Calliope

Manuscript
Day
1992

English Department
Western Michigan University
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Calliope prepared by Rebecca Beech.
MANUSCRIPT DAY 1992

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Bryan Charles  

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Play
The Jury

by Bryan Charles

THE SCENE:

It is a wooded area, thick with foliage, with the exception of an area cleared away SC. In the clearing there is a hole with mounds of dirt on either side. There is a white porcelain toilet bowl to the SL of the hole.

THE CHARACTERS:

SAMUEL  A tall man with broad shoulders, close-cropped conservative hair. He sports an expensive black suit, shiny black leather shoes and pearl-white teeth. He is very handsome and uses an extended vocabulary. He appears to be in his mid-thirties.

JAMES  Roughly the same age as Samuel, James is dressed to fit the mold of the middle-class working man. He is wearing blue jeans, loafers, and a plaid flannel shirt. His looks epitomize mediocrity, from his mouth to his ears to his nose. He speaks with honesty and innocence.

THE LITTLE BOY  About six years old. Dressed in white T-shirt, faded jeans and black canvas high-top tennis shoes.
(As the curtain rises, Samuel is seen sitting on the toilet bowl looking as though he is fixed in thought. James is sitting cross legged, clothes ruffled, just a few feet from the hole with a shovel loosely gripped in his dirty hands.)

JAMES: Are you wondering why I've stopped digging? (Samuel doesn't notice.) You may have noticed that I've stopped digging. (Samuel's gaze remains fixed ahead in thought.) I don't seem to be digging anymore ... the hole here, that is. Perhaps you've begun to wonder why.

SAMUEL: Hm ... I'm, uh, sorry ... were you saying something? Anything?

JAMES: I was just taking notice of the fact that I've stopped digging this hole. I'm resting now ... or questing ... well, at any rate, I've taken a break from digging.

SAMUEL: (vaguely interested) You'd better continue. It'll be dusk soon ... and you know what they say about digging at dusk?

JAMES: (pondering) Mmmm ... no, what?

SAMUEL: Well, I was hoping you could tell me.

JAMES: (confused) Hoping?

SAMUEL: Yes. Hoping. A human thing to do ... that is, I used to do it when I was human. Perhaps I still do it, unconsciously ... or profusely (struggling) ... no, no wait ... effervescently ... no ... never mind.
JAMES: What of hope?

SAMUEL: *(offended)* What did you call me?

JAMES: Isn’t.

SAMUEL: *(slightly angry)* What?

JAMES: That is, I isn’t done digging this hole.

SAMUEL: *(snottily)* I believe what you mean to say is that you’re NOT done digging this hole.

JAMES: *(confused)* Which hole?

SAMUEL: That hole ... the one right in front of you.

JAMES: Then you should have said THAT hole instead of THIS hole. Let me remind you that all of this is totally out of synch with your gestation.

SAMUEL: Any gestation I experience is, I assure you, totally and completely non-olfactory. You see, the prostation of the said ovulation is merely a conglomeration of your own wicked fornication.

JAMES: *(ruminating)* Yes. *(pause)* I guess it would have to be something like that.

SAMUEL: *(with an edge of authority)* At any rate, you should continue with the digging. They’ll want to know about our progress. You’ll have to tell them that you’re a hindrance.

JAMES: How’s your ass?
SAMUEL: My ass?

JAMES: You’ve been sitting on that toilet for some time and I wonder if your ass is sore?

SAMUEL: No. I do not believe so. *(shuffling, feeling with his fingers)* I can still feel it here.

JAMES: There? With ... your hands?

SAMUEL: Yes. *(pauses)* I wonder, do you have any bald uncles on your mother’s side?

JAMES: No, I don’t. Were you hoping that maybe I would?

SAMUEL: Haven’t we been through this all before? What would you know about the hoping process ... if it is indeed a process? After all, your proclivity towards these myriad manifestations seems, to my mind at least, to be totally flatulent in relation to probity. You wonder about hope ... you stipulate ... ah, well, that is you emulate ... well, you see, hope’s agglutination *(frustrated)* is ... you get my point.

JAMES: *(standing, stretching and slowly resuming his digging)* I should say that I know a great deal about mathematics. Systems. Economics. What is hope without mathematics? You have been given life, you proceed to hope that maybe one day you’ll be fully familiar with ... say ... logarithms. That is hope. That is life.

SAMUEL: *(seemingly agitated)* Your attempts at philosophy are endeavors in futility. Life is fornication ... fucking, for lack of a better word. You were made to reproduce. Humans, love, ideas, words, pictures, everything. The world as we, that is, you and me, James and Samuel, see it is through the infinite void of
the womb. Everything is made to reproduce or to be reproduced. It's as simple as that.

JAMES: You seem to know a great deal about life.

SAMUEL: What's not to get?

JAMES: Well, I'm certainly curious to know if they'll be here soon. I would say that this is an adequate-sized hole. Perhaps I shall lie in it.

SAMUEL: (in disbelief) Don't you know a damn thing? You must really relish life in squalor. It must be so simple. I mean, the redundancy of this simplistic, albeit prolix masturbation strikes me as incongruous. I could ... (pauses, cranes his neck, listens) ... I believe ... they could be ... why, I think they are ... here!

JAMES: (lays the shovel down, looking) Really ... where?

(The little boy enters, walking as if in a trance. He continues to walk languidly, finally stopping in the middle of James and Samuel.)

SAMUEL: We've been expecting you. We were told you were ready.

JAMES: (in agreement) That's right. We heard you were, in fact, ready.

THE LITTLE BOY: We seem to be. All our friends are here.

SAMUEL: All your friends are here. To wish you well, it would seem.

JAMES: To hope you well.
THE LITTLE BOY: Hope. Have we hoped?

SAMUEL: (to James) You idiot.

JAMES: Well ... to hope is to gestate.

SAMUEL: To fester.

THE LITTLE BOY: Have we lived?

SAMUEL: Well ...

THE LITTLE BOY: Have we loved?

SAMUEL: (patience lost) LIVED! HOPED! LOVED! WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE...

THE LITTLE BOY: (still languid) Have we...

JAMES: You're ready now.

THE LITTLE BOY: ... breathed?

SAMUEL: (still angry) ...LIFE, LIVE, LOVED. SLAVERY! OUTRIGHT SLAVERY... DAMNATION...

JAMES: (indifferently) You're...

THE LITTLE BOY: ...ready.

(The little boy moves slowly to the hole that James has been digging and as he does this, Samuel falls quiet. Samuel stares at the boy intently, with an air of indignation. James stares indifferently. The little boy jumps into the hole and proceeds to lie down in it. It now becomes apparent that this is to be the
boy's grave. James begins to cover the small child with the dirt that he took from the hole. He whistles slowly. Samuel looks away, as if in deep thought. As James continues to fill the hole, further covering the child, the boy can be heard talking very softly.)

THE LITTLE BOY: (softly, above a whisper) We're ready... We're ready...

(As the scene ends, James is still filling and whistling, unaffected. Samuel remains poised in thought, still sitting on the toilet bowl.)

We're ready... We're ready...

(The scene fades and the curtain is lowered.)

THE END.
Poems
Greed

Greed is a
black hole,
vacuuming in debris of stars,
a ditch on the shoulder of the road,
filled with dilapidated jalopies,
a tunnel to China,
a shovel bitten into the clay,
and a rut that traps
bicycle tires and
throws riders.

by Elizabeth Rivard
Catch the Chase

Two hours of pure and simple truth pass by,
The shadows flick and explode against walls,
   I gasp and shudder as images fly,
I walk with angels down black and white halls.

The actors experience pain and joy
On the silver screen in my living room.
   Anguish enjoyably begins to cloy,
At the lowest points, new hope strangely blooms.

A well-worn face, a wrinkled overcoat,
   Peter Falk's familiar dusty grin
Anchors me safely so I do not float
   Into the pool of passion deep within
This film which is changing my perceptions
   And waking me out of dull reflections.

by Lucienne Roe
Gratitude

No stranger has ever made such an impact on me as you did, Mr. Mapplethorpe...
May I call you Robert? Bob?
I came face to face with you through your self-portraits,
But the glossy black-and-white print holds no warmth, no pulse.
There are so many questions I have for you:
What is your inspiration?
Are you happy now?
Why do you shock people?
Did you die alone?
That last question gives me the most pain.
I cry for someone I've never met.
Now that you're gone, do you cry for us?
Trapped in a place where the naked human body is shameful.
Dirty.
I envy the fact that you rose above all this,
Don't suppose you were meant for it anyway.
Thank you all the same, Mr. Mapplethorpe.

by Lucienne Roe
She is really gone
Not sleeping-
Dead
Thunder grumbles
the sky is hungry
I think.
I watch the cemetery
smear and distort
the trees are alive
Their branches: arms
waving frantically goodbye
The rippling panes
are between the wicker people
and the earth
torn open
ready to receive the
red mahogany box
where she lay.

by Karry Blank
MAKE-BELIEVE REALITY

A sewer.
What's down there?
Yellow eyes.
Black mask.
Something hits my arm - a Sparrow?
Leaves are raining on me from above.
The warm, grey water continues to drain off the land into
the sewer.
Those yellow eyes.
Evil almost.
Watching my every move.
Not frightened, but curious.
A mosquito feasts on my arm.
My hand swipes him away, but not in time to prevent the
itchy bump.
Birds are all around me: millions of them.
What are those yellow eyes?
Why is there a sewer here? Nowhere.
Is this a dream?

by Brad Ryder
Nine Ways to Ingest a House Fly

1
One of the plump, juicy raisins
In my Lenders raisin bagel
Had wings.
2
Dead flies intermingled
With my Lucky Charms
I shrugged wondering when they
Had started making chocolate marshmallows.
3
A fly explored the intestines
Of my tuba
As I took a breath
I inhaled more than just air.
4
A fly took a joy ride
On an airplane
Being navigated
Into the baby’s mouth.
5
I snort flies
Instead of cocaine
For a natural high.
6
A fly got caught
In the air current
Of my Bianca breath spray.
As I yawned
I blindly walked head on
Into loaded fly paper.

A fly hid
In my toothbrush's bristles
Though I brushed and brushed
My teeth never got gleaming white.

As the fly entered
The black cavern
Of my snoring mouth
I dreamed
I had been swallowed
By a killer fly.

by Silva Semerciyan
Agnostic Mass

Schubert from the iron choir-
It surrounds and pulls and drugs;
D, F#, A the only Trinity.
The man in white lifts his hands,
Cupped to catch nonexistence.
"Blessed are the meek" they chant
(As they compare Sunday bests.)
Lips synchronized, kneeling paralyzed.
The time in the windows passes faster.
They appreciate the easy answers,
    thinking they are thinking.
Or so i think.

by Alison Black
Bare Branches

Tonight your shadow lingers
Swaying slowly over me
Your presence holds me
Tighter than your arms ever did.

Outside the moonlight glides down bare branches
The smell of fallen, sodden leaves
Of damp earth, of your hair, your skin,
Fills me, pulls me like a moontide.

I raise my arms to the moon
I wrestle with your memory
I will let neither go
Until they have blessed me.

by Alysia DeWitt
Music

The vacant garage was filled with an odor of stale, dead grass.
Dirt and pebbles stuck to the cement, where oil had leaked, and dead leaves rolled in with the quick autumn wind.

On Saturdays, when our fathers worked, me and her would haul
the wooden snack bar stools from the kitchen to the garage, and pull the massive door closed.

Always in the middle of a verse, I would hear a familiar voice, calling me from next door.
I pretended not to hear any thing but the wind whistling against the garage door.

Our voices echoed great melodies, in the vastness to the garage, and we were on top of the world, filling the room with what was in our hearts.

by Amy Hammond
Dark Places

Moon beams
Slide down
Along the silky bare sky
And fall
Like a spotlight
On my weary body.
I look up and see
This moon that watches me.
Thinking it knows only what we tell it,
I explain my loneliness
The empty spaces around me.
Tonight I burden its smooth face
With my fears.

At last I lose myself
In the dark places
Beyond the grasp of the moon's fingers.

by Danielle Teske
lemon lick of...

lemon
lick of the raw morning
letting
cool iron mist
separate strange dream
from
feathered
and bed soaked solace.
your wish this morning:
to be
known inscribed immortal
scarred pained
and remembered.
as
much
as
it is wondrous to face the world from the silky pages of a
text book, to be free from muck dead black duplicity and
only beauty
to learn with.
but let first things come first.
wake
to face
the fresh day.
burning ember splendor of thought to be crafted
like
new
trusting welcome
like
the
affirmation of these buds of genius.
"mourning morning
wet my tongue
let me wonder
what's become
become become
became became
same as every every day."
this fast and slow aurora borealis glow.
given room to roam
these
next twenty-four hours,
these
next hours fold like smooth white autumn sheets hung to dry.
but let first things come first.
wake
to face
the fresh day.

by Bryan Charles
hey

hey, fuck you said the city to the boy (who was infinitely smaller
and not quite metallic in strength or sheen)
you're not tall enough to be one of my skyscraper pals.
with this the boy let out a grand laugh
a laugh that would move blind men to sight.
and you
said the boy
can't get girlies to slow dance with you ... you're too big and filled with streetlights, roads and offices.
so that was that (or so it would seem, anyway)
a grunt, a laugh, with the world listening to them both the whole time.

by Bryan Charles
SAFETY PINS HOLD THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE.

There's NO such THING as a DRAGON, child.

Most men I know, some of whom are ASTROPHYSICISTS, can't work the VCR...

SURREALIST 1
Do surrealistic flowers ever fall in love?
...usually involving fish...

All you need is love, all you get is afraid.
You are invisible; we can't hear you.
Society is sneaking up on me!
Society tends to sneak up on me...
i think if i painted everything in my head,
    i'd be locked up...

by Ris Fleming
Beside Still Waters

Upon
a desktop
among
scattered papers,
pens,
pencils and
a coffee mug,

strewn
beside
the jumble
like outcasts
on
a child-sized
playground,

lie
fallen from
a vase of
decaying
morning glories in
water,
three pallid petals.

by Lynette Mallett
The Rain

I always miss you when it rains. The water hitting the roof of the car and rolling down onto the hood, lying there in little dancing bubbles. The lightning was so bright it lit up the whole interior of my car. This weather reminds me of the day you kissed me in the rain. The water had soaked through our hair, clothes, and shoes. The cold making the moment more intense. It seems strange that this memory should be so vivid tonight, the night I tell you of my infidelity. I wanted to say that I love you, I wanted to tell you how much, but you hung up the phone too quickly.

by jennifer elena burigana
Nightmare of Forehead Stew

Claw hands
grip my shoulders
and whip my
dreaming mind
from sleep.

"Hey little girl,"
gurgling words
pound their way
to my ears,
"Jesus is off
the boat!"

A breeze of
day-old
White Castle
wafts to my
unwilling nose.

His fingers
pry open
my eyes.
I grimace
at the wretched
dying mane
gathering into
cornhusk hair.
It's a man
(a.k.a. Forehead Stew)
arrayed in
clashing plaid.

He licks my
cheek, slurping
with mock joy,
then glumps
out of my room
leaving me with
nightmares and
a damp face.

by Marla McGuire
watercolours

A little boy stands in the fall rain
Packs wet leaves together
And tosses them at the clouds
Under a darkened sky

His mother watches the short raincoat dancing
From the other side of the window
She adjusts her reading glasses
Turns her head to the right and down
And dives back into her magazine

The next day rains too
But they’re downtown shopping this time
In a high-rise department store
And he’s hand in hand with her
Eyes wide and gleaming

Just outside the door
The dark gray sidewalk rolls
To the souls of other buildings
And in a small wet grass park
They eat hotdogs for lunch sitting on a bench

A light weight in her arms
The biggest treasure in her heart
Riding first class elevated
He’s seeing what he can
Strange faces smiling at him
Classical music for the afternoon
He sleeps on her shoulder
In a dimly lit theatre
The waves in the music sail his dreams
From far away into colour

Back in the car by dark
The street lights are coming alive
Her favorite station tuned and humming
He’s falling asleep head in her lap
While she’s steering the wheel

She looks in the rearview mirror
And finds herself smiling
Then she rests a hand on his soft cheek
Pulls out into the left lane
And passes all the other traffic

by Andy Bikichky
The Soccer Game

One time I learned that I would keep a mark,
On one who speedeth past me lightning fast.
His name was Vernon; all his skin was dark.
And only with awareness would I last.
As play proceeded stuck to him was I;
But when the ball approached, he beat me there.
Though Coach did yell at me and oh! I tried,
I could not stop his flight on ground nor air.
The hard fought game was not decided yet.
There was still time for me to win my man.
My anger grew while all my clothes were wet.
I ran so hard that every joint was sore.
And since I simply had to end this hurt,
Whenever chance came, I just grabbed his shirt.

by Trent Stewart
Zamboni

Snow from titanium razors
sprays schizophrenically
on my face.

The vulcanized rubber
bounces off my bruised arm.

Ear shattering slap-shots
crack like the thunder
on a rainy day.

The puck zooms past my
numb ear, smashing
into the boards.

Once there was a kid,
struck down by a
lightning shot.

His blood still bounces
off my ice cold
consciousness.

by Richard Meldrum
THE WINGS OF AN ANGEL

Walking along the unsheltered shoreline, the wind scattering litter on the beach.

I notice a black and white feather, playing tag with someone’s old Sunday comics.

Tom, an old Indian friend, once bound together two feathers like that.

Ceremoniously, twisting strips of leather between them.

When he finished, he held in his hands a pair of angel’s wings.

We hid them. He said we’d get them later, at a time unknown to both of us.
But I forgot those
angel wings.
I guess Tom didn’t.

Because he placed them
on my Grandma’s chest,
just before they buried her.

Tom told me not to
worry anymore.
He said that Grandma
sure did make
one heck of an angel.

We went home
and Tom showed
me how to carve
a whistle out of wood.

But that day is gone,
and I’m just standing
here with some
stupid feather
in my hand.

Right now I wish
I could be with
Grandma, instead of
being alone with my
shallow memories.

by Heather Herrick
Fiction
Goddarman's Monkey
by Mark Weston

"Nancy? NAAANCY?! Where in the hell is she?"

Lawrence Goddarman awoke from his nap to find no one in the store, no one at all. He stiff-armed the double glass doors, too impatient to wait for the automatic sensors to kick in, and came barreling out into the chill air. Nancy stood leaning up against the cement wall, one leg bent beneath her, a smoldering cigarette forked fashionably between two fingers. She cringed and crushed out the glow at the end of the half smoked Pall Mall. Mustering her strength, said, "I’m here, Doc... uh... sir... I mean, Mister Goddarman... sir..."

She had meant to sound relaxed and casual, but it came out like it always did--choked and frightened. Like a goddam child, she thought. Just like a little kid. Goddarman stood, fists balled in anger, eyes smoldering. Nancy couldn’t even look at him.

"I didn’t want to smoke around the animals, sir. I just figured... well... you were asleep and all... well... I’m sorry."

She was on the verge of tears. Larry saw that she was about to cry and unclenched his fists. His shoulders sagged.

"I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scream. I was just (cranky from the morphine)
tired. I overreacted. I apologize... go on and finish..."

"Ok." Her whisper was tired and small.

His breath flagged out a smoke signal in the February morning. There was something about a woman’s tears that always stripped Larry of his will. He paused for a moment, letting his gaze linger on the weeping girl against the wall, feeling that he should say something, offer something. He wasn’t very good at this. His eyes dropped to the ground and he walked back into the shop.

The animal sounds were deafening in his drugged ears, the
monkey loudest of all, swinging and chattering gaily from behind its bars. The odor of cedar and urine was warm in his nose and throat. The air, thick with humidity, made the place seem heavier, ominous. It didn't do much for his headache either.

"...too goddam hot in here..."

The monkey screeched in reply as Larry strode past the cast iron cage. It scampered across the bars, following him, then in one tremendous leap it connected with the top of its cage and hung there with one elongated paw, swinging. Man, I hate that thing, thought Larry. He turned his head back to glance at it. Man, I hate you too, its eyes seemed to say.

Larry went into the bathroom and slapped cool water on his face from the rusty basin, a futile attempt to rid himself of the remnants of sleep. He grabbed one of the neatly stacked white hotel towels from the ledge under the medicine cabinet. To his oversensitive skin the towel seemed to scrape the water from his face with a thousand tiny needles. He tossed it carelessly into the mildewed corner. The reddened face in the mirror gazed out at him hatefully. Its two bloodshot gaping holes seemed to accuse him of some unthinkable crime. What the hell do you think you're doing? they asked. Who do you think you are?

"Up yours."

He walked out into the coffee room and tripped over the cot, painfully banging his knees on the tile floor hard enough to make his eyes water. He hobbled around for a while, mumbling and swearing until his knees stopped complaining. Out in the pet store, the German Shepherd pups in the front display were yapping away at the monkey. Larry wasn't the only one who hated that thing. It screeched and rattled its cage. Ping! Ping! Ping! I hope that damn thing breaks its face on those bars, thought Larry. More screeches assailed his ears in answer.

Hurriedly he poured a cup of coffee, but he missed the cup and poured most of it onto his hand.

"JESUS CHRIST!"

Larry did a little dance, then ran into the bathroom again to let the cold relief of water lick his wounded hands. The high pitched chatter of the monkey sounded to Larry like laughter. He quickly wiped
off his hands then escaped into the quiet sanctuary of the pharmacy, where the cries of the monkey were only muffled squeaks. Muddy was there behind the counter. Larry had hired him around the time that he bought the pet store.

"What's all the racket about, Doc?" Muddy flashed a knowing grin full of crooked teeth. He looked like a rabid dog ready to take a bite out of any body part that a person dared venture too close. "Tripped over the cot again?"

"And burned myself with that mud, Muddy. Where the hell'd you learn to make coffee anyway?"

Muddy laughed.

"Take a break, man."

"Sure. Thanks." Muddy was still grinning. Muddy always grinned. "By the way, Doc, tomorrow's the day my brother's gettin' married. Remember...? ...Doc?--you said you'd gimme the day... Hey Doc...you OK? You look like hell, man."


"Thanks. Seriously though, man. Go see a doctor. You look like shit... Hey Doc, you awake?"

"Take a break, Muddy. You're hurting my ears." Larry sat at the counter with his head in his hands. Muddy walked away shaking his head and grinning. Always grinning. What the hell was wrong with that guy? How in the hell could anyone take a guy like that seriously? One thing he had straight, though. Larry did feel like shit. He sat and gripped his hair with his hands. The white counter swam with black spots under his eyes.

Larry considered getting another syringe of morphine. He looked up guiltily and saw Muddy flirting with Maggy, the girl at the register up front. Larry's eyes locked with Muddy's. The grin was gone. What's up, Doc? Whatcha thinkin' 'bout? Larry laughed nervously. His head swam and he began to totter on his stool. The right hand shot out for support and collided with the aspirin display, sending tiny white shrapnel in all directions as it smashed on the loop-de-loops. I'm orbiting consciousness, he thought. Orbiting the moon.
"Jesus, Larry, you OK?"
But Larry heard nothing. Larry was unconscious.

"Here... have another sip." Nancy sweetly offered the glass again.
"No, no. I'm fine. Really. I'm fine." Larry tried to sound grumpy and mad, but the truth was, he was loving this. When was the last time he'd had such a good looking girl taking care of him? _Shit_, he thought, _when have I ever? And damn, she is beautiful_. He fought back the smile, but it came anyway. Nancy blushed.
"You're staring at me, Mister Goddarman." Nancy looked away. She was scared of Larry. She often thought that she might love him... And well, wasn't it ok? He was divorced now. It was just that he never seemed to notice her. He was always so _pissed_.
"Chrissake, Nan, why do you call me that? Why in the hell don't you call me by my name?"
"Ok...L...Lar...Mister..." she was pleading now, "Mister Goddarman..."

The look in her eyes pinned Larry to the cot.
"Oh, all right. LARRY." She tried it out on her tongue again in a whisper. "Larry." She was pleased. "Larry."

The bell on the pet shop door jingled, and Nancy hopped up instinctively. She handed Larry the glass with a weighted smirk. Larry's stomach did a flip at the touch of her skin. She was gone. Wow. I must be flippin' my lid. He had to laugh. She's only twenty. Then again, who gives a flying fuck? I mean, with Sara gone... He flinched at the thought of Sara. Bitch. Of all the fucks in Michigan, she had to run off with goddam Bill Scarsdale. Bitch. Doledrum Ridge isn't exactly a big town either. Everybody in town prob'ly knew she was fucking Bill goddam Scarsdale before I even had a clue. Screwing the police and goddam fire chief! For all I know, they all know about the morphine, too... no... impossible... no way.

Larry forced his mind to go elsewhere. He considered Nancy
again. She was a senior at the Doledrum Community College down the road. She smelled good. She’d been working here since he’d bought out the former management of Doledrum Fish and Pet. It was just Doledrum Pet now (Larry hated those goddam fish), just like his original business—Doledrum Drug. The other management had run the place right out of money, the fools. They were arrested for tax evasion or something, (not that Larry didn’t do a little of that himself, how could he resist when he was dealing purely in cash?), and they were forced to sell. Larry had snatched the place up, pets and all.

"Just needed some management, was all..."

He realized that he had been talking to himself and he snapped his mouth shut. What would people say? It would be all over town in an hour. "Doc’s talkin’ to hisself. Heard him when I was in buying a bone for Chopper. Talkin’ to hisself just like a mad hatter." Everyone in town called him Doc. Everyone except for Nancy.

"How ya doin’, Champ?" Muddy stood in the doorway grinning.

"Pretty shitty, Muddy." Champ?!

"Ha! There’s the sense of humor!"

_You’re an idiot, Muddy. Dumber ‘n a crud._


"Hey, Muddy!" Larry grinned cheerily, "When you go back out there," Larry grinned some more, "...turn off that African shit. It’s smut. Bad for business...Champ."

"O god no- not 101- the Country One!" Muddy mocked over his shoulder as he escaped around the corner. Static fuzz came over the speakers, sterile and undemanding as Muddy changed the station, then it was good old Hank Williams back on the air.

Nancy’s soft footfalls announced that she was back in the room. Larry turned his head to look at her, eyebrows raised, questioning.

"Just sold a Shepherd pup." A modest smile stretched her lips. "Good."
"How you feeling?"
"Good."
"Good." She smiled again.
Larry’s mind spun, digging for a scrap of conversation. Anything, anything at all.
"Hey...uh..." Nancy looked at him attentively. "What... uh... what’s your major?" Oh great, Larry, I bet she only gets asked that about thirty times a day.
"Evolution." Her voice dropped a note in seriousness. Larry jumped.
"Oh, yeah?" All of a sudden, his heart didn’t seem to be pumping the blood as well as the second before, and the words grated against his throat.
"Sure. I don’t know what kind of job I’ll end up with, but it’s the happiness that counts, ya know?"
"How can you major in something like that, I mean you’re talking about one specific thing, right?"
"Well, that’s not all, anthropology, really. Evolution’s just what I like best."
There was an uncomfortable pause as both of them struggled for conversation, and Nancy’s hands nervously tucked her hair behind her ears.
"Maybe you should get that monkey off your back," ventured Nancy hopefully.
The mouthful of water that Larry had been occupied with flew through the air in a fine spray as he coughed it out. "Wha...what’d you say?!" he blurted out, half screaming.
Nancy backed off a little, wide eyed. "I said maybe we should put that monkey in the back...I mean it scared a little kid half to death today when he came in the door...never mind..." Her voice had faded into a whisper as she viewed Larry gasping for breath. She glanced at him like a mother fretting for a sickly child. "You look like you’re about to pass out again."
"No, I’m fine. I’m gonna sleep," he said shakily. "Why don’t you go back out there." Larry motioned toward the pet store with great
effort. Nancy seemed hurt.

"Oh. Well, just lemme know if you need..." She stopped midsentence to glance at the floor. "Ok." She stood up with a sigh and patted out the wrinkles in her jeans, then was gone in three short strides, lightly shutting the door behind her.

Larry put both hands over his face. Why'd you freeze up in there, champ? Why had he? Larry wasn't even sure.

"Maybe I'm dying..."

He stood up and slowly made his way into his office, and settled down easily into the desk chair. The palms of his hands made a smooth "Shhhhh" noise as he pushed them over the surface of faded and worn rosewood desk. They slid forward until his head rested on the scarred surface. It was to this sacred monument that he always found himself drawn, day after day. He let himself rest there for a moment, breathing shallowly, the dying sun bathing his head in orange light from the window. Then, inevitably, he drew the key ring from the right front pocket of his khakis, and unlocked the drawer below. The tumblers drew the bolt back with a snap, and he easily slid the drawer open on its well-oiled track. He dug around for a moment, and produced a syringe, a strip of rubber tubing, a small amber vial.

The pharmacy was able to get morphine in this form for people with things like terminal cancer and such. There was Jerry Crawford down the road and Millie Johnson across the highway; (and then just little old me and my soul cancer.) they had prescriptions. They could get the stuff at the pharmacy so that they could administer it to themselves at home, instead of spending the rest of their dying lives at hospitals. There was always the problem of the nausea that often comes hand in hand with morphiates, but, of course, in this day and age, they have stuff for that, too. The doctors figure it’s ok to let the dying be addicted, so why be addicted at a hospital when you can be addicted at home? Larry had no problem with that. Larry always made sure to order just a little more to stash in his desk.

"Soul cancer..."

Larry shot a little spray up from the syringe (just like in the movies)
to get the air out, then wrapped the tubing around his arm, slapped at the bulging powerlines of his veins to make them stand up. It hit you harder that way when you let it go. A moment later he knew such bliss...

(ohmygodohmygod)
such heaven...
(ohmygodohmygodohmyGOD)
such magic...
The tears built up and his eyes began to water, but Larry was the farthest thing from crying. The truth was, he felt just fine, just groovy. He went back to the cot and stretched out the entire length of his gaunt frame with great pleasure, to think things out. He lay for a long time like that, an eternity, unmoving, hardly breathing. He thought about the monkey. Evolution. That monkey was hell and gone from human. What is it about animals that makes humans so separate? No restraint on desires, thought Larry, then laughed. Yeah, right. Look at you. OK, fire, then. That was a third grade lesson. Something a person learned watching Saturday morning cartoons. The fact that Wile E. Coyote could blow up a highway with bombs and rockets was of course, absurd. That was the point wasn’t it? Or King Louie in The Jungle Book. He needed "Man’s Red Fire" so that he could be more human. Sure.

Larry’s drugged thoughts began to run down slower and slower like the gears in a dying clock, pulling toward the ultimate comfort of sleep, and finally dreams.

Huge tufts of snow gently caressed Larry’s features, stuck in his ears, settled in his hair, melted like tears onto his cheeks. He looked around and discovered that he was standing in a vast field of white, no trees, no structures, no horizon, just a faded, gray, windless sky woven with ever falling puffs of snow. There were no footprints. How did I get here? Larry called out into the nothing. His voice sounded dead, flat, muffled by the blanket of snow. He tried to turn and look behind him, but he found that he could not move, his feet seemed cemented to
the ground. He tried again to wrench his feet free, but lost his balance and fell forward, comically, doing a faceplant in the snow, and his feet slid out of his loafers, exposing his week-unwashed socks.

He rolled over, fighting with his white coat that had become strangely entangled with his head. He struggled to his feet, mercifully free from the coat, and stood bewildered at the loss of his shoes.

_Hey, boy! You feelin’ ok? Looks like you’ve got one hell of a monkey on your back! Ha! Ha!_

Larry whirled around in search of the voice. It was Muddy, standing in the untracked snow, grinning.

_I say! That IS quite a monkey!_

Larry spun again, and saw Bill (goddam) Scarsdale, hands on his hips, sporting a Muddy-style grin.

_I don’t know what in the hell you’re talking about_, said Larry, but both men erupted in hilarious laughter. Larry’s face began to contort in anger and turn various shades of red until he thought he might explode. Then, with a blood-curdling war-cry, Larry charged at Bill (goddam) Scarsdale, arms spread. He wanted to kill him. Bill easily stepped aside, and Larry went headlong into the snow once again.

_Oh, ho! Looks like he’s got it in for old Bill, eh, folks? Ha! Ha!_

Bill loomed over Larry, his feet planted only inches from Larry’s snow encrusted head. Bill’s badge and gun seemed to shine in an unseen sun. He raised one size thirteen boot, and slowly ground it into Larry’s face, laughing all the while.

_You’re wife is REAL damn good, son. Thanks for being a crappy husband, you needle freak!_

Bill raised the boot once again, this time meaning to bash in Larry’s face. Larry tried to roll, but it seemed like someone had parked their car on him. The boot came down with a sickening crunch on Larry’s nose, and Bill picked it up again, ready for more, but suddenly Larry could move. He rolled over twice...
...and landed hard on the cement floor, breaking his fall with his head. Dizziness added to the groggy fingers of sleep that still tickled his brain, and he had to sit for awhile on the cold tile floor to remember where he was. He could feel something warm and thick running down his skull, down his forehead, until it stung at the corners of his eyes. He dragged himself up in a daze to find the bathroom, but tripped over the cot again, and found himself sprawled out on the floor. He got up again and groped for the lightswitch in the blackness; he found it and flipped it on. He threw up his arm in front of his eyes to save himself from the searing pain that ripped through his head, then slowly shuffled into the bathroom.

He stood confronting the gore of his image in the mirror. Its one visible eye peered out from the mask of blood in accusation. His right hand moved absently up to the goose-egg on top of his head, then jerked away at the initial pain of contact. He touched it more tenderly this time, wincing. The bump was about the size of half a tennis ball. He laughed in disgust and began to cleanse himself of the blood

(...damn head wounds bleed like hell...)

that matted his hair, and stained his face and jacket in a crimson exclamation.

His pale skin began to show as he scrubbed, and it seemed like forever before the pink tint of blood was gone from his skin. He washed his hair with the cracked and dirty bar of Ivory soap that sat eternally in the soap-well of the sink. He carefully began to towel his hair dry as he gazed into the mirror. In the backward reflection he saw the coffee room door to the pet store swing languidly into the room, coming to a rest against the toppled cot with a squeak, revealing the darkened store beyond...

and a small hunched figure skittered across the window ledge at the other end of the store, silhouetted momentarily by the oval moon, then was gone. Larry wasn’t even sure he’d seen a thing,

(haunted)

or of his own sanity,

(haunted)

or if he was awake, or of anything at all.
He stood stupidly, mouth agape, head cocked, listening. He turned the grey dial of his Pulsar to his face. Three o'clock. Nancy had of course locked up and left by now. She hadn't awakened him before she left, she never did. The haggard face in the mirror eyed him puzzled, baggy-eyed and unshaven. His whole face seemed to sag. He hacked at the mirror, turned and slung the towel into the corner and strode out into the pet shop.

The faint smell of cigarettes hung stale in the humid air, mixed with the usual perfume of cedar and urine. Yellow light from the halogen street lamps painted the fur of the pups in the front display in a curious crimson.

...strange the way light plays tricks sometimes...

He reached the front of the store, by the window and the cash register.

*It was your imagination, pal, thought Larry as he peered out the window at his Oldsmobile, parked at its regular post. He faintly wondered why Nancy had smoked in here, she never smoked in here, but the smell was unmistakable.*

That was when he saw the cage door. It was open. The monkey was gone.

He shuffled over to the deserted frame in bewilderment.

*Did she sell it?*

The thought seemed impossible. The monkey had been there for years, eternally wielding the same price tag.

*She sold it without the cage? Why would anyone buy the damn thing without a cage?*

The store seemed unnaturally quiet to Larry without the twenty-four hour chatter of the monkey, even after hours and during the night. Not even the pups or the birds made any noise. He walked over to the front display where they lay silently.

He had noticed before that the streetlight had cast a strange red glow on their fur. They were red, all right, their throats had been slit.

Larry stood, mouth agape.

"What the hell?!"

He was awake now, as if torn from a terrifying nightmare,
drenched in sweat, adrenaline screaming through his veins.

*Are you awake?*

He had to be.

Suddenly infuriated at his own weakness, Larry let out a primal scream. The window panes rattled. He slammed his fist down on the linoleum counter four times.

"ARE-" SLAM
"YOU-" SLAM
"AWAKE-" SLAM
"FUCKHEAD?" SLAM!

With the last blow, the counter gave and his fist went right through with a crunch. He ripped it out of the splintered hole. He gazed unseeingly at the angry red scrapes that went to his elbow, and at the bloody fist, peppered with splinters.

...call Scarsdale...

...no way.
got to call Sheriff Scarsdale.
*Sheriff Bill Scarsdale.*

Larry's energy was gone now; the tears came as he slumped against the counter.

*tired. so tired.*

He made his way around the counter toward the telephone.

**NO PERSONAL CALLS**

announced his own handwriting on the sign scotch-taped to the handset. He picked it up and lifted it to his ear, dazed. He stared off into the back of the store at the shadows of racks and the pet food displays, trying to remember whom he had meant to call. His eyes settled on the empty cage. A beam of light fell on the bottom of the cage and there were cigarette butts there.

*Nancy? Has she completely flipped?*

He hung up the telephone and slowly stepped over to the cage. His hand reached in and flicked aside some of the ashes.
...two...four...five...six. Six butts.
He daintily extracted one of the foul smelling stubs and rolled it over between his thumb and forefinger to see
Pall Mall; Nancy's brand.
the label stamped in pale grey block lettering. He flicked it away and wiped his hand off on the back of his pants. A white book of matches caught his eye on the floor beneath the cage. He dimly made out Doledrum Pub on the cover. He bent down to pick it up.

WHOOSH!
A hurtling glass bottle nearly took off his ear, where his nose had been a second before. Larry dove to the floor to get a taste of the olive green imitation Berber carpet just as the display case glass crashed to the floor in pieces. The sound of a child's bare feet pattered away through the coffee room.
Pitpitpitpitpitpitpitpit...
Wheezing sounds came from Larry's throat as his lungs did their overtime thing to his heart's arrhythmiatic tune. His head spun sickeningly
(Too many hours on the merry-go-round, Larry.)
and Larry fought back a sudden wave of nausea. He heaved anyway despite his efforts, emitting a clear, foul-tasting fluid. Larry hadn't eaten in three days.
The heavy taste of metal seemed to pinch the sides of his tongue and saliva glands. He sat up and distastefully extracted the hairball that his mouth had gained when Larry had tried unsuccessfully to eat the carpet.

Clink! Clink!
Larry could faintly hear the bottles in the pharmacy being tossed around; and something else hit the ground with a loud thud. Then there was silence.

It's that thing. It's that goddam little monkey.
No shit, Sherlock.
The conversation in his head rambled on as Larry fumbled around in the dark trying not to run into the island as he sought out the door.
I'm gonna kill it! I'll kill it! I'll kill that little sonofabitch!
He found his way back into the coffee room and instantly toppled over the cot that had somehow migrated over to the entranceway.

"FAAAAAAHHHHUUUUUCK!!"

In a fit of screaming rage he smashed the wooden frame to splinters on the wall. This done he was delivered again into a foggy calm, and he made his way into the pharmacy.

The place was unnaturally dark, and Larry extended both hands to protect himself from any further migrating furniture. He could hear bottles tinkling in clumsy hands near the pharmacy counter, and he cautiously approached by ear.

Suddenly he was hit with a revelation.

*Lights. Turn on the lights, genius.*

Larry's lips curled in self-loathing.

...*idiot.*

He turned and headed straight across the room to the bank of lightswitches. Simultaneously, he flicked all ten on with both hands.

...*tick...tickticktitititititizzzot!*

The cold fluorescent tubes zapped on, blinding Larry with the excruciating light.

Larry cried out as he plastered his palms to his eyes and staggered a few steps toward the counter. Slowly, he pried his fingers open as his eyes adjusted. By some amazing coincidence, he was facing the pharmaceutical counter dead center.

...*oh, my god...*

...*jesus christ...*

The monkey had killed all of the birds. There were guinea pigs there, too.

...*oh, my god...*

It had strung them up with packing string, wing to wing like chained paper children, cut out with scissors. From each tufted chest protruded a hypodermic needle. The birds hung over a perfect circle of dead guinea pigs, murdered in the same fashion. Directly in the center, hanging from the line of limp birds, was the monkey. It hung there by one paw, lightly swaying. Its black eyes were cold, unmoving. It dropped to the counter with a dull thump, landing perfectly in the center.
of the circle. It stood on its hind legs. Lazily, its arm moved out and grasped the enormous syringe that stuck out of one of the silent guinea pigs at its feet. It had something in its other paw. A tiny amber vial of (morphine.) morphine. Its black, primal eyes never faltered in their fixed gaze. Larry’s own sweet baby blues that had once caused women to swoon, were now bloodshot and glazed with the tears that now gathered on the rims of his lower eyelids. Every scratch, every bruise, every ache in his body screamed, cried out for the soothing void of the narcotic emptiness. Every cell in his physical being begged him not to make them feel for even one second longer.

The hollow, stainless steel needle gently squeaked into the rubber seal of the upturned vial, slowly drawing the line of fluid closer and closer toward the neck of the bottle.

(...it’s too much...) The syringe was full now, and the monkey tossed the useless vial to the side.

(...it’s too much...) A tiny spray of liquid shot into the air. Larry’s feet seemed cemented to the ground.

(...it means to kill me...) The monkey was standing upright now.

(Mister Goddarman!)

(...way too...)

(Oh, Mister Goddarman!)

(...much...)

(ISN’T IT TIME YOU TOOK YOUR MEDICINE, MISTER GODDARMAN?! ISN’T IT TIME?!)

The Monkey’s legs propelled its miniature body into the air in a graceful bounding leap. It became a momentary silhouette against the blue lights and the horrible feathered wreath. It did not remain so for long, however; for even the youngest child knows that what goes up... must come down.
Consciousness had come and gone as it played its deceitful, spinning games with Larry's skull; but it unfortunately seemed that this time it was here to stay, at least for a while. Larry's throat let out a shrill squeak that should have been a moan. Every part of his body that was capable of feeling pain, throbbed with a dim, desperate ache. His leg muscles went into cramped spasms as he attempted to stretch them out.

*Who parked his truck on my head?*

Larry could hear voices over the ringing in his ears, they were impossibly loud, close.

"Well, your insurance should cover the.... damages.... Was anything stolen?"

*Was that the sheriff's deputy?*

"No, but if I get my hands on the sick bastard who did this..." The woman's voice choked off with sobs.

*That Nancy? What are they talking about?*

Larry slowly allowed his sleep encrusted eyes to open a squint, fighting back the urge to clamp them tight against the blinding rays of sun. Where was he? His blurred vision swam with black stripes.

Larry heard the conversation suddenly cut short as the entrance bell rang. Voices greeted the newcomer.

"Sheriff..."

(...definitely the deputy...)

"Mornin', Bill..."

(Muddy.)

"...sheriff...Mister Scarsdale...who?...why?..." Sobs again.

(Why is she crying?)

"There now, missus, it's gonna be all right. It'll be ok."

(That's that Scarsdale bastard.)

"Now, Sheriff, what's going to be done about this?" Here was a voice that Larry could not identify. Dry, haggard, slightly overanimated.

The Sheriff didn't answer right away, he seemed to be cautiously
deliberating.

Larry's eyes came into focus,

(What the hell?)

but what he was seeing was wrong. Absolutely impossible. His stomach squirmed with fear.

"Well, sir..." began the sheriff.

Larry sat up.

"Hey, Sheriff! That thing isn't dead!" spouted the deputy.

"I'll be...."

Bill Scarsdale's behemoth face loomed at Larry through the cast iron bars. With primitive rage, Larry let out a riotous war cry, a chorus of chattering, inhuman screams. He simultaneously launched his tiny body at the monster with one thought on his mind: the death of Bill Scarsdale. Larry's flight path was blocked by the cast iron bars, deflecting him and spinning him around. He landed face down on the mat of soiled newspapers and cigarette butts.

"Oh, ho! Looks like he's got it in for old Bill, eh, folks? Ha! Ha!" A chorus of laughter came from behind the grinning sheriff.

Larry got up slowly and sat on his haunches, wide eyed in disbelief.

"You're an ugly little monkey, aren't you? Yes, you are!" said the sheriff's monstrous face, in a high pitched mocking tone. "In all seriousness," he said, smirking and turning around, "I need you folks to come down to the station to fill out a report. Ok?"

"Ok."

"All right, then. That's where I'm headed now...." Bill paused, as if to say something more, then, thinking better of it, turned and walked out. Larry watched as the deputy, followed by the grinning Muddy, left, trotting after the sheriff.

Slowly, he cast his new eyes around him in horror and disbelief, and soon his gaze fell on him.

Every dog has his day, thought Larry. Mine's bound to come back. Isn't it?

ISN'T IT?
Nancy watched the police cruiser pull away, then turned back to face Mister Goddarman. She fumbled uncomfortably with her purse; she was always so damned nervous being alone with him.

(*Larry, remember to call him Larry.*)

Her nervous eyes rested on the little monkey. *That* was making her jumpy too. It hadn't moved in five minutes. It just sat and glared at Larry. She'd worked here for years, and had never seen it sit still for more than five *seconds*. Nancy decided that she needed a cigarette very badly. She pawed through her purse in search.

"Where are my damned cigarettes?" she mumbled.

"I smoked them."

"What?!"

"It's true. You left them here last night, and well, I smoked them."

"I didn't know you smoked!" laughed Nancy in surprise.

"People change, Nancy, people change." A confident smile appeared on his face. "There's another thing that I want to change."

He grabbed her firmly around the waist, smiling.

Nancy blushed, then smiled despite herself.

(...*my god...*he's *actually* acting human.)

He bent down to her upturned face and kissed her long and full, open mouthed.

A tiny sound of pleasure escaped her throat, and behind Nancy's closed eyes, she finally allowed herself to fall in love.

Mister Goddarman, however, did not close his eyes. They remained wide open, and they were cold. Cold and wild. His gaze fixed on the monkey in triumphant arrogance.

The two mouths slowly parted.

"We should go to the police station now."

"Okay," came Nancy's small reply.

"I'll go warm up the car for you. I won't have you freezing to death out there," said Goddarman. It was the voice of a man who demanded control. Nancy wouldn't have preferred it any other way.
She watched as he ran out to the car. Her dreamy bewilderment at Larry's change was stopped dead for a moment by the monkey's mournful cries. Nancy turned. Its large, sad, monkey's eyes glinted as it emitted its painfully sorrowful howl. It gripped the bars with its two forepaws. The howls gradually wound down to choking whimpers.

For some unknowable reason, Nancy was moved to tears. Her stomach was fraught with butterflies.

"Ohhhwah..What's wrong, little man?" she whispered tearfully.

The monkey pronounced a series of sad, high pitched chatter that could have been language, in some other time, some other place.

"Cheet-cheet. Cheet-tuh-cheuuw...."

It fell silent, slowly letting its head hang down. The motion seemed to imitate some lonely hopeless human despair.

Nancy slowly extended her index finger and stroked its soft fuzzy head.

"I'm sorry, little monkey," she whispered, "It'll be another million years before I'll understand you. You'll just have to wait for evolution to catch up. I'm sorry."

The horn honked and Nancy was jerked out of the spell. She jumped up and hastily wiped the tears off of her cheeks, laughing at her foolishness.

You can be so silly sometimes, Nancy. Really!

She turned and skipped out the door, and into the awaiting Oldsmobile. The car purred away.

The monkey remained behind, head hung in despair. From a distance it might have seemed to a passerby, had there been one, that the scene resembled an abstract portrait of an old, tired, lonely man, imprisoned for life, back hunched from ages of weariness, without hope of ever reaching the outside again. It didn't matter if that first passerby was not an artist at all, for it seemed that the monkey was going to remain there, in the same manner, for a long, long time.
Ratings Sweeps
by John Martinez

Charlie put his shoulder into the old door; with a begrudging grunt and shudder it gave in. Cursing out loud to himself he stepped into his apartment and threw the door closed. Dropping his jacket onto a hover-chair, Charlie walked over to his couch and collapsed. Charlie wanted nothing more than to sleep for a decade, it had been a long night. Work was getting more scarce nowadays, it was all he could do to make his monthly arm payments. Thus, he had mixed feelings when he spotted the red message light on his view screen blinking. Finally, greed won out over exhaustion and Charlie spoke into the air, "Messages, please."

A saccharine sweet computer enhanced voice replied in an almost too cheery tone, "Messages for March 2, 2090 being processed. Just one moment, please." The screen was a blur of flashing lights as the computer went about its preprogrammed task of separating junk mail from personal messages. Finally the rapid cycle slowed down and Charlie muttered out a feeble, "Play." At first it was nothing new, a couple of pals wanting to borrow money, his dealer trying to lay off some new kind of drug, and some sleaze he met last week. Charlie was getting ready to dump the screen when the image of a thirty-ish woman with a severe haircut wearing a business suit appeared on the dirty screen. Knocking over some beer cans and a week-old pizza box Charlie stumbled forward and mumbled, "Sound plus thirteen."

"This is Sharrone Takeshi," the woman announced in a strident voice. "A mutual friend of ours has informed me of your particular talents." A mutual friend, thought Charlie; he didn’t know anyone who could afford to breathe the same air as this suit.

"If you are interested," she continued (Charlie was), "Come to the Channel 26 offices tomorrow at 8:00 p.m. I’ve left a security pass at
checkpoint 13 with your name on it."

Charlie looked at his chronometer, it was 5:00 a.m. already; he would have just enough time to catch some serious z’s.

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7:45, Charlie looked at his chronometer again. This little hitlerite at the checkpoint was going to make him late for his appointment with her damn background check. He was seriously considering running through the blockade, and, in fact, he would—that is, if they didn’t have all those really big guns pointed at him. Finally, the amazonian guard got off the phone and walked over to Charlie’s bike. Stooping down to look him in the face she shoved a small yellow card into his hand and sneered, "All right, you’re cleared for five hours. Any longer and we come looking for you." Standing up, the blond guard waved the gates open, Charlie passed through.

The financial district at night is about the most alien thing in the world to an innersprawl native. There’s virtually no noise, no trash and no bums. Triads of CorpCops patrol the entire area armed with heavy equipment, there are few pedestrians and no loiterers. Charlie slowed his bike as he closed in on the Channel 26 parking garage. A hoverlimo glided by him and he was hailed by two armed guards. Showing them his yellow I.D. card, they pointed out to him the nearest lift to the Research and Development wing.

The silver-toned doors of the lift slid open with a barely audible "whoosh." Stepping out, Charlie found himself in a wooden-paneled reception room. At a large art deco metallic desk sat an androgynous-looking secretary. He/She got up and addressed Charlie in a computer emulated female voice. "Mr. Charles, I do believe Ms. Takeshi is expecting you." He/She then grabbed Charlie by the elbow and led him down a corridor to a pair of sturdy oaken doors. Stepping forward, there was a faint buzzing sound as hidden servo motors swung the massive doors inward.

The interior of the office was impressive, to say the least. The gigantic Masudatech window at the far end of the room held a view of
the higher end of the financial district while intensifying the ambient moonlight to illuminate the office. In front of the window rested an equally impressive sculpted marble desk, behind which sat Sharrone Takeshi. The diminutive oriental woman looked strangely out of place behind the massive desk, almost as if the bulk of the marble was more the center of her command, not the symbol of it. She looked Charlie directly in the eye and spoke with a rehearsed deliberate tone, "Please sit down," she motioned to a hoverchair. "Mr. Charles, I will be very frank with you as I understand that the law is not an inhibiting factor to your type of work. We have had our fill of Channel 40's monopoly of the global ratings."

Takeshi pressed a button on her desk and the lights dimmed, the window behind her turned into a luminous video screen displaying global networks, shows, advertising bids and relative audience shares.

"The next trimester season starts in one month and we want an edge. We want to know what 40 has got in store for the public, so that we can prepare appropriately competitive programming. As a result, we require someone to secure 40's fall lineup of programs. Am I making myself clear?"

Charlie nodded his head; corporate espionage was nothing new to him. All he cared about was what kind of compensation he would get for his time. Sharrone looked at him for a minute and then pressed another button; the vidscreen changed to a view of a large dull gray skyscraper. On top of the building, four giant vidscreens constantly play trailers for Channel 40's shows.

"We have learned that most of 40's programming and development takes place in the Richardson Metals Building, or the Network 40 building, as everyone likes to call it. 40's security is notoriously distrusting of normal software procedures, so they store most of their sensitive documents and materials on data cards in a secret central vault. All of their security files are physically cut off from the ComNet so we haven't been able to do much reconnaissance. We have been able to determine that their Research and Development department occupies a space somewhere between the eleventh and fifteenth floors."

Charlie leaned back in his chair and popped a cigarette into his
mouth. Lighting his smoke he clicked his lighter shut and mumbled between clenched teeth, "So how much are ya gonna pay me?"

"Nothing," was the reply.

Charlie sat on the end of his chair and looked Takeshi straight in the eyes. "What the hell do you mean nothing!" he yelled exhaling a large amount of smoke in Sharonne's general direction.

"If you would let me finish!" exclaimed Takeshi, "the 'nothing' is up front only. We're prepared to offer 4,000 worldbucks for each program you deliver, plus a bonus, to be determined on how clean the lift is."

"Sounds fair to me," said Charlie releasing his grip on the desk. "The only problem I got is, how do I get in?"

Takeshi pressed another button on her desk. "The answer to that is simple." A panel in the wall slid up and out stepped a young woman wearing a ball cap and a pair of baggy overalls. "This is Frankie James; she's an accomplished c-deck operator and will be handling the technical end of the operation through the ComNet. Frankie approached Charlie and smirked. "The pleasure's all mine," her sarcasm laid on like San Francisco smog.

* * * * *

It had been one hellish evening. Charlie had always thought of himself as a calm, rational person not prone to fits of wanton violence. Frankie James was quickly changing that. From the first sarcastic sentence out of her mouth his blood boiled. In fact, the only thing worse than talking to Frankie would be being incarcerated with her, a prospect which only made Charlie concentrate more.

The entry had to be perfect: he knew that if they suspected anything he could count the seconds he had left to live on his right hand. Coming up to one of the outer security doors, Charlie stuck the forged I.D. card the wise-cracking C-net junkie had given him into a rectangular slot. There was a faint whirring, and then the security computer spoke. "Please stand still; retinal I.D. scan about to commence."
A line of red light shot forth from the central lens scanner and began to probe his eye. As far as Charlie was concerned this was the most dangerous part of the operation. If the computer rejected him he could end up with a burnt-out eye socket and a hell of a headache. Suddenly the light stopped and the computer announced, "Scan completed. Welcome to Channel 40, Mr. Shuloff." Charlie grunted and stepped through the now open circular door.

"IT'S UP AHEAD!!" Frankie blared over the mini-receiver in Charlie's ear.

"Jesus Christ! Turn that fucker down!" he yelled, almost launching his cigarette down the long corridor. There was a brief buzz with the receiver and then there was nothing.

"Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing." The phrase reverberated softly in Charlie's ear. He was starting to get annoyed again.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked his ear. At first there was no reply, and then a soft voice said, "Why, I'm whispering sweet nothings in your ear." Charlie groaned, he really hated his job.

Charlie followed the corridor into a large central waiting area; sitting at a hexagonal security desk were two CorpCops, both heavily armed. Charlie started to sweat.


"Well, Hodges," he replied handing over a bundle of papers, "It's a bit too warm for me down here in 'Frisco."

"That's right," said Hodges, who was reading Charlie's I.D. papers. "It says right here that you're from our Alaska division. Must be a real change."

"That's for sure."

The guard began to type in a string of numbers on a small pad to the left of a computer screen. A startled look came over his face and he turned to face Charlie.

"Uhh..., Mr. Shuloff," Hodges spoke. "There doesn't seem to be any authorization records here. Are you sure you're supposed to audit the Advertising accounts?"

"Of course. Just check the computer again. It must be some
kind of computer glitch; the I.D. code's 102346-2389A, and it's Shuloff with two F's.

"I'll try again," spoke the guard. "But I don't know if anything's gonna change."

"It better," mumbled Charlie to his ear.

Hodges finished typing in the code and stood back up with a stymied look on his face.

"I don't get it," he scratched his head. "Just a second ago..."

"It's all right," jumped in Charlie. "I'll just take my papers and go."

The guard reluctantly handed the papers back over to Charlie. He shoved the documents into the coat of his jacket and headed for the nearest lift. Once inside he took a deep breath and looked at the floor selector; there was no thirteenth floor. Covering his ear he spoke, "Frankie, we've got a little problem here."

"What?" answered the receiver.

"There's no frickin' thirteenth floor!"

Charlie smiled at the two guards who were still watching him from their desk. With any luck they might just think he was insane instead of shooting him.

"Press twelve."

"Huh??" wittily responded Charlie.

"Just press twelve, dammit!" yelled Frankie who had just turned up the volume for effect.

Charlie pressed the over-large button and waved goodbye to the nice men. Looking up at the ceiling, he fiddled with his ear.

"What the hell is this shit with the floors?!

"Well," spoke Frankie, "seeing that you're just a stupid sprawlkid, I suppose you have no way of knowing this, but the Richardson Metals Building was built in the early twentieth century."

"So?"

"If you'd just shut up for a minute I'm getting to that!" Frankie continued, "When this building was built it had twenty-six floors; if you'd look at the floor selector you would see that the floors are labeled up to twenty-six, including the misplaced thirteenth."
The elevator stopped and Charlie spoke, "Just get to the point. We're here, already."

An audible sigh was detected over the receiver and Frankie continued. "All right, in 1947 Mr. Richardson had the thirteenth floor sealed off and converted into a massive office. The stopping mechanism was a manual one that only Mr. Richardson or certain friends of his knew about. My guess is that the R & D guys must be using the same mechanism since it doesn't appear here on the Net."

"Great!" replied Charlie. "How the hell am I going to get into this damn secret lab?"

"Y'know, Chuck, you really do swear too much."

Charlie muttered through clenched teeth, "Well, if you can't get me there through the Net, then how do normal people do it?"

"Chuck," replied Frankie, "you're anything but normal."

* * * * *

Charlie ripped the emergency hatch into shreds with his right arm. Grabbing the rim of the top of the elevator he pulled himself up into the shaft. On top of the elevator, it swung a little under his weight; looking to the right he saw the inside of the main elevator doors. Subtlety would do him no good here, so he pulled out his Mirage XR 32, set the frequency at tight and began to melt away the main locking device. In three minutes he was in.

The main foyer was an elaborate set-up with two rows of elevator banks facing each other; the walls were all pristine, and the entire area smelled of carpet shampoo. To his left was a security desk behind which a CorpCop was getting ready to gleefully blast Charlie into bloody goo with his 12mm. The first couple shots flew over Charlie's head as he hit the dirt; rolling across the room he tried to work free a small black disk from the back of his belt.

An overturned table offered a bit of soft cover as he worked the micro-grenade loose. Free at last in his hand, he flung it at the guard like a diminutive frisbee. Closing his eyes, Charlie grimaced as the explosion tore the CorpCop into little pieces. Running past to the desk
with his laser drawn, Charlie noticed a blinking red light and yelled to Frankie, "It looks like we've had a little problem. One of the CorpCops caught on to us and called in the cavalry. Do you think you can slow 'em down?"

"Not a problem, Chuck," replied Frankie. "After all, they can't be any brighter than you."

Charlie was not amused as he ran down one of the long corridors. Turning the corner he spotted the fake marble paneling on one of the walls sliding back to reveal a silver door that was also beginning to open.

"Thanks, Frankie," he muttered.

On the inside of the door was a small two-meter threshold; beyond that was a larger room with a circular door mounted on the wall. Charlie set his briefcase down and gently opened it, extracting a skin-thin glove. Placing the glove over his right hand, Charlie approached a small black plate and keypad. Pressing his hand upon the plate, a small line of red ran up and down his hand; there were two beeps and a small light turned green. One down and one to go. Charlie dug his cybernetic fingers into the wall around the keypad and pulled it off of the wall. Gathering up a small handful of wires he began to attach them to a fist-sized black box with a digital display. Suddenly, the display came to life as it cycled through a list of thousands of possible number combinations. Within a minute, the proper number sequence was on the digital display. Walking over to the large circular door, Charlie spoke into the air. "O.K., Frankie, do your stuff."

Slowly the door opened and Charlie entered the vault. All around him a fortune in electronic equipment was recklessly tossed aside like old garbage. Scanning the room he saw a row of small drawers lining the eastern wall. Walking over to the wall he read the labels above all of the drawers until he came to one called "90 Fall Schedule." Pulling the handle to the drawer, Charlie smirked; it was locked. He pulled harder.

Charlie gathered up the contents of the drawer and began to run them one by one into his datacard copier. All of the cards were labeled in codes except for the last one; it read "Island Love Intg. #1-10."
Putting the copied cards into his briefcase, his curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to one of the numerous data viewers in the room. Popping the card in, Charlie sat back and watched as the screen came to life.

The show began with a panorama of a South Seas island (accompanied by sappy, swoony mood music). There were a wrecked boat and a couple lying nearby on the beach. Incredibly, he found himself enraptured with the seemingly thin plot concept, and in fact he even felt strangely empathic with the poor couple. Charlie moved closer to the screen as the seductive plot unfolded with enticing slowness...

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!" yelled Frankie over the receiver. "THOSE CORPCOPS ARE GETTING CLOSER!"

Charlie, awakened from his reverie, grabbed the datacard and shoved it into his pocket. Scooping up his briefcase with his other hand, he headed back for the main corridor. Charlie started running back to the elevators when the muffled sound of many booted feet came from around the corner; he tried to turn but it was too late. There was some initial confusion but then one of the CorpCops yelled, "There he is!" To escape the ensuing hail of bullets, Charlie dove right through an open doorway of one of the larger offices. Crawling around the large desks which offered a sort of protection, he opened fire with his laser. He dropped five men in as many shots. The CorpCops were not prepared for this, and they fell back to the doorway in confusion. Charlie looked at the charge indicator on his Mirage; it was reading low--there was no way he was going to win this one.

Looking around, Charlie studied his options. He had none. Digging into his pocket Charlie pulled out an Imdar-12 time-release grenade; setting the timer he got up and rolled it across the floor. The CorpCops began to fire as Charlie leaped over a desk towards the window. Covering his head and neck he crashed through the window and began to fall; seconds later the room he had just occupied exploded with an incinerating fire. Charlie grabbed for the sides of the concrete and steel building with his cybernetic arm. His hand made contact once and Charlie dug his osmium steel appendage into the concrete with every forced ounce of willpower he had left. The sparks fell, but Charlie
didn’t.

Charlie heavily touched down on top of the parking garage; landing feet first, his right ankle buckled underneath him. Leaning against the wall he breathed a sigh of relief and stared at his mangled cyber-arm. Takeshi was definitely going to reimburse him for this little fiasco. Gathering up his strength Charlie hobbled over to where the briefcase had landed. He opened it and checked for any damage; the contents looked fine. In the distance some sirens sounded; taking his cue, Charlie stumbled off into the night.

* * * * * * *

The damp San Francisco sea wind was chill upon Charlie’s face. All around him there were the sounds of the sprawl: screams, sirens, gunshots. Charlie walked down a dim alley lighted only by the fading bug-zapping neon sign above an otherwise nondescript door. He approached the door, vermin scurrying at his feet. The sign read in large pink letters, "Cafe Sub-Nuclear." This was the place.

The smell of the place reminded him of a mixture of raw sewage and heavy perfume. To the right and left of him members of the various sprawlgangs cavorted like animals, the Cafe Sub-Nuclear was neutral ground, but that didn’t mean its members acted any better than the street scum they are. As a plastered Cyberpunk fell in front of him, Charlie couldn’t help but think how a suit like Sharrone Takeshi would get her kicks here. Charlie walked up to a graffiti-covered steel door at the back of the bar; waiting for him was the notorious bouncer Claws.

"Outa my way, Clawsy."

"No way, man, this room’s for V.I.P.’s, no scum like you allowed."

Charlie looked Claws in the eye. "Listen here, laughing boy, I got serious business inside there and if you don’t move they’re gonna be carrying you out in little plastic baggies."

Claws rose to his full height and flexed his fingers, purposely showing off his implanted set of laser-honed razorails.

"From where I stand it doesn’t look like no cripple like you is
gonna be able to do jack shit." He extended his nails and swiped the empty jacket sleeve of Charlie's right arm. "Now, why don't you go sit down and have a drink." Claws cracked his toothy maw in the semblance of a grin but only succeeded in showing off three rows of chromed teeth.

Charlie didn't have time to fool around with this genetic throwback. He flipped his left wrist out in a fast, whip-like motion. Suddenly a carbon blade the size of a large hunting knife fell into his hand and then "fell" into Claws' groin. There was a stifled groan and then a loud thump as Charlie pushed him out of the way.

"I'm really sorry, Claws, but the last couple days have done wonders for my stress level."

The inside of the V.I.P. room was a little disappointing. It smelled heavily of smoke and spilled drinks; on each side there was a line of booths, each with its own personal hanging light. Only one was on, so Charlie strolled closer. The sight at the booth nearly turned Charlie's stomach--there was Frankie James, baseball cap and all.

"Hiya, sprawlkid, done much hitchhiking lately?"

Charlie grimaced and shot back, "Can the crap, James; do ya got it?"

Frankie leaned over the side of the booth and patted a large black case, "It's all yours, bucko."

"That is, if you have the goods," sounded a small voice. Also in the booth, although Charlie didn't pick her out at first, was Sharrone Takeshi. The diminutive oriental woman was easily lost in the shadows of the back room. She stood up and beckoned Charlie to sit.

"Well, Mr. Charles," spoke Takeshi, "I'll try to make this as painless as possible. If you would turn over the datacards then you can receive your payment, and we can all go our separate ways."

Charlie smiled and then reached into his jacket pockets. He pulled out a handful of small datacards and displayed them on the table in accordion fashion. "Here ya go, Takeshi. Channel 40's fall lineup, stuff so secret you need security clearance to even think about it."

Takeshi gathered up the cards in her too eager hands. One by one she ran them through a portable data viewer, making remarks on a
small pad. "That's odd..." she remarked to herself.

"What's odd?" asked Charlie, perhaps a little too eagerly.

"Nothing. I just assumed that there would be eight pilot shows. Anyway, here's your money."

Charlie picked up the envelope and looked in it; 20,000 worldbucks stared right back at him. Things were looking up.

"And," started Frankie, handing over the black case, "here's the other half of the deal."

Charlie set the case on the table and gently opened it. Inside the case was a Gentech-11 cyberarm good enough to replace the one he lost. He picked up the glistening metal appendage, holding it to the light. It was perfect, not even a scratch on the chrome.

"Pretty good stuff. Is it hot? I don't want no body bank repo men coming after me in a week."

"Naw," replied Frankie, "I got a great deal on it--my uncle sells cybergear. Anyway, it also comes with three full cans of pseudo-flesh. Not bad, huh?"

Charlie grunted and put the arm back into the case. Things were going well, with any luck he'd be in the resort state of Hawaii by tomorrow afternoon. Charlie rose from the table, he nodded his head at the two ladies and left. He had just opened the door when he heard it. Several shots were being fired in the bar up ahead; Charlie squatted behind a partition in the wall and drew his Mirage. If there was any trouble, he was going to be part of it.

Looking over the mini-wall, Charlie tried to discern what was going on. Amidst the confusion of the bar, two men had just opened fire on three people sitting at a booth; the three people looked remarkably like Frankie, Sharrone, and him. Charlie had a decision to make and he made it--if someone had just bungled a hit on him he was going to find out who they were. Charlie's Mirage let out a beam of high intensity laser energy, burning a hole through one of the hit men's upper arm. The other tattooed punk opened up on Charlie with his automatic. Charlie flew back against the wall in pain as the slugs collided with his chest--without his sub-dermal armor he'd be a goner by now. He closed his eyes and slumped against the wall; the thug
smiled to himself and then started to run for the door. It was a big mistake, the last one he ever made. Charlie let fly with three shots through the man's back; he fell over in a heap of scorched flesh.

Charlie ran over to the felled men--the second one was dead but the first was still moving. He looked at the man's face--he was vaguely familiar, and then it came back. This man was the security guard at the desk the other night, what was his name? Hodges. Charlie looked at the ex-CorpCop one last time. It was too bad, he seemed like a decent guy. Charlie's search of the other man revealed nothing, not even an I.D. card. He got up to warn Frankie and Sharrone and then he realized it. They were gone.

By the minute, things were getting stranger. Charlie picked up his case and headed for the door. He didn't want to be around when the cops showed up. Outside the bar it had warmed up a little, the wind had died down, and the streets seemed a bit quieter. He set down his case and reached for a smoke, his hand coming across an odd square. Charlie pulled it out and held it to the neon light; it was a datacard. He had forgotten about this one. It was still worth a couple thousand worldbucks, but Charlie thought better of it. After all, he didn't care if he saw Sharrone Takeshi ever again. Jamming the card in his pocket, Charlie grabbed his case and hobbled off into the night, his ankle still hadn't healed.
When nobody answered the door, she opened it and walked in. She stood at the threshold for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room. The blackness fell around her, and she sensed that the whole house was empty, yet she held her breath as she moved quietly toward his room. It, too, was empty, but brighter because of the autumn sunlight pouring through the blinds. She stood in the center of the room, watching dust and lint float through the streams of sunlight. She focused on one thread as it journeyed through the thin streams of light. It floated slowly down from above her head, at times hiding in the shadows and at other times reflecting the golden light.

Her concentration was unbroken until a repetitive crunching sound fought its way into her senses. As her ears opened wider she noticed that the sound was coming from the backyard, so she moved to the window, cracking the blinds to peer out into the yard. She recognized his figure, and slowly backed away from the window.

He was digging again. The sound of his shovel slapping the dirt grew louder in her mind, and she closed her eyes as the rhythm pulsated with increasing intensity. After a moment, she opened her eyes again. She strode out of his room and into the yard. His back was to her, but as she stood at the edge of his shallow hole he felt her stare and turned around. He turned to her with a face that was devoid of emotion, a face that she was expecting. His eyes were remote, traveling through thoughts that almost no one could guess. His mouth formed a perfect line across his face, hinting at neither a smile or a frown. She laughed inwardly because she knew that he was actually bursting with emotion. She had worn that mask many times herself.

He nodded in greeting and turned back to his digging. She stared at his back for a minute and then began to slowly walk across the
yard. She watched the ground as she walked, and studied the holes that he had dug in the past. They had all been refilled, and the first one that she approached was still mounded with fresh dirt. Her foot sank into the black soil and left an impression as she walked across. As she walked along, each of the former holes was increasingly covered by choking weeds, grass, and dead leaves. She made her way down to the edge of the yard, where the first hole had been dug. She found it only because she knew it was there. Any other eye would have passed right over it, mistaking it for a normal, healthy piece of lawn.

She looked down at the spot and remembered. She thought about what was buried in that hole, as well as the others she had just walked over. Cold. She remembered how cold the holes had been when she had sat in them. She would sit and feel the cold seep through her clothes, through her skin, and into her bones. It seemed as if each hole had grown colder. She shivered as she thought about the new hole, the one that he was digging right now.

He looked up and saw her standing there, deep in thought. He stopped and watched her. His mind was also swarmed by bleak memories of other holes. Not just the holes he had dug, but the holes in which she had held the shovel. He remembered what had stopped her when she came so close. Fear. Finally, he had defeated his own fear, but he did not feel victorious. A bitter breeze suddenly whipped his breath away and he looked to the sky. The trees framed the sky with their bare branches, and he noticed that grey clouds were moving in, challenging the bright sun to a battle.

She stood with her eyes locked to the ground, still thinking about the new hole. She remembered how sick she had felt when she had first realized that she could do nothing to help him. The love she had for him became more real than ever, but it became false in its uselessness.

She looked up and saw him watching her. As she walked toward him, he returned to his digging. She waited until he was working on one end of the hole and then she dropped into the hole and sat down with her legs crossed.

"What are you going to bury?" she asked, knowing the answer.
He didn’t pause a moment in his shoveling as he answered, "Myself."

She believed him. She waited for the right moment to ask why, but he erupted before she could start her question.

"I hate my life, my school, my mother, my job." She mentally added "myself" to his list. It wasn’t a new list, yet he seemed to possess a new determination. She remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

"Too much pressure," he mumbled as he shoveled. "And she doesn’t love me like I love her," he added. She knew who he was talking about, and an image of the unworthy girl popped into her mind. She thought about how sensitive he was.

"I’m so damned hypersensitive," he exclaimed, just as she was thinking it.

"I love your sensitivity," she said quietly. Her compliment fell into the air, unnoticed. She hadn’t really expected him to hear it anyway. He kept digging and she watched silently for a while.

"Earlier," she started, "I was thinking about everything that is buried in this yard."

"Obviously not enough has been buried if I’m still at it," he added.

"All of the hatred, fear, confusion, pain, sorrow, and just emptiness that we’ve buried."

"Haven’t gone deep enough," he muttered as he dug.

She thought for a moment. "Deep enough," she said slowly, "maybe we haven’t gone deep enough into real life."

"That’s not what I meant," he said, leaning on his shovel, "I meant that we haven’t buried it deep enough. It keeps coming back. It’s time for me to bury it once and for all." He paused, and then added, "As for real life, I’ve been deep enough to know that I hate it."

As he dug she began to realize that something was different. This hole was strange, not like the others. It wasn’t quite as cold, and this surprised her. It also scared her. She did not know what had changed. She stared up at the sky, watching the clouds plan their attack. The sun seemed to be faltering; it knew that it wasn’t strong
enough to burn through the clouds.

The hole was deep now, almost up to his head. She could sense his tiring, but when she looked at his eyes she could see that he was still determined. She thought about what a risk it was to leave him here. The long period that always followed the grave digging, when he disappeared from her life, was always without meaning.

She stood up and climbed out of the hole. Turning her back to him, she began to walk away.

"Wait," she heard him say, "I want you here."

She slowly turned to face him, and answered shakily, "I know you do." She paused for a minute, and then explained, "I need to leave now. For myself."

Not wanting to see his reaction, she looked away. Once again, she began the long journey out of his yard and headed home.
"Wit. Wit. This is Chief. We need you to deliver a message..." 
"And I'd love to 'zap' any other time, but this is my minute off!"

"Wit, you're the best Impulse Carrier we have on duty. And she needs you."

"Please--let me guess. She's late for class, and she needs a believable excuse for the teacher. No, wait! That poor southern boy sang her a 'Daisy' symphony again, and she needs to pardon herself from riding on his handlebars," Wit quipped. "What is the dilemma now?"

The girl was always burdening her Brain with "urgent" messages coded to Perception Hall. Half of the time, Chief would immediately deny access for her to circulate the information. The other fifty percent of her thoughts were carried by Impulses to the various places in her mind. Consent would be given or denied to "pass" the Ideas. This moment, Wit felt her Idea had to be passed. Their girl entertained a Thought of one condition that would allow her to escape her next class: a HEADACHE. Simply put, she didn't want to take a test fifth hour. Wit calculated this request would take more moments than her usual whims, but this was only because the H.A. needed to be real, since her Mom-figure would definitely be skeptical and test the sincerity of the Girl's ailment--maybe even take her to the Doctor's!

"Chief, I'm ready for the job, and my expectations are high."

"Expectations for what?"

"For your reasoning to clear. I'm the best Impulse Carrier--on or off duty!"

"Wonder!" Chief muttered. "Just stay on your nerve path, away from any Notorious Sidetracker. This plea must be allowed!"
"Yes, sir!" Wit exclaimed with renewed vigor in his attitude. "I’ll take my usual route, from Perception Hall to Intuition Center, then through Deliberation and Contemplation Rooms, and I’ll even hit the Medi Chamber. From there, should I visit the Realization Office, or head straight for Logic Stores? I know. I’ll need Realization first. Then I’ll pick up some forms at the Vault, and finish my mission by checking in at the Conclusion Foyer. I’ll not stop until I’ve caused a Headache!"

His journey had begun. The path had been cleared. He would sprint out of harm’s way. His motive was clear as a bell--never mind the hackneyed cliches; Wit was approaching the exit from Perception Hall. He retrieved an odd-looking hammer from a nearby shelf and glanced over his shoulder with one final, corny remark, "You can count on me, Chief!"

Following a few Directions, who were holding neon flashers, Wit strode confidently down the corridor to his first destination. It pleased him to find the Intuition Center open, but he had known it would be. Intuition was always alive with activity: bustling secretaries, hurried and harried I.C.’s, and the Intuition ladies themselves. Ringing a fingerbell, Wit signaled for an immediate audience. He was ushered into a room half the size of a microchip, which appeared surprisingly tiny when reviewed from the interior, due to the dark-paneled walls and carpet. Wit didn’t seem to notice the darkness. Instead, he strode toward an antique, hand-carved on which sat Ms. Insight, founder and "brains" behind the Center. Her legs were unprofessionally swinging forward with each step Wit took, and the off-beats consisted of her heels colliding with the desk front. Step - thump! - step - thump! - step - THUNK!

"Ouch!" On the last backswing of her legs, Ms. Insight’s heel had landed with too much force, and now she was hopping, howling, and rubbing her bruised ankle.

"Insight, I’ve got the Girl’s proposition to pass to you...."

"Ow... I know. Yes, I know all about it. The news came in a microsecond before you arrived. You have my consent, but I must warn you about the Notorious Sidetrackers. One of their agents is trying to
oppose your efforts for the Headache by slyly planting a devious contrathought in your path. I’m not exactly sure what their plan is, but you’d better watch out."

"Thanks for the tip, but I’m positive I won’t be needing it," Wit bragged mildly. "The last time the Sidetrackers mingled with me was at a New Day’s Eve jam a while back. Yeah, I definitely mangled their nerves. Are you sure your sources were checked okay?"

"This is Insight you’re speaking with, Wit. I have the inside info on everything!"

"Then what was Oprah hiding from the Enquirer last week?"

"Continue your mission, Wit."

"Hey - you swore you knew all secrets!" Wit kidded Ms. Insight. He leapt through the doorway to avoid a playful swat in the stomach. Unfortunately, Wit backed into a secretarial assistant. As he bent over to scoop up some scattered papers she had dropped, Wit puzzled over the way she quickly told him to forget the papers and then hurried out the door. He glanced up soon enough to see the secretary’s facial features before she scampered away: it was Cate, a Notorious Sidetracker, undercover in the Intuition Center! Still toting the odd hammer, Wit dove for the double-doored exit and flung the left panel open. Cate was racing slightly to the right of Wit’s preplanned path. He considered chasing her, but then decided against that impulse, since his logical sense forbade him to. "Besides," he mumbled, "Chief warned me of this urge. I don’t want the Girl’s message to be lost because of me. Here’s lookin’ at you, Chief."

A straight yet jagged walkway connected the Center with Wit’s next stop, Deliberation Room. As he traveled the length of the passage, Wit noticed, "This must be the Girl’s Indecision Hallway." That was, indeed, a correct deduction, but it took Wit a few moments to decide this. Upcoming was the Deliberation Room, with an alley sprouting to its right, bypassing the room. Wit had no inkling of where it led, and he had no intention of knowing, either. Wit needed to enter the Deliberation Room, in order to receive more support for his mission. When he reached the Deliberation entrance, a slight complication met him. The doors were locked. Since his prepared course had been to
visit both the Deliberation Room, and then the adjoining Contemplation Room, Wit momentarily despaired at his situation. "I need to deliberately deliberate the deliberation of what deliberative deliberateness I should do," Wit tried to reassure himself. "Whoever locked those doors, though ... Cate!" he exclaimed angrily as he sighted a fleeting speck of her inspiration-flowing red hair around the alley corner. Following closely behind, Wit pursued her down the alley, until she suddenly halted and spun around to face him.

"I know what you want," Cate hissed, "but I'm not going to let your Headache pass!" Then she scooted far into a dark corner of the Girl's Mind, allowing Wit access to wherever the alley led. Did he have enough nerve to find out? It was the sole chance of completing his mission, since he could not turn and journey back. Physically, he could not retrace his steps, since once he had accepted a task, the pathway behind him was erased. More importantly, though, he would never consciously abandon his solemn duty. "Give me a Headache, or I'll flunk the test" was his standing motto.

Eerie sights and sounds crept at the sides of the alley while Wit ventured carefully: Veins pulsating, brain cells moaning horrendously in their dying (Wit hypothesized this condition befell them from an overdose of homework), colorless creatures unnamed and undiscovered by the Girl's world. None could touch or harm Wit, as long as he stepped on his path. For this, Wit was thankful. At last, the outline of a rear door appeared in Wit's sight. A cheerful white light shed its beams in the form of two words: Contemplation Room. To Wit, the sign penetrated the shroud of darkness with the piercing power of the slaughter of the Girl's Sanity cells on test day, or of her Control cells whenever her thoughts turned to the Boy. Wit's breath eased out in relief at this sight; Cate's diversionary efforts had not stopped him this time.

The contemplation Committee eked every particle of patience from Wit's being during the moments it took Wit to convince them of his task. After a brief, yet "sensational," Headache presentation, Reflect, the chairdendrite, became skeptical and called Perception Hall to be totally convinced of the plea. Reflect received a positive answer in
favor of Wit, and he proceeded to grant his consent to the message, amidst Wit’s nervously scuttled comments, such as, "Shouldn’t this be faster?" and, "I wonder why Chief’s response isn’t back yet." From the expression on his face, Wit didn’t seem to welcome Reflect’s caution with satisfaction.

"These things sometimes take longer than you deem necessary," Reflect responded.

Despite Wit’s haste, the plea won total affirmation from the contemplation Committee. Wit continued his journey.

Another lengthy, dimly lit passage brought Wit to the Meditation Chamber where Gu-Grew, the great Impulse Cell, was awaiting Wit’s arrival. It’s humorous, Wit conceded, How Gu-Grew is responsible for the girl’s long-term growth, like maturing enough to stay with the same Boy for more than a day, when it seems he never ages! He sauntered up to Gu-Grew, who was seated in a lotus position in the middle of the immense, yet peaceful domed room.

"Pardon me, Gu, but I need your assistance with one of the Girl’s problems. Could you un-meditate for a micromoment?"

"Speak now, or forever hold your plea," Gu-Grew commanded in a resonating tone.

"May I have your permission to carry the hammer I hold past you, and until the end of my mission, or will you put me in a trance for a hundred years first?" Wit requested in a tone he reserved for his humblest pleas.

"You may, after I offer you a warning - take it or leave it. The end is near, but you must first face opposing forces alone."

"Oh - you mean Cate," Wit deduced after a few milliseconds of consideration.

"Yes. Go."

Wit exited silently, brooding over Gu-Grew’s statement. Nevertheless, Wit had an obligation to fulfill, and he was just regaining his former confidence when a sing-song voice severed the silence surrounding him.

"Hi-ya, Witty!" the voice greeted slyly.

It’s Cate again, Wit realized. He couldn’t see the body that fit
the voice, but he knew it was she. Cate’s going to try to divert me from my path. Well, I won’t be swayed. Wit suddenly noticed a subtle pull on his jacket pocket. Swiftly, Wit clasped his hand around the head of his hammer.

"Leave me, Cate, or I’ll lose it!" Wit complained (threatened) trying not to lose his grasp on the tool.

"I know, you doofus. That’s why I’m trying to ruin you!" Cate screamed in retort. She yanked the handle further out of his pocket.

"I thought you wouldn’t tangle me after what happened two days ago," Wit naively proposed. He maneuvered the hammer so that both of his hands gripped it.

"No - that incident gave me even more motivation for revenge, after you insulted my intelligence and embarrassed me in front of my ‘trackers,’” Cate raged. Then she gasped in terror. Wit expended the final bits of his energy into swinging Cate’s petite frame over the side of his path and into a blackened void. He was encased in a block of silence once more.

Trembling slightly, Wit stooped into the Realization Office, a little amazed that he was not harmed by the encounter with Cate. From there, he received a notice from Chief: "Acknowledgement that you are nearly through with your mission. Wonder! Your progress is quite slow, Wit. Don’t daydream. Get moving!"

Upon arrival at the Vault of Derivations, Wit was greeted by an old friend, Attention. "I heard about your tough assignment, and I figured you’d need a friendly ‘Hi’ on the way back, just to know that you haven’t been forgotten," Attention brightly addressed him.

"I appreciate this, Tent. It got rough in the middle, and then I received an ungrateful message from Chief - but I suppose he didn’t really know what happened."

"Yeah, I understand, Wit. I’ve been there."

I’ve only one last destination before I can call this a minute, Wit remembered. The Conclusion Foyer would be the easiest part of his task, where he could deposit his hammer completing the journey. He conversed shortly with the Judge there as he handed his tool over the counter.
"Wow! This has been my longest assignment! Fifty-eight seconds, thirty-three milliseconds. I've seen it all and heard it all, but I still haven't done it all."

"What haven't you done?" the Judge naturally inquired.

"I have never had the privilege of pounding the Headache Nerve," Wit replied nonchalantly.

"Nice Oscar-winning try, but that privilege is reserved for those 'slightly' above your position."

"That's all right. I'm out of cracks, anyway, and ready for retirement!"

Later that minute, Wit was finally able to relax at Perception Hall, and think about the work he had accomplished. The Girl had gone home before her test, with an actual Headache. She sure keeps me active in the pain business. Hey! That's not my area of expertise. Wit did hope, though, that she would duly study for the make-up test, but that was not his concern. His moment had passed. He was finished. The job was done ...

"Wit. Wit. This is Chief. We need you to deliver a message ..."
utopian incubus
by Wayne A. Wolbert-Perez

The implant was done in an amazingly efficient manner, swiftly, with no damage to the brain's cerebral cortex, and the succeeding application of a weak electrical current insured any memory retained would be minimal, if not nonexistent, thus blocking transference to the parietal and temporal lobe, as well as the amygdala.

The good doctors sent the boy home, forgetting about him until he became a man.

* * *

He woke up.
He sat up. He felt drunk. He was hungry. He looked around. He saw the time. The time was past quitting. So he left work. He headed home. His wife came to greet him at the door. He never remembered his wife being home this late. He ate leftover macaroni. He slept.

That night he dozed soundly until the noises his wife made coming in reminded him that he was still alive. "Every morning," he thought, "she comes in at this time, goes through the motions of having gotten up to go to the bathroom, and then comes back to my bed. Every morning, I pretend not to notice, how painfully obvious it may be. Every morning since - no, before - the wedding."

* * *

Reminding yourself of this fact, you are instantly swarmed with notions of what love must be like and the farce you're under. You can recall, vaguely, like an old, grainy, faded, still-photograph, the kind no
one takes anymore because they don’t have time for the memories it may trigger. You know why you married her. Not for love, you try not to remember, but for survival.

You cannot stop this flooding of mementos anymore, but you try in vain. Every morning, you try. Every morning, you fail, as you do now.

You married an Anglo. You had to, if you wanted to live, as did your father, and your father’s father. Thinking of him, you also recall, as if you had lived it through your Grandfather’s life, before the first of many Decrees, how a Latino, or an African or Oriental, or anyone, for that matter, could marry outside of their implied race. You do not remember, but something explains the scar you received on your left shoulder, reading ‘NW-H’. The scar still remains. You know your wife has no such branding.

You have nothing in common with her, aside from similar skin shades, due to two generations of life under the Decrees. Inside, however, you never will see yourself through blue-colored eyes. You never learn, you never will learn, so we must kill you.

But not yet.

* * *

He felt his pale, meek hands slipping out of his Grandfather’s strong grip, felt the coarse, wrinkled earthy hands relax, then tighten one last time and realized he had been brooding much too long again.

During work, the office personnel, in a way, seemed nicer to him than ever before. The constant ethnic insulting slowed down to a few sporadic outbursts. The coffee, brewed from artificially cloned beans, served to him during breaks wasn’t more than an hour old, and the toilet bowl cleaner, packaged in non-renewable plastic polymers, had a sweet rose scent to it.

Long after the personnel left and the night watchman began his shift, he checked out and began his walk home through the lonely alleyways and desolate rows with their company of gutter cats stalking rabid, enormous rats, still hungry after their last meal of some junkie
who fell off a roof, and winos, stinking of month-old rotgut and defecation, asking for a bite or maybe a dollar, then passing out. This is where he would be. This is where his people and the people like him have ended up after years of struggling. Their minds reduced to numbness, thirsting for more television because of the simple way out it provided. Drunk, if only to sleep easier and lessen the constant hunger pains.

He walked on, oblivious to his surroundings as they were to him.

* * *

Suddenly, you hear footsteps. And heavy breathing. Then gunshots and sirens. You dart for cover, paranoia setting in, then realize it's happening in a different alleyway, thinking safety until the different alleyway becomes your alleyway and you are face-to-face with the man they, always they, never us, not yet, are chasing after.

"Hide me," he stammers.

You frantically push him away, in case they think you are involved with him, and he falls to his knees. You can't make out what he's saying now; in fact, you can't make out any sound except an intense throbbing in your head. And when you are about to scream, the sound stops and the outside world harkens its arrival with a gunshot. Then another.

Looking down, you can still see the man mouthing out words, but instead of sound, dark, moist patches of his skull, interwoven with brain tissue, leap away, and a tide of life-blood cascades from his mouth onto the faded black cement, dark as his skin, dark as the night, forming at first a little pool, then a stream flowing like a moat around the body. You resist the morbid urge to watch the body empty out, instead opting to stop the flow with your shirt until medical aid arrives, forgetting that in this part of the city there never is medical aid. The rats come, making their skree! skree! a constant hum in the symphony of the city, lusting for fresh flesh.

You raise his head, and it hangs limply, still pulsating, still moist. Turning him over, a guttural sound emanates from your vocal chords,
and you wash him in vomit.
   You will be next. You are the last.
   We are sure of this.

   * * *

   The man's head was blown open, as a demolition crew tears
down a building, from the inside out, and in the pale fluorescent light
of the streetlamps, it became painfully obvious that bullets weren't
necessary.

   He stayed waiting around until the rats started their frenzy, then
got up and ran home in a daze.

   At home, his wife greeted him. It was unusual for her to be
home this late, twice in the past week.

   She had cooked a meal, something never done before.

   In his daze, he didn't notice this deviation from the normal
drudgery. It all seemed so natural to him, the day's events, that when
she made her advances, he went along as if it happened every night,
diving into an ocean of concupiscence.

   Waking up, however, he felt dirty.

   He got up out of the bed, naked, and shuffled to the shower to
cleanse himself, paying no attention to the trickles of blood mixing with
water, turning a shade of tranquil pink as it entered the drain.

   His dull razor was now rendered useless, and in the light of the
new day the coarse stubble made him look as he felt.

   He was careful not to comb too hard and passed over the tender
spot where he must have bruised his head earlier.

   His worksuit enveloped his nakedness and helped him reorient
himself in the world as he walked out of the bathroom.

   He was surprised to see his wife still in the bed, covered,
cowering, as in shame, and sobbing to herself until he made his presence
known.

   "Please... I didn't want... I mean... You never did anything wrong
to me... Run. Run before they come back. Go, now."

   Normally, he wouldn't care. She had never talked to him before.
They married because his father promised money, compromising his soul so his son would survive. But she, like all humans, he felt, had some goodness in her, and through this he found means to trust her words. He had always believed in ultimate human redemption throughout his hardships. It was his religion; his acceptance of intuition.

Outside, he could hear noises. A helicopter above the housing project beat the air with its blades. Cars, their sirens wailing, sounded the same as the night before. Footsteps, in unison, as a military unit would make.

He took the stairs down, his pace quickening with each advancing level. Leaping flights, he dashed onto the crossway, expecting the snipers to advance on him and the helicopter he heard overhead to bomb him to oblivion.

Nothing.

The sky was grey, drab and bleak, as usual. An old man pulled a dog, or a rat, on a barbed-wire leash, the sharp barbs gradually tearing the beast’s flesh. Across the street, a bag lady rummaged through a dumpster, finding nothing.

Nothing.

* * *

You are afraid. So you run. Again, the sounds start, and you glance upward for a hidden assassin. You do not realize why you run, but you continue.

Like an animal, you are hunted down.
All your life you’ve been hunted down.
Like your father, and your father’s father, as well as your brothers, now all gone.

The last of an extinct race, only you stand in the way.

You run, and run until you tire, and then you find solace in the outskirts of the projects, the old city which was forgotten but never forgiven.

You feel that you will be safe here, at least for enough time to rest.
You feel afraid, so you hide from your fear. It does you no good.

* * *

He had found comfort for the night in a cardboard box, where so many of his kind had managed to survive centuries. The adrenalin surged through his body and made resting impossible, and the urge to flee took control of his psyche and he ran once more.

The noises crescendoed to a deafening roar, and he stumbled, breathing in dust, exhaling terror, knowing the future, knowing the finish, both as one, and you begin to lose consciousness, you begin slipping, but you manage to struggle to keep control and you regain your pace and you run and you run and you stumble and you run and you stumble and you run and you run and you are going to die and nothing i can do can prevent this and i can feel the tremoring inside my head, and i run and i run, and then fireworks, as when i was a boy, and my head goes light, and i slump to the ground, peacefully, and i sleep and i dream.

Forever.
The warm wind lapped my face and toyed with my long red hair. My cheap shoes were caked with mud, making it a hard climb.

We were running, Matt and I. We always ran together. His striped shirt stood out against the drab cut grass on the hill. It gave the impression of a t.v. screen after someone has played with the vertical hold--red and green stripes in an endless, mind-aching, sixties fashion.

Two small boys on a small boy’s adventure. Though we lived in shabby houses and wore grubby clothes, we knew we were kings, and brothers. We would always be together to live and even die for each other if need be.

We reached the top of the hill, lords, standing straight and tall, surveying all we had accomplished on that fine summer day. Our quest had taken us through the fields of the vampire roses, beyond the grounds of the Satan worshippers, on past the mounds of the speaking dead, to the very big road at the foot of the great hill on which we now stood. It had been a long and terror-filled journey.

It was our duty to find out what was beyond the great hill. No one before us had been so brave as to pass beyond this largest of barriers.

We turned our minute backs on the familiar world and beheld our destiny. The top of the miniature mountain that marked the end of our realm was crowned with a split mohawk of leafy trees. The effect of this was a gloomy trail which did not seem to be touched by the midday sun. Matt wiped a drip of snot from his nose making a new stripe on
his shirt sleeve.
"Ready?" I asked.
"Your face is bleeding," he said.
"I know." Those who walked through the vampire roses could not expect to pass unscathed. I was lucky to bear only two cuts on my face.

"I guess so....yeah, I'm ready," he sighed, turning manure-brown eyes upon our chosen path.

The way through the trees was not too perilous. Only my companion suffered the wrath of the birds, but, with much swearing and spitting, he was able to clear most of the yellow ooze out of his eyes and mouth. I laughed so hard I nearly coughed up my spleen.

I rounded the mounded corner first, laughing and holding my aching stomach, but my laughter was soon stifled by a gape of awe.

"Matt!" I squeaked as my intestines formed an ever-tightening knot around my lungs.

"Kachchchchch kchchchchch pthut what?!" he yelled, at last maneuvering the corner. Then his jaw dropped, and the brown crusty he had been gagging on fell out of his wide mouth.

We beheld a crater in the earth fifteen stories deep and two-by-two miles in any direction. It was huge, like some giant's footprint in the ground, and it was totally undiscovered, except by the hundreds of lovers who used it as the setting for their back seat fumblings.

Ignorant of the previously mentioned, my partner asked, "What do we do with this?"

I had no answer for him then. I only stared at the gravel interior of the pit's barren dryness and played with the cuts on my left cheek.

Nine years passed me by. I was no longer an innocent eight-year-old. I had been taken from my father, then I had lost both my dad and my grandmother. Nine years, like daggers in the gut, left me hollow and cold. The blue eyes of youth had been replaced with stones. The eyes are the windows to the soul.

A snow flake landed on my nose and melted away. Mathew's eyes, now amber, showed different sorrows. They spoke of the abuse of a drunken father still living 'Nam, and the fear of a cancer-ridden
brother.

We had run up the snow-white hill, Matt and I. We still ran together.

As lords, we stood at the top of the mount. Kings who have seen too much and forgotten how to live. Once more we faced the trail. I shouldered my sled and asked, "You ready?"

"Do you know that your scars are turning whiter?"

"I know."

"Yeah, I guess so...I'm ready."

"You ready?"

"Yeah, I guess so...I'm ready."

We knew what to do with it now.

Looking over the pit's barely snow-covered rim, I informed my friend of our impending doom.

"We are going to die."

"Yup," he said nonchalantly.

"Well, I feel real good about this! Let's do it!"

For a few seconds the two of us, in our respective sleds, did a balancing act on the edge of the cliff.

The spot for the slide had been carefully selected. It was a place where the floor of the canyon was covered with many sloping mounds. The hope here was that we would hit one of the mounds and fly into the air. The alternative was to slide full force into a flat area which would have the same effect as shooting one's self out of a cannon into a steel-reinforced brick wall. The thought of having our legs jammed up our rectum was none too pleasing to us.

I went over, eyes closed.

The sharp winter air rushed at me, pulling my hair back and making tears flow. I was laughing hysterically, a mad man's laugh.

In fear, I opened my eyes and immediately wished to be blind again. Not ten feet in front of me the snow which I had been traveling on came to an abrupt end. Gravel took over from there.

My liver rammed itself into my throat making screams impossible.

CRACK!!!

At the gravel barrier, my sled and I went our separate ways. It spun off to the left, slammed into Matt, and in a domino effect beamed
him in the head and knocked him off his sled. Meanwhile, I flew off to the right, pinwheeling through the air like a tittleywink.

While in the air, I formulated a plan. My strategy was this:

Step one: I would hit the ground, digging a fifty-foot trench with my back, which, at the end of the trench, would separate from the rest of my body, giving it much better ventilation.

Step two: I would do a flip, hit my head on a very large slab of granite, become unconscious, and slide the rest of the way down on my face.

I followed my plan to the letter.

I could hear my eyes creak as they pulled themselves open. I waited for the sky to stop spinning. Whether it was gravel or teeth I spit out, I'm not very sure. A moaning, simpering sound came from my right. With much strain, I flopped my head in that general direction. There, lying on a mound of rubble and bones from some humanoid creatures, was a hideously gelatinous pile of human flesh also known as Mathew Watrous.

The moans grew louder, and seeing that my long-time friend obviously needed help, I quickly jumped up, popped my spine back into place and proceeded to laugh at him.

"What are you laughing at?" he grunted.
"You look like unbaked meatloaf!" I heehawed.
"Well, you're not so pretty yourself, Mr. Cross-section! Now help me find my hand!"

It is the way with teenagers to laugh at each other's pain. It gives you a warm fuzzy feeling just knowing that no matter where you are, what time it is, or how much you need medical attention, there is always someone there to laugh in your face.

We found Matt's hand lying not forty paces from my left big toe. It was truly a lucky day. Lucky not only in that we both had reattained all our limbs, but also because we found something we thought was gone forever. Sometimes it takes a brush with death to make us remember just how much we have to live for.

On those bare rocky slopes we found hope.

I sat next to my friend and pondered the grandness of life. Matt
had found a Playboy and was attentively pondering the grandness of something entirely different. I peered at the sheer walls of the hole we were in and was suddenly struck with a realization.

"Hey, Matt?"
"Uh-huh."
"Have you ever noticed that there's no way out of here?"