiting for me beside the stairs. So agitated they’ve not taken off their coats.

"Mister Purcell!" Frau Keiger's become an air raid siren. "The most dreadful thing has happened!" She pants, bosom swells, apple cheeks flare, her long mane tickles Gottfried's own hairy ears--in this crisis the old people are standing shoulder to shoulder.

Hoist up the milk and beer with a grimace. Shift the bag from arm to arm. Articulate body speak, 'bags are too heavy for palaver, maybe later.'

"Ya." booms Mr. Keiger. "Someone has attacked our Johann!" His eyes dart at the corners of the wee hall. "Vhen ve gott home ve found poor Johann crying at the backdoor."

Elfreda stares me straight. "He was wet all over . . ."

"He gott hit by garbage, dat's vhat." Gottfried waves both arms, turning in a tight circle. "He gott hit by da vorst mess. Only animals make da mess like dat, ach."

"Didn't you hear anything?" snaps Elfreda. "Didn't you see who did this?"

"No no, of course dey didn't." In his excitement, Gottfried is blurting right up into my face. I gather they had something with onions for lunch.

"Dose kids are too smart to get caught."

"Why no . . . no we didn't hear anything unusual . . . We did hear Dr. Levine going out . . ." My subtle way of hinting that we actually heard Johann savaging the poor old man.

"Mister Levine, Mister Levine . . . do you think?" Elfreda's hand flies to her doughnut mouth. I wonder, did Gottfried bake-up Elfreda himself in Yorkville?

"No no, not Levine. It vas dose mean kids. Dose Greeks. Ach, I would like to do something to them. They hate our Johann. Dey persecute him."

Mr. Keiger almost lays his ashen face against my chest. Turning sideways, he jabs my stomach with that gun-like finger of his. He bends low, screws his neck up, gives me, vife and hall a round of shell shock. Maybe he's hearing voices in the radiator.

"Gott damn kids." Gottfried taps his nose, whirling about to accuse one of his own paintings. "Greeks, Italians, all de same. I know vhat to do vit them. I learn in the var."

"Gottfried!"

"Real sorry to hear it," I croak. "Mrs. Keiger, Mr. Keiger." Did Judas sound like this? "I'll ask my wife if she's heard anything."

And it is all your fault, Prudence. Just you wait. Baby or no baby, you're going to squirm over this mess. I'm trying to get up the stairs. They stop me three times with their babbling outrage.

"Do us a favor, Mister Purcell," orders Gottfried, blinking up at me from the bottom of the steps. His eyes are more shadow sunken than usual, face more furrowed and colorless.

"You keep a lookout from upstairs. You see dose damn kids und you let me know. Ve von't let it happen again. Never again."

Elfreda claps her palms over her ears. Gottfried covers his eyes. I try backing up a few more steps. Is that me blurting down to them?

"Well, maybe it could have been the Koreans." I should have clamped a hand over mouth.

Hope Prudence didn't hear that.

Lamentation from Elfreda. "Those people next door? No, no they are nothing. Oh, I wonder why we came here. Sometimes I think we should have stayed in Germany."

Gottfried listens to her, and suddenly, hangs his head in defeat.

"My wife, she vas so happy today," he murmurs.

"Sundays she is always happy when ve are gotten all dressed up. Ve go to Manhattan. Ve go there to the best hotel in the world, that Waldorf Astoria. Und ve sit for a vwhile in the lobby. Ve have a drink. Ve hold hands und vatch the rich people. It is a good joke for us. The people think ve are the guests."

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Something's wrong. Another uneventful trudge home from work is turning unusually eventful. Someone or something is closing in fast

on me from behind. I feel the menace. A horror film demon—hoofs clacking, nostrils snorting, lips slobbering.

In Manhattan when out walking and a commotion such as this arrives invisibly either you speed up precipitously or begin bellowing for help. Never do you look behind. In Long Island City you may look.

It's Gottfried and Johann. I might have guessed from the frantic scramble of shoe leather and claws. Johann gets walked at least three times a day. By walked that means the dog goes charging forward in any direction that appeals to him.

The two of them come racing for a head on collision with me. It'll be a hit-n-run.

Johann veers, swerves. He pulls Herr Keiger past me at a full run.

"Aaaaachhhh . . . Guten Taggg Mis . . . terrr . . Purrr . . ." The old man is too breathless to be coherent.

Gottfried staggers, must have been a long walk. He's listing forward, almost falling head first, arm outstretched with the leash end wrapped twice around his hairy wrist.

Johann drags them down into the gutter between a line of parked cars. He bounds, Gottfried leaps, clears a tall pickup bumper in a single bound.

Johann pulls so hard he's up on his hind legs, pawing the air. Three times he whips around a dying tree trunk, wrapping them up tight together on another futile effort by the Beautify Long Island City Association.

Johann's nosing into a desiccated dog turd. Johann sitting down. Johann lying down to scratch.

Liver colored slice of tongue lolls down to the sidewalk. Panting, Johann takes the moment to give a good lathering to Mr. Keiger's hand preventing him from disentangling the leash from the tree. While Johann takes a rest on the sidewalk I have caught up with them.

"My wife," gasps Gottfried, when I pause beside them to sympathize. He's succeeded, I see, in freeing them from the sapling although not before it snaps like a green bean.

"Since our son . . . was married she don't have de . . ."

Zoom, in a dash they're off and running. The race whisks the words right out of the old man's mouth.

We humans do get swept up against our will. Here I go, lunging right along beside Gottfried and Johann. We are being literally yanked back to 3254. It's like zipping home behind an insane sled dog, Nanook of the North after a failed lobotomy.

This is the quickest trip home I've ever made from Steinway Gardens. The frost will still be on the beer.

Gottfried, I and Johann, we tumble in at the gate. I'm feeling a little winded myself.

"Dis is man's vork . . . " grunts Herr Keiger. Johann is at last taking a piss, on the Welcome mat.

Gottfried stabs proudly at himself. "Me, I'm pretty strong. My people was coal miners. Ve ate berries. My wife, her people vere de bakers. My son, he is strong too. He is the dentist, ya, dat son of mine."

This experience reminds me somehow of the barbershop or the shower room, as if Johann, Gottfried and I had just shared a manly moment together.

"My dad was in real estate." This sounds lame, even to me. What he did was to wrap his new Mercedes and my mother around a tree before I could really know them.

Johann finishes peeing, shakes the last drop. He's nosing my pharmacy sack, snorting greedily. Go right ahead, gobble up some of Pru's prep-H, Johann.

The Keigers never use the front door. They always go round to their back door. Gottfried hangs on, though, making no move to let me escape. I busily slip the key in the first lock hinting politely that I have beer to drink, that my separate and inviolable life must go on.

"Well," I say. "Johann certainly does give you some exercise. Ha ha. Have a good day, Mr. Keiger."

"Ya, you too," returns Gottfried without conviction. I'd guess he doesn't have very many good days. I catch that dark look of his, suppurating, half longing, half bitter. It's as if he were bitterly railing against fortune while also pleading for someone to stop a minute and listen.

To hide my guilt at running away from him, I rashly bend down to give Johann a pat on the head. First time I've ever tried to touch the animal.

Instantly, the Dog goes into a grand mal seizure. It's a fabulous Alien-monster attack imitation. Fur erect he jumps back, falls sideways, sharpens his incisors on cement. It's all growling and frothing. He's writhing like a fur coat in orgasm.

I'm feeling a little embarrassed for Herr Keiger. This is not your typical, household dog. Below me, at my back, what's that? A slash of razor across defenseless skin. God damn it, I just got nipped. A sneak attack. This is Johann's Yamamoto day.

I've never been bitten by anything except mosquitos. My body has remained virgin. No broken bones, no hernias, no eye glasses. Still have my tonsils and appendix. I didn't even get pimples. After all I grew up in Brentwood.

Gottfried sees nothing. Johann looks at nothing. In awe I study the craft in the hand sewing on my Guccis.

"Still scared," confides Mr. Keiger, in a very matter of fact voice. "He gott treated terrible, terrible . . . Und I know how that feels. Ya, I know too vell."

Easing quickly into the safety of the hallway, shutting myself away from that crazed world outside, something more stirs in me. Could Gottfried Keiger be becoming my father figure?

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May Day. First day of my paternity leave. Free at last oh Lord, free at last. Throwing open the apartment door with a flourish I barge in squeezing my crotch. "Hey honey look at this!"

An old joke between us, from way back in our first days of love—randy Randy storming home with a hard on, ready to go.

The apartment holds back shyly, expectant, half filled with that sexy May Day sunlight, the teasing scent of Prudence. A peculiar silence strikes me.

"Honey, how about this for a maypole. Hey babe. Come here. It's May Day, my sweetheart Commie. Tanks, Missiles, all that manly hardware. It'll turn you on. It's out there parading through Red Square. It's on TV right now.

"Prudence, come-out come-out wherever you are. They'll have soldiers high stepping in jackboots. I know you won't want to miss all those young firm asses."

In the old days I'd expect to find her naked in bed, or naked under the bed if the fancy struck her. For the eighth month, however, that might be difficult.

"Prudence?" Nothing, not even a Laura Ashley rustle.

Has she gone out shopping? To buy a bottle of Moet? A real chocolate butter cream cake manufactured right here in Long Island City.

"Ollie ollie oxen free." No, nothing under the bed.

No feminine flourish across the white tiles in the kitchen. The bathroom door has no one hiding behind it. No Venus De Milo giggling in the tub. The baby's room is deserted.

Walking into the living room, the emptiness begins to strike me as more than emptiness. It's becoming a statement.

In the distance, 'yap yap yap.' Sounds of a ghost dog lost in our woodwork. I set my Louis Vuitton briefcase down on our \$1,500 Persian carpet. My heart flutters into the deep waters of this mystery.

On the dining table, the white round Saarinen dining table standing against the bare white wall under our round white antique mirror, I find a single rose.

A blood red rose that had begun to wilt before it left the greenhouse. The note lays under the thorns along with the wedding ring.

Mayday! M'aidez.

Yappity-yip-yip.

Note reads. "Workmen of the world unite." Could Prudence's lovely and loving hand really write this trite shit? "You have nothing to lose but your chains."

Once read, the note swan dives down to nestle beside the rose. Socialist red on Saarinen white.

What does this mean, Prudence? What stupidity wrought this? What nonsense have you made vows to now?

Yip, yip, yip. Woof! Opening chords of Beethoven's 5th resound through springtime light, bouncing off the barren walls of an empty apartment.

And in Moscow the missiles roll with warheads pointed, flipping the bird toward heaven.

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How long have I been stuck here-- a minute, five minutes, my life time? I'm not doing a thing, just standing, staring stupidly at my own shoes. my wingtips are the product of a leather atelier somewhere near Florence with the five--never four--matching eyelets.

Prudence calls these my Midtown clone clogs. Actually, I can't seem to move they seem glued to the carpet.

May Day Sun makes blinding holes, open dead yes of the windows, while inside me there's a black spot slurping up the Middle Kingdom. Silence too strong, frightening stuff.

Scratch. Scratch. Something's scratching at our apartment door? Scratch. Like a chard of chalk drug across the schoolroom blackboard. The heart retches.

It must be Prudence on the landing playing on the door with her immaculato manicured nails. A joke on me all along. Of course she's there. Out there on her knees. I hope that's still possible for her?

Bending over I reply with a rake of my own nails. Dragging them across the lower panel. OK for you, Prudence. Here's Daddy ready or not.

With my best imitation of a sitcom grin I'm opening the door, sweeping in a twirl like Loretta Young, arms outstretched. Love can be so silly.

Smile just got lost in the vacuum of space. Got sucked up alive into the green murk, the belly-up-fish aquarium-light of the landing.

Pru? Oh God. Prudence . . . I love you with all my heart.

The growling comes low, from below the groin. There's something on all fours down there staring up at me, glittering eyes trained straight in my befuddlement. The creature regards me insolently, no respect. No subservience to human kind.

Grrrrrrrr. Growl. Snarl. You swine. Notes deep as a Russian choir. It's mythological. A shaggy Gotterdammerung thing crawling at me out of our nightmare past. It advances, golden eyes with orange crud at the corners, a shaggy relic, a furry fright slinking for me to be born again as it fucks my asshole. Approaching cautiously one paw at a time from out of the most horrible of dark ages.

No, I will not let it make me tremble. Did this animal rip into the lovely throat of my Prudence?

As if my crotch were something edible, Johann jabs his snout into my balls. Nothing of interest. He steps coolly around me and struts into the apartment. He leaves me alone on the landing, arms outstretched in the green slime light, a crucified hunter-gatherer.

I'm left blinking stupefied into the flaring foliage of Prudence's immense Christmas cactus.

Strange snortings emanate from somewhere behind me, from out our apartment. At the bottom of the stairs something else pants and flounders heavily. Prudence?

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"Are you up there, Johann Sebastian Bark? Yoo-hoo." Elfreda's tones caress the ear. It's grandma down there, the universal bosom calling the litter for lunch. The old lady labors up, cheeks blossoming with the effort.

"Ach, it is you Mister Purcell. We are so sorry to disturb you. My husband has a project in the basement today and so we opened the door for Johann to keep him company. A dog is good company for him. Helps him forget. Johann? Komm her."

Johann answers. Sounds like he's blowing his nose in our living room carpet.

"Ah . . . Mrs. Keiger." Choke up I.

"Did you happen to see my wife this afternoon?" I hear only a thin quiver in my voice, only that ripple on the surface to betray me.

Three steps from the top and Elfreda puffs to a halt. She's staring at my crotch too, just like Johann. Except she has no yellow crud around her eyes.

Her broad flat face, the lank mane of golden-gray hair. Mrs. Keiger looks like she's just drowned while scrubbing the bathtub.

"Why, let me think. It has been such a busy day. I have so little time. She too seems mythological, holds me dumbfounded. A Brunhilde smelling of magic soap.

"Oh yes, I believe it so. Mrs. Purcell, she got into the taxi at 12:55. She must have called for it, it came to the door. It was a Checker, Number 2718. The driver was a black man, obese with a crooked smile. I know the time because of my soap opera, the one at 1:00. I just can't miss that. Those TV shows. This story now it is so complicated. What trouble people get themselves into.

“Oh, yes, and she wore a nice blue maternity dress with white collar and cuffs. Carried a white purse too, one gray flight bag. The purse must be very expensive, gold trim you know. Your wife had on such pretty shoes, matching the dress. They must be very expensive too. She is so pretty.”

OK, great. My pregnant socialist wife leaves me in a fortune of pret au porter maternity clothes accessories to match.

“The taxi driver helped her. He brought the suitcase down the stairs, a large leather suitcase. He is so fat, it was funny to see. In her left hand she held an airplane ticket. Perhaps to check a departure time? I know about those because I fly to see my son in Pittsburgh.”

Lowering her voice now. “My husband, he don’t like to go there. I must go by myself. Once each year to see the enkelin, you know, my granddaghther. Judith she is called and five she is.”

Struggling to do something with my face. A face that feels stripped like it’s just lost its death mask. I hear it falling now to shatter on the floor of the landing.

Johann has returned to sniff around my trouser leg. He smears hair and dandruff on my Prada, which even a circus dog could not earn.

"Bad doggy." Frau Keiger shakes a finger at him.

"There were no doggies like you in Germany. We ate bad doggies."

Elfreda glances from me to Johann, back to me. Johann glances from me to Elfreda and back to me. I’m looking at nothing I can understand.

I'm not sure who she's talking to. I don't really care. I want so badly to grill her about Prudence, give her the gestapo third degree—frau Keiger seems likely to know what color her panties and bra were. Getting into the taxi was she weeping or had she on her sweaty pearled brow? Did she wave goodbye, at least once, or give the place the finger?

"Ach, the Bible," gutturals the old woman from out of the blue.

Perhaps my face shows more than I can guess. Maybe she thinks I need blessed assurance.

"Do you read the Bible, Mr. Purcell? It is such a problem. I was just reading it downstairs. Who can understand it? I don't know." The dear rests a contemplative palm under her third chin.

"The Bible was written by Jews, wasn't it." She's telling, not asking.

I recount to myself what I know. Prudence left on May 1, 1983. She left at 12:55 in the afternoon. She left in a Checker. In her left hand she held an airplane ticket. I must remember all the details.

Johann is being drug off down the stairs by the collar. Plop plop. They go as comrades rumps plunking down close together taking one step at a time. About two inches of garish pink, canine penis bobbles between Johann's hind legs. Quite a roll of Double Bubble.

For her part Mrs. Keiger rear wobbles off and away, comfy as two rolled eiderdowns.

Casually, too casually, Elfreda calls back--innocently as if she were merely guessing the next plot twist in the soap they're using for a life below.

"Perhaps Mrs. Purcell has gone to visit her parents."

"Yes." I'm answering, not caring about truth or lies or anything. "Yes, that's exactly what she did."

"I believe it so. She told me she was going to Michigan, to Lansing isn't it. She told me you decided. She told me 'He thinks that this would be best.' "

Nothing is forth coming from my open mouth. Is this anaphylactic shock? Could I be allergic to Johann?

"A woman with her first hasenfurzchen needs her mother." Elfreda rocks her arms together, smothering an invisible baby with her bosom. "I would have done that too when our son was born. If my parents had not died in the bombing.

"Your wife is such a lady, always. To stop at our door to say goodbye.

“Oh yes, Mr. Purcell, also Mrs. Purcell said to tell you Johann is good company during the day. Wasn’t that nice to say.” My landlady’s voice comes from very far away.

I’m left alone at the top of the stairs. I’m here all by myself. A silly emotion rises in my throat.

Prudence, you dissembling bitch!

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The apartment door closes behind me sealing me alone into my own perplexities. Emptiness surges around me like the rush of a first toke.

In the living room ‘It’ awaits me. ‘It’ is in the middle of the carpet. ‘It’ rivets the eye and nose, if not the heart.

‘It’ is a pile of still steaming dog shit. Excrement dropped in a perfect, high coil of chocolate soft-serve.

At the very tippy top it sports a Dairy Queen flourish rendered in stinking, disgusting brownish red shit.

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Only Three weeks of my paternity leave are passed by. It’s been years. The days are crossed off on the kitchen calendar, same in a prison movie. I make big black Xs across each darker- than-the-day before square. From here I see that the Xs are getting bigger, bolder, scratchier. The one for today looks like it was made by De Quincy a day after his laudanum ran out.

There are some pacifiers to help me kill time and pain.

--Eating processed food from Steinway Gardens, preserved to the end of time. Hostess cherry pies, canned pears in syrup with large curd cottage cheese and plastic wrapped tuna fish sandwiches.

--TV.

--Drinking lots of beer.

--Smoking lots of dope.

--Jacking off, at least three times daily, into the bathroom sink, naked, looking at myself in the mirror for company.

--TV.

--Sleeping off the beer and dope; the nights are easier when you're drunk and stoned.

--TV.

--Music. Since the Stones are out of sync with this misery I'm listening compulsively to Prudence's tape of Horowitz playing Chopin's Etudes. It's playing now. Surely it will wear out soon.

--TV.

--Hoping. Hoping for Prudence to call, for Prudence to write, for a fat black man in a Checker cab to bring her back in her blue maternity dress with white collar and cuffs.

--Jacking off.

Of course, the problem is that you can't always be eating carcinogenic food, drinking beer, sleeping, getting stoned, watching TV, masturbating--or even hoping. The between times of the day are the toughest. In fact, the in between times when I have nothing to watch on TV are worse than anything I've ever known.

Surprising how blue I am just drinking my morning coffee, stretching the cups out to cover two hours. Alone over the sight of the Englischer Garten going berserk with spring. I don't have a soul to pity me. I've developed a personality disorder.

Yesterday I'd rate as the worst yet. In desperation I walked every single residential street between here and the RR elevated on 31st Street. Along the way I counted 48 Beware Of The Dog signs. Those signs are identical. But ours is unique. The warning for us is a one-off.

While there are at least 48 bad dog stories to tell in this part of Long Island City, 48 other Johannes do not exist.

In desperation I'm making the huge mistake of calling her folks. The professor and Mrs. Professor. Mrs. P answers, she's inured to me. She's doped out by the 'commencement-address' hopefulness of East Lansing.

“Ppp-eyton?” A stuttering obsessive, the fount of Prudence’s febrility. Before I can even get a word in she’s started up with those God damn trite baby lines.

"Oh yea” I’m saying. “Not to worry, everything’s fine, sure thing Prudence is OK . . . No, she's not home at the moment . . . Right, in less than a month now . . . Of course I'll call you from the hospital. Yes, I'm nervous . . . Yes, yes, Prudence already has the Lamaze bag packed and ready to go."

Clearly she did not run home to mommy and daddy. Why do I blunder on, make even a bigger fool of myself? In a rage I’m calling all her friends, begging for news. My whining questions give me the creeps.

Their answers, all lies. I know they are hiding her. What a humiliation. All for nothing. No trace of her.

Last night and this makes me cringe in embarrassment I opened a front room window. Into the fury of the honking, siren swept New York night I called “Come back little Prudence. Come back home... Get the fuck in here you spoiled cunt!”

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Johann was barking. He barked. Johann has been barking. He barks now. He is barking. He will bark. He will be barking... forever.

Almost a month to the day since Prudence left. I marked today on the calendar with a weak and very small X. Am I shrinking? How much more can I take? She's evil to do this to me. No one ought to suffer as I am. She should be punished. I will whip her when she’s back. No, that idea is giving me another erection. Pointless.

Haven't shaved in days. The beard doesn't disguise me, though. In the mirror it's the same handsome slob staring back. Am I beginning to smell? Something in here is.

I hug close to the curtains, binoculars fixed, crouched in hiding, glued breathless in anticipation. The Koreans are my prey. Why had I ignored them before? They’re giving me hours of entertainment.

They're my very own oriental soap opera on site right next door, across five feet of easement.

Now I recognize them. They are the same Orientals who run the pharmacy on Broadway. The older woman is the Korean pharmacist. Her husband is the mousy, Reverend-Moon-faced man behind the cash register.

Another Korean woman, indiscriminate age, stays in their apartment all day reading. She reads on their living room couch, in cut off Jeans and a T-shirt, no bra.

I spy on her legs moving on the couch, see her thighs and crotch by peering closely. I'm beginning to forget what Prudence looks like. She's blurring.

Johann barks.

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Frau Keiger squeaks. I've startled her out front, down below, stopped her near the Beware Of The Dog Sign. I'm hanging over her, halfway out the window, bare chested, fresh air smearing my troubled skin like a balm Gilead.

"It's a nice day . . . isn't it?" Yes, I'm croaking. That's me. Randal Peyton Purcell himself. What a ghastly sound. But I do want to be normal again. I must find normal.

She's squinting up at me. What is she thinking at the sight of her tenant at the upstairs window, hair uncombed, no shirt.

Her own hair's in a cruller bun. Her best dress, I take it, still shines from the iron.

Are they back from sitting in some elegant hotel lobby--the Pierre this time? Prudence and I once met 'under the clock' for drinks at the Biltmore--before they turned it into a Bank America money machine.

"What a beautiful day for a drive." That's much better, except it isn't a beautiful day, too windy, too brisk for late May.

"I like it best when it rains," calls back Elfreda, dimpling politely at me, the wind tugging at her, whipping the skirts about her Porky Pig thighs.

Gottfried remains hidden in the Bel Air. The Chevy idles in well-oiled precision before the fireplug. In a fit of jealousy Johann's trying to drown me out. He's inside, positioned at their own front windows, doing his maniac trick--whimper whimper whimper, yip yip yip yuk yak.

Johann says, Don't bother with the bum upstairs. Come to me. Me. Quick or I'll chew up every last pair of your ugly shoes.

What does the old girl really think of me? Does she know the truth, that I'm marooned up here, left high and dry. Why don't they invite me to dinner. I like macaroni and cheese.

I catch myself licking my mouth, trying to think of something to say and tearing the dead skin from the corners of my fevered lips.

"My wife likes the rain too," I'm blurting, amazed by what's coming out of my mouth. I do remember to follow up with a boyish grin. The smile could crack. It's lousy.

Elfreda clouds over. So dramatically that I myself glance up quickly to see if the sky has darkened. "We have been to an Exhibition." she reports sternly, regretfully, pouting to form her vowels.

"Damn lies." screeches Herr Keiger. He just leapt up from his side of the car, shooting his grisly head out like a grotesque Pierrot. I think he too looks somewhat tormented this afternoon. For going to exhibitions, I see that Elfreda puts him into a white shirt and extremely wide, floral tie.

"Barf, splurt, rumph, humpy-dump," interjects Johann. Saying I'm certain 'cut the crap with the creep, get the hell in here.' Elfreda starts at the sound of her baby crying, bosom aiming at the downstairs window.

"It is a World War II exhibition," she explains, still overcast. She darts Gottfried a quick 'hush my child, don't you cry' look.

"That sounds interesting . . ." Well, what else can I say--I'm as feeble up here as a paraplegic on roller skates. My jaw hurts from so much speech. My brain reels from the light and air.

"All ve vanted vas to stop de Communists. But dey blame us for everything." storms Gottfried, shaking his fist over the trembling hood of the Bel Air. He's turning white-gray, mushroom milky. From here, perched ten feet above, I can see his rivulets beginning to flow-- eyes, nose, mouth.

"Those pipple know nothing. Dey know notting at all. It is all propaganda. The Communists and Jews make them tell those lies."

"Gottfried." Mrs. Keiger peers fearfully at me, at the sidewalk behind her. Anyone listening?

"Ve could write a book on vhat ve know." Mr. Keiger can't stop himself. "Ya, ve could say a lot if it weren't for the Jews in New York. It is too dangerous here. Ve are very careful. Ve gott a good dog to protect us." Gottfried glares into a pothole on 38th Street. The Bel Air purrs. Johann screams. Elfreda frets with her necklace. "Ask my wife, if you don't believe me. Ya, do dat."

How annoying. Here I'm suffering, bereft, almost ruined, and these two are blithering on about the incomprehensible, about things dead and buried half a century ago. I want sympathy, a little human warmth. I want justice and macaroni and cheese. All I'm getting is a rerun.

"I saw Hitler." Cupping her hands around her mouth Mrs. Keiger turns this simple statement into an erotic whisper. It's a silly, disquieting sound coming up from 38th Street, and especially from her—like a grandmother talking about fucking.

"Marx-Marx-Marx Freud-Freud-Freud," Screams Johann.

The old people stare expectantly at me--not at my lank sick hair or bare nipples, but as it were into my soul. They seem to wait for me to brighten them up with divine knowledge, like they thought I might be transformed on the spot by their pathetic tale into a TV evangelist.

"I saw Hitler on," moans Frau Keiger. "—on--." She mouths the rest to me in slow motion. I cock my head and she repeats it. "On . . . *May 19th, 1945.*"

"On Queens Boulevard?" I hear myself asking. It's me pulling forward ridiculously as if on a leash, frantic for talk. Don't fall out the window Randy. You don't want to die in shame, not in this particular pair of underwear.

"No no no, you don't understand Mr. Purcell. He was crossing the border on a train, into Czechoslovakia. We walked there after the bombs fell. We were starving. We were so frightened the Russians would come. The train came through and we ran down to the station to beg for a place. We pleaded on our knees for it to stop for us. But it would not stop . . ."

"I saw Nixon once, in Brentwood. That was in . . ."

"The train went on fast not stopping for anyone. There were soldiers on it with their guns pointing at us--at women, children and old men . . . And Hitler. I saw him in the last car . . . I saw Hitler sitting at the window looking so sad . . . I saw the Fuhrer!" Again she turns to pantomime, silently saying the words in my direction. '*On May 19th.*'

With no one listening to me, I suddenly have nothing more to say. Seems I've used up my entire vocabulary. The Keigers too are spent. They look older.

Without a word, Gottfried sinks back into the Bel Air, disappears brooding, darkly glancing. Elfreda pauses to add, "Please don't tell anyone. You will do that for us Mr. Purcell?"

Her worry turns to alarm. Perhaps the Fuhrer is hovering above us, the dark angel? Or is it because I'm watching them from above. Johann sobs into the lace curtains. It's a heartbreaking song. Sometimes, Johann, you and I, we do sing the same song.

Wafting up from below a rusted zipper rip, long and definitive. Must be the death rattle of more old world lace.

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No wonder Prudence went loony. Day after day he's the same. When the barking begins, you snarl. When the high pitched yapping takes over, you whine. When the murderous growling and woof-woofing reaches its pitch you cower whimpering.

The worst of it is the sadistic unpredictability of the attacks. The cur erupts without warning, catching you breathless, totally unprepared. The randomness means that long silences descend on you from out of nowhere--silences that you time, that you wait through in clinical agitation, that you can't enjoy because you tense up in dread of the next shelling.

Johann has a personality disorder. In the morning he's a lap dog on acid. In the afternoons he's a terrier, worrying this rat-tail of the world. Early in the evenings, patrolling the perimeters of the camp, guarding us prisoners, he booms like a Doberman.

I have a mental chart of his madness. After their supper, I know from the aroma seeping up of macaroni and cheese, it's play time downstairs. This I recognize from Elfreda's squeals.

Then there are a few minutes of yip-yip, merrily we go prancing. Can Johann dance on his goatish hind legs? He must be wearing jackboots.

More happy time follows amid gleeful guffawing. Afterwards Gottfried Keiger sings a duet in basso profundo with his faithful pal JoJo. Probably marching songs.

Johann's one reliable silent time is after supper and his last walk. Do they gag him while getting him into his pajamas? He's silent too while Elfreda plays the piano. Half an hour of peace before it's kisses and beddy-bye.

Johann reserves his werewolf routine for later when the building is dark, for the terrible still of the night time.

For me, nights are by far the worst. Bad enough just lying alive in 'our' bed, a man going stone cold without a woman's warmth, the bed like a grave, Prudence's presence--lack of presence--so real it

makes me beg. But then comes the barking, so sharply menacing it shoots down a few stars. Or at least it should.

In that existential blackout I'm soon clinging to reason. It's an interminable barking meant only for me, telling me caustic, holocaust things.

At night, the Keigers let Johann out into the Englischer Garten at 11:00 and 3:00, both making me scream into the pillow. At 6:00 am from the blundering in the garbage cans and the old man's low curses, I know morning walk progresses.

At such times Johann leads all the dogs in this part of Long Island City into open rebellion. He's the instigator, their Spartacus. In five minutes he has an army of 50 followers. All howling, all bellowing blood lust at us, at me.

Prudence thoughtfully left me her earplugs on the bedside table. I use them every night but to no avail.

And do the Keigers do anything? No, they're his medical experiments.

Sometimes I hear Elfreda's voice yodeling a loving remonstrance, a tinkling admonishment no more effective than a kiss on the forehead.

Sometimes Gottfried joins in—a man's half hearted command. Something in German that I think means 'God damn it, shut up!'

At least Prudence and the baby made it out of here. Now who will free me.

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Instead of Prudence's *Columbia Encyclopedia*, Johann is getting pelted by artificial flowers. I can't even belt out an oath, too in awe to gurgle.

"Prease, oh prease be quiet!"

The soft calling frail and musical flutes in a bird's morning song. Sure as hell does not come from my parched throat.

In surprise we both stare at this oracular voice, me from across the easement, Dr. Levine by looking up from below. The old man shoots her up an appreciative glance, withered lips upside down, hand tickling the air, fingers drawn and elegant like the Chinese calligraphy for cuninlingus.

More fake petals cascade down. One plastic red daisy graces the sparse wisps of grey on his pate.

Best I didn't throw down the tome that I'm still holding on the sill. The old man's cranium looks eggshell fragile. Also I'm recalling that the encyclopedia, so heavy with Western Civilization, is the secret repository of our Money Machine access codes and .

Johann continues his attack. Dr. Levine shrugs and proceeds.

Across the six feet of easement, in the kitchen window of the Korean apartment, framed in unconvincing brick veneer, there glimmers my oriental peepshow girly. Her lipstick is a vinyl glint.

A man never feels at his best holding a very heavy encyclopedia, mouth open. Not in stained underwear before a strange lady. Particularly when the strange lady looks like something out of "Terry and the Pirates."

Weird to see someone first hand who you've been spying on from a distance for weeks, lurking member in hand in the curtains of a shrouded and ill-smelling room. She might as well have just stepped out of the TV.

Actually, at the moment, she's batting eyelashes in my direction. Lashes so long I wonder she's able to keep her eyes open. Is Johann still barking? Who cares.

This exotic lady stares frankly at my naked chest, following my man trail right down to the sill. Only a fool or a queer wouldn't know what that kind of look means.

"Rrrrarf. Grrrrrrrr. Snap." Johann Sebastian Bark lunges for Dr. Levine's left heel just as it moves out of reach.

"Herro, that terriber doggy! Somebody should tear his tongue out. Someone whould put thumbs in his eyes. Someone should cut off his tair." My Dragon Lady can really warble. How charming that

all her Ls are Rs, the English language has needed a revolution since 1616.

"You want to come over for a tark and a srice of remon merengue pie? No? "

Yes.

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This new person greeting me at her apartment door, stands almost to my armpits, even in excessively high spiked heels. Is she really alone? Sniff sniff. I smell an adventure in here, plus her musk oil.

They also need to take out their garbage. Something faintly corrupt possesses the kitchen. Hope she doesn't invite me to dinner.

Or could it be me? I did change my underwear before charging over.

"Hi there, I'm Randy. I'm not married or anything." On the run here over I managed to screw off my wedding band.

Stale, garden-apartment air, is it safe to breathe? Her windows are closed. She hasn't got any American summer time in here, just bathroom deodorizer.

"Herro, Urandy is a nice name. My name is Kim Kim." With this she gives a little bow but doesn't take my hand. She speaks so faintly I have to strain to hear. Every word gets smiled out of her diminutive mouth, which I already ponder how it can fit around me at tumescence. At least she's friendly.

Large gluey eyes, orbs made huge by those mock heroic lashes, reverently inspect my New Balances.

Up close, wrinkles show around slant eyes. She's somewhere near or over 40, distance and dirty windows distort the truth. Person to person, she also turns out too dumpy for my taste. Long trunk and short legs. Thick waist, droopy shoulders, flat butt to go with her flat head.

I can't figure her tits yet--but we'll get to that. Kim Kim wears a clinging mauve robe. Her hair is the one beautiful asset. Dark black and shining, parted in the middle over her oval face. It piles high looking, unfortunately, like a big black rat asleep on her head.

A mauve plastic flower decorates the pile. For that matter the carpet is strewn with mauve artificial flower petals. But I'm not here to be disappointed. I haven't come running, five minutes after first meeting her to be too critical.

"We got time?" I ask, my own voice is corny and unreal. My meaning, let's cut the crap and go for it right now.

"Oh, it is even past the hour of twelve," she beams proudly. Maybe she just learned to tell time?

It's always like this in our animal kingdom--the male's hot to go, the female sticks out her rump and takes her own sweet time.

The way she speaks is pure Tweety Bird. And those are Fu Manchu finger nails. What is real here?

Their walls are bare except for a framed photo of an enormous church identified in block letters as the Second Presbyterian Church of Youngsan and a quite large frame of an oriental gentleman in highly ornate robes with what looks like a book on his head. Maybe they have mardi gras in Seoul?

Shag rug glows the same DuPont purple as her shoes. I bet her panties will be purple too. Truly a color coordinated gal.

"So, you want some remon meringue pie?"

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By my Seiko, which like my socks I'm still wearing, it's only 12:30. How can that be?

Strange how within say five minutes of a dangerous orgasm, guilt, shame and that ugly twinge of the absurd begin rankling a sensitive man like me. Too bad. Wish it could be different. It's the price one pays for nobility, which is something ladies never consider in their hysterical denunciation of man's waywardness to woman.

Beside me, one leg pushing under me, the other thrown over my knees, Kim Kim sighs and giggles and tickles her nose in my armpit hair. She's babbling off into her own unfathomable China Sea. She's a large pair of pliers keeping me in place, a kneecap working like a screwdriver on a nut she's screwing in place. This woman comes with a tool kit.

Now for the tough part, separates the men from the men for sure. Disentangling from a still oozing coupling, for a civilized man of any experience, is an art form. How do I get dressed on the run without squashing this poor worshipful cockroach? How do I exit suavely, yet rapidly out the apartment door? That's something else a woman never considers, the anguish of a man of any sensibility as he tries to climb from bed, stooping to don his underwear, without showing her his asshole.

Moving my leg is the signal. Fini. Up and at 'em, let loose of me girl. Politeness or lack of it is also sexual politics. Important to imply without articulating, 'very nice, maybe we'll do it again sometime in a year.' Nope. She's not getting the hint. Can't or won't? That's an ancient question.

Instead, she's moving her head on my chest, nuzzling hair, licking nipples, nibbling on me like a ginseng root. She's inching, of course, downward, a direction that snake charms any man. Shit, she wants seconds.

"You rook just as I dreamed you wourd," she informs my anatomy as she goes. "So beautifur."

All in all, I'm afraid it's too late for me now. The only thing on the move is my penis.

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Friday afternoon. Sirens go full blast. Youths are running amuck, some sort of summer solstice rite. The alkies are brawling and bawling up at the Roger Casement Pub. There is an occasional

attenuated screaming like a mass murder in progress. No doubt, Johann will soon join in.

He does.

Prudence, Prudence. Where are you? Come back little Pru. Save me. I'll be good. I'll tell you about my trust fund. I'll sell the T. Rowe Price accounts.

I had Prudence. Prudence ran away. Ought I to advertise? "Lost. White bitch. 30 years old. Ready to whelp when last seen. Answers to 'Pru' Likes to be spanked with rolled up newspaper, *Times*, never *The Post*." Should I offer a \$1,000 reward? Do like the ladies of Paree?

Bad bad Pru. I don't deserve anything that's happening to me. Absolutely not. In clearer moments I can be the Randy of old assured that none of this writes my destiny.

Kim Kim's delight of today came at the moment she pulled the plug on the ice cube she'd stuck up my ass. Singing "I rove America . . ." This she does more often than Irving Berlin would wish.

"How rong your wife away, Urandy--what does she rook rike--wirr she ever come back? You rich, Urandy? She younger than Kim Kim?"

Then, pop goes the frozen weasel and my haunted memories disappear. No hint in mind of them. Nary a twinge in missing them.

If Prudence only knew that all my days alone have become paintings by Otto Dix. Take pity Prudence. Forgive me. Come back. Bring me our baby. I can count Prudence. I know he's been born.

Prudence's half dead tropical plant droops with holes, chewed on by something. Late afternoon shadows stripe the walls of the living room. Shades of its jungle fronds spread in a severe, post Mi Lai kind of futility. Even the game show is a somber dialectic on man's stupidity to man.

Nothing changes about these days alone. They are insufferable. I'm alert, feverish, even through this cannabis blur. Feature day dream of the moment is a sucker palpitating with blood lust, body of a giant yellow leach, head of a Kim Kim.

It's attached to my glans penis. Not even a match flame will make her stir.

Day to day she doesn't change. Poor Kim Kim doesn't have a personality, as far as I can tell. But then I figure she has an IQ of about 80. I bet everything she says comes out of those Korean Romances she's always reading.

Randy's darkening of the soul glooms invisible to her. Then why do I return to her again and again? Well, because of that one thing.

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Also I can't lurk forever in a dead philodendron. For sure, that Johann knows what I'm up to these days. When I leave for her place he bays in abject jealousy frothing through bared fangs. I know he wants to fuck Kim Kim himself—damn, she might like that.

Later he barks from the Keiger walkway directly below the bedroom window where Kim Kim and I are shackled in lust.

Barking incessant. Johann could well have an obsessive compulsive disorder. He's also a candidate for bipolar diagnosis—perhaps I could suggest that the Keigers dose his dog food with lithium.

Yet most likely of all, Johann is psychotic, he emanates violence. Once I peered down out of curiosity. Yes he was looking up at me, golden all seeing eyes. Hacking at me wickedly. Hell's steam rising from his lifted snout.

Even I'm tempted to wonder if this dog could be possessed. I ask myself if I oughtn't watch the Exorcist again. Perhaps for tips on what to do with this creature with an Italian Cardinal's nose. Do I need a silver crucifix and some holy water?

The Keigers are onto my little affair. Lace curtains flutter their tatters when I nonchalantly step out the gate, always around 1:00. Soap opera time, that's appropriate.

Does Elfreda jot down what I'm wearing? Once I thought I saw a camera lens parting the cupids. Click. Does the Fuhrer have spies in Long Island City.

Again the curtains tremble enthusiastically when I stumble back drained to my last drop at 4:30. While I in desperation yearn for no more than surcease from my Karma Sutra class. Just a modicum of sympathy and anti-chafe cream.

What does Elfreda think, spying on me as I trudge home, my wet underwear in a zip-loc?

How does one prevent a nymphomaniac Asian woman from washing out one's underwear? At least I have clean underwear and lots of used baggies.

At my return Johann always performs a Caligula jig. Jowls drooling he trots at my pace with only the fence between us.

And what if Prudence should return unannounced. She would catch it all. My illicit Korean girl. My life of live porn. Me with illicit wet underwear.

Underwear bag always drips. Turning I see behind me telltale spatters marking my trail on the cement to the corner of Kim Kim's garden apartment building. Low rise, low rent, low class.

Inside the plastic bag my underwear bogs down in an excess of water. It's turned on its sides like an assassinated goldfish.

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"My sister, she not smart. She miss the boat. But she do OK. Cuz she is the witch."

That riveting bit of news preceded the blow job she's just given me--ice cubes in her surgeon's maw, otherwise it's been warm tea.

"Such a flaidy cat my husband. When he run away arr he got to say for himserf is goodbye. But you are much prettier then him. *Bigger* too." Mmmmmmm. Slurp. Sometimes she and Johann make the same music.

"Oh. They wirr never ret me go. Oh. They wirr keep me here arways. Oh. I can not even work at the pharmacy. Oh. I have seen nothing here. Oh. I want soooooo much to go see Rockets at Radio City Music Harr."

This as she prepares to hum "Yankee Doodle Dandy"--in three choruses--on my nuts.

"The pharmacy, it is no good business. My sister does not know about America. It must be cut rate, yes? America rikes onry cut rate. There should be rots of paper too and a crown. She don't make money.

"That why she has to do the potions on the side. That why she moonright as witch. Arr Koreans in Queens know my sister. She famous woman. Me, I hide. It not safe. That why I carr me Kim Kim. It fake name rear name too hard to say."

Then between dubious moans as she reams me out. "I want to be arr American, Urandy. Prease herp me."

Finale of this incredible circus act is at last when Kim Kim guides me into her anus.

"I rove you, Urandy. Got to go out from here, quickry." She is not referring to her rear end. "We go together. How about Poconos?"

Of course, what I'm experiencing, this existential loneliness around me and inside me excuses my unseemly behavior. It explains why I run back to Kim Kim afternoon after afternoon.

For example, Prudence, my Gypsy whose body I know so well and love so much, she fades before me like a sunset. She is, was, my soul, my goodness, my sanity, my handiest means of getting off.

"That doggy!" Kim Kim wails, trying to work an index into my ass. I guess she too has her troubles, her wrinkles are showing more than usual. "We must do something bad to her."

"Right," Pipe I, leveled by sexual harassment. "Tell me how to kill *him* and I will."

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This afternoon we change topics. Instead of the barking we're talking about how to cook it. Bark au vin.

"I wurr make him into Kakogi soup, maybe stew. I wurr wrap that bad Kakogi head in garbage."

"Cabbage, you mean."

"Oooh Urandy you sooooo rike Kakogi with rots of spice and garic. Very fresh garbage is important. With that I gonna boir doggy untir she be quiet."

Kim Kim finds me very entertaining. Her giggles attest to that. What can be so delighting in this nasty bed is anyone's guess. She's rummaging in the sheets below my waist. My resolve, keep eyes tightly closed. Just lie here almost dead on the wet spot, flattened by life and draped in white as in a morgue.

"Rook, Urandy," tee hee hee, snort snort.

Kim Kim, knows how to have a good time. Her bedroom surrounds redolent of us, our skins, our oils, our secretions and excretions. It stinks.

To no avail it also reeks of lotus blossom incense and Evergreen Room Deodorizer. At the moment the cloying Hostess Cupcake scent of her perfume morphs ominously into a Gawanus Canal waft of magic marker.

No. I won't 'rook.' Eyes closed darkness blots out the magenta paper umbrellas and blue balloons adorning her ceiling. The afternoon is almost as spent as my balls downsized now to M&Ms -- not a moment for doing anything, even thinking.

But I do need to take a good think. Urgently so. My problems beg decisions. For example, who should I murder first. Johann or Kim Kim?

The mattress stirs. Kim Kim sounds like she's in a wetsuit. She waits humbly for my further attentions.

"Prease rook. It is soooooooooo cute." Kim Kim will soon be whining if I don't oblige her. All I ask is that she remain a nonentity. Just keeping to her own bozo distance.

I open my an eye. Kim Kim hugs my right hip, the Copenhagen Mermaid curled up in a spray of semen spattered Canon sheets and sprinkled with pecans bits from our Pepperidge Farm Geneva cookies.

Her hair falls almost to her sagging tummy, veiling her sagging tits. If she stood up it would brush the carpeting and hide her downgraded nates. For God's sake, this sagging woman is some 15 years older than I am. Her nipples eye me accusingly.

High drama, she pulls the sheet off all the way . "See, how do you rike?"

Kim Kim in her adoration of all things priapic, has always been enchanted by my circumcision.

"Why are you rike this?" she asks again, running a pinky around the cookie cutter foreskin. "I never ever see a man rike this before. What happen? Your wife bit it off? Tee hee.

Best not bother her tiny head with the details, the various cultural, ritualistic and climate reasons for circumcision, or with accounts of the ocean of blood spilt over the presence or absence of an inch of skin.

I'm merely telling her, "Highly intelligent men come that way. It's the sign of an elevated IQ hygiene. Like airplane handy wipes."

Now I'm looking where she's directing.

Goody, goody. Has she drawn something on the head of my penis? From upside down I can't identify exactly what, something with cartoon features.

My refusal to play a game with her is leading to melt down. I hear a sob coming my way.

That could lead to a bird-dropping mess of mascara, eye shadow and liner in rivulets on my chest. Perhaps an ersatz giant eye lash will fall piercing one of my nipples.

"OK OK. So what in hell is it?" To look closer I must dig my chin deep into my chest, peering down the extent of myself.

"You don't know?" Kim Kim titters with delight. Lightly, she tweaks my corona.

"It's all upside down to me." My patience begins to wear thin with Kim Kim. What a dolt.

"Whatever, that better not be magic marker."

"Here is a mirror," She's breathless with expectation. Or maybe it's the magic marker fumes. "Rook Urandy. You will raugh and raugh. Tee hee."

In the mirror, I'm seeing that flaccid, slightly raw part of myself that men don't normally spend much time looking at.

She has done the cartoon eyes well. The dots are the pupils, the circles the lids. I suppose the dots below represent nostrils. On either side, the inverted Vs must be ears. Around, the urethra, those short straight lines--whiskers?

"A pig," I drawl, not bothering to hide the funereal notes in my voice. This comedy hardly suits my mood. "Do you know Magic Marker is damn hard to get off!"

Kim Kim doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she's keeling over in a fit of merriment, clutching her head in both hands.

"Not a Piggy. Oh you soooooo crazy, Urandy," howls she. "It is a doggy. Woof woof. Isn't she a sweetie. Not to worry. It wirr come off."

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"You bad man" she scolds. "On the count of three, you wirr open eyes and rook prease. I won't tell you what it is if you don't rook."

Curiosity is something women know a lot about.

I look, with an eloquent groan. Some four inches from my nose, in her tiny and moist palm, the Tylenol bottle appears to bathe in a mystic glow. I suppose that's because it's obviously filled with mauve nail polish.

"For you, moon rover," more rustling excitement. "Guess what."

"OK," I glower. "You're the Tylenol murderer."

Kim Kim squeals with glee. "No no no. That some kind of mass guy?"

I close my eyes.

"Urandy. Stop it, don't do that. This is reary big, very important, a hory present. It wirr solve arr our probrems. Don't be mean."

"Good. Poison." I sneer, eyes clamped tight.

"Oh, you so smart. How did you guess? You cheater." A peal of laughter and she collapses on top of me.

Oh God, the dimwit wants a suicide pact. I should have figured it would come to this. Korean Romances probably never have any other ending.

"Fine. You take it. I'll watch.

This statement, unfortunately, she understands. Tears explode everywhere. Tears rain like hot tea, dappling the sheets, spattering my dick. What an unusual sensation--tears on one's penis.

"You don't reary rove me. You don't." The rest jabbers off into Korean, dramatic and strangely insincere.

Sometimes I wonder if little Kim Kim might be somewhat devious although I think her head's too small for that.

"So I'll put it in my beer tonight. Ok Ok, now stop that."

She does too, turns them off at the faucet. Her eye liner never even glopped.

"Oh but it is not for you. Dumb dumb," sniff, sniff, coy coy, manipulate manipulate. "It is for that doggy, that bad bow wow wow wow . . ."

"The one you kindly drew on my penis?"

"No, no. Kim Kim so sorry for that. I promise it wirr come off soon. I need to keep rubbing it.

"You said that a week ago."

"No no, this is poison for doggy that barks outside arr the time."

My open wide. Kim Kim is crouching on her pillow, staring at me expectantly, an evil sprite romping in her grin.

"I store it from my sister."

Only once has Kim Kim been brave enough to lead me beyond the kitchen to their dining room, the place where her sister rustles up the under-the-counter potions, the elixirs by which they pay the

rent. That's their real pharmacopeia, catering to any and all unreal Korean appetites.

I remember a room crowded with metal shelving, floor to ceiling, stuffed with murky orange juice jars, stained boxes, and underfoot suspiciously-bulging cartons. Hanging from the ceiling anonymous dried roots and grasses brushed my hair. The room reeked of MSG and Aqua Net. Kim Kim takes my silence for doubt.

"But it reary fresh. Sister made it to order rast week. The customer never came back for it. When she go to the pharmacy, I creep and creep. My heart goes kaboom at every rittre noise. I hide behind the door. I peek around. I count to ten. I take a big breath. Then I stear this poison. I put some raspberry pudding in another bottre to foor her. She never know . . . I hope."

Kim Kim sounds worried, a note of unease in her bird song. "Sister better not know nothing. We in *big* troubre if she find out."

"What kind of poison," I ask, nonchalantly. To get the answer I want, I turn on my elbow.

Now for more coyness. Kim Kim knows she's got me interested. Sure enough, she's batting her prosthetic lashes and playing with the rat on her head.

Good thing I've never once accepted that cup of tea she's always offering me. My Kim Kim becomes a little murderess at heart. She's thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Oh, you just give this bottre to someone and they OK for a minute. Maybe they OK for two minutes. Maybe they even smire. But then . . ." Her eyes slant up tight in mock pain, her lips contract to a Cheerio-sized O, her partridge hands grasp at her throat.

The unexpected has got some blood stirring. I'm beginning to perk up after all. Kim Kim, always on the lookout for any urban development, beams like an Eveready. Yes, she is gearing up for some 'rear rove.'

"And then . . ." coax I.

"Werr," a husky Kim Kim. "And then they turn green, ears run brood, they cough rike at church. It battre of Pusan arr over again."

I grab her by the wrist. I grab hard and pull. "That's not the truth."

"You are sooo strong Urandy. Oh. Quickry ret us do it."

She yanks free and pulls her hair back so she can wink at me. A real wink from Kim Kim. Her lashes unfortunately get stuck together.

"Actuary, I don't know if it make you die or make you farr in rove." This confession sends Kim Kim into a fit of pure joy. She's pounding the sheets in delight.

Tylenol bottle has passed to my hands, a mesmerizing artifact. I clutch it protectively, a druidical relic. Feels light yet powerful. I shake it. It gives a faint toxic swish-swash. The little bottle is filled to the rim with salvation.

"Soooo Urandy," she sputters. "If that doggy don't die, he wirr have rear rove with you."

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When Herr Keiger moves on his stilts, our living room sounds with a knocking from the departed. Madame Blavatsky Communication from those buried alive. But aren't we all buried alive?

The accompanying sight of a grisly figure stalking me through my home on stilts gives me an Edgar-Allen-Poe morning feel. Turning he's stalking back to me across a drop cloth spattered with great white blops of plaster. If this be raven shit it's one huge raven.

"Ya, I know how to do everything." boasts the old man, listing precariously in my direction.

His feet are strapped in the stilts his head almost greets the ceiling. He balances like a circus performer, juggling the mortar board with its heap of plaster in one hand. The trowel motioning to his words is in the other. From down here the hunk of plaster looks like dough. He could be baking dumplings.

Craning to converse with him or most often to simply nod politely at whatever he's spitting out I already have an horrendous neck ache.

"The Russians made us do everything. Ve learned to make all our things. Dat's how I survived, dat so."

Again today Gottfried's lost in the past. Maybe this marks some special day in his life, a commemorative date of some sort, a wedding or an anniversary. You can see the past misting in his eyes, a yellow fog. I'm seeing a young Gottfried and Elfreda walking hand in hand along the Elbe a beautiful day with barges moving in stately procession.

"Now you can't get anyone to vork. No one vorks here. This country in big trouble. You remember vhat I say. It vill be Communist here in 20 years. Ya, it vill. I know. I saw it coming in Germany before the var. I saw it in Russia. That Roosevelt. He gave it away at Yalta. Und dem Kennedy brothers. They vere veaklings."

He stops, looks down at me, glints fiercely, his hair glowing under our Bloomingdales light shade.

"You know vhy the Russians vill vin? They vill vin because they are strrrrrong. Like dogs. They can starve. They can freeze. They can lose everything und still they don't give up. America don't know vhat real var is. Ha, dis country. No one here knows a damn thing."

Not knowing myself what he's raving about, I just keep smiling, tail wagging. Normal normal, remember to be normal.

"Know vhat? Dere are too many Jews in dis country. That vhat. Ven I came here in 1953 ve had our little kid. Ve lived in a room on Second Avenue, near 89th Street. That landlord vas a Jew. Ya, und he know ve are German. Ya, und he don't give us heat. Ve so cold dat vinter, our kid cry all the time.

"So I go to that landlord and say 'give us heat, for the little one.' Und he vas an ugly old Jew, humped up wit a big nose--like dis, you know. Und he valk like this, you know."

The stilts move in a crazy dance. I'm trying not to look up although the tilt in my neck feels permanent.

"Und he say, 'vant more heat, pay more money.'"

"Now, Mr. Keiger," my own voice goes up, struggling to be reasonable, to get us both back to normal. "I don't like to hear that kind of thing. It doesn't do anyone any good."

Gottfried turns sullenly to his plastering, quiet for a moment. An accusing quiet. The moment of uneasiness passes. I'm proud to have spoken up. Bet Prudence would be proud of me too. I feel like I've done a good deed. It takes courage standing up like that to anti-Semitism.

Then the old man mutters, "Ya, ya. You just like my son. He say the same thing to me."

A moment of peaceful scraping. Gottfried must be thinking.

"Ach, dat Hemingvay," he says at last. "You know him? That famous vriter?"

Good, we're going to talk about literature, although I must admit it's not my favorite topic. Prudence is missing something she for once would enjoy. See, this is what happens when you leave the one you love.

"Yes , my wife wrote her thesis on . . ."

Mr. Keiger interrupts me in mid sentence. "Vhen I vas bartender in Manhattan, he come to that bar. He come in there all the time. Once I vas vit him in the men's room. I saw vit my own eyes. Hemingvay, he vas circumcised. Ya, ya."

This is incredible. This is certainly not normal.

"Ya, bet you didn't know he vas a Jew. Dat vhy he killed himself. I know. Who wouldn't."

And now, why am I suddenly struck by the urge to assure the old duffer of my Episcopalian childhood? Why do I feel the need to mention my Scottish grandmother's family Bible? This is very upsetting.

Good thing Gottfried's never seen mine.

Mr. Keiger finishes his last patch of ceiling. He thump-thumps to the doorway, balances himself on the top of the door frame.

Unfastening one stilt at a time, he eases his boots down onto the kitchen chair he's put there. This is descent from the cross.

"Dat Levine in the basement?" Gottfried continues, descending to my own level. How do I stop this? "Guess vere he is this veek. He's up in Boston at one of dem anti-bomb rallies. I think he's an old Communist too. That's vhat I think."

Gottfried seems to be coming to the point of it all. Looking around the room for stray tools, he craftily glances in my direction--what a sly fellow he is. Without once mentioning Prudence or my little adventure next door, he manages to let me know he knows everything.

"Anyway, dat Levine, ve can't trust him vit Johann. Ve told you about dat I think . . . So, this is it . . . Can you do us a big favor, Mister Purcell? If you got der time." I think I catch a leer from the old satyr.

"Ah . . ." Once again I'm caught off guard, somewhat confused by all this.

"Ve go down to see a friend of my son's next Tuesday. Ve go to buy meat. Ve don't eat the meat here, it is full of chemicals. Or worse it is Kosher. Ve only eat de Amish meat. Dey are German you know. My son's friend, he is a dentist in Lancaster, in Pennsylvania. Many Amish there. Ve go down. Ve stay the night. Ve come back quick the next day."

This old man, so strong, so sure, he's moving about cleaning up the mess, rolling up the drop cloth, not even out of breath. I'm always a step behind him, trying to be manly and help, getting in the way most of the time.

"So?" Gottfried booms the question, directly in my face--we're both bending over together for some reason, a rather embarrassing position for two males. "Can you do dat for us?"

What, I'm wondering, squelching the desire to wipe the spittle off my face. Something here isn't coming clear to me. I'm still reeling from his anti-Semitic attack.

"Ve vill put the dog food and the can opener on the kitchen table. He gott vater. All the vater a dog need. You gott only to go down once in the evening and open him a can. Just put it in his bowl on the floor.

"Den you let him out vhen he finish, so he can use the bathroom, the garten, you know. Den you call him. He come. He trained good. That is all. You lock up. Drop de key in our mail box. Done. OK wit you?"

I'm nodding, stunned. How did we get from Communists to Amish meat, Jews to Johann, from Hemingway's penis to dog food? No, this has not been normal. Perhaps normal is no longer normal? It has become the supernatural.

At least now I know why more than fools believe in fate. How else can it be that I've ended up as a baby sitter for Johann Sebastian Bark.

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It all comes down to this. Johann, the poison and I. We three are together in the deserted house. The dog downstairs growling at himself in the dark, me up here before the TV holding the final solution in a bottle.

Our trio waits to begin its concert. I must start. I sit beside the Williams-Sonoma coffee table gathering the inspiration for my work from the flickering of insipid TV commercials, volume off.

The old Jew is off protesting the bomb. The old Krauts have gone to the country to protest their meat. I'm sure my middle aged Korean has her sister and brother in law for company to protest the DMZ.

Prudence, of course, is the unseen presence here—and our baby too is another. Has she gone somewhere with someone I don't know to protest against the Greensboro Massacre.

The tensions of our little drama keep me sober this evening. I don't feel the five Blatz's, not much at least. The joint pleasantly

clouds up the ashtray, leaving my head relatively attentive. I listen to the Stones. Aptly at this moment, *Shattered*.

When that joint is finished, Randy, you will go downstairs to feed Johann. That's the timetable, no evasion.

Another drag, inhale slowly, hold. Get all you can out of it. You're going to need it, son. There are too many edges here tonight. Too many sharp things to get cut on. Dull your edges, Randy. Let the dope do it. Release and cough.

You must distort hundreds of years of White Anglo Saxon Protestant rectitude. You are to alter your upper class chromosomes, at least for the next half hour.

Johann barks at the loneliness. He's done that all day, since dawn, when the old folks made the shocks of the Bel Air wake the neighborhood. He's barked and barked. Weary now he barks at his own loneliness. He's rasping. Sounds worn out, almost pitiful.

Someone should give him a throat lozenge.

All day I've secretly kept him company, sitting above him listening to him with the shades drawn, trying to understand him. It's been just my thoughts and the barking.

I haven't stirred, except to dress. Just naturally choosing my oldest pair of Levis, this long-sleeved blue collar shirt, these thick socks, my L.L. Bean hiking boots. Without thinking I pulled out my work gloves.

Well, well, time's up, Johann. Joint's dead. To confirm this the oven timer I set rings in the kitchen.

Take inventory again. Gloves in your back pocket? Bottle of poison in your shirt pocket?

I've repeatedly made Kim Kim swear to me that this potion truly kills. Twisting an arm behind her back to get the truth, which achieved nothing except to turn her on. She took it for an exotic new position for intercourse.

OK, dog, say your prayers. Here I come.

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It's like a movie set down here. Great for an old fashioned horror film, from the glory days of the Astoria Studios.

Old folks went off leaving only the one light on. True of them, it's the too-bright entryway light. Makes the rest of their apartment all the darker. It's a stark, self conscious light.

Shapes of doors, windows and furniture are perceived but not seen. Anyone peering in would immediately assume no one's home.

I'm speaking in whispers, thinking in whispers, proceeding quickly in whispered steps through the gloom of the hall, making my whispered way into their kitchen.

From the darkness of the living room, comes the low grinding of incisors. That's Johann welcoming me to his lair.

"Alright for you Johann, you Creature That Ate Chicago. I'm coming for you. I'm going to get you."

Why do grown men panic in the dark while groping for a light switch? It comes from our cave days. Worse, our cave nights. We did live for too long in caves and that stunted our growth.

There, found the switch. A little light makes for a lot of courage. The Keiger's low-watt, single bulb, dangles from the kitchen ceiling lidded by a garish glass fixture. A 1950s splash of brown abstractions turns their wall tiles to streaked shit. The kitchen seems alive and breathing. Walls palpitate. The room a giant heart.

A subterranean growl stirs from somewhere.

"Hey Johann, it is I, Randy from upstairs." I call to him loudly. My voice makes me jump. "It's your friendly substitute care giver."

I'm already getting cooked. All the windows are closed and it's 90' at 9:00 and a humid 80%. No wonder I'm feeling like chocolate in Death Valley. Half of me's already run down into my socks. I slosh with each step.

The Keiger's kitchen looks and feels like a photograph-- A picture of a place long lost to the bulldozer. Or else like a still life memory of a wonderful kirchen in outer space, waiting for a happy

family to appear--juvenilia of Werner Von Braun. Makes me wish I'd brought a camera and a hard hat.

How touching. Just for me the old people tried to clean up Johann's mess. I can smell how they left the floor with an overdose of Spic'n'span. It's slippery under my L.L.Bean soles, the detergent grits like gravel on a deadbeat rural road.

Yes, Herr Keiger was true to his word. He left the can opener along with the can of dog food on the table oil cloth.

I'm way too tense. But I need to get started. I've got springs in my thighs. My hands twitch with hot needle point intensity. Take your gloves off, stupid. No wonder. You can't do a thing with work gloves on.

So, let's get started. Squeak squeak. The can opener makes a friendly sound. Very homey. Sure enough, that's Johann's cue. I hear him sneaking up, crouching behind me.

How strangely quiet he is through all this. But he can't fool me. Ha. I know where he is. I've got surgical eyes fixed behind me.

Disgruntled snarls from the kitchen doorway. Golden eyes burning like fires. A whiff of dog mixing with that of first stage decomposition. It's so quiet I can hear Johann's fart. Or is that my own? We are already fusing.

Alright, can is open. No more time now for philosophic bullshit, for quibbling over details of conscience. Do it.

My fingers fumble with the child-proof cap on the aspirin bottle. Johann's lurking behind me. From the corner of my eye I see his low, prehistoric, slinking form.

I see his yellowed fang tips, his baboon ruff just to the point of bristling. He inches closer. His eyes change color, sickly green to midnight black. What am I going to do? I've got the food in the bowl and the bowl at my feet on the floor.

But the fucking, Tylenol child-proof cap won't budge. I wrench it one way then the other. The cap emits a stripping grind of gears.

Johann grumbles with impatience. He's waiting for me to move away from his bowl. Cap lodges tight.

A single drop of sweat slowly meanders down my nose. It swings tickling at the tip. When that happens, a man can loose it entirely. But you can't, Randy. Not now. It's nothing, that single tickling drop of animal excretion. That's not fear or insanity--only a very hot night in June spent with an overzealous painkiller cap.

Calm down, Randall. Look closer at the bottle. Line up those little arrows, the one on the cap with the one on the bottle. Slow down and do it right. Grabbing the lid between my teeth I give it my all, baring my teeth back at Johann. This is Nixon with the aspirin cap in the Oval Office.

Got it now. Cap off the swill trembles, the color of plum pudding, of Kim Kim's eye shadow.

What an evil looking goo in this light. Feels like you're holding an open can of Drano over the ratatouille. Easy does it. Careful. That idiot Kim Kim would necessarily fill the bottle too full.

Howling in rage, Johann jumps up and snags one of Elfreda's prized drapes, what's left of it, pulling down drape, pull cord and curtain rod. He buries snarls in the material snorting, shredding. Two large off-white cupids still frolicking in their fig leaves are instantly destroyed.

He's redecorating as he comes for me. Is Johann in truth a tormented homosexual? The effect he achieves is what I think of as Long Island City Rococo after a home invasion by Puerto Rican militants.

Look out! From out of no where, a cobra-like strike. I myself have been nailed. The kitchen reels. Floor tilts to ceiling. Johann's gone mad. He's got his fangs not in my flesh but into the denim of my trouser leg..

The poison falls. He and I both watch it spill. Me pulled off balance kicking wildly at the dog and clinging to the table edge. The slick oil cloth slides out from under my fingers. Johann can snarl even with a mouthful of jean, yanking and straining, ears flat to the skull. He's shaking my L.L. Beans more ardently than a dying cupid.

The poison splatters in slow motion on the oil cloth. It's a shocking lavender hued malignant growth spreading in search of something to kill. Spreading over the cherries, relentlessly in pursuit of them as they slip in slow motion for the edge of the table top. My bared ankle is another ultimate concern reflected in his golden eye.

"Johann. Stop that. . ." I'm sure the Italians are hearing me scream.

Now he's trying to drag me back into the darkness of the living room. He wants to work on me there, rip his teeth into my bowels and pull out a foot of sausage casing while it's still warm. Help! Oh God!

In our struggle his bowl goes flipping up into the air. It's coming down upside down with a rattling finality.

My free foot sinks in a moist lump of brown goo. Offal.

I'm slipping in it. My hands go out from under me, felled by the Spic 'N Span on the floor. I'm going down in a split, clutching for the tubular steel table leg. Frantic to get a hand on the oil cloth.

The oil cloth comes off the table in an avalanche of salt and pepper shakers, the old ones' medicine bottles, a Sunbeam toaster and the poison bottle.

Poison sprays on me, on Johann. In a frenzy Johann knocks over a chair. He capsizes his water bowl. He's flashing monster eyes at me.

There's serious bodily injury in those eyes, if not to me then to my Levis. We slip and slide together growling at each other in our rough-trade Apache dance.

The floor's more treacherous than ever. Water, dog food and the poison mush together. Johann's hind legs tangle in the oil cloth. For a moment he loses traction although not a centimeter of his hold on my pant leg.

The oil cloth cherries writhe in agony. Johann is growling from under them slashing and thrashing with killing intent. One second pause, it's all I want, all I need. I lurch for the sink. Grab the edge.

Strain forward, pulling. I pull him right along he is a skiff laden with cement blocks packaged for the river.

In the sink a mere handful of chick peas clot the drain cap. A carving knife also lies in the sink. With a steel point to live by. Only a few flecks of cabbage remain on the cutting edge. How uncharacteristic of Elfreda to have left them. Maybe she was distracted by Johann nosing up warm and wet toward her crack.

I need one more second. One more inch. Fight for it, Randy. That's it. Grasp the handle. Lift it dripping. Grip it tight. Make a fist around it. I'm turning in a high flooding moment of pure exhilaration. My first ever Wagnerian moment. Hymn of the Valkyries.

Jabbing the knife blade down—down, down. It slashes into the convulsing, yelping cherries.

Once, twice, a third time. Pause. No pity. Once again. Grrrrrr, die you mother fucker. Is that me bellowing? I've never bellowed in my life.

My teeth set against my tongue. I see that the blade has lodged into finality, deep and true through a pretty splash of spring cherries into his rock-of-ages bone. A man can tell when a blade goes home to the heart of what he hunts. I know it all now.

Though it tears through a cheap oil cloth in a tawdry Queens kitchen that ancient secret we no longer speak of has come out to light.

The single bulb swings a violent arc back and forth. Light seesaws with lurid shadow, teetering at the edge of sanity, a sensation of erratic, fleeting light, as if the world were a plummeting jet airliner and we were all turning wildly, uselessly, to one another for help.

Rising up from my around my shoes comes a dim and bitter sigh. It catches me clinging on to the sink for my dear life.

The sigh diminishes. Turns stertorous. The breathing of the city around me turns stertorous. I can't swallow. But he won't be swallowing ever again. Madness abounds.

Plip plip. Does Herr Keiger have a dripping faucet? No, never.

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Nothing's moving here. I'm sure not going anywhere. There's a weight attached to my left leg. 70 pounds of death. One immobile lump of sodden fleas already engaging decay beneath a slashed and bloodied table cloth.

From just below its jaw the last drops of drool are pooled beside my work shoes.

I make out the tell tale baboon hump about the head. One paw peeks forth meekly from a corner of the oil cloth, a cherry snagged on its claw. Tail lost somewhere in the amorphous lump. No more wagging for you.

Most prominent are the staring eyes and the teeth. Eyes have been turned off for good. Bulbs broken. Fangs clench fast in incipient rigor mortis. Locked on the tip of my cuff.

Knife handle protrudes from the cherries, out of time and out of place. The knife blade stands buried up to the hilt in the body.

God damn, get this fucking dog off me!

Head down in the sink, pulling with all my strength, I manage to move Johann a few inches. Although my pants slip down vice tight around my hips.

Let go, damn you. Let go.

No shaking's going to dislodge that. Johann Sebastian Bark's gone to Hell chewing on my jeans.

Why do I have so much blood on my hands? How did that happen? I can't stand it. It ain't mine. Get that off me.

Deep breaths. Practice your Lamaze, Randy.

Try moving again. That's it. And again. Yes! You lugged him almost three feet. You can reach the sink.

First give yourself a drink. Ya, Do dat and then worry about the rest. Don't use a glass. Don't leave any incriminating evidence.

Wash that blood off. Scrub hard. Get it all. Don't get any of that blood in your mouth. It's mixed with poison.

Good. Now cup your palms. Lap water. Drink like a dog.

No. don't pay any attention to the blood in the sink. Let it go down the drain.

Quickly I'm unbuttoning my jeans. Hiking the free leg to pull it out of the trousers. In thoughtless haste I try pulling the jeans off over the boot. My underwear goes along for the ride.

The motion delivers Johann's head sharp to my patella, lolling nose flattened on my bare flesh. To free myself I must maneuver my hands around his head. It's still warm. I gag on the thought of head cheese. My hands are shaking.

The head is too ghastly, too heavy, too loaded with doggy memories. Fur feels slick with 13th century plague. Do I see bubonic fleas hopping in a panic to escape from him to me?

At last I get the boot off. No matter that the one jean leg remains in those predator jaws.

You can't stay like this. You can barely move let alone run away. You're also naked from the waist down.

First disembrace. For that find another knife. There's one in that knife rack. Now saw fabric, fast as you can. Go go go. No, you've got to start again. Cut closer to its teeth, close as you can without cutting yourself, or him. Damn, how could jeans be profitable when denim is for eternity.

Listen. What's that hitting onto the floorboards. It's your own sweat, dummy. So who's sawing? Or is someone in an iron lung?

Look at that. You're finished. You've left Johann with a tidbit of blue jean peeping between his teeth—it could be a pull string on a band aid.

Now jump to it. You aren't to linger at a murder scene. Fast, get your underwear and pants back on. Tie your boot strings. Find the gloves.

Standing up I see I've left the knife on the kitchen table along with a scarlet smear and a few threads of jeans.

Slide the shreds of cloth into the palm of your hand and pocket them. Quick, sponge the table top clean. Rinse the knife. Put it

back where you found it. Check the sink again. Wash those microscopic stains down and away forever.

What else? Think hard, Randy. This has got to be good.

Outside, why do I hear a car door slam!

It emanates from the curb, out front, by the fireplug. It's an Elfreda home run slam. The front gate squeaks. Footsteps pound along the side of the house.

Plip plip. Leaky faucet or Johann's blood? Who would ever guess what's lying there waiting for her in the kitchen.

Oh shit! The bottle of poison. Where did it go. What will the Keigers think of that? Not on the table nor the counters, No where to be seen on the floor.

"Johann . . . Johann Sebastian Bark. Wake up, es ist mutter." Elfreda too sweetly, too loudly. Voice falters. That bosom must be storm wrecked by now.

Somewhere nearby, at the edge of that horrid Englischer Garten, the old woman's standing aghast. I imagine her there. Her coarse stream of hair catches in the night's spider web. She's Rousseau's naked woman on LSD playing her flute for the snakes and the weird birds.

Elfreda heaves amply. To her their apartment must be a lifeless wonder--I know it grips her by the heart. It does me. Both plump hands will be fluttering, trapped in a net.

"Johann? Lie bling?"

Silence. Tattle tale silence. I hear her out there. She's praying to the old Gods.

"Gottfried!" A genuine scream.

Another slamming of car door. What to do? Someone tell me, please.

Why am I just standing here, farting spastically into their apartment? Just lolling here in their kitchen for the world to see, stuck in my steps, crazy eyed, bloodied, clutching a paper towel full of dog food in one hand. I've come to stand over their murdered dog.

There's a dead dog in the kitchen-there's a dead dog in the kitchen-there's a dead dog in the kitchen. For that matter your tenant standing frozen in terror in the kitchen.

There's also a gun on Gottfried's nightstand. I saw it, a Luger. Of course he's got a gun. A man like Gottfried wouldn't be without many guns, hidden in the Bell-Air glove compartment, stuffed in his pants or pushed down a sock.

One of those deadly Lugers, something ultimate and illegal.

Brogue heels bark rapidly on the back door steps. Rough German comes stomping on its way. He bounds up the steps, Kitchen light burns steadily, blindingly. It shows him a morgue at midnight.

Blustering, military German guts the silence. Gottfried's voice rises, engulfs the apartment. He's ready to shoot. A second passes. Gottfried is positioning himself at the backdoor, aware that he has something trapped inside.

Backdoor crashes hard against the refrigerator.

I race back into their entryway. No where else to go. He curses in a high shriek.

I'm wedged in a tangle of open doors. To hide I smear myself full length between them. Front side is flat against the mirror on their coat closet door. The open front door is at my back.

Too strong bulb above allows for no evasion. An image contorts before me in the mirror. Something gross and green. That can't be me flattened there in my own slimy glue to the mirror. Something ugly and very frightened. Something crawling, despicable. Something without a soul. I've squeezed the paper towel full of dog food into a tiny aromatic pink ball. Like me it is pancaked to the mirror.

I'm twitching convulsively, there in the mirror, a dress rehearsal for my own death. My eye balls just rolled up in my head. Sweat streams into my socks and underwear. Drips freely down my sides from my armpits.

I'm witnessing a whole lot of chronic swallowing going on. Animal functions have gone wild—I'm swallowing convulsing and about to vomit or piss myself, maybe both at once.

Gottfried storm-troops to a halt at the base of their back steps. I catch a single, harsh clicking. He's cocking a gun? Guns and knives, what else do they collect. Lampshades made of human skin?

In the mirror one peeled back red eyeball rolls. Terminally bloodshot. It too isn't mine. Too on fire for mine. It's pressed to the mirror like a crushed cherry tomato. Tainted green.

The uncivilized New World is in here, urban and lethal. Can one beg for mercy in German? The old man steps up step by step to the back door. I hear the couple muttering in German. A moment and then they will charge together into the kitchen.

Gottfried booms out "Achtung." There's no tremor in that voice. It's a bayonet thrust.

Elfreda screams at the sight I've left for her. Wild screaming going on and on, wafting throughout the apartment the garden, to Most Precious Blood and back again.

Ceiling light shows me more of myself I want to see. Profile drenched, nose flattened sidewise with a gaping nostril, half of my mouth crooked, stepped on into a snarl. A few teeth bared. Sharpened green.

Elfreda still free-style yodeling moves on to their bedroom. I fear she will have a sore throat in the morning. Gottfried joins her in a Swabian duet of grief and fury.

This is the one chance I've got. Run Randy. Take what fate's given you and make a dash for it. They can't see the front door from back there. Gottfried won't leave Elfreda's side.

Slither around the hall door one leg at a time. Inch yourself out, hugging the door all the way. You've got to shut it too. Gottfried wanted his door looked, heavy duty Yale Lock. He told you. And return the key.

What did you leave on that mirror. Nothing. But it seems you did. Prints, a face, a stench, that look deep in your eye--that unforgettable look. The outline through your jeans of your circumcised cock? You left all that on their mirror.

Gotterdammerung.

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"It's the night of the Blood Purge." The pipsqueak on my left tells this to his scotch and water. Surrounding uproar should be loud enough to redact my bar stool neighbor's crazed colloquy. But no, I'm hearing all of it.

"Forty nine years ago this very night."

He's hoping someone's listening to him. No one is but me. That's only because I'm trapped.

I had no option other than Roger Casement's bar. It's got one big advantage. I could run here in five minutes. Also, cigarette smoke is a laboring-class veil around me, further hiding me. Sadly it can't cover my companion's, dandruff, halitosis, eczema.

Obscurity will never hide my trembling hands.

He slumps on his barstool, staring down his drink, humped on his elbows so that his nose almost touches the wood. Probably severe scoliosis. His sweater cuffs--a sweater in August?--are unraveling. He smells.

"June 30th, 1934," he rasps, choking on this fetid air. He's sick. Veined cheeks, swollen nose, dirty fingernails. An ugly old alkie.

But in Roger Casement's they are all alcoholics. All old and ugly, except for me. I'm the natural standout. Wish I could draw a cloak of invisibility over my head.

"They got Klausner and Probst from the Catholic movement. They got Strasser, the brain behind the Nazi theories. They got Schleicher, the former Chancellor, and General von Bredow, his assistant. Hitler sent Goering and Himmler to do the work . . . They sure as hell did it too."

I don't believe it can really be me, stuck here in Roger Casement's, concealed among the scum, scared shitless. Here to kill time until the cops leave 3254.

Again, the street door opens. Makes me spasm head to toe. My asshole ties itself in knots. My facial muscles, brow, cheeks, mouth,

clench in rictus. What? Who? It wasn't me, I've been here all along, for the company.

"They got Ernst, the guy who claimed to have set the Reichstag fire for Hitler. They got Heines and Schneidhuber and Fritz von Krausser. Heines was the queer they shot in bed, him and his boyfriend together."

In Roger Casement's no one would notice or care if your hand shook when you tried to take a drink. That's one good thing because I can barely hold this fucking bottle. And this is only my third Blatz.

The Irish bartender's drunk himself. He's not seeing a thing except the TV screen, all the time he's serving he's watching a middleweight bout from Atlantic City.

Roger Casement's is carcinogenic. You can feel it everywhere, on your skin, the way your soles stick to the floor. My elbows slide on the counter top through puddles of shed Irish grief. My eyes burn from the agent orange.

Anyway you wouldn't want to see in here, not too much. They don't want you cheating on bets for what's creeping and crawling around you and on you.

Evidently I did get the blood off. Even in Roger Casement they'd notice if you had blood on your hands and face.

"They got Hayn and Uhl, both SA men. They got Von Bose and Jung, a couple of Papen's secretaries. They even got Dr. Beck of the International Students' Exchange . . ."

Someone gag this creep. I know everything about him, one look tells all--he lives in a hole above Broadway, with a cat. He goes to the Queens borough Library everyday for a free read. He comes in here every night to tell the people about what he's read that day. No one listens, no one gives a shit.

This guy thinks he's intelligent. Thinks he's got a brain. If someone tore it out he wouldn't even notice.

Someone's looking at me. Stare's stuck to me. Moist bacteria spreading over skin. A yeast infection of a stare. No, don't turn. Act

like nothing's wrong. You don't belong here, that's why someone's staring.

Have they put out an APB on me? How many more beers before it's safe to go home? The cops won't stay long. They did get there within minutes. I saw them arriving from the safety of across the street. NYPD arrives an hour too late when someone's getting wasted. They're on the spot when the dog's been done in.

Something's groping my thigh. Thank God the Naziphobe has both elbows on the bar.

"They got Dr. Litgebrune and General von Kahr. They even put down Schleicher's wife, just because she heard a shot and rushed into the living room.

"Schleicher was on the phone. His last words were to the person on the other end. He said, 'Excuse me just a moment; someone's in the room . . .'"

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Is my head a Boeing 747? Is our telephone ringing or do I have a brain tumor? Head's aching like a crash site, telephone's ringing without surcease.

I'M SICK. I'm getting sicker by the moment too. How many Blatz beers did it take for this, the worst hangover of my life?

What's the time? 8:30. Is that am or pm? Looks to be am from what I see in the window.

Ringin' isn't going to stop.

Would Prudence call me this morning? Don't count on it. It's a sales call, no more. Get his address and you can castrate him tonight.

Stop that fucking ringin' now! I rip the receiver off and bang it back down.

One moment of respite and the ringin' picks up where it left off. One two three four five six seven eight nine. I grab it up, screaming "Roger Casement's Bar. Go fuck yourself."

"Hello Mister Purcell." It's a Pentagon voice on the phone heavy with German accent. Immediately I'm sitting up in bed. Drunk-stinking sheet falls away. How did I get out of my clothes last night?

Sweat pops out like a thousand pimples over my entire self, runs the outside and inside of me. Sweat torrents between my legs and onto the sheet. Heart's pumping it, brain' drowning in it.

Jesus, how I'm aching to piss. My dick's a throbbing Aleutian totem pole. My mouth is a Calcutta sewer, assuming they have one. Meat hammer is tenderizing my mind blow by blow.

"You should know ve had terrible troubles here last night, terrible." Gottfried sounds a little hung over himself this morning.

At least he's speaking to me from somewhere sane and well fed. I hate him. I wish he had died in Siberia. Up above him I sit on the edge of my bed naked, stricken into a lonesome silence.

Without warning urine jets from me in a high arc hitting me in the face. My member pumps away out of control. It's a hot smelly shame stinging my eyes and mouth. It courses down the arroyos of my body, over my chin and chest, down my calves. Damn, I'll need to buy a new mattress.

"Mr. Purcell, are you there? I said ve gott de bad trouble down here."

". . . Oh?" I at last manage that. Urine on my tongue.

"Ya, dey try to rob us last night. Dey break in the back door . . . You ok Mister Purcell? Don't sound too good."

"I'm OK." Meaning urine's stanching.

Come on Gottfried, spit it out. Get this over with so I can run to puke. I note my piss in a desultory closure drip from the receiver.

"Dat's good because de son of bitches kill our Johann. Dat so. Ya." The voice steadies, he's a good soldier at the front. There's true iron in that billy goat gruff.

Sky I see is appropriately leaden. Funereal. Giant fingers gray cloud drip mist around the steeple of Most Precious Blood.

Turning in sop to look down below I spot Mrs. Keiger in the Englischer Garten. She's standing in the rain. There at the side of

the summer Dacha. She's in a black scarf, black raincoat and sunglasses. It's a French movie, hope they remember to shift the camera shot at least once. I hate French movies.

She's standing lost in the crazy abundance of roses, the mad tangle of vines and thorns. She seems to be composing another Sad Ballad while picking her nose. Or maybe it's a tear she's wiping.

On the phone, Herr Keiger rolls pitilessly onwards. Clinking of tank chains.

"You never know nothing last night, right? You don't hear nothing. Not see nothing, right? You feed Johann, ve know, und thank you. Ve find the can in the garbage.

"Ach, dose bastards. To kill a good dog is the worst thing. But Johann fought them good. He went down fighting. Not a ting but Johann is gone. Dey didn't get my stamps or coins. Ya, the cops come. Dey do nothing. Dey don't even try. It's bad, very bad."

Again I bring myself to look down at Elfreda. She's still out there in the rain, stuck on a thorn of pain, weeping into her fake sunglasses that are so totally yesterday.

"My wife take it hard." The old man doesn't mournful at all. There's rage and vengeance on the line. Fire and fury. Hate and gallstones.

"Ve come back early because she had a funny feeling something bad was happening. My wife, she gott certain feelings. Sometime she is right too. Ya, sometime she is."

Hurry up, old man. I'm up here dripping urine and swallowing bile.

Too ruined by fortune to speak I can think of nothing to add to this ridiculous threnody. No one should sound so distraught over a fucking dog.

Gottfried's pausing to gather strength. Spittle must be flecking their receiver, maybe it too makes a puddle on the floor. This place is ruined upstairs and downstairs.

"Ach, but ve gott two clues. In de fight, Johann tore off a piece of dere pants. Dey vere wearing blue jeans.

“Und also, dey who murder our Johann, dey drop a Tylenol bottle on the kitchen floor. It vas half full of raspberry pudding.

“My vife she sniff it und den she taste it. She even knows vhat brand it is. Jell-O, she say, der instant kind.”

How does their kitchen look this morning? Where is the body? Have they had the courage to move it? Does it lie in state on the dining table dressed up by one of Gottfried's best white shirts?

Maybe the body's entirely gone, only a white chalk line outlining its shape on the floor. I'm seeing too much for my own good this morning. Feeling too much. My hangover can't take it. I really am going to puke, and I haven't done that since high school track practice.

"Now Mister Purcell, if you know of anybody gott a piece of blue jean missing und like to put raspberry pudding, der instant kind, in Tylenol bottles, you please tell me. Ya, do dat, please."

Suddenly, the old man is shouting. "Dose Gott damn animals. I vill get them for vhat they do to our Johann!"

He's raving so loud I'm hearing him twice, over the phone and up from below.

"I'm an old man, but I vill still get dem. I have gotten too much. Enough is enough. I not take anymore of dis scheisse."

He breaks up into German, snaps the line sharply. He's hung up. I hang up. The universe hung up on me some time ago.

Abruptly I'm being convulsed by oceanic stomach surges. Here comes puke at last, erupting Krakatoa style. Partly processed remains of last night's frozen entrée come back in streamers of mozzarella. Bolognese sauce heaves up and then geysers down to sizzle on my toes, curdling in the piss. Effluvia gushers forth out of mouth and nose. Unholy and unnatural.

For this damnation I need two Tylenols directly. Make that 200. And a shower. Also a new bed, new sheets, pillows, and an area rug. A new address would come in handy. I wonder where Prudence keeps the bleach.

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Kim Kim's at it again. She's pantomiming Cleopatra's death scene in her kitchen window. Naked. For my sole entertainment

Although I don't want to look at her routine, and shouldn't, I'm held here in the living room securely, Ulysses tied to the mast. Does she want me to fall on my sword? Does she hanker for a pet viper?

Kim Kim's pantomime hasn't varied much. Again and again I've caught her in the same act--leaning far forward over the electric rice steamer as if trying to conjoin with a shrimp gumbo recipe.

Her arms are raised, her turnip head bobs desperately, face flattened by poor heredity, distance and two thicknesses of glass.

Their windows are closed, they have air conditioning. Kim Kim even looks cold to me. Goosebumps on the bare arms raised in supplication.

One hand she uses to hold something invisible on high between thumb and forefinger. She mimes tilting this 'what ever' item, then makes a melodramatic rendition of swarrowing swarrowing swarrowing. In the other hand she has an ordinary table knife, not at all sharp, that she keeps pointed at her belly.

In finale she'll raise her shoulders to me while playing with her nipples or rubbing the knife handle into her snatch. Myself, behind closed windows without air conditioning, I'm down to underwear. I'm swimming in warm wetness and distress.

Kim Kim's show is one long query. I understand and ignore it. The pleading silent movie of love's longing is disgusting. The way she emotes she might have been a star of Korean silent films.

Without straining my brain, I understand her. Who could fail, the simpleton. She wants to know if I love her—is that feasible. She wants to know why I'm sitting over here with the windows closed. She wants to know if I can still screw. She wants to know if Prudence has come back. She wants to know why I haven't been over to see her in three days. 'What's wrong Urandy?'

Above all, of course, she wants to know if the dog is dead. But she can hear that he is. Just listen! Even with the windows closed it's palpably clear. She wants, she wants.

Ha ha, babe, sometimes we can't have what we want. Women don't really need language, nor an economic order for that matter. Women would be content swinging from trees in clusters, their young on their necks, a few bananas for comfort.

Has it really been three days now? That long? Three days of moping around the apartment on tiptoe, hiding from the Keigers, cleaning up stray morsels of vomit, avoiding Kim Kim by keeping away from the windows, staying clear of the light. Keeping the windows closed and locked.

Three days spent joyful in the silence. Reveling in it. Proud of it. it's a silence of me, for me, by me. If it weren't for the absence of Prudence I'd be having a good time sloshing about in my underwear.

For certain, I should have killed that dog a lot sooner. Now that we have silence again at 3254 Prudence will return with my son in her arms, Randal Payton Purcell II.

Rap rap. Yes, Kim Kim's pecking on her behavioral lab glass again, mouth working frantically. Looks like she's trying to give me a blow job from six feet away.

Well suck on glass, honey. It was only raspberry pudding after all.

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"My vife, she vrapped him in und old sheet. Ve put him in de trunk of de car. Ve took him over de Tappan Zee Bridge, to a place in Rockland County. Ya, Rockland County it is beeyoutiful. I know a farmer there. For 20 years ve buy our apples from dat man."

Over our two heads giant streaks of garish pollution mark sunset and our national holiday.. A burden of dread almost makes me drop the Steinway Gardens sack, the Dipsy Doodles would then be be pulverized, the Blatz too fizzy to drink.

“Und he say, 'sure Freddy, bury your dog on my farm.' So dat vhat ve do. Ve dig a hole for Johann on dis hill, under the apple tree. You can see the Hudson River from the hill.”

Two doors down, the Greek kids toss another live strand of M80s into the street. Clearly they want to see us die from cardiac arrest. All the trash cans lids on the block rattle like a huge popcorn machine--pop pop pop kazoo.

But this is not child's play, this is an attack. LIC is dying in a losing war. The chemical factory ozone sky streaks Gottfried in ghoulish hues. He doesn't seem to care that we've all been flushed down the Love Canal. They should have issued us gas masks at birth. I'm not in good spirits.

The old man leans almost into my arms, thrusting his face at me as if he wanted me to take it away from him. He's doing his trick of turning his head from side to side while keeping his eyes fixed on you and tapping his nose. Half the time he's glaring at you from the corner of an eye, half the time staring you down like an imploring kid.

He must have been waiting for me. Too pat, the way he sprang up from the corner of the building just as I was trying to sneak back in the door, at the very moment I was congratulating myself on having made it safely out and back.

Man's best friend, Man's only friend,” I'm saying, hearing it from my own lips. Well done, an impressive compassion for Gottfried. What a ham you are, Randy.

“Ya, a good dog you can count on, and there is nothing like that in the world. In Russia ve had a little dog. Ve loved that little dog the vay soldiers do, you know. Ve had to eat that dog. Terrible. Terrible. I never forget. Never.”

I swallow the urge to ask if he was good. Herr Keiger shakes a fist at the street,

"Dose kids, dey make my vife sick vit all dat noise. She gott thumbs in her ears. I call der cops. Dey say 'Ya Sir.' You know vhat dat mean. My vife is inside crying. The bombing, you know, she can't take dis kind of ting.”

If he doesn't stop and let me go, I don't know what will happen.

All this drama over a fucking dog. Why should it leach on to me like Kim Kim's buttocks? There's a vast American entertainment sector out there to tranquilize us when in need. It's there to keep the past away.

What's done is done. I've no intention of forgiving myself, why should I. This is no fucking Kent State.

"Well, guess I better get this beer inside before it goes warm," I say, flashing my teeth in a smile of commiseration.

"But dis time dey go too far. Dey make a big mistake." Gottfried taps a finger nail against my chest, squinting through the gathering dark and settling layer of dust. "Dey pick de wrong man. I vill make them sorry."

A new Plymouth whistles brokenly through the air, shooting straight down 38th Street and hitting every pothole in a shower of sparks. As falls textiles so falls Detroit.

"You know about dem Nuremburg Trials, ya? Lies. Goering told them so, all lies.

"Those American lawyers, ha. Goering fooled them good, he had poison in his teeth. He tricked them.

"But he told them first. They don't want to hear it, no. He say 'look it up,' Mr. Purcell--he say 'in 50 years the world vill know the truth.' Ya, he say so. Someday people vill vake up. Dat's vhy people always after Gottfried. Dey vant him to shut up about de truth. My wife und me, ve be very careful always. Ve know."

God damn, but I've got to get away from this. Turn the key, open the door, make a break for it. Gottfried grabs my arm. Swift as a bite. Makes me lose my balance. He's a strong old man, those fingers are like teeth.

"Ve gott cut out off falling back from Stalingrad," his voice sinks into gravel. "Me und my friend ve hid for four days, freezing and starving in the snow. Ve hid in a dead tree. Vhen dey took us, my friend vas dead beside me. Dey just left him in dat tree. Ya, that it.

“Know what. I was the only one to survive in my regiment. The only one. Six years in a Russian camp. Six years and my mother and my wife never even know if I’m alive or not. You believe that. Dey wouldn’t let anyone know, not until 1949.

“Ya, but I made it. The others die night after night. The ground so hard we couldn’t bury them, snow up to here, all the time. Und we were too sick and hungry to do anything. My eyes dey went. For two weeks I was blind from no food. But den I ate some grass, ya, und dat did the trick. I live on grass and snow.

“The others only die. The wolves come to the camp and eat them, dead and alive. I saw it. Sometimes we burn the bodies to keep warm. Und de bodies we don’t burn and de wolves don’t get, dey just lie frozen on the ground, like garbage, frozen solid, no clothes. The Russians take de clothes for themselves.

“Dey don’t take the bodies. Oh no, we not good enough to bother wit.”

I’m beginning to get pissed off with this, listening to War and Peace on the doorstep. The old man’s spitting the story into my shirt front too, thousands of words are running down my chest in inky streaks. He’s holding tight, not letting up, screwing me hard with his eyes.

"Know how I survived? When I was young I read only strong books, Jack London, Zane Grey. Dat’s true. Dey ver in German. Und I remember everything. I know how to do all dose things dey do in dose books.

“I keep moving. I don’t give up. I eat grass und snow.

“The head of dat camp, he was a Jew. You didn’t know that did you. Ya, a Commie Jew. He knew good German too. He talk to me all the time. He gott an eye on me. He know I’m the only German left alive in his camp. All de others Russians, Ukrainians. He know.

“Und the end was bad too in 1949. When dey let us go, the German soldiers from all over Russia, hundreds of them, they ver round up like cattle. Sick, crippled, almost naked, ya, and dying. We made to march through Red Square.

“That Brezhnev, he vas a party member then, big shot even then in Moscow, he talk to us. He tell how good Mother Russia been to us. De son of a bitch. Den dey put us on a train and send us home.

“Ha! Home to vhat. To East Germany vere there vas nothing left. No food, no coal, nothing but broken stone.”

Good, Gottfried at last seems spent from too much history. His hand loosens. I too am exhausted by his recitative. Courses at Penn were much better.

Seems the two of us are pinned down here by enemy fire, surrounded by patriotism’s simulacra. Me? I’m dying of thirst on the banks of the Volga.

"I know, go on und drink your beer. I go drink mine. Make a toasten to America. Just wanted to tell you how ve buried Johann. Ya, you can see the Hudson from dat hill . . . Beeyoutiful!"

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Mail time. If anything comes for me it appears now. Other than bills and direct marketing odes I’m no longer receiving anything. Not even a hello from the office. I spy down on the entryway from over the bannister, ducking my head if I hear the Keiger’s door.

I don't have anyone to take pity on me. Me. Not even the mailman.

Since our arrival here Elfreda has guarded her role as mail lady. All the mail for this address goes to the Keigers. Apparently we and Dr. Levine live here unzoned, ilegal immigrants from wherever.

I know the routine. Down below, her secret rite of sorting the mail completed, Elfreda re-emerges from their apartment. That means one thing. There’s something today for Purcell. How can she be so oblivious to my presence up here on the landing, watching her every marshmallow move, waiting and longing?

All by myself, I qualify as a Distressed Area. Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. But she's just heaving and fussing and playing her part, inching toward the bannister post, our letter depot. How slowly she goes. Viciously slow, cruelly slow.

You mean old lady. I'm glad I killed your doggy. At last, she places one letter on the top of the post. Elfreda taps it once in farewell, clearly distressed that she can't rip it open and consume its contents.

To save her soul from such an uncivilized act, she trots back in haste to catch the next episode of "Lust For Love." Which I myself am missing.

Their door closes. Silence. My enemy is silence. I pause another moment beside the once giant philodendron, another monument in ruins on the landing. lies in a purple, syrupy mess. It no longer offers me even the pretense of a hiding place. All of Prudence's house plants are beyond death.

The apartment is a plant morgue. They've all entered the transfiguration stage, when the flesh melts away, color gone, shape gone, texture gone. All semblance to life gone.

I ought to give them toe tags but they are beyond identification. Screw horticulture.

A low cry of hunger breaks from my lips as I bounce down the stairs.

How pathetic to be moaning over the mail. But I've been sent such a fine and dainty envelope. Even before laying hand to it I know it can't be my Regional Economist's Newsletter or another census tract synopsis from the Feds.

No, nothing ordinary comes in light blue, dainty and discreet envelopes. Perhaps it's an invitation to a party? A summons to the Young Republicans barbeque and softball game at a mansion on Long Island. The perfect size for that.

But I know this handwriting. Oh my God. Yes. Prudence. No return address on front or back. The postmark is for August 10, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Today is the 17th, how dare the Post Office dawdle for a week with my salvation. Could Prudence be inviting me to a party? In Greensboro? Is there a Young Republicans chapter there? I know

she's coming back. I mean too much to her. She can't live without me.

Back in the living room I must pause, suddenly afraid and breathless from taking the stairs two at a time. This is deja vu, standing here beside the Saarinen dining room set, the whiteness searing in summer heat, girding to read something, anything, from Prudence.

Open that envelope right now. And be careful. Don't destroy any evidence. Don't tear a fraction of whatever precious missive it contains.

I'm terrified it will crumble into dust between my fingers.

Fumble fumble, rip rip. Sounds seared into my brain.

It's a greeting card of some sort. On the front, is not that a stork? A too cheerful rendering of a dorky-looking stork, purveying a baby by its diaper. Blue and pink pastels pervade. Stork's leering. At me.

Make a wish. I wish that Prudence is writing that she's coming back. Maybe she's asking for the air fare.

Open the card. Inside, left hand page--blank. Toilet paper white. Inside, right hand page--an anonymous, commercial art script with spaces provided for adding the appropriate information, which is given in a fine Daughters of the American Revolution script. Prudence's own.

It's a

Boy!

Name

Allende Dubois Kowalski!

Born

July 6, 1983.

On the back? Blankness. Except it isn't a Hallmark.

I'm blacking out, I think. At least I'm dropping, head lolling, into a Saarinen chair.

No message. No address. No mention of me. No nothing.

God damn you to hell, Prudence Purcell. You gave him your maiden name!

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At last comes the timid tweet of the doorbell, one that I've been waiting for during these weeks of their mourning. Who's it going to be? Gottfried or Elfreda--both of them? Prepare yourself. The inquisition, the outrage, the retribution. You'll have to get a lawyer. You'll have to find another apartment. You should have bought a bullet proof vest when they were on sale and legal.

Do I have handy the Trauma Unit emergency number for Mt Sinai?

Perhaps the newspapers will run the story. The *Post* at least would love to spread it on the front page in a typically overwrought banner, ECONOMIST MURDERS DOG. Maybe with a photo of me looking like Julius Rosenberg being muscled away.

Mightn't the notoriety bring Prudence back? Later, maybe I'll make some money off this, sell the story to Home Box Office, serialize it for *Red Book*. Wonder how I look. Wish I'd had notice so I could have brushed my teeth. At least I'm wear something more than my underwear today. I just knew something's coming.

At least I've completed my running in place exercise.

It's Elfreda dressed in black. Hair in lank free fall, bosom inflating. She's filling the space of the open door. Eyes are watery pools. No more cloudless blue. Nesferatu eyes after a hunger strike.

This is my first contact with Frau Keiger since I slaughtered her dog.

"Mister Purcell, please please please. What are you doing!" The old gal huffs and puffs, fretting with the tie to her robe. Will she undo it and show me the bosom of Abraham.

It's an embarrassed, half scolding tone of voice--no sweetness today. But I say, and coolly, "Why, just my exercises, Mrs. Keiger."

Gallant of me not to add that I've been doing them everyday since we moved in here a year ago.

"Just running in place. It's part of the Canadian Air Force . . . "

" Downstairs everything is shaking. The ceiling will crack and fall on our heads. Our steins are going to topple over and break.

"Mister Purcell, you must run outside like other people."

My, she's really prepping for a stroke. Looks to me like Elfreda needs a stiff schnapps and a valium. I could use those myself.

"You don't know what it was like. No one does. There was fire in the sky. It came with the bombing. I feel killing everyone, destroying the city. I can not take this shaking. You must not. Strictly verboten!"

Elfreda has changed in the past month. As with Gottfried, I detect a bubbling near the eyeball, something cooking in the cognition.

"When we came up nothing was left. Our nice bakery was gone. The people were gone. Everything was gone. Only the fire was there. My parents were killed. My aunts and uncles, all my cousins, gone. Our wonderful Dresden was ruined."

Good for you. Like me, an inmate of hell.

"Also, Mister Purcell, my husband asked me to call and remind you about the August rent."

Storm surge voice rises from the bottom of the stairs. Herr Keiger's.

"Ya, I tink that Levine sneaked back and did it. Or maybe he hire someone to assassinate our Johann. Maybe, ya . . ." The pause is dreadful. Turns your skin into an oil slick. It's the kind of pause you imagine coming right before the world ends.

"Und even if he didn't do it, Johann would not be dead but for him. Ve could not trust him, the vay he sneaked, so ve had to wait until he was gone to go away.

"Other wise, there would have been someone in our place --someone to hear the robbers valking in and call out for them to go away. Johann would have warned us. Know vhat. That Levine

isn't going to live here much longer. He better go quick too, or he will be in big trouble . . ."

The old man's voice peaks in a manly scream. It's got hold of me, carried me off with it. A lamb in the lion's jaws.

"Ach," he storms, "if I vere Hitler, he would be the first one in the oven."

"Gottfried!"

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The engine roars to life with a rental car rattle. The ping of a taut hymen lingers in thought like the ping ping of this well oiled machine, only 24,000 miles of abuse by angry salesman and drunken Shriners.

I'm only barely shimmying in a rapidly waning nitrate tinted sunset. Nothing left now but to wave farewell to the Englischer Garten, to the summer Dacha, to the cement frogs. Goodbye apartment. Fare thee well Most Precious Blood,

No Bel Air in sight? The Keigers are still out shopping, but hurry. There's a light above me, beckoning from Kim Kim's window, a voracious venus fly trap. But I know she's safely lost in a long sentence on page 900 of *Lust In The Inchon Night*.

As a precaution I ease the car door shut. Thereby allowing no more than a perfunctory 'click' to mark its closing and the end of this monstrous chapter in my life.

Even though rented this virtually new Toyota Corolla looks damn good. Sculpted purity in white. Such an almost new car does give a man a thrill, better than an almost new woman. Only one dent, right front bumper.

The plastic trim, dashboard, controls, faux leather glow like the salvation in sacks of US aid to Ethiopia. We are such a kind, good people.

I'm sitting a medley stink of industrial strength cleaners and stale cigarette smoke only partly euthanized by air freshener. Except for that dent this car sparkles fresh out of a cellophane wrapper.

Can the excitement. Get your ass in gear. Take care or you'll get caught. Any second too.

The Japanese motor tells me its conquest of the nation is assured. Anthem of the automobile, I feel your euphoric melody.

I simply need to put it into D and it rolls. Carolina here we come. Prudence, you bitch. You knew damn well he was supposed to be Randall Peyton Purcell, Jr.

Too late. I have forgotten something. I didn't leave the rent check. Forgot to even put it on my list. Worse, I didn't write out my little confession and leave it on the bannister post in the hallway. To save poor Dr. Levine from any potential pogrom.

You can make it a quick note from some nice place in route. A picnic table beside a Dairy Queen in Dixie.

"Rent enclosed. Take everything I left. I killed Johann. Hope all goes well."

Tires crunch on 38th Street crash scene debris. Rolling further and further, it's orgasm. I can literally feel the chains breaking, tearing link by link. Better yet if I had released the emergency brake. 3254 loses its hold.

Now I'm really gaining my inner momentum. I'm rushing away from myself. Just like the rest of my countrymen are speeding away from themselves. Euphoria. Happy, frolicking folk. A circle-jerk for millions.

Unbelievable how great escape can feel. So quiet and peaceful. For me no hint of the trash cacophony of life in Long Island City.

When you've turned the corner at the end of the block you'll be a new man altogether. No more immigrants. No more shit. So turn up the air conditioner. Put on the Rolling Stones. Enjoy life when it's young.

Only remember that you haven't been behind a wheel in almost two years. In that alone I'm an American original. It's dark now and

that calls for lights on, check. Lock Doors, check. A requisite only inside New York city limits. And due diligence, check. Beware running down the elderly or worse a stray child –or dog. The last to avert a self blinding emotional breakdown. You must take better care of yourself, so fragile, so ALD.

The lit dash shows reassuring vital signs in each dial. Nothing more to do but keep it under control. Beware of all these fools on the road, an entire nation of nomads on the move and bedazzled by bennies.

Don't crash on your first day of freedom. That would be cruel. Don't let it happen. Sadly, I brought no reefer. Far too risky, a Corolla with NY State plates rolling into Dixie with a bag of Grass. No way. I've seen those movies with malignant obese-ass cops terrorizing wayfarers.

Oops. Almost ran my very first light, and right here at the corner of 38th Street and Broadway. Here beside Roger Casement's. It's a jerking, embarrassing halt. At least I'm in the right turning lane.

Actually, I'm only half way through the pedestrian crossing lane. I'm dead even in fact with the car beside me in the left lane. So, all's proper, all neat and orderly. The past falls back. BEWARE OF THE DOG sign fades from memory as it drops out of sight. Goodbye to ghost barking. Easy as that. History has died a terrible death.

SHIT It isn't possible! What are the odds? It's the Keigers!

But how many 1954 bullet gray Chevy Bel Airs are on the road. And how many Elfreda's?

Beside me the Keigers idle in their Ukrainian tractor. Elfreda sits with a sad smile fixed on the landscape of Broadway. Her dimpled elbow flabs on their window sill, which is the same height as the top of the Corolla.

Framed in the window she no more than a wind blown mass of hair and one puff ball jowl. Except her funny bone is within striking distance. If only I had a sledge hammer. I'd do a hit and run.

That's about all I dare see of her, too. Must hide. Must escape. I can't lean any further away from her than I am now, not when bound by the seat belt.

The Toyota is so low, the Bel Air so high. Even if she should glance over she might not see enough of me to know me. Change light. Damn you. CHANGE-CHANGE-CHANGE.

Can't run the light--half of Long Island City's walking across the intersection. I'd take down three Aprica baby strollers and an entire family of Colombians. Can't back up, Congresswoman Geraldine Ferrara's motorhome 'Office on Wheels' has pulled up behind me.

Don't you look in this direction, Elfreda Keiger. Look over, look down and you're dead. Keep your dumb old eyes front and center. Don't recognize my golden haired forearm, flat stomach, these Sergio Valente jeans, my tight crotch and lean thighs. I hear a scrap of German. Do I detect a hint of consternation?

I myself am petrified, can't move, can't look.

Change. Oh please Change. Swing Low Sweet Change, Amazing Change that saved a retch like me, A closer Change To Me, In the name of the father, the son, the Holy Change, Mother Mary Change it for me, A Mighty Change Is Our God--I can't escape my Protestant indoctrination. forgive me God, make it change and I will change. Promise.

It's close now. The pedestrian light switches to DON'T WALK.

Green at last. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch that elbow twitching. It's alive! A plait of gray hair licks low, tickling the lock button. Still can't make it through the intersection without getting a stint at Rikers.

Oh no. My encyclopedic creep from Roger Casement's is staggering across, waving an arm and jabbering to the New York metroplex about the Blood Purge.

"Mister Purcell? . . . Is that you . . ." Elfreda is so near she can admire my crotch in its glory.

"They destroyed 200 Synagogues . . ." Shouts the creep.

“Mister Purcell, why are you in that car? My husband asks if you are running away . . .”

“They destroyed 7,500 Jewish businesses.” He’s directly in front of me. “They murdered more than 90 rabbis. They took 30,000 young men to the concentration camps.”

Sure enough, the old lady’s grown tired of my tidy bulge. She’s scrunching down for a better view of my upper half. To be heard through my closed window she’s shouting.

“Mister Purcell . . . Do not hide yourself from me. . . “

I won’t turn to answer. I’m not hearing a word she says. What else can I do? No more smiles, out of rope.

At last Elfreda gets into full voice.

“Are you trying to run away!”

My drunk’s faltered onward, gone his own way, weeping.

Now there’s Dr. Levine crossing against the light. Except for Prudence and Allende the gang’s all here. How did he get into this mess? He doesn’t see me, he doesn’t even see the Keigers. He’s rapt in outer space. Horns blast at him as he calmly turns another page of his book.

I hear a Chevrolet heaving, dripping oil. Door opens on the driver’s side.

"Mister Purcell . . . You must pay the rent. My husband wants it now." Dr. Levine has moved on.

Step on it. Elfreda’s trails off in the distance, swallowed by the City.

Gas pedal to the floor. Corolla gives its rental-car chug. But it’s off and lurching, a \$29.95-a-day getaway. Behind me, in the rearview mirror, the Bel Air just sits at the line, undecided, left turn signal doing a heavy flashing. Hypnotic red pulses in the dark.

There in the side mirror I can see Gottfried’s grim, ashen visage, like a wrathful postage stamp. Elfreda would seem to be memorizing my license number. Behind them, in the backseat, ride the tops of their three King Kullen grocery sacks.

Gottfried is probably saying, 'Ach. Dat Mister Purcell.' He's shrugging and about to go his own inviolable way. I can't imagine him breaking any traffic rule, even to swerve from left into my right lane.

No, come on now, do not do that. Did they really do that? Yes they really did do that. To cut off the campaign bus Gottfried maneuvered the Bel Air to straddle the two lanes, cockeyed. A giant V8 pounds away behind me.

Free of the intersection they lumber on. Gottfried must be reenacting a Zane Grey posse chase. He's coming for me In a toothy monster of a chrome-grilled car maniacally flashing his brights.

They can't fully realize what they're doing. They're too old. Too addled by Allied bombing. They can't follow for long. They need to get the milk home to the refrigerator. Here on Steinway they'll turn back, give up sportingly, maybe use this detour to go on to the factory and pretend they're shopping for a new piano.

Nope. Onward they come inexorable. They tail me illegally close to my rear bumper.

Without a doubt they'll give up as soon as they see me turn onto the Grand Central. Elfreda will be terrified of the Grand Central, too much like Canadian Air force Exercises. She'll clutch Gottfried's arm in an agoraphobic episode. I know my old twat, she won't permit him down off Steinway Street. Another moment and I'll be safe.

To be double sure don't give them a turn signal. Fake out the old folks, Randy. Make it a sly quick exit onto the expressway ramp.

Whew. What a nifty maneuver that was, too. Screeching tires and all the drama of a true Film Noir chase scene. I'm so proud. Congratulations. You just swerved tight too tight for words on an embedded bottle cap.

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Safe to settle back. Have your party. You've earned one. Open a pack of Dipsy Doodles. Go for that styrofoam cooler beside you full of what a free American man needs most next to a speeding car and

a tattooed metal rock chick -delicious iced down beer. Twist-tops too for one's driving ease. . .

"Snort snort. Guess who, Urandy. Knock knock. It's me that who."

The surprise party of a lifetime. Thoughts leave me. I'm momentarily blacking out. Extremely dangerous on the Grand Central.

A Kim Kim kiddy porn show has just flickered up in my rear view mirror. It's coming to me live from the obscurity of the back seat. Dim, a talking specter. Outline in gray, black backdrop. Cars and trucks zooming after me, their lights are white blurs. The world framed, reduced to the shape and size of, a rear view mirror.

"See, I come too, you big bad guy." Triple long lashes on double dip mascara, chunky chip eyes with extra schlock, "I would rike a dericious beer too." Has Kim Kim learned telepathy?

She strikes without hesitation. Going for my right ear. Scented breath oozes down my jaw bone. Sharp little teeth go nibbling on my ear. Her physical essence is an icecycle spear chucked down my spine. Its ice age tip leaving a wintry wet spot on the nape of my neck. The moment's frozen in time, in the deep freeze forever of Randal Peyton Purcell.

Kim Kim has taken possession of my view mirror. Almost fills it. Not quite. Beyond her merry Buddha grin-on-a-moon face, her wee fist waving a clutch of travel brochures, I do notice something else.

Unmistakably, a 1954 Chevrolet swings in goosestep choreography from the ramp onto the Grand Central. Its turn signal blinks a solemn announcement. Left forgotten on high beam its insufferable, remorseless headlights seer like owl eyes onto a terrified mouse. Me.

Even from a few car lengths ahead I see behind me the hood ornament emitting super gamma rays. Under Parkway lighting I'm seeing a vengeful SS ornamental dagger glinting at me from the depths of the car's 100% steel body. . .

"Peepee time," croons the dark blob of the immigrant woman.

Tearing out from my throat, a first true scream of my lifetime. It's going on and on. I imagine it's one of the loudest screams in the history of Long Island City. Tumult to make me drop my beer in my lap.

My scream concludes with an awesome Janice Joplin vocal riff. The ice cold beer seeping through my jeans is starting to trickle into my asshole.

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God bress America, Rand that I Rove, stand beside her and guide her...

I could turn the radio on again, but it doesn't help. The car radio has negligible effect on her noise level. Kim Kim is my very own Walkman. Her delirious sound bites romp along mile after mile.

She has been very loud. Rolling around all evening in the backseat, exclaiming in shrieks at everything we pass, flopping against one window then rolling to the other, frequently pressing her small face to the rear window so that lipstick streaks and grubby paw prints mar the retreating scenery of I-95.

In this late night hour her routine changes marginally. She's not moving as much, mainly hovering at my shoulder, her cheek near mine, one hand trustingly tugging at my left shoulder.

Dashboard lights mute the car interior. My hands are a spaceship green. When headlights catch at us from across the median strip we flicker, the two of us, like characters in an old newsreel. Then, without intending to, I see her profile in the corner of my eye. My companion of the highway. How can her mouth hang open in perpetual amazement?

"Where are the rights? Urandy?" She pipes. "Why aren't there any rights. Where are all the people? Is this big desert. Are we in Araska?"

She jabs a hand in some direction. "What is that, Urandy. Rook."

Kim Kim waves vaguely at something that has already disappeared, antediluvian, lost irrefutably from the imagination.

"How do you know where we are?" she purrs in my ear, taking a little lick or tender nip now and then. My ear has never been so clean, after nearly five hours of moistening. It feels swollen, transformed, minus any speck of wax it's an enflamed love orifice dripping bacteria.

At least she no longer makes those pathetic efforts to crawl up front. That first attempt, on the Tri-Boro Bridge, almost got us killed when I swerved in terror as she kicked a leg in front of my face.

"Stop and move that thing, please." She pouts, repeatedly. The thing is the cooler laden with ice and Blatz.

For the first hundred miles or so, it was, "Ret me come up front. We can have more fun. We can pray. I would see better. Please move the cooler. I Ret you pet one hot pussy."

I'm most thankful for the cooler. Just past Patterson, she unbuttoned my shirt from behind and began rolling my nipples under her palms. How many people die on the Interstate each year in the throes of stifled orgasm?

That first time I knocked her with my elbow flat onto the back seat.

"Oh." she screamed mid the tears. "You don't rove me."

Clearly, from the way she occasionally toys with the styrofoam lid to the cooler and the way she hands me a beer, tentatively, with barely concealed animosity, she regards the cooler and its contents with hatred.

Well, Kim Kim, you and I both would like to ditch something along the side of this road.

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Going through Baltimore I stopped for gas and to ask about recent murder stats. Telling her that if she was very good I'd buy her watery coffee, microwave zapped ham and cheese sandwich and a

stale Pay Day. That worked, at the gas station she hopped out eagerly.

But after feeding time at the zoo, to quiet her-- one ham and cheese sandwich made a week ago in Gary, one stale Baby Ruth, plus lots and lots of fake spring water-- instead of letting her inside I yank her around and get in alone. I slam on the master lock. No good, she pops into the backseat.

Jerking myself out I run around and pull her forcibly from the Toyota. But again, before I get to the lock she's back in her place.

"Stop sirry dance, G.I. Joe. I must peepee. Kiddy proof not work on this stupid jalopy." A row of employees and customers have come to watch us, their censorious countenances smearing the glass of the Git-n-Go.

Still, I remain determined and we're playing more ring around the Corolla racing for doors and locks. This actually seems to be one of Kim Kim's preferred games. At last I'm surrendering to her.

Back on the Interstate Kim Kim claps her hands in glee. "That was good time, Urandy. Ret's do it again. I raugh and raugh. Don't be so mad at me. I promise not to carr you Joe again."

That was when she began singing "*Home on the Range*." She hasn't stopped since then. She's sung it all the way down New Jersey.

"Can we stop at this prace?" she begs, running a finger around my bare chest. "It would be so nice. Much better then rast stop. See, they got arr this there. I would rike it so much?"

For once Urandy has been a stern master. Other than 'Shut up,' 'Get back.' 'Give me a beer,' I've not said a word to her.

"Urandy? Why do you try to go away without me? I saw you with the car this morning. I knew you were being bad. I wait tirr you go back in your house then I run rike a rittre mouse and hide in your car. Oh, it was soooooo cute the way Kim Kim run and hide.

"Don't be mean, Urandy. Prease move the coorer."

Near Washington, she made her final effort, right in the middle of the last big bang of homeward bound bureaucracy. She took off her

cut-off jeans and panties, despite my gruffest orders to the contrary.

Her naked butt smacks on the warm vinyl. Her second set of lips kiss as she moves. Just hope she doesn't get fecal matter on the seat. The rental car company would charge extra for that.

Somehow, in our twilight's last gleaming, she's wedging herself down onto the backseat floor, knees and shoulders jab my kidneys through the backrest. From there she manages to snake an arm around the gearshift, up between the two front seats.

She can just stretch far enough, straining through her giggles, to get a hand onto my crotch. She massages my parts where they lodge in the too-tight Sergio Valentés.

"I know what that is," she hiccups. "Ret me rick it. Teeheehee."

For once, today at least, a day when I can't claim to have made many wise decisions, I did come up with something smart. I'm permitting her the treat of an Easter egg hunt.

It is an oddly cheap thrill. Creeping through heavy, sworn-to-secrecy, bar association traffic. Chevy Chase is at hand, nice name, uninteresting place. A naked oriental woman in the backseat of a Corolla breathes heavily while stroking the balls of a New York City regional economist.

I clear my throat to say, "You're missing our nation's Capitol, Kim Kim. Look at that."

"Oh oh oh." It is enough. In a flash she forgets all about her front seat inflated sex doll, bobbing back to the windows to stare sincerely at the never-ending stream of nothing, the same old I-95 landscape.

"Oh it is soooo wonderfur."

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In the dark, in the country, the lights of Richmond already dim behind us. She's feeling the isolation, the strangeness of hurtling through a strange space. I can pity her a little for that.

I too feel strange here, I-95 unwinding before us like a giant-screen video game, the car a darkened living room. At the moment, tailing in the distance behind us there is but a single pair of lights. Two frail white eyes back there, peering at us as we run. Who are they?

"Sure you need to go pee pee," I cajoled her when we were still in New Jersey. "We can stop up here along the road and you can run down the little hill to the Interstate fence. Won't that be fun. You just sit in the weeds down there. Take your time. Count the stars." Nothing doing.

What I'll do if I feel brave enough to pull over? Act like I want a blow job in the front seat, move the cooler and then when she's bent over my lap club her hard with a beer can. I'll push her out onto the road for a semi to maul. I'll be free of a pain in the ass and my accomplice in crime. After all there are dead dogs all along the Interstate.

Of course, now it's me suffering the pains of the damned with a full-to-bursting bladder. I oughtn't to have begun the beer. Yet how could anyone handle all this without some comfort?

The turn off from I - 95 to I - 40 can't be too far down the road. And at that juncture there should be a very first heart-throbbing sign for Greensboro.

Greensboro has become my promised land. I do need Greensboro, as badly as I need to take a piss. What a shame the two needs work against each other.

Verily, verily, stopping it not part of arriving. And what to do with Kim Kim? The dilemma nags at me, persistent as her tongue in my ear.

Also, I have a terrible feeling that in my recent past I've missed a very major interchange in life. Perhaps too many beers? This begins not to look like an Interstate.

"Prease oh prease, peepee about to run." I can not take her much further. Where is Greensboro! Already, her presence seems

somehow sacrilegious. Prudence and Al have become religious reliquary wiggling on the dashboard.

Kim Kim might be urinating right now in the back seat. I will soon be urinating in the front seat.

What to do? No more struggling with a 90 pound woman in public even in the night. No trying to drag her out of the backseat by the hair, screaming. None of that. Strangle her? I am a killer.

"You kirred their bad doggy, didn't you. Good. The ord peopre chase you for that. They want to kirr you. Kim Kim will fight them by your side."

Crime breeds crime. Yes, I have an inkling now of how the criminal mind works, feeding on its own atrocities like road kill.

"Don't worry, Urandy. They are not there for a rong time. Maybe they dead. Maybe they road zombies."

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Low and peaceful land of Virginia, tobacco country, the economic birthright of the nation, feudal and sweet smelling, sensuous and alien. Darkness abounds. This sign for an up-coming backwoods Gas and Food rural station of the cross, will have to be it. Can't roll on forever. Much as we all want to. Although stopping is spending and we all are conditioned to like that too.

Driving for hours on an Interstate you begin to wonder if you can really stop. Have I lost the ability to slow down, the freedom to signal, break and exit. How many people are trapped on these roads unable to extricate themselves?

"We stop now?" Kim Kim bounces merrily in the backseat. "I wirr take a coke and a candy bar. We wirr sreep here? In a Horiday Inn? I reary want to sreep in a Horiday Inn.

"Arways I dream about eating McDonalds hamburgers. Any gorden arches? Can we buy rots of postcards? I need tourist brochures."

After all we do break the spell of the Interstate. As easily as lifting the foot off the accelerator. I'm angling off trajectory, off the roadway, coasting up the dark and empty ramp.

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Unlike Kim Kim, I really like this place. It's authentic. no nonsense, an honest to God old-timey truck stop. They named it "The June & Johnny." Good name but unfortunately it's a loathsome dump, even the condom dispenser is repellent.

At least this men room, a classic one-holer, does have a decent door on it with a lock. Any truck stop worth its salt will have such a cubicle, door and lock.

Unlike Stuckey's or Howard Johnson's, the kind of places Kim Kim dreams about, here you could shit alone in peace and quiet. I would if only I could.

My constipation is now alarming. I've had it for more than 33 1/2 hours. My all time record. I must be backed up to the tonsils.

Again the door shakes. Ask not for whom the door shakes, it shakes for thee. The knob rolls frantically as Kim Kim yanks at it from the other side.

"Urandy, are you in there? Ret me in." She's beginning to sound distraught. Maybe where the cold shoulder failed, starvation is succeeding?

Unfortunately, what with the door shaking on its hinges and Kim Kim crying "Hey in there, give me quarter. I want coke." I have a sinking feeling that silence, even hunger, may not be enough for me to take a dump let alone pass her out of my life.

"Urandy, hurry up. You want a spoon." Tee hee hee. "They got peanuts in sacks in a machine. May I have a peanut." Breaks your heart.

Too bad their Graffiti's gone out of fashion. No more than Pioneer doggerel, a few caveman depictions. No, no one asking to

meet a queer. No deviations from nature permitted in The June & Johnny's.

Ah, but here's the bit of esoterica. It's there below the empty toilet paper dispenser. Seems to be a down-home advertisement, scribbled in ink.

Hello Truckers
 Tired of choking your chicken
 Try the Taj Mahal Message Parlor
 You'll be glad you did
 We blow you mind with an AK-47
 Reasonable rates
 We're behind the tires

I'm impressed. It never ceases to amaze me how when a man of desperate reason comes down from the lonesome reaches of science and art, he can still find salvation in the crudest of places.

For now I shall give up shitting. I fear I shall never shit again.

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Out back of the 'tars', as the local expression goes, the path to this Taj Mahal begins in tall weeds and leads through a stark automotive parts graveyard. In passage I spy a tire iron in the detritus.

Casually I'm stooping to pick it up. Holding it close to my thigh. On the side from where Kim Kim hangs like the tumor that she is.

Strange mechanical shapes form from out the dimness. One must be the Taj Mahal. There, across an open stretch of barren crab grass. It's a double wide mobile home, looking to be 90 feet long. Although I know much, I don't know a thing about mobile homes. Nor do I wish to.

The one hint of life is the weak-tea glow behind the frosted glass in the front door and the long thin vertical flames, like Jedi blades,

marking where the drapes inside are pulled almost tight. A lone, lorn carriage lamp, screwed cockeyed over the front steps, sports the lowest bulb on offer at the local Walmarts.

But enough for me to make out four signs custom printed on aluminum plaques and nailed to the mobile home wall.

Attention, No Checks Or Cash Kept On these Premises

Attention, No checks or cards accepted

Attention, Leave Guns and Knives At Reception

And "Ring Bell." I ring bell.

From outside the mobile home this sounds exactly like a nail dropping into an empty can.

"What are we doing, Urandy?" whines Kim Kim. Women have a sixth sense for infidelity. She must be smelling it like a polecat's asshole. Like mobile homes I know nothing about polecats. Just practicing out southern jargon for when I arrive in Greensboro.

Bell's a timid ting-a-ling. Mr. Keiger would sneer at such a puny doorbell.

"Ret's not go in there. I have bad feerings. Ret's go drink cokes." Her tone is changing from angry to alarmed.

Better idea, let's go snort coke. I smoothly set the tire iron down to rest against the mobile home. On reserve.

This mobile home I notice is far from new. Weathered hide and lots of large dents suggesting it's been rolled in a Kansas twister or two.

Skin's telling me I'm being spied on through the peephole in the door. A muffled curse follows. An indignant scrambling. Door latch pops. The Taj Mahal is awake for business.

Door's opening wide enough for us to slip in. It slams tight behind us. Makes your ears pop. Feels like I just got vacuum packed.

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This tall weird woman is maybe more Indian than Mexican. Face is Mexican but red skinned like a squaw's. We are alone, the three of us, in waiting room décor that would make a queer cop pass out.

Woman offers no invitation to sit. Guess she isn't the Taj Mahal's director of hospitality.

"She along to hold your hand, or what . . ." Sharp chin takes a jab at poor dear Kim Kim. Too bad it's not a knock out.

"You want my business or don't you. Looks like you could use some." I say raising my voice to take command.

"Sure, do you know where you are?" The woman talks out of the side of her mouth, a jagged scar creasing the other half. Maybe it was a tribal initiation, or a wreck with a semi.

Adding, "Ordinarily we don't do kinky.

She's in her ultimate 40s, hatchet faced, broken glass eyes, too much lipstick, too much mascara, too much eye liner. Too skinny. No tits. Nothing going for her. I bet she's a mechanic's wife.

"I charge triple for kinky."

She's got Karen Carpenter playing on the muzak. Another tone deaf anthem for the anorexic living dead.

Mechanic wife's giving me the bitter once over. No translation needed. 'Don't fuck with me, you prick, or I'll kick your balls back to Richmond.'

Hatchet faced woman hugs ugly brown bathrobe, hugs it tight. That's for warmth I assume, not modesty. The Taj is cold as a pop cooler.

Actually, it's the living room of what must be a typical mobile home—worn motel furniture, gold shag carpet, crystal lamps dripping gold chains adding more low watt lighting for the blind making everything a puss colored amber.

This has familiarity with Kim Kim's apartment in Long Island City. She should feel right at home.

Can anything be bleaker in America than a hopeless mobile home living room at midnight?

More signs covering part of an entire wall. "No Guns, No knives, No Radio Playing Allowed, Thank You For Smoking & Supporting Carolina Agriculture, No Joints Permitted Unless you Share." Cute.

"Too bad you can't tell time," drawls the mechanic's wife, a real honest-to-god Appalachian springtime twang. Aaron Copeland alive. She's giving me the evil eye while staring at Kim Kim with sisterly compassion.

"OK, what's your deal," I'm saying, not smiling. This broad's nettling me.

"This is not nice, Urandy. You are sooooooo bad." The first tears are plopping off Kim Kim's fake eyelashes.

"She," I jerk my head toward Kim Kim, "Stays here and waits. So, I better get a choice." This I give straight to the ugly broad's face, making it clear I don't want her.

Mechanic's wife bellows a tired sneer, "Come on out, honey buns. He say's he wants a choice."

To me she says, "That's \$35 cash up front. No extras, no refunds neither."

Scarred bitch takes off her robe, tosses it on the sofa. I can't help laughing. She flips me the bird.

Her suit's a Barnum & Bailey reject, the magenta halter top spattered by rows of rhinestones, mostly absent, wrinkles up like an old elephant's butt.

Cheesecloth pantaloons, more magenta, more rhinestones, sag in all the wrong places, particularly where her ass should be. On her feet make-believe Hollywood Sinbad slippers. Hardly a Scheherazade.

That paunch isn't going to jiggle ever again. She's got at least four kids. Can't hide the cheap Caesareans plus a skein of stretch marks looking like U.S. production graphs. For sure she's a faltering function factor on the North Carolina disadvantaged ethnic work force statistics.

Woman knuckles back a lock of stray black hair. She knows she's no jewel. That's a taunting eye she's got trained on me.

Kim Kim sobs away in the corner. Makeup melting in a water slide of tears. Globbs of makeup quiver from her chin. She's started a weepy rocking on the sofa while singing "Jesus loves me yes I know" in desolate apprehension. I feel nothing.

But a girl now peeks sleepily around the corner from the hall. You could hear her coming, the tacky telltale clink these tin cans make. She arrives in an identical costume. dancing girl in magenta and spent sequins, stepping out from a Cecil B. De Mille Biblical flick.

"Hey, what the fuck time is it." she grumbles, very sleepy, very grumpy. "Hey, what the fuck that Ken doll doing in here? Hey, what the fuck that chink girl doing' in here. Hey, what the fuck, Juanita, it's your turn."

This is an improvement at least. She's slight, short and neat, almost delicate. She's a compact little person, sinewy but well proportioned. No makeup, doesn't need any with a pert heart-shaped face, long natural lashes.

True, she's on the skinny side and has bad skin—sallow to greenish with a few dull blemishes and a quarter size acne patch on one cheek.

But no matter, the features are acceptable, especially her nose. Best of all this girl has short, blonde hair, big green eyes that go with her skin color. She's got perky standing-at-attention tits, diminutive but comely.

With better light and a good fag haircut she'd be Jodi Foster.

"I want her." Order I, flourishing cash.

"Hey what the fuck," The young one yawns.

To me Kim Kim gurgles, "I don't rike you, Urandy." She glares hurt at me, Korean Armageddon adorned with flecks of spittle from the corners of her plum daubed lips. Will I miss her? No.

"Hey, what the fuck," groans the chosen one giving me the finger and a furious shake of the burnt out sequins.

That's my girl, made testy on an excess of sugar. No dietician or orthodontist would dare come near her unless she were in shackles.

"You kirr a nice doggie. Evir man, you!"

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In its former life, the Taj Mahal must have been a traveling rural health clinic. This one-time examination cell where my package awaits is fitted up with a sink, toilet, counter space, even a resuscitation kit. Maybe the Taj kept it in case a senior stops ticking overcome by the thrill of an orgasm 30 years on.

Girl's no more than 18. If that. Probably not that. 17 or 16. Not 15, can't be. Does this joint ever get raided? Would the troopers card this girl?

"You are the legal age for this." I'm asking.

"That's for me to know and you to guess."

"Now strip and put your clothes on that chair. Come on, make it quick. Put this towel on." I pick up my clothes for deposit on said customer convenience chair, the grey tubular kind, folding. She's yawning even as she renders more commands.

"Hey, God damn it, keep your towel on till I tell you otherwise. I didn't say to drop it."

The girl takes a white paper roll and spreads it expertly down the table. She unsnaps the halter top. One quick hip hop and she's on it flat to her stomach. Halter top clutched firmly to her chest.

"First, you massage me," For sure she's a commanding little head. With a splash of Shalimar she'd pass well enough for another Manhattan secretary--rather reminds me of my own air head back home.

I'm fumbling with her back, trying not to laugh. This is about as sexy as ringing out your own underwear. Her skin's waxy. I tug half heartedly at her pantaloons.

Between yawns, she says, "Un-unh, that ain't part of the package." She sits up, fastens halter top, gets back on feet.

"Now you can take off the towel. Put it in the hamper there." The girl's busy at the sink, washing her hands.

“Lie down, on your back.” Evidently her script is timed. Perhaps this is a franchise outlet in a sprawling chain of coast to coast Taj Mahal Jerk Off Shops.

I'm naked, and she doesn't even give me a glance. A glance ought to be part of the 'package.' A fit man in his prime likes to be admired, just a little.

Underage Girl's pulling out another clean towel, opening a jar of corn starch. It isn't easy trying to lie down gracefully--'on your back' as ordered--and not tear the paper roll. Girl's giving the room a quick blast of Lysol. What a live wire.

Underage Girl comes back from sink, impassive mouth, sleep drugged eyes. She spreads the towel over my stomach. All very hygienic and practical--don't want to get our tum-tum sticky with cum-cum do we.

She's smearing dabs of corn starch on her palms. Either she's humming something monotonous, under her breath, or they have a problem with the muzak system. It's her, *9 to 5*.

Ironically, through all this I'm beginning to get a little upset at not putting up an erection. When all is said and done, I would like to be-able to show her all six and 1/4 inches. I've seen the statistics. That's above the norm. I've measured, approximately.

Do the truck drivers really get off on this? Do they snort? I don't feel like snorting. Am I too cerebral? Are they bigger?

Without more ado, she takes hold. I can't help wincing. I'm a noodle lost in a Better Homes & Garden recipe for Fettuccine Alfredo. Obviously, I should have inquired in detail about the 'package.' No foreplay. She starts up in high gear, an oil derrick run amuck.

Wonder if they have a training course at headquarters, probably involves changing flats on Desotos. Alright, Randy, let it go. Don't let this phase you. You are here for one purpose, and so what if orgasm isn't it. Keep your thoughts on the smart end, not the stupid means.

For such humiliation Kim Kim better be sobbing her heart out in the waiting room. If not it's the tire iron for her. Next stop for my

aging Korean paramour will be the nearest Bus Depot--buy her a ticket for the Port Authority, give her some spending money so if she gets mugged there they won't kill her for having nothing. Stuff her on board by then her flat head made flatter.

For me, on to Greensboro. My land of milk and honey. Oz. Holy Grail. Al. Brentwood.

The girl's pulling away half heartedly on loose skin. Looking up, I catch a wandering glint in her eye, an eye not quite so dull as a moment before. It's directed somewhere else in the room--like toward the chair where my clothes are. Guess she hasn't hand many designer men in here.

Stare all you want, you hick runt. You sure as hell won't be getting a tip. Embarrassment gone, this is getting to be very irritating. Come on girl, do something interesting or give up.

Chimes tinkle in the hallway. That's their doorbell. Some bull-necked trucker just stormed in with a beer bottle hard on.

My girl's hand goes like a Jack hammer for 10 seconds. Even while she manages at the same time to check her Timex. My time must be trickling to an abysmal end. Good.

A thin crackle of conversation reaches us, from out beyond the closed door, from down the hall in the waiting room.

"We gonna get anywhere down there?" her automaton head jerks the question corn starched with derision.

Randy, do not keep thinking 'worm'. Maybe 'Oscar Meyer' instead, somewhat firmer? Maybe a stale pecan log roll from some desolate way station on the Santa Fe Trail.

Drat, I'm conjuring up an old folks home instead. Penile pumps and corrupted prostates.

What a stupid question from this child. Obviously we aren't--and we won't, never. And it's her fault. Ask Prudence. Ask Kim Kim. Ask my secretaries. They don't have any complaints. This dirt ball wouldn't know which end was up if someone didn't tell her.

I mumble, indifferently as I can, not really saying anything, giving her tit for tat. Making sure she knows I don't give a fuck about her

or this farm-club fumble bumble House. For the first time she's looking down. Maybe she's getting interested after all? Sorry, too late, although about time.

"Hey what the fuck. You know you got a dawg drawn on your pecker?"

This real voice of hers, no more recording, is live from the throat of someone just pulling off I-95, road drunk, mildly hallucinogenic, mowing down a tour bus crowd of senior citizens. Her country hill talk rolls in a lilt.

Reaching us from beyond there's a rough commotion in the hall. The mobile home vibrates like a Jew's harp. Acoustical tile ceiling looks ready to fall.

"Yep, ain't that the berries," the girl looks at the closed door same as she's been looking at my dick. Her eyes so droopy they look drugged.

"That's what I figured. We got someone who can't read no trespassing. You know it for when the floor buckles."

I'm rising up on my elbows curious looking myself toward the reconstituted wood pulp door with a knuckle imprint in it.

Something heavy and purposeful moves out there. Her hand stops, At last. But tightens its grip. She's got her head and my 'head' both pointed toward the door. I've got an important question to ask but it's already forgotten—maybe better reserved for their toll free complaint number.

I'm looking door wards myself, neck raised a foot off the paper. Kim Kim probably just had a nervous breakdown in the waiting room. Or she passed out from hunger and grief? I for one, my dear, don't give a damn. Or however it goes.

Sounds like someone's gagging in the hall—do engorged truckers gag. Door's given a violent shake. Something out there snorts. An impatient trucker without doubt would snort. I hope his penis explodes.

Our door opens an inch. It holds that way. We're being spied on. Fine, we're a torrid scene of passion for sure. The door bangs back full force against the wall.

"Ach, so der you are!"

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"Hey, what the fuck." shouts the girl. "One at a time, God damn it. One at a time."

But Gottfried's luminous yellow eyes have fixed on us like the wrath of God--on me, the girl, the brightly lit room. The stout old soldier stands ramrod straight, bushy gray hair running wild, arms flaying in the narrow doorway. Luger on one hand, road map in another. What a great character actor.

I'm not moving. Gottfried's not moving. The girl's not moving.

The head of my penis has caught Gottfried's eye. His face contorts, slowly, terribly. One powerful, Russian-physical of a finger points at arms length, directing the attention of the universe to judge my naked Corona for itself.

"Jew." Hisses the old man in injured astonishment. "So it is you who murdered our Johann Sebastian Bark."

Gottfried raves. He shakes his fist. Spittle flies like hot broth through the frosted air of the Taj Mahal. He stomps his foot.

Goose stepping into the room, fiery eyes wander to the girl, the belly dancing costume, back to the head of my cock. I'm totally immobilized, stunned, stung to the printout of my being.

"Killer. Cheater. You owe us the rent." To his words an unlit cigarette jerks between his lips up and down drumming along with my dick.

His indignation reverberates inside the mobile home--until you've heard such indignation in the night, in a mobile home, you'd never guess the full horror of it. Herr Keiger takes another step, menacing us with the map, gun hanging loose at his side.

"You people don't never get enough do you. You ruin Germany for us. Half de Russians is Jews. You are vhy they beat us. Half de Americans is Jews. You are vhy they give us only de Spam. Ya, you did that too.

"You take our money in your banks. You make our babies cold. Den you take away our sons and kill our dogs. You sneak to our only son und vhisper to his ear. Ya, you make him marry a Jew. Ya, ya, I know. You make Gottfried Jr. marry a Jew."

Delirious, he pauses, face a red cabbage. Strange, he's no longer staring at me or my parts. In fact, I notice suddenly that the offending piece of skin is no longer firmly in the grip of fate.

"Nazi," I peep. He stares at me in surprise..

"Vat you mean. I never in de Party. I vote for Hindenburg, ya dat so!"

But Gottfried Senior and I are now both staring together. It's the girl's black gun holding us spellbound. That is the biggest, meanest gun I have ever seen. The barrel points directly at the old man's barrel chest. Which makes me somewhat giddy, almost giggly.

"Drop it or you're dead." Without hesitation the gun clatters to the floor. Gottfried must have been some brave soldier.

Where's Elfreda, I'd like to know--swapping recipes with Juanita? We should all be in here looking at the dog on my dick, at the gun, and singing "Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun."

I'm falling off the physical therapy table. This white trash girl kicks me off with a be-tasseled slipper. I've landed down low gagging on the mushrooming dust rising from a knee deep shag.

Still on my back too with a sequin in my mouth. The one-time physical therapy room spins. Mobile home is trembling in after shocks.

"Don't you move, old timer. You're a dead mother fucker if you do." The voice seems to float out of the gun, deadly and killing me softly, girlish. It isn't sleepy or mechanical anymore. It's pure sex.

Calm yourself, Randy. Acid flashes might be fatal. I myself am lying still as a corpse between them, not knowing who to look at, which one to dread the most.

Gottfried's gone stiff in place, snarl riveted to his mouth, a dribble working down his stubbly chin. He's thrust both arms up above his head, locked behind. Guess he's experienced at this. For me, however, it is my first surrender.

Which probably explains why of a sudden I'm throbbing so painfully erect. Up at my fullest extent. The girl's face has also changed. She's not sullen. She's not dumb. Nothing secretarial at all. She's absolutely glowing with energy, almost angelic.

"Hey you," she says, meaning me I guess. "I like the shape of that billfold you got. Bet you got wheels to go with it, right?"

I nod, prostrate in the shag, fascinated by the jerking of her mouth, a tough yet oddly sweet mouth.

My penis is also nodding, merrily, spasmodically saluting the acoustical tiles.

"OK then, get up and skip over to fetch me that nice fat billfold and them sweet little car keys of yours. Act out of turn, I'll blow that hippity hoppity pecker off you, comprendez?"

"Ya, shoot him." rasps Gottfried, nostrils flaring.

"Shut up." And the girl cocks the trigger. "Hand 'em over real sweet. You're a good boy. Now you pick up that stupid looking gun and drop it in the toilet. I want to hear a real splash too.

"Get this wet back's wallet for me. How much?"

I'm counting fast, not easy with tears in one's eyes.

"200 . . . ma'am."

"Don't ever call me ma'am. You old enough to be my daddy."

"Dat is our vacation money," interjects Gottfried.

"There's an ATM in the Johnny & June, don't get your nuts in a cracker, geezer. Now both of you, take a hike down that hall. Move it. Trot damn it."

I'm stuck standing in disbelief, still too out of it to think. Something cold, round and very hard pokes me in the vertebrae.

"Hell no, stupid." she yells at me. "We don't got time for no clothes."

Gottfried turns, head high, hands still locked above his head. We march abreast down the hall, which is a tight squeeze for sure. Down the hall means taking about four giant steps, that's all. These mobile homes aren't heroic.

But it's all I need to wake up. No more hard on. No more illusions. I'm sweating and tasting fear strong as a second-hand roach in the beer.

We emerge into the waiting room. "Herro Urandy," sniffs Kim Kim between chews of something that has made her very happy. There's a bottle of coke cradled between her thighs. Appears that the bitter wife has been sharing her lunch pail.

Glad no one has a snapshot of this waiting room scene--me buck naked, a girl in a belly dancer's costume holding a gun to my back, Gottfried Keiger at attention beside the Christmas decorations, hateful old eyes taking in everything, and Kim Kim thigh to thigh with the bitter wife on the franchise couch.

An employment form cradles in her lap. Pencil twig protrudes between her stubby plump fingers.

Bitter wife doesn't even bother looking up at us.

"Cash is in the drawer," she tells the girl.

"Thanks, Juanita. Hope ya don't mind if I take it all." The girl moves a step, gun eases away. Guess I'm left with a quarter-size ring mark in my skin.

"Take it and run, honey. Save me the trouble of fudging accounts."

KA-BOOM.

The mobile home gets blasted by an earthquake. We're all rolling in another twister. It's Pompeii all over again.

I'm diving. Falling blind. Hitting the floor going 70, ears splitting, guts duck quacking. It's all lava and ash.

"Told you not to move, immigrant. You got that old timers disease or something?"

Gottfried has taken refuge too on the carpet next to me. I see him at eye level.

"Jew." he whispers, not missing an opportunity. He aspirates so fiercely the shag's an amber wave. "Ve get you yet." I'm so close to him I can smell the Big Mac on his breath.

I sneeze. "Gesundheit" says Gottfried. He was certainly raised well. Kim Kim stops squealing. Juanita's still laughing, a real hog laugh from the couch.

"Good Lord, honey," she sputters, "Your College Joe took a dump on hisself."

I wouldn't know what the dumb bitch meant if it weren't for the loathsome sensation I'm having of a giant mayonnaise jar spilling its guts down the back of my legs.

A groan of dismay escapes my lips before I can check it. Evidently my plug shot out at last. I've spilled, am still spilling, a few days worth of constipation.

"Oh quit your whinin' what's-your-name. Looks to me like you were needing to go anyway," drawls the girl. "Just wanted to show you boys I can shoot. So look real good at that sign up there."

We look.

A blistering, smoking hole has appeared in the VIRGINIA THANKS YOU FOR SMOKING sign, knocking out, dead center, the last I in VIRGINIA.

"As I was saying," continues the mechanic's wife to Kim Kim. "Don't worry none about no social security number. You go ahead and fill it out best you can, those dummies at headquarters just want something to file, that's all."

She's pointing at the employment form. Kim Kim smiles for all she's worth through her tears and finishes her banana in one gulp. I've seen her do that often enough.

"Don't got time for you to wipe off, friend," the girl nudges me with a dancing slipper. "So pick yourself up as you is and head out that front door. I'm right behind you. Don't drop them keys or that billfold neither. Get any shit on me and you're dead."

Everyone's in motion. I'm climbing dizzily to my feet. Kim Kim's brushing crumbs off her lap. Bitter wife rummages through the cloak closet. Gottfried's riddling me with lethal glares, on his knees and from behind the imitation leather armchair.

"Hun, I ain't got a forwarding address for you. How'm I suppose to get your last paycheck to you?"

"Don't worry none, Jaunita. I'll do fine. You keep it." This is like homecoming at a Penn sorority. They're hugging no less. Leaving me to drip unattended in the shag.

Gun's back in place, hot barrel sizzling a piece of my bare skin. The girl's a grim tinkle of Turkish beads.

"Sorry 'bout the costume, Juanita. And the carpet," she says, voice coming over my shoulder. "You be sure to give them kids of yours a kiss from me, OK?"

"Don't you worry, I got another suit in there somewheres," Juanita's head is inside the closet, neck cords straining, about to bawl, "She's such a tiny thing, though, don't suppose it'll fit worth a damn."

Meanwhile, Gottfried's not giving up. German growls fill the trailer home.

"Now hear this old fart," says the girl. "I 'bout had enough of you. We goin', this squirrel bait and me. You stick your ugly face out that door and you are dead meat. Understand English?"

"Ya ya ya. Go. But leave the Jew to us."

"Sorry. Hate to spoil your fun, but I need a driver."

A tickle of air on my shoulder blades. That's a laugh. She's laughing?

"Bye youngun', I'll miss you . . ."

"See ya, Juanita. . ."

"Goodbye Urandy . . . Uh oh. You make poop. Bad Boy. You Stink."

"Auf Wiedersehen, Mr. Purcell . . ."

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In a flash of the mobile home aluminum door we are outside. The world revolves faster than I can follow, real photo montage. No more dimmed cheesy lighting. No more croon of overworked air conditioning. No more musk oil, corn starch and underarm deodorant. No more sticky surfaces.

I knock over every geranium pot stumbling down the steps.

“Damn you squirrel-butt, Juanita worked real hard to get those growing. You best drive better than you can run.” The barrel pushes viciously into me.

The night steams on my skin. It is inferno hot. Stumbling out I trip on the tire iron. OW AH OW.

“Shut up, or I’ll leave you for the immigrant. You are the sorriest wimp ever.”

The grass scorches. AH OW AHFFF. A set of claws digs into the flesh over my left kidney, grabs and holds fast. I’m biting my lip not to scream. Darkness closes in tight around us.

"No jokes. Play it smart. Walk fast, don’t run, and straight for your car."

That means an eternity of stake-sharp crab grass. I’m moving mechanically trying to look where I’m stepping, trying to come up with some idea, some thought. Gun nozzle bores further into my back. Claws sink deeper and deeper.

I fear this is my martyrdom. Will they beatify me ?
Maybe carry me in plaster under a canopy through wretched Sicilian streets my suffering for the throng to adore.

Behind us, the mobile home sits quiet, nice and easy as the old homestead at midnight. The trees at the back hum with cicadas. At my heels, the girl moves cat like, cat in heat, cat on a hot tin roof. Ah Ah Ah Ouch.

“Shut up.” I can feel how she tenses against the darkness, alert to any movement, any sound.

My legs sting. Mosquitos are attacking me. Something sharp lodges in my right instep. The sweat pours, slicks me down from head to foot. I'm alive in boiling oil.

We are to the edge of the tarmac, beside the tires. Rubber's melting down in the racks. This is the edge of the light, the last step before the darkness gives way to the ruthless glow of sweltering arc lights high above surrounded by a global convention billions of flying monsters.

My harem girl outlaw pays them no heed. I'm blinking madly, adjusting clumsily to the light, looking frantically for broken glass. Every step I take I feel the shit dripping further down my bare legs. We pause.

The girl must be checking our rear, for sure she's not checking mine. Feels like I've got a Peterbilt haul of truck shit back there making my crack slap like mud flaps. I'm nauseated by my own fecal stench.

"Which car?" I hear her far away. The sound almost lost in all the other hungry night sounds, the choruses of large starving insects.

The girl breathes hard, the kind of breathing that sounds like thinking, an animal on guard in its every pulse of life. Gun and claws hold me steady. With a low growl she pushes me off into the light, claws steering me.

"White Toyota Corolla." A foreigner's voice, not mine at all.

"Cool wheels." She's jeering me with a cold cold sneer.

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Suddenly I'm screaming. The girl's pushed the nuzzle up between my buttocks and straight against my anus.

"That's a Glock .40 caliber. No tricks, tricky dick."

In this blinding light the emotion comes up in a blast. I suddenly know how naked I'm. Truly naked for the first time ever. Totally naked. Disgracefully naked. The light's putting me on show, not a secret to be hid. I'm being raped by a Glock .40 caliber.

"Damn it, don't hold back." she snarls, "Don't scream ever never again, mother fucker, hear me good. When it's so hot I just hate screaming." She violates me with another punch of the barrel. The second scream gets swallowed alive, sucked up whole by basic self preservation.

But I'm naked! Oh God help me. Naked. And the kid grease monkey stands in our way, mouth gaping, pumping gas for a customer. A red Ford station wagon, a "Je Me Souviens" Quebec license plate on it. Yea, and I bet they will, too. The pump clicks insanely, dollar and cents running away to the Near East. Help me, you knuckle head. We race right by them.

The heavy set French Canadian tourist sits laughing behind the wheel. He and his wife, both of them, take a good look--first down between my legs, then at my eyes, my hair, the shape of my body, its helplessness, shame. They don't try hiding their merriment. No one in history has been more cruelly naked!

They see what's following me too. And their eyes narrow in disbelief, a belly dancer in slippers, gun in hand, sequins starring this pitiful pit stop dump. We're another bizarre incident down south of the border.

In the back of the wagon, nestled among Disney World artifacts and wearing Mickey Mouse hats are four sunburnt, blue-eyed little girls. They too stare, like camera lenses. They too are bellowing glee at me. Little faces press to through the air conditioned atmosphere, drinking in the U.S.A. and pointing to their first dick.

We go on. No one shouts for us to halt. Not a sign of any intervention, divine or otherwise.

This truck stop just went numb. It's gaga eyed, tittering in repulsion. I'm a myth in motion. A story to tell at the next Brownie weenie roast.

We skip fast across the view from inside the cafe. The waitress peers out indifferent, perhaps too tired to react. The fry cook swivels on a counter stool to watch us go. He nods hello then goes back to his cigarette break and newspaper.

“You best run better than that.” My Torquemada growls. I’m doing my best you cretinous retard! Bel Air towers beside the Corolla. The heavy old engine sizzles from running so long so hard. If it were dog it would be panting, tongue lolling.

Bel Air sags to the passenger side where Elfreda suppresses its mighty Detroit fashioned shock absorbers. But can they fully absorb me?

Elfreda, bless her, is the only soul tonight not to be caught looking. She's sitting there in the front seat with her dress skirt pulled up over her face with one hand. The other raises in a salute, or curse. I want to yell at her but can't - “Help me, there's a gun barrel stuck up my ass!”

The girl's moving so fast I'm not seeing straight. Toyata's hot to the touch. Girl unlocks it. Pushes me hard so I stumble and fall. “Get up, you clumsy fool. Get behind that wheel.”

She uncorks me so she can wave me toward the driver's seat with the Glock. In a comic book flash she's roughed me toward the driver's side. She hops round to the passenger door, pops it open. Dives in. Her outfit even more incongruous against the sleek modernity of the Toyota.

She locks her door. Fastens her seat belt. Looks at herself in the rear view mirror. “You gonna bleed out in thirty seconds flat if you don't behave. Take the keys, stupid. NOW. Go go go! Move this thing! Get the fuck out of here. I mean haul ass. Burn rubber. Ball that jack like a bat out of hell.”

We do all of those. Then it's turn right, left, right, go straight.

“Slow down, shitbutt. We made it. Man oh man, that was one fuckin' blast.” Oh yes, a good time was had by all.

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We are parked just off I-95, beside the dippy dumpster in the parking lot of a 7-11 store. I'm not much more than 100 miles from

Greensboro, North Carolina. So near. Too lost to be found. So far. No amazing grace leftovers.

"Comfy?" drawls Femalé from the backseat--I've been instructed she spells her first name F-e-m-a-l-e, accent on the second syllable and to rhyme it with tamale. By any name she's a wired woung woman and for sure not shy. She's made herself at home with me, talks like she's always been sitting beside me, a hostage in the front seat of a car she's basically stolen.

Besides hoping for a stray chance to grab the gun from her I'm just sitting here struck dumb by misfortune. Letting her talk, talk, talk. Guess that's all she's capable of doing. At least she doesn't chew gum.

"Mama was so bi-polar she'd go cross eyed when it came on her," she tells me while waiting here in the parking lot for the store to open.

"She tried, but was too high to think up a name for me, so when the nurse brung me to her at the hospital she saw they'd put 'Female White' on my little ID bracelet. Mama just wrote that down on the birth certificate. Except she added the last name, hers, told me my daddy was just a four eyed blur, a slam bang thank you ma'am roust about. So that's how I'm Femalé White Brown. It gave her joy that they'd gone and named me themselves. I love the name.

"When I was 12 I put that cute little slanty line over the last 'e.' Makes me rhyme with tamale. My first husband taught me to do that. An Eyetalian trucker. He was old, 30 maybe. Always called me his hot Femalé.

"He choked to death right in front of me on a hoagie. He was driving. We was haulin' chickens. One messy wreck. Covered the road in blood for about eight miles. I broke near every bone in my body. Spent four months in the ICU at Duke's Children Hospital.

"The other two guys were nothin'. Guess I need an old one to keep me in line."

What a multitasker. Talks in submachine gun rounds while tugging tight the plastic parcel cord holding me together.

"Mmmmmmmph," yelp I. What else with a pair of under pants stuffed in my mouth for a gag? Hers, smells like it too. Sweet pork with some hot sauce.

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Clear as I can see it, feel it, my situation is this--hungry, thirsty, naked, rank with sweat and drying excrement, I'm tied up tight hands together and lashed to the steering wheel by the wrists. I'm the wreck of the Hesperus.

Last sign we passed on I - 95 showed we could've driven into Greensboro right there. Or gone on to Winston Salem. Or stayed true to I - 95 down to Charlotte. It implied the surreal. So many invisible possibilities. Maybe rush to Myrtle Beach and straight on out into the ocean. It was a true Interstate menu of boundless opportunity.

She, the evil teen bitch, forced me onwards to Charlotte. No matter that I screamed for pity through the gag. A mmmph-mmmph of sorrow and longing. She merely shrugged. Poked me hard in the right lung with her gun.

So here am I. It is perhaps 6:00 in the morning -- time is a mystery since my Rolex watch got left behind in the front pocket of my Sergio Valentés, in the back bedroom of the Taj Mahal Massage Parlor.

Ours is the only car in the lot. Femalé is looking down at me from over the seat back, obviously pleased with her work. The bangles glimmer half heartedly on her suit. Magenta glow, or is it a Carolina sunrise, spreads on the ceiling of the Toyota.

She appears unhealthy, far too excited and with a narcissistic personality disorder. Obviously she's a sociopath, psychopathic leanings. There are blue-black, fever circles under her eyes. A dew of perspiration glistens on her pale Rococo face. Grime rings her long Parmigianino throat. Certainly bipolar like her mother. The gene descends.

Femalé takes ownership of me by throwing everything in the car into the parking lot dumpster, all of it, even the presents for Prudence and the baby from Bergdorf. At the moment she's rampaging through my leather luggage.

"You sleep in silk pajamas? Well they're too big for me." Into the dumpster goes \$275.99. "No clothes here for me, damn, except this cocktail dress. Cute but not my style. You a cross dresser? Just nod if you are." Into the dumpster, \$500.

"Monogramed shirts, Mister! Guess that's how you got the Cool in Cool Breeze. I bet you're a homo. That's why you can't get it up.

"Hey what the fuck. These are pimp shoes? Ah, I get it. I don't want to know. Don't tell me or your dead."

Finally, all my possessions are gone into the dumpster.

Except Al's bear.

"How come you carrying a teddy bear, Ricky Cool Breeze, or Mr. Whoever You Be? You got a baby? Can't believe you could make a kid, you ain't got the balls which I know for a fact. Got it, you pimp homos."

Looking up and sideways I can see her hugging the bear and giving it a kiss. "But this little guy is macho. I'm keeping him. Yeah, I'm calling him 'Macho Bear.' She's moving her shoulders back and forth humming The Village People, "Macho macho bear, I want to be your macho bear." I'm not feeling festive.

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"Now you just stay put, Ricky, mama'll be right back." She reaches over me she takes the keys and blows me a kiss via the tip of the Glock, the barrel of which she stations a good six inches away from her lips. She bird hops out of the car.

I'm too numb with pain and dread to comprehend all of this. What exactly is she up to? The big picture eludes me. It's out of an Arabian Nights tale the way she disappears into a wild blue

desperado yonder. If she doesn't come back how long will it take for me to starve to death?

We found this 7-11 a block from I - 95. Femalé approved immediately, "Turn in there, Ricky. It's jest the way I like 'em, real sleepy and a jerk kid at the cash register."

So cruel, there's a pay phone 10 feet away hanging on the brick facade of the 7-11-- by stretching my neck and straining against the parcel cord I can just see the dial over the car window sill.

All along I'd planned on finding Prudence by merely contacting the local Unitarian minister. He would know about Prudence. Prudence has always been drawn to Unitarian pastors. She despises religion, it's just something else left over from her SDS days.

But how could a Unitarian pastor help me now, here, just as I'm. A prisoner in a parking lot off I - 95?

Hope this Femalé person hurries. Will she bring something for me too? I know it will be a coke and a candy bar, perhaps with peanuts.

She readily admits she can't drive, never has, hates even being inside a car.

That's clear from the way she braces herself with her feet to the floor when we speed through the scorched earth eminent domain of the Interstate.

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So it was a robbery. I guessed correctly. I'm watching her returning on the run, ducking low between the parked cars. She has a sack in one arm and the gun in the other hand.

Femalé White Brown. No other more fitting for you. What have you done to me?

Femalé rips open the door at my feet a crack. My soles are wrenched over the floor mat. Like being skinned, drawn and quartered. She nods slyly at me. Unpackaging me with a hunting knife.

I'm stuck fast in a life of crime. Tragic like a black fly on yellow fly paper.

Prudence, don't you hear me calling you. How close I am to you. Can you hear me in your sleep? I'm here, Prudence, only a half dozen gas and giant drink stops from Greensboro.

"Okie dokie. Hit the road, Jack." She twirls the Glock on a finger.

Of all mentally ill junior high dropouts in America why must I be stolen by the one who doesn't smoke grass?

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"You sure ain't no treasure. You're getting riper by the moment. I brung you a bunch of baby wipes so we can clean you up. We'll stop down the road a ways and get you hosed down. Dressed too. I found a stunning travel ensemble for you. Also I got Dipsy Doodles in here, some Dr. Pepper, Dolly Madison Cinnamon buns and two bologna and cheese hoagies. Don't eat 'em too fast."

Left hand is being manacled to the steering wheel with a newly purloined pair of toy handcuffs. Immediately they're so tight my hand's turning blue, they're nigh to disabling me in perpetuity.

"It's too tight." My plea is gagged off.

"Hush, hush baby love don't you cry, Mama's gonna steal you some big new cuffs and if those cuffs don't fit, Mama's gonna shoot you in the back.

"Damn but you're a whiner. Maybe I'll leave 'em on. See how long it takes for gangrene to set in."

She pulls the Glock from the elastic band of her pantaloons. Nudges my left hand with it. "If you want I can do some smiting on that hand.

"No? Ok. For now you'll have to chew on them panties for a few more miles, but you don't need a mouth to drive, right."

She jerks me upright then with gun pointed at me, darts around to throw herself in the passenger seat.

"Nothing makes me higher than armed robbery."

Femalé banks the total 7-11 take for the early hours of September 8th under the pop up drink receptacle. It amounts to a raucous clattering of loose change and a few torn bills.

Fuck me, she's made me an accessory, inter alia, a felon before, a felon after. Worse, a felon between the facts. I'm here as her get away driver.

I'll murder this underage werewolf first chance I get.

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Since then Femalé's hit two more places. Now she's looking spent, probably like she does after an orgasm, or when she changes cycles in her bipolar.

"I seen a sign I like, shit head, so go slow. Maybe there'll be another one. You're still going 60. Here here here, don't you dare miss it!"

I brake hard and careen off onto a non-exit exit, going 50 or so. For a moment the car swerves, then it tips onto two wheels, now it's fish tailing. What else could I have done? We are stopped in a veil of dust on the very side road she told me to take.

With a predator's shriek Femalé pistol whips me in a flash, sending my head cracking against the window glass. A death star attack. One moment only before the pain hits me. It's mega, spreading from a core of broken glass in the brain. Pain throbbing like an old Mercedes diesel. I feel a warm thread running through my three-day growth of beard.

"Now what did you do!"

Even dazed I know I'm cringing, crumpling in a survivalist's supplicating groan.

"You tryin' to get us killed? You dumb fuck. Worthless! Can't even drive straight. I ain't never picked out a guy worse than you. I'm gonna get rid of you so help me God."

She sits plaster stiff and white toying with her gun. Suddenly it occurs to me that she might be a murderer.

To cover up the lack of rushing she tunes the radio dial savagely at last landing on a Christian radio station.

A hymn rapture of the deep blares forth sung by hair sprayed white folks trying to sound like hair straightened black folks. I feel their glow. I see their tummy bulges. It's all clear even through the heavenly stars orbiting my poor broken head.

Never mind, this cracker warbling works quickly on Femalé, a fast acting sing-along. It's a regional sedative that I'm truly grateful for. The gun lowers.

I	took	Jesus	as	my	Savior
You		take		him	too
I	took	Jesus	as	my	Savior
You		take		him	too
I	took	Jesus	as	my	Savior
You		take		him	too

Way beyond the blue

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We've arrived where she she wanted to be. In the Camp Merry Dell Southern Baptist parking.

"I'm gonna truss you up like a pork roast." She does too, for the night. But first she works on my ear.

"A first aid kit is very important, you know. I got us this one just for such an occasion."

It's play nurse time. She's actually enjoying this, what a horrible small person. The merthiolate elicits my one scream. After that I'm numb to my life's sorrows. Nothing can touch me, not even when she pulls off the first bandage to reposition it to better effect.

"That looks better. Didn't know I was a born again outlaw, did ya. I know how to do a lot of things. Don't even need to wash my hands cuz I'm clean in the blood of Jesus. Get some shut eye. I want you fresh in the morning." The moron.

A furtive glance in the rear view mirror shows me to be a Van Gogh impersonator. I could probably land an opening on the strip in Las Vegas.

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Despite exhaustion, I sleep but fitfully. I seem in danger of swallowing Femalé's panties. I'm cut by my fetters. Rats or something romp in the nearest trash barrel. At every turn my head explodes. Savagery descends. My asshole stings.

My sleep, at last, is gnawed on by a vague nightmare.

Now in the morning it still haunts me, something to do with Johann biting me on the neck during a homoerotic hug and turning me into an undead dog with an Impeller haircut.

At sun rise Femalé jerks me befuddled out of the car. First thing I do is fall down. Dizzy with flatulence. It's the diet, I'm sure. Second thing was to piss on myself, again, and in less than a fortnight.

Femalé rips off the gag with a lot of lip skin. Drags me into the sunlight. Will it cause me to wither and crack into dust? I'm on full display for all in Glory Land to do a Bible study. Good thing atheism gives us cause for hope.

"God damn it, stop that pissing!"

"Coffee, please!" She ignores me. "Danish!"

"Did I tell you Mama was a Baptist, had me submerged. That's as far as went though. But my second husband was a guy specialized in ripping' off churches. I was 13 then.

"Any kind of church would do for him, he wasn't particular. We spent a lot of time in them, rippin' off sound systems and office equipment. I get a holy smell in the air recollectin' all that. You get a whiff, Ricky?" All I smell is myself.

She keeps me handcuffed disappearing into the back of Camp Merry Dell. Reappeared, she's transformed. No more Scheherazade. Instead she's in black slacks and a black halter top with a spread of

faux diamonds forming a poodle on her chest. This change for some reason I find ominous.

"Boy, I'm gonna hose you down real good. Hold still pecker head." She's located a hose somewhere 'out back,' the place where her entire life has been spent. To this she screws a mean looking "high pressure spray nozzle," according to the package she takes it from.

Hose she connects to a faucet hung on a crooked pipe jutting out of the crabgrass. Turns it on. Water hits me like speeding hyperdermic needles. Hurts like hell. Custer's last stand. I'm screaming. I'm charging for her.

Gun waves a warning. Does she really think she can break me with that after all I've been through!

Gun fires. Some tiny missile feels like wind through my hair. I'm not even peeking. Just down flat with a load of grab grass salad in my mouth.

Can this really be happening. Am I really fainting? I believe I really am. It has been a day to faint for. Last I see I've turned a purplish red all over.

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Someone slaps my face hard. Head goes left-right-left-right. Bandage slips. Someone turns the water torture back on me. Ouch oh ouch. I'm lost in time and space.

"You dummy. Get up so I can finish you off."

I'm trembling, shaking all over, staggering as I stand. My half awake life force too fragile and pink. It's like I got worked over while I was out cold. With lye soap and a wire brush. Maybe I was.

"Bet you close the bathroom door when you potty. You sit to pee? Run water so no one can hear you pass gas? Flush it twice so any yankacy baby goes down?"

"OK, you about as sweet as I can get you. Now take this wipe box an go over the inside of the car. I mean scrub her good. It's

already been hosed down. I get one whiff of shit in there and you're done."

"I took the handcuffs off for you. Take my panties out of your mouth. Best not have torn 'em. Then you climb in these new clothes I picked out for you. No, stupid, it's just too bad if you get 'em all wet. So very sorry I didn't stop to nab you a towel."

"Cut out that shaking. Makes me feel like I'm on a waterbed. No cause to be scared. Shit, think you're my type? I like men big and hairy. I ain't gonna smack you another one. You are the first hostage I ever mistreated. But you got to admit that was the worst ever exit off an interstate in the history of motor vehicles. Now you gone and make me shoot at you. Asshole.

Still dripping wet I lurch forward as commanded. My hands cover Adam's shame. My aching Tylenol raddled brain hangs low.

"And stop that God damn dripping!"

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Dressed at last I'm stepping out out from behind the front car door where I've been crouching.

Of a sudden I hear her whoop. "Fucking great." This exultation dedicated to the new outfit I'm modeling.

"That's better. I got 'em special just for you Ricky."

Her special for me amounts to one pair of white jockey shorts, green tube socks, one pair of white Chinese running shoes, blue Adidas knock-offs, and fire engine red Bermuda shorts. Everything is too big. In my clothes I have the sensation of drifting in different directions at once.

I also have a T shirt. It's the most enormous of all. Bright yellow and shows one erect bowling pin and two bowling balls. It reads 'grab your balls and let's go bowling.'

Think, Randy. Clean your head of useless humiliation and hatred. Dump extraneous econometric models. What's important is to plan how to get the gun away from her. How to turn it on her with a

snarl as she pleads for her life. How to aim and fire straight into her cold cold heart.

Oh God no! I can't stand it. She's saying we're spending another night here at Camp Merry Dell.

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We're at the starting line of late afternoon. Humidity's gone sky high. Light remains good, in a military way, tending to olive drab. Merry Dell changes very slowly. It's getting a forlorn army post in New Jersey look.

"Guess what I found under the front seat." Femalé has my wallet in hand. I'm feeling a ton of fate's red bricks crashing me down.

"Damn, ever listen to yourself?"

Actually haven't said a word. After so long in a gag speech is a second thought.

"Hey what the fuck. Maybe I'll get a tape recorder so you can hear what a dick you are. Don't you worry. In a minute I'm gonna set that barrel on fire. I have some weenies, like you, we can char. Are all Jews whiners? Never met one before.

"So who are you?" My moment of truth comes round.

You do got a wad of dough. That's OK, good for you. I'll put it in my collection plate." Cash she tucks in the waistband of her underwear.

"Hey what the fuck, I'm rich Ricky. Between you, the old fart and my take so far on this trip I got me almost a grand."

"My God, how much credit does one dude need. Shit, so Ken's made of plastic." Summarily she tosses the cards in the trash barrel.

She's throwing me away. Piece by piece all my identity goes into the trash. She does so standing directly in front of me, feverish, a small taut body. Not giving anything a second glance, completely indifferent to anything that makes me 'me'.

“Bet this pretty lady is your misses. She looks sweet. How’d she put up with you? Oops, just tore it in two. She won’t mind. I’m sure she dumped you way back when.”

Only then at last she spies my New York State Drivers license. Holding it up into the sunlight’s gleaming she’s obviously impressed.

“Just what I was hoping to find. I just love driver IDs. Guess it’s so cuz I ain’t never had me one. They’re so cute and friendly.”

“OK, now we play name-that-squirrel-bait. The moment of truth.” She has a palm cupped over my license. “Let me guess, you look like a Bob Jones, no, Billy Graham, maybe an Oral Roberts. Bet you sell aluminum siding. Or maybe you’re a Bruce Jenner? No, too much of a pussy. How about Alfred E. Newman?”

“And the winner is, Mis - ter . . . drum roll, please. Hey, what the fuck.” She’s laughing so hard there are tears on her checks and her little person is doubled up. “Ran-dal -- Pey-ton -- Purrrr-cell . . . Randall Peyton Purcell? Whew-wee.

“Sounds to me like one of them queers on TV hopping around in white tighties grinnin’ and showin’ their gonads for all to measure.”

Snapping upright Femalé says, “You know what? I’m good at drawin’, everybody says so. Want me to draw another dawg on ya. Mine would be a lot better than what you got now. Want it on your forehead?”

“Art’s almost my favorite thing. I’ll show you my collection some time. I been studyin’ you, Percy, thinkng you could model for me. Nope. You ain’t got the right symmetry. You’re crooked. Anyone tell you that?”

“Names is such a problem. Don’t think ‘Femalé’ Brown works too good for an artist. Anyway, Randall Peyton Purcell sure as hell doesn’t work shit for anything, a snidely guy like you, all crooked. It’s worthless on you. You’re a nobody. Like me.”

Last, she making me standing here, in the campground entrance, framing me under CAMP MERRY DELL, which is in rough hewn log letters directly above my head. She’s acquired a throw away camera.

One click. I'm immortalized in all my misery. Sagging, sopping Van Gogh bandage and all.

"Good thing we still got light. I'll get this developed and we can both have a copy."

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This nightmare night, spent in the Corolla trunk, I'm racked by stomach cramps. Probably the hot dogs. Sometimes I drift off to dream of being washed in the blood of Johann. Sometimes I bang on the trunk lid and cry out for rescue.

I wonder where Femalé is sleeping? In the car most likely. She better not have a stroke. A thought like that is not good for me. But then Femalé, as if she knew what I was thinking, banged hard on the lid. "Knock twice if you're still kickin', OK. You best be. And some shut eye or I'll skin you alive. I need you fresh tomorrow."

Evidently that gave me strange comfort because it's the last I recall of the night.

Birds chirping alert me to the dawn. As does Femalé when the trunk lid pops up to show her angry face.

I find the foulness in my mouth, of too much mayo on burnt casings, has subsided. I can tell I'm about to start feeling positive. Today will bring me something better. Indomitable American optimism.

"Why they close it? Seems a shame, Mr. Joe Ricky Ken Percy Breeze." she muses, pushing me into the driver's seat. "It's nice seein' families together, eatin' ice cream and getting' chiggers up their yin-yangs."

Driving away from the campground, heading back toward I - 95, Femalé is obviously depressed this morning and for some reason frighteningly hostile to me. She snaps off the Christian radio's morning program, 'Here Comes The Sunshine.'

"I can only take that shit for just so long." She quiets down. "Reminds me I should tell you ya got about a foot of used baby

wipes trailing behind your ass. Guess it's caught between your cheeks. Might want to remove that before we get to the International House of Pancakes. There's one at the next exit." Hard glint's all faded and gone from her.

Do I get to eat there? I pray for sustenance. Or will she rob it too?

She'll rob it. I'm already a wanted man so one more or less in my Book of Job tribulations won't matter. Just so it's after I've had my pecan waffles, bacon and hash browns.

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Just now off the Charlotte bypass she 'knocked over', as she puts it, her fifth 7-11 since we began this odyssey. According to the car clock took a few minutes longer than usual. The take this time amounts to \$28.83, plus one pair of plastic thongs, two pairs of cheapo sun glasses, a box of minipads, a tube of sun screen, two slurpees, five Mr. Good bars, and the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan*.

Her only comment upon slamming fast her door was "What the fuck Ken get me out of here, floor it." And then a minute later as we careen engine flaring onto the access ramp, "that guy was real cute, nice ass. I jumped his bones on the floor behind the check out. Felt great."

I assume her specialty is 7-11 stores. She's a virtuoso of sorts. "I try to keep my hand in," she explains while off we go again to a day of work on our convenience store spree.

Prudently I refrain from asking her why she bothers with nickels and dimes when she has my \$500 in her underwear. Other than her flicker of talk while she enjoys the Interstate, this mixed with bouts of soaring excitement, she holds back, moody and impassive.

Very self possessed for a young woman. I'm surprised by her despite myself, or herself, or whichever. I imagine her IQ is fairly high. Must be the reason she keeps me in line so well.

Seems that the sunset is our destination, the Interstate a monumental approach to an Aztec God. Wish I had a pair of Aztec sunglasses.

She's a manic fidgeter--pulling habitually on her curls, popping her knuckles, tugging at the crotch of her new finery, compulsively jiggling her legs open and closed, darting her attention hither and thither, punching the Glock into my thigh. Must be a good fuck. I'd definitely be interested if she weren't a shade of sallow.

Even driving I react promptly to any change in her, a fluttering eyelid, a frown, a twitch of the gun. She farts and I jump.

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So far, this is my list of her dislikes: I know she dislikes me, happily not enough to shoot--and she does need a driver.

My assumption is that for her I'm far too urban, sophisticated, upper middle class, good looking, educated and sexy. Class, cultural, sexual warfare rages here inside the Toyota bubble. It's good that I'm the only one here smart enough to know all about it.

Cars are also inimical, although she claims to the contrary and names almost every make, model and year we encounter. Succinctly, she's afraid they'll get a flat, crash, break down, run out of gas, get stolen, get lost, run us amuck into a roadblock by the South Carolina State Patrol.

Back roads too. "Them feist roads, shit. They never let you know where you are or where you're goin'. You could wander off on 'em and nobody would ever find you."

Must be tough, trying to be an American desperado and not knowing how to drive. Wonder how she manages. Answer. "Percy, guess what. I ever tell you I've had me five live hostages for drivers, just like you. Like they say on TV, isn't that amazing."

Above all I know that Femalé carries an abiding dislike and, yes, I think fear, of black Americans. The 'N' word is often in use, spoken like an incantation. For certain she'd have a nervous breakdown in

East New York. Probably open fire too. Probably wouldn't survive or end up joining the Symbianese Revolutionary Army.

Femalé's list of dislikes continues with Birds, Fire, Water and the Dark —she's thoroughly atavistic.

Surprisingly, my list of her 'likes' is longer.

"Shit, Ken," she exclaimed not too far back, husky with emotion. "I do love these God damn big roads. Good for doing business. Good for getting away from the fuzz. Mostly for moving on free and fast. The Federal Interstate is really groovy. And the best of all is I - 95. I am truly fond of this ole 95, in fact I don't much like getting off it.

Also she likes Al's bear, Macho bear, cuddles it and sings to it. She likes singing and has a voice for singing John Denver or Patsy Cline.

What else? The all time favorite phrase 'Hey what the fuck' and one of the names she's come up with for me, often spoken together.

She likes signboards too. She's reading every signboard on I - 95. I can tell because her lips move.

"Pretty much I take it again and again like a joyride." It's better for her even than carjacking or holdups.

"You can't imagine how many times I fucked in a car. And not with no tooth-paste for-a-dick guy like you.

"Yes sir, I know this mother all the way from Boston to Jacksonville."

I have the wisdom not to ask about the fate of the other hostages.

A Loud yelp to my right.

"Hey what the fuck. I just spilled my slurpee all down my front!"

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Femalé Femalé Femalé. This baby bitch is going to get me killed. Gunned down in a hurricane force blast of trooper fire.

She did lift another outfit, again all black. An incandescent 'Florida' spreads across the top in unavoidable rhinestones. At least

I now know where she's taking me. Her sharp little tits are clearly pointing us south.

I'm handling the steering wheel, accelerating, braking, signaling, checking my speed and mirrors, all without thinking. Our autonomic functions do save us from the wages of fear and loathing.

Roadway glitters dull red through the windshield. Makes the welts on my wrists from the cuffs burst lurid. Fire flickers over her face too when I catch a glimpse of it.

Last stop he filched large dark sunglasses for us. "Put 'em on, it's time. We're going undercover."

Mine are with black Clark Kent rims. Hers are pink bird-of-paradise baubles. I don't know about hers but mine don't do a thing to stop the sun. Craftily made in China deceptions. Their price tags still-attached sway to the car's motion.

Overpasses and service signs cast billowing purple shadows over her small self. Sky changes to a vast neon orange. It reflects into Femalé's sunglasses turning her into a psychedelic queen of the road.

"How come that chink gal was with you? You married? Who's Macho Bear for? Whoever, he's mine. How come you got a dawg drawn on your pecker?"

The sound of her own voice makes Femalé jump. Maybe her thoughts weren't supposed to be heard. Maybe they just bubbled out? I think some of that armor plate slipped an inch. I see a snarl coming. I duck gripping the wheel and staring hard at the road. That's the same as pleading 'don't hurt me or I won't be able to drive.'

"Me, I wont fool with no Jews." comes out of the snarl. Sure enough, she's angry with herself and taking it out on me.

"Jews is nigger lovers, everyone knows that. They killed Jesus." She spits 'nigger' out with a vengeance, something black and to go with nighttime.

She's flips the rearview mirror so only she can see out of it.

"Ah, I . . . I need that to drive with . . ." My own unsure voice sounds so haunted. More like hers than mine. Am I really blending into Femalé?

"I'll tell you if I see a police car . . . This gun says for you to button it, Randall Peyton Purcell." That gun's at my heart level. I shut up.

But she bats the mirror back in place. Another mile of silence. It's a beautiful southern evening coming down on us. You see it, but can't really, only the replica through the smeared glass of a 1,000 dead monsters encapsulating us. Time hangs dream like outside of the air conditioning and motor roar. Dusk loses ground to our speed.

The scene makes you wonder, perhaps an aesthete could cope best with the vicissitudes of life. Even violence, for them, might have its beauty. For sure, we, the two of us in here and all the others in their cars on I - 95, we are all doing an obscene violence to this lovely September day, which in fact like my sunglasses is manufactured in China.

"You dumb ass. I was lookin' in the mirror for that friend of yours who don't talk right. If I had an accent like him I'd go back to school. You think a nut job's gonna give up?"

Incredible she should even remember Gottfried. I'd almost forgotten him, lost him in the pre-prehensile past.

"Hey, what kind of mother-fuck-foreign is he anyway? A Jew with a chink gal and a foreigner . . . Bet you got a coon hidden somewhere. Do I need to check under the hood?"

"He's a German," say I with more boldness than I knew I had left. Word 'Jew' rings in my ear. Prompts me to add vindictively, "In fact, he's an old Nazi."

"Could have guessed as much." Femalé nods wisely at the roadside, lip-reading another signboard. "Nazits is always the bad guys on TV. Nazits is like the Klan though. Can't say I hold anything against the Klan."

'Nazits'? Can anything so correct come out of a crooked mouth?

So much conversation on the Interstate makes me nervous. She reaches nonchalantly for another Dipsy Doodle.

"So then, you killed someone named Yo-yo?"

I had hoped she wouldn't ask.

"Johann Sebastian Bark," the name burns my tongue. I wish we had just one more Dr. Pepper.

"Come again. Never heard a name like that. Bet it's foreign too. You sure don't look like no murderer to me. In fact, you can't even piss straight."

"He was a dog," I mumble, teeth on edge.

"Come again?" Femalé looks up from the Doodles.

"I said he was a dog."

Femalé's laugh is one fierce snort. "Oh, here we go. That really means a dawg? A genuine woof woof?" She's laughing hard now face turned up in joy towards the padded ceiling,

"Hot damn. A real live dawg killer?" She's slapping her leg with her free hand.

"I'm scared shitless. Maybe I bit off more'n I can chew. A dawg murderin' Yankee Jew boy with a dog face on his little dick. Bet ya own a department store. For sure they wouldn't let you have a pet store."

She opens her eyes wide in mock terror. For some reason, my own eyes are watering. Which is very dangerous since I'm in the passing zone. I signal, a slower moving vehicle to the right. To compensate, I turn on my headlights. It's almost the legal time. All's properly done. Manual perfect.

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Summer daylight fading in long streaks shows the hills in Chiaroscuro, Italian Renaissance descending on crackers.

This is a green land, some woodland, mainly numerous small farms looking like the people here forgot to pray for prosperity. I could begin quoting Wordsworth if I remembered anything more than

"I wander lonely as a cloud." Here I think they need to get back to basics, to Adam Smith for starters.

Femalé suddenly turns to me. "Tell me, Randall Peyton Purcell,"

For once, Femalé's talking calmly--nice and sweet. Even using my full name.

"You a college boy, right? Rate yourself smart, don't ya. Sure you do. Well then, would you do this for me . . . Just take a quick peek in that rearview mirror you're so damn fussy about . . ."

Victim that I'm, I do exactly as she says. In the rearview mirror, 50 feet behind us, headlights blazing for the coming of the night, rides a high, heavy, 1954 Bel Air. New York State license plate blazing like a terrible swift sword.

Oh son, you just passed Gottfried and Elfreda.

Foot to the accelerator we take off, I didn't even ask permission. We go rocketing down 95 way over the speed limit. For once she doesn't even notice, crouched on her knees beside me, facing the rear window, the gun held high in both hands. She doesn't even mock me.

At last the only lights following us could not possibly be Gottfried and Elfreda.

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I found this hideout. Thought of it al by myself. Femalé is pleased with me. She seems to have even made peace with the night, here in the squalor of a run down drive-in theater in Dillon, South Carolina.

Unless I've lost count, we must be midway through the third feature of this dusk-to-dawn orgy of B-Grade XXX flicks. Anyway, it's not *Shaft*. Not here. Wonder who does casting and where. Guys must be from some border town mensroom. Never seen so many pigeon chested creeps with enormous dicks. These guys are freaks.

This is my first ever drive-in theater. Have no prurient interest in what's on screen. For that matter I can't even see the screen.

But I find the experience itself to be healing. She's put me sprawled out in the back seat, once again in the handcuffs.

Those are so rinky dink I realize I could work free, although freedom has lost its appeal. Freedom to ogle what's sloshing and squishing in inferior technicolor? No thank you. Save me from the tawdry, the world is too full of it.

The voyeur in me seems to have been left behind, with so much else. Librettos to the various reels are enough. Summer stock at a Junior High for malnourished young adults with arrested psycho-sexual attention spans. Entire casts are obviously over dosing on something. Unconvincing grunts, groans, moans and slurps fill the void imprisoning us.

Between movies, the trailers for coming attractions promise much more of the same. Management is committed to bringing pornography to rural South Carolina.

At intermissions they run what I assume are Minoan made snack bar advertisements. Porn for luckless carnivores.

Done I'm sure, if I could see them, in garish shots of tumescent hot dogs rotating on an inquisition grill plus lines of marching, singing popcorn boxes left over from the Nuremberg Olympics.

The ads work well on Femalé. She's been to the snack bar three times since we arrived. Dome light sizzles on me each time. Then I shrink into the rear seat upholstery dreading detection by these local enquiring minds in my ketchup and mustard dappled captive self of shame.

Each trip she's brought back something for me. Femalé does have a decent streak. Perhaps it's a woman's natural compassion? How come I was blind to that and see it so plainly here, alone in captivity?

Women-- the good, bad and ugly-- are unlike me. They have substance. I'm hollow. I'm the Tin Man of Oz. If I tap my chest it will clank with the links of my handcuffs. Nothing more. Maybe that's why I can't really hate Femalé. In my heart of hearts I know she's better than I am.

Hey what the fuck, Randy, you've gotten carried away by too much thinking.

This diet has brought me down to copiously, silently-- or not-- farting here in the backseat.

Windows are all rolled down, excepting the one above my head cocked halfway for the drive-in speaker to hang. Our source of remorseless blaring. It brings in lounge lizard jazz and the suspension-of-credulity script in full.

Air inside the Corolla is not at all fart fetid. Upper intestinal tract sweet? Explaining why mosquitos swarm on me, the very atoms of the air.

But hey.

There again--I catch myself using one of her own expressions. Am I succumbing to this Patty Hearst simulacra—I think she does have a resemblance. Font of my very own Stockholm syndrome lies up front in coitus with Macho Bear.

I think I'm beginning to understand the relationship between Elfreda and the Fuhrer. Did the Fuhrer hold all of Germany in a Stockholm trance? Maybe that's really why he spared the Swedes. How do I turn off my brain?

"You awake, Randall Peyton Purcell?" A hacksaw voice splinters up from the front. It comes from a person hidden by the seat back, making it disembodied and mystical. Is it the last rite of the Armenian Church.

"Yes," I slur back, stopping short of adding 'ma'am.' I roll an inch to ease the cramp in my left shoulder.

"Oh oh oh aaah aaah splurt splat." Nothing unusual on the big screen.

"Yea? Well, I was just wonderin' Do you do anything else with yourself 'cept kill puppy dawgs and mess with Nazis?"

A big Bertha explosion of gas escapes me unbidden. It resonates above the heavy breathing coming off the loudspeaker.

"Wee wee wee, someone passed a pig farm," sing-songs Femalé. To avert punishment I quickly blurt, "I'm an economist."

"A what? "

"I'm an e-con-o-mist. I . . ."

"Shit, I'm not stupid. I know what that is. I read about a guy like you in *People* magazine. You're atheists stealing from the poor. Steal from corporations instead, like I do. Worst of all you're all Russian spies. Taking our secrets. Instead, why don't you go out and rob a bank or two, then you won't be downtrodden."

Silence in the car. From the speaker, "AIEEEEE," a Neanderthal expression of pure delight.

"Right, dumb as you are how did you get \$500? I'm guessin' you didn't win it in a poetry contest. And communists ain't suppose to touch money. You must be one wayward communist."

Right, I am. Pointless to try explaining even to myself.

All because of you, Johann Sebastian Bark.

"OK," she says to someone on screen. Inscrutable. "Tell me this--communists are suppose to be smart. How come folks got ants in their pants over a little piddley ass robbery? How come? I ain't takin' it like you do from poor people or cripples. I just move a few bucks from some joint to some other joint. I detours the money. All the same it gets to the same place, the government.

"I don't know," say I, and sadly too because I really don't. Wish she'd ask me a question I could answer. If I had the courage I'd tell her to never mind and take a couple of pills. I hear her toying with the ignition keys.

"Sure wish I could drive one of these things. Wouldn't need a jerk like you." She's sounding wistful.

"That's how I ended up at the Taj Mahal. I worked there almost a month. You believe it. That's the longest I worked anywhere, 'cept for the two months I done at the chicken factory in High Point. That was the pits. But I was married then, tryin' to go straight. That's where we stole the chickens."

"Mmmmmmm," I answer. Her voice fades another degree. All is a dimming night sky. I'm beginning to soar around in it, getting sleepier and sleepier.

"Yea, I do end up at some fuckin' far out places jest cuz I can't drive a damn car . . . Sure do hate that. Highway's always takin' you places you don't want to be, which explains why I'm so fucked up. Maybe I should start High School. I could take drivers ed."

Femalé sighs. For so slight a teen she must be full to bursting. Myself, when I move, my stomach goes 'glub-glub.'

"You still awake, Randall Peyton Purcell? . . . I don't see no spades in this drive-in theater. Course it's hard tellin' at night.

"Know why I can't stand em? Cuz they got funny eyes. They got double strong eyeballs, They see through things. They see twice. Lookin' in a nigger's eyes that's like a staring contest with a cat. I never have liked cats. I shoot 'em, the cats I mean.

"Ain't my fault they're depraved. I'm depraved all of my life but there ain't no government pogrom for me. Hey what the fuck, if you're spying on me for the Russians I'll shoot you for real."

I know she's pausing for another belt of Southern Comfort. The bottle is emptying out.

"Make that 'deprived,' Femalé. And it's 'program', although America has its own kind of pogroms for black people." She just snarls, along with the movie.

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I'm not sure of all she's acquired since we knocked over that 7-11 near a Savannah turnoff and she had me start this long detour. As we go along we are scouting for backcountry art and antiques.

Wherever we stop Femalé buys something of everything, more junk to fill the car with. And it's about full now. Backseat and trunk. At least for now she can't put me in it again.

But who could forget the knee-high plaster of Paris donkey with the blue sombrero, the cat carved out of coal, the 'Home Sweet Home' wood carving, or her favorite, the hand painted plate depicting Jesus with the bleeding heart—a heart looking like someone's home cooked Last-Supper liver.

"I sure am one sucker for art," she confesses as she squeezes back into the Corolla. "I'm always buying it, and never gettin' a place to put it. Keep havin' to leave it behind sooner than later."

Femalé settles back with two new paintings, cloyingly sweet kids with enormous black eyes that look suspiciously blind. She keeps busy sorting out her treasures, plus an inventory of Juicy Fruit gum packs, ammunition, post cards. Gun rests in lap.

"Know what, Randall Peyton Purcell? This is the first day off I had in almost a year."

By day off she means that we have been driving off the Interstate inching. For houses we've been our way toward Florida. Going along back roads, looping back and forth as the fancy strikes her, although always staying safely close to I - 95. I'm weary of it. Slow Beauty with no fast food.

For me she utters only the severest instructions, "Go near that damn ocean, Ricky, and I'll shoot your cute ass to the moon."

Rivers, lakes, seas, oceans—the list of dislikes waxes ever greater.

"Fact is," she's saying to me now. "I just can't let you go today. Maybe tomorrow. I'm gettin' accustomed to you. And you sure ain't hard to keep.

"Too bad you don't smile much. You ought to give folks a smile and a wave. Wouldn't hurt you none. My mama lives by the words 'Stay on the sunny side of life.'"

"Hey, you ain't ruinin' my day off, no sir. I'm gonna make this day last and last. I'm takin us to the Jacksonville International Airport, that's what. Best is departure. Fuckin' huge food court. Fat people really like it, they're everywhere. That's a good sign. Seal of approval. We goin' there and spend the night in cool lookin' plastic chairs and read lots of magazines. Tell you what, after that I'll turn you loose."

The exits flow by one by one, while she sits in lip-chewing indecision. Saying only, "Jes keep lookin' for the sign with a plane drawn on it."

Damn Right.

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What's the matter with Femalé? Symptoms: nervously hugging herself or fretting with the door handle as if she meant to make a suicidal leap from a speeding car, continually popping her knuckles, fussing with her hacked back dirty blond hair, fidgeting with her treasures, silently brooding over the traffic. Silence being the cause for my greatest concern.

She's been like this ever since we turned off I - 95 somewhere before Jacksonville. The huge orange sign did read 'DETOUR.' So I detoured at the very next exit. Indubitably the wrong detour. Seems I've been detouring for months.

What's the matter with me? Symptoms: chronic mental fatigue syndrome. Twitching facial muscles. Shaking hands. A post concussion headache that won't stop and a great load of depression. Obviously I'm perched on the precipice of a total eclipse of the self.

She shouldn't blame me for this detour. I'd been driving for hours in Georgia on cracked and rippling state roads. Then the idiotic intensity of the Interstate. In all I'm sure it's cost me 50 IQ points. At least I can spare them.

I've issued three warnings of what's happening to me—giving out jaw popping yawns, breaking for no reason, drifting across the lane dividing line. Even letting her see me driving for seconds on end with closed eyelids. Doesn't matter. She hasn't screamed or poked me with the Glock.

Finally, I'm done, finito. I take us off the Interstate. without her permission. Escaping in a blare of honking from somewhere.

At bottom of the exit ramp I turn right, very slowly, onto a far north Florida blacktop. We come blessedly to a stop on the nearest shoulder, one that has thrown us both to the extent of our safety

belts. Her art works on the back seat clatter to the floor. The Toyota stalls. Warnings flash with red lights, whistles and bells.

Windows open by themselves. A sweltering end of time atmosphere immediately begins to suck air out of the car, out of our lungs.

Femalé appears to be in shock. “What have you done to me, Ken!”

“I can’t drive anymore.” I’m hearing myself in awe. This is my first defiance. Perhaps I’m giddy with the thrill of stopping at last, and not by the fuzz. Truly at a halt. Stalled still. Suspended in time and place. Universe turned into past tense.

Eat your heart out Einstein.

“If I don’t rest who are you going to find to drive you?” I’m hearing what I take for a Byzantine lullaby. “If we keep going we both die because I have a constant vision of . . .“

Blackout.

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Something has gone wrong. The thread of our journey is erased. Since she rudely jostled me awake we’ve wended 40 miles or so onward. I’ve watched the odometer.

We’ve driven into a lonely nothing to out-do all nothings. Nothing but nothings.

Femalé rolls down the windows to let it in.

Even the trucks laboring bumper to bumper in a dense line have turned to nothing. Disappearing it seems in a puff of black magic. Not a truck remaining fore or aft. No car lights for me to steer by. No more poisonous air or moaning of hot brakes.

What has happened? Our Truck Route is straight, flat, barren. Have the others disappeared in fear of something unknown to the innocent traveler? I notice we a steadily rolling into a new territory. Swamp land.

Seems we've been airlifted into the Congo River Basin. Hot, sultry, Permian world. After the never ending pragmatism of Federal Government political science degrees this dark and deserted road is the opening scene of a horror film.

For comfort Femalé has Macho Bear riding on the dashboard. "I want him to see just what a fucked up loser you are." hisses Femalé, her bad temper might have turned obsessive compulsive.

"OK you, stop that whimperin'. Sing me a happy song or else."

I have not been whimpering. Not at all. That was merely a humble request for a piss stop. Actually, she hasn't been herself all day. From my experience with women I'd guess that her small tight body gives her long harrowing periods.

For that matter I am not myself either. Although my bludgeoned ear is somewhat less torturous. She gave me four aspirins. Washed down by glugs from her bottle of hot Savannah River Spring Water, radioactive hot.

"Pull over up there, it's a likely spot as any. But you hurry up, and let me look at that God damn map, too. How come you got us off the Interstate! How come you turned back there when I said go straight. How come you got a stiffy, dumb ass, this ain't sexy.

"You too old for this business? Maybe I better be tradin' you in on a newer model pretty damn quick."

The thing about Femalé is that she never seems to need to piss. Strange for a woman, and particularly so when you consider how much purloined death water she consumes in a day.

Her dark mood has me halfway panicked. The warning about replacing me gives me prickles in my thigh bone.

I wouldn't care if she shot me. No, my dread is to be pushed out on the road. Femalé has become my mother figure. Where would I go if she turned me loose? Who would I be? I don't have a single piece of ID, no cash, I'm faceless, stateless. Might as well be a Palestinian.

This panic leads to a less than perfect stop. We sort of tumble off onto the dirt shoulder, which is no more than a foot width of reclaimed swamp. We are about half disappeared into a black ink.

Real, alive swamp. Sick, dying and dead trees closing in, towering over.

“Make it real snappy, Ken. Or else.”

"Jesus H. Christ, man. I oughta make you get out and walk run that." Femalé really is mad at me. The gun whips up, her eyes spark, her mean little mouth screws hard on itself.

“Don’t glock me! I’ll be done in a jiffy.” By God, she *is* beautiful.

Across the way, directly opposite, under a few droopy pecan trees trying to stay alive, there's a roadside watermelon stand cut out of our Black-Hole of Calcutta swamp. Is it tangible? My faith is weak.

A string of Christmas lights show ripe fresh watermelons piled on a wooden wagon bed. An old black Joe slumps up front. He’s got mule reins loose between his knees. Mule looks old too. It’s a scene straight from the commercial for the Watermelon council of America.

"You turn this thing off. Don't you dare leave it running with me in it." Femalé rolls down her window.

“Here,” hands me a dollar. “Get us each a slice. And hurry. This is some bad shit you got me into.”

“Is there any more insect repellent,” I ask in abject supplication.

“No dumbo, I’m saving what’s left for me.” Nagging little woman. I’m beginning to feel married.

“Don’t you get any pee on them nice white shoes I got you. Aim straight.”

Stepping out of the car, I'm unfolding like a lawn chair after winter storage. Legs go wobbly, knees pop. After so long in the Toyota I do feel I’m slithering out of an old skin. Though hardly reborn. More like desperately antiquated.

Standing behind the car, shriveled dick out, turned to face the back bumper, back to the road, I can't help thinking of frying bacon. Makes the stomach turn and turn. And nothing's worse than this, your body aching to piss and nothing happening. I look out across the swamp. I strain. I wiggle and shake my weenie.

I need to think of something else besides pissing. Yes. Like the advent of passing cars, if there ever were any more to pass us by. Of children in passing cars giggling over the sight of a man trying to go pee pee alongside the road. Of snakes slithering toward me, of venomous prehistoric reptiles hissing for a drink of fresh urine.

Yes. Piss shy must be a hallmark of the civilized man.

Old watermelon salesman's Christmas lights shoot their red-green-gold glow into onto the road. In the cast off of red and green I can make out the head of my penis. I wiggle it in the dappled festival of lights. Dog face moves in a dawn of animation blur.

Don't know what Uncle Remus could be celebrating but it isn't Christmas.

A dismal trickle at last. It spatters on the earth, on my once-white 7-11 socks. On my new shoes too! I'm bad.

Something sizzles by me into the swamp. Whatever kind of big bug that was I don't want to know.

Without meaning to I'm turning my head self-consciously to look at the car and the road, feeling as foolish as any man can, standing here useless as a shy little boy.

Pop Pop. Maybe the old man on the wagon is making popcorn? Or listening to Mozart? Pa-pa-pa, pa-pa-pa. Papageno.

Am I being attacked by natives. I have no Food Stamps to offer them.

"Duck you dumb son of a bitch!" hollers Femalé from inside the car.

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Across the road Gottfried Keiger crouches mostly hidden behind one lordly pine tree trunk. Luger snout pokes out into view. Ugly. Materializing out of the mists of time.

Bel Air lurks, a silver ghost in the shadows beyond.

Closer to the wagon, her very own food court, Elfreda Keiger sits placidly facing the highway.

She's at a picnic table below a sagging Florida Power & Light line, One pathetic bulb casts her a pasty yellow. Her beefy elbows rest on the table's wooden planks guarding two giant slabs of watermelon. Her bosom is decked in black seeds and flies. There's a white plastic fork in one chubby fist. I bet she's lathered in a cotton candy perfume.

When she chews something moves on her head. Clamped down on her mane of grizzled hair is a straw hat. Bobbling on top is a red plastic alligator flapping its jaws to the motion of her chewing.

Obviously, the Keigers enjoyed a well earned break in their quest this afternoon to visit a Florida tourist industry death trap. Elfreda stares blankly at the heat, the swampy night, the old black man and his mule, at me. Chewing. Contemplative. Alligator jaws go locomotive.

Guess after you've survived the Dresden Firebombing a shoot out at a watermelon stand doesn't count for much.

"Murderer!" Herr Keiger's in good voice this evening. "Cheater!" The Confederacy rings with his accusations. "Murderer Jew!"

Ka-pow. How come that sounds exactly like a Luger when a minute before it was a beer can popping its fizz? We men be fools, be n't we.

Toyota's back passenger door opens a crack. Something snags my sock and pulls.

"Get your ass in here and do something." Hisses Femalé.

Sure isn't easy, slithering backwards over 6 inches of pine needles in loose fitting running pants, trying desperately to keep one's head down below the low windows of a Corolla.

The way I figure it, my only hope is to spring from a kneeling position of prayer and lunge into the back seat.

Ka-plooeey. Tinkle tinkle. There went our back window.

I'm still integral but can't move further. Caught in the line of fire. Car keys are still there where I left them. Snaking an arm between the seats I grope about for them until someone puts the ignition key

between my fingers. Straining forward my face presses hard into the back of the front seat.

“Go for it, Ken. You can do it.” Femalé cheerleads me on. Of all things the engine starts. There is a God.

“Femalé?” I’m actually yelling at her. She starts up firing off a shot at Gottfried. “Put the gear shift at 'D', on the count of 3.”

Un deux trois. Incredible but true, she understands French. Her hand floors the pedal. Screaming valves and an impotent explosion of carbon monoxide surrounds us. Car’s rolling forward fast. Fast as it can in neutral.

“No, no, no. It has to be in D D D D.”

“Sure thing, Percy. Is that D for dawg? Or dick? You better move up here and do it yourself. I’ll cover for you.”

At last I’m going over the seat while she fires around my head. But my legs tangle behind me in the backseat trench. I’m held down by heavy enemy fire, butt up.

“Keep firing or I’ll get shot in the ass.” I’m screaming. Got one hand on the brake pedal. Got the other on the gearshift. Move us into D, D, D.

Hand goes down hard on the accelerator. I steer us with my chin. Suddenly we two hug vinyl, tires blast us forward in a hail of spluttering dirt.

"Ouch." By accident, Femalé just gun whipped my thigh.

"Shut your mouth and drive."

A veritable hail of bullets now, from us to them, from them to us, 'If you care to send the very best' flits through my bandaged head.

I'm doing all I can to lay rubber 20 yards down the road. Not easy with an incipient beard on one’s chin slipping on the steering wheel and a charley horse in one’s right arm from maintaining optimal get away car speed.

"Shit, the only things I hit was a watermelon and the old guys front tire." groans Femalé, still turned backwards in her seat, gun smoking. "Good thing that Zit ain't a crack shot or we'd be dead about now.

"He hasn't had much practice lately," I explain, in Gottfried's defense. All of me's over. I only kick Female once. In the chin. At which I want so much to shout "Take that you grits chewing shit!"

Myself, I'm not even shaking. We do become inured to the vicious and the violent. If only we could in turn become indifferent to ourselves.

Straining for a view in the rearview mirror, at parting sight of the roadside stand, I see the grizzled old black man complacently macheteing more watermelon.

"Damn it, you never even brung me a slice. 'N Get your hand off that fuckin' horn."

Old timer and the mule wait on for more business under the string of colored bulbs, unperturbed by our antics. Mule's got its head down, ears straight and twitching, eating watermelon out of an old straw hat. Alone in his peaceful life the old man eats watermelon too. Guess if you'd survived being Black for so long in our deep South, the Dresden Firebombing might not count for much either.

"You shit in your pants this time, College Joe?" demands Femalé. Scolding me good.

No, I'm getting better at this all the time. But how am I going to tell her that I need to finish that piss?

"Sure do hope mule's still standing." Laments she.

"Aspirin get shot? If not I'll need another five, please." Laments he. That's it, she's made me an addict.

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"First time I ever been lost. And you done it," froths Femalé, sounding like the bad seed little girl. "I ain't takin' the blame for this one, no sir."

Since the run-in with Gottfried and Elfreda, our relationship has changed somewhat. Femalé may have the gun, but I've got the car. Whenever she gets too nasty I swerve a bit to make her scream.

We've settled into a cold war standoff. Far as power is concerned it's another Cuban missile crisis.

She's right about being lost. We are. I haven't a notion of where we could be, except maybe in Florida, someplace to the west of Jacksonville.

Which seems to have been the last outpost of civilization. We are still too excited here in the Toyota, gun fire in our ears, the adrenalin firing our rods so to speak. Femalé's agitation is such she isn't paying much attention to where we are, which is fortuitous. This deepest night gets deeper, weirder.

Not a light to be seen on either side of this pitted logging road with its verges looking like something has been eating away at it. Munching it down slow as carrion beetles working on a corpse.

There are no road signs. Femalé stares numbly, eyes frozen in fear, maybe waiting for a Zulu warrior to pop up from the dreariness and impale her with his bayonet spear.

She's hissing an incomprehensible warning clutching her Jesus plate and gun like John Brown with his Bible and rifle. All in all I'm afraid she's half out of her mind, car sick too probably, watching mile after mile on this flat coaster ride.

The blacktop is going straight and unbending, no side roads to turn off on even if I dared testing this Amazon unknown. What have we seen for the past 35 miles? One closed general store collapsing with termites. Ditto, one abandoned shack. There's no hint of a town ahead of us, no indications of farms or any kind of activity on the impenetrable land.

"I'm starvin'." complains Femalé. "We so lost I can't see straight. Hey, what the fuck, we gonna starve out here or what? Why ain't you scared? You got a secret map to where we are? Better not be trick'n me none. I can do worse than kill you."

Good thing she doesn't know I'm hallucinating. Hangover from my acid days. Cerebrally dead from gun whipping. Miserable from mosquito bites and thirst. I'd give everything for one Blatz.

Sometimes the road doubles buckling at me as its unremitting flatness becomes hypnotic.

A moment ago, for a split second, the steering wheel vanished completely.

Worst of all, and this too she does not know. We are almost out of gas. When at last I die from being shot by Femalé they should put 'He Ran Out of Gas' on my tombstone.

We enter a clearing, I slow down. We both peer longingly at it hoping for something to be there. Anything to be there. Tragically it is empty. Another Zen emptiness.

A shimmer of cypress trees in my headlights. In background, a swampy, inimical world glances back at us. Ah, but there is a sign. Here at last.

The sign reads 'Welcome to Georgia.'

"Georgia!" screams Femalé, and boxes me hard in my right ear. I scream too. A chorus of screams.

Then comes the other sign, one which with a ringing ear I propitiate the Gods for her to miss.

"You Are Entering The Okefenokee Swamp National Wild Life Refuge."

I swoosh by it talking about what's on the other side of the road. Then Femalé screams again, so I know she's committed that sign of damnation to memory.

I've got good reason to be screaming for good reason, more blood trickles sticky and hot down my jaw. But Femalé I can tell is screaming just to be screaming. Unjustified. It's a chorale of cosmic screaming in our small shared space although I'm half deaf to it.

Five miles on, interrupting the funereal ambiance that now weighs on us she suddenly presses her face into mine. I break to a halt—nothing ahead, nothing behind.

"Hey you, how come we goin' so slow."

At this moment in time I don't need it, but it happens. The red low fuel warning light pops on. I see no alternative but to tell her and get it over with. Defensively I cup my wounded ear.

For me The culminating moment in this progress through hell is the third sign of our trip through the dawn of the inferno. We roll by it slowly enough to make it ours.

Sign reads, 'No Services.' It's been roughly edited by shotgun fire to read "No vices." Poor child's too hoarse from her screaming to scream.

"We may be out of gas," say I, figuring to get all the bad news done with. "Actually, we probably are out of gas."

I know she's getting ready to belt me again. I may not even hear it coming. Goodbye Rolling Stones. But no, she raises the Glock and points it at my head. I think that's good.

"Ricky. You turdball, you have made me miss my night at the Jacksonville International airport."

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"I just seen a dawg," rambles Femalé a little tremor in her twang. "If there's dawgs around here oughta be folks too, right?"

Unless they're wild dogs. Feral dogs running in packs. Swamp dogs lusting for a taste of human flesh. Red eyes smoking.

Do dogs send messages long distance? Johann Sebastian Bark back from the dead. Johann the trick Zombie. Do like the Zombies of Parea. Best not say anything at all, son.

Riding in silence I'm ruminating, to distract from the pain and anxiety, on how a young woman could grow up so ignorant and mean. It amazes me.

She is an inchoate mess of angry hatreds. Bigotries subsume her so raw I'd need to cook them well done before using any. It shames me, somewhat, to realize I too have mine. For krauts. For poor white trash doing teenage girl impersonating. For the raw dog in each of us.

"How come it ain't built yet." she asks petulantly, the suspicion in her voice that 'here' must be someplace too evil even for the Interstate system to venture. Angrily she flips the bird at the

skeleton of the Interstate to be. A vast swath of raw earth that's suddenly risen on either side of us in our very slowly roving car lights.

The devastation sweeps away, awesome. For a moment only it's there before the swamp returns.

Maybe the Okefenokee's heart of darkness struck terror into the engineers and they fled scrolled plans clenched in their dripping armpits leaving the workers to disappear into the swamp. The horror.

"I ain't never heard of an Interstate that wasn't built."

Dates me for sure, makes me feel oddly inadequate. I who can well recall pre-Interstate America. An unconnected, services-free homeland for Lincoln Town Cars, obesity unknown, the sky was not cloudy all day.

"Hey you, say something . . . what's wrong. You too scared to talk?" She reaches over and pinches me hard on the tummy.

"Better not be gettin' sleepy. I don't like this at all. Don't you flake out on me. I'll pull your dick off and throw it out the window for the dogs."

Running out of gas is a form of death in America. I feel a creeping fourth quarter paralysis coming on.

"Just saw another one." she reports. "Too many damn dawgs out here. I don't like that."

She sounds like she's about to loose it. The gun's making strange motions.

"Must be lots of niggers too. I can smell 'em."

Poor little girl is almost in tears.

There, there. Wish I could comfort her. Too bad I don't have a nice lie handy, most people do.. But mystery and foreboding have figuratively cut off my tongue. Here we have fallen off the economic curve completely. Dark Age in a dark time.

"You better sing me a good song. I need one bad. So do it."

In desperation, I open my mouth and turn my head, ready to say anything, the Pledge of Allegiance, the Lord's Prayer, sing her Frosty

The Snowman, anything at all. But not 'I'm a little teapot.' That I'm saving for my death bed.

Instead in shock I hear myself crooning something from far back in the senility of my boyhood:

Wyatt Earped

Wyatt Earped

He earped all of the floor.

Long live the carrots and live the peas

And long may his story be told.

Bump. Crunch.

The Toyota veers to the left, skids to the right. I barely pull us out. Good thing I excelled at Driver's Ed.

"Oh my God, what was that." I cling to the wheel, foot on the brake, voice cracking, sweat flying. What did I hit. A child? Oh God help me, not that. I know what happens in prison to child molesters.

The ugly thud reverberates inside the car, inside my head, my soul if I had one. Even after we've rolled merrily on our way my life lies behind dead or dying. What's left of me, of whatever, lies hammered back there, a breaded but uncooked chicken fried steak. I'm a speed bump in the road.

"Sure are hell on dawgs," drawls Femalé.

I'm too horrified to even look in the rearview mirror.

"That one was big. And I mean big. Hey, what cha got against dawgs, anyway? Sure they do bark, it's their job. They do like licking their assholes just before licking your face, hey what the fuck that's their love shining forth."

I can't take this. My face must tell all. Another dog.

"You worthless wimp. Pull yourself together. It was only a dawg, could have been a child. God damn it. Get us some gas. Get us some food. Get us the hell out of here, this is the pits.

"You like feelin' sorry for yourself, don't ya. OK. I'm gonna shoot you in the kneecap, the one you don't drive with. Then you can truly feel sorry for your worthless hide."

Femalé snaps her fingers in my face. She snatches Macho Bear for comfort.

"Well, I'm not the only one, right." I blaze back, too upset to care. "What you doin' huddlin' against that door. 'N with my bear! Jes you tell me that, Femalé White Brown. Bitch, bitch, bitch. You'd make one hell of a wife, if any man livin' would have ya."

Our first quarrel, and in patois too. Femalé's lip trembles. I see it quivering even in this twilight of the Gods.

"Another crack like that and I'm gonna make you get out and walk. That's my last threat. It's the worse thing I can think of."

"Please do. What will you be doing?"

"Well sure as hell I won't be singin' no stupid song about some guy named Wyatt tossin' his Buicks."

We ride in broken-spirited silence, the car poking along at about 10 mph. My foot's completely off the accelerator. We're coasting.

"Don't you know nothin', past time to turn on your headlights. The President wants us to. Maybe you won't kill no more dawgs if you have your headlights on."

"I've been trying to save gas." I retort. She's too demoralized to make a riposte.

Declaring peace I do as she orders. Our lights splash out in a burst of energy. Nothing but more swamp. Have I really killed two dogs? What am I becoming. Randy The Dog Slayer.

Femalé collapses, silenced by her own calamity. Maybe it is my fault that we're lost? Maybe I did cause us to run out of gas? Did I hit that dog on purpose. In general I'm beginning to wonder a lot about myself.

After a couple minutes of rolling silence Femalé puts a hand on mine. She pats it. "Since you told me the truth, Ricky, I'll tell you some of mine. It's real bad news. I'm out of ammo."

Worst news I can imagine. It means our truth goes marching on while the Keigers wait to ambush us armed response at the ready.

As we consume our final fumes of fossil fuel. When we go gliding in agony toward a terminal stop. The dead ending of

American civilization. The third fall of Rome. Then around me Handel's trumpets burst into a baroque counterpoint of lamentation.

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How strange, we are still holding hands. It's going to be rather companionable. We won't face the end alone.

Suddenly, Femalé whips about, pressing her little face to what's left of the windshield, her breath steam on the dangling shards. Does she have a vision of vengeful midnight-hued youths brandishing machetes?

"I see a light!" She's so enthusiastic she's bouncing up and down. No more hand holding. I knew it couldn't last.

"Hey, what the fuck, it's down yonder. Look there. Can't be a logger, It ain't movin'. What you suppose it is. Mother fuck, I think it's really gonna *be* something."

I have never seen Femalé' so excited. Not even by a 7-11 sign.

"Come on, you see it too, don't ya?"

Me, I'm seeing about 20 lights at the moment. Every jolt in the road and I'm killing more dogs. I have one ear on fire. There's an irritating shred of crabgrass stuck between two teeth.

"Hey, what the fuck." Femalé's really got her voice back. "That's electricity. That's Tennessee Valley Authority stuff.

"Hate to tell you but looks to me like that's just a single bulb 40 watt deception."

"Shut up you. I think we just got saved."

The rental keeps rolling, inexorably forward to meet more really bad shit. Its power spent to the last bitter drop, mine too. A terrible swift momentum sucks me onward, downward and about to hit out.

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Under the lights cluster a motley collection of buildings. First up, a concrete bunker, which could pass anywhere in the nation for an abandoned Dairy Queen.

The sign reads "Squat & Gobble Café, All the Fried Chicken You Can Eat." At least the sign is real. But for the rest, inked blight and desolation, No cars. No fried chicken.

That is not promising. Anxiety attack flips to red alert.

What comes next as we roll past it lies in total blackout. I make out numberless seething shapes, unrecognizable blobs of perpetual motion. Leaping, contorting, dashing, cavorting shapes. Barking shapes. Be still my heart.

We roll under the park entrance. Monumental gates rise into the lights, just lit but already swarming with insects. Huge and rusting gates hang in crooked welcome. Kudzu strangles them.

The sign for the amusement park hangs derelict, up high, almost out of reach of their lights. In the faltering spin off I do not believe the wicked irony of what I'm seeing. What I'm stupidly staring at with quivering lips. I'm actually choking up on it. Not amusing.

"Hey what the fuck."

A wise saying that goes well with the overhead sunburst of askew golden lettering. We arrive at the nuclear core of the matter. The scene implodes inside me, a spent joint. Extinction flashes strobe across the stage backdrop of rusting metal and Spanish moss.

Multitude of dogs proclaims me home at last. The tourist attraction of my soul here gloriously proclaimed.

Calamity brings my golden boy life home to DOGLAND! DOGLAND? dogland.

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Last up we inch on to the motel.

It is pure 1950s, one story, 20 or so identical cabins fanning out from a central office. 100% ersatz log siding but nary a light in any window. No cars. Not a single rut.

I'm looking and suddenly they plug in their sign too. It blinds. My very own Second Coming in a burst of flamingo, minus half its tubing. In cool-blue rope script it reads "Sweet Dreams Motel--Air Conditioned--TV—Pool—Pet Friendly." Lies, all lies, I know.

"Oh no, they got a 'No-Vacancy' lit up, see." clamors Femalé. "But I just don't believe it."

Neither do I.

Dogs bark a joyful hosanna.

Toyota is dying. Air conditioning has gone. Lights dim. Locks won't unlock. To escape we'll need to crawl out through the Luger shattered glass.

This is a crisis of finality. Every alarm sound soundeth. Every warning light lighteth. Car gives out a ghostly groan. Knows it's dead.

Front end bumps up like the prow of the Titanic, hikes the front tires over some sort of barrier. We stop violently. champagne glasses are crashing to the floor in First Class. Save Our Souls.

For us there's mild impact surge. We're jostle forward. The air bags inflate instantaneously.

Then does the interior ring with shrieks. Mine, the girl's. Even the radiator gives a final bellow of rage against the coming of its night. On the sudden I have a face pillowed in something reminiscent of bubble wrap.

Air bag deflates enough for me to see over to Femalé. She remains enveloped, small as she is. Dainty fists protrude to either side pummeling the rapid deployment device. To quicken its devolution she points her Glock and shoots. Bulls eye.

Familiar ringing in my ears. Snow flakes dancing before me. Wisp of smoke. Revolver shot stink. We rock and roll.

"Come on Ken crawl out your skinny ass. We gotta git fast and take us a room before they're all gone."

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One look at this amber tinted motel office, and I know we're still lost. Still out of gas. It has that Bates Motel feel.

Femalé, standing at my elbow is oblivious, euphoric over having come to rest at last. Gives me a dig in the ribs with the Glock. Grins in conspiracy.

"Why don't we try begging for some gas and keep going?" I urge in a stage whisper.

"One room, two queen beds. Ask if they got the cartoon channel." Femalé gooses me with her free hand to make her exclamation mark.

Even if she should want to hear it, I'd be hard pressed to explain what's bothering me--just that little tic at the back of the neck we humans got when someone's watching us.

But also, everything's too perfect here--the small lobby, the sign-in desk, it's like a scene from the Senior Class production of "Death of a Salesman". Someone's worked too hard to make it believable.

An essence of recently sprayed roach killer hovers in the air along with the odor from my socks. Beyond the door marked OFFICE comes the dim babble of televised voices and laughter from a can.

Everything sparkles, clean, super compulsive and arranged. I know the ashtrays have been positioned with a tape measure and so pristine they look licked. The pine paneling is streaked with still wet swipes from a cleaning agent. Underfoot green linoleum shines sucking loudly to my soles.

"Maybe we should spend the night in the car. Tomorrow we can find a phone."

"No can do Ken. I haven't felt this good since I was 12. Gettin' baptized that first time in Turtle Creek." I hear going off on another babble.

Piles of DOGLAND brochures and complimentary Sweet Dreams Motel postcards are stacked like new decks of cards. The

complimentary postcards, I see, depict a Sweet Dreams from a sweeter and dreamier time. Then it stood surrounded by a packed house of early 50s Fords, Chevy's and Plymouths.

Femalé helps herself to a DOGLAND brochure, takes two postcards. "Got one for you too, Ricky," she slurs, as if drunk on the promises of light and safety.

Evidently, Femalé expects me to take the lead here, the way she hangs back. "Hello," I bellow self consciously hoping no one answers.

No response. Roach spray gets stronger and stronger, tweaking our nostrils .

"Hey, can't you read?" titters Femalé, nodding her head toward the note. It's a very discreet note, perfect grade-school penmanship. It still quivers, dangling from the desk top by a slice of tape. It's written on a yellowed piece of Sweet Dreams Motel stationery.

"Please sign the Register Book. Room key on desk--Cabin 3. Don't forget to collect your free DOGLAND ticket. Only one per room. Management."

Sure enough, the register book lies open, green plastic DOGLAND pen thoughtfully provided. Pen has a brown dog head at top for the click-click. Click it and the dog's eyes open. Just for me.

"It's self service," observes Femalé. "Like a Pizza Hut salad bar. You hungry? That Squat & Gobble don't look too open, do it?"

"You really want to sign in?" I ask, trying to give us one more chance to run. The sensation of being watched lingers with the bug spray.

"I ain't never signed myself into a motel," barks Femalé, defensive of her innocence. "You do it first, then me."

I sign. Femalé eagle-eyes around my shoulder, not missing a stroke of the pen.

"Hey, mother fuck. That's not right." She snarls. "You ain't some big time outlaw. You don't need no AKA." She's actually indignant at my droll choice of 'Wyatt Earp, Sheriff, Wichita.'

She snatches away the pen, carefully does her own scratching.

'Femalé Brown,' she writes. 'Bug Ugly, West Virginia.' Under the 'Representing' column, she puts 'Southland Corp.' Femalé does have a sense of humor after all.

Looking over her shoulder I'm saying, before I can stop myself, "Come off it, Femalé, no town is named Big Ugly."

In return she indents my butt with her penknife which she'd produced to stab a cockroach to death on the counter top.

"Is so. I was born and bred there. Proud of it too. No jokes neither or you'll need a pillow to sit on the crapper. If we had a map I could put my finger right on it."

For me she scratches out Wyatt replacing with 'Ken Coolbreeze, New York City.' Adding 'Communist' for occupation.

"There." She leans back to admire her work. "Myself, I want full credit for gettin' here,"

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From the ajar bathroom door comes the noise of water trickling. I think it has hypnotized me. Fatigue makes me very stoned. Shower runs so slowly I could try counting the drops.

I'm wait here on my bed hoping for the hot water to come. So far no luck.

Femalé continues on, reading the brochure to me from her own bed. It is most effusive.

"A visit to Dogland is a fun education for all ages," reads Femalé, her mountain-speak going strong. She reads loudly for we two to hear above the shower. Prudence would wince at such mauling of a copywriter's work.

"At Dogland you will be introduced to the amazing variety of the canine world. Dogland hosts one individual from each breed recognized by the American Kennel Association. This means we have 167 dogs.

I can hear all of them barking, too, through concrete blocks.

“You will see them up close, every one of them, from the smallest, the Chihuahua, to the largest, the Irish Wolfhound. From the sweetest in temperament to those bred to kill. These are muzzled and leashed.

“Our guided tours are designed to acquaint the visitor with the characteristics, history and amusing anecdotes related to each of our dogs. Be sure not to miss our world renowned Dogland Parade, held every afternoon at 2:00.”

Her voice drones on, but I really don't want to hear it. I'm forcing myself to tune her out. Also, I believe we are landed at a roadside burial ground, a place where the American service industry comes to wither.

At least the Sweet Dreams still has the basics, firm mattress and what I take for clean sheets and towels, although I'd guess we are the first guests they've had since before Armstrong walked on the moon.

I can only lie here. This is Randy's bleakest hour. I've had it with this absurd ongoing punishment. It's unfair unjust unreasonable untoward unscientific undeserved unwarranted, oh fuck it, I can't think of any more un-words. It's unconscionable.

All of you, dogs included, just wait. I am a wrathful creature. I am a vengeful god. I shall smite you. Smite, smite, smite. I know how to smite, pretty damn well. Once free I'll become an atrocity. I'll punch, gouge, kick. I'll stab, shoot, cut off testicles, pull hangnails. I'll dismember and grind your pieces up into regular grade hamburger.

My raving is making me feel so much better. If only I'd had the forethought to rant it all aloud. A diabolical shower song.

“Watch out for them brown recluse spiders,” adds Femalé to my already uneasy thoughts. She's so pleased with everything, nothing is scary. How can she be so obtuse.

This room # 3 has all desolation and despair about it that you associate with a Rambler showroom. Alas, the door doesn't lock. Forbidding news I think best not to share with Femalé.

Ah, at last I see the bathroom tiles are moist. Smell rises with whispers of steam, noxious. What poison has been called forth untreated from the bowels of Dogland? Don't swallow any of it.

"Fuck no stupid, leave that door wide open. I want to know what trouble you get us into next. And don't you dare use up that hot water."

Why do I feel blue?

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"Hey what the fuck. I can't find got my Glock," Femalé roars this to me in the shower. In surprise, not alarm. I know her voice so well.

At least she stops humming that idiotic Scots-Irish, Appalachian Orange Men hymn that's been in her head for an hour. Invisible to me, Femalé is suddenly quiet.

Probably she read to the end of the brochure, at last, for her like mouthing through *From Here To Eternity* word by word. They ought to have given her remedial reading. She is so astoundingly slow.

Very silent out there. Of course she tried the TV soon as we came in. Nothing but snow and static on all channels, TV in Anchorage. I could have told her so.

The air conditioner doesn't work either. I'm stranded in a holiday package to Hell.

There's an almost fresh bar of soap. I find it in an open Sweet Dreams pillow pack in the shower. But hey. Bar has no more than a few strands of somebody else's black hairs.

OK, she's probably busy playing on the bed with her collection. Last time I saw her she'd propped herself up on pillows admiring her various acquisitions.

She had me tote in the lot--the burrow, the 'Home Sweet Home' carving, the coal cat, the books of patriotic poetry, the home grown paintings, Macho Bear. The Jesus plate she positioned on an armchair for extra special safe keeping--"Don't you sit on it neither, dummy."

On the little stand between the beds, against the base of the lamp, she positioned her favored postcard, showing the flag of the Confederacy in Big Mac colors, lifted somewhere in North Carolina. Alongside this she placed the one of the Sweat Dreams Motel.

Clearly she's started nesting out of relief. Reacting to our unseen Providence from feminine intuition. For a vagrant like her a night in a notel-motel must be the closest she gets to the security of a sheltering home.

"Are you going to send that card?" I asked, indicating the motel. She vehemently shook no and straightened its position.

Truly I could be content here naked under this dribble. Content if it were not for my stomach calling to me.

When was the last time I was fed? When will I be fed?

How I yearn for what I expect in the hinterlands of New York, wherever the civilization of the Island of Manhattan ends.

That is, an over cooked 16 oz. Kansas City strip sirloin fairly well thawed, ice-aged as it were, a frequently re-warmed baked potato in its dead sea scroll jacket soaked in elderly sour cream and extra salty margarine. Plus, a salad bar plate spilling rusted lettuce, tasteless cherry tomatoes too firm to fork, lost in an industrial waste of blue cheese dressing where floating globs of something-or-other drip intriguing onto the cellophane package of pulverized Waverly crackers, a hockey puck of double chocolate fudge brownie cake with real 'homemade' staleness and far too hot from the microwave to eat, under a giant dollop of topsy turvy vanilla ice cream whose only ingredients are factory flavors, gum and preservatives that have never seen the sun, all made handsome by a crazy squirt of fizzled whipped cream from a factory in Chillicothe.

For amusement I could go on and on but it just makes me hungrier and hungrier.

I call to Femalé in a broken echo. "I'm hungry. What about you?" No reply.

"?"

I'm getting enough water to dampen myself. That at least is good. Cleanliness is vital to Capitalist ergonomics, rationality and my personal wealth. Equity building. Will this christening of sorts reflect in the next portfolio report from my trust fund?

For sure if about my penis it would show growth. Soaping away on it in a good muscular rub I'm springing an aching bone of contention in lurching upswings. My hand goes there without thought, purely physical physics.

"Maybe we can call for a pizza?" Silly to bellow so, she's only four feet yonder. This is not the Hotel de Crillon.

"?"

A faint commotion stirs the blurred and dripping world beyond the white plastic shower curtain. Wind in a rain forest scene.

I'm watching it, longingly. Femalé moves? Is she coming to shower with me? Does she too wish to wash her sins away?

Meanwhile I'm doing elbow grease work to unsuccessfully rub off the still vivid traces of my very own personal doggy. Dog throbs. Growl you beast.

"?."

She sure is moving around out there. What's she up to? Just had a blob of ancient private label shampoo slip with barbed wire sting into my left eye.

"!."

Suddenly It's a degree warmer in here. And Femalé's not wearing shoes--I hear shoes. Telltale peanut butter and jelly smack of sneakers on wet linoleum. Must be housekeeping.

Mysterious shapes ripple like lava lamps beyond the curtain.

Coincidental, with the helplessness of the animal in me I am arriving. My body starts firing off great ropes of instant tapioca pudding. Lips peel back in a grin of aggressive lunacy while the last of my DNA pumps onto my still throttling fist.

Minimalist pressure showers triple helix strands from my fingers down to my toes, goo-goo-ing in the crevices between them, using the toe hairs for life jackets.

One finale hydraulic. A cock is the greatest gift in nature.

Shower curtain slashes at my legs. Whips back ruthlessly. Metal rings tear clattering across the pole. Bathroom quakes with a madly careening light fixture.

“!.” “!.” “!.”

A crazed merry-go-round of commotion. DRING-DRING-DRING-DRING.

Yes, there are moments in life when even Hitchcock has nothing to say to us. We must admit, however, that they are our worst moments.

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It’s a mob.

Each one is a black giant of the earth. Defensive front line of the Pittsburg Steelers. They are all staring at me.

Especially for this passing moment all eyes are transfixed by the sight of the Risorgimento strands of sop webbing my fingers. Far below small curd cottage cheese dissipates before my eyes in the hair-filled drain cover.

Suddenly the room resounds with a Soviet Army Chorus of male teen knee-slapping guffaws.

No matter what, Randy, do not drop the soap.

"Alright fellas, hold it down. Let your lord and master pass." More laughter. That voice is immediately recognizable. It is that of a Hebrew son of Borough Park. More, it is the unmistakable booming voice of a degenerate scout master. Intimations of my scouting days in Brentwood.

It emanates along with its owner from inside the crowd, which dutifully parts, helped by a Red Sea parting tweet from a Scout Master’s whistle.

Whistle and voice belong to a short, Big Mac of a man. Somewhere in his late 50s. An afro wig, slightly askew, inflates his head and shadows him. Angela Davis with a beer belly. Booth ears

are pierced with bracelet-size plastic earrings, fake gold quaking from meaty lobes.

A biting, consuming glance holds unswervingly on mine. Bags of puffy skin roll under those bloodshot Egyptian eyes. Clearly he has a gift for applying eyeliner, black gloss lipstick and a rub on tan.

He seems to be all hair. Beard flows below the afro. Even ears and nostrils are crowded with it. Grey chest hair creeps out of the collar of his DOGLAND T-shirt.

T-Shirt stretches over massive man tits and gut. T-Shirt pulls up tight over the gut showing a morass of threatening pubic hair and Philmont on his craft class belt.

The wolverine of Dogland?

“Hi there,” says he in a lyric tenor voice.. “I’m Stalin Z.”

“!.” “!.” “!.” “!.”

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"Everyone can see?" Stalin Z makes room for himself at tub side. Patting the rump of the nearest lad he hands another his almost empty fifth of Jack Daniels.

Someone picks up the soap. Someone hands it back to me. Me, I’m doing nothing, just hanging out here with the hood. I cower back, pretending I’m an elite holistic compilation of white bathroom tiles.

Can’t count them all, maybe 30, or 300. Late teens. They are shirtless. Skins gleaming in health. All of them are tall. All fine with youngster muscle.

Looking at them, face to face, I see much curiosity, a lot of what I take for an abiding hostility, then too a snippet of old fashioned hatred. Good thing I’m here post the “I have a dream speech.”

They stand in silent attention obviously waiting for the Voice to sound again. Boom, there it goes and up close. The last trumpet sort of thing.

"Our visitor is Ken Coolbreeze, from New York City, New York. Salute Ken please." A host of arms rise straight up.

"Great. At ease."

Me, I can't do a thing except look at his eyes. Never in my life have I seen eyes like these. They move, you hold your breath. They are Miltonic, speaking epics, entire sagas. Makes one desperate to find a fallout shelter.

The bathroom fills with a rank combination of much underarm deodorant and far too much Jack Daniels.

"We will dispense with the water." He calmly turns the taps. The end of the spray portends bad shit itself. Water continues in drips and drabs, a spattering of cold grease on my tremulous self.

The leader places both hands on me. "We'll begin with the arms up, yes like that."

He uses his palms, pressing on me lightly in the direction he wants. "Spread the legs somewhat more. Good. Head up . . . eyes forward.

"Men, we have captured an example of the purebred Aryan male, and of a relatively strong line." He flourishes a hand at the boys for silence and attention. They pivot like a phalanx of Kilgore Rangerettes.

Am I seeing firsthand the power of overcrowding? Mussolini among the Romans. Can this really be happening here?

"Signs of in breeding, such as we have in our local Aryan population, are here minimized. Recall our lessons on the myths of Aryan domination? We talked about blond hair and blue eyes, remember? That is the myth of fire and ice, and it is here. in this very color of coat and this very color of pupil.

"Up close, come forward boys. Those in front squeeze in closer and kneel so that those behind can see too.

"OK, look closely, what do you really think of this male's traits? Anything special? Anything powerful and ruling? No? Good."

He grunts in an emphysemac way when he stretches up to hold my head, one hand under my chin, one at the back of my neck. He's also breathless from talking. Don't faint from his rotten halitosis.

There is a ring on every one of his sausage fingers, two where they'll fit. They are worked with silver and turquoise into odd designs. I'd guess their provenance to be a hippy commune in western New Mexico, circa 1967.

"Head is small. Ears do not break the top line being close to the head and well shaped. Skull runs flat on top, occiput bulbous, foreface square. Muzzle hangs sharp, nose pinched. Note the slight overbite. Note the long waist and relatively short legs.

"Turn, please."

In a daze, I'm turning. The bathroom tiles pivot, glaring in a field of ice and mold. His two palms run along my shoulders and down my back. I'm panicking now, without the assurance of those eyes. There's no mercy in bathroom mold.

"Wow! What a great ass!" This expostulate seems to escape his lips unbidden.

To hide it he proceeds. "Regard, withers are too narrow for advanced muscular development. General confirmation here is poor. And, this is very, very important, what do you boys think of these hindquarters?"

A scuffling, mirthful silence from the class. They really can't be older than Femalé.

Stop this nonsense, please, oh please.

One self-conscious adolescent voice finds itself,

"He one skinny Honky. Ain't that so?"

Laughter all around.

Two palms cradle my buttocks, pressing then together, squeezing them, spreading then apart. To keep from falling I sag flat against the tiles. One fat finger is probing my anus.

Please please. I'll be good.

"No discharge, that's encouraging. Now boys, do you recall our lesson on degeneracy? Alright, take a look at these hindquarters and

compare them to your own magnificent bubble butts. Which are riper? Which are more beautiful? Which are Stronger. Good, be sure to remember this when the time comes.

“The Aryan is nothing to be feared. He rules but that will soon end.” The hands pull away. “Turn.” A word I have been dreading.

I do and quickly lower my arms to hide my privates. His eyes again.

“No!” He’s a good bellow. To this he adds a painful fillip to the back of my hand. No way I can disobey.

“Proceeding to the brisket and loins. Note here the lack of proper development. The body line has almost no configuration at all, as our species should in the male. No muscle in the neck and shoulders. The chest is without definition. No inguinal creases. Loins drop flat and soft. Thighs are insignificant.

“I want those of you closest to touch this upper loin skin. It's safe. Don't be shy. Take turns. But go gently, boys. Gently.”

Hesitantly, the nearest ring of boys reach out their hands, prodding fingers at my belly button. More giggling.

“Isn’t this Aryan skin soft and womanish? Yet it is still skin after all, isn't it. And do you feel any current in it? Any electricity? Any atomic energy like in yours? Anything at all? Recall from last week’s lesson that they used our skins for lampshades.

“Of course not. And don't you feel the degeneracy of his skin? Yes, of course you do. . . . Alright, that's enough touching for now. You can sign up for touch time in my office.”

Something truly terrible is coming next. I close my eyes against it. Making a quick retreat back into my cloud of unknowing.

An indifferent palm cups my balls, lifting them up, weighing them, rolling then on display.

“But here, boys, is the true shame of the Aryan male, and also the reason for his viciousness. He has lost his manly vigor. Through ages of improper breeding, bad diet and tight underpants he has reduced himself to this.

“Compare these testicles and this small pink protrusion to your own nut brown manhoods. You are lordly. You are warriors virile and invincible. This is why the Aryan can not breed without assistance. This is why he needs his artificial stimulations and perversions. This explains why the white man secretly lusts after us.

“Most importantly, it explains why he hates and fears us and listens to Tammy Wynette.

“Now you see for yourselves why the Aryan persecutes us, waging pogroms and ghettos, forbidding our settlements on the West Bank. He does so because he is a phony. The Aryan is a phony. Repeat please.”

“The Aryan is a phony.” The chorus bounces off the bathroom tiles.

“Lesson over. At ease.” Tension released, the boys sag.

“At Attention!” roars Stalin Z in furious contradiction. Afro, makeup, jowls, earrings, all are aquiver. On command his rows of soldier youths stand taller.

“My sweets, I order no harm to this weakling. He is a comrade. He comes a needy Communist to our door.

“Moreover, look closer. This one bears the sign of the dog. Never mind that it is drawn on his penis. This is an omen. The prophecy begins. Behold the advent of the age of the Dog Penis.”

With his words the aforesaid sign of the dog bobs a cheery howdy-do to the crowd.

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“Call The Dogs!” Joe the Mynah bird gives his Dark Ages shriek. Joe speaks in late Bubonic. Redolent of hideous Italian churches, empty bookshelves, and extremely poor hygiene.

I like the voice. Maybe it’s the one and only thing left in the universe that there is to like. It has the crackle-cackle of an early radio, or a cartoon character from the 1930s. But what a welcome

reprieve from the incessant barking that addresses me uniquely, over Fender Twin amps.

Joe's cage hangs directly above us. When Joe shakes his tail feathers filth from his cage tumbles down on my hair. This is inescapable.

Each time we hear "Call The Dogs!" Femalé roars back, "Hey what the fuck. Shut up bird brain." That too seems a whim of Determinism.

Randal Peyton Purcell in chains. Randy Agonistes. In wet underwear. Imprisoned on a small island of formica, surrounded by dogs whose names I don't even know. Lost in a Florida Swamp. Wanted by the FBI in five states. Very thirsty and entertainment deprived. Trapped with an unhealthy and wanton teenager, an underage girl who has kidnapped me into violation of the Mann Act.

We're captive on a table top in the open kitchen-living room of Stalin Z's post sack-of-Rome mobile home. We tremble as one. We share shock trauma.

From the kitchen clock I know I've been here for 10 minutes. Haven't asked Femalé, I doubt she can read numbers.

We share our table top with a Chihuahua, a Maltese, an Affenpinscher and a dripping rubber mouse that has lost its squeak. I know because in boredom I've tried tweaking it twice.

The Maltese has taken abode in my right armpit. The Chihuahua nestles between my bare feet. Femalé cradles the Affinpinscher in her arms.

Some of their giant cousins sprawl on the floor beneath the table, a Doberman, Rottweiler and German Shepherd. Just now the Doberman puts up his front paws and silently takes back the rubber mouse in its jaws, regarding me, whites of his eyes in shy supplication.

I only know what kind of dogs they are because Femalé identifies them, reading aloud about each from her hardbound "Official Dogland Souvenir Visitor's Guide" that Stalin Z gave her.

She is dressed but I wear only my one pair of underwear. Rinsed by some daft soul but not wrung out. The scout master? Daft enough. Underwear dribbles on the table top whenever I move. Another cross to bear.

For the rest I'm also still beaded in shower spray head to foot. In the miasmatic weather of Florida nothing can dry.

"Hey what the fuck! Stop thinking. Talk to me." A small elbow stabs me in the back.

She clinks. I clink too, a few centimeters away. We two are bound closely by a chain to each other and across the kitchen to a padlock on the sink plumbing.

"This chain sure ain't for a puppy," snarls a very angry Femalé.

Surrounding me is a high resolution Imax scene of post Atomic attack. One lit only by the fluorescent tube over the sink, a spotlight of ancient yellow stuttering cruelly on our Promethean chains. I know it's ready to blink out at any moment. And then, I fear, all will be lost.

Ironically, about the room are half a dozen lamps, shades punched-out, bulb-burnt, knocked awry. Darkened, no promise of any light to come.

There's a disemboweled couch. Two wasted recliners tilting disfunctionally. A coffee table mauled viciously by raking claws. The four kitchen chairs have lost their backs leaving plug holes holding spikes of splintered pine.

Except for our table every surface in sight is heaped with a looney bin of leashes, loose pennies, the shells of various frozen foods containers, ripped hoodies, ketchup smeared paper plates, an enormous dildo, red rubber bouncing balls, two of which glisten wet with saliva, half chewed shoes, leashes, muzzles, stained piles of newspapers, uncountable faded receipts plastered to the kitchen counter top by dried spills of whatever.

A large array of used blue plastic glasses clutter amid empty soda cans, beer bottles, bourbon bottles, ice cream tubs on their dried wet spots. Lots of empty tuna cans and insect repellent

sprays, and more depleted cans of flea spray than I can fathom. Also there are more than many moldering Wonder Bread crusts and Hostess Cupcakes with their cores sucked out.

From here I count nine 52 lb dog food sacks standing precariously about the room. From my vantage these are either brimming over with dried dog food nuggets or garbage. The garbage sacks move to a siren's song of excess.

The floor marches to its own muddled diaspora. Just below us, around and between desiccated and fresh dog turds, across glinting dog urine lakes, the linoleum heaves with flies, roaches and, from the itching on my legs and feet, a whole lot of famished fleas.

We move too. We struggle together in a subtle, manic depressive episode. Destitution and despair abounds. An unstable night breeze blows hot air through the open front door.

Breeze ripples across the walls of the mobile home. Makes the walls undulate. This because kitchen and living room walls are taped floor to ceiling in yellowing newspaper clippings.

The articles in reading distance are accounts of mob lynchings, a bombing attack on a Long Island synagogue, the Kennedy assassinations, World War II Concentration Camps, riotings and burnings, last year's worst atrocity.

There must be many hundreds of these wind tossed clippings, and all must deal with the same sort of thing. The worst dementia the world offers. Stalin Z's walls writhe alive with mortalities, beckoning me into an apoplectic Hell.

I'm shivering. Chill of old news and nightmares? No, it's only the breeze drying my hair.

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So far I've fallen off this too crowded table top once. It sounded like a Calder mobile hitting the floor of The Whitney.

Clanking back up in a mad panic I was greeted with touching kindness. Femalé pinched me hard on the tummy leaving a lingering

red mark. The nasty little dogs growled and snapped. At the moment they lick whatever of me they can find.

“Ouch! Stop it.” Femalé keeps snapping the elastic of my underwear. “You’ll wear out the Calvin Klein logo.”

“Don’t you dare fall off again. You could pull me along. I ain’t never getting’ near any floor like that on bare feet.”

“Call the Dogs,” interjects Joe.

“Hey what the fuck,” Femalé’s sharp little tits gouge my scapulars. She bellows her whispered shout through the bedraggled bandage and straight into my wounded ear.

“You asshole, you’re getting me all wet. Take your damn underwear off.”

“How!” I rattle my chain to make my point.

“We’ll do it together.”

“Don’t touch me!”

“That freak’s flat out bugs.” Femalé actually whimpers. She has goose bumps on her arms. Her eyes stare at me so wide and green. “He’s bonkers. A real fruit. I oughta know. I hitched with a few.”

“But I do like his groovy T-shirt. Bet they sell ‘em in the lobby. Next time he comes in ask for two, small and X. And ask him what he’s gonna do to us. Tell him we’ll sue.”

Her ongoing inquisition is comforting. At least I have a companion in misery. A welcome fellowship even if it comes with a cro-magnon accent.

“You get a whiff of him? That’s terminal B.O.,” her voice in stress is a true Carter Family banjo. “Almost as bad as his dog breath. Did you ever catch such a stink. And what the fuck kind of name is Stalin Z. How you spell it? Capital or lower Z?”

“We’ll shortly be making brooms,” say I. I wish to hearten her while in truth seeing only a blighted future for us of splinters festering in all fingers. Femalé ignores me. I know she thinks me benignly reality challenged.

I let her prattle on, quietly going out of my mind. Sunk in a sink hole of despondency. Feeling the bite of the black black dog.

“I don’t like this one bit, Ken.”

“Do I?”

“If I get a tick,” moans Femalé, “I’ll just roll over and die.”

“Call-The-Dogs!”

Ever quite lively Femalé rolls in my direction. That does it. Here I go off the table again with an embarrassed simper on my lips.

Suddenly, dogs are barking everywhere. Louder and louder. Outside. Inside. Throughout the mobile home.

Wildly scrambling. I’m making it back up. A breathless escape from what lurks below.

Down there under the table top they go woof-woof-woof. On the table top they go yip-yip-yip. Highly distraught, Femalé remonstrates too.

“You, Ricky, better say something or I’ll push you off again.” That too is a yip-yip-yip. “Snap out of it. Better not be dead because if you are you’re gonna really regret it.”

I feel her small sinewy self leaning over my shoulder to peer up close into my face. How could a mere girl be such a cruel and constant cynic.

“Hey, Ricky Cool Breeze, you’ve really skinnied up. From now on I’m calling you Skeletor.”

She teases the hair on my crown. “You’re getting old too. You got’ a bald spot.”

“Where!” I’m yelping.

“Here.” She grabs my nearest index and jabs it deep to the spot.

I follow the line of pain. “But that’s smaller than one of my Pierre Cardin cuff buttons,” I tell her.

“Who’s a Pee Hardon? I’d change my name.”

I strain for a withering glance over my shoulder. There she is, at it again, angelic face up close, mocking grin focused on me, an ischemic scrutiny.

“Skeletor, you should really let me pluck your eyebrows.”

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My days blur into something like the lunchtime mega-crowd aimlessly moving up and down on Fifth Avenue. I can't name the day or the date. There is no difference and nothing different. To all I am indifferent.

Ah, but something different is arriving. The knock on the frame of the trailer's front door announces Stalin Z. Among his traits, he is deeply courteous.

"B-r-a-c-k. What-The-Fuck! B-r-a-c-k. Bird-Brain!"

Joe struts his new sentences. Perhaps pleased to have something more to say to us.

"Come right on in, Mr. Z, you're quite welcome." Female must be recovering, she has that je-ne-sais-quoi touch of sarcasm back in her voice.

"Thumbs up." Z using his Altered States voice. "I'm told they'll arrive soon. Be prepared.

"It's all about this." He's indicating the shambles of his mobile hovel with a grand wave of his hand. Gesture makes his afro slip ever so slightly.

Stalin Z jumps and gives us a suspicious once-over. I can tell he's accusing an invisible intruder of goosing him. Another trait is extreme paranoia.

Paranoia just caused him to drop his armful of Kalashnikovs, the Soviet's one gift to Civilization, and a bag full of ammunition that he's bringing in this morning.

"Cafe and motel are our front lines. The boys will fight in the runs if necessary."

"It has been 10 years since they stopped the work. You know you're dead without an exit.

"No offense, sir," he chuckles, talking to the Schnauzer and absently scratching the hair on my stomach. "But we really must put the Aryans in concentration camps. Then our only problem will be the French."

Summarily he tosses a rifle. This for a smirking Femalé to catch, our troubled adolescent in rebellion mode. She wandered in this morning looking her cocky best. That means she probably ‘jumped the bones’ of another lad.

“This is a Kalashnikov, an AK 47. It is Russian designed and Russian made, just for us. A gift from the Supreme Soviet. Enjoy its beauty. Delve into its secrets. Remember what Bertolt Brecht wrote, when a soldier charges he’s erect. When he shoots he comes. Try it now. Just aim away, please.”

She does. To the pounding fire of the Kalashnikov, whoosh, Femalé disappears. The recoil hurtles her back into the dark innards of the trailer home. I’m looking for her in genuine surprise.

“Hey what the fuck!” An infuriated Femalé, stumbles back into sight.

To this, Joe’s *Deo Gratias* reply is “Bird Brain!”

“Now watch me carefully.” Stalin Z takes the weapon back, spreads his legs and plants down his heels. The AK roars forth.

As he fires he swings to and fro across the mess in the kitchen. Counters disintegrate away. Scraps, paper plates and Bud cans make blast off in a deadly shrapnel. The room is alive with the drifts of flotsam of pulverized chicken pot pie and TV dinner packages. A few bullet riddled front covers of People Magazine float about. There’s a fine snowfall of artificial down from the couch.

One round and the kitchen transubstantiates into the archeological dig of an advanced consumer society.

Hunkering down under the table Femalé and I cradle our heads. The are no more dogs to be seen. They’ve scattered to safety.

"Presto, KP is done. Now isn’t that something. Every American housewife should own one of these.”

Outside, I can see the dogs and the boys roaming free something I envy them. Besides the frisbees, favorites of both boys and dogs, another game is for the youths to fire their own used Kalashnikovs, which they do now in joyful reply to Stalin Z.

Frisking youths and larking dogs. All chase frisbees, footballs, sticks and one another. They romp through a dust cloud of semi tropical decay. They are lovely to behold.

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TV's on. It always is. There's nothing to watch except snow and one rolling black line giving an infrequent buzzing and 'Wonk' that makes ever fainter my hope of someone listening in deep space, trying to reach us, to hear and rescue us.

For now I have an arthritic and ungroomed Borzoi in my lap ineffectually scratching for fleas. She drapes my body in a luxuriant field of white curls. Another ancient of days, a Labrador Retriever, licks at my bare toes, will it dry them in its fur? In the open front door an English Bull Terrier growls endlessly. Seems I am designated Dogland's geriatric ward.

I am also the nanny. A pack of extraordinary puppies gambols on the remnants of the living room carpet, a mixture perhaps of Borzoi and Dalmatian. At least they have spots of sorts.

The whining, yipping, growling come from everywhere, every room inside the mobile home, any given direction, any distance around us. Outside I see an incredible array of dogs as I sit here, looking through the tattered curtains of the open kitchen window.

Some dogs in groups, some dogs alone, some romping, some limping with age, dogs sniffing, peeing, shitting, fighting, breeding. Dogs digging holes. Dogs filling holes up. All the dogs run loose. Of all creatures here, I'm the only one still in chains.

Dogland's ruins have become scenic.

Out there the distant swamp water simmers a ghastly green, looks deep and menacing this morning. Light goes creeping in arabesques through the deserted dog compounds, slowly conquering the row upon row of high chain link fences. Brush-stroking them into a sylvain spider's web.

Dogland itself looks like a concentration camp without a purpose. Gone native. In the distance, how far I'm not sure, but not more than a couple of hundred feet, rise the rooftops of the Sweet Dreams and the Squat & Gobble.

Femalé tells me we are surrounded on two sides by impenetrable sticky swamp. Says the swamp waters come up directly underneath the mobile home. Femalé is my eyes and ears on this American entertainment industry death trap.

Which, come to think of it, is also not unlike a Fascist Youth Convention.

"The young coloreds live in the motel," she's explaining. "About thirty of 'em, I think. Man oh man, them and that swamp is *black*," and she shuddered. "Fall in that and you ain't coming out a Southern Baptist. They could use you for motor oil. Also the Toyota is history. Stripped down buck naked. They even drained the oil and lifted the motor. "

Damn. Why didn't I take the full insurance package.

"Nap time," declares Stalin Z. Already he's abruptly staggering out the front door in the direction of the swamp. He goes stumbling off the steps backwards with a curse. He's down. He's almost up. He's down. Soon he'll be back for another bottle of Jack Black.

That leaves Femalé and me as the last humans in here.

Where oh where does Stalin Z keep his Percodan time-release.

For the moment all the beings of Being-land are silent. Silence reigns supreme and lovely until broken by an exultant Joe. "Hey what the fuck!"

"Skeletor, think I'll stay the night right here." Femalé stretches, yawns. "You got fewer fleas than this couch."

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Dinner service is always the frozen entre of Stalin Z's choice. Tonight it's the Big Mexican Combo. Not my favorite. I dine alone.

Femalé is unchained. Off with one of the boys. Stalin Z occupies the debauched recliner.

My array of small dogs watches every move of the plastic folk as it shovels refried beans and enchiladas into my mouth. There is pathos in their beady, carnivore eyes. They are begging. I am strict. Not a bite. This particular meal gives them the runs.

On Z the neon tube light casts a soft edged glow. Of the ruin it makes a Vermeer masterpiece. It casts Z into a better man, so why not me. What do I look like? I'm a ruin too.

He slumps in the scene a tragic satyr. Snoring prodigiously. Occasionally exploding Greek Fire farts at me.

He'll be in his chair, unmoving, until sun up a dark lump of a man, besotted, a fool. But aren't we all.

Studying that figure I can't find it in my heart to demonize him. He's become a comrade. He's also interested in economics.

I wish Femalé would come back tonight. She too is a comrade. I've got a Mexican combo waiting for her, ready to pop into the microwave. Guess I'll sit up until she comes home.

Fuck. Impossible to withstand their soulful stares any longer. I'm giving in. Each one will get a forkful of diarrhea with a little love pat on the head.

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Distant popping catches me short. I know that sound. Our bell tolls at last. It tolls for me.

Bang bang bang. PING. PONG. Has a Chinese tourist bus stopped for lunch?

If only. No, big kids have begun a deadly game outside with their fearsome toys. Bang scram patooey. Not an AK.

The dogs erupt in unison, inside the mobile home, outside the mobile home. Their deafening uproar drowns out the shooting, snaps the dawn in twain. Femalé's barking too, with more enunciation than usual to be heard above the rest.

"You hear that?" She screams, a direct hit in my face. "Hey, what the fuck's goin' on out there."

Am I the only spot of peace and quiet left on earth?

Poor Femalé, all she's got left is a Jesus plate and an old Kalashnikov, upon which she is performing an in-action reassembling and reloading drill, and me. The Sacred Heart must be palpitating for sure. I myself do not have the heart to tell her the final countdown is already begun. The end, as they say, is right now. ET or PT? Any other time is inconsequential.

"Hey what the fuck" screeches Female. "They even got a SWAT team out there. They got Remington 870s. They firing Glock 17s at us."

Atrocity clippings poke their tongues at us. Glossolalia for beginners.

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Even through the smudged goggles of this gas mask I can follow the action fairly well. The Waycross and Charlton County Sheriffs and Deputies have got to within 75 feet of the front door of the mobile home. They inch about on their big doughy bellies, about a dozen highly excited middle-aged men.

They've make it to the base of the nearest fence. They wallow in jungle vines and weeds. Gray wisps of Spanish moss flail about them in the commotion. Their rifle barrels poke at us lasciviously through the chain link.

Oh no, they are capturing Stalin Z's flag, a pole vault with a Dogland T-shirt attached. This is disheartening for us all. It has been severely peppered. They are burning it.

On the field of action, further back, between the dog runs, their support vehicles have not been moved. I can see the Folkston Hospital ambulance, Charlton County paddy wagon, and the mobile TV unit from Jacksonville. The roar of fire power, the haze in the air, make it even more unreal and desperate than it is.

We are all masked for the occasion--the men outside, we three inside. Z even tried fitting a mask on the greyhound. Got a bite for the trouble.

The Bel Air sandwiches between the first aid station and the paddy wagon, looking quite official itself. I do hope Elfreda is alright. She's been reclining at the first aid station for about half an hour now. Maybe she got a whiff of gas, or maybe this is too much like Dresden and her nerves have come unglued?

All I can see of her are those plump feet sticking out of the ambulance door, white tennis shoes, white anklet socks. The tennis shoes are moving again. Earlier I saw her in earphones. So she's listening to Ingelbert Humperdinck? For sure she's been given lots of valium, which makes me envious.

Elfreda's big mistake was to wear her alligator hat. In the first attack at dawn she stolidly marched shoulder to shoulder with Gottfried. Off at last to the Eastern front. She did him proud with her Valkyrie routine.

The plastic red gator bobbed about on the straw. Then a gang of Dogland denizens jumped her in pure doggy delight, knocking her over, drawing and quartering the hat. Pieces of it went up like cheap champagne fizz. Reports are that not a piece of that gator is to be found.

Gottfried lies beside the Sheriff and his Deputies. Looking from my perch I can see their big old-man butts. They likely tingle with the thrill of war.

Spread there on the field of strife, are an ample apple shaped German butt, an ample apple shaped Scotch-Irish butt, an two ample apple shaped black men's butts. For the opposition, nearer to the mobile home, I see the familiar and more than ample apple shaped butt of Stalin Z.

From Dresden or Jewish Brooklyn. Isn't this profound? Sometimes, like now, Gottfried waves the Luger in angry defiance. Sometimes he just screams imprecations in German, with an occasional translation.

I believe Gottfried has been directing the siege himself. Could be he's reenacting Stalingrad? The snake grass must be wet with spittle. Whenever I glimpse him there's a lite cigarette between his lips or fingertips.

Certainly Stalin Z blames Gottfried for the defeat at the battle of the Squat & Gobble Cafe. He's only told me the story three times, embellishing it a little more each time--the brave boys in glorious action, how the sneaky Sheriff and his cowardly Deputies were on the run until Gottfried--the old Nazi--whipped some spirit into them, shouting "Get dat Commie Jew."

In retort Stalin Z claims he roared "Get that Lutheran Boche." This sounds to me like a Norwegian French dessert.

Of course, he is convinced that by 'Jew' Gottfried means himself. I'm quite sure that Stalin Z, perspicacious as he sometimes is, recognized me for nothing more than an Episcopalian on vacation the moment he first laid eyes on me in the Sweet Dream's Shower of Dread.

Femalé hates the 'Law,' The law hates us. Gottfried hates me. I would guess that everyone here present hates some group or another, Aryans, Jews, and/or Blacks and maybe Seminoles, rich Yankees, red necks. Maybe Elfreda secretly hates Gottfried? He insist they go away for the night when Johann was murdered.

Only the boys are too young to hate anyone, except their fathers, of course. Round and round it goes.

Me, I hate only myself.

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The mobile home would be unbearable if not for these masks. Without them we would be overcome by more than tear gas --by the stench of too many animals in too close quarters, by the stink of human sweat medaling with old crawling garbage and excrement. The toilet is backed up.

Above all without these cooty bug masks we would be incapacitated by the putrefaction of ourselves, the rank odor of our fear. Fear in us all, in the dogs, outside too in the heat and squalor of Dogland, in the cops and news crews. It's a giant excessively humid groin.

Mid afternoon, heat's a jet vapor trail in the heavens above. Florida melts into maggots, biting flies and mosquitos. It evaporates before us. Acrid stench of spent ammunition. A languishing gas. Do I alone know what is closing in upon us? Tiny, hideous, monster things. They emerge from the dead dogs. They creep out of their shit. They come voraciously tunneling underneath us in the sand. Knowing or not we all blink at the horror of the sight from behind our goggles.

My underwear droops on my hips, a relic of the True Cross. Stalin Z's armpits are draining. His fly is open. Females has changed skin tones. She's become a dusky warrior on steroids.

But Femalé looks the best of us. She hugs the side of the other living room window, hiding in the shredded drapes, her rifle barrel gouging through a shattered plastic window slat. Her most recent 7 Eleven outfit isn't much the worse for wear.

"Hey, I think I just popped me one Natzit." growls Femalé, her voice garbled by the mask. We three seem to be talking underwater through snorkels.

Stalin Z is hoarsely bellowing into the cardboard inner liner of a spent roll of paper towels.

"Get that Nazi? . . . Try to hit all the Nazis." This from someone who can't shoot very well at all.

My heart breaks for the dogs. So far I'm counting 23 on the ground. Many whimper from wounds. One or two have lost their minds and are barking insanely. The remaining dogs are too confused to do much more than try to hide. Many have dashed into the swamp.

With the last of his troops surrendering around him there is but a moment for him to make a break for us. Waving an hirsute arm he

calls to the dogs “follow me, boys.” Stalin Z shows considerable talent for blowing his whistle. At the same time he’s racing for the trailer while bullets pop into the earth of Dogland in a gust of sound and fury.

What a tragedy that only a dozen or so manage to tumble inside at his heels. For most, Stalin Z's retreat from the parade ground is just too frantic. Once at the door he turns to flip the bird at the enemy. “Shmocks!”

Mercifully, Stalin Z shuts the dogs that return up in the back bedroom. They cringe in horror at our gas masks. The tear gas makes them sneeze convulsively. Gunfire sends the more highly strung into seizures—that’s how we lost the Chihuahua. When? Around lunch time? Z pronounces it ‘Chi-who-ah-who-ah.’

I’ll never forget watching Stalin Z burying the diminutive body in a Wild Turkey Christmas box, placing the coffin with a sniffle under a heap of Florida State *Sunshine* magazines. Even I have trouble swallowing.

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Another desultory, inconclusive round of exchanges. Gunfire from outside ping-pings off the mobile home metal shell. Gunfire from inside, splashes out into the depths of the unruly strangle vines. Round ends, no decision.

"There just killing' time," observes Femalé, stopping to reload. "They'll get serious soon as it's dark."

Yes, Femalé knows about the evil of the night. She's right.

"Bastards." screeches Stalin Z, at the top of his lungs. "Take your own sweet time why don't you. You sure took time building my Interstate. What's the rush now."

To himself, he goes on, mumbling, pulling up the mask long enough to swig another blast of Jack Black. On him, I must say, the mask is an improvement. Hiding the rub-on tan that is melting, also the run off from his eye shadow that streaks his cheeks.

Yet without it his eyes though red and rheumy shine magnificent. The earrings might be gone but the afro remains relatively pristine, defiantly in place.

"Me," he sniffles. "I'm the one who never had enough time. It isn't fair. They had plenty of time, lots of help, to come up with their Swastikas and Iron Crosses. They had Albert Spear to do their plan for Berlin.

"God Damn, but the Catholic church got hundreds of years to get its pomp and circumstance together, plus the coolest drag ever. To me they give a measly ten. Never even got around to drawing up a nice logo. No time to sit down and write a good cosmology. No wonder I got no easy access. No dormitories to roam at night, no secret libraries of forbidden fruit, no kissing of toes, no Gloria in Ecclesia. Just isn't fair."

I'm the odd one out here. My observation post, perched on all fours on the kitchen countertop, chain dragging to the floor, might as well be a thousand miles up, from a spy in the sky. I'm merely ringside with the almost dead Maltese and obnoxious mynah bird.

Joe's battle anthem, "Call The dogs" and "Hey What The Fuck!", runs endlessly, for me a Marlene Dietrich fingernail dragging on a record. A Portuguese wind up phonograph in Macau.

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I'm not yet taking sides--Femalé and Stalin Z versus the Charlton County Sheriff's Office, Gottfried and Elfreda Keiger. I just wish they hadn't mildly wounded some boys and killed a few dogs.

I'm probably also the only one present who has an inkling of all that's involved. The knowledge stirs a reckoning in my heart. Makes me occasionally wretch. So much understanding and so incompetent in using it.

I wish someone would rid me of this meddlesome Mynah. No way. Femalé talks to it when she has a moment. She tells me he's so

cute. "I'm gonna get me one of 'em birds soon as we get out of here."

Stalin Z whose real name is apparently Stanley Zuckerman--that's what the Sheriff keeps bleating over the loudspeaker, "Give yourself up Stanley Zuckerman . . . Let your hostages go, Stanley Zuckerman . . ." Unfortunately, Stanley Z has drifted off for good into his own fantasia.

The folks outside are just as sure of themselves, are equally opinionated and overwrought. Our human condition that makes us the most inferior of animals evolves here like shape shifting swamp gas. Too much Weltanschauung whizzing around. That is for certain.

Poor Femalé, she probably has no idea at all of the 'ologies' conflicting in this jungle. Although she too might explain it as much more than swamp gas delusions.

She's fighting for what? For the fun of fighting? Survival? Maybe in her own eyes she's become a B-grade horror movie star. Even if you don't have a cause I suppose it can be uplifting to just fight and play the heroine. With lots of makeup and six arms.

"Get your mother fuckin' head down, Randall Peyton Purcell." snaps Femalé. "You gonna get your skinny ass shot."

"Hey-What-The-Fuck!"

But Femalé, that is exactly the point.

"Call the dogs," squawk.

Yet I humbly obey her. It's a present of sorts, doing what she says, for old time's sake. And, I wonder if a bullet in me would stop this nonsense. Afraid not. Or, for that matter, that in the ways of nature, as I now intuit them, my punishment could end so simply.

Stalin Z staggers away from his post. He grunts hollowly as he tugs a thigh-high cardboard box out of the front closet--a Charmin Toilet Paper carton. The carton is heaped with what appear, to my disbelievers eyes, to be Molotov cocktails.

Besides Molotovs Stalin Z finds various uses for his empty Jack Daniels bottles. Pissing in them for one for which he unzips and pulls out a small penis to affix its tip to the bottle mouth. In battle will

he get his piss bottles confused with the Molotovs? They might be more effective.

"We're going to light up their lives." he chuckles, nothing more ghastly, I think, than a chuckle through a gas mask.

That done, he turns to me. Since his retreat to the front porch, Stalin Z has been too upset to even mention economic development.

"I'm going to unchain you, comrade." He rubs his bottle meaningfully against my rump. "Further, you will be the first Aryan I have trusted in some 25 years. I hope you will do justice to the honor."

He pillages through a kitchen drawer. Ends up dumping its contents on the floor.

"You are to take the can opener . . .this one here . . ."

He hands me the biggest can opener I have ever seen. "With this you are to proceed to the bedroom where the dogs are."

Unsnapping me, he tosses my collar and chain in the sink. It should be a moment to cherish. Instead, I'm adrift in an ocean of possibilities. Without a chain I'm a stray.

"Femalé?"

"Dummies are putting all they got into the kitchen window. Stay clear of the sink. Good news is that all they're hittin is cockroaches."

Suddenly, Stalin Z lifts his mask and pins me still with a long, sobering stare. Short as he is, we are now at about the same eye level what with me on all fours on the counter.

"It's a smallish rust hole now, from the last time the swamp came up. But you are to make it larger, big enough for freeing the dogs one by one."

Stalin Z can still dazzle you with his eyes-- blood, sweat and tear gas aside. He reaches up to pat me on the head, snorts, gives one sharp little laugh.

"B-R-A-C-K! Bird Brain!"

"You are to go with them and guide them to safety. Also, when you are back to the City you are to write my biography. You must

call it *Everythng Came up Roses In Florida*. Send it to Grove. Got that? My friends and family will adore it. Don't let me down, all of us are counting on you, Mr. Richard Coolbreeze of New York City, New York."

"Call The Dogs. . . " Ptooeey. Before my eyes Joe the Mynah bird disappears for eternity into an explosion of black feathers. A core of down. And one flying eyeball.

Gunfire. The holy war continues. They allot no time for a memorial service.

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There are a total of 16 grown dogs crowding around me while I try to work. The Airedale appeared at the trailer door half an hour ago. They jump on my back. They wiggle between my bare legs. They sniff the seat of my underwear as I bend forward to my task goosing me with their noses then shaking their heads and sneezing.

Still, I would rather have the dogs getting in the way like this than hiding and growling under the bed as they were doing until I removed my gas mask. As a result I'm choking over my task, dripping tears and sweat onto flakes of agent- orange colored rust.

I'm so pleased the dogs like me. So few creatures have.

Despite all we have made progress. Although the can opener keeps slipping in my palms, where the swamp bit and ate into the metal it actually works. Other places and it's as effective as chipping at concrete with a swizzle stick.

The can opener is engraved on both sides with the smirky line "EveryTHING's bigger in Texas." Must hail from a most picaresque moment in Stalin Z's life.

The Border Collie is again trying to help me. She's gone back to digging hard at the gutted artificial wood paneling, the split-end entrails of insulation. I fear her getting Monsanto poisoning.

Slowly we are getting there. Shards of the rusted trailer hull rims the hole, burns my skin, flips through the air and makes the little dogs sit up and beg.

Already I have a salami-size slice of flat black swamp water to look at. The water lies three feet below the mobile home floor. Dead. Forebodingly inert underneath so much turmoil and agitation up here.

I blindly trust Stalin Z's judgment in this task, assuming he knows the depth of such an ugly water, that he's not sending the dogs to a watery grave. Also, I do hope he's right in figuring that no Southerner, public servant or not, with their fear of snakes, would be caught lurking in the swamp, prepared to ambush the dogs as they flee.

Yes, my work takes shape. The urgency of the moment drives me on. Massive infusions of adrenalin. I'm not once stopping to rest.

And this does seem, ridiculous as it may be, some sort of genuine atonement, something tangible and at last worthwhile. Prudence and Al, I only wish you could know me now, the me I think I'm becoming.

Ah, look at that. My hands bleed. Good.

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"You better be about done there," drawls Femalé from the doorway.

I pause only long enough to wipe the sweat out of my eyes--I would like a quick glimpse of her. More, I want to take her with me. She too has removed the gas mask. Sunset breezes are clearing the smoke.

Femalé takes this opportunity to rest, leaning against the jamb. She looks altered now, haggard, dripping. Her dull look has returned, her face pinched and exhausted. Mousy blonde hair plasters to her small skull her outfit for the Augusta Lady's Open has lost it's shape.

"They're eatin' dessert. Can you believe it. They'll rush us soon as they digest. Sun going down. They'll be wantin' to got home, drink a beer, watch themselves on TV."

I've never heard Femalé stoic before. The tone gives a hint of wisdom to her voice. In our time together, in my pride and superciliousness, I've never once considered her a superior being. Not until this moment. I listen to her with care, even as I continue to chip and gouge and pound.

"Tell Stalin Z I'm ready to start letting the smaller dogs out," I report, proudly so--I can't help it. Also this is the only manual job I've ever had.

"Ask him what I'm supposed to do with the puppies. I shut them in the closet so they wouldn't fall out and drown. Tell him they're too little to swim."

"Go ahead, do as you want to. No need to ask him. Stalin Z's a cherry bomb 'bout to go off." Into nowhere I let the collie go.

The soft splash and gurgle mark her farewell. I listen breathlessly until she begins paddling. The dark below the mobile home is an utterly, profoundly, metaphysically terrifyingly black hole.

I look up at Femalé. "You're coming with me. No choice about it. I'll knock you out, whatever."

"Hey stupid, so you think maybe that bitty hole's big enough for me, my art and guns?" asks Femalé, twining a wet curl around her little finger. She lifts up the gas mask and for once smiles at me.

"Of course it is. I made it your size exactly. Fuck the art and guns. Only these largest dogs are left to lower, and the puppies. You'll take the puppies with you in the bedspread."

A moment of raw silence. The three remaining big dogs wait beside me, trusting me. Femalé, indifferent, swings on her toes to swipe at a mosquito--rocks back again to sag in the doorway. No gunfire in the distance. Too early yet for the bullfrogs.

As I lower the Border Collie through the hole, I make a short silent prayer for her well being. The kind of prayer that doesn't have any words. That comes in a rush from deep inside you, like a fart.

"Know what, Ricky" she says. "That was the meanest thing I ever did see. Them lard ass Law eatin' fried chicken out of big paper buckets right out there in plain sight of us. They had slaw too and mashed potatoes. That was damn unchristian. I wouldn't treat a dog that way myself."

She sniffs, grips her rifle. What a fabulous poster girl for any revolution. The battle has melted her away to a taut she-tiger essence. Her face is glorious to me with a terrific symmetry. Jade eyes. I can't turn away from them. They hold me in their Belladonna glow.

From the living room, the hoarse bray of Stalin Z interrupts us. "If we have to go under," he screams, "The whole earth will tremble." Someone should tell him his finest hour has come and gone.

"Mother fuck," whispers Femalé in sudden awe, grinning at me in the fading light. "This is it, Randall Peyton Purcell. Guess they gearin' up to name the contestant winner. I think Stalin Z's gonna torch them Molotov cocktails any minute now."

"The Aryan Gods are dead." Stalin Z hyperventilates in righteous spluttering. No rejoinder from Gottfried. I hope he's OK.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world." Snips Femalé back to her reassuring cynicism, my personal favorite of her split personalities.

Femalé slips the gas mask back in place. Sound of a latex swim party. She lifts the rifle. It's pointing at me.

"So, if you ain't a liar and that hole's big enough for me, it's sure thing big enough for a skinny wimp like you."

Through the mask she's again got the Dark Vader death rattle. Now you get them puppies and you get the hell out of here. I mean move it or I'll cure your constipation forever."

I rock back on my heels, letting the last dog loose into the water--the Newfoundland, who says goodbye with a lick to my bloody hand. Ah, for once I have something important to say.

"I'm not going. Shoot me. I'm staying right here." Gunfire rips from the living room, Sounds like Stalin Z is shooting at the ceiling. Femalé's at the closet door before I can even move.

"Fine, then I'm gonna shoot them puppies. How's that. One by one." Well, Femalé, you do have more than a glimmer of real understanding. I crouch protectively over the bubbling, whining bundle.

"A whole way of life is crumbling," laments Stalin Z.

In answer, outside, a hallelujah-chorus fusillade is turned loose.

"Hey what the fuck! They just shot down the DOGLAND sign. That really makes me mad."

"Constantinople falls! The last emperor dies upon the walls! Eunuchs jump screaming into the Golden Horn trying one last time to jack off . . ." Z is at his best.

"Come on, shit or get off the pot." Femalé stamps her foot at me, taking aim at a puppy, impatient. Absently I'm wondering what would be left of a puppy after a rifle shot at close range.

"You want cute soup all over your shoes or what."

"No." I can't help sounding dead--it's how I feel. "No, don't do that. I'll go."

Femalé looks like she might be ready to smile again. Instead she hands me the rambunctious bedspread. Gives me a nudge toward the hole with her tennis shoe. "Git or I'll blast ya where ya stand right in that sack full of adorable shit."

I'm staggering upright, still reeling from a couple months of collar and chain. Before she can stop me I lean forward and kiss her on the gas mask, passionately where I take her lips to be. I close my eyes and savor its flavors. Dog, spent ammo, peanut butter and grape jelly. The kiss of a lifetime for a lifetime.

In another moment, dazed and disbelieving what I'm committing, I'm putting my own feet down into warm goo, keeping my eyes on the dimming world of Stalin Z's mobile home.

In particular, indelling in my brain the holy image of Femalé, her angry pre-Raphaelite presence waning under a patina of glowing black mold.

"Goodbye, Femalé." I have a lump in my throat engorged on a unsettling sentiment. Something other than tear gas stings my corneas.

"I'm glad you kidnapped me."

Bullets whiz overhead.

Both feet sink slowly into the oozing slime. Water inches up to my knees. My head and shoulders still clear the trailer floor. As I fall out of the mobile home, pulling the bedspread full of puppies after me, I catch one fleeting glimpse of an inferno world.

The walls of Stalin Z's home are trembling. In the living room an immense fireball rolls about in a blinding crackle. Hundreds upon hundreds of atrocity articles are haranguing me in their dragon breath.

"Don't you dare forget me, Ricky Cool Breeze." She turns and is gone. "Hold on you fuckers, wait for me!"

I smell the Reichstag burning. I see the flames walking on swamp water. I hear the storming troopers, their rifle roar. Above the tree line the sky pales with smoke. The sky is burning. Where will I find another sky?

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Again, I'm counting the dogs. There are still 12, not including the six puppies on my back. Two hang close at heel, swimming at my side--the Beagle and the Cooker Spaniel. I'm counting up the times I count up the dogs, counting the times I turn to look behind me at nothing, counting my steps forward crying out the number in the agony of each one.

Night birds flap, searching for prey, high in the cypress. A thing slithers against my kneecap. The air swarms, alive with insects. I can

barely breathe, an atmosphere thick as tar. I'm going back beyond the dawn of all things wading through primal putrescence.

In the streaks of silver light the ghost mists simmer around us. They wisp into spirit shapes, constricting the ash gray spars into polar bear embraces. They rise coiling from the tortured rot of the still living trees.

But no more gunfire in the distance. Just the bull frogs roaring, booming chorus after chorus, louder and louder, drowning out even the splashing and floundering of our own desperate escape.

When I turn to gasp for air, to peer in dread over my shoulder, checking the bedspread, searching for pursuers, I see only a sullen glow tingeing the mist beyond the furthest line of cypress.

But a few moments ago it seems, Femalé and Stalin Z lit up the horizon in a grand finale. I imagine their embers burn low as the moon rides across the sky.

The last faint cry I hear in their direction, "Hey what the fuck." Femalé!

Three dogs are proceeding us at the edge of the night. They chase the creatures of the swamp from our path. I believe they are the Foxhound, the Australian Cattle Dog, and the dear Border Collie.

The older dogs lag further and further behind. The Newfoundland flounders heavily. The Jack Russell and the Whippet are doing as well as can be expected. I have most concern for the Poodle. I'm afraid she won't make it, if any of us do. I would carry her if it weren't for the puppies.

We stagger. We almost fall. We go on and on, head forward and down, in this mad and hopeless rout. Sometimes, the water comes up no more than ankle deep. Sometimes it creeps to the knees. Sometimes we are enveloped by it, the bottom drops out from under us and we groan, frantic for survival. A morass of dead matter sucks us down and then we all strain in terror to escape from it.

One more look, a last farewell over the shoulder. No firelight there, dying reds in treetops. Only the moon glances on the off

ripples of our struggle. Our shadows glance one to another outlined in steaming glitter. The horizon has consumed our dead.

How far have we run? How much further can we go? But no one will follow us here. No one dares. Leeches suck on my legs and thighs. My face bloats with insect bites. Feet, like my hands, are swollen and bleeding.

This is delirium. Keep going, Randy, and for once in your life don't think. Don't think ever again. Go numb. The dogs before me are barking. The dogs behind me are whimpering. I'm both barking and whimpering. Singing too. I could howl my song for eternity.

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Goodbye goodbye. The poodle gives me one last glub-glub as she sinks forever from sight. Poor devil, you did your best didn't you. This sudden patch of deeper water, up to our breasts in soup, was too much for you. Too much for us all. Goodnight goodnight parting is such sweet sorrow.

My head fills with numbers, a just end for an economist. My countdown is in seconds, 1001, 1002 . . . That might be the number of leeches dragging my body down to hell. But no, I know what it is. My mind is doing a NASA count down toward its own extinction. But in Houston? Please, not there.

The black hole is sucking what is me into its core. as the swamp sucks down my weak and weary legs... 105 seconds. Coated in fungus. Black with muck. What is my name? Mr. Fungus Muck. Or Mr. Cunnilingus Fuck? From the Twilight Zone. We are slowly surrendering to the swamp. Inch by inch it reclaims us to the Campbell's soup life from which we were spooned. Definitely Cream of Mushroom.

73 seconds. Now each slow step forward is raw pain, I go on the stumps of legs. The next to go will be the Airedale. 45 seconds. Not much longer now. Can this really be happening to golden boy?

Eyes almost swollen closed even as more mosquitoes bite and gorge and whine at them.

An anthem rises in my ears, 'Give up give up give up you dumb shit'. . . Contraction ends. Yes, Dr. Lamaze, I have found another use for your method of natural childbirth. I'm using it for natural man death.

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"Just an I'm, without one plea . . ." This warble is coming from the other side of a veil that I can't pierce.

Also the swamp gas has begun to shine. A very bad sign augmenting my delirium, potent as grass on acid. It's taking on the form of a human voice. A voice in song.

Acid flashes coalesce. No, I'm not to be fooled by this celestial white light flickering up in my sight out of vapor. Or the sight of a luminous dry ground. Not even by the young and tender voice floating to us through these deceitful mists. It is swamp free.

I don't believe in it. None of it. I can't and won't. It's false news. From a false prophet.

The vision lures us on. A vision so potent that even the dogs see it. The Australian Cattle dog wags his tail at it. No use. We are at the ends of our tethers, so to speak.

"But that thy blood was shed for me . . ."

A piano tinkles out of tune on the sultry air waves. It comes wonderful to us on Marconi's ragu breath. Sure isn't Elfreda. She'd be missing more notes than that. This is such silly stuff.

How odd to discover that at Death's portal the mind reverts to kitsch. Not all is terror and despair. Some of it is comic relief. And I'm glad for it, too, for the dogs' sakes. I won't fret over their struggles any longer. I don't need to ache for them, dying alone and afraid.

For that matter I'm dying alone and afraid.

"And that thou bidst me come to thee . . ."

We are faltering to a standstill, my brothers, sisters and I. We drool, we drip, we melt into the black crud of a Double Fudge cake batter.

All of us crawl on all fours. The dream flickers directly overhead.

An altar shows up on this fantastic TV show. I recognize it immediately for General Hospital. One of my favorites and certainly one we need now. It flickers at us.

The mists are assuming human faces, expressions of amazement, pity, disgust. There seems to be a heavenly array of candles.

Chair legs grate in our ears along with a vague sensation of books raining down upon us. Are those hymnals falling from heaven?

My skin crawls with the razor blade sensation of satin. No other feel to compare. Perhaps robes of white satin? This death rattle of mine is quite a Super Bowl Half Time production.

We can go no further. My colleagues and I, we collapse in each other's arms, going down for the last time. The puppies spill whining from the bag at last. The Cocker Spaniel gives a final licking to my face. We've lost.

"O Lamb of God, I come . . . I come." That is so. I'm coming, I do believe, in a death rattling ejaculation.

The post apocalypse spreads itself in a banner above me. Words fade even as I look at them. Who could have ever guessed that my final glimmer would be of "*Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Campground*."

I think I've just been saved.

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I know nothing. Only what I'm told. Delivered by helicopter. Delirious. Only visitors FBI agents and journalists. With whom I'm incoherent.

So I'm feeling very confused, lying here in the Saint Mary's town hospital. So depressed over being alive I can barely breathe. I'm the only patient without flowers.

Specialists, interns, nurses and orderlies in either white or green uniforms tend to me. They are of various sex, intelligence and ethnicity. So far they've told me in sometimes comprehensible speech, probably middle Sumerian, that I have too many medical conditions for them to cope with. I'm already forgetting a few. So apparently are they.

I came in with exposure, exhaustion, food poisoning, tapeworm, a broken big toe, a couple of dozen contusions and lacerations, a hernia, a broken rib, a concussion. As well, what the doctor describes as 70% skin surface in fleas, ticks, mites and scabies, the near ubiquitous bites of mosquitoes, black flies, tics, and leeches. Lice too. All my body hair has been removed.. Plus claw scratches virtually everywhere with sepsis. They found syphilis and hemorrhoids both preexisting conditions. According to my chart they did not find heart break. Which is an error.

I'm thankful that I bought 'no deductible' with my insurance plus a single room request and a TV package. No phone. Who would call me. Who would I call. A true cautionary tale.

If I understand correctly, which I fear is a matter of doubt, my treatment consists of strict bed rest, a profusion of salves, antibiotics and painkiller, sleeping pills, antidepressants, eye and ear drops, and purgatives. I have too many bandages to count. I'm hooked to an IV. A catheter line swishes whenever I move as if I have a cat under the sheet.

My finger I see is pressing the call button. I'm not sure why. Can't stop it.

"I hear ya. Mistah Purcell, ya got no need to ring your bell more than once? If ya keep ringing it like that maybe no one'll come at all, ever. What ya'll want? "

She's fussing about. I'm silent since I can't think of anything to want except for what I can no longer have.

"You got the blues, don't you? Now listen to me Mistah Purcell." For sure I am.

"Know what I do when I'm blue? I sing."

Goodie, stay on the sunny side.

But her voice is for me, coming to me, uniquely me, in this sick green room in this Camden County Hospital. Broadcast from here on the hospital's top floor with a great view of the Okefenokee Swamp. Like a swing band radio program in the age of FDR.

“Driving to work sometimes I hear a song on the radio by this band of colored boys, least they do sound so. They sing a song that means something to me. Gets bigger and bigger for me. Listen now.”

She sings it to me with head back, mighty nostrils flaring and her black face shining in all its handsome glory.

*You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometimes well you might find
You get what you need.*

Song over, at last comes the question I've been dreading for some time.

“Mistah Purcell, being a nurse and all I got professional interest in you. Never seen a patient come in like you. Excuse me for asking. We all here at Camden County are curious ever since they brought you in half dead. Now that you can answer would you mind telling me how come ya'll got a dog's face on your man's business?”

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The line trudges forward very very slowly, one step at a time. We go in a shuffling cadence timed by pauses for passengers to climb aboard one by one, search for their MTA token and then at last drop it into the fare box.

Bus will be standing room only. Behind this there's a second empty bus waiting to pick up more of the throng.

In my ravaged imagination we are being herding toward a freight car of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe line. An all-American nightmare.

No, this is the Q101 bus. Almost the same thing. My all time first bus ride. I am not excited.

Today, they've assigned me a blotchy brindle, mix of the Unknown Terrier with a long lineage of Undesirable Mongrel. The kind of dog that's been invisible, unwanted, for a few thousand years. Her doleful image is to be found scavenging for scraps on the walls of an Egyptian queen's tomb, Middle Kingdom, Upper Egypt. She's caved in to the ribs.

"We all need a little warmth and companionship, don't we, girl." At the sound of my voice, the bitch goes nuts.

She whines, cringes, growls and frightened by herself ends by leaping into the air twisting to fight the leash. Up she shoots rising hysterical to an altitude of a couple of feet.

Crashing back she hits nose first on another Jackson Pollock New York sidewalk, spattering of hardened flattened densely spewed blobs of chewing gum. Her landing is a pathetic clunk of teeth and bone. Four legs splay out on the bitter concrete.

This is the best thing I have ever done, to become a volunteer Dog Walker for the New York City Humane Society. I come every Saturday to do this. The only appointment in my calendar book. It's my one just reason for leaving the tight quarters of my SRO on 173rd Street between Amsterdam and Audubon, the place where I'm learning Spanish by simply breathing the air.

Girl's on the small side, scarred, an uninteresting nothing from tip of nose to tip of tail. Her sole attributes are that she's young and that so far she hasn't bitten me.

I can see my own breath. I can see hers. Guess that means we are both alive. At least I think she still is. Girl's just lying where she fell, flanks heaving in distress.

In the street the manhole covers steam, subterranean New York is also alive. Steam is incorporeal, same as the emanation of dislike and disapproval sent to us by this miserable creepy line.

We wait at the end of the queue. The last allowed onto this bus. The less lucky told to wait in the arctic for the next bus.

The Q101 bus is probably the most singular in the city. I looked it up to be sure. The route runs from 59th Street in Manhattan, on the steps of the New York City Humane Society, to the Rykers Island prison in Queens. From prison to prison.

On a Saturday, like today, I gather that the throng, the women of Bed Stuy, Brownsville, East New York, the Lower East Side, Harlem, the South Bronx, wake up with primal urges to answer. They go by instinct to the bus.

A multitude of them are here. Cold in cheap coats. Perhaps in flimsy best dresses. Dressing up to tease their caged men. Odorous of sugary perfumes. Most stand with babies or young children.

Sex and poverty, social betrayal and sorrow. Tension here is a rapture of the deep.

From one end to the other all the way along tension has this line enthralled. And Americans, meaning the white middle class, are not well schooled in handling social, racial, class fault lines.

Anger vapor trails over our heads, trailing some dangerous self pity too. It smells stronger than the perfume. Hot asphalt. Some of it lavas in rivulets between the black and hispanic riders. Some between young and old, pretty and ugly. Strong against the few white women here. Strongest of all for me, the one white male in sight.

At least I assume I'm still white and male. Anyway, I have no mirror large enough to look at myself naked. Wouldn't want to.

It remains.

Bitch sure isn't happy waiting.

"Easy girl. We're about to go." She squints up at me in manic angst, hating 59th Street, the cold air, the mean, quarter-sized sun

above us almost lost in the city sky. Bitch sighs in resignation. Her ears sag. Obviously she'd commit suicide if she could.

The Humane people give me their most hopeless cases--must be something in my face. I walk the sickest, meanest, most pathetic and uncontrollable dogs. Every dog I walk ends up being 'destroyed'.

Young woman in front turns, opens her mouth to show me her lack of an orthodontist. "Man, that's the ugliest dog ever. I mean the worst. Better keep it clear of me or I'll do you."

No one in line stares directly at anyone else. Most seem to be staring stricken at a communal abyss. Or at winter, at the Humane Society windows, at the dirty bus. Or up at the slate sky. Wistful for superman to rescue them.

Myself, waiting in line here on this sidewalk of doom I'm feeling a semblance of peace. Not so the bitch who after wrapping two feet of leash around my ankles has squatted to piss with 'don't hit me' eyes on my shoes.

Line moves away from us another foot.

Bitch is attempting to claw her way down to China through layers of New York City bedrock. Claws spark. Tether noose tightens. She gags half strangled.

Lighter in hand my joint paper fires up in a jolly 'you are about to lose your mind' kind of way. I hope so. I'm cupping it in my hands against the East River. Holding the smoke in for as long as I can.

Bus smokes too. Maybe I'm getting higher and higher on whatever it's got in its diesel. A Shreveport refinery on wheels.

Bitch snorts. Good enough reply. She scratches at the blue ribbon I tied around her neck. Hoping it would make her merry. Is she getting stoned on second hand joint smoke? I hope so.

No one here knows what sort of being the other is or even who we are ourselves. Very strange realization.

For example, I'm carrying so many acquired names it makes me feel like I'm on the FBI most wanted list, where in fact I might well be included.

I'd like to say something, to any one. "Stand up straight girl. Don't drag your tail. Look your best."

My voice is thin, too cold, tinkling of ice in a glass. Am I speaking aloud or to myself? Afraid I'm sure. I am more and more uncertain these days.

Line's moving along. We're about to get left behind. Better raise my free arm so the driver sees us.

Fumes and this outstanding dope give me cause to catch the arrival of my very own private ghosts. They're coming up from the East river. The dripping blue spirits of those who have vanished from my life. Maybe they aren't even dead. They shiver and that's a sign of the undead.

No choice in the matter they're coming along for the ride. Hope they have their tokens.

To the dismay of all riders girl and I are moving to board. I'm pulling but she's not moving. I bend down to pick her up in my arms. Directly she goes limp, her hindquarters drop. No resistance. Does she think she's already been injected.

She gives out a mournful "Urrr." I could do the same.

Except I also feel a sudden deep stirring inside me, an ineffable brightness welling. Could it be the gyro I had for lunch? Can't be happiness. Not for me.

Young woman turns back to confront me. "No way. You aren't bringing that on the bus."

I just give her the finger. Sunken eyes rage accusingly, suddenly vulnerable. Why do I attract women who fixate on me?

With my arms full of dog I'm saying, "Come on girl. Don't be a pain in the ass. We need to go ring Gottfried's and Elfreda's doorbell."