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The August vanities and other stories

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THE AUGUST VANITIES AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

David Wayne Johnson

May 2007

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ABSTRACT

THE AUGUST VANITIES AND OTHER STORIES

By David W. Johnson

The August Vanities is a collection of short stories, each marking the author's diverse experiments in exploring the craft of Creative Writing, uniqueness in the author's personality the common thread that ties the works together. Using broad-brush strokes, the stories are as diverse in style as they are in content. From the expressionistic "High Art" to the complex impressionist voice of "Florida," each provides its own horizon designed to illuminate the extents to which that experiment can reach. In that sense, the collection satisfies the basic premise of academic writing: the development of the author. The "Hexes of Haight" experiment, for instance, introduces the subculture-within-a-subculture element. A woman questions not her heterosexuality, but whether she can trust her homosexual instincts. In the title work, the author introduces Michel Pêcheux's tripartite identity states to the creative writing process by applying all of them to the development of a single protagonist.

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PREFACE

Inherent in the definition of *peace activism* is gun control. Yet, the rumblings of more than a few American peaceniks about the need to keep and pack ordnance are a pervasive chat in cyber space. It's a fitting anecdote for the times. We've entered a period of reassessment, possibly due to political misadventures, but undoubtedly anxiety about an uncertain future plagued by climate change, resource depletion, and the decline of an empire contribute to the angst.

The August Vanities collection re-imagines a host of contemporary issues, and no political ideology is immune. The primary purpose of the experiment is to take advantage of this uncertain period by challenging those fundamental beliefs that we hold without reservation. A psychiatrist, suffering a nervous breakdown due in large to a love relationship with a fourteen year-old girl has his preconceived notions yank away from him in the title story; a poet plagued by a lack of talent becomes something of a living poem in "High Art." The point is not to dictate tastes or preferences, but to tread new paths around well-

worn avenues, asking the kind of questions that publishers of cultural realism tend to avoid. Asking the tough questions is a subversive act; it risks exposing the voting public to what anthropologists have always known about culture: it is an illusion.

Right and wrong [are] shades of meaning, not sides of a
coin.

-Louise Erdrich, "Love Medicine"

A Curse of Love

Wendy's Honda 550 barked its way across Castro Valley and down Market Street, waking peripheral characters as far away as the Civic Center. Élan's eyes blink open when he hears her bike, but he can't shake the hold of muscle paralysis until she long passes his window. Then he lies in bed staring at his ceiling for an hour, terrorized by the curious similarity between the sound of Wendy's engine and the perpetual drum beat from the nightclub that kept him awake until one. Pigeons hear her bike, and they take flight as she draws near them, a Doppler ballet fanning the distance from Fillmore to Masonic.

The only one who doesn't hear the machine, the person who perhaps should have, for the sake of Helen, who got in late from jumping out of a cake in her birthday suit on Saturday but who within a couple precious hours will sing

in the choir at the Glide Memorial on Sunday, is Jennie. She sleeps soundly knowing that when Wendy gets her letter this morning, she and her insanity will be out of Jennie's life forever and she can start dating men again, something that amounted to sacrilege and even treason during the Wendy period.

But Jennie's sweet dreams of hard male bodies and soft wet kisses were interrupted by the rumbling of Wendy's illegally modified muffler, and out of a complete disregard for the neighbors, she lets the bike growl like an impatient dragon under Jennie's window.

Princess Mona, who lives in an adjoining flat, reached her window first. She knows the sound of Wendy's bike, and adrenalin jolts her from her fretful sleep.

"Jennie! Hey baby I love you!" Wendy shouts. "Look, I'm sorry! I'll change! C'mon, buzz me in baby!"

"You bitch! I'm calling the cops! You better get your ass out of here!" warns Princess Mona.

"Come down here and make me you fucking prick!" Wendy responds, pressing every button in the building, and then she kicks a garbage can and tosses the lid up at Mona's window. When the lid comes crashing back down to Earth,

Jennie's brown eyes flutter open and she scratches her nose and licks her lips.

"Jennie baby, I talked to a therapist, and I'm gonna quit drinkin'. Don't do this to me! Gimme another chance!"

"You don't need therapy, bitch, you need a straightjacket," Princess Mona answers for Jennie. And then it occurs to Jennie out of the blue that today is Sunday. Something about the shouting brings her around to that realization. Like mom and pop back in Pennsylvania, who couldn't live together, but did so anyway, in an attempt to save face at the last moment as they carted the kids off to church with mechanical smiles, buttoned up in their Sunday bests, but burning to death from inside, from the heart. But for the dawn of the moment, Jennie is thirteen again. She hears, but doesn't listen to Wendy, then Mona, then the two together, and then she wonders whether she should paint her toenails pink. A small smile creeps across her lips.

Wendy plodded up the worn-out stairs in the hallway. Someone had the ignorance to buzz her through the door. The electric charge from inevitable violence between Wendy and Princess Mona melts the smile from Jennie's face, and

now she is fourteen; a half-woman governed by a child's brain. Torn between adventure and responsibility, a haze had settled over her that has yet to burn away in the California sun.

Now she lies in bed listening to the low thud of bodies slamming into the soft Redwood-studded hallway six years later. Despite a trust fund, an active social life and a short career in therapy, nothing rises to the level of excitement. She lives with the daily reality that a deficit slowly eats away at her soul, that God had abandoned her at the age of fourteen, never to return, casting her away to the indifferent whims of an irrelevant world. And yet there is nothing left for her to blame this feeling on, so she bears this responsibility as life drags on, when all she wants to do, the goal of every healthy young woman, is to see the whole matter slip beneath her consciousness and forget about it.

Wendy on the other hand, at five-foot three and one hundred forty pounds, is a tempest in a teapot. Her rite of passage into womanhood involved medication during pubescent mood swings and institutions during lapses. She and Princess Mona are rolling around and swapping punches in the stairwell next to the front door of Tyrone, a

similarly situated off-duty security guard who joins the affray at the sight of Princess Mona's ebony skin. But when Mona looks up at him with the seductive eyes of a damsel in distress, she realizes that chivalry is dead, at least at five o'clock on a Sunday morning, when Tyrone decides it's too early to explore a side of him he's never known. He backs away into his flat threatening the contenders with violence and ad hominem labels.

"Thanks Cedric, I'll take it from here," Jennie says, as she leads Wendy into her flat, leaving Princess Mona to her tears.

"Jennie, baby, I don't know what I'd do if I lost you," Wendy sobs. She presses her frozen cheek against Jennie's breasts.

"The craziness has got to stop, Wendy. I wish you well, but I wish you'd stay the hell away from me."

"Jennie, I'm trying to stop drinking, I'm changing my medicine. I'm even seeing another therapist. This one doesn't work for the state. She's doing me on sliding scale."

"Wendy, listen to me. I don't want to hurt you, but I have to be frank. It's over. I have lots of good memories, but I have to move on now."

As tears drip across Wendy's cheeks, change has been set into motion. Her frantic mind races through all the memories that the lovers had shared. There were the bike trips across the Golden Gate, Point Reyes, hiding from the Ranger at nightfall. There was dancing by the light of the moon in the surf-drunk on cheap wine-then collapsing at Stinson Beach in the afternoon while Marin families step over the inner-city hippies, asleep again and baking in the sun like to big buns of Patchouli.

Wendy plays with an Egyptian amulet around Jennie's neck. An Egyptophile, Wendy had stolen it at the Haight Street Faire in anticipation of Jennie's upcoming birthday. Jennie would add it to her collection of meaningless objects that define their empty two-year relationship. Wendy can smell her unwashed musk and hear Jennie's heartbeat, but she knows that she's holding on to a memory. In a moment (Wendy searched her mind for clues of when that moment would be), she will have to let go. Then she would have to struggle to continue holding on to the world.

"Are you OK?" Jennie asks, but she already knows the answer.

"Isn't there anything I can do, Jennie? I just don't feel I can go on. The time just ain't right for me."

"There's never an appropriate time for these things."

"I know I'm going to die. I saw it in a vision. When I read your note, I had a vision. The Goddess is summoning me."

This wasn't good news. Wendy had needle marks on her arms and once spent four days in the state mental hospital last winter after chasing a handful of Vicodin with Tequila.

"What did she say to you?" Jennie asks, trying to be responsive.

"She said my soul-sister will hold a requiem deep in the Redwood forest for me..."

"Wendy..."

"...And all our friends will be there, and you'll be wearing a chartreuse gown with lace gloves. I saw you, standing inside the circle with me as I lay there covered with a bouquet of wild flowers..."

"...But Wendy..."

"Michael was there."

"Wendy, don't bring him into this."

"A pall bearer. With Kevin and Trey and the rest of the band."

"They wouldn't drop a tear for you, Wendy."

"They'd come. Because you'd be there. With me out of the way nothing would stop them from slobbering all over you like St. Bernards..."

The facts were wrong, but the effect was the same. The band wouldn't wait for Wendy to die, but while she's around, Michael wouldn't betray his crazy sister, and the band, by solemn oath and an endless highway of experience, wouldn't betray one another other over a girl. Jennie of course could find another man, but love has a habit of singling out individuals, and Jennie could no more pull away from Michael as his sister could from Jennie.

"I don't love you Wendy. Do what you gotta do, but give me my freedom."

"Never. What I gotta do is get rid of Michael once and for all. I'll tell him you drove me to jump off the fucking bridge. My memory will be the pariah that's haunts him away from you in the end."

"Don't joke like that, Wendy. No matter what happens, I'll be there for him the entire time"

"I'll take him with me. Our next trip south for the Monterey festival, I'll grab the wheel at Grey Whale Cove. I promise he'll go quickly. A quick hundred-foot drop and he'll be dead before he hears the crashing of the waves."

"Give it up Wendy, you're not going to kill him. You know that."

"Remember Brenda what's her name? From Wisconsin? The one that gave you the hickey? I was the last one to see her alive, remember? Everyone said they couldn't believe she was a heroin junkie. Well she wasn't."

"Wendy, you're wierding me out..."

"Listen, honey, I love you. I'm not giving you up for no one. Just forget about all this nonsense about breaking up. If you want Michael, I'll make myself scarce once in a while. But you and me babe, we're perm, ya got it? No one's going any where."

"No, of course not..." Jennie said. "You an' me like you said. Together for the long run."

Wendy and Jennie look into each other's eyes. Now there was understanding-A contract, a reason for Wendy to hold-on. Suddenly a loud thud hits Jennie's front door.

"You fucking bitch! I hate you, I hate you!" Princess Mona cries out from the other side.

"Sore loser," Wendy sneers. The two smile at each other.

"I beat him up, you seen it," Wendy says.

"You took him to school'" Jennie says.

"And Cedric. He didn't want any part of me."

"Now you're pushing it."

As sunlight begins to slip through the cracks in her Venetian blinds, Jennie takes Wendy by the hand and leads her to her bed. On her side table lays a CD player and an assortment of discs. She searches for the one the band made up in Seattle before heading to Chicago. The sound on that one didn't mix right, and you could hear Michael plodding on the drums, as though a persistent heart beat, drowning out Kevin's hungry guitar and Trey's sexually predatory lyrics. That one is Jennie's favorite recording. Wendy meanwhile rummages through the closet until she resurfaces with a favorite toy, a leather strap-on and ten-inch silicon attachment. Jennie drops her robe and rolling onto her hands and knees, tries to picture Michael on stage with his large biceps and crystal blue eyes. With a forceful jerk, she veers forward, and though her eyes are open, they glaze while she slowly turns to stone; her spirit forever encased within the statue of the Sphinx.

High Art

Despite the occasional prosaic valentine, or perhaps one designed to demonstrate his proficiency of the language to a high school English teacher, Mitch wrote only one poem in his adult life. It was a good poem, and before he finished it, he knew he had something special. His spine tingled when he realized he could tie contemporary politics with timeless imagery, and the thrust of that experience compelled him to finish it.

When he did, he carried it around with him in a folder with a polystyrene window, and set off to visit acquaintances. After the usual formalities, Mitch was quick to steer the conversation toward his poem. If talk was global, he would tie the weather to imagery, and imagery to his poem, which he would produce in short order. If timely issues guided the banter, Mitch the activist supported his position inherent in his one, altruistic

poem. If no one was interested, or if conversation were futile, he would sniff and state bluntly: "Hey, I wrote a poem...ya wanna read it?"

After several would-be critics chimed in, Mitch realized he would benefit from expert advice about his poem. The words came to him so effortlessly that Mitch felt that it tied organically to his soul. Like a window, someone could look through and see him in all his naked honesty, slicing like a laser through all the intermediary psychomachia that came between him and his need for self-expression. For that reason, he wanted to understand the poem as well as he wanted to understand his own self.

"It could be cleaned up a little, the language is a little awkward, but yeah, I think it's an interesting poem," his old high-school English teacher offered. "Listen, why don't you take a poetry class at the community college, since this seems to be important to you?" But Mitch had no time for college. He wanted to know about this poem, the one he knew was better than all the others, the crest of the wave that defines the high water mark for all the poetry to come.

"Ha!" the English Professor at the community college blurted. She caught the irony in the last line with the

insight of a skilled professional. "You know there are several poetry contests. You could always submit to one."

Mitch walked along the hallway in the English department in awe of all the brochures and flyers from literature associations, academic programs and contests pinned-up before him. Mitch already realized the thing was an autobiography, cunningly hidden within a pond of subsequent meaning. He wondered how in all that ocean of purpose pinned to the walls anyone would ever find the pink skin waiting for discovery in his little basket of double entendre. Then, in a moment of extraordinary insight, or maybe panic, Mitch concluded that the piece needn't be prostituted around the literary community anyway. He would go to the bookstore, buy a pencil and notebook, and sit in the library scripting a lesser piece. It would be a good one though, one good enough to pass the muster of the finer poetry contests, giving him the notoriety he needed, but if not, then without the humility of the rejection of his finest work, that one that defines the mark of the master. There was no guarantee that the judges would "get it," or worse, misinterpret it, potentially creating a spiritual crisis that might lead Mitch to the couch of a therapist.

Mitch sat alone at a large oval table in the library with his pencil in his hand and his heart on his sleeve. When a theme refused to emerge willingly, he tried cajoling one with possible titles, each one more obtuse than the last. To Mitch, it began to appear as though the large table was growing even wider, and the tall racks of books on both sides of him were leaning in, like skyscrapers in a sophisticated city, built on the fruitless swamp of Mitch's imagination. After untold hours of scribbling pretentious phrases that he sentenced to death with strike-throughs, the natural lighting from the windows in the library gave way to the incandescents, and still he had no poem to show for his efforts. He tossed the pencil aside and rested his face in his hands. After a moment of silence, the librarian alerted him that the building was closing in five minutes. Mitch released an anguished roar that turned heads as far away as the periodical section. The next day, he was back at the table, arriving hopeful and leaving teary-eyed and it went on like this, day after day for weeks, until finally he simply didn't show up anymore.

Mitch kept quiet for several months after his visit, and people wondered what happened to him. They speculated that he had joined some sort of religious cult that spoke

in metaphors rather than concise sentences, and others held the view that his political ideology got him into hot water with the government, and they were holding him in a secret location. But the majority opinion, supported by witnesses who frequented the library, held that he retired into his home, working on some of the greatest literature ever written. After all, here was a man so committed to his art that he lived and breathed it, obsessed over it, or at least fretted over it, until it became natural to identify him by it.

As hearsay goes, so do the scholars of the community, and it wasn't long before an overly tenacious English Professor from the college came around looking for him. If Mitch was working on something exciting, then she wanted to reserve the right of first discovery. His single floor rambler was easy to find. On one side, a retentive neighbor had weed-whacked the definition of a border between his property line and Mitch's, as his grass had grown so high that feral cats were living in it, leaving one with the impression that Ernest Hemingway's ghost took possession of the house. She made her way along the overgrown sidewalk and up the front stairs. Mail protruded out of its box, and some letters lay water-stained on the

porch. She picked them up (a scholarly penchant for research) and read the return addresses: some bills and junk mail, but nothing that revealed what high art might be lurking within tight constraints of the orderly suburbs.

She rang the bell. After several minutes went by, she convinced herself that all the evidence pointed to disappearance, and started negotiating her way through the tall grass behind her. Just before she left, the door creaked open. She turned to find the shell of a man, ghost like, or ghost inhabited, with a pale face and deep bags under his eyes. He lost a substantial amount of weight, perhaps thirty pounds, and his hair had grown wild and long. But it was Mitch. She recognized him by his intense, purposeful gaze, and he her, by her plaid academic-like sport coat, the one she was wearing the only day the two had met.

"I knew you would come," Mitch offered, "When the floodgates of Atlantis burst open by the weight of Poseidon's nectar, then poets will drink from that fructuous well."

"What?" she asked innocently.

"Aren't you here from the college?" he asked, more precisely.

"Yeah, we spoke a while ago. I was interested in how your literary career was coming along."

"I have a literary career?"

"I just want you to know that I'm here to help. Show me anything you have, and I'll see what I can do with it."

Mitch's face went blank. Then he turned and went back inside the house. After a tedious several minutes, in which the professor took in the spirit of the eccentric, she called out to him from the porch.

"Mitch? Are you coming back out again?"

Then he emerged, forlorned, holding out a piece of paper. The professor quickly retrieved it from his hand. She read it, immediately recognizing the original poem he brought to her office many months earlier. He waited a stiff moment before he explained, but the professor, as sharp as ever, answered before he had a mind to.

"I see. You're working on an anthology. This is your first installment. Do you mind if I submit it?"

"Sure. Why not. What do I have to lose?"

The college professor knew Mitch never checked his mail or ventured out of his house. That's why, when she received the notice from a major magazine that they wanted to print the poem, she delivered the news personally.

"I'm recognized?" he deduced, dreamlike, as though the praise was meant for someone else. "They get it. They understand."

Soon, people began to learn that Mitch was a published poet, with work featured in the most mucky-muck of magazines. He got invited to parties, spoke extemporaneously at gatherings, and was even featured as guest celebrity at the opening of the college library wing dedicated to the work of T. S. Elliot. His color came back, and he gorged himself on wine from art galleries and finger food from poetry readings. Through it all, no one ever asked him to explain his work, because to do so was gauche, as though one were begging him to impart the being of Mitch into the artificial body of the freshman recreant. Mitch, his poem, and his reputation, were an entity, eccentric and original, and the public ate it up. They worked themselves into a frenzy trying to describe Mitch in papers. He became the subject of critical essays and well-intended poems that Mitch would regard with rancor. They found creative ways to appease him, one young man going so far as to offer to cut his lawn if he would only write a note excusing him from English class while he "assisted" Mitch.

None of this went unnoticed within the great publishing concerns in New York. They felt compelled to recognize Mitch, for someone who has so captured the imagination of the community deserves canonization, or at least co-opted, before the competition gets to him. Through it all, Mitch labored in private anguish. He knew the matter of his production was bound to come up, and sure enough, it wasn't long before an agent came knocking on his door.

"First, let me say what an honor it is to meet you", the agent said. "Now let's get down to business. I represent a publishing house in Manhattan, and this is my proposal: You give us the right of first refusal on everything you write. In exchange, we'll lobby for a Guggenheim, advance you ten thousand dollars against your first collection of poems, and pay the first three months rent on a studio apartment in Midtown Manhattan. All you have to do is sign here."

Mitch hovered over the contract in paralysis, until the agent spoke again, leaning his head toward Mitch, as if there were someone lurking in the bushes: "um, I'm not supposed to say this, but I know they'll go as high as twenty-thousand dollars if they have to."

"I dunno," Mitch said. It just doesn't seem right.

"Wow, priggish talent," the agent said. "Well how about this, then...our final offer: we'll buy all your manuscripts for ten-thousand dollars, right here at the door. I'll cut you the check when you hand me the goods."

"Jeez, I do have a lot of notes. You really want to buy them?"

"You haven't received an offer from the college, have you?"

"Mister, if you want my notebooks, you can have them. But I'll need time to produce the poetry."

"We'll cut the check for everything right now, and give you a year to produce the literature."

Mitch shrugged his shoulders.

"Sounds fair enough."

With that, Mitch began packing his bags for the Big Apple. The community gave him a grandiose exit party, with all the pomp and circumstance of a local hero. Artists sketched him sitting on the porch of his house, so that his lengthy repose would follow along with him in spirit. On his last night in town, loud music, cocktails and Hors d'oeuvres embellished the Elliot wing of the library. Women who normally kept their respectful distance, now perceived

their last chance at wooing him, and he received untold phone numbers written on napkins, and as the night drew on, they flung their arms around his neck and with dizzy heads and spaghetti legs, danced the night away.

In New York, Mitch recognized immediately he was out of his element. Midtown Manhattan only made things worse. His studio was three stories above the ground, and still the tall buildings on each side of him reached high above him, leaning in on him, intimidating him with their jaded humanity. He heard voices rambling from every direction, like half-worn phrases that he wanted desperately to silence with a quick strike-through, day in and day out, and at all hours of the night. The crowds were as indifferent to him as the halls of the English department once were. When the city would suddenly fall silent, the impending chaos sure to follow was enough to cause Mitch to scream into the night until he was exhausted and hoarse. Upon looking for somewhere else to go, to get away for a moment, he had found only the roach and rat infested belly that fed the imagination of all of those artists a hundred floors above him who saw only an epiphany where Mitch saw his undoing.

Mitch's complimentary three months rent had become a testy six months now, and it wasn't long before the publishing company came around calling on him for the return on their investment. After several attempts at reaching him, they hired a private investigator to find him, who reassured them that he never left his apartment. They knew this, because experience had dictated that the occasional scream had originated from Mitch's studio. Thereafter, they stood in front of his door along with several sheriffs' deputies and knocked. When no one answered, they let themselves in, unceremoniously. They found an unclad Mitch huddled in the corner with a pillow over his head, the floor littered with scratches and ramblings tied together with deeply creased pencil marks and eraser scars, and to those present, it looked as though Mitch's most prolific literary days were behind him.

Mitch walked the streets of New York for weeks after that. His emaciated frame and unkempt hair rather melted in with the general façade of the streets and the alleys he bedded down in, and it wasn't long before he grew accustomed to the squalor. With acceptance came insight, and the city began to talk to Mitch in a language he could understand. Before long, Mitch became adept in speaking

that language; one of private imagery and politico-philosophical rambling that was beyond literary codification.

No one was sure what became of Mitch after that, though there are always those who can speculate with skillful authority. The corporate view held that he took a job at Berkeley, as a philosopher, giving high marks to those students who asked the most questions. His declining fan base believed Mitch retired from poetry, because he refused to be a pawn in the corporate destruction of the American literary establishment. But for those scholars, who pursue leads as tenaciously as a rat takes to scraps of Coney-dogs, Mitch was a mineshaft largely unexplored. They plodded through card catalogs in libraries, interviewed hometown friends, colleagues, friends of colleagues, even dove head-first into dumpsters, all in a vain effort to find that one diamond in the rough, that unpublished poem that Mitch surely wrote, the unequivocal proof that Mitch was the master of all that is poetic. But if Mitch were there to guide them, he could reassure them that they were looking in the wrong places.

The V.A.

The nurse found his name right away. Nelson, Roland R. It was on the door leading to his private gurney, followed by his Social Security number. Below that, typed slightly offset, and intruding upon the form line, was Roland's alibi: "brought in for motor vehicle accident." After waiting for nearly four hours, Edna finally found her Marine.

"Thank you, sir, for your help."

"That's alright, lady," answered the male nurse, "But next time, you'll have to come during visiting hours."

Edna had come during visiting hours, but avoided a confrontation by not suggesting as much. Edna was a shy woman with little to say about the world. She normally worked out both sides of a conflict in her head, but deferred to the opinion of the adversary in the end. Usually this would be her husband. Given her experiences

with him, she'd rather not speak at all, but today she would have to. She served her four-hour tour of duty avoiding eye contact as much as possible, as an assortment of pathologies and their nuptial support fussed over one paper after another. Whatever conversations she couldn't avoid had been standard operational: she forgot to fill out the back of one form, didn't realize another was an eight-and-a-half-by-fourteen folded upwards, and failed to put her initials in some hidden boxes. Her husband's DD214 was a copy, and therefore provisional only. She would have to send to Missouri for the original. If she finished everything correctly, and pressed hard enough for all carbons to be legible, they assured her of seeing her husband before visitation was over.

In the meantime, she had papers of her own in which to worry. The man riding the twenty-thousand-dollar Harley was an off-duty police officer. That was the civil complaint. However, her husband kept going until the car came to a stop at the bottom of a ravine. That and the initial DUI were the felony criminal complaints. Next in line were the divorce papers. A legal aid service filled them out, and she worried that the house wasn't sufficiently protected. Then there were the insurance

papers. She didn't understand them, and hoped that by the sale of the house, she could hire a lawyer to translate them for her.

As the nurse walked off, Edna noticed a sharp pain in her side, accompanied by nausea, which made her indigestion grow worse. Since at this moment she could think only of herself, guilt caused her face to turn red and her ears to ring. She considered throwing the papers into the air and collapsing onto the floor, but after mulling it over for a moment, decided that would only delay her from getting out of there for another day, so she unwound another Tums and pushed the door open to meet her husband. "How typical of him to be O Positive, the most common blood type," the form on the door reminded her, "Some people were just born to prevail."

In his room, however, Roland didn't look much like a winner.

"Roland?"

When he failed to respond, she searched for a light switch. Only one fluorescent bulb flickered to life in the fixture above, dim and buzzing precariously. It cast irregular lines that blinked across the room and up and down her husband's body, but it was enough light to notice

that he was swathed head to toe in bandages. A winch stretched his right leg out and pulleys elevated the left. On his neck, he wore a brace that pulled his chin high in the air allowing his sorry demeanor the dignity of a Marine, if at the expense of comfort. At the top of the brace, screws twisted into his skull. In all, everything about Roland reminded her of the last twenty minutes of a driver's-education movie.

To her relief, she noticed that his jaw was clenched shut, knitted up with wire mesh, the miracle for which she dared not hold out hope. Overall, however, she took pity on him. They had been married for seventeen years. Some of that time, they even enjoyed one another's company. She resolved herself to keeping the visit as civil as possible.

"Roland honey, can you hear me?"

Slowly, he struggled to raise his head. She stepped closer to see his face. Only his eyes were visible, blood shot and pale gray, probably an after-effect from the medication and trauma.

"Roland, I've been waiting for four hours for a chance to see you. Can you look at me?"

He looked confused and disoriented, and she bid him to lie back down.

"That's O. K. I have enough talking to do for the both of us."

As she traced her thoughts for something to say, he gurgled and made a smacking sound with his lips. That tiny acknowledgement was enough to cause her to snap out of the moment and search her mind for a more defensive approach.

"You're not going to take this moment away from me, Roland. I acknowledge the fact that you're seriously injured, and if you could, you probably would be jumping all over me about how selfish I am for not driving you to your bowling game. Yes, Roland, I knew how much you drank that evening, and you know what? I didn't want to stop you. So there it is." A campaign began to brew in Edna, which seemed to do what her collection of self-help books couldn't. She felt purged, if only for the moment. His head slowly returned to the pillow and turned away from her. She took advantage of the momentum and continued:

"The fact is I was hoping you would've killed yourself. How you survived is a mystery to me. You were so drunk; I had to practically load you into the car. I had to put the keys into the ignition. I tangled the seatbelt up in the doorjamb. Still, after being pinned under a Volvo, you managed to survive. After two tours in

Vietnam and prostate surgery, I'm beginning to think you're invincible."

As she struggled to pull herself together, she noticed she was wringing her paperwork like a rag. Perhaps there were original copies in the stack. She unfurled them to have a look and noticed the divorce papers.

"There's another reason I came here, Roland. Every time I try to leave you, you talk me out of it. Not this time. I'm serving you these divorce papers. I want the house. I'm getting a lawyer, so please don't waste money by making this a contest."

Once again, his head rose from the pillow. He gurgled emphatically, but incoherently.

"This isn't easy for me, either, Ro, but trust me, I'm resolved this time."

Despite the virtual impossibility of his condition, his gurgle managed to evolve into a definite mumble, and the faint uttering of words began to emerge. It took a valiant effort on his part, but still she was having none of it.

"You won't let me divorce you, will you Roland? You son of a bitch... you know about the insurance policy... of course. You would have to. That underwriter was a friend

of yours from Camp Pendleton. *Goddamnit Edna,*" she cursed herself, *" how could you be so stupid? You made a mess out of your own life, and now you're making a mess out of mine! That's what you're thinking, Roland. That's what's going through your head. You're lying here on the verge of death, and you think I'm taking everything away from you, that I'm a stupid ninny."*

Both sides of the issue were becoming clear to Edna now, and she argued from his:

"Half of everything belongs to me. How are you supposed to take care of yourself without me? You're not getting that house, woman. That place was purchased on my G. I. Loan. I earned it Goddamned it I spent two years at Khe San alone. If you're not strong enough to support a man who's been through everything I have, how do you think you can survive on your own? Your mother's not here to take care of you any longer, sugar."

She shrieked and pounded her fists on his bed. The redness in her face returned and her belly coughed up the dragon breath of indigestion. Once more, his head slowly moved to rest on the pillow behind him.

"You're not taking this away from me! I want to start a new life free of you, Roland! I deserve it! You won't do this to me...!"

After a minute, She caught her breath and looked around the room. It was clear something was coming over her; perhaps in a bad way, but in it she found the strangest enjoyment and relief. She felt purged for the first time in years. She moved toward him with a smile on her face.

"I have all the power now, Roland. You will not destroy me."

She moved her hands up his waist and felt the bandages. He'd lost some weight. The inevitability of his condition Edna found erotic. If only she would have had this kind of control at home, to be unbound from her fragile submissiveness, her sex life would have been tremendously better. She felt her hands reach around his neck. It had atrophied from leather to pencil. How the tables had turned.

"You know, Roland, I tried to kill you that day."

She draped her legs around his waist and felt the bandages becoming soggy. He grunted and twisted. Perhaps he was trying to escape her.

"Go ahead, Ro. See if you can get away from me."

He whimpered and tried to move his neck. It was no use.

"That's right. I tried to kill you. I tinkered with the car. I set you up. I got you drunk. I took out an insurance policy on you months ago. Think of the irony. Your insurance connection from Camp Pendleton and me running off with all that loot that you gave your life for. It makes me wish I was having sex right now."

Her hands drew tight around his bandaged neck. She put her thumbs on his Adam's Apple, amazed at how easy it was. She pressed as hard as she could. Then she started to listen to Roland die.

"No! Please don't kill me!" what a wonderful conversation, that began in her head, and now is reaching out into the world.

"I take responsibility for treating you like an indentured servant. You can have the house, the money, the Uhhnnn..."

She collapsed onto her husband's chest. She noticed that she was covered in sweat. Her breathing was irregular and deep. Her heartburn went away. Endorphins flooded her system and tamed the piercing pain in her side. For the

first time in two years, she had managed to have an orgasm. The bandages around his neck began to come unraveled. He gurgled one last time, wheezed and fell silent against his pillow. After everything that had happened, it was a good day. She drew the drapes and let in the sun. It was high in the sky and a cool breeze accented perfection. She decided she would go to the park. She gathered up her twisted papers and tried to arrange them as neatly as she could. She opened the door to leave, but it burst open with a far greater force than she tried it. Standing in front of her, with minor bruises and bandages, was her husband. Shocked, she turned to inspect the poor lifeless figure collapsed on the gurney.

"Hey, Edna, what the hell are you doin' in here, ya ninny! Were you in here blabberin' your heart out to a complete stranger?"

The nurse stuck his head in to have a look.

"Sorry Ma'am. Somebody put the wrong name on the wrong door. It happens from time to time. Sorry for any inconvenience."

Edna stood there speechless for a moment. She had proven herself in combat, but the war ravaged on. She felt the tunneling onset of combat fatigue, like Roland, and his

traumatized comrades in arms, initiated by the necessity to kill or perish. At once, Edna experienced that moment of clarity that condenses time to a momentary command of the field; but as a side effect, expands that moment across the span of a lifetime, so that she would both see her life before her, and yet relive this moment for the rest of it. Her thoughts, too fast to process and in the absence of critical faculties resulted in a vacuum of understanding that could only be interpreted as images: a dead husband, a tall, overweight Roland lording over her in the doorway, an innocent stranger slumped lifelessly on the bed, court paperwork, life in an iron cage.

Left with little more than the amygdala to guide her senses, tongue-tied and sick from adrenalin, she struggled to address her husband.

"That's my wife for ya. Too goddamn stupid to talk in complete sentences. C'mon, Edna, let's get the hell outta here. I'm getting' sprung from this place and I need a drink."

"B...But what about the charges? Aren't they taking you to jail?"

"Ha! No charges! No lawsuit! My attorney had a look in the lab in this god-forsaken dump and demanded my blood

sample sealed until they could prove it wasn't tainted by incompetence. And the hit-and-run charges were dropped when the investigators found out my brake line had been severed. Can you imagine that, Edna? I'm surrounded by incompetent fools. Now get me home, goddamnit, and fix me a drink. I need a stiff one."

The nurse shut the window and redrew the drapes. The room returned to darkness.

"This is Mr. Singleton. He can't be exposed to bright light or he'll risk brain damage. We wouldn't want his condition to get any worse."

She felt knives stabbing her in the side. Stomach acids were flooding her throat.

"What's that you got there, Edna? What are these papers?"

The loyal wife struggled to hand them over, but the soldier in her could not let go. Roland made a manly grab for them but try as he might, he couldn't overcome the power of her clenching fist.

The Public Interest

My brother Frank and I heard his name on the radio as we drove through Glendale in Southern California. Both of us were surprised to hear it associated with mine. I'd only met him in passing, and he was quiet most of the time. Frank didn't even introduce us. He only said this guy was a friend of his "from the joint." As an unwitting participant, Frank drove me by on his way to score a bag of weed once, and this guy sat on a couch in the dark with a cigarette stuck to his lips as though he were using it as a dialysis machine for his lungs. A calm breath in, the cherry lighting his small dark eyes up like a diode. A contented breath out, smoke cloaking his already mysterious personality. The day we dropped by, Frank seemed anxious, and catered to him as if some sort of pecking order established in the joint had spilled out onto the city streets. He offered Frank a cigarette, but during the

cherry phase, I noticed he was staring at me. Frank reached for the stick in a series of defensive jerky moves and shifted anxiously while he waited for the jump-start. This too seemed like part of a ritual. He held Frank's hand as he guided Frank's unlit stick toward his burning spike. Still his gaze never strayed from mine.

"Here you go", he said, smiling at me with a pack pointed in my direction as if it was my turn.

"No thanks. I don't smoke."

His gaze turned briefly to Frank, who looked down. Frank is my older brother, which would explain why he might be ashamed of my seeing him acting this way, especially since Frank wasn't the kind to cower to anyone. Whoever this guy is, he must be one intimidating son-of-a-bitch.

I adjusted the volume on the radio in Frank's pickup and we both leaned in to make sense out of the events. Harold Carville is his name and he's fortified in a house not far from Glendale. An accused murderer wanted in connection with a bank hold-up. The press, still trying to fill the air awarded it from the station executives, sounded desperate for anything that might be neatly compressed and packaged at their sound byte factory:

"...This station is now getting word that Harold Carville is a known associate of J. Raymond Harvey, long time defense attorney turned Fox News analyst after his license was suspended by the Bar." She could, of course, just as easily mention that I've been sober for three years.

"Let's go back to Sandy Wu, who is reporting live as the story unfolds. Once again, *A Suburb under Siege*, live from Van Nuys, California. Sandy, what do you have for us?"

"Well, Dana..." the correspondent regurgitated. "Harold Carville has a long history of violent crime. Recently he's been on the streets due to an overturn of his last conviction."

Frank said something about difficulty finding enough witnesses to retry the case.

"We know he has hostages. Sandy, do you have names at this time?"

"No names yet, Dana, but one of the negotiators for Carville is in a wheelchair. In that condition, it's probably in his best interest to cooperate with Carville."

"Right. And then there's his wife."

"Yes Dana, we recognize the woman as that of Carville's one-time estranged wife. She's been shouting insults at the barricaded police and appears to be on drugs, possibly methamphetamines."

"Stay with us a bit later, Sandy, we have a follow-up story on meth labs in the valley. But for now, do you have anything on the Carville-Harvey connection?"

I'm a professional, but those words coming from the radio allowed the acid to fight its way back to my esophagus, despite a regimented H. Pylori routine. I practiced law for eleven years before I became something of a media figure, and despite defending some of the most sinister characters back home in the Bay Area, I always held that as a lawyer, I maintain a professional distance between myself and my clients; subsequently, the dirtier they were, the craftier I appeared. But now, with my license in the shredder, there is an unquestionable sense of foreboding, as if I'm about to climb on a ride at the carnival without a safety harness. I'm fairly well known in Northern California, but not Southern, not so much for my clientele, nor even my skills. I represented gangsters that the world rarely heard of, and won about a third of those cases. And by winning I mean avoiding a maximum

sentence. Sometimes I even got lucky and bought probation here and there for the occasional tax cheat or child molester. My notoriety lies in a series of anti-government radio broadcasts I made while trying to make ends meet after losing my license to a federal sting. I left a bar dead-drunk and high on Phenobarbital and climbed into bed with an FBI informant that recovered two kilos of my salary stashed in an air duct in a motel room in Sausalito. I was so wasted that I left a list of names in my shirt pocket, two of which were dead and similarly scratched out on the list. The last name on the list was the no-bullshit hanging judge scheduled to hear my client later that week.

The judge that whacked my livelihood could have been stiffer. Instead, I got probation. I argued attorney-client privilege on the coke and insisted that I was turning it for a client. While a better man would have learned his lesson, I hadn't hit bottom yet. I spent every Wednesday morning at three o'clock on the radio deriding government in all its form and substance. That's how the Fox News Network found me.

I'm thinking a career was about to be made or my comeback attempt as a legal correspondent was about to be

pissed down the hole, yet those few seconds of press were more information than I had ever known about this guy.

Somehow, I began to detect that Frank's connection to this, but I was afraid to ask. I didn't have to. After a brief commercial break, the on-location correspondent reported she had obtained Frank's drug treatment records from probation listing everyone he did drugs with, going back eleven months. The agreement was a good idea at the time. It bought him diversion as opposed to lock-up, as long as he stayed away from the names on that list. The only names she brought up however were Carville's and mine. Frank and I have a lifetime of common drug use, so much so that he probably added me despite my receiving a three-year chip last week. It's so easy for an addict to confuse association with permissibility, and Frank may have even added it for nostalgic reasons. At any rate, he couldn't have been aware of any damage he might've been causing. After about fifteen seconds of character assassination, I decided to put a call in to the station.

"This just in, Sandy..." the studio voice interrupted, "We have Fox News legal analyst J. Raymond Harvey on the line."

"Hello Raymond, are you there?"

"Yeah I'm here, can you hear me? Listen... I just wanted to say that I don't know this guy Carville. I..."

"Carville himself said he knew you well when we called the house he's barricaded himself up in."

I looked at Frank. "He's a big fan of yours, Ray."

"Carville is giving out erroneous information. I am not now, nor have I ever been acquainted with..."

"Harold Carville's wife said that when you and he smoked marijuana together recently, he, that is Carville, had a spiritual vision to rob a bank and start a government insurgency group."

This came right out of my first attempt at publishing a novel. I was surprised anyone had read it. I hadn't even landed a bookstore speaking engagement yet.

"Sandy...or Donna...or whatever your name is, this woman is confusing facts with fiction."

"It fits the mold regarding interviews you've had in the past."

"No it doesn't. I'm being implicated here as being some sort of associate or accomplice of this guy. My stuff is a critique on constitutional law. It's widely regarded by some defense attorneys in this state and we anticipate endorsement by the ACLU soon. You can pick up a copy at

the Glendale College law bookstore, but I wouldn't recommend buying online. I can't guarantee the quality of a used resale."

This went on for thirty seconds until Carville himself called the station. He said he'd negotiate the release of the hostages if I'll come over and represent him. I spoke briefly with the producer who put in a conference call to the FBI and they convinced me it would be in the public interest to negotiate with this guy, albeit pro bono. Since my last conviction was a DWI, Frank is my wheels. He'd be going along too. At least he knew this lunatic personally.

Frank and I negotiated the crowd, the barricades, and the careful warnings by the police. We made it as far as the front lawn when Harold's wife flung the door open unexpectedly, causing everyone to flinch.

"Look who it is honey...Frank is here! Hey and he brought that lawyer guy with him."

Two pink eyes slowly moved out of the darkness and peered through the slightly opened door, and then slowly disappeared again.

"Well come on in, ain't nobody gonna hurt you sugar, we're just havin' ourselves a little party!" she said.

Feelings of dread came over me. Frank smiled excitedly.

"Check out all the cameras and cops, Debbie," Frank said, sporting a mile-wide grin.

I have a theory about the kind of people who end up in prison: Those who belong there, and those who can't stay out. Frank falls into the latter group.

Once inside, Carville offered us weapons. Frank picked up an Uzi and started examining it. Probably the first and only one he'll ever see. I pulled out a scratch pad and a ballpoint pen.

"I smell gas," I said.

"There's a gas leak," Carville responded.

"How many hostages are in here?" I asked.

"C'mon, sit down on the couch. We'll get to that."

I sat down. Carville pulled up next to me a little too close. Perhaps prison interferes with your perspective of personal space. I got a close look at his eyes, and they disturbed me. He had the eyes of a shark, cold and dead. His crooked smile and faded speech exhibited the only signs of life.

"Where's the guy in the wheel chair?" I asked.

"He's safe. He's in the bedroom with a needle. Wanna bump?"

"No thanks."

"The little midget is our heroin and meth connection. That's how he makes his living. Other than that, he'd have to survive on disability. Hey midget, get out here! Bring a needle for our guests!"

I noticed the TV was on, but not on a news channel. Carville was watching an animal program.

"I'm curious why you're not monitoring the news. Are you not interested in what's going on outside the house?"

"I'm not concerned by any of that. I have a destiny. They will come to me."

The midget came to him.

"He has a collapsed lung. That's why he's in a wheelchair. Otherwise, he could walk just like a normal person-A midget with a collapsed lung. What the hell do you have to live for, Sammy?"

Sammy slowly lifted his head forward, smiled in Carville's direction, and then let it fall forward again until his chin touched his chest.

"Look at these little feet."

Carville pulled him out of the wheelchair by his arms like a rag doll, causing the guy to wince with fear. He and Carville briefly made eye contact, then Sammy's face turned to stone. I surmised it was some sort of survival façade, like the blank stare in a prison chow line. My gaze moved briefly towards the bedroom where Sammy had left the door open. To my utter shock, Frank and Carville's wife pressed against each other, and Frank's hand was running under her skirt. I looked away to distract Carville's attention.

"This appears to be shot in Africa. That's really cute how the mother lioness is moving her cub around in her mouth," I said. His answer made me realize we were watching two different programs.

"The cub is dead. She built her den on top of a Cobra nest. See how her leg is poked way up in the air? The snake bit the mother and all the cubs. The fucking mother lion is blind, her babies are dead, and she's still trying to save them. What kind of stupid bitch is gonna do that?"

I jumped when Sammy grabbed a hold of my arm. I didn't hear him wheel up next to me. He started snapping the inside of my forearm apparently looking for a vein.

"Hey, no thank you man, I guess you didn't hear me turn it down."

Sammy is like a cobra; quiet and deadly, his head wavering in time to the mesmerizing intimidation of the cobra master, Harold Carville. When people enter Sammy's lair, the little cobra poisons them with his drugs and sends them back into the valley to die an agonizing death.

Outside, a bullhorn started squawking. They wanted the hostages.

"I need to go, Harold. I realize you like my work, and I appreciate that. But are there any hostages in here?"

Carville pulled up a little closer. He put one hand on my back and started stroking my hair.

"I hope not," he said.

His breath was shallow and his skin was pale, dead tissue waiting for the heart to catch up.

"Hey Frank, where are you? We gotta be going. Are there any hostages in there?"

Frank and Carville's old lady laughed loudly. I waited for a response from Carville.

"Hey Frank, go ahead and get a piece. We're all friends here."

"This is not a hostage situation, is it? This is some sort of death party."

"You write about death. I want you to write about mine."

"I would need to survive in order to do that. Let's call this off, and maybe we can parlay for life rather than death."

"It's too late for me. What about you, midget?"

Sammy raised his head again.

"Let's do this thing."

Carville picked up his shotgun and released thunder on little Sammy. Frank came into the living room holding onto his pants in one hand and the Uzi in the other.

"Put that fucking thing down and let's get outta here!" I screamed.

Carville pointed the shotgun at me, then at Frank. A smoke grenade came crashing through the window and rolled up next to Sammy's overturned wheelchair. Debbie came screaming into the living room, and Carville released another round on her. She exploded into the hallway leading into the bedroom. Frank and I ran as fast as we could out of the house and were quickly overpowered by a torrent of officers. Behind us, the house popped and

sizzled as one canister after another was lobbed through the windows until finally a bright, milk-white flash of light preceded a rumbling agony deep within the bowels of the earth. Then the earth pushed back with equal fury and a sudden hot blast sent pieces of Sammy's house raining down on the encircling crowd, who then spirited away in all directions. A piece concrete, the size of a softball landed on the back of an officer who winced, but dutifully continued to grind the ball of his knee deep into my temple, my cheek pressed firmly into the safety of the sweet Kentucky bluegrass of Sammy's carefully manicured suburban front lawn.

I noticed Frank was pinned down next to me. He had retained just enough freedom to drag his chin through the grass towards me, so that our eyes could meet

"What happens now, do you think?" He asked.

"Thank God for due process," I said.

A Ship of Fools

The cresting humidity blotted their faces in beads of sweat, but a forgiving clip of sea wind cut through the crowd that lined the road from the Franciscan monastery to the docks. A mountainous fog rolling in far from the east cloaked the dawning sun and a wet drizzle filled the air with the customary ambivalence of the equinox. The passengers huddled close to the monks, who walked stoically among them, but they kept their respectful distance from the brooding resilience of the parish bishop. He mumbled almost inaudibly and in Latin, sprinkling Holy water on the ground ahead of them so that their travels would at least be blessed in heaven.

The crowd was at once both in ridicule and in reverence for the ragamuffins who passed before them and called out insults, but then they slinked away when the eyes of the damned fell upon theirs. There were many

curiosities in the procession, but the local townspeople had seen variations of them being led to ships before, all essentially fools whom the Duke of Cherbourg had abandoned in their regard any hope of redemption. The crowd had showed up early that spring morning for a single passenger. They wanted to get a glimpse of perhaps the most famous fool of all, a man who very few had ever laid eyes on before, the one whose reputation had exceeded the walls of Cherbourg and was known across the Frankish kingdom as *The Spider*.

Had the Spider been merely a cannibal he would perhaps have ended up in the criminal court and beheaded after a hasty conviction. However, the church intervened because they had known his parents and tried on occasion to exorcise what amounted to a full-scale demonic possession. The Spider showed no signs of enlightenment and eventually slipped through the bars of his holding cell and into the promising darkness of the alleys of the town below. By the time the court's deputies had found him sandwiched two weeks later between the chimney and the rafters of the local brewery, the carcasses of two yeast packers and a horse lay lifeless with the meat from their necks partially chewed away. Due to the bizarre circumstances, the local

lord decided to declare the Spider a fool and have him spirited away for redemption at sea, rather than risk the chance of drawing the attention of the Prince of Darkness toward his estates.

The captain of their ship stood unflappable as a wall next to his single-masted Carrack as the first of the passengers began to board. He kept his hands folded behind him and his chest heaved outwards until his reclining chin almost rested upon it. He gave no outward expression and no passenger expected one, for his demeanor suggested that he was as firm as his ship and that he and it were fatefully inseparable, one an unyielding extension of the other.

All at once, a heavy murmur broke from within the crowd at the street and then shrieks of horror rose above the mist. This caused the captain to lose his composure, his eyes grew as large as cod sinkers and an expression of self-pity fell upon his face. The ship seemed to reflect his anxiety when the wind picked up and the halyards began beating against their masts in a chorus of alarm.

The Captain's sudden retreat into self-preservation caused Henri, a nervous and stuttering teenager, to engage him in conversation.

"I... I don't belong here..." stammered Henri. "I can stop, I can stop," he repeated.

"Stop what?" the Captain asked in feigned attention.

"He suffers from chronic masturbation," warned a monk, who guided Henri along by his arm rack. "Once they become obsessed, there's nothing you can do to cure them." Then he produced an articulately illustrated document inscribed on an otter skin. "Our only option is water therapy. If this doesn't work, the court has issued a castration judgment."

"If he returns, he'll be singing with the choir," the Captain retorted with a surly grin. "I've done this for years, and I harbor no faith in water therapy."

"Nevertheless, the lord does," the monk reminded him.

"Load him up," demanded the Captain, dismissing his obligations for conversation.

The shrieks cascaded down the cobble-lined street as the crowd got a closer look at the Spider. A lanky monk accompanied him, smiling peacefully while the Duke's deputies heaved the Spider's wooden cage toward the harbor. His pronouncement by the crowd at the street signified that the last of the passengers were about to be loaded and the

collection of villagers fell onto the pier, shuffling about, mesmerized behind him.

"Ah, here comes Friar Tomas," announced the bishop. The monks had gathered in anticipation of the straw lottery. They watched the hands of the bishop closely and paid no consideration to Tomas' arrival.

"Take a straw, brother Tomas."

Friar Tomas plucked a straw from the Bishop's hand with no hesitation. It was long and promising.

"Now it's your turn Friar Michel."

Michel sighed and breathed deeply. His straw was as long as that of Friar Tomas. He would be drinking wine at the monastery tonight. All eyes then fell on Friar Benedict. The fog was yet to burn off and limited visibility to an attenuated acre. But the long straw Benedict pulled from the Bishop's grip seemed to blow away the mist, at least in the friar's mind. Now it was Marchand's turn. Three brothers down didn't leave much room for chance. And as it turned out, fate had preserved itself for him. Friar Marchand pulled the short straw.

"What happened?" Marchand asked in an illogical state of shock.

"What do you mean what happened?" The bishop asked.

"You chose the short straw. You'll be discharged with duties of God until the ship has returned," he said.

Marchand's disorganized and confused words tripped off his tongue until brother Tomas laid a heavy hand on his arm.

"It'll be ok. Just take care of yourself and be alert for trouble."

"It won't be alright! Marchand shouted. His voice caused the passengers clinging to the side of the ship to wince in grief.

"I'm not coming back! I've been damned to Hell on the face of the sea and only my torment will God have by which to judge me."

"Come on!" Demanded the Captain. The sea is receding. I need to set sail before she's left high and dry.

"That's it then. I'm going to die." Brother Marchand broke into tears and started weeping uncontrollably. The other monks put their arms on him and thought about their own fate. To join an order was a choice, to leave, a mandate from God.

"I'll go in his place," Friar Tomas offered.

"You've already discharged any obligations to the Spider, Tomas," the Bishop said, "come back to the

monastery with us and pray that God will bless this vessel. Let the hand of God be the arbiter of fate."

"I don't think His Almighty will object to a substitution. I know the Spider better than anyone and I think I can control him if allowed to study him further." Marchand shot a hard look at the bishop, who turned the palm of his hands to the sky.

"Be my guest, Tomas. Go with God and I wish you well."

"I bid you gentlemen adieu."

The Captain narrowed his eyes discerningly at Tomas. What kind of man is this who will risk his life for doomed cargo? When at sea, the Captain had orders from the Lord to dump the Spider overboard and he suspected that Brother Tomas might get in the way.

"Watch your place, friar. May you never make the mistake of forgetting who is in charge of this ship."

"I can assure you, Captain. I take my orders from the highest authority in all humility."

The Captain stomped up the plank and began unchaining the crew. To the man, they were condemned sailors who were promised leniency if they committed to the journey. Still, the matchlock he kept tucked under his belt reminded the

crew that the captain wasn't the kind to take chances. The Spider was taken below deck and then buckled-up again inside a cell custom-built to house the wooden structure he was brought in. Friar Tomas stayed below and lit a lamp causing the Spider to slink away in disdain. Above deck, the Captain shouted orders and the groaning of the anguished passengers followed the sound of a cracking whip. Tomas turned the light of the lamp low and listened to the sound of the commotion above deck. A shot from the Captain's pistol followed by a splash in the harbor answered the first of the damned when he questioned the resolve of the Captain. The Spider slowly moved forward until the light of the flickering lamp illuminated his small brown eyes.

"Come now, young man. You've no reason to be frightened. We're well beyond the chaos up there."

The Spider seemed to relax a bit and then became alert when a black moth fluttered toward the light. Tomas cupped it in his hands and then reached into the cell to pass it on to the Spider. The Spider hissed in approval, then pressed his chin against the cedar bars and extended his tongue, but he was too far away to reach the morsel.

"You'll have to do better than that," Tomas suggested.
"Reach out toward me son. I'll hand it to you."

The Spider gripped the cage and began trembling. At first his hand started through the bars, but then he jerked it back and began using his hands to crawl up to the top of the cage and then down the other side until he was out of sight.

"Very good then, son. We're off to a smart start. Later we'll see just how far you can reach toward me." With that, Tomas squeezed the life out of the moth and tossed it as far as he could inside the cage. The insect landed out of view of the light, but then Tomas heard the sound of its crisp wings crunching and the smacking of the Spider's lips. After a moment of silence, a hissing noise indicated that the Spider had enjoyed his aperitif. The ship's anchor scraped against the hull as it drew up. The vessel rocked slowly side-to-side, and then began a long portside tack until it disappeared beyond the horizon and disappeared from the shore.

Friar Tomas rose from below deck shortly after dusk when he heard the shriek of terror from a woman's voice. The difference in this case from those who had been screaming all along is that there was a decided calculation

to her misery. Every few seconds Tomas would hear a scream, and then the woman would fall silent as if she were a machine designed to do so. Tomas suspected fowl play from the crew. To his dismay, he found four shipmates stripped at their waists. Three held the woman's bare legs apart while Gaston, the largest of the crew, placed his hand on her vagina and then removed it with machine-like repetition.

"For the love of God man, stop this nonsense at once," demanded Tomas.

"Watch this friar," said Gaston, and then he repeated the experiment.

"This woman is an hysteric," said Tomas. "If you don't stop this, I'll have the Captain deal with you severely."

"Do you think the Captain cares?" replied Gaston. "Go ask him." Tomas marched toward the Captain's quarters. When the Captain refused to open his cabin door, Tomas barged in with no regard for self-preservation. The Captain had been biding his time drinking the beer given him as part of his compensation from the monks. He immediately rose in defense and struggled to ignite his side arm.

"I should take your head off this instant, monk," the Captain warned. Tell me why I should wait the customary thirty days before tossing you to the sharks."

"I represent those who pay your fee," countered Tomas.

"If you ever expect another gold coin from the monastery, you'd better get control of this ship. I want those crew members who have been raping and torturing the passengers to be brought to order."

The smell of carbon and a dim red ember hinted that the matchlock was prepared. The Captain stared hard at the monk while he aimed the firearm between his eyes. Tomas gazed back at him without blinking.

"Let me alone," said the Captain.

"I will not," said Tomas.

Finally the Captain lowered the weapon and smiled slightly at Tomas.

"You have far more nerve than I give you credit for, monk," the Captain confessed.

"My faith is total and complete," said Tomas. "I live for God and die for humanity."

"These people are cursed, friar. I save one today and in a month they'll drown at sea. You can't expect to bring them back. You should know the rules just as well any man.

We take them as far as half the crew's provisions will allow. Those who haven't responded to water therapy by then must be thrown overboard. It's the law of the land."

"Then you will act as if each and every passenger is redeemable. You will show them as much grace as this ship can muster until we reach the point of no return. That too is the law of the land."

"You're a greater fool than your wards, monk. They know they're going to die. The very knowledge will be the damnation that pushes them beyond the point of no return."

"Then they, too, must believe they are redeemable. Go out there and restore order."

The Captain snorted and left the quarters, still holding the smoldering weapon. Tomas stood in the Captain's quarters for a moment, immobile even by the discharge of the Captain's sidearm. He knew the Captain would kill anyone without giving fair warning and the survivors would get the message. He only expected the splash in the ocean to be the body of Gaston and hoped it wouldn't be the hysteric, but another shot rang out and he knew then that hope for her was gone.

After a week had gone by, the Captain approached Friar Tomas with an amendment to the plan. Tomas had been

keeping a precarious order onboard, regulated by his unyielding compassion and the Captain's abiding trigger twitch. The sun was high and there had not been a head wind for days, which would have been unfortunate enough for a ship on its way somewhere, but for a ship of fools, a strong wind might predict an incoming storm. Water therapy, then, could commence and the Captain could return to shore prematurely for his reward. Even worse, the charts predicted the coming of a full moon. The Captain calculated that it was time to toss down the proverbial gauntlet.

"Friar Tomas, I have a document from the Duke," The Captain said, flatly and without expression. Having waited a week to address Friar Tomas with the news, the monk surmised that the document would be antagonistic to his ideals. The Captain read:

"To Charles De Pourers, Captain of the vessel Joy Devour, I bid you greetings from Cherbourg. The passenger referred to as the Spider and kept in the cargo hold under lock and key is to be redeemed by sea at your earliest convenience. Under God, the Duke of Cherbourg."

"Unless you go out of your way, Captain, it will be convenient to wait until the point of no return," responded Tomas.

"The letter indicates that the Duke wants the circus freak extinguished," said the Captain. "Later isn't going to make a difference with this one, monk. I want him off the ship and his rations for the crew."

"Captain, that passenger is responding to me. I have him eating oats from my own hand. If therapy is to have any merit at all, then you must let me continue to observe the boy."

"I'm growing impatient, monk. I want this cargo off my ship and the cargo-hold mopped clean. If you stand in my way, I'll use the power of the Duke as well as the power of command to destroy you."

Friar Tomas fell silent for a moment and considered the ultimatum. His own death would only weigh heavily on the passengers whose deaths were surely to follow that of the Spider.

"As a representative of the church, I have the responsibility to carry out the last rites of the condemned."

"Do what you have to do, but I want the cage up here in one hour."

When upon the hour the crew called for him, Tomas emerged from the cargo bay holding a blood-soaked rag wrapped tightly around his arm.

"I hope you gentlemen are tolerant to pain," Tomas said. "Whatever you do, do not let him touch your skin or clothing."

The crew stared at one another in horror.

"You're a brave crew, and what ever happens, God will admire you for your courage. Has the ship timber of at least nine feet in length? I believe the Duke's men carried their timbers back to the court. Failing that, we will need passengers to replace the crew as they are injured. The last thing that can happen is that the rickety wooden cage falls and breaks open. The Spider grew up in the circus. He will be on your neck and up the rigging before anyone realizes what happened."

"Err... Perhaps we should let the passengers bring him up," offered a nervous deckhand. "We can stand guard in case of an emergency."

"That sounds like a good plan. Would anyone else prefer to weigh in on the matter?" A chorus of affirmation reinforced the seaman's position.

A somber and anxious pall bearing team of passengers brought the Spider back into the light. The friar, at ease as always, slid his hand through the cage comforting the hunched redemptee. As was custom, the monk was rambling in Latin. The Spider was crouching, but still as a corpse and wrapped in the monk's bedding so that he could at least die in the dignity of darkness. The Captain leaned against the ship's wheel, tied in position for days and grinned through his broken teeth at the spectacle. Finally, Tomas said all he could and the cage was elevated to the ship's plank.

"Once last time, before God I beg you Captain, let this man live so that he may receive his rightful redemption," Tomas said squarely.

"Commence with the therapy," the Captain said without a pause in the conversation, and the passengers slid the cage overboard and into the sea.

The sun fell that day to the rise of a full moon. Around midnight, the Captain had run out of beer and bid a crewman to retrieve more supplies from the cargo hold. After some time, the anxious seaman emerged empty handed.

While Tomas lay on his straw-lined cot in his quarters reading his nightly prayers, he heard a shot fired, followed by a heavy mass splashing into the ocean. Tomas continued reading his prayers without a hint of curiosity. Moments later, the Captain charged into his room.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" Tomas smiled. The Captain pressed his smoldering pistol against the monk's forehead with enough force to leave a circular imprint.

"You wrapped my keg of beer in that blanket and tossed it overboard. That little monster is still somewhere on my ship. The theft alone is worth lodging a ball of lead into your temple."

"Press your complaint with the Duke, Captain. You breached your agreement with the church. The contract specifically stated that you take the passengers as far as the point of no return and therein adjudicate them for redemption. You forfeited your lien on church revenue and that includes the beer."

"...And you aided and abetted the escape of a dangerous criminal, monk."

"The Duke declared him a fool. At that point, it became a church matter. Any redemption ordered by the Lord of Cherbourg is legally invalid. And if you discharge that

weapon, Captain, you will be held to answer in the Highest Court for murdering a man of the cloth. Now leave me while I study the blessings of the Almighty."

"I'll find him," retorted the Captain. "My resolution lies in the gravity of a history that sparing your life will not recompense and a lack of alcohol with which to forget it by." Once again, the Captain snorted and stormed out of Tomas' presence.

The ship tottered in the bulging sea that evening, and the bright moon cast its melancholy light upon the deck. The crew started at the faintest noise and went everywhere in pairs watching for the Spider. The Captain had swung the ship around retracing its path. He stood vigilantly at the bow with a grappling hook watching the reflection of the moon against the surface of the sea for any sign of a bobbing keg. The clear air of the cloudless night carried the sound of moaning anguish far beyond the misery of the ship of fools.

Brother Tomas walked along the deck offering any reassurance a monk with no authority and little guidance could give the miserable rabble. But when he happened upon a conversation between the boatswain and a fool, he stood beyond peripheral vision and eavesdropped.

"...The point of intersection of the vertical through the center of buoyancy of the ship with a vertical through the new center of buoyancy when the ship is displaced is the most logical point on the ship a man can hide without ever being seen," offered the fool to the boatswain.

"We already looked there," hesitated the boatswain, sounding a bit displaced himself.

"No, you don't understand," said the fool. "The Spider would have to find the new meta-center every time the ship reset itself, but an observer would have to move to accommodate a moving ship. If the Spider were in an area with obstructed vision such as the cargo hold, you may never lay your eyes on him." He could have been inches away from you, but you would have been looking where to put your feet while he moved out of your line of sight."

"I don't buy it," said the boatswain. "He's too big an object."

"Ignore him, friar. He's sees numbers."

"Yes, I'm familiar with your profile, sir. You had been committed for dementia."

"I was sentenced to this ship because I approached the parish bishop with a set of numbers that proves that the Earth is far older than the Church estimates."

"The Church is an establishment of man. It's an imperfect means of communication to the Lord. The best we can hope for is that God forgives us for presuming how best to decipher His wisdom."

"I hope God has more forgiveness in his heart than I do. I dedicated my life to my research and the result is that my family is without a father and a husband."

"I'll bring you back, sir. I'll find a way."

"God bless you, Friar."

"The redeemable is as damned as the rest of us if the Spider gets to them," said the boatswain.

"Don't worry about that man, boatswain. He isn't going anywhere."

"If you know where he is, Friar, you'd better confess. I represent the Captain and I, too, have a family."

Friar Tomas looked hard at the boatswain causing him to see the wisdom in the brother's alliance.

"We're approaching the second week of a two month voyage," said the boatswain. "There would be just enough space in the bilge for a man to live."

"A circus freak could do it without being seen," seconded the fool.

"And have a safer trip than the rest of us, if that's your disposition," the monk said, still glaring at the boatswain.

"I'd better tell the captain," said the boatswain. Friar Tomas laid his arm around the young man's neck.

"Keep an eye out for the Captain, sir. I don't like him gazing upon the moon's reflection so intently. He's already showing signs of the Moon Sickness."

"The captain a lunatic?" The boatswain shuddered. The very proclamation could turn the two into shark fodder.

"When you return to shore, boatswain, the court will hear your appeal for supporting a Captain whom I have judged to be a fool, and the church will hear your appeal for condemning a man to death who is scheduled for redemption. When I tell you that the Spider is under lock and key, what authorization do you have to challenge my word?"

"I hope you know what you're doing, friar."

"So do I," said Tomas.

Friar Tomas awoke the next morning to a rolling keel. His mind hadn't quite made sense of the experience yet, but the subsequent sound of splashes upon the sea alerted a more primitive instinct in him. Fearing the worst, he

didn't wait to perform his morning prayers before dashing out to the deck. The news was mixed: The crew had stood guard around the Captain while he tossed the bulk of food rations overboard. But the passengers at least were still accounted for. The deck was wet and the passengers huddled together with rain-drenched hair and their clothes sticking to their bodies.

"Our agreement has been rescinded," the Captain laughed in an unfamiliar tone. The hours without alcohol had changed him. "I'm under no obligation to transport your supplies."

"The weather is turning Captain. Stop this nonsense and begin the redemption."

"No more tricks, monk. Those strong enough to make it ashore will witness their own redemption."

"Captain De Pourers, you will be responsible for the deaths of anyone who starves on this ship! Now turn this vessel around and return to port at once!"

"The passengers are your responsibility, monk! The cargo is mine! I don't ship cargo without compensation!"

"Listen here, gentlemen," said Tomas to the crew, "the Captain has the Moon Sickness! I demand he be relieved of command of this vessel at once!"

The momentary reflection of the crew for their safety was enough for the Captain to produce his side arm.

"Anyone who so much as takes a step toward me will be pleading with the devil to remove the lead from his skull!"

"Listen here, gentlemen! The Captain only has one shot! If I have to take it, then you will be held responsible to God to take the Captain into custody!"

"Not you, brother Tomas," said the boatswain. "I'll take the shot!"

The boatswain, who was but three feet from the Captain, lunged at him but turned out to be a step too far.

"Not so fast," declared the Captain.

"One more step and the monk gets the bullet."

The friar jumped toward the Captain, but the boatswain got to him first. The two struggled for control of the gun until the boatswain stepped back. Tomas heard no shot, but when the boatswain fell backward, he saw a dagger lodged in his ribcage. The Captain then approached Tomas mechanically, raising the pistol to his temple.

"Now I have a legitimate claim to your life, monk. High Seas Piracy is the charge. The crew is my witness. How do you plead?"

"You are relieved of command," Tomas said to the Captain. Then to the crew, "Take this man into custody." The Captain surveyed the crew at the tip of the barrel of his pistol.

"The prosecution has stated its case. What says the jury?"

"Guilty," murmured the trauma-stricken crew.

"Wait! I'll tell you where the Spider is if you let the monk live," cried a pale and winded boatswain. The Captain's lips creased in his wicked, tooth-chipped grin.

"No, boatswain. I'm a condemned man regardless." The Captain kneeled next to the boatswain and put his ear to the dying man, keeping his barrel and his eyes fixed on the friar.

"That's a good boatswain. Now tell me where the Spider is my loyal shipmate."

"He's in the bilge. I'm sorry friar."

The Captain removed the dagger from his chest and reinserted it with brute force into the boatswain's stomach. He then drew a bloody line through the boatswain's stomach back to his rib cage. The Captain then rose with the pistol in one hand and the dagger in the other and disappeared below deck.

After an hour of searching, the Captain re-emerged empty handed. "Drain the bilge!" He ordered the crew. The Friar did what he could to console passengers and crew as they watched in terror as a seaman bucketed out fresh water over the next several hours. The skies continued to blacken and the ship tossed about.

"I see somebody!" declared the seaman.

"Give me the lantern!" demanded the Captain. He squatted down and lowered the lantern into the pitch-black compartment. Nothing. He sat quiet for a moment, and the ship rocked wildly. He heard a splash towards the rear and held the lantern out toward the sound. Briefly he caught a glimpse of a human arm before it disappeared back into darkness.

Florida

The third call in five minutes came from the Republican Party. Duke thought about hanging up on them, but he knew they would just call back, and next time with a facetious tone. Not that they were worrying about getting their money, Duke paid like a slot machine (as the saying goes), but they want to talk: ask him questions and then beg his patience in answering a short poll. Can you call back tomorrow? I'm up to my ass in housework.

They would. Some of the blood splattered onto the wall by the light switch and he knew Luminol would glow there, like a swatted firefly the size of a lemon. But for now, just heaving the body alone, holding onto the stretched-out edges of the trash bag was enough to think about.

Twenty minutes ago, they were neighbors. They got along famously at first because in polite company, august

southern gentlemen avoid the gauche banality of political rhetoric. Poker was their chosen mode of communication, and both of them spoke it like natives. Paul had chosen the Sunrise Center for his semi-retirement because Duke, who had long since hung his hat there for good, greeted him with a hearty hug. Then their state got mixed-up in a ballot-counting fiasco that had nationwide implications. Paul ate Duke's T-bones like a Republican, and even drank like a Ford. Still, how two octogenarians with hours of anecdotes about womanizing could have over-looked the fact for two years that one of them was Republican and the other a Democrat is a question for the ages.

The gun belonged to Paul's grandson, the smart-assed one who bought it for his baby's or his mother's protection or something. It must have been six months or so, Duke reckoned, that the kid stood there along side of the highway twisting the gun in Duke's face and threatening to shoot him where he stood to prove to Duke how easy it was to kill a man. The point was lost because Duke couldn't imagine that a longhaired vegetarian who hugs trees for a living would have the marbles to pull the trigger. He gambled right.

-I was a Captain in the Marines, you little pecker head. I stormed Guadalcanal.

While the West Palm Beach chad analysis was dragging on, the two old men made pleasant about their polarity at first, as if Paul rooted for the Bucs and Duke, the Dolphins. But somewhere along the line it became more than a game. The partisan press coverage was relentless and took a toll on Paul, who ended up postponing his retirement. He started blaming the Republicans for this and that, and then Paul got the idea that Duke harbored some resentment. Stuff he didn't express to Paul; kind of like a behavioral tick that gets inflated and begins to grind on the other's patience.

The first fight they had, for instance, wasn't even related to politics. In the parking lot at Target, they circled around in Duke's Buick for who knows how long and Paul said he saw a place to park and Duke tried to get there but someone else jumped in quicker. Finally Paul flew off the handle and suggested maybe Duke should retire his driver's license and Duke said if he had a gun he would shoot him and leave his body to rot in the parking lot. He was right about the part about having the gun.

When the phone rang again, Duke swore he wouldn't answer it. He figured it would take about an hour for Dorothy to return and Paul's wife would be with her. Agnes and Dorothy are old school. Politics are for men. But the phone kept ringing and finally a light from the bungalow next door indicated that Barney and Maggie had already returned. *The wimp. Maggie can get her own oxygen. Finish the movie. Ronald Reagan gets Nancy Davis in the end.* Maggie wouldn't hear it with that constant hissing from the hose, but Barney could hear sticks snap twenty meters away, Paul told Duke. Barney hunted wild boar in the Suwannee River valley, so he would easily hear the relentless ring of the phone and come by to check on Duke, and Maggie would come with him. If folks would just stay out of other folk's business, bad things wouldn't happen.

Finally, the call Duke had been waiting for came. A representative from the lodge, the gentlemen's club Duke belonged to, was on the line. But they were looking for Paul. For Paul. Maybe Duke didn't hear them right. Posttraumatic stress. He wasn't supposed to tell Duke about Paul because it was a surprise. But they can't find Paul. He called earlier to say he's retiring and not sour

anymore about the Suwannee River hunting trip. Asked the club to make plans for a party. Good ol' Paulie. He means well. He was going to drive you, Duke. Maybe Paul stopped by Barney's first to pick him up and Barney is in on the surprise.

Paul only joined the Suwannee trip because Agnes was riding his ass about making a good faith effort. What Paul really wanted to do was fly up to Charleston and watch them relive the American Revolution, because history was his major in college and he wanted to prove how book-smart he was. Those pencil-necks would no doubt listen to him while he rambled on about jurisprudence and separation of powers. They would whistle, cheer, cause a ruckus, and attract the attention of the media as if things weren't complicated enough. He needs to keep a low profile. That kind of publicity can generate a lot of power for an old man way past the age of retirement. One shouldn't have that much influence on the young.

During the Suwannee River trip, things went bad from the beginning. Barney had a cellular phone and after the fellow from Washington told him not to use it, he pissed and moaned and said it was a present from his daughter. Then Barney got cold feet. After the Remington backfired

he told Paul he confused him for a boar. Said to the other lodge members he didn't want any part of no conspiracy no matter how old Paul is, and that everyone has a right to life, even a pro-choice magistrate. He must have called Maggie ten times up there, and no telling what he said to her. Duke stopped talking to Barney. If you want something done right, you got to do it yourself.

The lodge was actually Paul's wife, Agnes' idea. It was the perfect scenario. She encouraged him. When in Rome and all that. Told Paul to start acting like a retiree and make new friends. He'll never outlive another governor, so stop pretending to be a law student. Not that he ever spent much time in the chambers anymore. But the job was his as long as he wanted it. And he took it to heart, just like when he and Agnes would come by Duke's place and Dorothy would offer him another heap of mashed potatoes. Suwannee would come up much later. What does an old retired real estate developer like Duke know about people?

The tree of liberty must be fertilized from time to time by the blood of patriots and tyrants. When Paul finally joined, it was after the national election and he fancied the idea of getting in a little sea bass. One time

the vegetarian grandson came along with him, Duke, and Barney. Duke didn't know him back then so when he started going on about a drug bust he didn't think anything was out of the ordinary. Smack him on the back of the head and help the kid find an attorney. One of those privileged man-to-man chats under a melancholy sunset against the castigation of the rolling waves. Paul tried to get him to plea bargain. But the kid was scared, said something to the effect that these were some serious fuckin' people. So Paul quoted Thomas Jefferson. Started going on about family history and then steered him toward a guy of his in Internal Affairs. That just made the kid angry. He told Paul he didn't understand politics. Paul said the right to remain silent should be extended to those who have nothing to say in the matter and pushed a business card on him.

Weeks later, Paul got a call from the lodge. It was Barney and he wanted to relay a message. People in Tallahassee were complaining about the kid's mouth and can you shut him up. There's more going on here than a little dope, and if he sings the media will start putting two and two together. They can't drop the charges on just your family and not the Cubans too, so maybe you can overturn it on appeal. The prosecutor is playing ball. He has

connections in Washington and maybe you might want to end your career from the federal bench.

Just before the case came before Paul, some Arabs hijacked four commercial jetliners. When it was over, three-thousand-plus Americans were killed and The People were screaming for revenge. The *Herald* wanted to know how thirty kilos of high-grade Heroin made its way from the steppes of Afghanistan to the streets of Miami, and who is this Sunrise Savings and Loan. That's when this fellow from Washington showed up. Duke nominated him for membership in the lodge, but Paul wanted to keep it local. Paul told the boy he may have to take one for the team, but he'll lobby for a reduced sentence if he names names. Pretty soon Paul's running into this guy wherever he goes. Paul elects a trooper to act as a second pair of eyes, and the kid gets paranoid and buys a gun and starts threatening people.

In the end, the kid and the Cubans walked, but Paul's reputation was damaged. Fox News carried his picture day and night and kept the retirement issue alive for two weeks. But Paul wouldn't budge. He started growing tired of the lodge and when they invited him to Suwannee, he said he wanted to speak at a historical re-enactment event

instead. The media gave him life and he was fired up about politics and wanted the world to know it. And then the kid disappeared. It happened like this: The kid needed to drive out to Key Largo to show the prosecution where the money and drugs were transferred. Paul asked his best friend Duke to go along and watch the boy's back. The Dade County Sheriff called several days later to say that sometime between Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning both your grandson and Duke disappeared and can you help us locate them. Finally Duke showed up Sunday evening caked in dried mud and said the car went into the swamp. What a constitution for such an old man. The boy and the car were never seen again. Agnes of course was frantic and asked Paul to go to Suwannee just in case he might learn something.

Duke had planned to wait until Barney's light went out and then try to heave the body through the back door and into the trunk of the Buick. There was still no sign of the fellow from Washington and Paul's massive frame resisted forward momentum. Now he had another problem to worry about. The lodge pulled out. What could go wrong now? Barney's light went out and moments later the

doorbell rang. It was Barney. Maggie was still in the dining hall watching the movie.

-Barney, you know that thing we were going to do in Suwannee? You don't have to worry about it now.

Duke pointed to the body and a high-pitched whine came over Barney and he kept doing that until he gasped for a deep breath of air. Then he started wailing and Duke had him come inside.

-You don't know what you done, Barney says.

-I finished the job you were supposed to do.

-Paulie's retiring from the bench, Duke.

-Why wasn't I told?

-That's why Paul was coming by. He was going to tell you.

-Barney, you gotta help me get this thing out of here.

-That's Paulie, Duke, that's Paulie laying there.

-Snap out of it goddamned it.

After Barney's rifle backfired in Suwannee, Paul never again felt at ease around the lodge. He was beginning to get the feeling that twenty-three years on the State Supreme Court Bench had insulated him more than he realized. He came as a favor to Agnes, always the

suspicious one, but now he was beginning to think Agnes had something. The Remington snapped him out of his professional coma even if it was an accident. Paul was academically trained to consider all the facts, and Barney was no poker player. But why would Barney want to shoot me? What does he have to gain? Has Agnes turned me into a paranoid old fool?

Ostensibly, up in Suwannee, the cards came out after dinner when everyone had grown weary of heckling Barney about the accident. Besides Paul, there were four lodge members on the trip and the young man from Washington made six. Barney was knocking back one cognac after another, but through a cloud of cigar smoke, Paul and Duke watched each other swirl the same un-tasted drinks in their hand all evening. Finally, Paul produced the deck, and the other two members gleefully took him up on the offer. That left Duke, Barney and the stranger. The score: Paul one, Duke, zero. The remaining three, realizing they had been upper-handed, ambled toward the table. Duke calmly offered a little advice:

-Keep your cards down, gentlemen. A close friend can be a close enemy.

-A danger foreseen is half avoided, retorted Paul.

-Oh God, I think I'm gonna to be sick, said Barney.

Around three a. m., Paul found himself staring down the double barrel of Duke and the stranger. Barney was the first to go, but not until after Paul sustained him long enough by feeding him folded hands. What Paul learned was that Barney blinked his eyes and looked at the fellow from Washington, then quickly into the abyss of his drink when the following words appeared in a sentence: *choice, reorganize, highway, guilty, mistake, inept* and the phrase "are you in Barney." Surprisingly, yet innocently enough, the two other members were saying something about *ballot machines*. It seemed like a random thing to say, but it managed to register a ding in Barney.

-Tell me something, son. Do you fellows up there in Washington have trouble with your punch cards too, or are you on those new machines?

-I wouldn't know. Don't vote. Ya want a card?

-Yeah, give me one. My kingdom for a club.

-Three of hearts. It's to you, Duke. You gonna stay?

-It's getting late. Can't imagine why someone with such a run of luck would want to keep going with this.

-You can always back out.

-I'm talking about you.

-Education can be expensive, eh Duke? What do you think young man? How much would you pay to find out where the aces are hidden?

-I think I'd consider another occupation.

-You're young. Duke and I, you see, we got time on our hands. Maybe too much time.

-Just make sure you know when it's time for you to retire, my boy.

-Take my grandson Marshall, for instance. Young kid with a bright future. Kind of a snot, but not really contemptible. Didn't know when to cut his losses and get out of the drug business until he got in over his head. It was a shame too, because he was trying to get his act together. Started watching his diet. Now he's gator bait.

-You say that as if the two events are related.

-Am I speaking of two different events?

-I believe you told Duke that your grandson didn't know when to fold and that there was an accident. But you were looking at me.

-Well then the two events are obviously related.

-Are you suggesting that I meant to drive the kid into the swamp? Duke fumed.

-I was merely suggesting that I was speaking to you, Duke, but looking at our guest. But I thought Marshall was driving. After all, it was his car, your testimony.

-It's late and you're tired Duke. Shut the fuck up. Miami-Dade has already done their investigation, countered the stranger.

-Gentlemen, I think it's time for all of us to retire for the night.

And with those words of wisdom, Duke folded his hand.

In those wee hours of the morning, Paul was finally ready to rest his mind. He walked out onto the porch and watched the last of the Milky Way glitter amidst the inevitable sunrise. Suwannee was quiet, he noticed. Or perhaps he was finally ready to listen. He remembered taking Marshall fishing along the Suwannee River when he was six. Just like he and his grandfather before him had done. He remembered the eight-pound large mouth, but he couldn't remember whether he or Marshall landed it. His memory was becoming more selective as time passed, and he knew his days were ending. But it didn't really matter to him who caught the bass. What did matter was the time together. After using the fish as a monster to frighten the boy, Marshall asked his grandpa to throw it back in.

-Why should I? Paul asked.

-Why shouldn't you? The boy countered. He didn't do anything to you.

Paul turned and went back inside the cabin. Now he would have his cognac.

Duke, Paul, and Barney stopped hanging around with one another after Suwannee, and the fellow from Washington disappeared into thin air. The word was that Barney was spending a lot of time with Maggie, catering to her every whim. Duke would walk out of his unit to retrieve the paper, then grunt at Paul's window and stalk back inside. Sweet Dorothy would wave and Paul and Agnes would wave back. One day a crate of Lemons ended up on Duke's front lawn from Esterhaus Citrus Farms. Paul leaned in the doorway of his apartment while Duke took pains dragging it into the apartment. He made such a large production out of it that Paul couldn't help heckling him. As for Paul, he felt he had one last mission to accomplish before he was ready to relent to the nagging pressures of retirement. He dusted off his antique Schlesinger attaché case, tried his bow tie for fit, and went to work like a first-year law student rooting out the aces.

A routine background check on Barney showed he had been receiving a comfortable pension from his former employer, an information systems contractor out of Trenton, New Jersey. Barney was an accountant who presided over a merger between his company and a mechanical slot machine maker on the verge of bankruptcy. The result was digital gaming, and it took off in Atlantic City and Barney became a star. About the time of the Suwannee trip, the checks were abruptly cut off. A Price-Waterhouse analysis revealed that in the month prior, the company merged with Hammett Industries out of Tampa, one of the largest alarm and security companies in the nation. The ultra-right wing J. Wilkinson Hammett, who stalled the merger negotiations until they agreed to keep his name as the parent company's marquee, captained Hammett. On the company website, Paul's people learned that Hammett had recently started venturing into the promising market of electronic ballot machines. The original Trenton plant that Barney had retired from now churned them out.

Barney, it would seem, a lifelong yellow dog democrat, may have struck a deal with the unscrupulous Hammett to get Paul out of the way for the simple issue of money. Hammett was a rabid, pro-choice conservative, so he had a motive,

and Barney on a hunting trip was his opportunity. But it couldn't be as simple as that to risk everything on the assassination of a State Supreme Court Judge. The new ballot machines were most likely involved, and though he kept his mouth shut, so was Marshall. It was time for Paul to walk in the footsteps of his grandson.

Paul knew none of the Cubans would talk to him, and he closed the case with his own signature, thereby removing any threat of subpoena. In Key Largo, the transfer point remained a mystery, so there were no avenues to trace on the island, and Sunrise Savings and Loan folded and the feds sealed the records. The next logical step was to trace Marshall's political activism. When his attorneys from the State Bench walked into their offices at the University of Miami, EarthNow greeted them with the expected jeers and paranoid aloofness. But when they mentioned that they believed Marshall's disappearance was a result of a conspiracy, EarthNow was all too willing to talk. Marshall would roam from one protest to the next like a tourist, but he was actively working on stopping a development project from pushing into Seminole land at the time of his drug bust. Tying ballot machines in Trenton to heroin from Afghanistan by way of a real estate development

case on a Seminole reservation seemed like a long shot at best, and Paul suspected the trail was growing cold. Then Dorothy invited Agnes over for some lemon meringue pie.

-The George Esterhaus? The Democratic Assemblyman? Paul mumbled, shoveling Duke's leftover pie into his mouth. Agnes had pecked at a thin slice for two hours at Dorothy's and returned home with half a pie.

-Oh stop it Paulie. He's also Duke's district representative. Why wouldn't he thank Duke for his support?

-Every candidate needs constituents like you and Dorothy, Agnes.

-Don't talk with your mouth full Paul. You look like a big fat boar.

Paul had a death-penalty case to review in Tallahassee anyway, so while he was up there, he thought he'd drop by Esterhaus' office.

-Congratulations on your recent appointment, Paul said.

-I'm always flattered when a Supreme Court Judge makes a trip all the way over here to thank me, your honor. Especially when it's as the Chairman of the Legislative Subcommittee on Judicial Oversight.

-Nice to know we have a democrat watching our backs.

-I like to think it was an ethical decision.

-Curious, though. A Republican legislature appoints a Democrat to oversee a right-leaning Supreme Court bench.

- Judge, I get the feeling you're accusing me of something.

-No no, I'm not trying to make waves. But I got to tell ya. It strikes me as curious that you received a sizeable donation from Hammett Industries just before you approved the new ballot machines in your district. Now you chair a board that can potentially bring down a liberal magistrate that can challenge voter litigation.

-I'm not the only legislator to approve them. Repub-

-Yeah, yeah I know. Republican and Democrats alike have approved them.

-But only you received a kick- I mean donation from Hammett.

-It's perfectly ethical and legal.

-Sure. By the way, while I had my people taking a look at Hammett's ballot machines, we came across some missing calibration dates. The tests had to do with uploading to the mainframe.

-Workers miss calibration dates all the time. They straighten it out when they re-calibrate.

-But all the dates that are missing are the ones when TSA reported you booked on flights for Trenton, New Jersey. Do you want to see the print out? I'm sure the media would.

-What do you want?

-Tell me about these ballot machines, son. You're not the one I'm after.

-I went to Trenton to participate in a presentation on the performance of these machines. They wanted to prove to the Democratic Party that they were invulnerable to partisan manipulation. It was kept secret because Hammett has vast holdings in digital gaming machines, and if the Democrats started knocking them, it could cause the public to lose faith in their gambling division. Not even the engineers were supposed to know. That would potentially destroy Hammett Industries. I was paid a hundred thousand dollars by Hammett to keep it a secret and reported back to the party with my results.

-And the results?

-Between us?

-Of course.

-The machines are nonpartisan in a manner of speaking, if you take into account that we're all ultimately consumers in the long run. In a broad revision of the Federal Privacy Act, the machine separates voter registration information from their party, and then sends the results of the party vote to the Secretary of State for certification and the names to Hammett's subsidiary in Trenton for archival. Hammett would want a contract to collect data from each party who cold-calls the consumer in the name of public interest, and then upload that information to the mainframe, reattaching voter information with the poll results. The connection is the phone numbers. The consumer and the poll worker are none the wiser.

Paul entered the chambers still scratching his head as to the implications of Marshall, if any. The other justices had already arrived and were chatting politely over coffee, a routine professional courtesy before the blood bath was to begin.

-Why Paul, glad you could join us, Justice Callahan began. Nice to see the robe still fits.

-Looks like new tie, Bob. Did you lose a bet?

-Sounds like we're about to get started here, ladies and gentlemen. The name is Romero, Antonio Luis, said Chief Campbell. Does anyone want to break for a handkerchief before Paul sees the docket?

-No thank you John, said Justice Overstreet. I still have my coffee napkin.

-Why don't we shock him and get it over with? You weren't waiting for me were you? said Paul.

-We'll leave that to the governor. For now we just need to record your vote so I can get back to my golf game, said Campbell.

-Says here he wants clemency in exchange for testimony against an organized crime syndicate.

-Prosecution says he doesn't know more than what he already told.

-Maybe the death penalty changed his mind...says here he knows about the disappearance of an engineer. Maybe their family would like to know where the body is.

-I don't think the disclosure of his criminal activity is enough to change my mind, Paul, said Callahan.

-It may be enough to postpone the decision until we can guarantee he won't lead us to bigger fish.

-Prosecution says they checked it out already. It's hearsay.

-What kind of an engineer was he?

-Electronic. He worked at the Seminole Indian Casino off of highway 175.

-I'm getting old. Why does that nag at the back of my head?

-Does your semi-retirement center shuttle you out there for some bling-bling?

-Since I'm not retired yet ladies and gentlemen, I beg your patience in staying the execution until I can exhaust the engineer lead. Then you can have your body.

Electronic ballot machines... Hammett Industries...Indian Gaming... Marshall. A younger Paul might've discovered the connection earlier, but there it was. The development project was an expansion of an Indian casino Marshall campaigned against. Now it was time for a trip to Bradford State Prison to see if Romero knew anything.

-You gotta protect me, ya see. I'm a dead man either in here or out there.

-I can arrange for you to enter the federal witness protection program if it's worth our time.

-No no man, you kidding? The feds will pop me just as fast as the mafia will.

-What do you want?

-Send me back to Cuba man. Gimme a fighting chance.

-I'll do my best. Now tell me about this engineer.

-Well, he stole some parts from la familia, you know? They run the Indian Casino. People think it's the Indians. They don't know shit about running a casino.

-What kind of parts were they?

-I don't know, man. Little parts. He snuck them out in a backpack. I had him in the trunk of my car when a state trooper pulled me over and found my gun, so I had to shoot him. Then I had two packages to deliver. They found the trooper, but never seemed to care about the engineer. He's probably still out there in the swamp.

-Where was he taking the parts?

-Don't know. I think he was selling them to the protestors because we started going after them looking for the parts.

-Can you take us to the engineer?

-Sure man. Bring your waders.

A close look at Hammett's invoice revealed that they shipped the wrong chips to the casino by mistake. The

engineer and Marshall both graduated about the same time from the University of Miami, so it was a fair bet they were intimates who shared the same intellectual curiosity. Marshall's friends at the University of Miami revealed a complex underground community that among others included a chip-pirating outfit. When state investigators threatened them with FCC violations, they told Paul's people that Marshall indeed brought them a chip, and they found that the chip had a mathematical principle that caused X and Y to divide the input between them, and then randomly assign a one to three percent larger number to either X or Y. The investigators asked them if X and Y could mean Republicans and Democrats, and the pirates said yes. So the investigation turned once again toward Esterhaus.

The legislature wasn't in session when Paul went looking for him, but he managed to find Esterhaus on his citrus plantation. Esterhaus drove slowly along a dirt road admiring his orchard as Paul followed behind in a state police car. Esterhaus pulled over finally and walked toward his harvest and never looked back. Instead he slowly picked a lemon off a tree and studied it in his hands.

-Mr. Esterhaus, I'd like to talk to you for a minute,
Paul said from behind.

-I don't think we have any thing more discuss.

-I got these charges here I'd like to file. This nice
officer is here to take you away.

-What charges?

-Conspiracy to commit murder. Conspiracy to rig a
state election.

-We had an agreement between us that what I told you
would be in confidence.

-That's right. Now I want an agreement involving
witnesses.

-You can't prove anything.

-We know about the chip. It's worse than you let on.
It games the system so that no party has more than a one to
three percent majority.

-That's your evidence? That the chip creates party
parity?

-Yep, that and the fact that the only counties still
not using the machines are the ones that represent a
Republican majority. Something like a fifteen to thirty-
percent majority. You do the math.

Paul told the assemblyman he thought his grandson was murdered because he was aware of a link between Indian gaming and the international arms-for-heroin trade. Paul said he thought that link was the right-wing Cuban Mafia, who laundered funds through Sunrise Savings.

-Well I guess a tree is known by its fruit, said Esterhaus. Your grandson followed in some monumental footsteps. He looked long and hard at the lemon he palmed as if he was holding a bar of gold. Then he asked Paul:

-you know why you never grow oranges and lemons in the same field? They cross-pollinate. Then you got lem-oranges, a half breed that you can't sell in either market. Them ballot machines you're talking about, they're unmarketable for the same reasons. The chip was flawed because it was meant to game a two-party system. The engineers overlooked third party voting, which would have resulted in literally every upstart political organization garnering between a one and three percent majority of the total vote in thirty-three percent of the reporting precincts that the machines would be used in. It would've made Florida the laughing stock of the nation. We couldn't have that again. So the conspirators in both parties

abandoned the deal, and Barney was left owing Hammett a one hundred thousand dollar favor.

Esterhaus agreed to play ball with Paul in exchange for a written confidentiality agreement. In exchange Paul could count on him for his support in bringing the conspiracy down. Paul felt it was now time to pay Duke a little visit, but not before saying goodbye to Agnes.

Under the driver's-side windshield wiper of the Buick, Duke found a business card from the office of the Miami-Dade County District Attorney. On the back he recognized the handwriting of a personal message addressed to him: *Men like you and me, Duke, don't retire from politics. Tell Dorothy she bakes a mean lemon meringue pie.* Estherhaus was on his way with the state police to pick Duke up. Except there was one thing that the lodge hadn't counted on. Duke would pick up the gun again and meet his District Representative in the parking lot.

The Ecovangelist

We begin before sunrise. It's early August, and the stars in the Northern Hemisphere cartwheel across a Milky Way sky. Soon the Canadian dawn will bleed the cloak of night out from under them, from under us, so we move quickly to prepare for action. Our eight-man mule team carries gear on its back from the van to the shore. I carry a Johnson 50 horsepower outboard motor bouncing along my spine. Somewhere out beyond the horizon, the floating fortress *U. S. S. Independence* enters English Bay, and not all of our preparations and forthright convictions can alleviate my angst. Within an hour, we will confront her on the high seas in our small inflatable Zodiacs.

A photographer and his crew join us, hired by the Organization. He draws chuckles when he sets a tripod up on the dock, apparently ignorant of the distance we are from the real action. He is directly in our way; and we work

around him blowing up Zodiacs and counting gear until the Action Coordinator kicks the tripod down, drawing mumbles of contempt from everyone. The pre-dawn hours are too early in the morning for bad vibes. We do, however, need to work as a team, and that means everyone doing their job with maximum efficiency. The Coordinator will have to lighten up, the crew will have to move fast, and the photographer will have to stay out of the way. All communication will have to be focused on the job at hand, and that means no grumbling from the team, and no cynicism in particular from me. Not that I'm spiteful, but I do have a tendency to reduce everything to its weakest link, which might make me sound competent, but tends to alienate those around me with an enthusiasm for team spirit.

Along with the photographer, we expect press, the media had been alerted, but they tend to be neutral at best, and the Organization survives on an appeal to emotion. For that reason, our photographer will submit footage slanted in our favor. By the time the action reaches your television, you will see only twenty seconds of an action that takes place within the span of around an hour, if we're lucky. In the worst-case scenario, the Canadian Coast Guard intervenes to stop us, and we go home

instead of jail; that is, in the worst-case scenario. If all goes well, we'll withstand the pressure of six water cannons blasting us at around 500 pounds per square foot, and spray-paint radiological signs along the hull of the air-craft carrier, compelling the coast guard to takes us into custody. Then as I said, we can count on perhaps twenty seconds of media exposure.

It usually works like this: An anchorman or woman appears on the screen for ten of those twenty seconds. The icon of our environmental group-an anchor in a green circle-fills up the space of the blue-screen in the background behind her. She states the facts flatly, and then they cut for five seconds to the film shot by the network, which generally shows only footage of the arrest, creating an atmosphere of political parity between the protestors and the state. Usually they run a quick sound byte from an activist at that point. During the last five seconds, the network will show our film, or rather the photographer's film, condensed down from an hour. They will have edited through it looking for mistakes, carelessness, and signs of grins or horseplay, anything that reveals our humanity over our political necessity. Juxtaposed against this footage, the anchorwoman's voice

explains that the U. S. Government denies any wrongdoing; or in the case of nuclear weapons, neither confirms or denies anything at all.

So in order to guarantee we act like professionals, to work as a team, the Organization hires Jeff, the Action Coordinator, to supervise the mission and technically be held responsible for any blunders. Jeff actually works out of Toronto, where his skills as a climber and diver have made him an asset to that office. Over the years his experience with activism has tempered him, and before daylight, that edge can come across to a dreary-eyed young crew like the demeanor of a drill sergeant. With tremendous responsibility comes anxiety, which Jeff wears like an expectant father, obsessing with the most microscopic of details. He shuffles through dog-eared papers back and forth along the dock and stares shell-shocked when one of the inflation pumps has to be located. The Organization must have thought his anxiety to be a trait when they promoted him to the job. The rest of us operate on adrenalin rushes and the serenity of mind that comes with surrendering control and following directions.

So responsibility is one thing less I, personally, will have to worry about as I stomp on the foot-pump to my

inflatable. My mind runs through the words I will have to say to the media. We must use our own words, because we are compelled to act, rather than having been recruited. In our training before the mission, we are given the facts:

-Plutonium is the most poisonous chemical known to man; one drop of plutonium the size of a grain of sand is enough to cause cancer for thousands of years.

-After an affected organism dies from contamination, plutonium escapes the decaying carcass and re-enters the food chain at the most fundamental level, the Earth. It happens like that over a span of several millennia. When plutonium is mobile, the potential for disaster is widespread.

-Nuclear weapons are the greatest source of mobile plutonium, followed by spent material headed for burial or storage. They travel the Earth in warships, such as the carrier *Independence*, though the U. S. Navy never confirms nor denies the existence of the weapons. The ship's crew monitors them constantly, because there is a real danger they may leak radiological contamination.

-The Organization is not nearly as concerned about nuclear detonation as they are an accident at sea. Nuclear

accidents have happened several times in history already, where missiles have ended up at the bottom of the sea.

-Greenpeace has taken a special interest in the world's oceans and has dedicated substantial resources to protecting them.

-Vancouver Harbor, the destination of the *Independence*, has been designated a "Nuclear Free Zone" by popular election of its citizens. These zones are established by grass roots activism throughout the free world in order to prevent radiological material from entering into these areas. By the *Independence* docking in Vancouver, Greenpeace's position is that the U. S. foreign policy only adds insult to injury, and that the Organization has a legitimate right to "bear witness" to a crime. The U.S. Navy, as a vehicle of its foreign policy, tells the world that they have no respect for a popularly elected democracy.

With these facts in mind, I construct my sound bytes. I see the camera pointing at me (usually at the point of arrest), and I perceive the microphone is within recording range. My expression hardens with the sobriety of the situation and I spout as loud as I can, alternating my phrases as I go:

"The U.S. Navy violates Vancouver's nuclear free zone".

"The U.S. exports a foreign policy of aggression".

"The U.S. bullies foreign shores to accept radiological materials."

"Keep Vancouver nuclear free- say no to leaky bombs."

But this is all a plan. When the time comes, I'm unsure how the words will come out of my mouth. My prior experience in activism in the past only reassures me repeatedly that anything can happen. With my nerves tried and adrenalin coursing through my veins, my tongue will swell and my mouth will become dry. I fear I might freeze in front of the camera. Further, my only opportunity may come during an affray with police, when I feel like speaking the least. I know all of this beforehand, and yet the information only calms me momentarily. My reputation as a professional will have to be proved all over again, every time I engage in environmental activism, not only to myself, but also to those who support me. With the rising of the sun, I know this day will prove to challenge my skills, my competence, my restraint, my resolution to succeed, even the indignity of incarceration: all in the name of the Organization.

By the time we have our act together, the sky will turn a deep purple, then a turquoise-blue. The tide has been receding, and halyards from the near-by vessels start clanking, indicating a rising wind from the northwest. Seagulls and sandpipers are clearly visible now, and I watch them compete with one another for territory. They swoop down from the dock posts and patter after the nuggets of sea life abandoned in the sand after the sea had deserted them. Jeff, the Action Coordinator-drill sergeant starts barking orders at me, and I fling my Zodiac into the shallows. I say a little prayer to the Great Spirit and Jeff answers it by climbing into another zodiac besides mine. Greg, an Action Coordinator from the states, decides to join me. Aside from myself, he's the only other American on the mission. He has a quality of silence that's inoffensive, yet keeps you anxious of his thoughts, like the wise man on the hill who's about to teach you a hard lesson. When you ask him a question, he usually wouldn't give you a straight answer, but his response is always short and deep.

We move out in half-moon formation, Jeff in the lead, with rest of us, two to a rubber boat, trailing wide to his left and right. He cranks back on the throttle and the

crew chases him, bouncing along, gliding through the air and slapping down against the waves. He has a bullhorn, and squawks orders constantly, mostly telling us to sit up straight. The media finally spots us and moves in close. If their cameras roll on me, I imagine they will see my envious eyes looking longingly toward their hard-hulled Chris Craft, which is long enough and heavy enough to absorb most of the pounding of the sea at 40 knots. Adam smiles and waves to the cameras, despite his training, and I cringe, not only because I'm embarrassed for the Organization, but also because it could just as easily have been me.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jeff scolds in his amplified tin voice.

"Act like you're in a state of crisis, Goddamned it."

Jeff is his own crisis. He could convince you plastic bags are endangered. He orders the mission to a stop. I can see the silhouette of the fleet in the distance. After a bitter lecture on etiquette, we go over the plan a final time.

"Greg and Owen, stay behind me until we get to the carrier. We'll circle her once, and then you guys take port. Jan and I'll take starboard. Are there any

questions? All right then. Look alive out there. Don't say anything unless the media sticks a mike in your face, then remember your training. Those who don't get arrested bring the gear in.

Let's go!" I heard the plan already. I keep my eye on the carrier.

"Hang on, I have a question," I tell him.

"What is it?" Jeff squawks through the bullhorn, though his Zodiac is next to mine.

"They're dragging their anchor. Maybe someone should climb it, Jeff. They won't be able to move. It'll make a great shot."

"It's too dangerous, stick to the plan." And with that, Jeff opens the throttle and churns the water before any more discussion can slow him down.

Very soon afterward, I get my first close look at our objective. My stomach sinks, as the carrier grows ever larger in front of me on approach. The reality of the situation finally hits me. The *Independence* is literally a floating city. Even before we pass the bow, I realize the futility of expecting any sense of control of the situation. Our welfare is unmistakably in the hands of the U.S. Navy, and we count on them to show compassion in the

eye of the camera. Still, sailors are lined up along the massive deck like a denim picket fence, leering, cursing, and spitting down on us. By the time we pass the port side, not yet halfway around the ship, I notice I'm talking to myself. I reassure myself that I'm not the enemy, but an environmental activist with an agenda of peace, for one and all, including the gunners, rocket launchers and fighter pilots of this great weapon of mass destruction.

Coming up on the starboard side from the stern, we notice the ship's crew opening valves on the water cannons. Jeff has been shouting at them since we passed across the bow, warning them that Vancouver Harbor is a nuclear-free zone, and that docking means a violation of law and an international incident. They respond by blasting him in the face with the intense pressure of the hoses. For the moment, my sentiments are with the Navy. He is campaigning away when the pressure hits him, causing him to wrap up his sentence hastily with a "...yarrgh," but before I can celebrate, my eyes start to blink, then burn, and I notice that the hoses are mixed with CS, or riot gas, which works essentially like pepper spray. Greg hasn't noticed yet, and is resolute in torquing the outboard motor through the pressure. Meanwhile, Jeff cuts directly in front of the

bow, causing the ship to throw her engines into reverse. With his disappearance, all three of the hoses on the starboard side are now directed towards Greg and me. I turn my head away, knowing full well what to expect. I'm hit in the back of the head, causing the headband I'm wearing to hurdle into the air. Screams of delight and triumph ring out along the deck. Now Greg feels the gas, and squints to maintain control of the inflatable.

Over the next untold minutes (maybe ten minutes, maybe a half-hour, it's hard to tell in the chaos), Greg and I-on starboard bow, along with Adam and Owen on the hull- take turns distracting the cannons while the other Zodiac attempts to leave a mark. The difficulty lies in the fact that the persons in the front of the inflatables (Adam and myself) have to hold a twenty-four inch stencil in one hand, and a can of spray-paint in the other while getting blasted, the momentum pushing us away from the carrier, while the seas are as choppy as ever. The tillers have to keep Adam and me pointed toward and close to the carrier, shouting warnings and instructions at us all the while. This takes several attempts, as the Navy dislodges us over and again. At one point, we are blown far enough forward to notice Jan, the only woman on the team, and a member of

the other port side crew, climbing the anchor chain and binding herself to it with a more portable chain. So much for the Plan. I can see fear in her eyes, and she seems glad to see us. She appears happy as well to see the Canadian Coast Guard moving in to arrest her. Now we're running out of time, and soon they'll be around for us. Jeff is powerless, still on the port side struggling with the full thrust of three water cannons. Eventually, Adam either loses his stencil or his spray can or maybe both and that crew volunteers to attempt to distract the cannons for us. Greg has the great idea to switch jobs, since his eyes still burn. I open up full throttle against a cannon dedicated to us, and move back in toward the carrier. Greg finds the opportunity to hold the stencil against the hull, and succeeds in spraying on to it. He is so determined to succeed that I don't have the heart to tell him that a small yellow stream is also flowing down upon him. When I look up, I notice it's coming from the black shaft of a sailor, who is rewarded by a chorus of laughter from the deck.

"What's going on up there?" Greg asks.

"Great photo op." I reply. Greg smiles proudly.

Eventually there are three twenty-four inch radiological signs along the starboard side of the carrier, symbolizing that the ship is a contamination hazard. I let the thrust of the cannons push us away. Greg drops the equipment into the bottom of the boat and collapses with exhaustion. But we are not finished. The Canadian Coast Guard (a detachment of the RCMP), which had been waiting patiently for us to get out of the way of the cannons, now moves in to apprehend us, with the media in tow. I alert Greg, and he springs to life.

"Vancouver Harbor is a nuclear-free zone," he tells the cameras with all due sincerity. "The United States is in violation of international law." The RCMP pulls him out of the boat and politely arrests him without handcuffs. Now it's my turn. "The yoo-eth Navy ekth-porths contaminathun." I bellow at the camera, adrenalin flooding system and drying my tongue out, while the camera's bright light blinds me like a rabbit on the highway. While they pull me out of the zodiac and on to the RCMP's hard-hull, I look around for the wary eye of Jeff and wonder how his day is going before I feel comfortable enough to enjoy my arrest.

Hexes of Haight

She hates his cat. His cat hates her. Both are coy in their contempt. The animal, on the one hand, is demonstrative. Once, when she picked him up, the cat sat in her cold, tense arms for a minute, and then drove his claws into Sophia's skin as he jumped from her lap. Sophia speaks, but passive aggressively, as if to speak poorly of his cat is to do so of him. She says things that she can't back up with evidence like: "I've been feeling lousy all day, I think I'm allergic to your cat," or "There's trash in the streets. I think your cat is getting into the trash cans outside." This guy is aware of the relationship between the two, but does nothing to improve it. Though he likes them both, the truth is that he'd rather have the cat than the girl, but both of them have friends, and to break up over a cat would be social suicide, even in their cat-loving hometown of San Francisco.

Not that Christopher Lynch and Sophia Porter are crazy about one-another's friends; neither camp hangs out in the same circles. He is a lawyer by trade and a yuppie by choice; she is a shopkeeper by trade and a witch by choice. But people are people and cats are cats. Any ultimatum would have to be hers, which would give him the upper hand, because there is something inherently suspicious about a witch who hates a cat. The cat on the other hand, has nowhere else to go. Raised on gourmet cat food, he prides himself on his care, tailoring, and attention invested in his three-quarter-inch claws. His owner brings in enough cash to hire a maid, who feeds him at regular intervals. He gets monthly flea treatments and plenty of toys. He has a three-story scratch post and an automatic self-cleaning kitty litter box. Given an alternative, there is nowhere the cat would want to go.

One day the maid interrupted this precarious détente when she came by on a Sunday morning and found Lynch and his cat in bed. Behind the door, Sophia was dabbing cat hair off her slip with masking tape. The Latin-American maid hailed from a country that harbored many superstitions, and she felt it her duty to disclose any

precautions in this regard to Mr. Lynch, who watched her with one eye as she offered this example:

"Oh no, mister Lynch, you must not sleep next to the cat on your bed. He will steal your soul and then you and him will change bodies!"

Sophia stood in front of the mirror, hidden behind the bedroom door when she heard this. She perked up and raised her eyebrows as she listened.

"I have seen this with my own eyes!" the maid continued.

"My aunt Octavia fell asleep with the cat on her chest and you know what? The next day she ran around all over the town chasing the chickens and licking her butt in public until my uncle Jorge locked her up in her bedroom. The doctor said she had the head sickness but my uncle Jorge said she practiced black magic and then all the townspeople knew what happens then, mijo. She wasn't loco, she got her soul stolen. So then the priest came out, he read to her, and he told everyone let this be a lesson to you. Now my uncle Jorge plays the accordion every night for the cat and charges everyone ten pesos to have my aunt Octavia come by and chase the mice away. You must be very careful with animals when there is black magic around."

Lynch's eyes blinked and he and the cat looked at each other in bewilderment

"Morning Regina," Christopher said, as he stretched and yawned.

"Could you step out this morning and pick up some coffee? Get the whole bean stuff this time. It says it on the bag: Whole Bean. And get a paper. The Wall Street Journal. Someone's been stealing mine. Also I'm having a party tonight so please make the usual arrangements."

"Mister Lynch, I'm serious! You are seeing that woman... I don't trust her! She keeps that big black box here and God knows what's in it. Anyone who plays with magic plays with the devil. And she doesn't like your cat. She's gonna do something to him. Make him a devil cat like she is! You gotta stop letting her into your house!"

Sophia spoke to her, surprising the maid. She drew a cross in front of her chest. Sophia was pretty, but she had an elongated, perky nose that caused the maid to feel uneasy in her presence.

"Ms. Rosario, you must be very careful who you criticize when there's black magic around."

"Santa Maria, Jesus and Joseph, don't sneak around," she said before turning away abruptly.

"Don't threaten the maid, Sophia," Chris said, halfheartedly. "She'll run out on me. I need a woman in my life who knows how to take care of a man."

The statement infuriated Sophia, but she made it a source of personal pride to keep her cool.

"How about it, Ms. Rosario, do you know how to take care of Christopher? You know he likes domination, don't you? Do you know how to use a whip? What do you think Chris, why don't you show her some of your toys?"

"That's enough Sophie!"

However, Sophia was not finished:

"Let's see what we have for Mr. Lynch in that big black box of mine."

"Oh, no, not the box. I'm getting out of here," said Regina, as she stuffed clothes in her basket with vigor.

"Don't be afraid of her, Regina. I got more magic in my portfolio than she has in that whole shop of broomsticks and incense."

"Other people's magic. You're a parasite, Chris. You're as dependent on others as that miserable cat of yours. But you like to be dominated, don't you Chris? Yeah, you'd make a good kitty cat. I think I'll call you Mr. Biggums."

Chris laughed, but sarcastically.

"Where in the hell did you get that name from? You know, Sophia, at least I'm realistic. I give my fucking clients exactly what they expect. I don't misrepresent my product like you do to all those mixed up kids that stumble into your shop, looking for an alternative to a God that let them down. Why don't you just use that space to hold codependent anonymous meetings? They'll stand a hell of a lot better chance of getting their needs met than they will with frog legs and candle wax."

"So you don't believe in my magic, do you? That's just like saying you don't believe in me," said Sophia.

"Hey man, I just interpret magic differently than you do. To me, magic is the ability to overcome obstacles and to succeed, that's all. Over and done with. No smoke and mirrors."

When Regina backed out of the door with a full basket, Sophia stepped closer to Christopher.

"That's a lot more shallow than you realize. It takes the type of training in the occults that someone like you wouldn't understand. Magic is a lot more complex than you think it is."

"Prove it."

Sophia looked at him quiet for a minute.

"You don't know what you're asking."

"I said go ahead, prove it. The words are English,"
Chris grinned.

"Right now, while you're standing there, do a spell on me. If you impress me, I swear I'll give you anything you want."

"Alright, have it your way. If you're convinced, you pay off the balance of my three-year lease."

Christopher picked up the cat and stroked it.

"And if I'm not?"

"If it doesn't work, I'll close up shop. I'll let you use the rest of the lease to sell wine."

"Sounds intriguing. Are you sure you're not getting over your head?"

Sophie thought for a moment. She looked down at the wad of masking tape covered in cat hair she'd been carrying around in her hand.

"It's a big gamble. I'd want the cat too."

"Come again? What would you do with this cat if you had it?"

"Tease it. Whip it. Rename it. Give it everything you've always wanted."

"So you're going for my soul! Not very original."

"You just invite your friends over to the party tonight. I'll provide the entertainment."

"Ha! This is better than television! I can't lose! Listen I don't want the stupid shop. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"Are you losing your nerve?"

"Fine. You got a bet. Listen; invite your friends over to the party tonight too. I'm sure everyone would like to see this!"

So Sophia went to the shop that afternoon, but she didn't open the door for customers. Instead she sat in a little room in the back of the store with her face glowing from the light of a computer monitor. She entered a series of key words into an Internet search engine and pondered over the pages for hours: Latin America. Occult. Spells. Self-suggestion. Hypnosis. When Molly, her hired help, arrived at 4:00 pm, she sent her off with the customer log with specific instructions. Then she stayed in the back room, despite passers-by banging on the door. She awoke from her trance when the police called. The time: 6:45 pm. She laid out various herbs and sprinkled salt in the middle of the storeroom floor. She put a large caldron on to boil

in her converted little kitchen and continued to stir it as customer after customer came by and rattled the door and left again. Around 8:00 pm, she started dancing and reciting poetry. She shook her fanny and twitched her nose. She shrieked out into the night causing pigeons on the roof to flutter away. Finally exhausted, she collapsed into her rocking chair and picked up her cordless phone.

"Y'know Chris, this whole thing is stupid. I mean who would prostitute their craft for some stupid bet, that really adds up to nothing."

"Sounds like you're getting cold feet pumpkin," replied the squawk from the little speaker.

"I'm sorry Chris. I got in over my head. I just got my feelings hurt and I over reacted. I've been at this all day and I really got nothing."

"Poor baby. I'm sorry to see you lose your shop, but you know how much I've wanted my own wine store. To back out on a bet now would only encourage your tirades in the future. How do you expect to learn your lesson?"

"You're right, Chris. I deserve it. I just want things to be back the way they were. I want to come over and see you."

"Are you mad?"

"Mad as hell."

"How mad are you?"

"I'm so mad. I could just scream. I could hit a wall. I could hurt somebody. I guess I have some pent-up aggressions I need to get off my chest"

Christopher's breathing became irregular.

"M... Maybe you should come over"

"I'm leaving now." Sophia said, as she slammed down the phone.

Upon Sophia's arrival, another hour remained before expecting fashionable guests. Christopher, who anticipated her arrival by dismissing the maid and putting the cat out, met Sophie at the door wearing black leather panties and a collar around his neck.

"There you are, my miserable little cretin, open the door."

Christopher complied with the request. Then he got down on his hands and knees.

"If only people could see you now." Sophia laughed to herself.

"C'mon Mister Biggums. Let's go open the big black box," Sophia said.

Inside the box were various articles and pieces of equipment that resembled the footlocker of a medieval dungeon master. Sophia tried one and then another on Chris, and when she was sure he was in her control, tried something that wasn't in her box: Auto suggestion.

"Christopher, listen to my voice closely."

For the remainder of the hour she talked to him until things were beginning to run late. Sophie counted one, two, three... then she called his name: "Christopher"?

Hearing this, he perked up and looked around startled.

"Huh? What happened?"

"You must have enjoyed yourself," Sophie replied with a twitching of her nose.

"The party's about to start, you better get dressed."

"Oh my God! Where's my trousers, my jacket, my tie?"

"C'mon Chris, let's get you ready for your guests."

Regina had showed up to manage the party and distribute finger food, and the guests piled in a couple at a time as expected. There were Sophia's friends, some of whom retreated into a back bedroom, told stories to each other, and never came out again, and others who bunched together on the couch passing a joint back and forth. Then there were his friends, who gathered in the kitchen or on

the balcony, clinking wine glasses and talking about business and Sophie's friends. After a few drinks, Christopher felt like he had an announcement to make. He clinked his wine glass with a dessert fork, so that all would know that what he had to say was for everyone.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I have an announcement to make. Come here sweetheart, this concerns you too." Sophie and Chris huddled together arm and arm.

"As of today, Sophie and I have decided to go into business together. Hexes of Haight, the shop Sophie has ran for five years now will be closing its doors. Starting next month, that space will be occupied by Lynch Wines."

The group in starched shirts and dinner ties clapped their hands, but the people dressed in black were aghast. How could she surrender the store just like that? The place hadn't quite been a breadwinner, but it wasn't approaching bankruptcy either. More to the point, Hexes was something in which Sophie had invested her heart.

"Well," Sophie began, "it wasn't like I wanted to do this in the beginning, but we had a bet and I would expect Christopher to honor it if he lost."

Everyone wanted to hear the details about this bet. When Chris told his side of the story, his friends guffawed

at his cleverness. When Sophie told her side of the story, her friends looked away in shame. The magic didn't work. Her long time customers felt used. They weren't as experienced in magic as Sophie, but they expected results eventually.

So that was that. As the crowd began to fade away, Sophie piped up one more time.

"Oh wait a minute, everyone, I have just one more thing to say."

Though they were polite, everyone felt Sophie was going to rationalize it all, when it seemed better to just let the whole thing go at the time.

"Well, what is it dear, out with it." Chris urged.

In a large authoritative voice uncharacteristic of Sophie, she boomed:

"Mr. Biggums, if only people could see you now!"

With that, Christopher began pulling his clothes off as fast as he could, exposing tight leather panties and his collar.

Everyone gasped at the same time.

Sophie reached under her dress and produced a leash. She fastened it to Christopher's collar.

"Who are you, my little cat? Tell me your name." But try as he might, Christopher could only meow.

"If you feel you won the bet, please tell us all.

People are beginning to think you turned into a cat."

But Christopher could only meow.

"C'mon Chris, get up. You're making a fool of yourself," Christopher's friends from college begged. But it was no use. Christopher rolled over on his back and Sophie rubbed his belly. All of the sudden Regina dropped her tray of wine glasses she was carrying and began to shriek.

"It happened! Mister Lynch is now Mr. Biggums! Just like I said!"

"Alright, this has gone far enough," demanded Christopher's boss, who happened to be the managing partner of his firm, and the one in charge of his promotion.

"He's under some form of hypnosis. This isn't magic. Bring him around."

"My pleasure."

Sophie counted one, two, three; then once again she called his name: "Christopher?"

Hearing this, he perked up and looked around startled as he did before.

"Huh? What happened?"

"You must have enjoyed yourself," Sophie replied with another twitching of her nose.

"The party's about to start, you better get dressed."

With that, the crowd roared with laughter.

"Oh my God! Where's my trousers, my jacket, my tie?"

For the rest of the evening, while the guests debated whether magic had actually occurred here, Chris tried to drink himself into a state of amnesia. At the end of the evening, everyone decided it must have ended in at least a tie and were willing to support Sophie in getting her shop back. Meanwhile Christopher's college buddies lugged his unconscious body into bed. Every now and then, Chris would mumble something to them like "Oh my God, I'm so embarrassed" and "If only she had turned me into a cat, I could've lived with that."

While everyone spilled out of the building, the cat used the opportunity to slip back in. He cuddled up to Christopher on the bed, and the two fell into a deep, somber sleep. The next morning, when the maid came by, Christopher was nowhere to be found. A call to Sophie yielded no new information, but several days later, Ahn and Sung Nguyen spotted a cat inside their corner market. The

husband and wife team who ran the place, reported to police that a bottle of wine fell to the floor and broke open, and wanted to know who the animal belonged to. When Sung investigated, he found a cat matching the description of Christopher's, hunched over the pool, lapping up a forty-dollar bottle of Artemis Chardonnay. That was the last anyone had heard of the two of them for weeks, until one of Sophie's clients who jumped trains swore he saw Chris running into an abandoned warehouse by the tracks. He thought about going in and investigating, but changed his mind when he saw the remains of a disemboweled rat lying in front of the roll-up doors.

The August Vanities

I'd been having one of those days. Yesterday I was the on-call psychiatrist at County emergency until about 2:30 this morning, and still I agreed to meet with residents at the State Hospital at ten. I kept this appointment in order to showcase my type A personality, though I knew no one would notice or even care. It occurred to me (only now that the meeting is over) that what I really wanted was an excuse to be bitchy. My colleagues would dismiss me as an over-fatigued, impetuous forty-six year old, enabling me the opportunity to act out. I would practice a highly skilled and professional level of passive aggression. I would do this because I lacked the guile to look the state hospital administrator in the face every time he reduces every psychological ailment to a chemical imbalance and tell him that the only chemical

imbalance is the lack of black ink on the pharmaceutical spreadsheet.

I have my own theories about mental health. Well, like most academics, I have co-opted ideas from Marx and Freud and embellished them with my own creative curiosity. But because I work in a junkyard, those ideas may never see the light of day. When a stock car careens out of control and slams into the wall at the Daytona 500, they send the remains to the junkyard. That's where I work. My job is to pick through the pieces and reassure the establishment that the reason for the disaster is that the individual driver had lost control, and that there is nothing inherently dangerous about a gaggle of speedsters elbowing one another for first place at one hundred-eighty miles per hour. One of those speedsters was Karen, a very beautiful, intelligent, creative, and very fucked up seventeen year old. Falling in love with her was one of several issues that have come up today and pushed me to the brink of a nervous breakdown.

But it is early afternoon on a gorgeous Monday in August, and I try to pull myself together, do some thinking. I decide to walk down to a nearby lake that has a waterfront at a park near the hospital in hopes of

finding Karen, who had run away. Sparkling sunlight reflects off the mellow rippling in the waves, created by a slight breeze and emphasized by water-skiers further from the shore. On the horizon, swinging mastheads pull taught mainsails that tack left and right peacefully in their silence. Opposite the lake, a thick brush of oak trees planted during the FDR administration cloak the highway, providing little relief from the sound of the relentless onrush of traffic.

They are well-groomed vegetation, though there was an obvious intent to stagger them when planted in order to create a sense of spontaneity. State budget politics since have created an interesting growth histology in the trees wherein one can glean a fat fiscal year from a lean one. During lean times, the large grove grew unfettered opposite the highway, so that the lean years provided heavier trees. The well budgeted, and hence highly maintained, trees are a mere shell of their fiscal cousins.

Above the tree canopy, one can still see the top floor of the unpretentious, constructivist State Mental Hospital in the distance, reserved for the executive offices. Regardless of state budget politics, there are those in the building who have the power to crop the tops of the trees

so that a view is possible. With privilege comes the opportunity to see beyond the trees to the lakes-side park near which I stand. Though I can see the horizon from my office, I cannot see the beach, so I wouldn't know without a hike whether or not Karen had returned to her cardboard pergola by the lake.

When I record my assessment of the patients under my care, I sometimes watch the sailboats for hours. I once recorded my blood pressure after a staff meeting, and then again after catching up on paperwork. I once recorded a swing of nearly twenty systolic and more than ten diastolic. I also noticed that as I write, my tendency to prescribe psychotropics decreases over time, from one file to the next. Perhaps those patients with the worst view should have the less deeply buried files.

Armen sells me bottled water from his hotdog cart when I come to the park. Today I try to surprise him by buying a hotdog, but he seems ambivalent as to whether to make a sale or just go on reading the paper and listening to Arabic music from his transistor radio. He seems equally disinterested when I tell him I want the hot dog without a bun. He smiles and charges me the same price anyway, and I can't help but feel slightly deflated that he never noticed

after all this time that I had been a vegetarian. Perhaps in a couple of weeks, he will notice that I've lost a couple of pounds when ketosis sets in.

I carry my weenie wrapped in a napkin down to the lake, feeling more than a little exposed. I narrow my eyes and look back and forth, prepared to sneer at anyone who finds me the least bit lascivious. Somehow I have mentally prepared to make today the worst of all days for myself, and I struggle to rise above the sentiment. I feel I deserve it. Nothing seems to make sense to me anymore. I became aware of this growing tumor in my soul when I read an article in JAMA on amphetamine abuse, and opposite the article was an ad copy for Dextran, a stimulant, the ad showing a slim blonde in the prime of her life. I wonder how many more doctors were taken in by the quick exposure to the model and missed the article altogether. Dextran was the beginning of my angst, the critical mitosis in my professional malignancy.

The death of my mother was the second event that has lead to my unraveling. She had breast cancer for over a year before the disease took her, and all along, I convinced her to be a good patient. I told her that she had access to the best health care possible, and that I, as

a medical doctor, can avow that she is better off sticking to the regimen. She endured chemotherapy and radiation treatments. I held her hand. When she would break down in tears, I would say, "There, there. Stay the course." And she would swallow her pain and be a good patient. I was unwilling to let her go, and she held out as long as she could for me. I immersed myself in cancer research, finding myself frustrated repeatedly when the statistics contradicted years of clinic practice. I was never able to establish a preference toward survival rate with treatment versus no treatment at all until she died, at which point I concluded that the statistics show there is no correlation at all. But she endured the medical invasion and the butchery nonetheless, so that I could have her just a couple years more, that turned out not to be the case.

Atkins is the third event, or more precisely, Cedric's Atkins diet. He's an African American janitor who lost forty-eight pounds over the course of three weeks. Upon his release from prison, he weighed 320 pounds, and at 6 foot 4, he had an imposing frame. He would meal about in the hallway near my office in a half-hearted show of industriousness, then inevitably lean against my door (which I usually keep open) and start talking. Any other

doctor would have inquired as to whether Cedric had a schedule to keep, but the nature of his lectures became more seductive over time. In the beginning, Cedric would start a conversation by stating the obvious. As I recorded my assessments, his baritone voice would beckon me to his presence by suggesting that I might be able to find things quicker if I organized my files on a shelf. "Thanks Cedric," I tell him, "I'll keep that in mind." But I won't, because I hate having to dig them out again.

Cedric intimidated me, and yet I couldn't shut him out. His crass, blatant analysis of the world was so evident that I found myself having to brake the wild horses that run away with my own mind in order to stay on point with him. It was an interesting tug of war. I would want to pull the proverbial rug out from under him when he suggested that white people take orders well. We're like sheep, he says. I could think of all sorts of contingencies and exceptions, but the bottom line is that he was right. Generalizations can be sobering, especially if you've spent your entire career avoiding them, only to rediscover them later in life and painfully at issue. He

once said that talking to me was like being a navigator on a runaway train. I'm slowly learning what he means.

My profession has caused me to compartmentalize my way of thinking. When Cedric said he was trying the Atkins, I immediately jumped to the part where I interpreted his suggestion as reaching out, wanting me to validate him as a huge man, and in polite fashion, I told him that some people were meant to be big. Don't change, I told him, accept the way you are and you will be happy. But no one is ever happy the way they are. Cedric, a janitor with a junior-high school education had to tell me that, or at least had to say it in a way I was meant to hear it. Cedric was the one who told me that where we have no physical obstacles, we create mental ones, and when things are going well, we create problems, just so we have an obstacle that we may overcome. Perhaps that's why I contribute to charities that rarely deliver despite their capacity to do so. It might also explain why I continue to donate blood to this violent society at a time when my body is already so weak from exhaustion that I can't even defend myself on the bus when a potato-wielding schizophrenic relieves me of my wallet.

Cedric's maxim might also illustrate the horror and the delicacy of love. 'Atkins is a revolution,' he says, echoing the conventional wisdom that forty years of research in cardiology means nothing when a man with Cedric's disposition actually reduces his chances of getting a heart attack with a high-protein, high fat diet. Therefore, I hoist the flag of Cedric's revolution. I take up the Atkins like a knife and cut deeper into the tissue of my professional expectations so that I may appear sexier to Karen, alternatively rebelling against the unrealistic expectations of the values I inherited from my colleagues and exemplified by my patients, personified in their ideal by Karen, and have willingly chosen to make my own.

The most difficult part of being a medical doctor to me is trying to balance research with practice. I am a scientist at heart, but I have to practice to make a living, pay off the loans. I rely on the research of others, but I accept their findings tongue and cheek. While that distraction haunts me, my paperwork piles up on my desk, existing mostly for a single purpose: to mitigate malpractice claims. So even though I sit on my throne on other days, passing judgment on the minds of those whose values reach beyond their ability to manage them, today I

watch slinky, skinny, amped-up feminine bodies adorn the beach of the lake, primping and proud as conquerors, seizing the day at the expense of the future. When one of them looks like Karen, I lose my balance or miss a step. Paralyzing fear overtakes me, because of what she represents, and that what I have to say to her is beyond the realm of my practice. While she is my patient and I have a responsibility to her, I have a need beyond my control to research the field of intimacy with her; I want to surrender to her nonsensical world and curl up in her arms as the lake does when it follows the shore.

I'm overdressed in my three-piece suit and my tie lingering over my shoulder, propelling-about in the wind. I want people to take notice of me. Not the dry, sober doctor, rational and appropriate; I want them to take notice of the beast within, the man behind the curtain. The naked child running across the dining room while his mother gives chase as formal company waits to dine, laughing all the while; strangers who attempt to contain me as my mother panics, because they too once had my brain and still retained at the time the memories of their youth.

There seems to be no end of the people who make a pilgrimage to the beach. It's never empty, and seldom

quiet. Young bodies mostly, worshipping the sun and each other, while professionals like me fret about prolonged sun exposure and the frivolous behavior, and cannot, when we finally are able to take a break, fully let go and allow ourselves to be caught unaware for fear of coming across as reckless, and therefore unprofessional. So I don't know how I will react if I see Karen. It has only been a few days since she left, just long enough for me to realize my true feelings. She came to me in a dream last night, and the revelation is too much for me to ignore. I'm running frantically through the hospital, calling her name, and in the distance, her shadowy profile turns down darkened hallways, passes through mysterious doors. I try one door and then another, but they're locked. I notice I have a large ring of keys in my pocket, and try to focus on which one fits a particular door. When I find the right key, I realize I have the wrong room when a colleague steps forward, possessing the demeanor of a patient, and accuses me of misdiagnosing his or her peer-reviewed research. Finally, I get the right door, but it's too late. She refuses eye contact, turns away to the window and climbs down a series of bed-sheets knotted together to the street below.

My greatest fear is that I might find Karen. I know now that my long-standing perception of the world will change forever. My fear is not go unsubstantiated. I squint through middle-aged, myopic eyes and make out the silhouette of a woman sitting in a patch of willow on the shore in the distance, fussing about in a fit energy. However, a lover is strangely familiar when in the presence of his affection, although everything else quickly loses perspective. My heart races and my face, flush with fever. Suddenly the lake has lost its familiarity. I do not know what hold this woman has over me, but I know instinctively that I cannot turn back. I walk on, precariously, like a child, teetering on the tilt of new legs.

When I approach her, she pretends not to notice, but I see her prepare Styrofoam cups for two as though she were expecting me.

"Hi Karen, how have you been?" I ask in a quivering voice. The tone is new to her, and she glances toward my face.

"Haven't been better," she says. Then she pours me a cup of tea that she prepared from dandelions and wild licorice.

"I think you stopped taking your medicine," I say, though I know the statement was obvious. I'd hoped speaking from authority might pull me together.

"I stopped being normal. I wasn't getting anywhere."

"You didn't give it enough time," I contended. Yet I don't want her to be normal anymore. I don't want to be normal myself. I gulped my tea and crumbled the cup. When the lake waves brought in the shallow tide, I tossed the cup into it.

"Hey, haven't I taught you anything?" she said. I got up, waded out to me knees in my slacks and retrieved the Styrofoam ball.

"We have to save the planet," she warns me again. Then she runs through her list: "Have you been recycling? Taking the bus? Giving Blood?" I tell her that I have, that I continue to be her servant and steward to the planet.

"You silly thing," she said. "I'm worried about you. I heard Cedric talking to the administrator about us. He thinks we're having an affair!" She started to laugh, and the seriousness of my situation rummaged around in my brain.

"He spends a lot of time with you." I said, fishing for a reason to hate her.

"We were an item. Oh, it was quite platonic. He said he's going to marry me when I turn eighteen."

"That's not going to happen," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because you need professional help!" I shouted, grabbing her by the arm.

"You're hurting me," she said.

I said I was sorry. I didn't mean to hurt her. She searched my face again, and now she found what she was looking for. Now she was holding all the cards.

"I think you're jealous!" she shouted.

I told her to keep her voice down. Someone may be listening.

"You had your chance. Now it's Cedric and me."

"Never!" I shouted, and found my hands across her throat. She squirmed around for a moment, and then her body and face went soft again.

"I own you," she said, matter-of-factly. I reached down and pressed my lips against hers. Her kisses were warm reassuring. For the first time in days, I felt at home, and I found it in her arms. We made love in the

willows, made no attempt at concealing it, and afterward, I stood by the shore naked as a newborn and shouted as loud as I could at the setting sun.

The emerging shadow of the oak trees overcast the institution, an effect I had never before witnessed. On the hidden highway above, the sound of the passing motor vehicles were augmented by headlamps that darted between the lake and the office building like searchlights. My trousers had drifted away in the tide. Karen's naked body lay pressed in against the folded cardboard, and she slowly rubbed her hands across her thighs. I had taken a bite of the forbidden fruit, not for sex or love, but for something more profound. I had asked a question that I lacked the authority to answer, and I responded with a resounding affirmation that values are only as valid as our experiences allow them to be.

Call this experience the August Vanities. It's the appreciation for what we had and lost, or abandoned or gave away, because we felt at the time that we deserved more, expected better from life. Seven years of medical school, fourteen years of practice could not give me what I have found in Karen. I don't know where we go from here, or even how long she will continue to patronize me, but for

now, I have no interest in going back to the institution, at least not in my official capacity.

They'll say I had a nervous breakdown, a chemical imbalance, that I struck the wall at high gear, at the cutting edge of success. Upon assessment of Karen and me, they will accuse us of having unreasonable values. They will stop at nothing to sabotage our happiness, our frivolity, or enjoyment of life. Blame the August Vanities. It's the reason that my practice is over, and yet my education has just begun.

Liberal Studies

"They're Wheaties," he thought to himself as he waited for the milk to arrive. But to be sure, he picked one up and studied it between his fingers. During his undergraduate career, breakfast cereal was more interesting. Everything was more interesting. Now *he* was more interesting. Doctors probe him and nurses quiz him. Academic journals catalog him. For this, once a month he receives a check from the feds. The little check, that is. He stopped waiting for the big one. That thing brought in almost a thousand dollars a month. Since then, Congress had passed a bill that put a hospital lien on his disability payments. That left the little one to provide cigarettes, a six-pack and a perhaps a month's worth of T.V. Dinners, but that's the only money they'd let him keep. After all, he earned that money.

"We got another letter from those student loan people," a female voice echoed from the other end of a tiny hallway. He put the flake down and picked up another. At closer inspection, the frontier of a Wheatie was not unlike the frontier of Mars. Unlike Mars however, there are two hemispheres on a Wheatie, separated by a thin proximal horizon.

"You need to tell them you're going to start giving blood," said the voice, whose words seemed to flutter in on the wings of a black moth that had entered jointly, and then followed the heated air out of the kitchen window:

"They don't have to know about the experiments, but I'm tired of these creditors bothering me all the time."

One, two, three...pretty soon there were more Wheaties on the table than in his bowl, and still no milk had arrived.

"You're thirty-six years old, Alan. Pretty soon I'm not going to be able to take care of you any longer."

He began separating the broken Wheaties from those he considered intact. From there, he separated those that looked mal-formed from those that came closest to a perfect ellipse. Eventually he had four groups of Wheaties. There were the chosen few, which seemed to have the rigidity to

survive any journey no matter how bumpy the road and still maintain a perfect orbit. Then there were the mal-formed ones that kept the orbits from settling down into the bottom of the box. Next, came the broken ones that scraped against one another in an attempt to survive anymore jostling around, and lastly, there were the crumbled remains that stayed in the box, stayed in the bottom of the bowl. He picked up the bowl and studied the Martian dust left behind. It was already two o'clock. By two-thirty, he would have to catch his bus to the County Hospital. It had become apparent that there would be no milk today.