

THE JOYS OF PUMMELING

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James R. Kincaid

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Violence is man re-creating himself.

Frantz Fanon

Everything is funny as long as it is happening to somebody else.

Will Rogers

See, people with power understand exactly one thing: violence.

Noam Chomsky

If it's natural to kill, how come men have to go into training to learn how?

Joan Baez

If everyone who had a gun just shot themselves, there wouldn't be a problem.

George Harrison

We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love.

R. D. Laing

Note: The prospect of distinguishing those stories unpublished from those probably published (much less where) seems to me so little inviting that I would rather take on Mohammed Ali in his prime. Besides, who gains from such distinctions? Who loses? Who cares? You are with me, I know.

FOREWORD

You know, I was told (by an old friend I have no reason to trust) that these preliminary statements were useless, worse than. She said, “What purports to be a guide is too often an apology, craven, cast out in the hopes of making readers adopt a charitable attitude, of. . .” I stopped listening at “purports,” a word walking on stilts and never used by kindly people.

So – in hopes you will pass over the many errors, acres of tedium, effects that aren’t in any way telling, I offer these tales, yoked by violence together (like metaphysical poetry, you see). I figured the title would make all that clear, “pummeling” being a bolder and more empathetic term than “violence” or “sadism.” Pummeling appeals to you, to all of us, one way or another. Now, I’m not saying you necessarily find your happiness in pummeling someone or dreaming of doing so. Maybe you figure that it is more blessed to receive than to give. That’s a little disgusting, perhaps, but I’m not the one to say so.

After all, as Humbert Humbert says, we can smile a little, too. “There is no harm in smiling.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Not with a Whimper	1
2. Educational Television	9
3. Camping	16
4. Far from the Peaceful Shore	23
5. Pardon Me	30
6. Thank a Teacher	38
7. A Way Out	46
8. Bumper Crop	60
9. A Helping Hand,.....	73
10. Cheaters Never	78
11. The Youth of Today	84
12. Door to Door	91
13. Walking it Off	95
14. Correction	101
15. Trapped	103
16. Try a Little Tenderness	107
17. Seeking the Thugs	118
18. Hell Week	125
19. The Price is Right	130
20. The Last Refuge of a Scoundrel	136
21. Above Us Only Sky	141
22. Late Departure	145

1.
NOT WITH A WHIMPER

It's weird – you know the end of something great is coming, but you want to hold on, just for one more second....just so it can hurt a little more.

Anon.

In the end, everything is a gag

Charlie Chaplin

It's ain't over till it's over.

Yogi Berra

Will the last person on the planet please turn off the lights?

John Joseph Adams

Fran got it from Lucy who got it from Terry who got it from Ahmed who got it from Ray who got it from the Internet. Fran then told Billie who told Pete who told Allie who told her brother who told his wife who told the kids. The kids found it exciting and so did Pete who didn't, however, believe a word of it – and told his co-worker Martin not to worry about anything at all, nothing.

“It's horseshit!” he said to Billie and then repeated to Martin.

Billie would have none of it. “Well, you think what you like, but you'll be in a pretty fix if you're wrong.”

“If **you’re** right, seems like there’s only one fix – one size fixes all.”

“You’re so cynical.”

“And you think this is a time for solemnity. I admire that in you, Billie.”

“Anyhow, I don’t have time to stand here talking. Just thought I’d give you the news.”

“Thanks. Time’s about to become an empty idea anyhow, right? How much of it do we have, ‘it’ being my out-of-the-loop, now archaic notion of time?”

“You don’t believe me. Call somebody. Turn on the television.”

So he called Martin and told him not to worry but to turn on television and catch the latest idiocy, what they were saying about time. Fran, usually reliable, had said time was running out of the hourglass, like in that old soap, “The Days of Our Lives,” which Martin remembered fondly.

So Martin called Fran directly, who said she didn’t have time to talk about time, that there was no point anyhow, and that he should turn on the television.

“Turn on television? That’s what Pete said. Why in hell should I turn on television? My soaps don’t start for fifteen minutes.”

“Very funny. Hope you’re still here then. Call Ray.”

And he did: “So, Ray, Fran tells me. . . .”

“Jesus, I thought you were Mother. Get off the fucking line, Martin.”

“First tell me what all this is about.”

“No time.”

“According to Fran, there’s not much point thinking about time.”

Click.

Channel Seven: Talking Heads blithering about “Homo

sapiens” and statistics. What he caught, before switching, was, “After all, 99 percent of all species that have ever been on earth have gone extinct, so it just stands to reason. . . .”

“It does **not** stand to reason!” Martin said, out loud. But he did find his mind turning to important things he may have neglected: library books that would soon be overdue, laundry to pick up, his lawn. He went and looked out – needed mowing – but it was there, the lawn. So who cares about the various extinct birds that aren’t around to shit on his grass?

He decided that was a good way to look at it – good but apparently not sufficient, as he found himself again picking up the phone, which wasn’t working, not the landline. But the cell phone was another matter, and he dialed the first number on his list, connecting him to his ex, his embittered and vicious ex:

“WHAT?” It wasn’t unusual for her to scream, with a snarling undertone, but this was a personal best.

“Sorry to bother you, Anna.”

“Great timing! The one good thing about this is that it’ll get you, you miserable prick.”

“Well said, but can you tell me what ‘this’ is? Seems to have something to do with time.”

“It has to do with no time at all, none, none at all, not any, minus time, time turning in on itself.”

“What could that mean?”

“How could you miss this?” Her tone suddenly was softer, as if curiosity or concern had taken over. Couldn’t be concern.

“That’s a mystery. I suspect you won’t tell me what’s going on, so maybe advise me on what to do? I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course. Glad to. Martin, I think you’d be well advised—I’m shooting you straight here – to call your broker and sell anything volatile, anything that might not be able to sustain a hit. Knowing you, I think that’s not only sound but also loving advice. It’s entirely

within your range of values and competence.”

“Yeah, but why should I do that? You won’t tell me, of course.”

“I’m not a cruel person, Martin, not vindictive. I think you should consult Don Yeomans, who’s at NASA, and who, as it happens, agrees with Stephen King. If you aren’t close to Yeomans, though I’m sure you are, you could give Steve a buzz.”

“I’ll call Lyons – my broker, you remember – and do as you say. Of course I have no idea what the fuck I’m doing, but that’s nothing new, right?”

Silence.

“OK, Anna, see you.”

“That you won’t.”

Well, there’s family for you! Made Martin wonder why the idea of family got such positive press. Provides stability? No. Values? No. Comfort? Ha. The security of an iron maiden: kept you tormented even when divorced.

He felt liberated for a second and then remembered his family included a daughter, with whom he’d not been in touch in a little – a long – while:

“Debbie!”

“Oh, Dad.”

“You have a cold?”

“A cold? No. Oh my dear, dear Dad.”

What was this?

“Just thinking of you.”

“I was thinking of you too – and that nursery rhyme you used to sing to us, “When the wind blows.” I loved that.”

“Well, I called to see what you were up to these days.”

“Huh?”

“You doing OK? Want to have dinner some time?”

“I love you, Dad.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Remember, Dad, just remember. I promise you I will.
Goodbye, my always dearest Dad.”

And the line was dead. Nothing more to do there today, so he did call his broker, got him at home.

“Hi, Will, sell everything that’s volatile. Sorry, this is Martin.”

“Get off the line, you idiot. This is no time for jokes.”

“Doesn’t seem to be the time for time, Will. Wish I knew what I’d just said. Anyhow, would you. . . .”

Click.

Decided to call work. They’d know. Dial tone – and then dead. Altogether. Have to remember to recharge it. Took out his Things-To-Remember pad and saw “Change Dental Appointment,” which he couldn’t do because the phone needed recharged and – what the hell.

Back to the television, which gave him snow. Odd.

Martin decided to go straight to the heart of things, out his front door and into the street, where there were a few people, not many, but a whole lot more than usual for a Tuesday afternoon. The first person he ran into was a kid, somewhere between six and sixteen years old. Martin was never good with ages or with kids.

“Hey kid, you live next door?”

“Next door to what?”

“To me. I live there in the white house.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah what?”

“I live next door.”

“What’s going on?”

“You shitting me?”

“No but I’ll kick you in the shin if you don’t tell me.”

Wrong approach. The kid sneered, told him to eat something,

and went running toward the house next door, where, apparently, he did indeed live. Martin considered following him, but decided it'd be much better to try another plan.

What plan? Suddenly, the populated street was deserted. Not knowing his neighbors, Martin decided to try his car – better than roaming an empty street.

After going back into the house for a beer, so he'd have something to do while driving, Martin slipped in and was surprised when the engine sprang to life. Had he expected it to be dead, all the juice in the world having gone the way of time?

Up the street and around the bend it was no longer deserted. Martin slowed then stopped, as even the lawns were filled with people. Then he remembered: there was a church here, some off-brand Christian bunkum.

“Silly assholes!” he yelled into his closed window. What were they doing? He rolled down his window and asked just that.

“We're here for the rasher, oh yes!” said a googly-eyed man.

“Bacon?” asked Martin.

Googles just pointed to a huge sign attached to a pole apparently too heavy for him, since in bringing it into Martin's view, it smacked hard against the hood of his car and probably dented it. He could read it, though: “1 Thessalonians 4:17.”

Sensing it would be foolhardy to emerge from his car, Martin scanned the crowd for other signs: “The Tribulation Is Upon Us,” “Cotton and Increase Were Right,” “We Are the Dead in Christ.” What in hell? Martin did decipher the Cotton and Increase reference: the loony Puritan Mathers. But what were they right about? Thessalonians 4? The Tribulation? Maybe this is a tax protest, taxes being the heaviest tribulation since the Inquisition! Martin shouted this, working to ward off a cascading sense of fear.

But the worries didn't last long. Probably some savage group, centuries ago, had predicted horrors to come down and these folks

needed a day off to celebrate being the dead in Christ, as if that were a cheerer-upper.

Backtracking from the slaving true believers, Martin eased his car into a driveway, hooked backwards, and then down a side street to a friend's house. Martin had asked himself which of his friends was most reliable? He caught himself before he got to the part where he had to acknowledge that he had few friends, none of them reliable. At least Cameron was close by, Cameron and his attractive wife Julie and their three kids whose names were a jumble of Jens, Janes, Jasons, Joes, and Jeremiahs. The last was actually the name of one of them, but he didn't know which one, and what did it matter anyhow?

"Go away!"

Whispered from the other side of the keyhole.

"Cam? Julie? What's going on? Let me in."

"I'll shoot your head off if you don't go away."

"Listen," Martin said, struck with an inspiration, "I come bearing news from Thessalonians 4."

"I mean it. Ten more seconds and you're a dead man – slightly prematurely."

"OK, I'll leave. Just give me the ten-second version of what it is."

"Christ, imbecile, the end of everything, everything."

"Oh."

"Now go away."

"What do you mean, everything – end?"

"An asteroid, six miles across, maybe a minute away, less, hitting Montreal."

"I see. Thanks."

So that's the end of Montreal, which was charming but too French for his tastes. Most important, it was way more than six miles away, hell, more than six hundred miles. So he was safe and sound,

and Humpty Dumpty was still on the wall.

That was a reassuring thought. Martin told himself as much:
“There’s a reassuring thought.” In any case, it was his last.

2. EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION

I read in the newspaper they are going to have 30 minutes of educational stuff on television every Monday from 7:30 to 8:00, to educate America. They couldn't educate America even if they started at 6:30.

Groucho Marx

It took some time to piece together what exactly had happened, gone wrong. I'm still not confident that the story we agreed upon is very closely connected to actual events. The kids involved told several thousand different tales, contradicting themselves and circling back often to insist that what they had denied yesterday was true today. Some of my colleagues attribute this wobbling to the nature of children's minds, to the stress these particular poor little kids were under, or to the troubled times in which we live.

Horse fucking shit, I say. I say these particular little pissants are cunning liars, sociopathic little demons who ought to be gently helped out of this world for the good of everyone. Few people realize how much of the violence in this world is attributable to kids. I don't mean little peckers picking up guns and winging a playmate, pouring rat poison onto the tea party cookies, nudging little Timmy off the top of the slide---"on accident." I am of the opinion that nothing happens by accident, certainly not in the world of kids. Adults are different, I'll admit. Adults get careless, have a lot on their minds, let their left

hands flail around while their right hands are scratching their nuts. But not kids. Kids have very little on their minds and know exactly what they are doing.

That's part of it. The other part is that kids have no moral restraint. What I mean by that is that moral considerations don't enter into the way they think about things. And they do think. Simply but very clearly. Lots of people convince themselves that kids are instinctual, operating like puppies and gophers. Nope. Kids have this terrifying ability to send their locomotives down a single track. That's because kids are stupid, but their stupidity is their strength.

Adults can think in very complex ways, which is their weakness. Adults build up a lot of resistance to seeing what's right there in front of them and waste some of their best thinking time manufacturing ways to avoid what's so fucking obvious. And it is obvious. Jesus Christ! We have to teach ourselves, carefully and over time, to mistake utterly what kids are and what they do.

Freud said that if parents were capable of learning about children from observation and experience there'd be no need for him to write books. But what did Freud know? As usual, he got it only half right. True, adults don't know a thing about kids, but it's not because we are incapable of learning but that we don't want to. Allowing ourselves to see kids for what they are would be like learning that God is a fall-down slobbering drunk, that the moon is made of shit, that the best things in life are expensive.

In that sense, there's nothing exceptional about this particular criminal case. People are always thinking crimes involving kids are exceptional. Those British monster seven-year-olds who tortured a five-year-old and then tied him to the train-track and watched as he was sliced and diced; the kids who burned the fourteen homeless people alive, tied them to stakes and then set fire to them on the beach by the light of the moon; the kids who executed the parents of one of their set by taking an electric meat carver to the folks and hacking off

very thin slices over a period of six hours; the little girls who drowned all the boys in the second grade of their exclusive private school by holding them down and forcing garden hoses down their throats, slowly turning them up to full blast; the Columbine goons. Run of the mill. I know you won't believe me. You can't, not because you love kids but because you love your own illusions. It's not a question of being sentimental but of being a coward.

It makes me sick, to tell the truth---not kids so much as people like you.

But to get to the story: it all starts with one of those infuriatingly enlightened kids shows on television the taxpayers are forced to fund. Don't get me wrong. I am not a campaigner against PBS or other pathetic little high culture dribbles our government supports. I may be a cop but I don't mind it when a symphony or a ballet gets some public money. Museums and libraries and lesbian performance art: I am not opposed. Such things would wither and die without a few million being wrenched from unwilling citizens, who would be happy to subsist with such art experiences as are available in wrestling and the graceful tire-changing at a NASCAR event. Fund the highbrows, I say, not much but some. Me and my fellow flatfoots often get together for Masterpiece Theatre or an episode of NOVA. If you believe that, you'd probably believe that college football players are actual students, that public officials are public servants, and that fucking little monster kids are innocents at heart.

I guess I've made my views on kids, or rather my views on the customary views of kids, sufficiently clear, maybe over-clear. But it is the point of this story, so I'm not fucking going to apologize.

I should apologize, were I the apologizing sort, for tilting a little from the center of my story in discussing the adult programming policies of PBS and how they are funded. Truth is, that it has as much to do with my story as do my opinions on the future of the Pittsburgh Pirates (dim). The thing about PBS is that they devote a ridiculous

amount of their limited time and even more limited money not to sensible people but to kids, to children's programming. I haven't seen figures, but I'd guess that half their schedule and at least that much of their budget are beamed straight at the soulless minds of the under-ten set. Why? Who knows? But those are the facts. Everyone knows about Sesame Street; but not everyone knows that, along with such comparatively harmless dribble, there are programs trying to educate the uneducable, appealing to a high-toned curiosity that we'd love to think is there in children. Did you know there are hours of informational and cultural programming aimed at "our youngest viewers"? PBS wants to teach them not simply to count and add but to ingest social values and cultural sensitivity, a respect for diversity. The true agenda is straight-line left wing vomit, of course, a clumsy attempt to manufacture little Democrats who will grow up to tolerate illegal immigrants and White House Aides with loose and willing lips.

The particular program that came under our view was part of a series called "One World, Many Peoples." Imagine having the sort of mind that would find such a title expressive and digestible? Thank God you and I are more sensible. You are, right?

The program in this case aimed at forming the sensibilities and holding the attention of the little ones by giving them a view of our Southern European neighbors that was colorful and happy, spirited and chummy. For a full hour, kids were shown fast-moving little pictures of Spain, all aiming to show how delightful these people were, with their sombreros and their paintings and flamenco dancers and siestas and fucking Roman Catholicism and some mountains and beaches and a history rich with sculptors and writers and generals and explorers. The segments were very short, silly, and didactic, especially short. Still, gauging the attention span of their average audience member at about twenty-five seconds showed serious misjudgment, a wild overestimation of the quality and intensity of concentration these little near-morons were willing to expend.

But, dim as they were, these kids could exercise a demonic kind of focus when something caught hold of their selfish desires. In the case of the hour-long celebration of Spain, it was bull fighting. The program, of course, offered a sanitized version of bull fighting, a lot less bloody than the real thing. They also had a talking head letting kids know that, though we mustn't judge other cultures and their pleasures or indulge in what is known, kiddies, as "cultural imperialism" by being censorious, this ancient and, yes, religious ritual edged a little too close to animal cruelty to be the sort of thing an enlightened American child would want to approve of or attend when in Madrid or Tijuana.

That caution had less than no effect on the particular collection of little Jeffrey Dahmers and Lizzie Bordens we had here in this white, up-scale suburb that falls in my jurisdiction. Where the crime occurred. That's right: up-scale and, even more remarkable, heavily REPUBLICAN! WHITE! There's one area of felonious behavior that knows no racial boundaries, and that's the vast realm of kiddie crime. It's certainly shocking that it should be so, and even cops like us have a little trouble recognizing the fact that the usual overwhelming dominance of blacks in the crime area doesn't extend to kids. A little trouble: that's a laugh. We're no better than the average idiot when it comes to sentimentalizing children and white children especially.

Here we have these little rich shits, watching the way the bulls were tortured and tormented, their neck muscles weakened or even severed so that the toreador would have easy pickings for his ritualized murder. They sure paid close attention to that! Swallowed it in, processed it carefully, to the smallest detail.

Had they lived on a farm, they might have tried an actual bull for their fun and the result would likely have been even better than this one: maybe the bull would have cleaned out the whole lot of them. As it was, there in the suburbs, they could find nothing that big

or, so they thought, ferocious.

They didn't have the same sort of trouble duplicating or even surpassing other features of the Spanish rite. The costumes were remarkably fine, no cost spared and no thought given to wasting human resources on twenty minutes of play that would have kept alive a moderately sized African village for months. The mock arena they devised was so elaborate I am still convinced adults had a hand in setting it up. The grandstands and wooden barriers and the flags? Kids wouldn't have had the patience. But the parents here are eager to stay away from this, lying their asses off and disclaiming all responsibility as soon as they discovered death was a feature of this kiddie play.

What we do know is this: unable to locate a bull or cow, llama or brown bear, the kids stole a large neighborhood dog, some kind of Labrador mix, we have discovered. They proceeded, just as in the film, to torture the animal, taunting it verbally and not-so-verbally, finally sticking pointed sticks in the beast and adding little creative touches of their own: needles up the butt, not to mention some thrashing with branches and a wee bit of clubbing with thicker poles, enough to fracture a shoulder and cause what must have been great pain. The dog, probably by nature as gentle and passive (and imbecilic) as Labs generally are, was apparently not in such a good mood after this treatment.

The chosen matador had a really terrific costume; we can at least give her that. We have to take that mostly on trust, though, as there's not a lot of it left. As I opened by saying, it is tough to know exactly what happened when little "Missy" Barnard entered the arena to the trumpet music they had piped in through really first-class amplifying equipment. Here's where the stories become mixed and fluid, colored by the little shits' willingness to tell any sort of lie to save their own hides.

Near as we can tell, Missy came in slowly, approaching the

battered beast with an artistic strut borrowed from the PBS special, for sure jabbing at it with a sword-like branch, probably also thrashing it some as well. There are about three hundred possibilities as to what developed in the next seconds, but the upshot is that the dog tore free of its tethering, gathered its last energies and threw its maddened flesh straight at smug little Missy, guiding its fangs unerringly into its tormentor's throat and ripping out her windpipe and almost all the surrounding flesh, severing both major arteries and sentencing the sadistic little girl to a death whose quickness and relative painlessness she did not deserve.

We are involved here only because the parents of the kids involved have filed charges against the dog owner, claiming negligence and pressuring the DA to bring manslaughter charges. I expect you feel as I do about all that; if you don't, please keep your disgusting opinions to yourself.

One last thing: before the vengeful parents could get to the dog to put it down, it died from the injuries inflicted on it by the children, our hope for the future.

3. CAMPING

Camping: nature's way of promoting the motel industry.

Dave Berry

Some national parks have long waiting lists for camping reservations. When you have to wait a year to sleep next to a tree, something is wrong.

George Carlin

“It’s a little coolish for camping, don’t you think, Ben?”

“Coolish?”

“Yeah. Not ideal for enjoying the outdoors, which you never seem to do anyhow – even when they’re fit to be enjoyed.”

“So?”

“May a mere parent ask why you’re choosing such a personally ill-suited activity to pursue at such an extraordinarily ill-suited time?”

“Why do you talk like such an ass? Ill-suited!”

“So why, Ben, are you doing such a dweeb thing in the middle of fucking winter?”

“To perplex and exasperate you, Daddy, put some distance between what I’m doing and your range of expectation, to lay waste to your idea of what is predictable---for me or anyone else. And nobody says ‘dweeb’ these days.”

“OK. That makes sense. And I find ‘dweeb’ an apt term for my needs in this case. If you say it makes sense within your range and

that range is hidden from your father, I'll be content with that, yes I will. I'll agree it makes sense."

-

Only it made no sense at all. It was February, in the midst of a really cold spell, he hated the outdoors generally and camping in particular, and he disliked the boys who had talked him into this.

So?

He honestly didn't know. Was he really doing all this to befuddle his parents? Probably not. To establish his manhood? Probably a little. To make a few friends, even among those he despised? UGH—but maybe. To journey into the unexpected, find ways to navigate in strange waters, with equipment never tested and perhaps not even in his possession? That sounded most respectable, so he attached himself to it, knowing all along it was pure bullshit.

"Ben, hi! This is Murray. You need a ride?"

"Hi, Murray. Glad you called. Nobody told me – I guess I neglected to ask – what time we were leaving, where we were going, what I needed to bring."

"Really? Those assholes. You should have asked me."

"I'm asking now."

"We'll pick you up – my Dad will – in half hour. So you don't need to worry about a thing."

"Half hour! Shit, man, I'm not packed or anything. I got a tent, but. . . ."

"You're our guest, Ben. This is in your honor. We supply food, games, everything. Transportation, too. I forgot to add that."

"So –"

"Sorry, Ben. I heard you mention a tent. Good you got one,

but you don't need it. Terry's bringing one for you. We each got private tents, you see, so you don't need to worry about somebody going for your privates in the middle of the night, anything like that – just kidding.”

“Damn. I agreed to go on this outing just so I could put my privates at the disposal of any joy-seekers, which I figured you all were.”

Silence.

“Just kidding.”

“Sure. So, be ready in half an hour. We even got blankets and stuff for you. Just wear your long johns, you know. It's a little cold out there.”

“Just a tad coolish, I'd say.”

“Huh?”

“No, Murray, I got you.”

“OK, see you. Wait. You got asthma, right?”

“No. I got pulmonary. . . . Never mind.”

“OK. I'll call it asthma.”

“You do that.”

“Half an hour. Remember. Just bring your body.”

Why was he Murray interested in his health? Why were these guys doing all this for him? Why in Jesus' name was **he** doing it?

Just bring his body? What the hell? He did find an old backpack (his Dad's) and decided to load it with stuff he might find useful---and Murray would never think to bring – a good book, snacks (cashews), a strong flashlight with fresh batteries, a blow-up pillow, a spare inhaler (Murray had been right), something that looked like insect repellent (but turned out later – damn it all – to be suntan lotion), an outsized knife (useful for blazing trails), and jammies.

Two hours later, he was no closer to solving any of the central

mysteries. Murray's dad had indeed picked him up at 6:25, right on schedule, and entertained him, too, with a running account of Murray's deficiencies, lasting all the way up the mountain, a good hour's drive. Almost enough to make him pity Murray.

Almost.

Once there, he had been ushered to a lawn chair, a ratty one but a chair, and told to rest and watch while the others, his good buddies, put up and arranged the tents, built the fire, scouted the area for dangerous wildlife, forked the hotdogs, and unbottled the illegal beer.

"You see, Ben, we put your tent in the best spot, away from the woods, you see, Ben."

"I do see."

"That way, any bears will come to all of us first, eat us, be full and not interested in more food by the time they get to you."

"Thanks. It's also very picturesque, located right on the edge of the hill – the cliff."

"That's why we put you there, knowing how you liked picturesque. We can move your tent back some if you're worried about the hill. It's not really a cliff, is it?"

It was, in fact, a cliff: high up and straight down.

"OK, then, time for games."

And it was: games fitting a Cub Scout outing, maybe, or ten-year-olds in somebody's backyard, but hardly these teens, early but remarkably mature teens, one might say. One might.

Well, one would hardly say that, exactly, but they were teens, which made it seem odd (to Ben) that they'd be happy with unsophisticated variations on hide-and-seek.

This turned into the even-more-juvenile pastime of ghost-story-telling, which finally yielded to talk about which girls in the seventh grade (their common class of choice) had been lured into intimacy or were, almost certainly, lureable.

Ben tried not to make himself conspicuous by his indifference or contempt, managed to mask those responses so well, in fact, that they disappeared and he found himself becoming easy. Was this what it was to be happy?

“I think Sarah. You know, Sarah Jenkins?”

“Really, Ben? You and she have?”

“Not yet, but. . . .”

“Wow, Ben. You’re awesome!”

This all seemed too good to be true.

Was.

Along about 2 in the a.m., they all, without anyone announcing anything about bedtime, began to drift toward their separate tents. It seemed so much like spontaneous agreement, like a perfectly forged oneness that Ben didn’t question the move.

He had been included in something strange and wondrous, something he didn’t want to question. He wouldn’t have raised questions, even if an outsider, maybe his dad, had urged him to ask himself what really was going on. That would have been sensible, maybe, but he didn’t want to know what really was going on.

Not at all, so he did what the group (his group) was doing: went off to his tent, his cliff-top tent, trying hard to suspect nothing.

You’re way ahead of me, though I think there’s nothing so remarkable in your figuring out that Ben was being set up. Hell, I’ve dropped 113 clues, big loud ones too, telling you as much.

But let’s get to it, see how much you really do have figured out.

At 4:10 exactly – Ben looked at his watch, of course—he was awakened by scratching noises and grrrring sounds, not right outside his tent but not far away either.

He was instantly petrified. No he wasn't. He was instantly enlightened. The rotten scheme he had fallen for was at once clear, top to bottom: the set-up, the let's-mess-up-Ben game he had mistaken for joy and friendship. No longer.

He knew they would lure him out of the tent and then ditch him in the dark – a version of the old snipe hunt trick his grandpa had told him about. Of course his grandpa had never been the hunter, not in his recounting, only one of the clever tricksters. Sure.

Still, Ben knew the only ammunition his tormentors possessed would be drawn from his being stupid – knowing, guessing nothing. Ha!

He figured if he stayed put – and silent – they'd come drifting back. So he did just that, staying put not exactly at the exact spot, not inside his tent, but slightly to the left, in the shelter of the trees. There he established his own lair, and waited.

His enemies were, and he knew this, stupid, so stupid they violated the first rule of successful tormenting – stick the hell together.

It wasn't Murray who first appeared, clearly visible through the branches, but a kid whose name was either Jason or Justin, not that it mattered a damn. Ben watched as Jason (let's call him that) looked all around the campsite before he approached Ben's tent, tapped on it (why?), then (why?) sank to his hands and knees outside the rear of the tent and carefully crawled to the front, delicately opening the flap and inserting himself inside the tent, all the way in.

Ben could see nothing, but after twenty-one seconds (he timed), screaming shouts emerged: “Holy Shit!” Then, “Beeeeeeaaaayyyyyuuuuunnnn!”

Ben considered for only a few seconds. After all, his plan had been clear all along. An idiot could have figured it out, even you.

When nobody responded to Jason's howl, Ben moved stealthily through the trees over to the cliff edge and stage-whispered, "Over here."

"Ah shit, Ben. I'm so glad. . . . Over where?"

Ben took out his flashlight to shine in Jason's eyes when he drew within range, blinding him, only temporarily but long enough. As Jason drew nearer, within range, Ben drew out the big knife, just in case. Just in case. I mean, why take any chances? Games were games. Take them seriously or don't play at all. Ben had learned a lot on this trip, was now glad he had come. He might even tell his dad, who would be proud of his resourceful, two-fisted son.

4.

FAR FROM THE PEACEFUL SHORE

I was sinking deep in sin,
Far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within,
Sinking to rise no more,
But the Master of the sea,
Heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me,
Now safe am I.

Love lifted me!
Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
Love lifted me!

No sooner had he emerged from his cabin (upper deck, superior), than he was met with the noise of what sounded like a choir. He hated choirs. Sounded like a church choir. Son of a bitch.

“From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.”

What horseshit.

“Has He heard your own despairing cry, Brother?”

“Pardon?”

“Just listen to your heart – and to those inspiring lyrics.”

“OK.”

“He will lift you by his love out of the angry waves. He will.”

“What in hell are you talking about? What angry waves? The ocean’s quite calm.”

“Not the ocean of life, the ocean inside you, the ocean of sin in which you are drowning, yes you are.”

He was starting to catch on. He was in the grips of a Jehovah’s Witness or something. What he was after was not redemption but a drink. Where was the bar? No use asking this wild-eyed freak. Not that he was actually wild-eyed or freakish-looking. That made the whole thing scarier.

“Look, I know you mean well, or think you do, but I am not a candidate for your miracle-working, just want a drink and some quiet time, maybe watch a football game, a movie.”

“A movie?”

What had he said that would cause such alarm?

“Yeah, just a movie. Not porno or anything.”

“Let me tell you, Brother. . . .”

“Certainly not. I will not let you tell me anything more, you scabrous nincompoop. Leave me alone or I’ll call one of the sane people on board and pay them to kick your ass from here to Sunday.”

“Speaking of Sunday. . . .”

“Speak of it to another, one of your flock. I’m outa here.”

And he was, though he had to execute a near- sprint to escape the seeker of sinking souls, equipped with a lifebuoy, apparently.

He circled what seemed to be the main deck, nodding politely to the many fellow passengers but carefully avoiding anything like talk. No sign of a bar. Finally, he spotted a crew member, white uniform and even some kind of sailor’s cap.

“I’m so glad to find you. Can you tell me how to get to the nearest bar?”

“Certainly, sir. We have four juice bars next deck down and a variety of soft drinks, flavored waters, and non-caffeinated specialties on the recreation deck, two down from here, where the snack bars are,

most of them, located.”

“I had in mind a neat scotch, maybe a Manhattan.”

“That’s a good one, sir. Enjoy your cruise and don’t hesitate to call on any of us if you need further assistance.”

What?

Two decks down and twenty minutes later, he did locate a snack bar, all snacks and no bar at all. At least the snacks were not healthy, so he loaded himself down with candy bars and looked round for a friendly face, a source of information. Plenty of faces, all of them friendly.

There was nothing for it but a dive into conversation.

“Excuse me, young man.”

“Hello, brother. How can I help you?”

“Give me \$500?”

“Oh, well, you see. . . . You are kidding. That’s rich. \$500. No, what can I **really** do to help you. My name’s Brad.”

“That’s all the help I need. I was just itching to know your name, and now I am comforted, safe in the arms of the sea.”

“Oh, really? Well, I am happy that you. . . . Oh, you are kidding again – a very witty man. Yes.”

“Thank you, Brad. People often say that about me. About you, too, I’ll bet.”

“No.”

“Well, they should. But, Brad, I do need your help. Is this some kind of temperance cruise, an AA event maybe? I’m starting to think there’s no bars on this ship, which would make no sense, now would it? I mean, why in hell float around for days unless you can get drunk in the company of the like-minded?”

“Drunk? Oh, my. You’re kidding?”

“No.”

“Well, what’s your name?”

“Timmons.”

“How did you end up on this cruise, Timmons? Not that you aren’t welcome, in a way, and will serve a purpose. Timmons is a very nice name, deeply traditional, I would venture. Let me guess – your grandfather’s?”

“Grandfather? Anyhow, I’m here because a friend of my wife’s gave a cruise ticket to her and she gave it to me, as she was busy and I wasn’t.”

“Your wife, I take it, is a sister in Christ, a member of The Southern Brethren?”

“Not that I know of, not if she wants to stay my wife. Oh, shit, I see: her friend must be a member, and. . . . Now it’s all clear. The whole ship is clogged with the Brethren? Never mind, I can see it is.”

“And how welcome you are, Timmons. There’s a meeting right now. Will you come? I’d advise it, strongly.”

“Why not? I got nothing else to do. In for a penny. Do you do communion, have wine? I know it’s small amounts, but. . . .”

“Sorry. Of course we do not. I’m very sorry you asked.”

Seemed like the whole damned ship was there. Probably they were, considering this was a dedicated Jesus cruise. Why was his wife friends with a Jesus freak, Patricia Moon (he now remembered her name)? Patricia Moon didn’t seem altogether wacky, not that he knew her well enough to gauge that. Did they do this as a joke? Of course they did, a joke that also got him out of the way so his wife could carry on the affair he suspected (knew) she was having. Patricia Moon was an unscrupulous accomplice, nothing more.

But he couldn’t keep riding this train of thought, so insistent were the noises about him: the singing, the friendly folk touching him repeatedly, eager to get spiritual hooks into him, finally the preacher, who was really rather interesting, once you made allowances. He took

his text from Matthew, and he used the King James Version, with its strange, lilting tones. Two marks in his favor.

And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, it is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, "Be of good cheer; it is I, be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water." And he said, "Come. "And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, "Lord, save me."

And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

The brethren responded enthusiastically. He'd expected that, but didn't expect it would be so boisterous, almost manic – and somehow directed at him.

"O thou of little faith!"

He was getting a little unsettled, decided he'd get out of there. Somehow, though, without seeming to do so, they blocked his way. He couldn't be playing a part in all this, but he sure seemed to be, perhaps the starring role.

"Do you see the wind boisterous?"

Now there was no doubt: he was the one being questioned. He felt as if he were on trial, though that was ridiculous. He figured he might as well play along. Maybe this would turn out to be amusing.

"Oh yes, very boisterous."

"Do you doubt that we will support you, hold you up?"

"Oh no. I am certain of your support."

“Do you have faith?”

“I have faith. I have faith.”

They then pulled back some flooring, revealing some kind of lower portal, opening onto a swimming pool. It was pretty hot in the room, so the idea of swimming was pretty inviting, or would have been had he been wearing trunks, half drunk, and not surrounded by a mob of true believers asking him absurd questions, wanting something.

What was it they wanted?

“The waters are calm, are they not? They seemed very anxious for a particular answer.”

“Oh yes.”

“Look again.”

The water was now boiling, very high waves coming from somewhere. Like a storm at sea. Impossible.

“Oh my.”

“Now what do you see? Are there billows, tossing high?”

“The waters are not calm. You are right.”

“Do you see the figure on the water? Is it a spirit?”

There had been something about that in the passage from Matthew. Perhaps they were testing him, seeing if he'd paid attention. What was it? Not a spirit.

“There is no spirit. No, no. Just the waters.”

“Look again.”

“OK. You're right. I see the spirit. Clear as day.”

“Is it a spirit or the Lord Jesus, your Master?”

“Huh? Sorry. It is Jesus. Now I see. Just like the paintings.”

“Walk out to meet him. He will lift you by his love.”

“Walk out? Wait a damned minute.”

“Do as God commands.”

“Fuck you.”

The pressure from behind was not violent but it was insistent.

“Hang on just a tad. Wait, please. I’ll do as you say.”

No change in the shove forward.

“I’ll do as you say. Jesus will lift me. That’s no spirit. Now it’s all clear to me. That’s the Son of God out there. I see him now.”

No change.

“Stop shoving me. That’s no swimming pool. I can’t swim. You don’t want to kill me, assholes. Let me go and I’ll give you a hefty donation. Really hefty. More than you’d ever get from the faithful here. I really will.”

They remained silent. How could he argue with them when there was no them, only a mute force, a determined force.

There was only about ten feet from the edge, then no distance, then he was gulping sea water, thrashing, about to go down for the third time. Then he remembered the line from Matthew, “Lord, Save me.” He screamed it out as he rose with a mighty effort a foot or two out of the water. But the Lord did not save him and the hymn took over: “Sinking to rise no more.”

5. PARDON ME

I'd rather go by bus.
Prince Charles

How do you kill a Republican with a quarter?
Throw it under the bus.

“Excuse me, Ma’am. Is this seat taken?”

I couldn't believe it. Right off the bat. Fourth passenger on. No food on his chin, weapons visible, tattoos, hair curling out from the collar of his shirt; both eyes are focusing on the same thing – me, gazing in a way not all that common for Greyhound Bus riders. No signal that he was hoping to assault me or feed me to his dog. He was looking at me with interest, polite and well-tempered interest.

That seems like a lot to conclude from a four-second assessment of his half-crouching body. It seems wildly conclusionary, an impressive (don't you agree) term we lawyers love to use. But if you rode busses as often as I, you'd form these powers too, abilities to read faster and more accurately than seems humanly possible. It's the ability prey animals possess in deciphering approaching forms, distinguishing predators from friends from potential mates. I developed my instincts for the very same purposes.

But wait: I go on these trips only for enjoyment. I take bus-rides. While others are gardening on weekends or attending film festivals, I'm boarding the Greyhound from Akron to East Lansing. That's just an example, though one drawn from real-life experience. I never take the same route twice.

“No. Help yourself.”

“Errr. . . .”

“Oh yeah.” I shifted to my lap the briefcase and coat I’d placed there to protect myself from just such as he – obviously not just such as he, since I’d just this minute opened myself up to him, if not myself then the seat, which was all that stood between me and – the aisle. Not to be dramatic. As you guessed, I am not taking these trips in search of danger exactly.

Wonder what I was getting myself into? I figured I’d find out before we got very far out of Columbus. What was his story? What was he after? What was a nice boy like him doing in a seat like this: not very clean, reclining mechanism broken, next to me?

I wouldn’t have to wait long to find out, only I guess I would, as he sat there quietly for several minutes. Not just quietly but like a set of signals in charades for “I’m being quiet”: not moving, hardly breathing, hands folded. Really, his hands were folded, as if he were in second grade or Sunday School.

This was ridiculous: “So, where are you headed?”

“I’m not too sure,” he said, grinning a lopsided grin.

“I see,” I said, wondering if I should be frightened.

“Sorry,” he said, straightening out his grin; “I mean I’m supposed to meet my cousin in Cleveland, though he may be in Detroit. You’d think I’d have determined all this before setting out, but I had to get started, and. . . . It’s not an interesting story. My cousin’s supposed to have an interim job for me, for the summer.”

“Interim, huh? Before you. . . ?”

“Enter witness protection.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to be nosey.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry. I DID mean to be funny. I start my second year of Teach for America in late August. My parents set me up with this lunatic cousin who runs a nightclub in Cleveland, but may now be in Detroit. He says he can use me doing stand-up or,

if that doesn't work out, as a waiter. Let's say as a waiter."

"I don't know. That witness protection line was hot."

"I got a million of em."

"Detroiters will be beating a track to the door of your cousin's nightclub."

"Clevelanders."

"No, they'll take bus rides over from Detroit just to see you."

"Nobody takes bus rides." He laughed.

"I do."

"Pardon?"

"I take bus rides."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be insulting."

"That's OK." But it wasn't.

He looked at me in a way you might find inescapably charming: "You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"You mean you take bus rides for. . . ?"

"I take bus rides for enjoyment."

"Oh."

"You find that odd?"

"No, not at all."

"You're a goddamn lying prick!"

He looked at me to see if I was joking, but I wasn't joking and he saw that. He wasn't stupid.

"Look, I do apologize. Can we start over?"

"Of course," I said. I mean, how many beautiful young men do you meet on Greyhound Bus rides? About one per trip. This companion was exceptional, though, especially in being so young.

"How old are you?" I asked, with renewed amiability.

"Twenty-two, only for two more weeks."

"Happy birthday in a fortnight," I said, and smiled.

I knew that would make him relax.

He smiled back and spoke calmly. He had a very easy way about him generally: “May I ask you if you are going to meet someone or just taking a pleasure ride?”

“No, just a pleasure ride, like always.”

“I see. May I ask what you do in your regular time, I mean when you aren’t taking these pleasure rides?”

I stared at him. He must have thought I was annoyed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to suggest. . . .”

Then I laughed. “Just jerking you off. I’m an attorney, a partner actually, doing sexual harassment cases mostly, but some broader civil rights issues.”

“Really? Wow.”

“What you mean is, ‘How old are you?’”

“No, I wouldn’t. . . .”

“Be rude.”

“Exactly.”

“Or is it that you’re not thinking about age because you’re not interested in me?”

“Let me catch up. I’d sure be interested in you if I thought about it.”

“Think about it.”

He paused but not for long. “Seems to me guys develop protective mechanisms, don’t let themselves get interested in women when there’s no chance for them anyhow.”

I smiled, trying to indicate nothing whatever. I succeeded. He was flustered.

“Well, how old are you?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“And a partner!”

I had to give him some points for that. Quick adjustment.

“And a partner. My name’s Jennifer.” I stuck out my hand, always an awkward move to manage in side-by-sides. I did it well.

“Mine’s Stephen,” he said, taking my hand with just the right pressure.

I didn’t exactly retain my grip, but I didn’t exactly let go either. This was a test: what would he do?

He let my hand drop.

Failed. But there were other exams up ahead. He was still in the game.

“Stephen, did you go to Ohio State?”

“Kenyon. I was an English major there, signed up for Teach for America just to give myself a couple of years to see if someone wouldn’t tell me what I should do with my life. I thought maybe it’d come to me, like the news somebody else was delivering, since I sure hadn’t generated any plans on my own.”

“Has it arrived yet?”

“If it has I wasn’t home to get the message.”

Stephen was handsome, thin and lithe, a swimmer’s body. He was wearing jeans and a white shirt, no message on it. I knew what that meant: he was confident and at home with himself, felt no need to hide behind manufactured political sarcasms. His skin was so clear and smooth, so hairless that I had to look close to see if he was shaving yet.

“Do you shave, Stephen?”

He looked at me with what may have been mild alarm.

“Now it’s my turn to apologize. I meant it as a compliment. You have terrific skin. It’s not that you’re boyish.”

“No need to apologize, Jennifer. I sometimes get carded.”

“Teaching, then, is a way to get some life experience and avoid jumping into a career that may not be right for you, that it?”

“Exactly.”

“Such as law.”

“What?”

“You’re anxious to avoid such a mind-numbingly

conventional, life-sapping career as that offered by the law in its many but down deep all the same forms.”

“God, Jennifer. I didn’t say that.”

“How many of your fellow English majors at Kenyon went off to law school?”

I hadn’t given any indication that I was kidding, but he laughed. “About 80%.”

I laughed too, made the attempt.

“How’d you know that?” he asked.

Before I could say anything, he answered his own question: “You were an English major yourself?”

“No, but close. Philosophy. And not at Kenyon, though close. Barnard.”

“You have nice skin too, Jennifer.”

I reached over and took his hand. He didn’t pull away.

“So, Stephen, is there a chance you might just stick to teaching? I bet you like working with kids. Think you might devote your life to them?”

“I do enjoy it. I thought I’d have high-schoolers, but they assigned me sixth grade. The kids are great.”

“Tell me about them.”

“What do you mean?”

I tightened the pressure on his hand, simultaneously shifting my butt on the seat a little and letting my left shoulder and breast press very lightly into his arm.

“Stephen, you know what I mean.”

He looked at me a little strangely. Maybe he wasn’t the corn-fed normal boy he pretended to be.

“I guess kids this age are still kids, but right on the edge of toppling over into ado-essence. They don’t realize it, of course, but it’s the last time they’ll be free and easy.”

I was speechless.

“I know that’s a Romantic view, but it’s hard to avoid when you see these kids still all unconscious of their appearance and bodies, taking the world pretty much for granted. Even in this real poor school where I am.”

“So you’re the catcher in the rye, Holden?”

He laughed but seemed a little taken aback.

“You got me.”

“Don’t be insulted, Stephen. I know what you mean about how un-self-conscious they are, how rough-and-tumble. It must be great being around them.”

“If it were just the kids, I think I’d keep at it. But there’s the school system, you know, Jennifer, the moronic principals and school board and testing, and the parents.”

“Yeah, those baggy old adults aren’t unconscious of their bodies, are they? Not like the kids. You can’t wrestle and roll around with them, right Stephen?”

“God, Jennifer, you make me sound like a child molester.”

“What made you think of that? What brought that into your head?”

He looked at me oddly. Maybe there was something wrong with him. I moved closer into him sliding my coat across and over our laps. Then I laughed heartily to put him at his ease.

“You don’t mind if I take a little nap, Stephen?”

“No, nap away, please.”

“Am I crowding you?”

“Not at all, Jennifer. I’ll prop you up.”

“Thanks, lover.” And I did go to sleep but not altogether.

When I awoke, it appeared that my hand had found its way inside his fly – or he’d put it there. Best not to make a fuss about it. I did move my hand, as the driver had pulled over into this rough gravel, very bumpy.

Several people got off here, de-bussed. It was a shuttle station

into several small towns, doubling also as a rest stop. Lunch time, everybody! A truck stop, not the sort of place I would have chosen. Still, one of the reasons I loved riding the bus was the lunch stops. They were so often near fields. Sure enough, there it was.

“Want to go for a walk, Stephen?”

“That sounds wonderful, Jennifer. But I don’t think so. I really need to. . . .”

“Oh please, Stephen. I really must have a walk. It’s important for me, for my condition. I’d be afraid to do it alone. It looks deserted back there but you never know. Please? I’ll owe you one.”

What could he say?

As we descended the small hill leading to the field behind, not heavily but sufficiently wooded, I felt into my purse. There it was, sure enough, just where I packed it. Precautionary. You never knew what might happen. A girl can never be too careful, and it’s up to each one of us to look out for her own safety. It’s fucking certain nobody else is going to do it for you!

6. THANK A TEACHER

Honk if you love Jesus. Drive fast if you want to meet him.

Anon.

A tree never hits an automobile except in self-defense.

American Proverb

Teaching kids to drive is like instructing psychopaths on the secrets of poisoning.

Anon

The only fly in the oatmeal was Beth Ann Johnson. Otherwise, it wasn't so bad. And that was like saying, "Apart from this nagging leprosy, it's a fine life!"

He didn't mention Beth Ann Johnson to colleagues, didn't have to. They were obsessed with her, couldn't keep their tongues from wagging about the one subject sure to disturb his equanimity. Maybe not all colleagues, really only Ben, who taught science; so it was Beth Ann Johnson every lunch hour – 43 minutes.

"She's such a kiss-ass, makes me want to shove a test-tube up her nose," Ben remarked. "Know what I mean?"

"Oh, I do," he'd said, hoping to change the subject, knowing it was impossible to deflect Ben and wondering too why it was he didn't agree entirely. Beth Ann Johnson had terrible flaws, no doubt

about that, flaws the size of Pike's Peak (not that he was interested in breasts, not on students) but being a suck-up was not among them. Even if it were, he'd have had no objections.

Beth Ann Johnson didn't make personal comments. She stuck to the subject at hand relentlessly, just one of her infuriating habits. Oh sure, she came to office hours, spoke to him after class, but always about homework or tests, questions she had about driving or sex. That sounds personal, perhaps, but it wasn't, as will become clear if you're patient.

But there's no understanding Beth Ann Johnson without some background information and a few anecdotes, deeply interesting in their own right.

He'd been teaching for many years, as a loyal and, yes, obedient member of what he liked to call a faculty team. He was useful. That was one way to look at it. That's the way the vice-principal had looked at it: "You'll be useful," he remarked in breaking the news of a new assignment. Mother would have approved. "Make yourself useful; mash the potatoes."

Wasn't like he had a choice.

Three periods of the day he taught art. Up until four years ago, that had been six periods of art, the entire day, not counting his free period. Heaven.

It didn't feel like heaven at the time. The students had no interest and less talent. Of course, there had been the occasional devoted and brilliant kid, only there hadn't been. Sure, he varied their grades, now and then flunked someone, just to keep up appearances.

He was a born teacher.

When the district had dropped its support of the arts, he had protested along with everyone else whose values were lined up properly. Imagine cutting art instead of football! He liked football. And he probably didn't like art, if he let himself think about it, which he didn't. Besides, the assistant principal assured him they would

“see to” his interests, not forget his many contributions, find a way to keep alive his hopes and dreams for art education and for the children of the community.

“We can’t have a school full of cretins, can we?” asked the assistant principal.

“No!” he had agreed.

“We’ll find a way, don’t you fear,” the assistant principal promised.

“I’ll not fear,” he had said.

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” said the assistant principal.

“I can’t quite agree with you there,” he had protested.

“Well, you’re right. We have plenty to fear beside fear itself. What do you fear beside fear itself?”

“Enclosed spaces and turtles, the snapping kind.”

“I’m afraid of that miserable asshole, Mary.”

“Me too. Why do **you** fear her?”

“I want her job and she knows it.”

“You deserve it.”

“Yes.”

So, that’s how it had come to pass that he had found his schedule supplemented by one class in sex education and two in driver’s ed.

The transition was difficult at first, but he was a flexible teacher, just as he had been a flexible student, an excellent student. While other kids found themselves liking one subject and not liking another, he was blessed with equal-opportunity indifference. When it came time to put away the social science texts and pull out the math, others sometimes found themselves still thinking about the wrongs done to Native Americans or the cultural differences separating us from the Chinese. He cared as much for math as for Indians. That ability not to give a shit, coupled with an eagerness to please, formed

an unbeatable combination.

He said that the best preparation for teaching was life itself. The sexual education course was but one illustration of the living truth of this maxim, his watchword. He had mentioned this precept in several letters to the editor, written during times of public consternation over education, prompted by what others saw as crises in funding or failures in bringing to the youth of our community adequate tools to rise to the top. Most recently, concerned citizens had become alarmed over the failure of their sons and daughters to do well on standardized tests. He shared that concern and did not take shelter with so many of his colleagues behind ridicule of those tests. He said openly that he felt the tests themselves, the tests per se, were not the problem; the problem was the failure of our educational system to bring to the classroom that requisite life experience which alone could arm youngsters to do battle with the forces of Mine craft, drugs, and political correctness. In each of these letters he had argued that the best preparation for teaching was life itself. So far as he could tell, he was a voice crying in the wilderness.

There was one disadvantage of teaching different courses rather than just the one: he sometimes forgot which class he was in, found himself talking to the sex class about double clutching and the driving class about the responsibility to attend to the needs of the other.

“Abstinence only” was the official policy. He agreed wholeheartedly and used it as the organizing principle in all three subjects he was charged with teaching. Abstain from dangerous sexual intercourse, from driving, from doing art!

He was honestly uncertain whether Beth Ann Johnson was wholeheartedly committed to the abstinence-only policy. That uncertainty gnawed at him, as he was sure that the policy served not only the needs of the school board but those of our young people. He didn't think he much liked our young people, but he knew how to

teach them, using a principle that had served him well all his years: non-coercive joy.

Faced with this new subject, sex, about which he figured he knew as much as the next guy, he asked students what their views were, and he listened with unusual care. Then he repeated back to the students what they had told him they wanted to hear.

Not that he was without experience of his own to draw on, sexual experience. And he was aware that his root principle called upon him to bring into the classroom exactly that direct knowledge. The difficulty was that he hadn't been what you would call thoughtful in relation to that experience, which may have been vast, for all he knew. Sexual activity had happened; that went without saying. But lots of things happened he couldn't reasonably be expected to instruct others in. Still he did it.

He taught free style. Beth Ann Johnson aside, students were wildly appreciative, he figured. He was a radical, a path-breaker, one who would be written about in years to come and should be written about now, were he not surrounded by half-wits.

In art, he had allowed all. If students failed to blossom under his unrestrictive tutelage, it wasn't because he intruded on their native talents. He had to make some adjustments in sex ed, but not many. The district policy appeared, at first glance, restrictive, at variance with his basic and unshakable permissiveness. But he found quickly that he could adjust, whether Beth Ann Johnson liked it or not.

Abstinence, he discovered, could be transformed from a Puritanical restriction into a virtual trampoline of twisting inventive fun. All he had to do was let the students run and roar, and they brought a lot to the table when the discussion turned to the joys of abstinence. As he (and they) saw it, the main challenge was to find ways of having sex without letting penises get too far into vaginas. A gifted teacher could teach, if not by doing, than by creating a welcoming, non-judgmental atmosphere where informed discussions

appropriate to the subject could take place: discussions of oral sex, of rectal manipulation, licking, and spanking. The official district policy said – or, if it didn't, didn't expressly forbid saying – that abstinence did not mean absenting oneself from pleasure; it meant avoiding pregnancy, the clap, and financial complications, not to mention marriage and wholly unhealthy talk of “love” and “feelings.” The students soon learned that abstinence meant turning loose one's inventive capacities on bodies, one's own and another's. Short of one trifling restriction, abstinence opened doors into new and exciting territories.

Students were not slow to shout out their discoveries of new vistas: the rear and the mouth, armpits and toes, loosely balled fists, and hollowed-out configurations of clothing and bedding. Pets and neighbors, food and tree branches: the whole world became one instrument of joy. All was permitted, all!

Same held with equal force in driving.

But this last course, fifth and sixth periods daily, brought him something less than the unexampled success he enjoyed with art and sex. Winner of several teaching awards he was, not that such verifications were required. Everyone knew. He knew.

Beth Ann Johnson didn't know. Beth Ann Johnson was a student in both sex ed and driver's ed, a lurid nightmare in sex ed and worse in driving-for-today. Not that she was one of those impertinent, question-asking, bra-snapping, gum-popping, inattentive, criminal smart alecks. Well, she was just that, down deep, but she tried to disguise it by being polite and affable. He wasn't fooled. Other girls had crossed their legs at him, shamelessly themselves, hoping to win favor. Beth Ann Johnson was a dime-a-dozen floozy. Take a number, get in line, Ms. Beth Ann Johnson!

“Miss Johnson, are you attending?”

“Oh yes, yes I am.”

“What did I just say?”

“Front-seat cup-holders are not meant to hold spare change, since spare change can cause the cups to fit uneasily in the holders, tipping over at the wrong time and spilling scalding coffee into the crotch of one of the principals and threatening peril to the car, its occupants, and other sharers of the highway — sir.”

“No I wasn’t.”

“But – sorry, sir.”

“Don’t think you can win me over by being agreeable.”

“No sir.”

“I see right through you, Miss Johnson.”

“Yes sir.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“Oh, no sir.”

“Don’t think you can use your little ways on me, Miss Johnson. I’m on to your game.”

She produced a blush and what may have been tears. He knew that ruse.

No question about it. Beth Ann Johnson deserved to die. And he was just the fellow to arrange it, take matters into his own hands – strong hands and able.

The school didn’t do private lessons, so there was no way to isolate Beth Ann Johnson. There would be others in the car. All must take their chances in this our life. We didn’t ask for it to be that way, but so it is.

Sixth period, therefore, Beth Ann Johnson was joined by three of her classmates. He put her in the passenger seat, not called the death seat for no reason. The others were in the back, safe as any reasonable friend of youth could make them. He passed them a blanket and winked. They didn’t seem to understand, so he mouthed the word, “Padding!” They looked blank still. He had done what he could.

There was a state park outside town, pretty in a trite way. He

often hauled art classes out there and let them have their way with these banal scenes. It was fitting that Beth Ann Johnson get her just deserts here, where cliffs abounded, drop-offs and jagged rocks, narrow winding roads. Fitting and proper. Dulce et decorum est pro being-an-insolent-slutty-bitch mori.

He rolled off the driver's seat and out the door, having first jerked the wheel toward a precipice, tromped on the accelerator, and warned those in the back seat to relax. "Tense up, Miss Johnson." He would willingly plead guilty to saying those words, recognizing how badly they sounded coming from the experienced driving teacher that he was. Bad advice and not sound pedagogy, but he wouldn't be inclined to judge himself harshly. I'm sure you're with him on that.

7.

A WAY OUT

Every exit is an entry somewhere else.

Tom Stoppard

Here's the thing: I **am** an up-to-date Premier Club Member. Thrice, I have been told, by uniformed officials who act knowing enough, that this Club does not provide access to exit-rows. I urge you to try yourself. Perhaps you'll discover something different, the Premier Club Membership plops you right into the exit-row.

I never get exit seats, have no idea how to do so. I read that in the old days the odds of winning the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes were 1 in 35 million. I figure that beats my chances of sitting in an exit row.

For I am just now told the very opposite of what I'd heard before, exactly the opposite, by the guy manning the podium. Imagine my frustration. This official here at D-16 tells me Premier Club Members **are** assigned exit-row seats, no extra fee, should they find themselves able to perform the requisite duties in the case of an emergency. He says I should have straightened that out back at baggage-check today or earlier, through the Internet site, available to Premier Club members. I explain patiently that the Internet and the check-in person both are very clear about this: exit-row seats are assigned at the gate, for this flight, irrespective of any Club membership. Fine. At the gate? Lead me to it!

Filled with a confidence slightly dimmed by confusion, I glided to D-16, stood quietly in the slow-moving line, and finally

reached the podium. I was careful to appear confident and friendly, poses that come natural to me.

“Hi, there!”

“How can I help you?” Just short of being rude, giving off self-conscious signals of how busy he was, how important.

“I won’t take much of your time. I just want to arrange an exit-row seat. I was informed at check-in that you are in total charge of assigning. . . .”

“The flight is sold out completely, sir.”

“That must be a happiness for you, but what does that have to do with me getting a seat in an exit row? I’m just inquiring in the most respectful way.”

“It means, sir, that all seats have been assigned and there is no way I can move anybody. Next.” He had a small amount of spittle collecting at the lowest left corner of his ill-formed mouth.

“Excuse me, please. I do not mean to be obstreperous – er – rude but, please, tell me how did **anybody** get assigned an exit row seat? Some lucky folk are sitting there, right, somehow got assigned? How?”

“Sir, I’ve explained that there is no way I can begin shuffling people around, even were there reason for me to do it. Every passenger is seated, as it is. If I start moving people around, I’d have chaos on my hands. Everybody’d be moving.” I fought the impulse to wipe away the growing pool of off-colored dampness.

“No they wouldn’t. Here, let me see your screen.”

I did **not**, as he was soon to allege, push him aggressively away from his computer in order to insert myself behind his podium, polluting his private space.

“Sir, it’s a serious criminal offense to assault an airline associate. You must retreat immediately or I’ll have to call my supervisor.”

I moved away, of course. He was red-faced and panting, and

I didn't want to push him beyond his unbending little limits.

"I apologize. I just wanted to illustrate my point. Here, let me use your pencil." I wanted to draw a diagram for this triple-dyed moron. It was such a basic issue and I was being both reasonable and gentle, but you would have thought Freddy Krueger was attacking him. I had backed my feet away from his goddamned podium, as a gesture of cooperation, and thus felt justified leaning in, tilting awkwardly forward to borrow his pencil. I certainly did not "grope" him. Who gropes a person in the area of his plastic pocket shield anyhow?

I only meant to illustrate that a one-to-one exchange of 37D and 11A, just for example, does not involve moving everyone on the plane. It's not musical chairs.

"I mean, Roy, also to discover on what grounds the occupant of 11A, an exit seat we'll say, was assigned that seat. What gave him (or her) rights not possessed by 37D, also desirous of an exit-row seat? Can you kindly explain?"

Simple question.

Roy looked at me as if I had just requested his assistance in involving his mother in a three-way that included a dog.

"Sir, 11A is not an exit seat on this flight."

I did not, as he later claimed, attempt to strike him at that point. I admit that I shrugged in a manner expressive of contempt and uttered some mutterings not meant to be complimentary. Still, I remained calm. I wasn't after Roy's job; I was after information and said as much: "I don't want to be the cause of trouble, Roy; I want to be the beneficiary of enlightenment. Please believe me."

I don't think he did. In any case, another functionary showed up behind the podium. Roy's supervisor – I took her to be – gave every initial indication of being accommodating and intelligent. Alas!

"I wish we could accommodate you, sir. Roy said you wanted an exit-row seat."

“Or bulkhead. It’s my legs. As you can see, they’re. . . .”

“Yes, or bulkhead. Unfortunately, all these seats are assigned for this flight.”

“How? That’s what I’m struggling to determine.”

“Well, sir. Our Premier Members and Star Alliance Club . . .”

“Please, may I explain, oh please? I will be brief.”

“Well, sir, if you please; I was about to explain. . . .”

“Roy here has already delivered what I can see is the standard line, one that strikes you as sufficient but that seems to me palpably asinine. In any case, I have heard it. I am not deaf.”

“It would not matter if you were. We still couldn’t accommodate on this particular flight, where all seats have been assigned.”

“Assigned how? Please tell me. I am a member of all these clubs. Useless. I asked at check-in. Unsatisfactory. I also logged in twenty-four hours ahead for E-Z check in and seat assignment. You see my point. Explanations shift as I go, like magic mirrors. How are exit row seats assigned, real and true?”

“Sir, all seats have been assigned.”

That’s when anyone would have lost it. Not me. I have been trained to handle situations like this, dealing, as I do, with irascible parents. That’s my job: guidance counselor and psychoanalytic therapist. The second title refers to what I **do**, the first to what the school board thinks I do. They want me sewing up troublesome psychic frays; I do much more: I delve, analyze, cure. My point is that I have better luck with criminally deranged kids than with airline functionaries.

I have two colleagues in my office, an office that would, speaking frankly, be a disgrace, had I not devoted several weekends and some out-of-pocket funding to professionalizing it. Our office decor and the ethos of our practice are echoed in placards I designed and had manufactured for our use. (I tried to make them in my

garage, but I was fooling myself imagining I could do a decent job with an old wood-burning set my grandpa had given to me.)

Our placards reflect the overall aura without dictating to a patient a necessary response. That's vital: we advise; we do not control.

#1 DON'T WORRY! THE PROBLEMS YOU BRING WITH YOU WILL NOT BE THE ONES YOU LEAVE WITH.

#2 WE DO NOT RID YOU OF CONFLICTS HERE; WE GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO LIVE WITH THEM MORE VIVIDLY.

#3 THE TYGERS OF WRATH ARE WISER THAN THE HORSES OF INSTRUCTION.

#4 IF THEY TELL YOU, 'IT'S NOT ABOUT SEX,' THEY'RE LYING.

In our line, problems are inevitable. The source of those problems for our kids? Parents! Our problems with parents began with these posters, as you guessed.

Take #2, the promise to vivify conflicts, not erase them. What objections do you suppose erupted? Here's a list, gathered from our suggestion box:

You're supposed to be helping. I can understand "conflict adjustment," but what the hell's this?

1. I don't want my kid loaded with exciting conflicts. I want him to do what he's told.
2. This New Age stuff makes me long for the days of straps.
3. Who died and made you King?
4. How can I tell if my kid's on drugs?

5. Do you do intra-family counseling? I mean on your own time, for a fee, of course. We're frankly desperate; and Jason seems to trust you.

My team and I are firm believers in "inclusion," which means "No Wrong Answers," accepting whatever comes to us as in some way honest and revealing. Sounds mushy-headed, I know; but it pays to give people a little confidence. We are all so scared and have so few defenses, even hard-pecker people – and kids for sure. So we don't worry about being a little short on rigor. I never was fond of tough love. In my experience, most people have lots of contact with toughness and very little with love.

Maybe it's time to discuss #7, the one referring to Jason and his family.

I knew Jason well, as it happens, before receiving the note from his parents, but more on that later. Jason was cute, a sad role for a kid to adopt, full of short-term payouts but, in even the intermediate run, our culture's darkest prison.

Let's consider: cute is rooted in *acute*, suggesting "sharp," "cutting," somewhat suspiciously precocious. The "cute" one is always inside the game, knows what he's doing. The cute child is admired insofar as he can convince us that he is unaware of his cuteness; but we also know he could never manage cute were he not aware of his role and its effects. Aware and unaware: you have to be both, convincingly. Look at Shirley Temple. That cutie knew what she was doing just as a kitten does: their provocative come-ons depend on an audience willing to just as unaware and simple-minded as the cutie. Cuteness is a two-way task, the audience doing the heavy lifting.

Jason was close to recognizing all this. His parents had lost the ability to incite his interest, and thus their Oedipal lust had nowhere to go, was waving in the breeze. They were hurt, hurt and scared.

These were good people and they loved their boy achingly. Of course they kept themselves from recognizing the full dimensions of that love; parental love would be impossible otherwise.

Jason's parents, reasonably intelligent so far as that went; had awakened one morning to find that intelligence no longer making contact with the territory inhabited by their son. So for all parents, though few are able to handle it. Most try to become indifferent to their kids, protecting themselves from the nightmare of their own irrelevance, their sudden and brutal redundancy.

The world Jason had shared with his parents just yesterday was the only one they cared for. Their investment was complete and unqualified, which left them with nothing to draw upon now. We teach ourselves to believe a lot of dangerous and cruel hokum about over-investing in kids. But that's not possible. As a character in the magnificent film "Magnolia" says, "It is **not** a mistake to confuse children with angels."

Jason had been seeing me for several weeks, seeking help in finding ways of evading the one subject that had driven him to me in the first place.

"Hi, Mr. C? How they hanging?"

"Jason, tell me now: do you think Principal Dickinson would appreciate your interest in my balls?"

"He'd sure as fuck rather it was me being interested and not you, you know, in my – err – balls." He blurted out the last word and simultaneously turned brick red. Jason's cuteness depended heavily on the appeal of foul-mouthed modesty. So sweet and a mouth like a sailor! Jason did it well – not brilliantly, but well enough.

"Actually, Jason, he'd not be in the slightest unappreciative of the configuration of interests, right?"

"Huh?"

"He'd more or less expect my imagination to travel inside your underwear."

“Huh?”

“You tell me.”

“Ah yeah! I see. He’d figure that you’d – you know.”

“Yes, I do. Why, do you suppose?”

“God, Mr. C!”

“Think about it, friend.”

“OK. Principal Dickhead wouldn’t really be surprised when he caught us together doing – because. . . Because he thinks I’m gay anyway?”

“No.”

“Because he thinks you’re gay?”

“He does, I suppose, but that’s not it.”

“I give up.”

“No, you don’t. You got it.”

“Because **he’s** fascinated by my balls and stuff.”

“Like many others, right?”

“I guess.”

“Because —?”

“I make ‘em be fascinated. God!”

“And?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“It’s just something I do.”

“And that’s bad?”

“No, it’s just something I do.”

“And it’s good all around. Even Principal Dickhead gets pleasure imagining you and him naked and going to town.”

“God!”

“Or imagines you alone.”

“That’s as bad.”

“No it's not. You spread joy, not just the joys of lust but of righteousness too.”

“Huh?”

“Dickface gets to exercise his lust – you know what I mean by that – and also feel superior to those lusting after you.”

“Oh. He'd beat his meat with one hand and sign the court order arresting you with the other.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, YOU, you leech! Want to see me naked?”

“Returning now to your parents, you getting tired of titillating Mom and Dad? No longer interesting to you?”

“I did **not** titillate my parents. God!”

“Gee, you didn't? Well, I guess I was wrong then.”

“When I was maybe 10.”

“Time to give it up with Mom and Dad, huh?”

“Not like I'm hanging on.”

“That's exactly what you're doing. Still playing with them, only the game disgusts and bores you.”

“God, man!”

“I'm right and now you're satisfied.”

“No.”

“You're not happy. Here's an idea then.”

“You gonna **tell** me? You never do that.”

“Now I am. Your parents have stopped being important to you. Accept it and be nice to 'em. Not like you hate them; you just don't give a shit, and that's hard to face, for them and for you. So you try to hate them, out of kindness, figuring it's better than indifference. It isn't. Just let 'em go. Be nice. Hell with 'em.”

“You're crazy.”

“I'm right. Concentrate on what **you** want, what's going to work for you. Right now you're living inside scripts other people have written for teens. Your parents work inside other scripts, but they're not your problem. Think of having the most fun you can. Find new games to play. Your games, not somebody else's.”

“Yeah! Fuck everything that moves!”

“I would have thought your inventiveness was more expansive.”

“It ain’t.”

“Yes it is.”

“So, Mr. Prude, you gonna counsel me **and** my parents?”

“I’ll tell them what I told you. That OK?”

“No.”

“Sure it is.”

So I did.

They took it pretty well, toned down and padded with references to “studies” showing how parental influences decline in all healthy teen-parent relations, yielding to the dominance of peers. “Let go!” I told them. “Jason wouldn’t be causing these problems did he not love and respect you. He’d just enjoy tormenting you. Trying to be more central than you can be forces him into double binds: ‘I love them and they aren’t that important, and what’s that say about me? I wish they’d go away and leave me alone; and that makes me feel like shit.’”

They saw what I was after – probably didn’t want to, but it was a formula that made everything click. I’d say it was pretty much an absolute triumph of effective counseling, producing a more relaxed if still erratic domestic scene, a reasonably happy boy, and a letter to the principal, signed by the whole family, praising me. He called me into his office, did Principal Dickinson – “Just stop by when you can.” That’s a new level of intimacy.

“You know, Don, how active this family has been in the school and it’s manifold affairs.” He was addicted to curlicue phrases. “I wanted you, you especially, to be fully aware that I am not insensitive to the good feeling you managed to create for yourself and, I will not hesitate to add, for the school community in all its reaches, the top reaches not excluded.” This last he threw in with “a winning smile.”

“It’s kind of you to say so, Principal Dickinson.”

From there it was a short hop to the airline counter on the way

to Orlando, for the class trip (every student, excluding only those whose GPA had dropped into the C level, those with suspected gang affiliations, and those displeasing to the principal). Dickinson was a man of decision, and he lost no time cajoling (and threatening) me into chaperoning the seniors' excursion into just about the last place they would have chosen on their own: Walt Disney World. The kids regarded the site as an insult, thrusting on them a cruel notion of what kiddies enjoy and how far their capabilities extend. Adults found teens inauthentic and silly, a perfect match for a five-day immersion in this cult farm. So it was Walt and his machines versus a bunch of canny kids, a mismatch all the way.

I wasn't the only chaperone; but the others, four sets of parents, were more than happy to leave the active work to me, withdrawing to their Disney suites and letting the kids find their own pleasures in this monument to dated preciousness.

So it was just me and fifty-two kids, all of us hoping to get through the time without letting ourselves recognize how bored we were, how utterly without resources, how indifferent to all attractions but those presented by the bodies around us. More and more, I was boxed into the world determined by these kids' libidinous urges, leaving me with little to think about apart from deniability.

And it left the kids with unscreened and focused lust. My own position was not – I shouldn't have to insist on this! – complicated by any improper quiverings of my own. 18-year-olds had stopped appealing to me after I turned 22. That's not a claim to virtue, just the truth. Besides, spending hours listening to their repetitive maunderings would dull the erotic fantasies of any fixated pedophile.

I tried hard to distract them from the route they were traveling, one leading to pregnancy, disease, and hot water for me. Other teens might have had more range, added electronic push-button things, music, conversation. Not these. They were single-minded in their contempt for everything except being drunk, naked, and rutting.

OK by me, theoretically. I regarded their views as both reasonable and healthy. But who cares about enlightened views if they threaten my livelihood? My goal was to get the hell out of there without having the kids' joys attributed to my irresponsibility.

There was a larger problem. Let's say the kids could handle all this prolonged orgyizing without shooting one another or collapsing into soap operas of jealousy and rage. Unlikely, but the real dilemma was different: finding ways to prolong such an essentially limited programme over four full days. Even giving over mornings to sloth, and afternoons to hangovers, left a great fields of time for thrashing flesh to occupy.

"Look, kids. Let's invent games, just so all this sex doesn't get predictable and ruin you for life. Want to lose the mystery, become like your parents? If you're just going to pair off and screw, then you'll find yourself with empty time. Invent games or you'll end up gossiping or shooting one another."

They looked shocked, but I had their attention.

"So create games to make your bodies and doings curious and odd."

"You mean like spin the bottle?"

First rule of counseling: make dumb responses into smart ones. "Excellent idea! How can we build on it? Spin the bottle makes the partner a mystery. How about also mystifying the activity, location, body parts, that sort of thing?"

They picked up on that, devising many games utilizing booze, speed, revealing or ripped-off clothing, upside-down beds and cots, unusual body parts, costumes, cameras, and public places.

"You're playing too, Mr. C! It was your idea!"

"Not on your life! You kids are risking, what? – embarrassment? I'd be risking my job and my ability to remain at large."

They were good kids, saw what I meant, and satisfied

themselves with appointing me security guard, pimp (more or less), and (in one game) reluctant cameraman.

Was I flattered? Was I a goddamned fool? Should I have roped in the other parents? Should I have exited?

After three days of this, I was called out of the shower by a rude alarm, accompanied by insistent shouts:

“Mr. C! Mr. C! Fire! This way!”

A large group of kids was somehow in my room, adding to my badly-tied-around towel a fleecy robe I hadn't noticed before, covering me before guiding me to safety. I happened so fast that I barely realized all that they were doing with my body: ensconcing it, yes, but also insinuating their hands here and there and pushing me gently but insistently somewhere. I can't remember ever being less alert, less aware of what I was being induced to do.

Then I wasn't sure that there was a robe at all: only hands and something staring at me. I was keeping my eyes glued ahead and above to avoid seeing too much of the kids – or of me. What soon came into focus was a large “EXIT” sign.

The sign was in red, large letters beckoning me off the balcony where we were pinned, the bunch of us. I never wanted anything so badly as to reach “Exit,” a sign located at the end of a series of balconies, leading into a building that I at once connected with privacy and safety.

“Kids, if I can just put myself where the exit is, then ...”

What I got back was laughter, not sardonic or even unkind, but certainly thoughtless. Whatever their plans, they didn't include exiting, at least not for me.

All of a sudden I felt desperate, panicked, a flicker away from having my life flash before me. Deeply irrational I know I was, but those kids somehow now seemed bent on destroying me, keeping me exposed and immobile – lost.

Then it hit me:

“Jason, is that you? Are you here?”

It was a risk, asking him to separate himself from the herd, an insecure kid mustering the independence to help a staff person who had obviously overestimated his popularity. Just then, I saw or sensed a gaggle of adults, down below us, looking about, ready to jump up and down, jump up and grab me, jump to conclusions.

In minus time, I was under the EXIT sign, looking straight into Jason’s face.

“Sorry, Mr. C. I don’t know how that went wrong. Really, we really just – you know – wanted to show you – wanted to make you part of our game. We wanted to thank you. You taught us a lot.”

“Teacher of the Year.”

“Yeah you are.”

“Thanks for letting me exit.”

“Don’t count on that, Mr. C. We love you. You won’t ever get away.”

8. BUMPER CROP

The simple hearth of the small farm is the true center of the universe.

Masanobu Fukuoka

Never answer a question from a farmer.

Hubert Humphrey

I was never a good farmer. The pigs had a good time, but lost money.

Willie Nelson

“We’ll have such a fine time, Harry!”

“Wanta bet? And please, Mother, I’ve told you repeatedly that calling me ‘Harry’ will not produce the conventional sonny-boy you want. It’s ‘Harold.’”

“I know how you enjoy being cantankerous, but the farm will work its magic on you, you’ll see. No need to respond with more sarcasm. I know just what you’ll say.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t find me as predictable as you pretend. Let’s have a little test: what *will* I say?”

“You’ll say – let me see – you’ve been inoculated with anti-magic vaccine, something on that order.”

“You should’ve let it pass. You imagine I’m as witless as all that? I had in mind something the coarse lout Harry you want me to be would produce on bucolic discomfort, featuring yobbish imagery: beasts coupling, insects stinging, cows spraying, the ubiquitous chicken shit oozing up between toes. That’s the magic you meant, I know.”

“But Grandma wants. . . .”

“Oh don’t go hypocritical on me, Mother! Grandma does remember who I am, I grant you; but it’s only because she feels I am sent by the powers of darkness to appall.”

“Why, she thinks you are. . . .”

“She thinks I am a sucker of cocks, Mother, that’s what she thinks. Grannie’s mind is so constituted as to admit no class of being other than these two: manly sorts and suckers of cocks. Not a delicate observer of this our life.”

“When all is said and done, you’ll go, so why must we have this conversation?”

“Because, Mother, you cling to the illusion that you persuade, possess the gift of reason, treat me well, want to do what is best for me, and, all in all, know best.”

“That’s a lot of illusions, not one. And you’re going to Grannie’s, young man.”

“I’m going and I’m going to like it, that it?”

“I don’t give a shit if you like it or not, Harry. You’re going because I’m bigger than you. And you’re going to your room right now or I’ll beat you on the ass with that show-offy book you’re reading.”

Hands up, all who think Mother is a parent worthy of Harold, those who hope she carries through on her threat. Shame on you. Harold will turn out to be better than you suppose, more capable of acts of self-forgetfulness. He has no faults not attributable to youth

and to feeling lost and friendless. He does what he can to survive, being obnoxious in order to give himself a reason for being disliked so thoroughly: “it’s not me they detest but this pose I’m adopting.” Feel for him, do. There but for a lot of luck go you. I’ll wager that there, luck or no, go many of you, differing only in being one quarter as smart and one-twentieth as articulate.

“Hey, there’s hairy Harry! You got any hair yet, Harry?”

“Let’s see. Get him.”

And they did, his loving cousins, four of them, out behind the henhouse, where things were most vile. Threw him down into the beshitten grass, rolled him on his back. Cousin Louise sat on his face, her private parts, covered only by fiercely dirty undercloth, pressing straight into his nose. It would have been hard to breathe, even had the stench been less insufferable. That’s what he was thinking: not of what they were doing to him down below but of his insulted mouth and nose. He was hoping to keep alive, worried that he likely would not.

“What’d ya say, Harold, you prissy little faggot?”

“I think you’re suffocating him, Lou!”

To give her the credit she deserves (little), she did shift her bovine hindquarters enough so that Harold could allow into his mind not just fear but hatred. They were pulling up his shirt, ever so slowly. He’d had this happen before, “an Indian belly.” That was bad. But this was to be worse. He couldn’t move his head and see, but he felt them, as they got busy on his belt and his zipper.

“Haroldeen is wearing tighty-whities. Can you believe it?”

“Here, look!”

“Pull em down, his panties!”

And they did. He could feel the cold air and then rough hands as they cupped his testicles and jiggled them, meanwhile worrying his penis back and forth. Something wet was touching him there, and

fingers were going back under his naked hips toward even more private parts.

He didn't protest and he didn't cry. He let them do what they wanted – he had precious little choice in the matter. But he could have registered protest and he didn't, not even twisting about. True, his penis extended itself as they played with it and sucked on it. Only that moved.

You might suppose he was employing his silence as a weapon. But you'd be wrong. He kept still for no particular reason, hatching no plan, controlled completely by a steady and mastering rage.

The roistering abusers finally became ashamed, worried that they'd gone too far, put themselves in real peril.

“Don't you say a fucking word, Harry.”

“We'll pull your pecker off if you do.”

Silence.

“Harry, I'm sorry. I don't know why we did that. It was wrong and I'm really sorry. Please.”

“Yes, Harry. Please.”

Harold finally spoke: “That's OK. I know you didn't mean anything.”

They were ready to elect him class president, football captain. What a guy! They'd had him all wrong. Hell, they'd even be willing to call him “Harold.”

All he wanted was to be left alone, to his own devices. As soon as they finally weren't there, he went straight to his grandmother, telling her everything in great detail. He knew he had only to say “naked” or “abuse” to set her off. Sure nuff:

“They did what?”

“OK, Grandma, I'll tell you. The four knocked me down and sat on me, holding me so I couldn't move. Then they abused me.”

“Abused you how?”

“They undressed me and played with my testicles and

manipulated my penis and sucked on it; and they stuck their fingers up my anus.”

“Oh my God in Heaven! I’ll skin each one of them alive. They’ll be sorry they ever were born into this family! Undressed you! Played with you! Was Louise there and Dora? And that damned Larry and that toadstool fatty Alfred?”

“Oh yes, Grandma. The girls seemed like they may have been in charge. I couldn’t be sure, though, to tell the truth and don’t want to lie.”

“It doesn’t matter. They did it. Made you naked, did they? Well, they’ll be naked themselves within three minutes and feeling some cowhide on their butts too! I won’t have it. I know they weren’t raised that way.”

“No, Grandma. It’s me they did this to. I’m asking you not to say anything to them, not even to let on you know.”

“You afraid they’ll get back at you, Harry? I promise you they won’t. Leave it to me. They so much as look at you cross-eyed, I’ll ruin em, and that isn’t just a way of speaking either.”

“It’s not that, Grandma. I just need to handle this my own way. I’m absolutely sure I can. I have to learn to take care of these bullies.”

“Well, Harry. I never would have thought. . . . But you’re right about that. Stand up to those morons! Hit em good. Hit em a lot. Hurt em. Don’t play fair. There’s those hay rakes out in the grain house. Give them a taste of those, some good scrapes across their own craniums, and then use the other end to whack them good and hard and in the head, in the face. Don’t worry about breaking the rake – or them.”

“Thanks, Grandma. I see what you’re saying. There’s another reason I have for handling this on my own.”

“Yes?”

“Jesus.”

“Huh?”

“Christian forgiveness.”

“Oh Harry, please! Even Jesus drove the moneylenders out of the temple with a whip. Don’t get sloppy. Kick their asses!”

“Thanks, Grandma.”

“I’ll do as you say and shut up, but I’m keeping me a close eye out to make sure they’re toeing the line. My blood boils when I think of what they did – stripping you bare naked, invading you.”

Those who feel an itch to judge Harold for tattling will feel a trifle guilty: he’s a little boy who’s been brutally assaulted. He has no weapons that he can call on and has to appeal to some power for help. What’s he supposed to do? Take it? Actually fight back against four older and bigger kids, kids beyond the call of decency? That may be Grandma’s code, but Grandma is one of those women, unfortunately not few, who tie up their own gender with the vilest ideas of masculinity. Where is the little boy to turn? Don’t we owe it to Harold to sympathize with him, respect his reasons?

Nah. It’s one thing to sympathize with him and quite another to see his motives as sufficient. Whatever he’s planning, doesn’t it seem a little arctic? Mixed in with your compassion isn’t there at least a small amount of – I’m searching for the right word here – distaste? Do you detect something almost appalling in his readiness to turn on his cousins? Brutes they are, unthinking brutes, but there’s a measure of exoneration in the very brutality, the way they turned out of instinct on the weak and too-perfect goody-good. Harold, on the other hand, reminds one of Heathcliff or Heinrich Himmler or Charles Manson, all of whom bore insults calmly only to return the favor a billion times over.

But then, just imagine arguing that Harold was the villain here! What an odious position to take! What’s wrong with you?

Those who suppose they spot in Granny a certain pathology, a fixation on the image of the naked, abused Harold should consult a

therapist.

Harold left Granny's room without being observed. No matter. In the fullness of time all will be unfurled.

Granny could be counted on to apply indirect pressure, by glowering and letting fall little threats, bloody and unsubtle, as she moved about. Before two more days were out, the four offenders were trembling in their shit-kickers, unable to draw a secure breath. They didn't know why their footsteps were dogged by misery, their wildest pleasures now hardly better than the deepest gloom. They were being flattened but had no idea of the source of the pressure or its terms, only that they were beginning to wish themselves anywhere on earth or in hell itself rather than here at Granny's outpost.

"Harry, I just wanted to say how sorry I am, really sorry, you know? I really am."

"Sorry about what?"

He had that conversation, not versions of it but that exact conversation, with all four of his hated cousins within the thirty-six hours following. He himself was brightening as they were drooping.

Even Mother noticed: "I told you this would be a great vacation, hun."

"Ah, you're right there, Mumsy."

"And —— ayunnnd?"

"It's about what I anticipated, insofar as one can anticipate the joys of being buried up to the neck and chewed on by red-neck ants."

"Redneck ants? That seems beneath you, Harry."

"It is, isn't it? It sounded good as it formed itself, but then soured on the wind. Thank you for pointing it out, Mother."

"But it is better than you anticipated, the summer and not the phrase?"

"The pleasures it offers are all in anticipation, Mother; but you are right and I wrong: those pleasures are immense."

“I told you.”

“You told me.”

And now our narrator, secure in your admiration for our hero, drops his flimsy disguise.

The next day, one Larry, short for Larry, accosted me as I was walking beyond the barn, seeking a spot sufficiently idyllic or at least sufficiently devoid of droppings and grunts so that I might plan what it was I had to plan. Planning was, after all, the core of all this. Rush in and risk bungling. I never bungle, and the truth is that the delights of plotting were, as I admitted to my Mother, oh so intense.

“Harry, can I talk with you?”

“My time is your time, Larry. What were you ruminating on?”

“Can I give you some advice, cousin? Don’t take this the wrong way, please. I’m trying to help.”

“OK.”

“Don’t say things like ‘ruminating’ when you’re shitting on people. It makes the offense even more fucking awful.”

“Shitting on?”

“Of course you were. And everybody – this is another point – already knows you’re real smart. You lose almost all the advantage that could gain you by piddling it away being sarcastic. You’re better than that.”

Where was Larry getting this from? He read a teen magazine? It wasn’t off the mark, though, and I knew it. I looked at my cousin with what I hoped was a simulation of a new and deep respect, saying nothing.

“Please understand, Harold, that I’m not trying to exonerate us. We didn’t do what we did BECAUSE OF anything you did; we did it because we turned ourselves into a mini-mob, possessed by wild sadism. I know you don’t want to hear this, but I was the one who first

pulled down your underpants and then later stuck a finger up your ass.”

“I already said that was OK. Don’t think a thing about it.”

“Harold, it isn’t OK; and I’m sure you don’t think it was.”

I tried to be noncommittal, interested in where this all might go: “uh-huh.”

“I’ve always liked you, Harold. I think you sense that. I’m way older than you, but I always knew you were superhero smart, interesting and. . . .”

“Yeah?”

“This is the hardest thing I’ve ever said to anybody, Harold; but I think if I say it and you let me and let yourself understand, we could be great friends, great friends.”

“OK.”

“I know now that I’ve been attracted to you. Don’t be scared. Please. I wouldn’t hurt you for the world, not again. I don’t even think I’m gay, generally. I’m not attracted to anybody else, only you. I don’t know about the other three, but I did what I did because I hated myself so. And I was the ringleader, really I was.”

He was rolling now. Let him go on – or, rather, just try and stop him – an eighteen-wheeler going downhill, no brakes.

“I want to be your friend so bad. I know that’s a hell of a way to inaugurate a friendship. And I know that a worse way would be to admit I’m hot after you. But just because I’m attracted doesn’t mean I’m going to attack you. I’d do anything to be friends, but that doesn’t mean sex. Not like I have sex with all my friends, not by a million times over. That’s a stupid way to put it; but you’re smart and know what I mean.”

I knew: Larry was dying to fuck me and somehow figured the assault was a come-on, inaugurating a lasting friendship with a complete and rounded profile, spiritual and emotional and straight-up-the-butt.

“Larry, this is all so new. Can we talk while I do a chore Grandma asked of me?”

This chore, which Larry eagerly pledged himself ready to share, was actually part of a plan Granny had set up. Seems that her breeding boar was now old and remarkably vicious, scaring even leathery old Grams. She had suggested that I lure one of my human tormentors into the pen with Old Horace and then “give them one hell of a scare; that’d show ‘em, the little bastard; let them face Horace. Now Horace would love to eat one of you kids, but he’s slower than shit and is leery of the cattle prod. So I’ll give you the prod, see, and the little plan unfolds. It’s up to you to lure one of these bullying morons into the pen, though. I figure you can, genius boy like you.”

“Genius boy?” Was Granny losing her interest in helping me? Here were signs of a fraying affection that was never more than a grain of pity and a lot of her own cruelty. I was little more than the vehicle whereby she could run in her head graphic images of violence, tales of terror. She’d never much liked me – putting it mildly – and the length of time I could hold this position of her trusted hit-boy was limited.

So I made Larry believe that Granny had asked me to rub some salve on Old Horace’s back, first distracting him with a bucket of garbage (sure to hold his attention after having been starved for two days). The salve could thus be safely and quickly daubed on the massive hairy hump behind Horace’s head, Larry being the applier. Myself, as a backup, would hold onto the juiced-up prod and be ready to protect, should the plan show itself in some minor way defective.

“God, Harold, that pig’s a killer.”

“OK, I understand.”

“No, no, I can do it. He can’t barely move, that waddler, no matter how homicidal his bent. You be at the gate with the prod, I’ll slap on the salve while he’s eating, and you slam the gate as I run through, giving him a zap if he’s close, which he won’t be.”

But he was and the zap I gave was not to the pig, of course, but to Larry. I can still see the disbelief written on the panicked face of my boyfriend as he clawed the air, slopping through the pig-pen mud to the very point of safety, only to be jolted back into the path of Horace, actually on top of Horace, a position which seemed further to madden the beast and cause him to rend away more savagely, rooting at Larry's chest, neck, and stomach to his heart's content.

I would have liked more, but the first screams drew help from farmhands, distressing close at hand. There were only the first screams, though: Larry had no voice box left after a few seconds with Horace, not to mention very little of a liver or stomach or pancreas. His face was virtually unmarked.

“Come up with me to the hay mow, Lou?”

“Oh Harold, after what just happened to Larry?”

“I was there, Lou, I know. I was hoping you'd help. Somehow if I could talk to you about it, I don't know, it'd just. . . . But I understand. Not like I was trying to come on to you, nothin like that. I know you're popular and I'm not — just hoping we could, you know, maybe talk?”

“Oh, how selfish of me, Harold. I owe you a lot and this isn't like paying back something I owe anyhow. It's more like something I'd like to do, really.”

She looked at me with the eyes of a practiced, if routinely unsuccessful seductress. All the better! I've seen Pittsburgh, I've seen France, I've seen (and smelled) Louise's underpants. And now. . . .

Once inside and up the ladder into the mounds of animal food, I put on my best forlorn face, drawing bulky Louise slowly over toward the open mow gate, where the huge iron hook floated in the air.

“Lou, I feel so upset, I don't know if. . . .”

“If what?”

“I can keep going. I know you understand. Sometimes this life

just isn't worth anything at all, doesn't mean a thing. Lou, there is no God."

"Oh, don't say that, Harold."

"How can there be a God when a friend like Larry. . . ."

"Oh have faith, poor Harold."

I had advanced toward the hook, trying to make it obvious that I was about to attach myself. Lou, dimmer by far than Larry, seemed oblivious even to my miming, so I finally just grabbed the thing and made as if to slip it into my gullet. Finally she caught on, made her galumphing move toward me, allowing me to sidestep, catch her as she went by, through the top of her jeans and grubby panties. Then I pulled on the rope's other end, yanking up floppy Lou and sending her spinning just above my head. Tying the rope to a nearby barrel, I seized a pitchfork and started jabbing at her, getting in some great punctures and moving her with some speed toward the cement block walls on either side, faster and faster. Now using the fork only as a pushing device, as in a game on the playground swings, I soon had her smashing hard into one side and then the other, speeding up the spins so she'd have less chance to shield her face and skull.

Finally her screams stopped. Not before alerting and calling to the scene her two smaller cousins.

"Oh Dora and Alfred. The most awful thing. We have to help. First we need to get to the creek. Right now. We got to have water. Water. If we delay –don't be scared now – Lou might be in terrible trouble. Might die."

They both started to cry.

"We gotta move fast, kids. Do as I tell you. I know you're courageous and real good kids. Lou needs you. Her life depends on you."

"Take these buckets and get to the creek. You go by the grain house, Dora, and Alfred, cut right through the south field."

But the south field's where the bull is."

“And I’m not allowed by the creek. I can’t swim and Momma says. . . .”

“Do you want Lou to die?”

They looked like they were weighing the options, so I raised the ante:

“Do what I tell you or I’ll tell Granny what you did to me.”

So, Dora took off to the forbidden creek and Alfred through the bull’s field.

Later that day, that day soaked in tragedy, I put up small opposition to my mother’s insistence that we leave. I knew she was trying to protect me. Ordinarily, I would have resented such condescension, but I knew that while a mother can never really be a boy’s best friend – Norman was wrong there – she can be useful.

Mother, I hate to say this, but our trip was indeed magic. I know now you have to take the rough with the smooth. I see that I don’t know everything, not by a long shot. Granny has shown me that you need help in this our life. I want to thank you for the chance to reconnect with dear Granny.”

“Harry – OK, Harold – you’re so full of shit. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

9. A HELPING HAND

FALSTAFF: Strike; down with them; cut the villains' throats: ah! whoreson caterpillars! bacon-fed knaves! They hate us youth: down with them.

Henry IV, Part 1, II,ii

“I wouldn’t say ‘smart,’ exactly, more like ‘clever.’”

All agreed, every teacher crammed into the ridiculously-small, ill-appointed lounge, seven professional colleagues, the entire staff: Kyle was ‘clever.’ That was the word. Close proximities – “intelligent,” “gifted,” “original” – didn’t really fit, sent one off on the wrong scent. Clever. Stay there.

Stephen, who taught social studies and coached soccer, agreed heartily but felt distanced from the note of cynicism creeping in and the finality of the verdict, the self-congratulatory, conclusive flavor of the tag. Kyle certainly was clever, no doubt about that, but there was more there, much more. Other teachers might be satisfied with a dismissive label. Not he.

It wasn’t that he was what he would call close to Kevin, or to any other student. He didn’t fool himself on that score. He kept his distance not for the usual reason (the rising tide of sexual tomfoolery accusations) but because he regarded students as equals, really he did. He didn’t think they were a species apart, occupants of a different (and inferior) developmental stage. He saw no difference between students and all others in his life.

He’d said that to Agnes, a colleague and, like him (he thought) respecter of private student space.

“You see no difference between little Cathy over there and your wife?”

“That’s hilarious, Agnes. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to meddle in their lives, just teach them about Asia Minor and whatever else you do.”

“I don’t condescend. I don’t see it as my job to get inside them and plant things.”

“Nice metaphor.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No. You think these little shits are equal, these half-formed walking Ids, these contemptible cocky know-nothings.”

“Exactly.”

Not all students viewed Stephen as he viewed himself. Most, of course, had no view of himself at all, really did imagine himself as just one of the indistinguishable herd of uglies their fucking parents and fucking society had forced kids to endure for a short time, pretend to respect. Kids had to mime a deep-down interest in school subjects and, God help us all, teachers. Stephen recognized all that clearly, didn’t fool himself. Poor students, forced to suffocate in folds of hypocrisy.

Kyle was different.

“Let’s go on a camping trip, get to know one another real well.”

“What do you mean, Kyle?”

“We get four or five of us, those of us who really understand, and head off for the mountains for the weekend, form intimate bonds.”

“Intimate?”

“You object?”

“No, Kyle, I just don’t know what you mean.”

“You will.”

“OK. Me and Jason and Mike? That it?”

“They’ll do.”

“This weekend?”

5.”
“Right. If you say so. You corral Jason and Mike. Friday at

“Well, I don’t know. I’m supposed to. . . . OK.”

“That’s good. And ask Mr. Lincoln. Tell him to come.”

“The teacher?”

“No, the President, stupid. Yes, the teacher. Tell him.”

“OK.”

“Camping, Brad?”

“You’ll come, right? Just us four and you, all together.
Camping. Kyle’s organ-izing it. He said to tell you to come.”

“I don’t know if that’s altogether. . . .”

“Altogether what, Mr. Lincoln?”

“Where?”

“Mountains.”

“Kyle said to **tell** me, right?”

“Yes, he did. So I did. You’ll come, right. Just us four and
you. Intimate and all. Form bonds.”

“That what Kyle said?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, how can I resist being told to do something so idiotic?”

“What?”

“Sorry. OK, I’ll do it. What time? What do I need to bring?”

Kyle called a meeting of just the four of them, minus Mr.
Lincoln, who wanted to be called Stephen, which was OK by three of
the four and not by Kyle.

“Why don’t you want to call him Stephen?”

“That’s exactly what makes him our enemy, don’t you see,

Mike?”

“No.”

“He says we’re equals but he really wants our space, our beings. Friends my ass! Equals? The way a vampire is equal to his prey.”

“You think he’s invading us?”

“I know he is trying to, Brad. He’s the most dangerous kind of enemy: secret and fierce, operating in the dark. Before you know it, he’s inside, sucking everything out that’s you. Then you don’t exist.”

“I sorta see.”

“Of course you see, all of you. He wants to kill us. That’s what it amounts to. Before he accomplishes that. . . .”

“Before he accomplishes that, what, Kyle?”

Kyle knew this great spot up near Carter’s Leap, a ridge with a sharp drop-off, cliffs with no angle, straight down. It wasn’t a huge precipice, maybe only a hundred feet or so. It’d do.

The plan was simple.

Friday night they spent telling stories, the first stage of intimacy, and drinking that brew of true togetherness, iced-tea.

“Have more tea, Mr. Lincoln.”

He had hoped they’d call him “Stephen.” They didn’t.

“I’ll flood my sleeping bag, I have any more.”

The boys were silent, Stephen at once sensing he had embarrassed them. He rushed to cover his mistake.

“Sorry.”

Kyle laughed: “No, Mr. L, we aren’t shy about pissing. But try not to piss on one of us when you wake up in the night, not if you can help it. There’s that ridge back there, where you can pee right down the mountain, like a beautiful waterfall.”

And, along about 4 a.m., that's what Stephen did, walked the twenty or so yards up to the crest, carefully turned his back on the sleeping boys, and let fly.

Only they weren't sleeping, were they? What they were doing was creeping up behind the drowsily whizzing Mr. L and using gloved hands to push him gently over the cliff.

Then they went back to their bedrolls, after making plans for a short morning hike before returning to town and the idiot officials.

10. CHEATERS NEVER

I would prefer even to fail with honor than win by cheating.

Socrates

If you're not cheating, you're not trying.

Eddie Guererro

“Mom and Dad would die if they knew.”

“Hell, Ralph, not like Mom and Dad are going to. . . . Fuck it! Why did I ever ask you?”

“I'm your big brother who loves you, and also I've cheated on tests. You knew that, which is why you came to me.”

“Yeah. Not because I thought you'd bring up our parents, sanctimonious asshole. Where were Mom and Dad during your years of fraud and deceit, highly successful though it was.”

“Successful! You knew I was caught, right?”

“Caught? No. That why you're against it?”

“Of course, dumb ass. Not like I have moral objections. If there were no dangers, big dangers, I'd say go right ahead.

Absolutely. But. . . .”

“I know. Perils unimaginable. What happened when you got caught?”

“I had to re-take the test.”

“Oh my Jesus! Not re-take the test! The iron maiden, fingernails extracted, a Scarlet ‘C’ – nothing to having to re-take the test.”

“Listen to me, Mark. True, my penalty was no penalty at all, but I had to spend a whole evening bargaining, begging. The first penalty threatened was expulsion, which got lowered to failing the course, which finally. . . .”

“This bargaining and begging. What’d you have to do?”

“Huh? Oh Jesus, Mark. No I didn’t have to perform unnatural sex acts on Professor Wilhelm.”

“Too bad. You’d have enjoyed that. Anyhow, I see what you’re telling me: you got off easy but almost certainly I wouldn’t, which would kill Mom and Dad and land me in a hopeless situation, a life spiraling downward, branded as a cheat. Better just to flunk honestly, right?”

“That your only option? How about studying. Just a wild suggestion.”

“I’m so far behind, Ralph, so far behind. And it’s a tough class, really. God, please help me, Ralph. If I flunk this class, I’ll be outa here anyhow, probably.”

“Too late to drop?”

“No, but my scholarship won’t let me. And without the scholarship---you know.”

“How the fuck you get so far behind?”

“I been real sick. I don’t want to go into that. And don’t tell me to talk to the prof. He already said he accepts no excuses, illegitimate or more illegitimate.”

“That last was his little witticism, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like a prick.”

“You have no idea. He comes late to class, a couple of times didn’t show at all. He ridicules kids openly, makes sexist jokes, even

one racist one. Want to hear it?”

“No.”

“OK. Here goes: ‘Studies show that 98% of blacks enjoy sex in the shower. What about the other 2%?’”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“They’ve never been to prison.”

“He told that in class? All his jokes about blacks?”

“Nope. How is Donald Trump going to get rid of all Mexicans?”

“I don’t know. How?”

“Juan by Juan.”

“Yeah. Have you even tried talking to this guy? Office hours or anything?”

“Early in the term. I went to Office Hours, advice somebody had given me – just to introduce myself, tell him I was looking forward to the course. You know what he said?”

“He said, ‘That’s nice.’ Something like that?”

“‘Why should I care?’”

“Nah.”

“I swear.”

“So, how you plan to cheat? And how can I help?”

“Tell me what works best.”

“Not cheat sheets. Too easy to detect. Two questions: he give multiple choice exams and is there more than one section?”

“Yes and yes.”

“There’s a section before you? Say ‘yes.’”

“Yes – and I’m ahead of you. Get a buddy – and, yes, I do have one – in the preceding section to smuggle me a copy of the test. But wait, how’d he get a copy and how’d he smuggle it. The test is the answer sheet – you know, fill in the blanks.”

“This buddy of yours smart.”

“Yeah. Very.”

“He like you?”

“We don’t do romantic weekends together, but, yeah, he does.”

“At the end of the test, he takes a picture with his cell phone—not of the test but of his answers.”

“YES! That’ll work.”

“Mr. Ruston isn’t it?”

“Ralston, Professor.”

“No matter. You cheated, you stupid immoral asshole.”

“Oh, no, sir. I just studied hard. I know you might be suspicious of my high score, perfect score, but it’s the result of hard study, that’s what it is.”

“Every answer is wrong. 0%.”

“How could that be? I am sure. . . .”

“You’re sure the prick who fed you the answers from Section 101’s test got 100%, which he did. But – even you should be able to figure this one out.”

“You switched tests. The answers I had – none of them fit.”

“You’re a genius.”

“Please, sir, let me explain.”

“Fuck you. It’s 5 o’clock and time for drinks, not for listening to your sniveling. Besides, what do I care why you did it?”

“But if I flunk. . . .”

“I didn’t say you would flunk.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t say you would flunk, now, did I? You hear me say that?”

“No. I just assumed. . . .”

“Well, don’t assume.”

“So. I pass?”

“Did I say that?”

“Then what will happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Excuse me.”

“No, I don’t excuse you, but I am putting the ball in your court. It’s up to you what happens. Meet me tomorrow, right here, at 11 p.m. You have some engagement will interfere with that?”

“Oh, no sir. But what will happen then?”

“Simple. You will tell me what should happen.”

“Just tell you?”

“Not quite. You will tell me what should happen and also why what you say should happen makes sense – makes sense to me. I don’t care if it makes sense to you, only to me. Get inside my head, my desires and fashion your proposal to fit them, fit them perfectly. Surprise me. Make me ecstatic. Raise me to the stratosphere.”

“So, I need to tell you why you would benefit from passing me?”

“That’s altogether too blunt. Think in more subtle, nuanced terms. What would cohere with what I’ve always wanted, always needed?”

“Always?”

“Always---even or especially if I haven’t been aware of it.”

“Come in, Mr. Ralston. See, I got it right.”

“Yeah.”

“Who are you? You’re not Ralston. I have an appointment with Ralston, so you’ll have to get the hell out – right now.”

“I’m keeping the appointment. Didn’t know Ralston was rich, did you? Rich and pissed. He said I should give you what you always needed.”

“Wait. What’s that?”

“You’re the professor. You tell me. Got any last words? No. I thought not. Bye, bye, asshole.

11. THE YOUTH OF TODAY

The teenager seems to have replaced the Communist as the appropriate target for public controversy and foreboding.

Edgar Friedenber

“Miss Jackson?”

“My name’s McKennon.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. You’re next on the list.”

“What list? You know what time it is?”

“As it happens, I do. But you’ll have time to make it.”

“I’m going back to sleep.”

“Please don’t. I know it’s tenth grade, but they’re good kids, mostly – so I’ve been told. Anyhow. . . .”

Light was starting to dawn. Only metaphorically, as it was still dark as – what was that quote. Nothing fancy. “Dark as fear” – Swinburne. That fit. Only it didn’t. What she felt was not fear but – wait for it – wrath. The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction, said Blake. Yes, they are, but for the time being I am a horse of instruction, so – back in harness: “OK. What school? When?”

“Oh, thank you, Ms. McKennon. I won’t get your name wrong again.”

“That makes everything lovely. What school and when.”

“Let’s see. Locking Senior High School. You’ll love it.

7:20, or thereabouts.”

“Any special subject I’m teaching?”

“They’ll have notes and instructions there for you – front office. Good kids, like I said. Not inner-city or anything.”

“I live in the inner-city and I am 100% Negro, you’ll be dismayed to hear. And you’re sending me to a suburban school, set up just to escape that inner-city blight and the kids who are causing it.”

“Oh, please understand. . . .”

I hung up, understanding perfectly.

“Dark as fear” – couldn’t get that out of my mind.

No time for that now, as I had about half an hour to dress, drive, arrive, and study the notes and instructions. I knew by experience those notes and instructions would tell me nothing, less than nothing. You see, I’d substituted before, oh so many times (thrice) and knew what I was getting into. I hoped.

Made it on time and found the office, thanks to some friendly students, who actually steered me straight, privileged little shits that they were. Maybe they were learning to respect authority or patronize darkies, both important skills for youth trying to make their way in this modern world of toady, a phrase I am plagiarizing from an essay I received at my last subbing gig, lasting two weeks and allowing me to read ever so many charming and illuminating student papers, written on the subject (my invention): “It Sucks So Bad to Be Young Today.”

I guess I’m nervous, which I hope explains my defensive and cynical tone, which you probably find tiresome, if not offensive, as you should. Truth is I like the youth trying to make their way in this modern world of today and detest the automatic and poisonous mockery spewed on them by adults, who sense their own inferiority and have no better weapons than venomous nostalgia: we lived in real times, outdoors and tough and connected, not like these young robots always glued to their phones, never leaving their padded cells.

Me, I like their fancy phones and wish I knew how to use them better. I'll bet the eager-to-please students here at Locking Senior High will show me.

Back to the immediate scene and a more ingratiating tone – witty but not brittle.

So, I arrive at the front office, where a friendly staff woman greets me, hands me a cup of coffee (strong), and conducts me at once into the office of the principal, also a woman and, get this, not even completely white.

I'm not used to finding anything more than a sheet scrawled with room number, class roster, and perfunctory instructions, so this is sweet. I feel very important, which, turns out, I am, not only important but vital. Yes.

“Oh am I glad to meet you, Ms. McKennon! And I hope you won't be sorry you ever met me.”

She is actually on my side of the desk, somehow, halfway hugging me. I don't hug back, starting to smell a rat, thinking something smelled fishy, sniffing some deception somewhere, something stinking to high heaven. You understand my plight.

“You are wondering why we are so desperate. I don't mean that we turned to you out of desperation. You were our first choice.”

She must have read the scornful disbelief in my face.

“You were the one we wanted all along.”

No better.

“You're here.”

Now we're on the same page. I nod, being careful not to smile.

“Here's the thing,” she says, looking at me now like Bugs Bunny in the cartoon looking down Elmer Fudd's rifle barrel. “We have three teachers out today, three! All three let us know within a ten-minute period, phoned in around 3 a.m., left messages, the lousy bastards. Thank Jesus, Clarissa came in early and heard them. And

that's why, you see, you are here."

"You're tripling up the classes? We're meeting in the gym?"

She laughed, almost. "Not far from it. Clarissa and I have been scrambling to shuffle the kids into other sections, near as we can, so you would have a normal schedule, normal in a sense, and there'd be seats for all, pretty much. You'll just do the six periods, you know, with no more students than usual, not too many more."

"You know," I say, in my most ingratiating tone, "I seem unable to determine what subject I'm teaching, and unless someone tells me within the next twenty seconds I'm going to find out where your three malingerers are and join their three-way."

"Yes, well, that's the very thing," she says, no longer chipper.

"I figured it was. Out with it."

"The only way we could manage it was to give you more than the one subject, not that we have any doubt you'll. . . ."

"How many subjects?"

"Six."

"That'll fill the day. What are they?"

"Starting with period one, you know, and going straight through:

Social Studies
History
Wood Shop
English
Sexual Education
Gym

Before you say anything, I should have added that you have a lunch period, shortened only a little, between Shop and English, as well as a ten-minute coffee break after Sexual Education."

"Piece of cake," I said.

And it has been. I am now in Sexual Education, only one more to go, having done brilliant work in Social Studies (I got them talking about domestic violence), History (the Native American genocide), Wood Shop (bookends), and English (write your own limericks).

By the way, though I am aware this interrupts the flow of my narrative – no need to point that out – I inspired several limericks quite fine (which I hung out to dry on the line – ha ha). Here are two:

*A bather whose clothing was strewed
By winds that left her quite nude
Saw a man come along
And unless I am wrong
You expected this line to be lewd.*

*There once was a young lady named bright
Whose speed was much faster than light
She set out one day
In a relative way
And returned on the previous night.*

You're thinking they are plagiarized. Quite likely, but gifted teachers care nothing for that.

Sexual education was where I met Colby and Tessa. But that's getting ahead of myself, just a little. Colby and Tessa belong to the night; we are still in the afternoon, late afternoon, in class, studying safe sexual practices, public health issues, and g-spots. Teaching kids about sex is like instructing a fish on how to swim, somebody said. Somebody was right. I enjoy the class, though, and learned a lot.

There's where I met Colby and Tessa, who, as it happens were also in gym class, idiotically scheduled for the end of the day,

when I was dog tired and the students ready to get away and start really learning things. Like the finest teachers, I rely on sudden inspiration, and my sudden inspiration for gym class was this: “Sit on your ass and talk to the people around you.” Refreshing and muscle-toning, too.

So, Colby and Tessa. Came up after sex ed and started a conversation which turned into them inviting me to drop by that evening, Tessa’s house (Colby would also be there, you see) and just hang out. Around eleven.

I knew better than to ask why so late and where parents would be and whether all this was legal. I wasn’t born yesterday.

So, I got there a little past eleven, eager to hang out. You probably guessed it by now, but I wasn’t sure what “hanging out” involved. Nobody had ever asked me to do that before. That’s just the way things have gone. Nobody had asked me to do anything, not really. I could ask others, you’ll be saying. You’re right. I have done that, just as you’re recommending. I have done it so often I am getting scared. Dark as fear.

Tessa greeted me and there was Colby, too.

I went in and sat. They right away included me in their talk, and in their plans.

“You know why we invited you, Ms. McKennon?”

I wasn’t expecting that, so I just said, “No.”

“Here we got you – indecent hour of the night, two minors, forcing us to drink illegal beverages, shoot up, have sex with each other while you tape us, have sex with you which isn’t taped, eat unhealthy junk food.”

“I see. Then you’ll extract from me money, cool clothes, and promises for future encounters. I’ll have no choice.”

“That’s it.”

“I like it, like the cut of your jibs.”

“OK, Ms. M, but we gotta teach you to talk cool.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“We like you a lot, Ms. M.”

And if you believe what I’ve just told you, why. . . .

On the other hand, maybe you should. It’s not up to you.

12. DOOR TO DOOR

December 29, 2015

DAILY NEWS---Like seasonal allergies and rainy weather, door-to-door magazine scams are an annual annoyance that return each spring. Be on the lookout for scammers selling fake magazine subscriptions.

“You see that, Kent?”

“Yeah, you damned near stuffed it up my nose.”

“They say to be on the lookout.”

“I see they do. Right there in print.”

“That’ll make it tough.”

“Don’t panic. We’re not peddling fake subscriptions. We got them from school, the PTA fundraiser. Legitimate all the way, sort of.”

“Last year’s fundraiser. They stopped doing that. Some of these magazines aren’t even still in business.”

“That’ll make em all the more valuable.”

“Jesus, Kent, people will get suspicious – or will start bitching after a few months go by and fucking ‘Field and Stream’ isn’t coming.”

“We’ll tell them we were taken advantage of.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll tell em these awful pedophile adults took advantage of us cute kids, told us it was all on the up and up and what we had to do was go around and get the subscriptions and everything would be fine. I mean, we are just kids. How were we to know?”

“Oh. That’s pretty good. You really think it’ll work? What if they bitch to our parents?”

“God, Jonah, tell your parents there was this guy, from the Cancer Fund or something, got us to do this, said not to tell anyone, that he’d pay us well and set aside special presents for our family. Tell your parents he was squeezing your butt as he said all this, but you didn’t think anything about it at the time.”

“OK.”

Trouble was the take was so small it didn’t make any of it worthwhile, lightning bolt smart as the scheme was, especially when they had to split the tiny take seven ways.

So they had a meeting.

“Not worth our time. I told you, Kevin.”

“Nobody reads magazines anymore.”

“Maybe if we sold porn magazines?”

Kevin was silent through all this, pondering. Not that they were wrong. The take was very small, not worth the time or the brainpower required, much less possible backlashes from angry customers or parents or cops.

Needed a new scheme, that was for sure. After all, the outfit had expenses: good tablets, game subscriptions, clothes, and (yes) high-quality porn.

“OK,” Kevin finally said, “I got it.”

“How are you today, Mrs. Blaine?”

“I’m fine, Charles, and you?”

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Blaine. I’m very well. Please call me Charley. All my friends do.”

“I see. What can I do for you, Charley?”

“I was just wondering if you’d look at my new list of magazines, Mrs. Blaine, see if there weren’t some that’d interest you, appeal to your reading habits.”

“Charles, I told you last week I wasn’t in the market, didn’t read magazines.”

“It’s for a very good cause, Mrs. Blaine, most of the money going to help African kids who are dying otherwise.”

“I’m sure it’s a good cause, Charles. But there are many good causes out there and I am really not interested in magazines, no matter what. And, didn’t you say last week the money was going to fight cancer?”

“That was last week, Mrs. Blaine. This is different.”

“Fine, Charles, but. . . .”

“Oh please, just examine my list. Take your time.”

“Oh, all right, but I’m telling you right now. . . . My, this is a long list. Let me see.”

“Do take your time.”

“Well, oh, there are many pages. Charles, I really don’t think there’s any point.”

“There’s a separate section for gardening. Just two or three pages back.”

“I see.”

“I know you like gardening a lot.”

“Well, I am sorry, Charles. You are a very nice boy, and I’m sure the cause is worthwhile, but – why are you looking over my shoulder, Charles?”

“No reason, Mrs., Blaine. I thought I saw something back there, something moving, you know.”

“Oh my – and the back door is open.”

“I hope nobody has come in while we were talking, burglars or intruders or anything.”

There had been some opposition in the group (among those less savvy) to the idea of declaring so openly that there was movement behind the sucker, that there might be (were) burglars. Wouldn't that be a direct tip-off that the gang was doing the burglarizing, distracting old (always old and mostly stupid) suckers with the smallest and most comely of their number while the rest piled in through back windows and found the really valuable stuff? Weren't they announcing their unity, giving the game away?

“That's the beauty of it,” Kevin had said. “If we were in it all together, would we be so stupid as all that, telling them to look, go see for themselves what we're doing? Shit, no. Just occupy the stupid fucks for a while, wait till we're done, and then tell them there's been burglars or something. We'll never get caught.”

They got that part right.

13. WALKING IT OFF

Cape Town is a city that ranks as one of the greatest contradictions in the world, regularly appearing near the top of two completely different kinds of lists. The first type highlights its consistent reputation as one of the most beautiful cities on the planet, and one of the best to visit. The other type lists it as the most dangerous and crime-ridden city outside of the Americas. Both are fair comments.

Guardian Angel Report

It wasn't a serious quarrel, not what you'd call a fight, but what you'd call a natural consequence of unnatural conditions, only that. Nobody's fault. There was just the usual strain of being at a conference, that was number one. Also – and don't discount this – they hadn't yet caught up on sleep. It was a long haul from Iowa City to beautiful (less than advertised) Cape Town. No wonder they felt a little edgy. To be expected, really. It was a spat. That's what you'd call it, that an the issuance of sulfurous poison from Fran, who couldn't help it, after all, any more than a scorpion could help stinging if you crossed its path, threatened it's young. Fran hadn't always been like this, only she had. Perhaps that's why he had married her, some need to prove something to himself – maybe that he was a stupid horse's ass.

But he knew he'd feel better about it soon, get things in perspective, like they say. He'd already started to cool off and see how trivial it all was, Fran's position for sure. He tried a strategic laugh. Big mistake. Turns out he wasn't yet ready. What emerged was a whining snarl. At least it made Fran pause. Then she giggled. She actually giggled. Nobody could be expected to take that, so in order to avoid saying something he'd later regret, he grabbed his umbrella and mentioned quietly he would be going for a short walk, just to clear his head.

That wasn't quite all he said. He was only human. He added – and you mustn't judge him harshly – “I hope you swallow your tongue, you rancorous bitch.” Too bad he also added – even he later regretted it – “I think you're the worst person in the western hemisphere.”

Not that she wasn't, very likely, something of the sort, but what exact sort was it she was? Insults had better be specific or they're nothing worth. He'd always thought that. I mean, talk about vague. The worst person? In what way, to what degree, in what categories? As insults went, it was no better than C- and it didn't come close to matching the phrases that sprang to mind as he walked along the streets, streets, he suddenly remembered, not even located in the western hemisphere. He also remembered he'd been told not to walk these streets, at least not by himself, at least not after dark.

But it wasn't dark just yet and he soon found he wasn't alone.

“Loved your paper, Tom.”

“Thanks. It's Thad, not Tom.”

“Oh, yeah, Thad. Short for Thadeus?”

It wasn't, but he didn't want to explain, so he said, “Uh Huh.”

This fellow conferencer said no more, arrested his progress by standing before him grinning vacantly. He had no choice:

“Liked your paper too.”

“Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

“I didn’t give one.”

“Oh.”

“I’m just here for the fun. Actually, I told my university, such as it is, I was on the board, in charge of something, instrumental and indispensable, you see. That way, I don’t have to produce evidence of a paper, they pay my way, and I have a good time.”

“Do you?”

“Have a good time, oh yes. My name is also Tom, Tom Wilkinson, only your name isn’t Tom, it’s Thad. I got that now.”

“Are you taking a walk, Tom?”

“I wasn’t but now I am. I’ll just trod along beside you, if I may. Where you off to?”

“I thought I’d just wander. You know.”

“That’s a real bad idea, Thad. Remember what they said.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Keep your wits about you, Thad.”

“What did they say?”

“Dangerous streets, high crime, gangs, prostitutes, slick salesmen, unscrupulous peddlers. Don’t go unattended.”

“OK. Thanks.”

“I’ll attend you, you see, and that we’ll be within the guidelines, violating no precautions established for our own benefit. Have a fight with your wife?”

“What?”

“Not to be intrusive.”

“Of course not.”

“So, did you?”

“Why would you think that? My wife and I . . .”

“Fight all the time. Anybody could see that. It’s not your fault,

these fights.”

“How would you know that?”

“One look at your wife. Well, more than just one, kind of studied her. A real shrew, right, a harridan, no understanding of your position.”

“Well, she’s no dummy.”

“Oh, no. She’s smart enough. Them’s the ones. She knows, she just doesn’t give a fuck. She reads you like a book and then spits on the pages. She’d shit on your clean shirts if the idea crossed her mind.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“That’s because you’re hiding things from yourself, things plain as day to perfect strangers, or those who used to be strangers before joining you on a pleasant stroll along the mean streets of Cape Town.”

“Well, I don’t know. There’s a lot to be said. . . .”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The only thing to be said is, ‘Good-bye, honey; I hope the door hits you in the ass on the way out.’”

“Yeah, well, it’s not that simple.”

“I know. Divorce, lawyers, alimony. Cheaper just to bump her off and no less risky, really.”

“You a hit man?”

“No, no. I have many talents but only academic ones. I won a teaching award last year and I’ve published quite a bit, quite a bit by anyone’s standards except my fucking Dean’s, who won’t even let me stand for promotion, the miserable son of a bitch.”

“Yes, well, my route veers off here, you know. I’ll see you at the morning session, all about “Dickens and Africa,” I think.”

“Is it? Anyhow, where are you going? I have nothing planned.”

Even if it meant swimming with the white sharks, he wasn’t going to stay in this guy’s company a minute longer, not if he had to

bump off one of them.

“Table Mountain.” It was the first thing entered his head, probably because he’d been told not to go there.

“That’s a long hike. Way too late.”

“Cable-car.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Thanks.”

“No, I mean – just give me a minute. Here, I got the materials. There’ve been fifteen attacks on tourists at Table Mountain in the last fortnight alone, according to *The Sunday Times*, attacks from gangs. And the gangs here make the ones back home look like bands of Brownie Scouts. That’s the truth.”

“Well, I have a gun on me.”

“Nah.”

I was silent, but he wasn’t.

“Not just gangs but snakes. Here, let me read to you: ‘The mountain and its trails are infested with many varieties of lethally poisonous snakes, the most aggressive of which are the puff adder, Africa’s biggest killer, the cape cobra, which is mistaken often for the harmless mole snake, and, of course, the deadly boomslang.’ Wait, they also say, ‘Most people think all these snakes are fat and lazy, but they move quickly, strike without warning, often from behind, and will cause both pain and death. Do not pick them up.’”

“I’ll be sure not to try and pet them. I really must be off, catch that cable car.”

“Ah, Jesus, Thad. One more thing. Just one more, I promise. There’s been a rash of falls off those cliffs. You know those picturesque cliffs that lead straight down. Just yesterday a guy had a seizure and fell seventy meters to the Upper Africa Ledge, he did. And two others last week, not with seizures or anything, got too close to the edge and – they’re off! Slippery even when not wet and gravel that slides under your toes, sending you off into space. Why, an

American schoolteacher and her sister. . . .”

“Thanks, Tom. I’ll be very careful.”

But you know what? He wasn’t. The cable car ride was just fine, took less than five minutes and deposited him in what should have been ideal grounds for viewing one of the best sunsets of the entire summer. That’s what the next-day papers, supported by locals, reported, and doubtless they were right.

But Thad was no dummy, had absorbed enough of Tom’s cautions, exaggerated as they obviously were, to watch his step. He watched it so closely, imaging puff adders behind every rock, that he failed to notice the menacing gang until it was almost on him.

Moving quickly – Thad had good reflexes – he edged diagonally away from them and right over the edge of the cliff. Didn’t slip, really, more like plunged. Just before hurtling forward he saw that the gang was not so much a gang as a group of tourists with hoodies, protecting themselves from the winds and drizzle.

“Well, the laugh’s on me,” he thought, or maybe said, as he descended. He also had time not only to think but undeniably to shout, “Oh, Fran, forgive me!”

Then his body broke open.

14. CORRECTION

It wasn't so much a body as an allegory, desolation in a coat, thumb half-extended, offering a gesture so hopeless it wouldn't even count as an apology.

What the hell. It was so cold, somehow worse now that the snow had stopped. Mother had always warned against picking up hitchhikers, but then Mother was dead, wasn't she.

He pulled over, backed up, backed up some more, as the figure didn't seem able to move very well, lurched and stumbled. He thought about getting out, offering an arm, but by the time he had decided to do so the guy was in the car, looking at him, saying something.

“What? I didn't catch that.”

“I said, very clearly, why are you doing – what you are doing?”

He checked the mirrors, just as he should, pulled back out onto the road and considered the question. They proceeded in silence for 0.4 miles – he checked – before he found the answer he wanted.

“I am doing what I am doing because I am the captain of my soul. How's that?” Then he giggled.

The passenger did not giggle. Instead, he opened the glove box and started sorting through the contents.

“Well, I never!” said the driver. “You might have asked me before looking for my insurance cards and registration.” He giggled again. This was fun.

They drove on 1.2 miles, neither saying anything. The passenger finished his survey of the glove box, closed the lid, and

turned toward the driver, studying him.

“I think,” he finally said, in a voice surprisingly light, even chipper, “you are a blessed creature, or lucky. Not that it matters which.”

“Either way, I’m a doozie, right?” said the driver.

The passenger studied him, silent but not for long, only 0.7 miles. Then he said, “I am my brother’s keeper.”

“Good for you. I mean that. Good for you. I applaud that. Are you going to keep me?”

The passenger spoke immediately: “Much more than that. I will teach you, teach you what your mother should have but did not. Your mother was a fine woman, but she made mistakes.”

“We all make mistakes,” he ventured.

“That is wrong. We are not put on this earth to make mistakes or tolerate those who do. Even if your mother did not understand that or was too weak to carry the burden of correction.”

“How far are you going? I’ve got to get back. Where can I drop you?”

“Why do you have this in your car?” the passenger asked, now smiling and holding up the long ice-scraper.

“Huh? To scrape ice, of course. I used it earlier today. You know, scrape the ice. Now, where can I drop you off?”

“It has other and better uses. It can be an instrument of correction for those whose mother’s failed. It can do what you badly need to have done.”

“I’m stopping right here.”

“Good, and I can do what I am sent to do.”

And he did.

15. TRAPPED

The first thing that occurred to me was that it was all a mistake. Must be. The door was stuck a little, couldn't be jammed, locked. Just try the handle. Which I did, several dozen times. Then I stopped to think. Mustn't panic.

I didn't panic. Not that I had to fight down panic, wasn't necessary. What I did was, I laughed. Quietly. It was ludicrous. Here in the biggest night of my life, about to pop the question, which wasn't in the least a question: Sarah Lou was certain to say yes, absolutely yes; I thought you'd never ask, ha ha. True, I would have asked earlier had I been absolutely certain the scene would play out that way, but tonight I was what you'd call dead certain, at least 60% certain.

I sat down on – well, not to put too fine a point on it, the toilet. I decided to think about it, review the situation. Sarah Lou and I had come to our favorite restaurant, which is what we called it, even though we'd never actually been to it before. We'd always meant to come here, spoken of it, oh maybe thirty-five, forty times, made reservations, we had, at least three times. But something had always come up, something to keep us from what had to be our very favorite spot for putting on the feedbags, Sarah Lou and me.

I forgot to say that this stall wasn't like the usual stalls that had openings top and bottom. It was open at the top, I could see, but way up there, beyond what I could reach, even if I climbed up on the can, risking a slip and a slosh. There was no bottom opening, not what you'd expect. There had to have been, I told myself, as I had

opened the door to come in, you see, and it had swung open. It stands to reason that anything swinging open once would swing open again. Of course it had swung shut when I pulled it, and that was the problem. But how could there be no bottom opening? I guess it is just a flush fit, protecting privacy.

Right now I am less concerned with privacy than with returning to our table and Sarah Lou, who by now must be wondering if I got lost or something. Not like she'd think I abandoned her. She trusts me too much for that. To tell the truth, it may not be so much a matter of trust as it is a feeling about how my level of commitment to us, as a couple I mean, a couple with a future, is a little stronger than hers, a whole lot stronger, let's face it.

It occurred to me to detach the toilet paper roll and throw it over the very high top of the door, thus attracting attention. Good idea, only it wasn't, as I could not figure out how to get the roll out of the complex machine. That machine held two rolls, one shifting into place when the other was used up, I think. Wonder how it knew the other was down to mere cardboard and it was time to go into service?

Plan B was to extract some toilet paper, wad it in a ball and throw it over the top in place of the entire roll. Not as attention getting, perhaps, but a good back up plan. Maybe not so good, as my first two attempts didn't make it over the top of the door but came unwadded and fluttered back down on me. I hope you won't think ill of me, but I then added a little moisture to them, which made the balls cohere better. After two more failures, I got one over – then a second, then a third.

I waited a bit but nothing happened. It seemed to be a wonderfully designed Men's Room, no ookie sounds being audible, by design I am certain, this being an upscale place sparing no expense on acoustical materials to provide an upscale bathroom experience. I say this not because I could not hear my missiles strike the floor on the other side but because I couldn't hear anything at all.

Resourceful as always, I devised Plan C. Sarah Lou would have been proud of me, maybe surprised. I don't think she regards me as resourceful. She hasn't made any direct criticisms, but she wouldn't, would she now? I have forgotten you don't know Sarah Lou as well as I, but let me tell you she's not one to humiliate or fire off direct criticisms. She does, I have to say, sometimes insinuate, give off subtle indicators that I try to pick up on and use for my own betterment. I dress better now than I used to do and am less likely to talk about unseemly things over dinner, such as dogs.

Anyhow, Plan C. I decided that my paper wads, though making it over the top of the door and, I felt sure, onto the other side, could be regarded by visitors to this place as waste, unseemly but not really cries for help. That would be only natural. I was not one to stick to a bad plan simply because it was mine. That's a losing strategy for sure. So, what I did was this: I took out my pen. I always carry a pen in my shirt, though sometimes I forget to close the cap and it makes a stain at the bottom of the pocket, though I regard all that as an acceptable consequence of a good plan, kind of unavoidable collateral damage. So, I took out my pen and wrote a message, as follows:

PLEASE EXCUSE ME. I AM SOMEHOW LOCKED IN
THE STALL

I waited fifteen minutes. I know that because I timed it, not wanting to be hasty and perhaps incite nervousness – in myself, I mean. Then it struck me: I hadn't specified which stall. I knew very well which one, as I always choose the second one in, this time second from left. The reason I do that is simple but elegant: experience has taught me that end stalls are most popular and tend, therefore, to be less pristine. I need not be more specific. So, it was easy for me to alter my Plan B, allowing myself an inward chuckle at my earlier mistake. Of course, willing rescuers, kindly friends of man, would not know where to find me, so I sent out another missile, adding:

SECOND STALL FROM LEFT – SORRY I LEFT THAT OUT

This time I waited twenty minutes, though not altogether avoiding a little concern, not nervousness, but unmistakable concern. I couldn't think of too much more to add to my messages, much less another plan, so I added:

THIS IS RATHER AN EMERGENCY

I didn't see how I could do more than that. Oh, you might wonder why I don't shift to Plan D, which might involve shouting, banging on the door, and similar raucous displays. You'll understand, though, that I have, with Sarah Lou's guidance, conquered a tendency I had earlier toward what might be called, in truth WAS, a habit of sliding, now and then, toward the undignified. One thing I have learned, and learned well: once you have overcome a bad habit, you'd be a fool to let it come creeping back.

16. TRY A LITTLE TENDERNESS

“We received the sweetest letter from Consuela, hun. Want me to read it to you?”

“Sure!” He hated it when she read to him, called him “hun,” and fawned long-distance over Connie, calling her “Consuela” in her revolting p.c. way.

“Dear Bill and Brenda,

“I miss you so and just wish you lived closer, so we could”

He tuned out, remembering, barely, to nod and seem attentive as his wife chirped along. He was occupying himself thinking exactly how he might, on the spot, stage an accident, upsetting with impunity the fondue pot and its lethal bubbling grease onto Bren-da’s chubby thighs. He was looking at the folds of the tablecloth closely, seeing his elbows entangling accidentally so as to. . . . Then he noticed something startling. Silence. For how long had Brenda been waiting?

“That’s sweet of Connie. I agree. It’s really – sweet of her.”

“Bill, you goof! Of course it’s sweet, but what do you think? Should I say yes? Tell me what to say.”

“What do you think, dear?” Back in your court. He’d gotten out of many a tight spot by pretending he was interested in her views.

“Well, you can guess what I think, knowing me from inside-out, the way you do, babe. But it’s your schedule that’s full. You think we might?”

Now he was starting to sweat. His “schedule”? Was Connie coming to visit? Bringing her tortilla tribe with her? Setting up shop on the premises? Souvenirs? He needed to stall. Keeping Brenda

yapping was never a challenge; extracting useful information was another matter.

“Well, as you say, it’s a busy time.”

C’mon, Brenda, you silly cow, drop a hint.

“Really? I thought you said last month that things were looking good for maybe 6-8 weeks – from when you said that, last month.”

“Oh sure, 6-8 weeks, but not right now. Actually, two months from **now** is when I anticipate some slack, though that’s uncertain. Up until then, though: you know how it is. I can’t really be pinned down. But in two months it’ll be OK. I’m sorry, dear, and for Connie too. I’d like to, but you know – the demands of work.”

“Oh, I know how hard you work, duck. Nobody knows better than I.”

That much was true, not that he worked hard or had periods that were more undemanding than others; but that he kept her alert to how overworked he said he was.

“I’m really sorry, dear. Wish I could afford some time. . . .”

“But, as she says in the letter, it’s just over two months away. Perfect, right?”

He felt as Jesus must have when his walking-on-the-water trick stopped working and he found himself sinking beneath the waves. An apt metaphor, as it turned out.

“Well, you never know for sure. . . .”

She looked so cutely expectant, so much like a kid who knows the next words will be “Yes!” that he really had but two choices: homicide or agreement. The former was the better choice, but he hadn’t planned ahead. So, he tried to put a good face on things, succumb to the inevitable. He didn’t put a good face on things, but it’s unlikely Brenda noticed. She noticed so little.

And that’s how they came to be here in Acapulco, staying at the Hotel Plaza Las Glorias and visiting with the Reach-Out-And-

Nurture child they were sponsoring, Connie something or other. To say Bill had never counted on this much intimacy with Connie and her family would be true enough, but a weak form of the truth. He had counted on giving this bunch of Mexicans no thought whatever. He'd set up an automatic minimum payment on-line, checking the "no" box on "optional holiday remembrances."

True, the idea had come from him. It was a Brenda sort of idea, start to finish, but he had originated it, enthusiastically, at a party. There he was in a corner with a colleague's wife, using an oversized corn plant to screen them but not in an obvious way. He was anxious to escape detection, despite the fact that there was nothing to detect, yet. Pretty soon there would be, or his name wasn't William Thomas. He was using a can't-fail trick, looking straight into a woman's eyes, imagining he was swimming in them. In their eyes at 9; in their pants by midnight. Always worked. Almost never worked, but he could explain the failures. One price his trick exacted was total absorption.

"So, Bill, have you ever been to Mexico, I mean the REAL Mexico?"

"I haven't. Never. I'll bet you could show me, though, right, Jen? I'll bet you could initiate me into all sorts of reality." Not his best line – he couldn't have said what it meant – but it carried a hint of the forbidden.

"Bill! I wasn't suggesting the two of us run down there for a weekend."

"Of course not. We'd never be able to get in touch with all that REAL in just a weekend. Let's try a full week, keep it open at the ass end – sorry, "rear," sorry, "back end," sorry, "terminus," just in case we need more, you know."

"Bill! You are incorrigible. Why would we need more?"

"You never know about needs, right, Jen?"

"I never thought of you as a needy sort, Bill."

"You don't know me, Jen, don't know what needs I have. I'll

bet I can guess some of yours. I'm not saying you have unmet needs, Jen, not that you're aware of."

"Bill, you devil!"

"You know how to get your needs met, Jen hun?"

"I can guess how YOU think I might. You're a needs-meeter from way back, right Bill?"

He tried hard to keep his lust alive, which wasn't too easy in the face of Jen's unremitting banality. My God, what would a week with her be like? Better make sure it was only a couple of days, a single day, an evening, twenty minutes.

"I can meet needs you don't know you have. I can create needs, terrible and unbearable needs, whose satisfaction will make you happy for the pain."

"Bill, are you into pain?"

"I'm into lots of things, Jen. And I'd like to get into more."

"Bill, do you mean what I think you mean?"

"I count on you to help me recognize what I mean. I can't do it on my own. I seldom know what I mean, hun."

"That's just not true, Bill. You're always selling yourself short. Don't believe him, Jenny. He's the most modest man on the planet."

Christ on a harmonica! His wife. How much had she heard? Speechless, he watched as Jen picked up the ball without even bending down to get it: "I think you're biased, blinded by love, Bren. But I can understand that. As for unassuming, I'd say you and Bill are in a dead heat. We were just talking about needs."

Holy shit!

"Needs?" Brenda smiled, to all appearances unsuspecting.

"Yes, the needs of the poor people, the truly needy," Jen explained in her throaty voice Bill had taken for sexy and now wondered why. "I was telling Bill about this wonderful program."

"What program is that, Jenny?" His wife had this trick of

upping her considerable weight, growing by the minute, onto her toes when she wanted to appear eager. It looked less like eagerness than aggression, causing people to retreat in alarm, worried that this great mass was going to pitch forward onto them.

Jen looked at him with unconcealed panic. Up to him to save their joint asses.

“It’s a sponsorship program, dear. Jenny was telling me about it, how you can sign up to help a kid in a needy part of the world, a needy kid, poor little things. Jen was saying how they’re starving and dropping with AIDS. Just awful.”

“Oh, how ghastly,” Brenda said, an ominous catch in her voice. Were she to start crying, he’d slap her on the spot. But she didn’t quite, continuing, “So there’s a program. And what did you say, Bill? I mean about signing up.”

She had turned her listing form toward him. Backing up, Bill whacked the corn plant, which threatened to topple, also being top-heavy, giving Bill time to think as he steadied it. But he could think of nothing. “Who could resist. It’s just awful, like you say. Jen painted a heart-breaking picture. I know you couldn’t resist it, Bren. And I was going to make the arrangements and surprise you.”

“Oh, how like you, Bill!”

Even Jen smirked at that. What could be less like him? He could think of nothing to say, which gave Brenda a horrible opening:

“What country, Bill?”

“Mexico.” He’d come within an inch of saying Monaco but at the last second recalled that Monaco had no poor children, just rich adults he despised a good deal less than envied.

And so it was that they found themselves at the Hotel Plaza Las Glorias, trying, in Bill’s case, to maximize the number of hours whiled away right there, not in intimacy with his wedded one, but in needful napping, card-playing, anything but contact with Mexicans. He had worked hard to keep their south-of-the-border visit to just a

weekend, being forced up from his starting point, a single-day (“There’s good plane service to Acapulco, and we can always come back!”) to three days, awful, but down from the two weeks Brenda had regarded as “only decent.”

Here it was second day in, Saturday evening, the shank of the evening, as Bing Crosby used to say, when he was at his coolest. He thought of Bing Crosby because the voice of that very child-beating one (Bill had read Gary Crosby’s self-pitying reminiscences with great admiration for the Dad) was oozing out of the speakers there at La Perla nightclub, recommended by the cut-rate guide book as far and away the best place to watch the “world-famous Quebrada.” The book had not mentioned that La Perla was crowded with bussed-in tourists, nor the ubiquity of Bing.

He was thinking thoughts like this to avoid the immediate present, the immediate past too. Yesterday they had gone straight from the airport to (get this!) Connie’s school, where they met not only with Connie but with her teachers, counselors, friends, and thirteen of her younger brothers and sisters, all in the third or fourth grades. Though very large, the school building wasn’t what you would call nice, inside or out; it was what you’d call a shithouse, unredeemed by the inhabitants, who looked exactly alike, a uniformity emphasized by uniforms, a dull grey jumper hoisted over indifferently white shirts, and by the giggly, gat-toothed friendliness that possessed them, every one. They did have the intelligence, these school administrators, to make the skirts very short, barely covering asses soon to be thundering but now still firm.

“Oh, Consuela, how honored we are to be here in your country, at your school. How can we ever repay you for this privilege?”

Guess who had said that?

Connie at least didn’t simper. She stared at Brenda in a blank, rather stately manner Bill admired. “Stately” didn’t seem like a term

that would fit a fifteen-year old, but there it was. Then it hit him: the little beaner no speaka Anglaise. Wasn't stately at all, just blank idiocy.

“Woolla moocha fahoolee ronay.” That’s what Brenda sounded like, mixing in garbled “excoosie, excoosie.” Bill spoke passable French and German, better than passable. But he never saw any point in working up Spanish. I mean, why? Brenda handled the Maxi-Maids and Bill could communicate with his gardener through the boss, who had a little illegal-immigrant English.

As they continued at the school, feigning interest, several peasant kids grabbed at his pants’ legs and hands, trying to be charming. Bill did his best to avoid any contact, but decided against striking; he frowned and gently pushed them away, which had the effect of making them giggle and grab more insistently. At one point he kicked out a little, not wholly with the intent to do harm, sending a small male toppling and taking another half-dozen with him, like bowling pins. Even this they seemed to regard as a game. So, he satisfied himself with jamming his hands in his pockets, avoiding intimacy and protecting his valuables.

He concentrated on Connie, who at least didn’t collapse into grateful giggles. Interesting little kid. Not so little. She was short but surprisingly mature in body and even gestures. Probably had more sexual experience than he. Certainly a family this size needed every penny they could generate, and would never overlook a moneymaking machine like this one, right now at her cash-attracting peak. She probably had only four or five years in her before she started looking like every other overstuffed burrito in this country. But for now she was pretty amazing.

She glanced at him a couple of times, registering not much of anything but giving him what she didn’t give Brenda: a slight smile and flickers of what surely was interest.

That evening, the family had insisted on having them to

dinner, he witnessed a first: a groaning table actually groaning – probably rotten wood protesting the beans, flour things, and animal fat. At least none of the kids climbed on him. Good thing, as he was prepared to resort to violence, should frowns fail. One of the slightly larger brothers fancied he could speak English and was assigned the job of keeping Bill bored for the evening. For example:

“Mr. Bill, what do you do in Amer—ee—ka?”

“I live there, Michael.”

“Miguel, Mr. Bill. Oh, I know you live there. I mean, what ees your occupayshone, I theenk you say?”

“We say occupation, Miguel, not occupayshone.”

“Ah, Meester Bill, please excuse my Eengleesh.”

Silence.

“So, Meester Bill, let me guess. I bet you are poleeteeshun, maybe mayor?”

“No.”

“Perhaps you own thee bank?”

“Are you going to run through all the main occupations you read about in your English class, Miguel? I am not a fisherman, a cobbler, a professional wrestler, or a tinker. Nor am I a beautician, major league baseball player, lap dancer, or sheep farmer. Are you a sheep farmer, Miguel?”

“Ah, Meester Bill. We do not have sheep een Acapulco, which is not what you call an agricultural deestrect.”

“Ah, what with all the animals running loose, I thought it was an agricultural deestrect. Thanks for setting me straight.”

“Meester Bill, you have fine sense of humor.”

“Yes I do, Miguel, and that explains why I’m here.”

No matter what he did, he could not shake Miguel, which made for an evening almost as bad as the one he had once spent in jail when he was in college. He later said he was arrested in a civil rights protest march, but the truth was that he was charged with the crime of

public drunkenness, disturbing the peace, and losing a fight with a boy much smaller than he. During the night, he was thrice sodomized, slowly and thoroughly, by inmates fat and hairy, who unaccountably left untouched his co-drunk fraternity brother, small and girly. Wasn't that what attracted prison sodomites? Apparently not.

Miguel was himself girly, which may have been what made him recall that night of shame and pain. He couldn't understand the connection very clearly, didn't want to. Not that Bill was attracted to Miguel. He put his hand on the boy several times, but only to test whether he shouldn't gouge or pinch him.

The next morning they invited the whole family over for breakfast, prior to attending some festival at the local Catholic Church. Bill was no atheist, but he could spot con artists when he saw them, and those Catholic priests, two of them, were like guys just learning the pyramid racket, so egregious were they. Of course they were speaking either in Spanish or Latin, but some things are obvious.

He spent the time trying to avoid Miguel and find out more about Connie, more that would be useful to him in his mentoring position. Since he couldn't exchange words with her, it seemed appropriate that they get to know one another through other means: smiles and winks and hugs, the usual language of sponsor and needy cutie.

Turns out Miguel was doing his 100th cliff-dive that very evening, which meant that a select group would be joining them at the La Perla, a window table being arranged by devil-may-care Brenda, financed by HIM. Bill had read about the cliff-divers and probably had seen the actual event a couple of times on television, back in the days of primitive sports coverage. At least he'd get to splay footsie with Connie under the table.

“Doing his century dive, our Adonis diver and favorite with the ladies, Miguel Ramirez!”

Everyone stretched out to watch Miguel hold his torch on

high, flex his body, look down 136 feet into the pounding Pacific below, timing the surf so as to take advantage of the full depth of the inlet he would sail into, a mere 9 ½ feet deep at max, and push off from the top into a graceful swan dive, only to smack into the rocks below with a splat one could hear through the glass windows, the pounding ocean, and Bing.

They went to the rite that in America would be called a funeral, Bill losing the argument that it would be in better taste to get the out of there, immediately and quietly.

“Oh, Bill, that would be so cruel to little Connie. We really have to do our best to help, offer condolences.”

Bill managed soon to get Connie aside, hugging her closely and employing the universal language of consolation to let her know, wordlessly, how deeply he mourned her loss, respected her family, and wanted to help in any way he could.

Two hours later, he convinced a reluctant Connie to go for a walk on the beach. It was NOT the same beach containing the rocks into which the beautiful Miguel had made his final, awkward dive. That would have been callous and brutal, and Bill was neither.

He let her talk as they strolled along, understanding nothing, letting the waves do the responding for him, the waves and the insistent pressure of his hands on her back and shoulders, then thighs and breasts, first over clothing and then under. They found a secluded place, Bill did, and administered all-out physical comfort. There was no way, he was sure of this, that he was taking advantage of her or the situation.

True, she was crying, just a trick to elicit cuddling.

Of course he wanted to get the hell out of there, especially now, but he did fold her in his arms for almost two minutes, nuzzling her hair and trying not to breathe in. So absorbed was he in resolutely not thinking of Connie’s immediate presence and figuring how best to get shut of her, he altogether failed to notice the unattractive shoes, not

even true beach shoes, outside their grotto but plainly in his line of vision, were he looking.

He finally did, but took a beat or two to register that the shoes were familiar, brown and orange sandals he had picked out himself as a gag gift for Brenda, wondering if she would recognize how tasteless they were. That she (of course) didn't gave him a rush of pleasure mixed with something like self-justification. Then he started to bring into focus not only the shoes but their owner.

He could talk his way out of anything, even this, Brenda being so dense. It was a bore but he inhaled deeply and set to it. "Bren—" he began. He saw the flash of light, heard the explosion – and, damn it, wasn't able to finish his thought.

17. SEEKING THE THUGS

Violence is a calm that disturbs you.

Jean Genet

Non-violence is the policy of the vegetable kingdom

H. G. Wells

There is a violence that liberates.

Benito Mussolini

“These guys are legend, Sally.”

“Legendary thugs – violent fools, assholes, drunks, psychopaths.”

“Right. Just what we came to England to find.”

“*We*, Terry? And don’t we have that back in L.A.? We gotta do a semester abroad to find hooligans?”

“This type, yes. We don’t got this in America, you see, not really, not in this sweet, organized, up-yours, anti-establishment, pure form. This is violence raised to religious ecstasy, or so we read.”

“And that made you want to seek it out, violence as devout mania? Why didn’t you tell me that before bringing me over here to this pissant town?”

“It’s very pretty here in Nailsworth. Sorry we missed the Festival, though. I’ll bet that’s something. But we do have the match

in three hours. You nervous?”

“Petrieved.”

They had taken a fast train and then two very slow busses to arrive here at this beautiful – from certain aspects – Gloucestershire village, certainly giving no sign of thuggishness, football or any other kind. Of course, they both knew it was part of the hooligan game to keep out of sight, play a hide-and-seek game with the police until it was time to explode into the reckless orgasmic violence that gave meaning to the lives of these team supporters, the Lads.

They weren't going to be disheartened, at least Sally wasn't, by the unprepossessing surroundings. Right now they were in front of St George's Church, not because they thought they'd find the lads hanging out there but because they had three hours to kill before the match between Forest Green Rovers and Oxford and figured they'd take in the local dasn't-miss beauty spots.

St George's Church, however, was not what you'd call picturesque. For one thing, it had no steeple (funding had run short) and no churchyard (the bequest offered only a small plot – no room for corpses), not at all what Terry and Sally had come to expect from lovely villages---they were all lovely over here in England – and their Gothic (sometimes even Norman) churches, be-spired and surrounded by charming gravestones (old, very) in them. Reading the pamphlet available for free (donation welcome) right beside something that looked perhaps baptismal (neither Sally nor Terry was Anglican, so how would they know?), they discovered that the church was neither ancient (erected in 1900) nor really central to the town. Oh sure, there was a mural (Sir Oliver Haywood did it, yes he did, in 1985) depicting community life in the town, apparently not a merry place, and some add-ons to the original structure (which, they said, had been merely “a nave, aisles, and a south porch”) in 1939, but a thorough walk-through and sympathetic study for Terry and Sally occupied only seventeen

minutes.

So they then headed over to the Tourist Bureau (closed) and found a (not-very-clean) pamphlet in a rack outside, giving them (in half-a-page) the full history of Nailsworth, along with a list of the town notables, headed by “Peter Reed, Olympic rower.”

This added only four minutes, and they were still left with time on their hands and nowhere to deposit it.

Not quite nowhere. There was a pub across the street, not especially friendly, it turned out, but a place surely the colorful (and dangerous) locals frequented. They took a seat in a corner, figuring it would give them a good vantage point from which to watch the early, developing stages of the riot, the plans for the riot anyhow, the sparks that would grow into a conflagration.

The beer was exactly what they had gotten used to back in Cambridge, as was the pub. They looked about for telltale signs, though they had no idea what those signs might be. To the untrained eyes of outsiders, which they were, this pub didn't seem exactly to be the meeting place for thugs planning to level the whole fuckin' town and murder all the rival thugs from the especially thuggish regions of Oxford.

But appearances can be deceiving.

“I think this is just the place, Terry.”

“You do? There's only four people here besides us, and that counts the bartender.”

“Early yet. And these three are probably the captain and two of his lieutenants. They need to strategize, get the lay of the land. Pretty soon there'll be a mob in here, spilling out into the street.”

“OK, Sally. You'd know, of course. And will we spill with them?”

“They won't like it, if they notice us at all. Outsiders, you know. They might take us for police plants. We'll have to be

unobtrusive, very careful.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, given . . . Jesus, Sally, we going to get our asses kicked?”

“That’s a real possibility. One way or another, you know. Either the Forest Supporters turn on us or we get caught in the middle of the brawl with the Oxford – ah – the Oxford. . . What is their name?”

“The Oxford Dons? The Oxford Scholars? The Oxford Well-Behaveds?”

“It doesn’t matter. Anyhow, our goal is to be in the very heart of the melee but invisible. Try not to draw attention to yourself, Sally. Don’t say shit.”

An hour (and three pints) later, the crowd in the pub had swelled to seven, not what they were expecting but still encouraging in that one of the newcomers had on a shirt announcing his firm support of the FOREST GREEN ROVERS.

YES!

Closer inspection (undertaken by Terry), however, revealed that the shirt didn’t promise mayhem, generalized ass-kicking, or destruction of city blocks. Not exactly. “The First All-Green Football Club,” it said.

The wearer, turns out, was a friendly chap, responded positively to the girls’ invitation to join them.

“All-Green?”

“Yes, indeed. The club partners with Ecotricity, the big local firm, and is going all out to be the world’s first truly sustainable. . . .”

Shit! Just what did any of this have to do with fractured skulls, bitten-off ears, gouged-out eyeballs?

“That’s great, Will.”

“You seem disappointed.”

“Oh, no. We think it’s fine the Club does all that worthwhile

stuff. But isn't it a little pussy, you know?"

"I beg your pardon."

Sally looked over at Terry, who may have been terrified but maybe just embarrassed, like she just wanted back on the train and out of there. Then, all at once, it hit her, exactly what was going on, so she turned conspiratorially to Will.

"Didn't mean to be insulting. And now I get it. It's a cover, right? I mean, your shirt and all the going-green eco-horseshit. Go green is code for some unparalleled wild ass kicking. I see. Very clever."

"What?"

"You and your mates, the lads, use the cover of this do-goody crap and then go to town on the rival thugs. I see."

"Rival thugs?"

"I read about you Nottingham Forest supporters, coming together now and then as one big gang, spreading terror and hysterical power, finding a kind of inexpressibly thrilling high in murder and dismemberment."

"Nottingham Forest?"

"Yep. Or Nottingham Forest Green. Robin Hood and a bit of the ultra-violent, eh?"

"But Nottingham is way up. . . . Never mind."

"So, when is going to come off, Will? You can tell us. We're not connected to the police."

"I see. I was worried you were agents, sent to infiltrate us and block our happy carnage, keep us from our lunatic glory, our flowering of violence."

"Well, rest assured. We just wanted to be part of it all. We hate those Oxford. . . . What are they called?"

"Oxford United."

"Some stupid name. A pussy name. Anyhow, we're here to make sure none of them leaves town – except on a stretcher."

“Or in a casket, right Terry – and Sally?”

This went on for quite a while, without, Terry noticed, any real increase in the size of the mob---the group---the small set of companions. They were probably hiding elsewhere, only the leaders gathering here at The King’s Arms.

Will confirmed as much, when asked.

Finally, Will looked at his watch, then at the girls, and then smiled conspiratorially:

“You ready for some real danger, some action, some sweet horror?”

They were more than ready---at least one of them was.

“Follow me.”

(Your Choice: A or B)

A:

“It’s not a lot farther. Just up ahead there, that corner. See it? Turn right.

I’m just behind you. I know it looks like an alley but you’ll see it’s – it’s an alley, ain’t it, you stupid American bitches. You want violence. OK, here it comes.

OR

B:

“The grounds are nice, girls. Do you have good seats? Let me see your tickets. Yeah, excellent. Mine are cheap seats, so maybe I’ll see you afterwards, though not in Nottingham, which is five hours away, up North.”

“Huh? But there’s riots here too?”

“Last riot was in 1135, but maybe things have been building up since then.”

“Oh, damn.”

“Don’t lose heart. Forest Green Rovers have spent longer in this low league than any club in history. That means they suck, as you would say. The dozen or so loyal supporters may be reaching a boiling point and you could get lucky. There may be some restlessness in the crowd, even some muffled swearing.”

“And that’s all we. . . .”

“Oh no, we have some club songs – well, one club song. Very catchy.”

18. HELL WEEK

Our findings [2014] show that pain is a particularly powerful ingredient in producing bonding and cooperation between those who share painful experiences,” says psycho-logical scientist and lead researcher Brock Bastian of the University of New South Wales in Australia. “

Association for Psychological Science

They are survivors of grim, pinched decades who have been left with this irreducible minimum: a belief in each other, a belief that they cleave to even more strongly when death comes. For if the living let go of the dead, their own life ceases to matter. The fact of their own survival somehow demands that they are one, now and forever.

Richard Flanagan, The Narrow Road to the Deep North

As long as gay people are marginalized by our culture, and as long as being submissive to a man is considered feminine, hazing will continue, not only because it emasculates the victim, but because the perpetrator feels no other acceptable way to live out his same-sex desires.

Cyd Zeigler

“My brothers – oh, my brothers. . . .”

Pause. A very long pause. Did he forget what came next? Script get disordered? Sudden brain jumble? Spasmodic dysphonia? Aphasia?

Please let it not be overwhelming emotion, choking up, tears on the way. Better if the speaker has bit the big one. Death would be OK; he'd be happy with that, happy and not even show it. He could be phony, pretend to care that Brother McPhee had gone to his reward right as he was about to close the deal on the biggest monetary gift ever for the national brotherhood. Anything other than what this speaker was about to do, sure as shit: wade into marshy sentimentality, open the dam, drown them all.

Of course the whole affair was sinking, not so slowly, into just such bathetic mawkishness. Why should he be surprised? Did one attend the annual national con-vention of Epsilon Gamma Omega expecting to hear Swift or H. L. Mencken, the very finest in wry and indirect discourse? That being the case, he told himself, just bottle it. Grin and try to avoid the hugs and butt-pats.

After all, he had volunteered, actually won the subsequent election, to represent his chapter, yes he had. Mustn't forget. He was here by choice, here in Cleveland, Fri-day through Monday: skip a few classes, have some drinks, lots of drinks, meet nobody at all, and, in due time, let fly the carefully articulated views of his chapter, his “brothers-in-loyalty” (the required phrase he planned to ignore) on the subject of “hazing,” the public name for a set of private practices referred to by his own chapter as “Hell Week.”

He was about to check his back pocket for that two-paragraph (short paragraphs) statement, crafted just last week, when the speaker, still among them, again found his voice:

“My love for you, each one of you, means more to me than life itself. I know you are all with me on that.”

With him on that?

“More than life itself. More than any other tie. To business, to family, even to country.”

Oh sure. What’s Mom and Dad, the accounting firm, and the Stars and Stripes to ol Epilson Gamma Omega?

“But what we’re here to discuss – and defend – is Hell Week. I don’t need to tell you that. Why is it necessary for us to mount a defense? Because we are forced to do so, forced to do so, forced to do so.”

Was he ever going to stop?

“By who?”

By whom, moron!

“By the ignorant. Now, some of them may be well meaning, but mostly not. You’re with me on that.”

All the way.

“What we know, in the deepest core of our being, our hearts, is that our bond and our ties are made possible and guaranteed by the most meaningful, the most spiritual, the most foundational experience in our lives – Hell Week. I do not exaggerate. I know whereof I speak. And I speak for all of us. Let there be no doubt about that.”

Certainly no doubters in this crowd. Let the reports be what they may.

“So let’s begin in an orderly way with the report from the first of our seven Alabama chapters.”

Knowing he had a while to wait – quite a while – he thought of twittering a bit, maybe a snooze. But he was situated in such a way as to make privacy tough, wedged in among brothers as he was. Listen, then, he must.

The first reports were what he expected. He knew what to expect because his own report was along the same lines: while we recognize and deeply honor the fine traditions of our brotherhood and the wisdom of those who forged them, we also acknowledge that changing times demand some alterations, alterations that will not

loosen our hold on those fundamental principles which have allowed us to flourish and to create the lasting. . . and so on.

But by the fourth report, from Alabama something – he hadn't caught the name of the chapter – a new note had entered, one not exactly defiant but resistant, less willing to go with the “changing times demand alterations” view. These reports were also miles away from the gush of podium-holder, citing studies and quoting from diaries and books about war, suffering, prolonged pain and our human reactions to such experiences.

“That’s the way permanent and unbreakable ties are formed, then only way. Shared pain. Soldiers in combat, prisoners of war, isolated communities devastated by disease, slaves, the oppressed: they connect at the very deepest level. There are no other roads leading to this end. If we give up our traditions, if we allow the ignorant and the envious to rob us of Hell Week, we give up everything, absolutely everything, that gives our lives meaning and value.”

He felt the kid next to him jostle, give him an elbow in the shoulder.

“Huh?”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to do that. Wasn’t trying to get you to come to my room.”

“That’s a relief. Hey, what do you think of what that guy just said?”

“Shit, man, I don’t know. Seems kind of embarrassing.”

“So, you’re against Hell Week. Your chapter is.”

“Nah. We like making kids eat raw eggs, pee on one another, get undressed, pre-sent naked asses to us so we can beat them. They have to bring a dozen paddles each to Hell Week. Sometimes that’s not enough.”

“That’s what you like?”

“Yeah. You don’t do those things?”

“No – Yes.”

“Right. So, just say so in your report, fucking say it.”

“You gonna say that? Keep Hell Week going so we can get off on paddling naked asses?”

“Yes – No.”

“So what WILL you say?”

“What that guy there just said about studies and all that shit. I took some notes.”

“Oh.”

“Want ‘em? Here.”

“Thanks.”

19. THE PRICE IS RIGHT

The lyricism of marginality may find inspiration in the image of “the outlaw,” the great social nomad, who prowls on the confines of a docile, frightened order.

Michel Foucault

My rackets are run on strictly American lines, and they’re going to stay that way.

Al Capone

“I think I got it, Uncle Newton.”

“Carl, idiot!”

“Oh yeah, Carl. Why’d you pick ‘Carl,’?”

“It was assigned. Don’t ask questions.”

“OK. What’s my gang name?”

“It’s not a gang! It’s a business, private and select, like I told you. That’s why you gotta shut your trap and not be asking questions.”

“Right. So what’s my handle?”

“Jesus Christ, kid. Let’s see. It’s ‘Morty.’”

“Can I choose something different? I like ‘Pounder’ or ‘Lilac Terror.’”

“No. Be happy with ‘Morty.’”

“What happens if the customers haggle, Carl?”

“No questions, Morty. Besides, they don’t haggle. They take

it or take it, if you catch my meaning.”

“No I don’t. They accept the price or just leave?”

“No, moron, they take it. Period.”

“Oh, I see. If they don’t take it, though, want a 10% reduction, for instance. What then?”

“That can’t happen, like I say. They take it or they become the mission. We ain’t selling encyclopedias.”

“Can you bargain down the price of encyclopedias? I never knew that.”

“I don’t know, moron.”

“Oh, so if they try to haggle, they become the victim themselves, that what you mean? They say, ‘That’s a little high, don’t you think?’ and I just by Jesus shoot right then and there. Blow their head right the hell off. That’s cool.”

“Discretion, Morty, discretion. We say ‘mission’ not ‘victim’ and. . . . You sure you wanta go into this profession?”

“Oh, yes. You don’t know how much I admire you, Uncle Newton. Always wanted to be just like you. You’re my model of what a man should be.”

“Uh huh. Well, your mother put a lot of pressure on me to get you this job, but. . . . You sure you don’t want to go to college? Be a CPA or something, a gardener maybe.”

“Go to gardener college? Just kidding, Uncle Newton.”

“Carl.”

“Right. When do I do my first hit?”

“Oh, Lord Above. Don’t call it that. Anyhow, first things first. Meet with a client, determine the mission. Happens we got a client in our office. We’ll go there now.”

“Basement of a bar, a secret back room?”

“What? No, Room 217 in that new office building on Thompson. We got ten minutes. Move your ass.”

“OK, Morty, go to it. Right in there. Remember, keep it short and simple. Mission: the goal, time, place, method, money. No more. Nothing! I’ll be looking through this one-way mirror and I’ll have a speaker, case anything gets loused up. It won’t, though. Just don’t babble. This is business, business only.”

“And I’m a terrific businessman. Here I go. Gonna wish me ‘Godspeed’?”

“We don’t talk that way. Get your ass in. The client’s waiting.”

“And I’m worth waiting for, right, Uncle Newton? Here I go!

“Hello there, client. My name’s Morty. Yours is?”

“What? I thought no names.”

“That’s not very friendly. I just thought we could, you know, be friendly, even if you. . . .”

JUST BUSINESS, MORTY! NO NAMES, NO FRIENDLY!

“OK. Sorry for the voice of doom there. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, you know. Ha ha. Really, it’s just me and you settling things, like the price. What’d be a fair price for what you have in mind, do you think?”

NO, NO. GET THE FACTS FIRST. YOU NAME THE PRICE, WHICH IS \$25,000.

“Doesn’t sound like I’m the one naming the price, does it. Well, OK. I’m just following orders here, sort of. I think \$25,000 is a little steep, but I suppose it’s not a buyer’s market, getting somebody bumped off. Who’d you have in mind?”

MORTY, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD. JUST FACTS.

“I thought that’s what I was doing. Oh, I see. So, nameless one, what’s the mission here. Weapon, date, spot, attire – that sort of

thing.”

“I don’t care about anything except you get it done and fast. How you do it and where and when: I don’t wanta know. Here’s a picture.”

“Good clear picture, I’ll say that. This a co-worker, your boss, your mother?”

“That’s none of your business. It’s my wife, as it happens.”

“Just happens to be your wife. She was probably prettier when she was younger.”

“No she wasn’t, but that’s immaterial.”

“Quite. So you have no preferences as to date, time, method?”

“Just so it happens fast.”

“Painful OK?”

MORTY, SHUT UP!

“So, let me get this straight: method, time, place: all up to us. Your only object is to have this wife of yours dead and no doubt about it. How’d you ever end up married to her?”

“What? That’s a long story.”

“She trap you? Pretend to be pregnant?”

MORTY!!

“As a matter of fact, she didn’t. It’s the old story, you know, Morty.”

“Your parents forced you.”

“No, we were in love.”

“Ah. I’ve been in love myself. Four times. I can see now where that leads.”

“Take warning.”

“I will. Don’t marry for love, then.”

“Marry the boss’s daughter.”

“Well, in my case, the boss’s daughter probably comes with a lot of baggage – in the form of guns and ammunition.”

“I see what you mean. Maybe don’t marry at all.”

YOU GUYS DONE IN THERE?

“So, you fell out of love. Another woman?”

“No and no. I love my wife deeply, passionately.”

“Another man?”

“I don’t think so – hadn’t even occurred to me.”

I’M BREAKING THIS UP IN ANOTHER MINUTE

“What then?”

“I found out something worse than all that?”

“What?”

“She’s hired a rival firm.”

“Oh.”

“So you see.”

“You know what I think – what’s your name?”

“Bill.”

“You know what I think, Bill?”

“No, what.”

“First: your wife hate you?”

“I’m sure not. Just a misunderstanding. You see. . . .”

“Don’t matter. Listen to this.”

“OK.”

“Here’s you two lovebirds about to waste \$50,000 between you, am I right?”

“I don’t know how much her firm charges.”

“Well, let’s just say.”

“OK.”

“I got this idea. How about the three of us get together, lay it all out on the table, split the money – say 40/40/20 (I’m the 20) and have a little picnic to celebrate?”

“You serious?”

“I know just the place. Lake, clean tables, shade.”

“Lead the way.”

**NEPHEW ARTHUR, YOU GO TO THAT LAKE,
YOU'LL BE SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES.**

“Good line, Uncle Newton. Me and Luca Brasi, right?”

“So, buddy, you driving or me? Pick up your wife on the way, right?”

20. THE LAST REFUGE OF A SCOUNDREL

Every day we're told that we live in the greatest country on earth. And it's always stated as an undeniable fact: Leos are born between July 23 and August 22, fitted queen-size sheets measure sixty by eighty inches, and America is the greatest country on earth. Having grown up with this in our ears, it's startling to realize that other countries have nationalistic slogans of their own, none of which are “We're number two!”

David Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*

Patriot: The person who can holler the loudest without knowing what he is hollering about.

Mark Twain

“And to the country for which it stands – “

“And to no country at all!”

“One nation”

“A miscellaneous group!”

“Under God”

“Bullshit!”

“Stop, everyone. Nathan, what are you doing?”

“Refusing, Mr. Lee, with respect – I guess.”

“I see. What you’re doing is being a smart-ass, disrupting the class, delaying things on a very busy day.”

“If your schedule is packed, all the more reason to delete this noxious set of oppressive lies, coercive and mind-numbing. . . .”

“Nathan, it’s ‘The Pledge of Allegiance.’”

“Allegiance to what? And why pledge. What is it you’re forcing us to do – and for what reasons?”

“Because the School Board says so. The President says so. We all participate in. . . . It’s part of being a loyal American. It’s part of not being a self-centered brat.”

“You’re calling me names just because you’ve run out of arguments, as if you ever had any. All you got is stupid slogans, robot babble. That’s pure idiotic. And in a school, where we’re supposed to question things. You said so yourself, even you did. Remember critical thinking? It seems to me. . . .”

“Well, I’m the teacher, and **it seems to me** you should exit this very minute and head for the counselor’s office. Wait and I’ll give you a note.”

“May I write an opposition note, stating my side of the argument?”

“No!”

“Liberty and Justice for all. Right? No? You’re a big . . .”

“OK, Nathan, write your note. Write anything you want. Just get out of here NOW!”

“I happily obey, as your command coincides with my wish.”

“I wish we were back in the good old times when I could make a paddle coincide with your butt.”

“So, what is it now, Nathan?”

“Here’s a note from Mr. Lee, laying out, probably not in

startlingly literate terms, his position.”

“His position?”

“Yes, his reasons, the best he can concoct, for ejecting me from class and sending me here for a rousing lecture and appropriate correction.”

“OK. Let me read it.”

“Do. That’ll give me time to pen a short response.”

“Don’t bother.”

“I have no right to respond.”

“What did I say? Don’t write anything. Just sit there in respectful silence.”

“How does respectful silence differ from other varieties?”

“Just shut up.”

“Of course. You have every right to oppress.”

A good six minutes passed, actually six minutes and eleven seconds. Nathan timed it.

“Were you timing me, Nathan?”

“Indeed.”

“That’s endearing.”

“Good. I aim to be just that, at least with you, Mr. Sorenson.”

“OK, Nathan. I read the note. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“That’s your way of inviting my response, my reasons for rejecting all nationalistic rituals, vile. . . .”

“You got detention for one week, Nathan. Now shut up and get back to class.”

“May I state my case?”

“Nobody cares, Nathan. Write a letter to the school paper, expose your views to your peers-----and superiors.”

“I have no peers here, certainly no superiors.”

“You got 47 seconds to get back to class. I’m timing.”

“You know, Nathan, I’m having second thoughts about letting you air your views. We do have a little time left, so, if you promise to be brief, I’ll open the floor to questions and – you must be prepared for this – alternate views.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lee. I will be brief.”

“Good.”

“Now? I should go now?”

“Yes. Go!”

“In pledging allegiance we are aligning ourselves, first, with any old thing any old President or Congress might decide to do, agreeing to be sheep. Why cover such totalitarian tactics with high-sounding platitudes? But there’s something more basic. What is a “country” and why do we imagine some countries are better than others, more exactly, that ours is best. Shaw said every person on earth imagines his or her country is best. You know why?”

“Because that’s where they happen to live?”

“Right, Ava. Because they’re born in it, whatever “it” happens to be at the time. That’s the only reason.”

“But without countries where would we be? How would we live?”

“Think about it, Zack. What that is basic and dear to all of us, that really counts, depends on geography, on arbitrary and meaningless lines on a map?”

“What’s your nationality, Nathan? You some kind of terrorist?”

“I’m a Cuban Muslim, Gene. A commie with a jihad.”

“Nathan, I hear what you’re saying, but some people have died for this flag, to keep us free. I mean, what you say seems right, but we do have something pretty great going on here and a great history – worth preserving.”

“Really? Just ask the Indians, Sarah”

“OK, but what about the wars and all the heroes?”

“What did they die for, Louis?”

“Freedom, our country, our rights, Nathan. What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with all those who threw away their life---for what, Sam?”

“Huh?”

“My own dad did that, the idiot, the fucking fucking idiot.”

“I didn’t know that, Zack.”

“Yeah, well. . . .”

21. ABOVE US ONLY SKY

If God exists, I hope he has a good excuse.

Woody Allen

Prayer has no place in public schools, just as facts have no place in religion.

The Simpsons

Thank God I'm an atheist

Salvador Dali

Mr. Johnson, “Ted” to his students, colleagues, wife, kids, and dog, looked at his watch, not sorry to see it was within a few ties of 3:20 and the end of school for the day. Don’t get me wrong, now, and go thinking Ted had picked the wrong field. He’d be the first to tell you he had capsized into just the right profession.

“Through no fault of my own,” he joked, “I ended up just where I should be.”

“If I hear you say that one more time, Ted, I’ll twist off your nuts with rusty pliers,” said Julie, his wife, and a loyal ally, as well as a very funny woman in her own right.

Truth is he did repeat the line often, had grown so fond of it over the years he must have supposed it was not only witty, but true, as true as large generalizations ever are, which isn’t very.

“Beware of large statements,” he told his students. He didn’t say that at home, though, as he knew by instinct that Julie had her

limits, very low limits, really, for what he called his “words of wise-
assness.”

Students were another matter.

When Ted told friends he had ended up in just the right line of work, he didn't mean that he was what you would call a “born teacher.” Not at all. In fact, when given the chance, he'd chortle, “There's no such thing as a born teacher, any more than there's a born iron-monger.” He'd hit on the ironmonger comparison after trying others less colorful and apt.

What he meant by that, he was ready to explain, was that teaching was not a natural talent but a skill developed over time, over years, through patience, hard work, and attending conferences.

“OK, pestilential presences [one of his amusing terms for the students who loved him unreservedly and whose love he would have returned, were it not against school policy], time to put away your books. Oh, I see you haven't any books out at all. So, put away your pretend books and listen up.”

He waited for them to give signs of having heard him.

“As you know, tomorrow is a vacation day, allowing you to gather your resources and rest – as if you needed rest – for the big Easter weekend in front of you and whatever observances you and your family traditionally observe, I mean, whatever religious or otherwise ceremonies you have in your larder.”

He wasn't too sure what he meant by that, but, before he could clarify, a boy stood up and started talking, not just any boy, but Kevin Davis, one of his best pupils, if, at times, troublesome in the way the best students sometimes are. Kevin felt very close to Ted, obviously, which is why he was sometimes – Ted would go so far as to say “obstreperous,” and not just because he liked the sound of the word.

“Excuse me, Mr. Johnson, sir.”

“Please, Kevin, it's ‘Ted’ to you – and all your friends here,

my friends, too.”

“Well, dear old friend, I think it sucks that you talk about Easter and religion, and I think you shouldn’t.”

“Explain yourself, Kevin.” Ted, of course, knew exactly what Kevin was getting at, but regarded it as important for the boy to verbalize it anyhow. Only he had no idea at all what Kevin was about to say.

“I think it’s against the law for you to promote religion. You ought not to urge upon us a set of crippling and venomous lies.”

“Crippling and venomous. . . .”

“I mean Christianity.”

“I see. Well, Kevin, to be fair, fair to me, I didn’t urge or sponsor or promote or encourage any religion or non-religion. Not at all.”

“You just assumed, which is worse. It’s condescending and stupid. Christianity is a load of shit and you shouldn’t just assume any of us is wallowing in it.”

Of course, Kevin was stretching some limits in suggesting he, Ted, was stupid and in saying “shit” but Ted didn’t observe such limits, really, wanted his pupils, his friends, to be able to express themselves freely. If they couldn’t do that, he’d say, what’s the point?

“Go on, Kevin.”

“Go on? I just said. You talk about Easter and religion and observances as if we should all be doing them or at least we all did do them. Just say you didn’t, just deny it.”

“Go on, Kevin.”

“Shit, man. You said we’d all have religious stuff to do, it being goddamned Easter and all, like we were all going to spend the weekend praising God because his son had riz from the dead, like anybody believes that.”

“Go on, Kevin.”

“With what? OK. It’s not just that this stuff is vacuous but

that it sucks our brains dry, makes us idiots. And there's worse, of course."

"Yes?"

"It oppresses everyone inside it and even those outside too. It makes poor people and slaves and all that accept what they got because things'll be better later, up in the sky. It's poison, always has been. I'd think, TED, as our dear and loving friend, you'd try not to make our lives worse than they are, not that we have it so bad – compared."

"You don't have it bad?"

"Fuck, Ted, we're not poor, most of us, and we're all of us white and able to do more than most of the world."

"You mean you're free."

"Free? Are you listening to me, Ted? The major thing keeping us from being free is this Christian crap. School, too, and you."

Just then the bell rang and students at once, not waiting for a signal from their teacher, rose in a body to leave.

"One minute class, please. Does anyone have a response to Kevin?"

He was sure there'd be an outpouring of rage, or at least counter-arguments. No. Not only that, his request that they pause a second wasn't taking effect. Students near the door were leaking out of the room and the rest were pantomiming impatience as only eighth-graders can.

"This is important. Kevin has raised a powerful point."

No one seemed to care about that.

"Kevin has accused me of impropriety, of breaking the law, even."

The room was emptying.

"Kevin, you little bastard, who do you think you are?"

"I am your friend, Ted, eternally – your brother in Christ."

22. LATE DEPARTURE

Granted, the system is insane, but we must not let sanity stand in the way of airport security.

If security personnel do their job properly, they just might cause you to miss your plane, thereby possibly saving your life.

Dave Barry

The corridor went on forever, the distance between B-17 and B-36 more like the depth of a dreamscape than the couple hundred yards it must have been.

“Can you hurry the hell up?”

“Screw you, father.”

I knew it was a mistake to say anything. She’d get snottier. Worse, she’d go slower. Best to swallow it. So I didn’t.

“I’m simply suggesting that it’d be nice if we made the flight, which won’t happen, honey, if you keep dragging your ass.”

She stopped dead.

“Move it!” I reached out, gently but firmly nudging her, half-playfully, to illustrate what I had in mind. Keeping my voice down, I was.

She didn’t keep her voice down:

“Git yer hands offa me! Help! Rape!”

It was 8:13 when she started. At 8:19, I was in a room with a host of national-security thugs.

“She’s my daughter. Just bring her in here, ask her.”

“You think that makes it better, puts you in the clear, you being her father? You think that gives you the right?”

I kept my cool. That struck me as important.

“Makes what better? I urged her to walk a little faster, my daughter. We were trying to make a flight. Teens, though. Oh boy! You know how it is.”

Evidently not. Blank stares. Hostile, perhaps.

“I know you have to investigate, but this is all just a domestic comedy.”

“You think it’s funny?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I thought I heard you say you found it comic, laugh a minute. Something wrong with my hearing, Agent Conally? He didn’t say that?”

“He said that.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“He’s making distinctions now, drawing fine lines. You a smart guy? We got a smart guy on our hands, Agent Conally? He supposes we don’t tape these things. Should we check what he said, Agent Conally?”

“I’d say there was no need – not with him.”

“Not with smart guys. That what we got, Agent Conally, a special case?”

“Looks like it. You a smart guy, a special case?”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Do not blaspheme, sir!”

“What?”

“I’m ordering you not to blaspheme, sir.

“Ordering me?”

“Hearing problems, Agent Maloney. He’s defective or he’s faking it. I’d say both.”

“Look, this is all a misunderstanding, Agents. Bring my daughter in here and it’ll all be clear.”

“You giving orders?”

“A take-charge guy, a special case, given to drawing fine lines and doing stand-up, all in questionable taste.”

“Not-suitable-for-children.”

“Please, bring my daughter in.”

“He’d like that, Agent Delaney.”

“I don’t think there’s anything he’d like more, Agent Maloney.”

“Please tell me what you want with me.”

“He wants to know what we want with him.”

“That’s funny, Agent Maguire.”

“He’s a funny guy; let’s not forget that.”

“We should take note of that, all his defects aside.”

“Being preemptory is one. Either a defect or an unlikely asset.”

“He does assertive comedy, which we have down on tape.”

“Jokes on all subjects, howlers at a moment’s notice?”

“He does deaf jokes, we know that much.”

“My mother’s deaf, Mr. Daddy of the Year.”

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

“He wants to do something, Agent Calhoun.”

“Something in his line, down his alley?”

“No, I mean what do **you** want to do, with me?”

“Us? We should do something? Does he think we’re entertainers?”

“He wants us to tell the jokes.”

“He wants to steal our material.”

“He feels his stock needs freshening, made suitable for all

ages.”

“He’s lost touch with the younger crowd. Should we help him out?”

“We are public servants. He’s the one giving orders.”

“Lest we forget.”

“To laugh.”

“I know a joke, Mister daughter rapist. Would you like to hear it?”

“I’m no daughter rapist.”

“Don’t be a spoil sport.”

“He’s a spoil sport, Agent Donaghy – no sense of humor.”

“Went into the wrong line of work. I feel sorry for him.”

“You have a tender heart, Agent Shapiro.”

“But he doesn’t like our jokes, that’s what gets me. I think my compassion is tempered by hurt feelings.”

“Are you saying we aren’t amusing?”

“I want to talk to my lawyer.”

“Here’s the joke. I doubt it’s suitable for mixed company, but if you insist. You’re making demands, which is how it should be: this daughter-rapist walks into a bar and says to the bartender, ‘Hey bartender, a boilermaker for me and my kid here. And by the way, do you have any objections to. . . .’ Do you like it so far?”

“You get my lawyer here right now, you rotten bastard sadists!”

“But I haven’t finished the joke.”

“I think we need to move to Phase Three, Agent Llewellyn.”

“It’s where the lawyers come in, Phase Three is.”

“And the lawyer jokes.”

“Would you agree you are a threat to national security, Mr. – what’s your name?”

“I won’t tell you. I won’t say another word until my lawyer comes in.”

“I thought it was your daughter you pined for.”

“Yeah, bring my daughter in.”

“It’s a different daughter he’s talking about now.”

“He has several. It could be confusing to those without our training and willing-ness to empathize.”

“We are sympathetic but not all of us are astute.”

“Good thing we have it all on tape, Agent Zacher.”

“I can produce an up-to-date list of his daughters, all victims of his wanton and unscrupulous – I cannot say the word.”

“This particular daughter he now wants us to produce is a lawyer, that’s key.”

“You want us to bring her in and leave you alone together? Your daughter that’s a lawyer or the one you’re raping, or both – or other daughters on our list here?”

“It would make little difference, I’d say, just judging from the way he puts things, the way he thinks, his general bearing.”

“His rich comic sensibility.”

“Exercised on all his daughters.”

“He doesn’t play favorites.”

“He plays different tunes with all his daughters, not just those who are lawyers, unless they’re really the same tunes, which is a possibility we’d be wrong to overlook.”

“No. I didn’t say I had lots of daughters or that my lawyer is my daughter. I didn’t say anything you said. I want to see the one I was with. That’s my only daughter. She’s not a lawyer. Give me a chance.”

“He wants a second chance. Speaking for myself, I’d say the best chance you have is to put yourself out of the reach of temptation. Never again see your daughter, any daughter. Never ever. Not ever. Nope. Don’t bother looking for them, travelling to strange locations on strange airlines, lifting up the bedclothes.”

“I think he wants a chance to redeem himself.”

“Never see them again, remove temptation.”

“Once bitten, twice burned.”

“That’s not the way it goes. Please, do kindly let me see my lawyer, any lawyer.”

“He doesn’t think it goes that way. He thinks it goes a different way.”

“The wheels on the bus go round and round. He wants us kindly to put his law-yes, all of them on a bus. He wants to fight fire with fire.”

“Agent Nesselrode, I am convinced of his sincerity”

“Me too. And it’s a fine idea, I’d say, removing temptation is. It’s the sort of thing a laugh-a-minute drawer of fine distinctions would find to his liking.”

“It’s a Christian idea, Agent Nesselrode.”

“He has renounced his old ways, his wicked comic ways.”

“When did you stop raping your daughter, Mr. Reformed-Felon?”

“This is ridiculous. Let me go.”

“So, you won’t say that you have renounced Satan. Get thee behind me, daughter. You won’t say that? That’s what you’re saying?”

“I want my lawyer. I don’t have a daughter who’s a lawyer. My lawyer is a woo-man but not my daughter. Really.”

“We believe you.”

“We believe everything you say.”

“That’s our job.”

“Let you condemn yourself with your own words.”

“Out of the mouths of babes – and daughters.”

“Oh please, please. My lawyer – here’s her card.”

“That lawyer is somebody’s daughter. You ever thought of that?”

“He’s never thought of that, Agent Mulroney.”

“Agent Maguire here is somebody’s daughter. Does that give you pause?”

“No.”

“It doesn’t give him pause. Are you your daughter’s keeper, Mr. Suspect?”

“I refuse to go along with this anymore.”

“Then we will have to assume you are what you say you are: a deaf spoil-sport tongue-teasing bossy quibbling special case who rapes daughters, constructs artful jokes about it for his nightclub act, and deserves whatever comes to him.”

“No.”

“You said so yourself.”

“It’s only what’s just and fair.”

“Fair and just.”

“So, Agent Maguire, give him what he has coming to him.”

“Now?”