

AMERICAN INFERNO

by

PATRICK DENKER

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

American Inferno, a novel, is a loose transposition of Dante's *Inferno* into a contemporary American setting. Its chapters (or "circles") correspond to Dante's nine circles of Hell: 1) Limbo, 2) Lust, 3) Gluttony, 4) Hoarding & Wasting, 5) Wrath, 6) Heresy, 7) Violence, 8) Fraud and 9) Treachery. The novel's Prologue — Circle 0 — corresponds to the events that occur, in the *Inferno*, prior to Dante's and Virgil's entrance into Hell proper. The novel is a contemporary American moral inquiry, not a medieval Florentine one: thus it is sometimes in harmony with and sometimes a critique of Dante's moral system. Also, like the *Inferno*, it is not an investigation just of its characters' personal moral struggles, but also of the historical sins of its nation: for Dante, the nascent Italian state; for us, the United States. Thus the novel follows the life story of its principal character as he progresses from menial to mortal sins while simultaneously considering American history from America's early Puritan foundations in the Northeast (Chapters 1-4) through slavery, civil war and manifest destiny (Chapters 5-7) to its ultimate expression in the high-technology West-Coast entertainment industry (Chapters 8-9).

INDEX WORDS: Dante Alighieri, Divine Comedy, Inferno, Sin, American history, American morality, Consumerism, Philosophical fiction, Social realism, Frame narrative, Christianity, Secularism, Enlightenment, Jefferson, Adorno, Culture industry, lobbying, public relations, advertising, marketing

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PATRICK DENKER

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PATRICK DENKER

Major Professor: Reginald McKnight

Committee: O. Bradley Bassler
 Thomas Cerbu

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

For An Old Novel:

Craft, Conservatism and a Modern/American *Inferno*

Part 1: Craft

The English department of a reputable American university requires that its creative-writing doctoral students produce, as part of their dissertation, a “writing manifesto,” an “essay about craft” (“Graduate Student Handbook”). The very term itself — *craft* — is curious. It gets bandied about creative-writing circles a lot. Sometimes it’s used to refer to writers’ formal aesthetics, sometimes to their thematic concerns (which might or might not include their politics), and sometimes to their writing “process” (e.g. what role caffeine, opium or benzodiazepines might play in the writer’s act of writing — as they did for Balzac, Coleridge and Kerouac, respectively). For the purposes of this essay, I’ll take *craft* to refer primarily to the first two items: aesthetics and thematics, a.k.a. good old “form and content.”¹

I have no problem with old tools — when they work.

¹ My demon interrupts: “But are not form and content inseparable?” They are, as apples are from apple pie. We can, nevertheless, distinguish meaningfully between apples and apple pie; if we couldn’t, we’d have sticky lunch sacks and drab desserts.

Get your laws off my oeuvre

Is it even a good idea for a writer to produce a manifesto? Couldn't there be something stultifying about committing oneself to a certain aesthetic or thematic program? Shouldn't a writer's craft change, to some extent at least, from work to work? Shouldn't they try their hand at different forms and styles? Surely craft considerations differ significantly from genre to genre: surely the craft considerations of the "realistic" novel differ significantly from those of the magical-realist novel, the experimental novel, the romance, the thriller. Surely what the writer's called on to master (or to question) differs greatly between high-brow, small-run, "literary" fiction as opposed to "trade press" work.²

Perhaps a given writer's craft differs from work to work and perhaps it doesn't, but it seems obvious to say that, to some extent at least, it should; if it didn't, we'd be consigning writers to stultification — to the late-career self-mimicry of writers such as (so they say) Faulkner or Hemingway. What's to be gained, and what lost, by having a consistent craft that one works out (or trots out?) in book after book? Is a writer's craft, as reflected in a given work, something that he should produce an apologia for, or is it something that he should apologize for?

² And while we might think it easy to distinguish between genres and between markets — between high and low, literature and pulp, art and entertainment — are they not also like the apples and the pie? Some pornography has been canonized, and some high literature is masturbatory. If the distinction between the mind and the belly is absolute and clear, then so is the one between art and entertainment; if not, then not.

Teaching as violence

If the relativism of craft implied in the above passage has any truth to it, it might cause trouble for creative-writing pedagogy. If there are no general rules or standards for the craft of writing creative prose, it's not clear how one could teach creative writing without constantly doing violence to the craft of a particular writer's particular work. Perhaps teaching writing is something that one can do properly only one-on-one, work by work, letting each individual work convey its own self-expectations and judging it by its own standard. That's the sentiment that John Gardner expresses on the first page of his *The Art of Fiction*: "Every true work of art ... must be judged primarily, though not exclusively, by its own laws" (Gardner 3).

Of course, we do exactly that, in creative-writing workshops, to an extent. Or at least, any halfway-decent writing teacher does. A writing teacher who imposes his particular generic or stylistic preferences on his students, ignoring or discouraging work in other genres and styles, is simply a poor teacher (unless it's an expressly specialized course). And after Gardner's page-one caveat, he does, after all, go on to write a 200-page book about the *do's* and *don'ts* of good writing.

There's something to be lauded about a little instructional violence. Teaching can be violent. To correct error is violent; to confront prejudice is violent; to suggest a better (or merely another) perspective on a topic is violent. Teaching writing is no different. Each genre — each set of aesthetic predilections and craft techniques — has its strengths and weaknesses, its tricks and tools. The "realistic" prose writer can learn a lot about imagination from the fantasy novelist, and the fantasist can learn a lot about constructing a believable fictional world from the realist. The prose writer can learn a lot about piquant, shapely, rhythmic language from the poet,

and the poet can learn a lot about everyday language (and perhaps a bit about everyday experience) from the writer of prose.

Show, don't tell

It certainly seems as if there are at least *some* universal rules — or, as Gardner better calls them, recommended techniques (Gardner 8) — for the writing of creative fiction. At least, we teach it as if there were: they're the bromides one finds in almost every writing workshop or book on craft, *Show, don't tell* being the emperor of them all, the Golden Rule of writing. The long form of the maxim goes something like this:

Show, don't tell; dramatize, don't analyze. Use exposition sparingly, when you need to cover a lot of plot-ground quickly. Dramatization creates a tangible world that the reader can enter. Instead of saying "John looked nauseous," describe John's face turning pale, his lips quivering, the saliva backing up in his mouth. The reader can identify with (can feel, can literally sym-pathize with) concrete, detailed description. It puts flesh on the bones of whatever you're trying to get the reader to imagine.

Anyone who's ever taken a creative-writing workshop will surely have heard the maxim, and I can't imagine that it doesn't appear, in some permutation, in every single mainstream creative-writing handbook, e.g.: "It is always dangerous to depend too much on words that *tell* rather than *show*" (Jason & Lefcowitz 57). Sometimes the maxim is attributed to Henry James' self-direction to "Dramatize, dramatize!" (James), but its roots go further back. You can find it

in Aristotle, naturally: “Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies” (Aristotle 55, Part IV). But it’s not merely Aristotle’s aesthetics of naturalistic imitation that produce the dictum; concrete detail is not solely the handmaiden of writing in a verisimilar, naturalistic-imitative or “realistic” style. Brenda Ueland employs the maxim into a much more general service in her 1938 *If You Want To Write*: “The more you wish to describe a Universal, the more minutely and truthfully you must describe a Particular,” attributing it in turn to William Blake (one never accused of dreary prosaic realism), who wrote that “Singular and Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime” (Ueland 104). And (even) Robbe-Grillet appealed to the maxim explicitly to *combat* the tradition of Aristotelian verisimilitude he so despised: “The little detail which ‘rings true’ no longer holds the attention of the novelist ... What strikes him ... on the contrary, [is] the little detail that rings *false*” (Robbe-Grillet). The devil appears to be in the details, regardless of what work you want to set the devil doing.

Is a maxim such as this applicable across genres? Surely, to a large extent (although exceptions, like perhaps Blanchot’s attempts to write the unwriteable, come quickly to mind). But in the main, concrete and precise detail, whether it’s about objects, feelings or ideas, is as useful to the writer of realistic literary fiction as it is to the writer of fantasy or romance — or expository prose, for that matter. Even experimental fiction (depending, to be sure, on the experiment being run) often relies heavily on the writer’s ability to create a realistic fiction, with which he then tampers in some way; one can’t be disillusioned about narrative’s spellbinding trickery without first being illusioned (sic). The average “postmodern” meta-fictional device works this way: you enchant the reader using traditional fiction’s delusive trickery and then

invite analysis of the spell by breaking it, by calling attention to it. One can find this meta-fictional trick, in various forms, everywhere from Shakespeare's plays-within-plays to the self-referential pyrotechnics of Pope and Sterne — from George Eliot's constant interrogation of her reader to the average postmodern novelist's permanently winking eye-rony. But that's starting down a new path, so let's step onto it.

Part 2: Conservatism

Device vs. gimmick

Having raised the ghost of George Eliot — a specter that should strike terror and shame into the heart of the self-styled young experimental writer (as it did me when I fancied myself one) — let's continue a few steps along the garden path with this ghost. While George Eliot's constant admonishments to her reader (i.e. *Does X's behavior strike you as Y, dear reader? Do not be too quick to judge ...*) do certainly bridge the so-called fourth wall, their primary purpose is not to call attention to the narrative as such, but simply to drive home the moral questions that Eliot is dramatizing in her narrative. Eliot isn't Mark Leyner or David Foster Wallace — nor is she, for that matter, Sterne or Pope. Like those writers, Eliot (I would argue) is dissatisfied about the extent to which a mere tale can instruct. How can Pope satirize pompous scholarship, as he does in his *Dunciad*, without the multiple layers of editorial footnotes — all thoroughly fabricated — that permeate the text? A straightforward tale relies on the principle of *Verbum sapientis satus est*, but if you're wise enough for a word to suffice, you already know the moral

that the tale is trying to convey. When Eliot steps outside of her narration, it's to say to the reader, and quite sincerely: *Did you get that? It's trickier than it seems. Go back over it.* If it's a narrative "gimmick," it's one that's justified.

Some readers' intelligences might be offended by Eliot's device; *Of course I got it*, they might feel. I'd say two things in defense of Eliot's didactic asides, and these two things lie right at the heart of my deepest motivations both in writing and in teaching. First: Eliot's no fool, and the productive questions that can lie embedded in smart fiction, like the ones that lie embedded in life, are often deceptively simple: quotidian, apparently commonplace, easy to overlook — and also difficult, profound and, if not universal, widely applicable. For example: Eliot's *Middlemarch*, at first glance, appears to have the typical 19th-century quota of sentimental heroes and heroines weepily pitying each other. Easy to pass over; standard Victorian fare. But Eliot deploys her characters (in this case, Dorothy and Lydgate) carefully, having them dramatize a specific philosophical question: when is pity charitable and empowering (Dorothy), and when is pity contemptuous and disempowering (Lydgate)? This is a question easily posed but not easily answered — and a profoundly important one, on both a personal level (as any moral social being who's lived more than a few years can attest to) and a political one (our debates about the extent to which the United States should be a welfare state or not hinging on the like).

My first defense of Eliot might be characterized as philosophical, my second as political (though I would call it, instead, moral). If this didactic "underlining" of Eliot's is overkill to the super-*sapiens* reader, so what? What's wrong with occasionally telling the clever reader something she already knows if it means reaching a slightly dimmer reader that you wouldn't otherwise have reached? Because Eliot's not writing to keep her fingers limber; she's writing to enlighten. What's wrong with writing for a wider audience? In fact — *if he could do so without*

doing fundamental violence to what he was trying to get at — why wouldn't *every writer* want to address the widest audience possible?

The phrase in italics above is crucial, obviously. Eliot's departures from narrative norms are slight. But if you're trying to Write Degree Zero, to borrow Barthes' phrase — if you believe that "Writing is in no way an instrument for communication" (Barthes 19) or that words "in no way correspond" to their alleged referents (Nietzsche 635) or that "to call a cat a cat" is not just "mystification" but "hypocritical violence" (Blanchot 368) — if you believe that traditional narrative notions about character and plot are "obsolete" and "dead" (Robbe-Grillet 25) or that a writer is "fooling himself" if he "states that his function is to write for others" (Blanchot 367) — then you're quite likely to need to do more, in order to "get at what you're trying to get at," than indulge in the occasional Dear Reader.

Location, location, location

The above-referenced writers are (obviously) in no way representative of so-called "experimental" writing (itself a hotly debated term) in general. To treat that, I'd have to stretch from *A Tale of a Tub* to *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, and I can't. (Who could?) I'm going to use this tiny sub-set of "experimental" writers to make a point.

These writers aren't cranks. They're not insane, they're not working in bad faith and they're not tilting with philosophical windmills. This statement might seem obvious, needless or insulting to some readers — to a professor of experimental literature or a professor of Continental philosophy, perhaps. But it needs to be said. The average reader — and not the average American, but the average well-intentioned, intellectually curious, college-educated

American reader — is challenged by Faulkner or Barth and befuddled by Beckett. To this reader, the experimental work of writers such as Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet is incomprehensible. The notions about language and knowledge that fathered many of these avant-garde preoccupations are themselves arcane at best and controversial at worst.

[That's putting it mildly; others have not. The extremely polite J.S. Mill said that Hegel was insane, and the equally polite W.V.O. Quine called Derrida a charlatan. All I would venture to say is that the reasoning to be found in this particular experimental tradition seems often subject to the fallacy of false choice: for one example, that a writer can't "write for others" because that writer would thus not exist to write, "would be no one" (Blanchot 369); for another example, that words and objects "in no way correspond" because there are many stages of translation from object to brain-perception to discourse (Nietzsche 635).]

I can't do justice to those philosophical debates in this space, and it's not my intention to do more than cast a passing shadow. Allow me to press on toward the point of this sub-section by simply stating the obvious: that there are revolutions in literary form from generation to generation. Sometimes these are the result of revolutions in philosophy or science or politics, but just as often, as Milan Kundera argues in *The Art of the Novel*, it's the novelists who are doing the ground-breaking research: Cervantes' "inquiries into the nature of adventure," Richardson's examination of "what happens inside," Balzac's discovery of "man's rootedness in history," Flaubert's exploration of "the *terra* previously *incognita* of the everyday," and so forth (Kundera 5).

What's interesting about the avant-garde in literature (and art in general) is that artists so often — especially if they're academically trained — feel a keen need (and sometimes an overwhelming one) to "locate themselves" in their aesthetic tradition. Too often, such writers

assume (or are taught) that the aesthetic tradition of their medium is something that they have a primary responsibility to address — to reject, to incorporate, or both. While this maxim isn't as ubiquitous as *Show-don't-tell*, it's pervasive. *You can't work in ignorance of the traditions of your medium*, the bromide goes. *You can't merely re-discover the discoveries of the past. That would be 'derivative.'* *You must be familiar with your tradition. Incorporate it or break it, but build on it.*

Doesn't it sound a bit like the logic of modern science, in which the only valid work is work that builds on what's come before? No point in rediscovering $E=Mc^2$. Doesn't it recall the Enlightenment notion of Progress, so popular among 19th-century imperialists, industrialists and positivists? — not just that there are always new inventions and perspectives coming into existence, but more fundamentally, that Progress is Natural and Good? It's strange company for someone like Robbe-Grillet to be in, perhaps, but there he is, and he expresses the sentiment well in “New Novel, New Man”:

... the evolution has become increasingly evident: Flaubert, Dostoevski, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett ... Far from making a *tabula rasa* of the past, we have most readily reached an agreement on the names of our predecessors; and our ambition is merely to continue them. Not to *do better*, which has no meaning, but to situate ourselves in their wake, now, in our own time. (Robbe-Grillet 136)

Again, there's an assumption here that needs to be questioned. The assumption is that a “New Man” doesn't *automatically* write a “New Novel” — not entirely, perhaps, but to a degree that matters — simply because of his new time and place, his new experience, his new thematics,

his new *content*. For example, when we consider Upton Sinclair's preoccupation with, as Robbe-Grillet derisively puts it, "the factory and the shantytown," Sinclair's social realism would no doubt have qualified as a "more or less bastardized formula of Emile Zola" (Robbe-Grillet 161). Of course Sinclair was formally derivative of Zola — and surely would've taken the accusation as a compliment. And when you compare *The Ladies' Paradise* to *The Jungle*, is the latter really not a new novel by a new man, for new men in a new world? The unspeakable industrial squalor of the Chicago meat-packing industry ... the bewildering tricks and traps of early 20th-century laissez-faire capitalism in America ... that is to say, the *content* of Sinclair's novel: does it not differ enough from Zola to suffice, to be current, to be "situated in the now of [Sinclair's] own time"? (Robbe-Grillet 136) What kind of person would read a pair of novels by Zola and Sinclair — or Jane Austen and Joyce Carol Oates, or Thomas Hardy and Ralph Ellison, and so on — and not come away from the pair with radically different experiences of each?

A formalist.

The lineage that Robbe-Grillet traces above is telling. It's a very particular (and familiar) one. Any English major can see how each writer in the lineage "builds on" the prior — especially in regard to each writer's degree of formal experimentation. It's not a new novel that Robbe-Grillet (like so many avant-gardistes) calls for, but a new formal aesthetics of the novel.

What's wrong with experimenting with form? Nothing, in theory; in theory, it's marvelous. In practice, a lot can go wrong. The worst danger of formal experimentation is that it caters to the proclivities of the lazy, inexperienced, pseudo-intellectual writer. To "push the envelope" of one's content requires life experience and hard-won wisdom; to "push the envelope" of one's form requires, at best, a studied familiarity with one's aesthetic tradition. At worst, it requires confusion, disrespect and a childish desire to seem mysterious. *Legitimate*

formal experimentation frequently produces work that is difficult for even the above-average reader to understand. Now, Robbe-Grillet (like many avant-gardistes) blames this on “a certain literary culture” which “came to an end around 1900” and makes it “more difficult [for the average reader] to understand” new novels (Robbe-Grillet 140). Even assuming that it’s true that many aesthetic traditions have hung on since Aristotle’s *Poetics* not because they have any legitimate value but for some more nefarious reason, the fact remains that they *have* hung on, that traditional narrative is largely the language that the average reader understands, and that legitimate departures from it are difficult for the average reader — and the average writer — to distinguish from junk.

As I said before: in theory, formal experimentation is great. In practice, it has pitfalls, and the production of fashionable flummery is one. I’ve edited student literary magazines and participated in creative-writing workshops for more than 20 years now. I can’t calculate the number of hours I’ve spent earnestly trying to puzzle out some “difficult” and “experimental” piece of writing with my peers, only to leave the workshop or submission-review meeting to hear the author admit that he threw the piece together in five minutes, has no idea what it means and was very amused to hear us all make so much of it.

It may well be that overexposure to experimental student writing has clouded my judgment. I would merely emphasize that I’m talking about the pitfalls of experimental writing *for novice writers*. According to John Gardner, a lot of “experimental” writing is perhaps better understood as mere “jazzing around” — something that “may cover anything from parody to whimsy to heavy European surrealism.” And this jazzing-around, Gardner goes on to observe, is “unfortunately ... what most beginning writers do most of the time” (Gardner 93).

From Robbe-Grillet to Eliot: a short personal intellectual history

Like a Jew who reserves the right to tell Holocaust jokes — like Chris Rock mocking stereotypical African-Americans in his stand-up routine — I reserve the right (feeling that I’ve earned it) to cast the occasional bit of cold water on experimental writing. I was a compulsively “experimental” writer (with form) in college, and my above description of the lazy, inexperienced, pseudo-intellectual writer was a self-portrait. I was introduced to Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet during my MFA study and applied to PhD programs in order to continue those studies. But during those MFA years, flies started to stick in the ointment.

One fly was Nietzsche. I had loved Nietzsche when I’d studied him in high school, but when I returned to him as an MFA student — ten years older and more serious mature — there were problems. Nietzsche’s tirades, which had thrilled me as a rebellious teenager, now seemed cheap, *ad hominem*, unjust. His essay “Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” was one example. As much as I wanted to like the essay, something about it seemed fishy. Its argument was based on a “no-correspondence” model of language that could not account for the successful quotidian communicative interactions that comprise the vast majority of language use, e.g. a person’s being handed a pen rather than a cat when he asks to borrow a pen. I also had learned enough about biology to know that Nietzsche’s exclusively competitive, domination-driven, red-in-tooth-and-claw model of nature — a premise fundamental to so much of his thought — was simply a popular 19th-century error: one that was unaware of (or ignored) the many instances of genetically programmed eusocial, collaborative or “altruistic” behavior observable in countless species, from orangutans to ants.

Another fly was *The Mill on the Floss*. I had never read George Eliot before, nor had I

studied any of the great 19th-century novelists other than Flaubert. I studied Joyce (and Shakespeare) in high school, and 20th-century American literature (and Shakespeare) in college. I'll never forget George Gretton, the 19th-century literature professor in my MFA program, characterizing the 19th-century novel as the work of art in its final form before the great 20th-century high-/low-culture schism. I squirmed. While I was still aesthetically elitist, having always fancied myself an avant-gardiste, I was politically and morally egalitarian. It sounded very appealing: a work of art that was smart but that nevertheless remained accessible to the general public. And *The Mill on the Floss* was, though an early book of Eliot's, clearly such a work. Then I studied some short stories of Tolstoy and Dickens' *Hard Times*. Again, these works struck me as unusually well-rounded, compared to what I was accustomed to: full of science, philosophy and social analysis, and simultaneously full of humor, compassion and adventure. In two words, smart and accessible; in one, full.

At the doctoral level, my study of both 18th-and 19th-century novels expanded and deepened. It seemed to me that, in them, the writer was presenting the reader with "problems" at the level of the idea, not at the level of language — that these novels used simple language to get at difficult ideas, rather than difficult language to get at simple ideas (which is what I suddenly felt that I, in my experimental writing, had been doing). I felt chastened by these novels, these writers. I fell in love with them. In comparison to the well-rounded novels of Defoe and Shelley, Austen and Eliot, Melville and Tolstoy and Flaubert, the novels I had always convinced myself that I loved — the flashy (post)modernism of (late) Joyce and Beckett, Pynchon and Leyner — suddenly seemed thin and gimmicky.

Though I hadn't planned it, my philosophical studies were pushing me in a similar direction. As out-of-date as synthetic philosophy may be in some circles, I fell in love with the

grand tradition of mainstream synthetic philosophers seeking (perhaps vainly, but valiantly and productively nonetheless) to put it all together, to meld ontology and epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, history and language, psychology and physics into a grand unified system: Aristotle and Kant, Hegel and Mill, Peirce and Habermas.

Lastly, there was Barbara Epstein's 1997 essay "Postmodernism and the Left," which described how an increasing preoccupation with formalism and esoteric theory among "postmodern" artists and scholars had alienated the intellectual elite from the general population it had once served. This essay rang true for me, accurately (I felt) describing the increasing knowledge gap that seemed to be tearing American society in half. Creationism was resurging; the magical twaddle of Christian Evangelism continued to gain ground; American historical and scientific illiteracy was a well-documented international embarrassment. Meanwhile, it seemed that many of America's best minds — its intellectual and artistic elite — had been carried away by a sort of neo-Scholasticism, devoting too much of their energy to career-advancing arcana and too little of it to the thankless business of enlightening the masses. It seemed to me, to use a military metaphor, that the avant-garde had left the rear guard far behind, and supply lines were breaking down. A culture thus divided is in danger: just such a knowledge gap characterized the Weimar Republic when the Nazis, in 1930, won 18% of the seats in the parliament of what was at that time the world's most scientifically, philosophically and artistically advanced country.

A country's head needs to know what its hands are doing, lest it find them around someone's neck — including its own.

Part 3:

A modern/American Inferno

Dante's amoral Inferno

I did not initially intend to write any sort of conventional novel for my dissertation, and I certainly didn't intend to use Dante's *Inferno* — that least modern of modern texts³ — as a springboard. My first two dissertation projects weren't traditional prose fiction at all; one was a website (an online mock encyclopedia), the second a mock tax code. The first had been done; the second proved unworkable.

When I was teaching Italian literature in Cortona one semester, my students begged me to put Dante's *Inferno* on the syllabus. I had left Dante off the syllabus intentionally, much preferring to start with Boccaccio — a *real* Renaissance radical, to my mind, who not only wrote in the vulgar tongue, as Dante did, but who wrote about astoundingly vulgar, quotidian, common topics, as Dante most assuredly did not. Re-reading the *Inferno* in preparation for the class, I was disgusted by it. Not by its grotesquerie; I didn't mind its brain-eating, its demon-farting, its wallowing in shit. What disgusted me first and foremost about Dante's epic poem was its near-total lack of moral inquiry — and this in a work that's canonized, allegedly, because it's a masterpiece of moral and theological literature. The *Inferno* does have a moral framework, to be sure, i.e. the nine circles which correspond to nine types of sin, divided roughly into three categories: sins of incontinence, sins of violence and sins of fraud. But moral philosophy —

³ Whenever I use the term *modern*, I mean it in the technical historical sense: post-medieval or post-Renaissance, believing that the Renaissance and especially the Enlightenment initiated the “modern” era in which Western culture remains located.

inquiry into what constitutes sinful behavior — is almost entirely absent from the book. Very occasionally, Dante will tell the reader a bit about what a given sinner did to wind up in hell; more often, not. And often, we don't get even that much: the reader has to glean, from Virgil's offhand comments, what sin is being punished in a certain region of hell. Sometimes Dante doesn't give us even this, and we race past punishments with no idea of why these people are being punished. When does love become lust? When is hunger gluttony? When is rest sloth, frugality avarice, independence heresy? You won't find these questions explored in the *Inferno*; it's a catalogue of punishments, of names and (sometimes) of the names of sins.

Let me quickly note, to Dante's credit, that this sort of moral inquiry is intentionally *not* present in the *Inferno*. As Dorothy Sayers observes in her introduction to the 1949 edition, Dante's hell, being removed from any hope of grace, is *properly* a place of darkness, ignorance and confusion (Sayers 60). There's nothing to be learned there; the sinners in Dante's hell have no hope of salvation, ever. There's no point in learning or instruction. The sort of moral exploration I missed when reading the *Inferno* is to be found in abundance, of course, in *Purgatorio*.⁴

The problem is that no one reads *Purgatorio*. Or, more precisely put: of the three books Dante's *Divine Comedy*, only *Inferno* became part of the canon and is widely read. Dante would have been horrified, since it's the least important of the three: there's nothing to learn in hell except that you don't want to wind up there.⁵ Nevertheless, the *Inferno* is the book of the

⁴ Properly speaking, the novel I'm writing should be called *American Purgatory*, not *American Inferno*. But the former title lacks the alliterative ring of the latter. More importantly, I wanted to use — to “revise,” in a sense — a famous, canonical, moral-touchstone text, and as much as it *should* serve that function, *Purgatorio* does not.

⁵ To draw a legal analogy: the *Inferno* is a prison, where you see the application of the law but little of the reasoning behind it. *Purgatorio* is a legislature, where values conflict and laws are

Comedy's three that has been canonized — mostly, I think, for base reasons. First, it was politically titillating for Dante to put his enemies in hell. Second, it has the prurient appeal of horror. These two things (combined of course with the fact that it's exquisite poetry by Italy's early-Renaissance master of letters) secured the *Inferno* its place in the canon, even though, taken separately from the rest of the *Comedy*, it serves poorly as a work of moral literature.

As a prose writer — i.e. someone who's accustomed to dramatizing the complexity of moral decisions as people actually wrestle with them in real, day-to-day life — I found the two-dimensionality of the *Inferno*'s moral philosophy offensive. *What good is a list of the names of half a dozen barrators?* I asked. *Dramatize what barratry might or might not be in real life; that's moral inquiry.* This sort of situational moral inquiry — where one investigates the context of moral decisions and takes into account such things as motive, habit and social programming, and in which there are not necessarily any easy answers — is also a decidedly more modern (rather than medieval) view of sin and sinfulness. For Dante — *especially* in the *Inferno* — sin is presented in a cut-and-dried fashion: if God's law prohibits lust and you're lustful, you go to hell if you're unrepentant and purgatory if you're repentant. As a modern moralist (and an atheist), I felt that moral questions were more difficult, and very much required the medium of “realistic” prose to explore them properly, i.e. to dramatize the situations we all must muddle through every day in a struggle to differentiate right from wrong. I wanted to write a book that would do that — that would take the nine famous categories of sin that Dante (and the Christian tradition) had bequeathed to the Western canon and consider them in the context of contemporary American life.

debated. *Paradiso* is a congressional library, where the moral philosophy that shapes values waits patiently to be studied.

Heroes vs. citizens

This brings me to another point upon which I found myself at odds with Dante. For the most part, the *Inferno* is concerned with outrageous sins and famous sinners. As moral instruction for the average person, it's nearly useless. The menial sins of common folks are rarely on display; Dante's hell is, instead, populated largely by popes, kings and famous (in Dante's day) politicians whose sins are, usually, fairly tremendous: defrauding the church or state of millions, waging unjust wars, slaughtering dozens of friends, eating family members — not quite the sort of sin that the average reader is tempted to (or able to) indulge.

So again, as both a modernist and a writer of common prose, I was offended by Dante's decidedly non-populist leaning. It's not that there's anything wrong with writing about the great sins of great men; it can be both entertaining and instructive. The problem is that, for citizens of the modern Western world, this sort of individualistic, "heroic" moral philosophy isn't the *most* useful sort of moral inquiry. We moderns — especially today — enjoy the honors and responsibilities of representative self-government, a universal franchise and a high degree of social mobility. Our governments' and our cultures' sins are our sins, our fault, our responsibility. Our leaders reflect our vices — or at least, do not "lord it over" us without our implicit approval. In the modern era, we the people are the leaders, and if our ship of state wrecks, it's our everyday venality amassed that drives it onto the rocks.⁶

⁶ This is the notion of a "venal bargain" that's prominent in *American Inferno*. In modern free societies, the capacity of the powerful to corrupt the masses depends on the masses' implicit partial cooperation. The cultural sickness of consumerism is an excellent example. Manipulative "demand-creating" marketing succeeds only to the extent that we consumers let it exploit our materialistic greed. If Americans were resolutely anti-materialistic, no amount of advertising could create a demand for worthless garbage. Consumerism is, thus, a venal bargain

Dante, who is at best a transitional figure between the medieval and the modern, obviously doesn't have this preoccupation with common folk. He has it enough to write in Italian rather than Latin, to be sure, but politically he's (obviously) no democratic populist. For Dante, the worst sinners are either corrupt leaders or high-ranking officials who undermine or betray their leaders — literally, their lord or Lord. Thus the worst sinners of all time — the representatives of ultimate sin in Dante's moral system — are Judas, Brutus and Cassius, i.e. those three persons who undermined the two lords of Dante's "Two-State" system: Jesus (Lord of Christendom) and Caesar (lord of a unified Italy).

Is there an American analogue? Is there one man (or a few men) who we could fairly say bore primary responsibility for betraying their American lord — for undermining the American social contract? Would we put (for example) Jefferson Davis in Satan's mouth, as Dante does with Brutus and Cassius? Jefferson Davis was a prominent rebel, to be sure, but could we lay the causes of the Civil War at his feet? Of course not. We'd be much better off looking to the Southern plantation-owners and Northern merchants who lived off the slave trade — and not just to them, but to every American who profited from our slave-based economy's capacity to "run hot," i.e. to be more profitable than it could otherwise have been.⁷ Citizens of a dictatorship (or an Italian dukedom) might legitimately be able to disclaim responsibility for their nation's sins; we can't.

Where *does* Dante locate the masses in the *Inferno*? In Ante-Hell, the first and highest level of his moral system. Dante means this as an insult: conformists are so pathetic, they're not

between the exploiters and the exploited: *let us play our foolish fashion-games and we'll let you enrich yourself absurdly at our expense.*

⁷ The abolition of slavery, obviously, didn't end this venal bargain. It was transferred very briefly to domestic wage slavery but, this being unpopular among self-governing citizen-slaves, we quickly began shipping it, as early as the 19th century, overseas — where it continued to allow the American economy to "run hot" for another century.

even allowed in Hell Proper, and are condemned to chasing standard-bearers this way and that on the near shore of the river Acheron; they're not "good enough" even for hell. This is an amusing jab, but if we're to take a properly American "hell" seriously, we can't let the masses — ourselves — off the hook so easily. We belong in every circle of hell, and what we do to undermine our lord and benefactor — our uniquely American moral code, our "scripture" — is our gravest and most damning sin.

American scripture

I knew that, if this novel were to be a properly American hell, I'd have to think carefully about what the moral system was that governed and structured it. For Dante, obviously, that moral system is, first and foremost, Christianity. More precisely, we should call it "Dante's semi-revisionist take on Roman Catholicism" — but Dante's moral code is still, basically and overwhelmingly, Christian. For Dante, Christian scripture has authority; the Pope (when he's not corrupt) has authority; the Christian god has authority. Ergo Judas, specifically, is history's worst sinner, since he betrayed the ultimate Lord, "the Christ" Joshua (a.k.a. Jesus, from the Greek derivation of the name).

But the United States is not fundamentally Christian, nor is American culture. This isn't to say that the countless sects calling themselves "Christian" don't have or haven't had a tremendous influence on American culture; of course they have. What it means is that what makes U.S. culture distinct — what makes it uniquely "American" — is not any appeal to Christian doctrine. It is, in fact, rather the opposite. The "scriptures" of the United States — the body of Enlightenment-era writings upon which our republic was founded and that made "The

Great Experiment” a reality — were occasionally Christian, sometimes Deist, occasionally atheist and almost always overwhelmingly secular. Except for Jefferson’s vaguely Deist reference to a “Creator” in the Declaration of Independence,⁸ our republic’s two most basic scriptures — the D.I. and the Constitution — are thoroughly secular. The organizing moral principle for a distinctly *American* hell would have to be, then, not the Christian doctrine of Dante (or anyone else), but the secular, liberal, republican, Enlightenment-era philosophy of John Locke and the American “Founding Fathers.” To my mind, if there is a unique “American” moral doctrine, this is it.

As I worked through Dante’s moral system, I found that we were in agreement on moral points as often as not. I had decided to adopt Dante’s nine-sin scheme as an organizational structure for the novel and found that, for the most part, there were few fundamental conflicts between Dante’s Christian and my American moral codes: lust was bad, gluttony was bad, &c. There were a few points of acute doctrinal disagreement, and when this happened, Dante lost: this was, after all, to be an *American* inferno. For example, Limbo — the First Circle — could not, in an American hell, be populated by unbaptized infants and virtuous persons born before the coming of Christ. Whenever this happened, I had to consider Dante’s logic and try to find a suitable though subtler analogue.

⁸ A reference that John Adams pointedly removed, by the way, in his 1780 Massachusetts Constitution: “All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential and unalienable rights ...” No “Creator,” no “endowed.”

American analogies

I used Dante's *Inferno* as a "springboard" text, borrowing the basic structure of his moral system (the nine sins/circles plus their "topographic" logic, as discussed below) and major plot-points and characters, and sought to develop American analogies for them. Our hells would differ in almost every other respect: prose instead of poetry, realism instead of fantasy, quotidian instead of heroic, secular instead of Christian. As I noted above, Limbo was one instance where that last difference required a fundamental reversal of what Dante was doing in the *Inferno*, and it will serve as an instructive example.

I sense that Dante, as a great fan of the Classical writers, felt bad about having to put his heroes in hell. He had to, however; the doctrine of Limbo (damnation of unbaptised infants and "virtuous pagans") was too well-established by his time, and Dante was not heretical enough to attack this fundamental point of Christian doctrine. Virgil and Socrates and Aristotle had to be damned. Dante gives them a lovely place to live, however; his Limbo has fountains and gardens where the Peripatetics can walk and philosophize for eternity — excluded eternally from the presence of God, however, which is in the final analysis the true punishment of all in Hell. This damnation of the innocent should stick in the craw of any modern reader; it did mine. The Christian logic is that, for all their virtue, the denizens of Limbo lacked a crucial component: salvation through Christ and awareness of divine grace. No amount of secular virtue, from the medieval Christian perspective, can make up for that. So the logic of Limbo, if you abstract it past the point of being explicitly Christian, is that of a well-meaning and admirable but

fundamentally insufficient worldview.⁹ So into my American “Limbo” I put well-meaning, muddle-headed, New-Age Protestants: Americans who are moral and benevolent but whose moral system is blind to the liberal/egalitarian Enlightenment values that fundamentally distinguish Christian morality from modern secular morality (and weaker because of that fact).

That’s just one example. In each chapter, I’ve tried to take the major points of Dante’s narrative and find loose analogies for them in my novel. Sometimes the analogies are fairly straightforward, sometimes not; whenever I’ve had to choose between following the *Inferno* or writing my own organic, contemporary, American narrative, I’ve chosen the latter. I do not at all want to write a novel that would require knowledge of Dante’s *Inferno* in order to appreciate.

Still, the analogies are, while loose, present throughout the novel. Dennis Dougherty (whose name means “bad counselor” plus “do-cartach,” Scotch for “no-love”) is the moderately flawed Dante-the-Pilgrim. Thomas Luciano (a reference to Thomases Jefferson and Paine, plus a nod to Enlightenment “luce”) is the noble-but-damned Virgil. Tom’s mysterious wife, who we won’t meet until Chapter/Circle 9, is Beatrice; until we do, Tom (a professor of U.S. history, a therapist and a mild advocate for Enlightenment thought) stands in as the story’s (and Dennis’) best available representative of American scripture.

The novel’s Prologue covers the ground that Dante covers prior to the First Circle. First we meet Dennis, who (like Dante), is roughly mid-life and is straying from the path of virtue with his drinking, smoking, philandering and, above all, his well-meaning but subtly disturbing dishonesty. Then Dennis meets Tom, who, like Virgil, has been “sent,” in a manner of speaking,

⁹ This is *still* not something I was comfortable putting “in hell,” as it were. But since not doing so would mean eliminating an entire circle of Dante’s, and since my American “hell” was actually more of a purgatory in which “sins” were explored (rather than sinners eternally damned), I went with it.

by the Three Beneficent Ladies¹⁰ to intercede in his protégé's wayward life. As Dante knows and respects Virgil's work, Dennis finds that he knows and respects Tom's: a U.S. history textbook that he studied in school. After this comes Dante's crisis of faith, when he must be encouraged to buck up and soldier on (as Tom does with Dennis at the McDonald's). When Dante's confidence is restored, he and Virgil step through the nefarious gateway (in the novel, the ubiquitous glowing "golden arches" of the McDonald's fast-food chain). The first "level" of hell that they encounter is, as discussed above, not a proper Circle at all: it's where conformists are punished, and in the novel, it's the club-kid crowd scene on Sunset Boulevard. At last, Dante's travelers cross the River Acheron (the "river" of Coca-Cola) and enter into hell proper.

The "river" of Coca-Cola scene is terribly long. It's very important, as the crossing of the later "rivers" will be.

The topography of hell

The order of Dante's nine circles of hell is carefully considered. They fall into three main divisions: sins of incontinence (Circles 0-5), violence (7) and fraud (8-9). This ordering reflects another way in which Dante *was* very much a Renaissance (rather than a medieval) thinker. For Dante, God's most sacred gift to man was that of reason, and thus the abuse of reason is, for Dante, the direst sin.

For Dante, the least venal sins, among the three divisions, are the sins of incontinence, i.e. the mere excess of natural and healthy desires. These sins are at the highest ("best") levels of

¹⁰ For Dante, these are Mary, Lucia and Beatrice; for Tom, they're liberty (the belief that enlightenment can liberate), equality (help is what any person owes another) and fraternity (Tom simply likes Dennis).

hell and are the most lightly-punished. Lust (Second Circle) is the excess of our need for love. Gluttony (Third Circle) is the excess of our need for food. Hoarding and wasting (Fourth Circle) are the two manifestations of an excessive preoccupation with material security, with property. Wrath (Fifth Circle) is the excess of our need for justice.

Limbo (First Circle) is a technical exception, as discussed above. Heresy (Sixth Circle) is a transitional (and fascinating) circle. Obviously, heresy is an abuse of reason, which is why it's at the bottom of the incontinence division. But heresy isn't intentional fraud, which is punished further on. The Fraudulent are malicious; the Heretical are simply mistaken. Thus heresy can be seen as sort of an intellectual incontinence — as the perversion of the desire for free and independent reasoning, or as theoretical (rather than physical) violence.

The final three circles — Seven for violence, Eight and Nine for fraud — are self-explanatory. Fraud is last and worst because it's the most explicit abuse of God-given reason. What's interesting (and very important) is how Dante demarcates all these divisions: with major topographical formations, i.e. four rivers plus one giant pit.

Dante borrows four “infernal” rivers from Classical mythology and uses them to demarcate the major divisions of his hell. The sins of incontinence (Circles 1-5) are entered into after crossing the river Acheron. Dante's hell has no major topographical disruptions again until Heresy, which is bounded by rivers on both sides: the mucky river Styx (plus the city walls of Dis) mark the beginning of Heresy; after it, one crosses the fiery river Phegethon into Violence (Seventh Circle). From mire to fire: these are the suggestive parentheses that frame Heresy, the circle in which intellectual incontinence provides the theoretical grounds for violence. It's brilliant.

Violence is separated from the two circles of fraud (Eight: Fraud Simple and Nine:

Treachery Against Lords and Benefactors) by a giant pit, so deep that Dante and Virgil cannot descend into it on their own power, but must be flown down into it on the back of Geryon. In Fraud, the rivers Acheron, Styx and Phlegethon merge to form the frozen pool, Cocytus, site of the Ninth and final circle.

Not only does Dante use these rivers to major divisions in his sin system; they're also, crucially, what metaphorically links hell to Earth and to the history of mankind there. As Virgil explains to Dante-the-Pilgrim in Canto 14 — in Virgil's longest speech in the *Inferno* — the common source of all these rivers is a statue underneath Mt. Ida (the traditional center of the Classical world). The statue — with a head of gold, a silver torso, iron legs and feet of clay — represents the decay of mankind over the course of human history. The statue weeps, says Virgil, and its tears trickle down its legs to hell, where they form the river system that structures man's eventual punishment for that decay. As you sow, so shall you reap.

And that's why, at the end of the novel's prologue, there's the extensive "river of Coke" scene. The river of Coke is the river of incontinence, and the rivers that follow it will be similarly suited to their location in the novel: a river of blood (for Violence) and a river of lies (for Fraud). Heresy's topographical demarcations will get their own special treatment, but I can tell you this much: the mucky Styx will be the muddy Mississippi, and the gate of Dis' city walls will be St. Louis' Gateway Arch.

Three parallel arcs

The image of the statue and the "four infernal rivers," so central to the organizational structure of the *Inferno*, also suggests that, for Dante, there's an important parallel between his

schema of sins and the history of his country.¹¹ I wanted very much to attempt something similar — with, perhaps, some additional twists. Thus, in *American Inferno*, there are four simultaneous and roughly parallel “arcs” that I’m trying to keep in the air all at once.

The first arc is that of the fiction — of plot and character development — of (for example) Dennis’ personal life story as he grows up and progresses through his career.

The second arc is that of the scheme of nine types of sin — the nine sins/Circles/chapters — and it’s my intention to show how these nine sins can be seen as occurring in approximate chronological developmental order. That is, they’re ordered in the novel not only by their severity (according to Dante’s schema), but also roughly in the order that we experience them as we age and progress (or regress) from the incontinent sins of youth to the fraudulent sins of experience.

The third arc is that of U.S. history. The setting of the novel roughly follows the path of American development, from the Northeast (Chapters 1-2) to the South (Chapters 3-5) to the Midwest (Chapters 6-7 — St. Louis and Oklahoma City, respectively) to the West (Chapters 8-9 — Las Vegas and Los Angeles). The settings are not arbitrary. As with the second arc, I’ve tried to suggest a vague progression of American history through the sequence of sins — like the statue under Mt. Ida, the progressively decadent ages of American culture, beginning from its theological/ideological inception in the northeastern Colonies, progressing into 18th and 19th-century slavery and wage-slavery and industrialism, expanding violently across the Midwest in the 19th century and finally coming to its nadir in the institutionalized fraudulence of Las Vegas and Hollywood.

¹¹ One can’t say “the history of Italy” because, of course, though Dante longed for Italian unification, Italy didn’t exist in 1300 — and when the peninsula *had* been unified, it was Rome. But Dante definitely has a sense of belonging to a Roman/Italian political culture, if legally indistinct.

There's a fourth arc in the novel, but it's as much a theme throughout the novel as it is a directional arc. In this theme, I repeatedly try to trace how our personal sins translate into public sins — how menial personal sins agglomerate and develop, in a representative democracy, in ways that ultimately corrode the holiest of holies, the liberal/egalitarian social contract of the American republic. Most of us Americans are not violent or flagrantly fraudulent. Many of us are somewhat heretical, especially if *heresy* is understood, in this context, as being out of touch with the principles upon which our republic was founded. But almost all of us are a little (if not very) incontinent. It's my desire to explore how the menial incontinence of the many facilitates the mortal fraudulence of the few. This is the theme of the "venal bargain," discussed above, that permeates the novel. In a sense, it's a constant attempt to interweave arcs 2 and 3.

Appendix: where from here?

This section isn't appropriate for an essay that "stands on its own," as my department's instructions for this essay require that it should, so consider this an addendum.

First: what's attached is in draft form. The five chapters I've attached are the first half of the novel: the Prologue and Chapters/Circles 1-4. They're (I hope) free of grammatical errors and, according to my advisor, are sufficiently developed for submission to the dissertation committee. But they are at the draft stage. Only when I finish the novel will I go back and substantially review and rework the entire project. There will be substantial revisions, excisions and additions. My advisor has already suggested many; there will be more, and I would deeply appreciate and welcome any suggestions from all of my committee members.

There are two entirely new elements that are not present in the current draft at all. Each chapter will begin with a short summary of the circle of Dante's *Inferno* that corresponds to that chapter in *American Inferno*. Each chapter will end with a press release that Dennis has written for (and as) his boss: a U.S. Representative from Orange County for whom Dennis is working as a political advisor. These press releases will be roughly related to the topic of the chapter and will suggest that Dennis has "learned the lesson" of the chapter — enough, that is, to convert the lesson into an appealing political position. Whether either Dennis or his boss actually believes a word of them is another matter.

The end

This leads me to the end, i.e. the ending of the novel. Since you're bothering to read half of it, and since it might not ever see the light of publication, you should know how it ends. I do.

In one last departure from Dante, *American Inferno* is not a comedy. No omnipotent, benevolent Deity presides over modernity; for us, a happy ending is not guaranteed and, with our all-too-animal proclivities and our nuclear arms, a tragic ending is still a terrible threat. Most of the novel takes place in flashbacks that tell Dennis' life story up until the novel's present. The novel's present is set in Los Angeles.

But isn't the Ninth Circle set in Los Angeles? It is. In the *Inferno*, Dante escapes the Ninth Circle. In *American Inferno*, he's resided there all along.

At the end of Chapter 8, having discussed Fraud Simple (Circle 8/Las Vegas) with Dennis, Tom declares Dennis graduated. Not "cured," because Dennis was never sick — but Tom says, essentially: *There's nothing more I can teach you; you've got it!* Cheers all 'round. Dennis seems to have learned his lessons. Los Angeles, which I've portrayed as an Eden of healthy and progressive living throughout the book, now really clicks with Dennis. He quits smoking, drinks moderately, does yoga, respects his girlfriend. Dennis ends the chapter with a particularly wise and rousing press release (again speaking for his boss, the Congressman) about fraud and honesty and character and Our American Social Contract.

The end.

Then Chapter 9 begins. In it, the past catches up with the present. In Chapter 9, there's no frame narrative, no therapy, no Tom. We finally learn in detail, now that we're exclusively in present-time, what it is that Dennis does for a job, i.e. that he's a political/media consultant for a

U.S. Representative, and exactly what that entails. (This is one of those revisions that can only happen when the draft is finished: I'll have to go back through all the previous chapters and fill out Dennis' daily life in Los Angeles, which is currently very underdeveloped.) In Chapter 9, Dennis bumps into Tom's long-mysterious wife at a debate that Dennis is staging for his boss. Tom's wife is a distinguished and radical media critic at UCLA. Dennis is smitten with her — until she tears into him about his profession, attacking him for turning real political discourse into pure adversarial entertainment. It becomes questionable whether Dennis has really “learned his lessons” or whether he's simply incorporated them to graduate to a new, more accomplished and more potent level of fraud — not just personally enriching fraud, but the undermining of American political discourse, the sacred guarantor of our democracy. The book ends on a decidedly foreboding note. The vision of stars that ends Dante's *Inferno* is analogized here as the stars of an American flag waving on a particularly smarmy TV ad that Dennis has scripted and is focus-grouping.

That's the end.

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AMERICAN INFERNO

Circle 0: Prologue

Let's take a minute to look around Dennis' apartment before he gets home. There's not much to see — and he's downstairs parking — so it won't take long.

First, there's not much to it. Or in it, rather. Furniture-wise. It's a nice enough apartment; I hesitate to say very nice only so as not to mislead you, this being Los Angeles, and a "very nice" apartment being something with hardwood and marble and fountains and doormen, something that rents for thousands of dollars a month. Dennis' apartment has the hardwood. It also has the doorman: one imposingly towering but thoroughly affable Dori (this being a short form, thought unbeknownst to Dennis, of the Swahili name *Dhoruba*, or "Storm"), with whom Dennis is currently exchanging pleasantries in a friendly "down-style" manner that, to Dennis, seems appropriate to this particular well-spoken African American. The apartment building, however, lacks the marble and the fountains, and while it does cost thousands of dollars a month, it's only two thousands, and just barely.

And let's also establish right off the bat, so that there's no confusion, that it's Dennis' appraisal of the doorman and the style of banter that's most likely to put said doorman at ease and endear him to Dennis. Not mine. Not that Dennis doesn't actually care for the guy. He does, actually. He's a sensitive fellow, Dennis, and while he has very few intimate friends, if any, he's a naturally cheerful person. He likes to make people happy and make them feel at ease. He likes to be well-thought-of by strangers.

You think I'm being ironic. Am I? Is that fair? Is being well-thought-of by strangers such a paltry thing? Oho, you say, but clearly it indicates a superficiality of character: to be

charming, to be a “good guy,” as the fraternity boys say, to make people who are paid to serve you like you so that they’ll serve you better. Or maybe they’re the only kind of people that Dennis interacts with, these “service” people, these clerks and doormen, these delivery-persons and check-out girls who are paid, let’s face it, to interact with him. And so? So instead of having intimate relationships, Dennis fills his social world with pleasant, positively-reinforcing interactions with people who are paid to serve him? But they’re people too. They’re not just drones, or walking job descriptions. Is it so bad to bring a little sunshine into a stranger’s life? In case you think that Dennis is just feathering his nest, he’s not. He isn’t like that just with people like the doorman — people who can do things for him, like turn away an inquisitive girlfriend or profess no knowledge of Dennis’ whereabouts. He’s naturally like that. Perhaps you’ll find him likeable. I do. But you can decide for yourself soon enough, because he’s just stepped into the elevator and is on his way up.

So without further digressions, the apartment. It won’t take long to describe; it’s sort of empty. Not the sort of empty you see on television, i.e. some easily-scanned apartment that “says bachelor pad,” as the producer puts it to his assistant producer, i.e. an apartment devoid of furniture and decorated only with pizza boxes, beer cans, a mattress and a lamp, all residing on the floor. No. Dennis hasn’t lived in L.A. long, but he’s made the requisite quick trip to the IKEA, and was happy to do so, and came home — well, he came home with no more than a retro ashtray and a couple of dimmable lamps, but the delivery people (to whom he was jovial, yes) brought the bulk of his purchases a few days later. And that’s what we’re looking at. Unpainted pine bed-frame, unpainted pine futon, unpainted pine tables here and there, all tagged on their undersides with appealing-because-unpronounceable proper nouns (the languorous Aardsnjarn chair, the crisp-lined Tsvetsvatsvik dinner table, the squat Bjor ottoman), all perfectly suitable

for painting, should Dennis find the time, but all perfectly acceptable as they are, being of smart, tasteful, minimalistic Scandinavian design.

And that's it. A place to sleep, a place to eat, a place for him to put his keys: in a dish, on a table by the door, a table designed to serve that one purpose, to support the dish that receives his keys, his smokes, his cellphone, his loose change and his lighter, all of which go clattering from his hand into this dish as he enters the room, because that's what he's just done.

* * *

Dennis arrives home exhausted and mildly anxious but satisfied after a long day doing God's work for the Republic. He used to say "a day in the salt mines," a phrase he picked up from his father, but he's not his father's son anymore, so much, and this new job he's landed is not so much his father's business. For the first time in his life, after a little bit too long, he's doing something he believes in: not God's work, to be sure, and who talks like that today without either irony or pathological delusion? — but good work, and for the republic, too, finally. One can hope. Can do one's little part. Can be a giver rather than a taker, a bringer of a little light rather than et cetera, et cetera.

He makes a beeline for the fridge and secures himself a local microbrew. I didn't say he was perfect.

Dennis is not, in fact, perfect. His mild anxiety stems from the fact that it's sixish on a Friday evening and Heather will invariably be calling, any minute now, to suss out not so much what their plans are for the evening (because frankly, she's already otherwise committed, or at least is if she so chooses), but more to gauge Dennis' interest in her by the degree of his

initiative. Which is, at the moment, slight. He doesn't have anything Heather-exclusive lined up for the evening, but it wouldn't be difficult to do so and he wouldn't mind.

"We're still checking each other out," he says aloud to the Other in his head. "It's not as if we're dating." It is at this point one hour and a second microbrew later, and Dennis is in the shower, rehearsing scripts. He has already masturbated and sent off some vaguely promissory e-mails to some internet-personals leads (none he can't later plausibly deny having received an affirmative response to, should one accept an invitation before a more promising other), so it's already too late for Heather tonight. *Heather's really more of a Saturday-night date anyway*, he thinks. He hacks up some brown phlegm and spits it on the shower floor, watching the splashing water worry it to pieces as it slithers toward the drain.

I mentioned his cigarettes. Well, he's not a light smoker. *There are heavier smokers*, he likes to say, *but they're tire factories in New Jersey*. Of course, that's an exaggeration, but minimization by way of exaggeration is the point. Also, of course, there are no longer tire factories in New Jersey any more than there are steel mills in Pennsylvania or textile mills in North Carolina, but that's not the point, and people who hear him make this joke laugh and forgive him for smoking a pack or so a day. Also, it's not as if he's not cutting down. This is Los Angeles. The physically, mentally and spiritually healthful life is a priority here. And that fact is by no means far from his mind as he hacks his lungs up in the shower, getting down on his knees occasionally to see if there's any blood in the phlegm. He's pretty sure there's not. But he's more on-edge than usual. He couldn't help but notice, when he was masturbating, that he seems to have a lump, or thinks he does, on one of his testicles. It didn't match the internet's description of testicular cancer, but a lump on your testicle, that can't be good. "So much for the stairs program," he grumbles to himself, referring to his resolve, upon moving in, to use the stairs

and not the elevator to raise himself the three short floors to his abode. “You’re not eighteen anymore,” he scolds. Dennis is the sort of person who reasons with himself a lot, rarely having anyone around to do it with. “No teenage metabolism. Gotta work, boy, work!”

He’s at this point out and toweling vigorously. He can’t see his cellphone, which (having been in the shower) he can plausibly deny having heard ring, but he knows that it’s blinking impatiently in its dish. His ablutions are interrupted by three loud knocks at the front door.

Dennis knows exactly who’s there (or rather, isn’t). He races to the front door, whipping his towel around himself as he goes, and jerks it open. No one. He can’t very well go parading around the building in his towel, so he merely shouts “Fine, you’ve made your point already, give it a rest!” into the empty hallway. He strains to hear anything: little footsteps, or a door closing. There’s nothing but the sound of his own breathing. He closes the door, grabs his cellphone and hits the speed-dial for the management office downstairs. It rings a few times before anyone picks up.

“They’ve done it again.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry. This is Dennis Dougherty in 306. I’ve called a few times before about a prank knocker. Someone’s knocking and then running away. I assume it’s just some stupid kid on my floor whose parents won’t buy him an X-Box — I mean it’s not a big deal, but —”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Doggery, but this is just the answering service. Do you want me to notify the building’s security personnel?”

“No, that’s not necessary. They told me to call if it kept happening.”

“Well I’ll certainly make a note of it and leave it for them. And you said that apartment was ...”

“306.” And as a matter of course, he spells his last name out. It has to be the most uncommon common surname in America.

He finishes the call, hangs up and stands quietly at the door for a moment, listening. *Are those footsteps shuffling down the carpet outside the door?* He peers through the peephole. Nothing. He returns to his coiffure, stopping every few seconds to listen, but the only thing he hears is an echo in his memory.

After dressing himself in his standard tasteful-but-informal style (slim-fit blue jeans, untucked cotton-twill button-down shirt, expensive but simple shoes — a style which quietly advertises its fashionableness not in its materials so much as in the names of its manufacturers — or its designers, rather, since its manufacturers are, down to the last stitch, Chinese companies that no one’s ever heard of) and setting himself up with another microbrew, Dennis retrieves the phone again and settles down in Aardsnjarn to make the fateful call.

As is customary, Heather knows who’s calling, and the conversation begins *in medias res*. “*There* you are.”

“I’m sorry, sweets. I was in the shower.” *Control the interview*. “How was work?”

“Fine. I left a little early” — true — “so I’ve just been sitting around waiting to hear from you.” This is, in point of fact, not precisely true. Heather went out for the requisite 20/30-something Happy Hour after work, during which she met one or two fellows who might make for satisfactory Friday-night fodder. She got numbers. Like lottery tickets, such cellphone numbers can be discarded without loss or cashed in for small rewards: the candy bars, free sodas and ten-dollar payouts of the dating universe. But saying that she’s been waiting for the phone to ring is the right move. These are successful, well-socialized and attractive people, by and large, and this isn’t a generation in which anyone actually sits by the phone, waiting for it to ring — not

so much because telephones reside in pockets and not on tabletops, but simply because everyone has options. To sit and wait for a call from a Certain Someone is a pledge of allegiance not far short of buying them an engagement ring or going with them to the abortion clinic. In saying that she has given him the gift of awaiting his call, Heather's not so much lying as offering to have given it had it been desired, having already calculated that it wasn't. But it does give Dennis the opportunity to decline her theoretical gift, *post facto*, by saying "Aw, you didn't need to do that." Which of course he does not say.

"Aw, I'm sorry. I figured you'd call when you got off work. Anyway, I just got home."

"How was work?"

"Fine. Exhausting. Good. God's work for the Republic." He starts to talk about his day, but quickly suspects that, no matter what he says about it, Heather is going to respond with a non-sequitur. He trails off.

"So," Heather says. But she does not say: *Are we on for anything tonight?* She already knows that he's going to beg off, so it makes no sense not to turn rejection into an opportunity to give another gift. "I was hoping I might be able to lure you out."

Dennis takes another sip. "I'd love to, but I don't think I'm up for it. I'm not used to this schedule yet. Come Friday I'm just whipped. Let me rest up and we'll do something tomorrow."

"Well — ohhhhhh-kay," Heather says, drawing it out, trying to sound mock-dejected, i.e. dejected-but-understanding. "You East-Coast workaholic. You're gonna have to get on L.A. time, you know."

"I know, I will."

"Are you drinking?"

“No.” Dennis is startled; this was an unexpected conversational move. Heather has quietly moved a pawn to reveal a clear diagonal between her bishop and his queen. Or perhaps, between her queen and his? Concern is vulnerability. But it can also be insecurity. Or simply meddling.

“Are you sure?”

“Well I had a beer when I got home, but I’m not *drinking*. Why?”

“No, I don’t know. No reason.” This might sound like another “gift,” but it’s not. She really doesn’t think he drinks too much. While she was pleased both that Dennis virtually accepted her virtual offer and that she’s free to play one of the lottery tickets in her pocket, Heather still feels vaguely rejected and is passively retaliating. She immediately regrets the play, knowing subconsciously that she’s threatened his queen without having gone to the trouble to set up a pin.

“Do you think I drink too much?” It could be said that Dennis is merely pushing his advantage, but he’s not. He has a good heart (and a spotted past) and is legitimately, if not seriously, concerned. Call it curious.

“No, it’s nothing like that. Maybe you drink a little more than we do out here, but maybe it’s just an East-Coast thing.”

“You may be right. I haven’t gotten used to all this healthy living. I damn near have to drive to Nevada to have a smoke.”

“I know, me too.”

“But seriously, if you’re worried, you tell me. You can tell me. We go way back, you know.” They do and they don’t; they know each other from college back east, but Heather has been out west since then, whereas Dennis has just arrived. But the longevity of an acquaintance

is at least one measure of its intimacy, and to allude to this is to offer a gift.

“I will. Anyway, get some rest.”

“Call me later if you feel like it.” Insurance. To be taking calls, officially, is to be “home,” i.e. reading a book, working on your stamp collection, painting miniature wooden ducks. If he’s ever not home, there’s always *showering* and *asleep*, not to mention the loyalty of doormen.

“Kay.” Heather hangs up without saying goodbye. Doesn’t everyone?

Dennis folds the phone and returns it to its dish. He smiles, though a little tiredly. “Well played, sir,” he says. And is it so wrong for him to be pleased with his social skills? Is it so wrong to get what you want, to maximize your options for personal growth and not to disappoint other people in the process? A strategic business analyst would call that a win-win, would she not? What should Dennis have said? *I’m not at the moment entirely captivated by you, Heather, and I don’t really know what my value on the dating market is, here in this new town, so I’d like to explore my options, but if they don’t pan out, I’d like to get to know you better.* Please. That sort of “honesty” is a guaranteed deal-breaker; he might as well say *Fuck off, whore*. And would that be honest? The dating market is a difficult one to navigate. You have to look alive, be on your toes and at your best. It makes the floor of the New York Stock Exchange on the first day of its reopening after 9/11 look as simple as buying a pack of breath mints at a gas station.

The anticipated internet-personals e-mail hasn’t arrived. Dennis’ hair has reached the proper stage of semi-dryness for effective mussing, so he tends to that. He returns to the living room. No e-mail. He gauges his sobriety and gets himself a Coke from the refrigerator. He stands in the middle of the room and looks around. “It’s nice,” he observes. It’s a nice place. As we’ve established. Spare, not Spartan. Not cheap, either. He doesn’t have an ocean view,

but the windows are large and it's sunny. L.A. is sunny. Not the white-hot hammer-on-an-anvil sort of sunny that Las Vegas was, where the shadows everywhere were sharp enough to cut you. A more golden, everywhere-diffused sort of sunny. Even, mildly, as now, at night. Dennis parts the blinds and looks out into the street. In the gaps between the buildings he can see off into the distance of the city. The lights of Los Angeles are scattered thickly like diamonds on black velvet, as if the hand of some strangely generous jewel merchant had poured them there without stint or measure, some merchant who had lots to spare, who didn't need to draw attention to his one or two items for display, *No, we've got millions, enough for everyone, take as many as you like*. Diamond and sapphire streetlamps, ruby stoplights, emerald go and amber yellow, plus all the neon! — who could find gemstones in nature for all those colors? — the whole of it, this jewel-laden blanket, takes its treasure and gives it away again, casting the glow of its million points of light up into a soft night sky which catches it in the gentle saline haze which turns it back to Earth again, setting up an infinite closed loop of generosity, the city saying *Here, take this*, and nature saying *No, please, you*. Talk about a gift economy. Dennis whistles softly and shakes his head in wonder. “Not like Vegas,” he says. No: not at all like Las Vegas' sinewy skein of brilliant lights flashing desperately against the asphalt black of the encroaching desert, a deathless sea always threatening to reclaim any property left untended, unswept, unlit at night. Unlike Vegas, the palm trees here are not imported; the ocean is real and full of living things. A steady eastward breeze creates its waves, not a hydraulic system sunk into the concrete underneath it. Sharks and crabs and jellies live in it, and flat five-chambered crustaceans beach themselves upon its shores to dry themselves in the golden sun and fill children's plastic beach buckets with bone-white coins. “Sand dollars? *Sand* dollars?” laughs Dennis to himself, almost shouting. Where else does nature strew coins for children on the beach?

Still, the anticipated e-mail hasn't arrived. Dennis takes a sip of Coke and lights a smoke. He's confident that the internet, in its infinite bounty, will yield up some pretty and conveniently damaged wisp sufficiently distracting to fill the time between now and sleep. And if it doesn't, it's just as well; he's tired, and complications are themselves tiresome, and actually spending a night at home alone would put him in an excellent tactical position vis-à-vis his current primary target. And the more he thinks about it, the more he doesn't really feel like going out. He's already had a few beers, but now instead of a pleasant buzz he feels mildly guilty. Fencing with Heather isn't pleasant, and the business with the knocking, well. "It's stupid," Dennis says. He fires up the X-Box to kill zombies and some time.

* * *

Dennis has just acquired the flamethrower when his computer strums its pleasant little e-mail chord. It's mild, but still clearly audible to him over the roaring of the flamethrower and the crackling of charring zombie flesh. He feels a surge of relaxed comfort and finishes the level. There's no rush. Thick-necked zombies with pus-yellow rubbery flesh lurch at him from around corners and from behind crates of ammunition and explosives. They're generally poorly armed, if at all, but their deadly poisonous blood is their weapon. It's lurking in the back of Dennis' brain that it's like running for your life to escape a crime-rotten ghetto full of HIV-infected crack whores. They touch you and you die. But you have multiple lives to lose, and the zombies are slow-moving and soft-fleshed, so even the halfway-decent pistol that you start the game out with is enough to stop them in their tracks. Buckshot, when you graduate to it, will take off whole arms and legs at once. And the flamethrower, well, what does its name not convey? It spits

greasy liquid fire. Zeus was stuck with lightning bolts.

The e-mail is from Fox85. It isn't hard to understand, despite its grammar. Fox85's real name is Cyndi; she thinks Dennis is cute and would love to show him around L.A.; she's going out clubbing on the Strip tonight with some girlfriends; her number is such-and-such; he should call. He does, and is greeted on the other end by a wall of noise: giggling, shrieking, music, hubbub. Presumably, Dennis can be heard better than he can hear, because the girl squeals "Dennis!!!" and this squeal is echoed teasingly by others in the background: *Dennis, Dennis the Menace, come out, come play with us, we want to meet this "Dennis"!* His own name starts to seem distasteful somehow. He makes out that they're at a bar called Prospekt and promises to come.

So the Strip, he thinks, while punching the place up on the internet. Not his first choice, Sunset Strip: a little on the glummy, tacky side. But he's only been there once, and he *is* supposed to be exploring his new city. And who knows? Maybe he'll wind up in a threesome — or a six-some, from the sound of it. There's a first time for everything. "And this *is* the land of milk and honey" he says, collecting his wallet, keys and smokes.

He weighs his car keys in his hand. The problem isn't so much the however-many microbrews it's been, nor the near-certainty that he'll be drinking more, because he'd normally never even consider driving under such circumstances. The problem is that his car is sort of nice. It's not a Lamborghini or a Lotus or anything like that — an outlandish poser-car he wouldn't buy even if he could afford it — but it is a sexy (if inexpensive) little roadster, and relatively new — one of the few good things that came from his time in Vegas — and he's rather proud of it (though if he had spent more time in L.A., he'd probably have been cured of that). It seems to make a positive impression. On — well. On people upon whom he wouldn't mind

making an impression. If only in their flesh.

And that's the problem. He turns it over in his mind a few times, drops the car keys in the dish and calls a cab. Then picks them up again and heads out the door, re-dialing the cab company.

* * *

Dennis arrives at Prospekt without incident. The bar, done up in the retro-Soviet theme that Dennis had predicted from the name and confirmed when he saw the typography of the sign, is quieter than he'd expected. It isn't very late — nine-ish — and he realizes that he's arrived in that dead zone between Happy Hour and the hour that the club-kid zombies come swarming out of the filthy little garden apartments where they invariably live — gleefully, wrathfully piled on top of each other, five to a flat, living the L.A. life in squalor, dressing up like prostitutes, going to the bars to hunt and taking turns sharing their bedroom to fuck guys with no last names. There are couples here and there at Prospekt, but Dennis doesn't see any gaggle of sex-addicted anorexics. He joins the line of stags getting quietly wasted at the bar. A bust of Lenin glowers at him amid underlit bottles of green Midori melon, red Campari, amber Maker's Mark. To his right, two tanned, guayabera'd and sandaled young men, dressed for a night out in Cabo, are intensely debating the merits of some soap-opera actress whom Dennis has never heard of. To his left, a dowdy-looking fellow is nursing a beer and reading a book by the light of a bar tea-candle. "Guess I'll be calling the children," Dennis mutters, taking out his phone. He raises his bourbon in a toast to Lenin and takes a sip.

"Liberté, égalité, fraternité," says the man with the book. He has noticed and is joining

Dennis' toast. Then he raises his glass to Dennis, nods, and returns to his book.

This is the point at which Dennis, in a split second, has to make a quick series of evaluations. It's not that he's not impressed by the attempted pick-up; he's in no way homophobic, and while decently cute, he's neither too handsome nor too vain to be flattered by a compliment from almost any quarter. He knows this about himself, too, and the Simon and Garfunkel line about *the come-ons from the whores on Seventh Avenue* flickers across some synapses in the back of his brain: *I do declare / There were times when I was so lonesome, I took some comfort there*. No: it's simply that the fellow seems nice, and Dennis doesn't want to lead him on. If Dennis nods in reply but then returns his attention to his drink and his cellphone, he has politely but unmistakably declined the pick-up. On the other hand, this isn't your average old queen waiting patiently to scoop up some stray martini-wounded stag at evening's end. In fact, it might not be a pick-up line at all. Dennis doesn't know the L.A. scene well enough to read it, but there's nothing obviously "gay," whatever that might be, about this fellow. His dowdiness isn't even of the passé-dapper sort; he just looks plain, with simple reading glasses and, as Dennis senses in his peripheral vision, some kind of unassuming, tweedy jacket. And the fellow has, as Dennis registers in that same glance, a wedding ring — which of course might just be a ploy to set the stags at ease, but still. Nor would Dennis necessarily prefer the squealing echo chamber of Cyndi and her entourage, even if it were to terminate in a six-some, to a conversation with this interesting old gent who, on closer but still glancing inspection, might not be *that* ancient. But the clincher of the deal, for Dennis, was the fellow's reference, under Lenin's aquiline gaze, to the motto of the French Revolution. It's the sort of thing that Dennis might say if he were bored in a bar and trying to strike up an intelligent conversation, the sort of card that Dennis might play. He has an appropriate response card in his repertoire. He decides

to play it. “Vive la révolution.” He raises his glass to his neighbor and returns the nod.

This all takes place in less than three seconds.

What a difference the smallest phrase can make: the smallest gesture, a nod, a pause, an ironic little bow, a raised eyebrow, an idle compliment unrepressed, an utterance delivered in a questioning rather than a declamatory tone, a wink, a smile. They don’t usually, of course; the “butterfly effect” describes a theoretical possibility, not a likelihood, and generally these instantaneous decisions — because that’s what each one of them is — come to nothing. Or do they? What’s the appropriate metaphor for them? Are they butterflies whose wing-beats eventually cause typhoons halfway across the world? Or are they snowflakes in an avalanche? Perhaps Dennis’ “good-guy” routine strikes you as too much of one, too slick, too subtly self-serving. I wouldn’t disagree with that. But the same facile benignity that might be his fatal flaw might just as well save his neck, might it not? If it makes him capitalize on a situation such as this? And if this one comes to nothing, fine, but what about some other time? In the distant future, or perhaps around the next corner? Perhaps the incipient conversation with this bookish man will come to nothing. But what if the two men in the guayaberas overhear it? — and what if they turn out not to be, as Dennis intuited, slightly shallow, but are instead interesting, well-read, bright, and secure enough in their intelligence not to feel that they’re “lowering” themselves to gab a bit about soap-opera stars over raspberry martinis? And what if they all become good friends with Dennis, drawing him into their interesting, easygoing, healthy lives, showing him his feet in this new town, salving his bruised ego, healing him and making him whole? Don’t friends do that?

So: long live the revolution, Dennis says, and nods — *comrade* — and raises his glass to the man, and takes a sip.

Book-man's eyes don't light up, but he does smile. "Aha! A fellow-traveler."

"Perhaps," winks Dennis. "Or perhaps a counter-revolutionary double-agent."

The bookish man is pleased. "Aha! Yes, there's always that. Triple- and quadruple-crossings. Spies who come in from the cold. But we have ways, you know," briefly adopting a mock-German-interrogator accent, "of getting at the truth."

"Do you, now?" says Dennis, entertained but on his guard again. Joking about getting at the truth is a set-up line for suggesting that Dennis is repressing his homosexuality. If the follow-through is sexual ...

"Oh yes." Book-man wiggles his eyebrows. "Cross-examination protocols. Good-cop-bad-cop routines. Genealogical records. And everyone has neighbors."

"And serums," Dennis adds.

"Sorry?"

"Truth serums." Dennis holds up his glass and tinkles the ice cubes in the bourbon.

"Ha! Yes. Perhaps."

Dennis detects less than full agreement. "Don't they say *In vino veritas*?"

"They do. But they also say it makes a man mistake words for thought."

"Blasphemy!" says Dennis in mock indignation. "Who says that?"

"Ah — hmm. One moment." Book-man closes his eyes. "Not Franklin, that's for sure — 'beer being God's way of showing he loves mankind' and so forth. Not Jefferson — not about wine, at any rate. Johnson."

"Lyndon Johnson?" Dennis is thinking Presidents, not eras, and skepticism about booze sounds out-of-character for one who was known to piss, when drunk, in the houseplants of Washington socialites.

“Oho! Not quite. Samuel Johnson.”

“Johnson, Johnson. The dictionary guy?”

“Among other things. Good, though,” continues Book-man, pushing his book away an inch. You’ve read Johnson?”

“No no. A brush with him in college. I remember that he wrote an English dictionary —”

“The first.”

“— yes — and that his definition of — um — one of the two political parties of the time — I forget which, Whig or Tory — was very snarky.”

“Snarky?”

“Insulting. But wait, now. I’ve got one for you.” Now it’s Dennis turn to close his eyes and think. “Got one. ‘Wine is bottled poetry.’”

“Oh, very nice. Yes, it’s familiar. One minute.” Book-man tilts his head back, as if doing so will dislodge a piece of information in his brain. “Uncle. Who?”

Dennis can’t help but feel a surge of pride that he’s stumped the book-man, and perhaps recovered somewhat from his inane blurting out about Lyndon Johnson. “Robert Louis Stevenson. Also from college. I don’t remember that much from college, but I remember *that*.” Dennis grins. He feels better, swapping quotes with this fellow, this bookish man. Who really isn’t, now that Dennis has gotten a better look, so old as all that. Mid-forties, fifty tops. A high-school teacher, maybe? Dennis’ phone is buzzing on the bar. He puts it in his pocket.

“Oh, you’re going to get me on literature. History’s one thing, but I have a tin ear, especially for poetry. And I can prove it while *simultaneously* matching your last quote. How’s that for a challenge?”

Dennis is thoroughly entertained. “By all means. It’s your play.”

The bartender walks up. “How are you gentlemen doing?” Dennis orders another bourbon; Book-man is still nursing his ale.

“Right then,” says Book-man. “My favorite quote on the topic of *vino* and *veritas*. So much so that I actually took the trouble to memorize it. Perhaps it hit too close to home.”

“I’m all ears.”

Book-man sits up straight and prepares himself for recitation. “Here then: ‘The harsh, useful things of the world, from pulling teeth to digging potatoes, are best done by men who are as starkly sober as so many convicts in the death-house, but the lovely and useless things, the charming and exhilarating things, are best done by men with, as the phrase is, a few sheets in the wind.’ Mencken. Isn’t that tragic and heroic? We’re hung between what we would be and what we wouldn’t be. Like flies in a web. So we struggle — because the spider hasn’t sucked us dry just yet ...” Book-man pauses to take a small sip of his beer. “But we don’t fight so hard that it kills us, either.”

That’s more than Dennis can digest without more rumination and less bourbon. He whistles respectfully, *whew*. But he grasps the sense, sort of. And he senses that this man just told him something very intimate, something difficult and complex. Dennis’ hand shoots out.

“Dennis Dougherty.”

They shake hands. “Delighted to meet you, Dennis. Thomas Luciano. Tom. I meet a lot of strangers in my work, but rarely one so quick to cross wits. A very satisfying first round.”

Dennis is somewhat at a loss for words, not knowing whether “round” refers to drinks or something else. “Likewise, likewise.” He feels that he’s disposed to like this book-man — rather, Tom — more than he has reason to. The concern that it’s all just been an exceedingly

clever pick-up strategy again flickers across his mind. “Let me guess. Teacher.”

Tom grins and gestures as if to dust off his sleeve. “Oho! Is it that obvious? My wife is always teasing me that I need to update my wardrobe. Actually, I *do* still teach, part-time. U.S. history at WestLAC.”

“WestLAC?”

“West Los Angeles Community College.”

Dennis nods. “Of course. I think I’ve seen it. Culver City? I’ve only just moved to town.”

“Yes, just south of Culver City.” Tom pushes his book another inch away and closes it. “So. Welcome to paradise.”

“L.A. really *is* paradise, isn’t it. Though you might not realize it here.” Dennis gestures vaguely to their surroundings.

“What, here as in Bar Gulag? I must say, I don’t quite get it. Or here on the Strip? It’s a bit rough-edged, I’ll grant you that. But I have a fondness for it. This was where I escaped to for my teenage rebellion. I saw Frank Zappa play on the Strip. And for 20th-century U.S. history, it’s a treasure trove. Dorothy Parker, Scott Fitzgerald, The Doors, the clubs, the riots, the punk scene. I quite miss it.”

“You’ve moved away?”

“Not far. My wife and I moved to Venice about a dozen years ago. It’s a better place for us. It’s been a while since I was waving lighters at Led Zeppelin concerts. I only stopped in here for a beer because I happened to be in the neighborhood, and I didn’t understand what the Soviet paraphernalia was for. I thought maybe it was a temporary art exhibition.”

“Oh no,” offers Dennis, “Retro-Soviet’s all the rage. Was, actually. Wave’s crested. A

few years ago, it seemed like every city had to have a Soviet-themed nightclub. Now I think they're all doing about as well as this place.” But as he looks around, he realizes that the club is, in fact, becoming noisier and more crowded. “Or less so.”

Tom gestures at the Lenin bust. “So do you think it’s real?”

“Don’t know. At first, top-shelf nightclubs like Red Square — that’s in Vegas — would pay top dollar for original artifacts from the Soviet Union. Busts of Stalin and Lenin — big ones, too, knocked off of outdoor statues ...” Dennis is feeling more relaxed, mostly since he has a subject upon which he can enlighten his interlocutor for a change, but the bourbon isn’t hurting. “... or giant bronze hammer-and-sickles stripped from office buildings. Or actual sections of the Berlin Wall. Red Square had those. In the men’s room. Urinals installed on them, so everyone could piss on the Berlin Wall. But then there was a whole cottage industry in China cranking out fake Soviet memorabilia.”

Tom is frowning, still trying to get his head around Soviet-chic. “I can understand what you said about installing urinals onto sections of the Berlin Wall. That’s obvious enough. But in a place like this, there’s no sense of critique, or of celebrating victory over an enemy. It’s just decoration.”

Dennis bangs on the bar. “Precisely! I think you just hit on it. The trend exploded in the early 90s. Wall had just come down. It was political *then*. Now it’s just — well, like you said. The age group these places are targeting, it’s not us. It’s 16-24 — ”

Tom interrupts. “But 16-year-olds can’t drink.”

“But they do, and if they don’t, they will shortly. The whole point’s to get the customer *before* they start spending. And for that age group today, ‘Soviet’ says two things. It says ‘retro’ and it says ‘counterculture.’ These kids were like *two* when the Wall came down. All they know

about the Soviet Union is that their parents don't like it. QED." Tom nods, but Dennis presses on, unconsciously afraid, perhaps, of a change of topic. "S'why you don't see this stuff in mainstream joints, family places, sports bars. What do you see there?"

"I don't know," say Tom. "Ferns, tennis rackets? Aha — black and white baseball pictures."

"Precisely. Older crowd, post-teen-rebellion, so they don't want counterculture. So 50s retro, mainstream, happy shit. Black-and-whites of clean-cut men with baseball bats. Soda-fountains, poodle-skirts, red leather and polished chrome."

"And no black folks getting dragged away from the lunch counter."

"Bingo. You teach history, you said. Must be kind of sad."

"Sorry?"

"Sad. To see history like that. Not about what happened. I mean using it for decoration." Dennis realizes he's having to raise his voice, or thinks so. Normally that's what you do in a noisy nightclub. If you choose to talk at all (and you're not supposed to, because if you're talking you're not drinking), you and your interlocutor stand and scream mindless small talk at each other. It's not supposed to matter that you can't hear what's being said to you, because you're not there to converse; you're there to spend money, and if you insist on talking, the point of talking is to perform monologues that share stage-time, not to communicate. Dennis is just beginning to realize that this conversation isn't suited to a noisy nightclub when he sees that Tom has paid both their tabs and is standing up.

"Are you at all peckish?" Tom asks.

"Hah?"

"Hungry. I came straight after work to pick up something. Haven't eaten. Have you?"

“Well, I ...” Yet again, Dennis considers the possibility that this is a pick-up. But he dismisses the thought almost immediately. In the month or so he’s been here, Dennis has met twenty women, has had sex with three of them, and doesn’t have one friend. Tom might not turn out to be that, but a half an hour’s conversation with him is preferable to a year of squeaking sameness. And Dennis is tired of this place. And he *hasn’t* eaten, and he *is* hungry, and he feels like the room is suddenly *full* of groups of six or seven wriggling anorexic club-kids sending him text messages from across the room and squealing *Dennis, Dennis!* — and he suddenly pictures some of them approaching him, in front of Tom, and pulling at his clothes and saying *There you are you naughty boy, where have you been hiding, didn’t you get my messages, we got a table in the VIP lounge, oh my Gohhhhd!* And Tom would no doubt graciously back away and say something polite: *Well, I see you have your evening’s work cut out for you.* This scene flashes before Dennis’ eyes and he’s mortified. “I haven’t. Famished. Let’s go.” Dennis polishes off his bourbon, but it’s all ice. “Let me just run to the boy’s room. I’ll meet you outside.” Tom nods. Dennis makes for the back of the bar, doubles back, flags down the bartender, orders a quick shot, downs it, pays and leaves.

Outside, the night is cool. The Strip is, for the Strip, still fairly quiet. Tom’s book has disappeared, presumably into his satchel. He’s apologizing. “I’m afraid I don’t know the area’s eateries all that well anymore. I used to know a really excellent rathskeller not far from here — a perfect little dive with solid, all-American hamburgers — but it’s long-gone, I’m afraid.”

Dennis shrugs. “Well *I* certainly don’t know my way around. I’ve heard that there’s an outstanding pan-Asian place in the top of some hotel around here ...” He trails off. It occurs to him that, on a teacher’s salary — and didn’t he say part-time? — the sort of place where Dennis’ high-flying clients and co-workers suck down martinis and *unagi* might exceed Tom’s budget,

and neither of them would feel very comfortable with Dennis having to pick up a \$200 tab. Nor can he particularly afford it himself, come to think of it. "... but a burger would be great. Fine."

Across Sunset Boulevard, well-lighted place glows brightly in the California night. Life-sized decals of clowns and cartoon characters from the latest CG blockbuster confection tumble playfully around its windows. Its goofily dated golden arches glow brightly at the top of a tall pole, beckoning for blocks: *It's fine, you're safe, come here.* Tom and Dennis look at each other and grin.

"A hundred billion served," says Dennis.

"I'm not above being a hundred billion and two."

And they're off, Tom discoursing through the intersection about some trivia regarding Ray Kroc, Dennis weaving slightly at Tom's heels.

* * *

The conversation in the restaurant wanders, more excitedly than lazily. Dennis tells Tom what he knows about whatever comes to mind and makes up the rest. Tom is charmed and doesn't object. Tom doesn't lack friends, but his principal intelligent interlocutor is his wife; besides her, there are an awful lot of college teenagers and mildly mentally unsettled people in his life, and Dennis is a welcome pal and promising case. After twenty minutes, Dennis realizes that he (or the bourbon) has been talking too much. That wasn't supposed to be what this interaction was about. And if all of this was just a wolfish ploy to separate a wounded, woozy stag from the herd, Dennis has stumbled straight into the trap. So, partly out of a sense of danger and partly out of shame, Dennis turns the conversation back to Tom, realizing that he still knows

all too little about this reformed 70s glam-rocker with a book-bag and a wife. Plus, he's still not sure if he's blundered in bringing Tom to a McDonald's. If he has, Tom would be too polite to say so, but if they're going to be friends, he needs to have a sense of Tom's financial status. Tom's not a doorman. This frumpy-yet-hip-yet-proper-yet-not-priggish routine is difficult to read. Dennis takes advantage of a lull in the conversation to marshal his unfastened wits and find an oblique angle of attack.

"So, a history professor. Are you very famous? Should I have heard of you?"

Tom demurs. "Oh no, nothing like that. I had a hand in a textbook early in my career, but I was never much of one for publishing. And I only teach a course or two, now, just to keep a hand in."

Dennis, who has been relaxing well down into his plastic bench, sits bolt-upright. "I'm sorry, I'm shit with names. What did you say your last name was?"

"Luciano."

"As in Levine-and-Luciano?"

"Aha. I see you're one of my victims."

"I *do* know you. 'LL.' That was our textbook in AP U.S. History. Every day it was 'another forty pages in LL, gentlemen.' *The American Idea*. You *are* famous!"

"My fifteen minutes, then. Ron Levine and I were in graduate school together, and I helped him write the text for the first edition. But it was always his project. He was the one who shepherded it through the subsequent editions. He's very kind, and always insisted on giving me equal credit for its authorship. It's largely on the basis of his generosity in doing that that I was able to make a run for tenure at Marymount. But it didn't work out, and it's really been for the best. I was never cut out to be a research scholar."

“But you still teach.”

“Oh, I love it. History and teaching both. I wouldn’t have it any other way. But the research, the graduate seminars, the politics, the posturing, the marginalia — the drive to say anything, no matter how marginal or off-the wall, just to publish, which is survival — I was never suited to that. I’m not a high-powered thinker. I liked taking kids who knew absolutely nothing about their historical context and simply turning their lights on. I wasn’t cut out to train other professionals in the field. A high-school textbook was perfect for me, and so is a community college. Don’t get me wrong: it wasn’t easy to accept that realization about myself. Susan helped tremendously.”

Dennis is struggling to keep up. “Susan?”

“My wife. Also a professor. Also a Dougherty, by the way. So I know all about you badly-behaved Irish boys.” Tom grins and looks at his watch. “Speaking of whom, will you excuse me for a moment? If I don’t check in soon, Susan will call out the cavalry.” Tom rummages in his satchel for his phone. He takes out the book that he was reading; only now does Dennis see that it’s a biography of Jefferson. While Tom places his call, Dennis leafs through the volume, looking for marginal notations. They’re in pencil, in microscopic lines of script that writhe like centipedes under Dennis’ slightly doubled vision.

He’ll get more from eavesdropping on Tom’s conversation with his wife.

“Buona sera, bella ... Si ... No, niente como questo. Tutto a posto ... Non ci crederai, ma noi stiamo a un McDonald’s alla Strip ... Si, noi. Ho trovato un’amico interessante ... Si ... Non so — forse. Spero ... Si si, presto ... Ti amo sempre. Ciao.”

Or not. “Is Susan Spanish? Or — was that Italian?”

“Italian. But no, she’s not. Either. I’m sorry, I hope that wasn’t rude. It’s just a phone

habit we have.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Oh yes. I’m a creature leashed, have no doubt, but I’m on a long leash. If Susan is anything, it’s reasonable.”

Dennis is uncomfortable — strangely, very mildly terrified — to come so close to this man’s marriage, to what must be this man’s innermost intimacy. He quickly moves to resume their former subject. “Good, fine, it’s — anyway. Where were we. Ah — you said part-time. You — ah. Did you retire?” It’s strange; he’s having trouble regaining his composure.

“Heavens no. I certainly hope I don’t look *that* old. No, I merely — how might you put it? Diversified. Into counseling. It was really just another aspect of what I loved to do, and it’s very easy out here in California, as luck would have it.”

“College counseling?”

“No, though some of that happens in the normal course of business when you’re working with a student. No, just counseling. Therapy.”

“Aha!” Dennis leans back in his plastic seat, pleased. “That explains it.”

“What?”

“Why you’re such a good listener. I feel like I’ve been sitting here for the past hour telling you everything.”

Tom smiles. “Is that me? I’m very flattered. I thought it was the Maker’s Mark.”

Though he knows that Tom is only teasing, Dennis feels chastened. His hand finds its way to the back of his neck. “So, therapy.”

Observing the neck gesture, Tom moves lightly on. “Yep. After Marymount let me go, I ground away as an adjunct for a year or two. And I was approaching forty, and it was

approaching the millennium, and Susan was encouraging me to expand. I really didn't stand a chance. So I started taking classes, and got the Master's, and pretty soon I was counseling."

Dennis is still subdued, though his red face has lightened a shade. "Psychoanalysis?"

"No, just your average run-of-the-mill cognitive talk therapy. In most states they call it 'licensed professional counseling.' California's unusual, as it turns out, in not requiring any license to practice. But I have to do things by the book," Tom grins, "so I went ahead and got the degree and, a few years ago, the license. It's still not required, but it's sure to be eventually. There's a bill in the state legislature."

Dennis is angling around at something else now. "You counsel at the school?"

Tom notes that Dennis is curious. He doesn't comment. "Yes, I help out at the counseling office at WestLAC some. And I've done some work at some community clinics here and there. Logging supervised counseling hours is part of what's required for the license. And I do still teach, and it's worked out very nicely: they dovetail very nicely. That was the idea, but still, it's lovely that it should play out so well. I'm definitely a better teacher for it, I think. I hope. And the history finds its way into the counseling, too. Sometimes. When it's appropriate."

"I see," says Dennis. Tom takes a sip of coffee. Dennis instinctively reaches for his milkshake, touches its sweaty cold exterior, then puts it back down. It's not sitting well on top of the Maker's Mark. "Private clients?"

"Yes; now, quite a few. I didn't at first, of course, but in the last few years, I've started to."

"It's probably expensive."

"Not really. My wife is doing well at UCLA, and with all my little jobs here and there,

we do all right. I generally charge a nominal fee in my own practice that depends on what the client feels comfortable with. I've done it for \$120 an hour and I've done it for free."

Correction. It's not that the milkshake isn't sitting well on top of the Maker's Mark; it isn't sitting at all. The two are sliding over each other in Dennis' gut, refusing to mix, slurping in lopsided gyrations like oil and water, like Romulus and Remus wrestling beneath the milk-swollen paps of the she-wolf. Dennis excuses himself hurriedly to embrace the toilet. Where he discovers that pubic hairs cling to porcelain even in paradise. He returns to the table sweaty and flushed but a little less green at the gills.

Tom greets him with a wink. "Feeling better?"

Dennis appreciates Tom's urbanity but doesn't need it at this point. He's made up his mind. "Will you take me on? As a client?"

It's a question that Tom has been anticipating for an hour. "You don't need to pay me for us to be friends, Dennis."

"I know. It's not that. It's just — look. I think — I'm in a better place now. I don't mean *now* now." He gestures toward the restrooms. "I mean here in L.A. now. It hasn't been all sun and roses. Before. This was supposed to be a positive move for me. Getting out of what I was doing. I didn't know what to expect. But it's good. Better than I expected. The new job — so far so good. Very good. And this city. New start and all. But it's more than that. It's better than I expected. It feels — healthy. Everybody's healthy. No one smokes. They drink wheat grass and carrot juice and exercise and walk their kids on the beach. I just — I don't want to fuck it up. Again."

"Dennis, I'd be delighted to be your friend. I'd also be delighted to work with you. I think you're very interesting, and I get the pleasure of your company either way, so either

option's fine with me."

Dennis smiles at that, a little. "So it's either or?"

"Not necessarily. I've become friends with former clients, though it's rarer that one takes a friend on as a client. It's not as if friendship and therapy are polar opposites. Any good friendship is therapeutic: a friend should be someone who can provide a helpful perspective, or listen when you need to vent, or give you good advice when it's needed. Counseling is more structured, and sometimes more impersonal; you can often say things to a counselor that you wouldn't to a friend. There's less at stake. The point of counseling is more singular: that you become wiser, deeper, more aware of your self and your surroundings. I benefit from it too, no doubt, and I think I'd benefit a lot from working with you. But if we work together, you're the objective. It's your choice."

"What do you think?" Dennis asks.

"I don't know you well enough to hazard an informed opinion. What I can tell you is that you've just told me you feel you're at a turning point."

Dennis pouts. "Very diplomatic."

Tom's smiling, but his eyes flash, and Dennis withers. "I'd prefer to call it accurate. Also, don't forget, you haven't hired me. If you want me to hold your feet to the fire, you're going to have to pay for that." Tom wiggles his eyebrows evilly. But Dennis, having made his decision, is now feeling safe to start unmaking it.

"I don't know. I mean, what's in it for you? I'm sorry. No offense. It's just that — I only met you just tonight. And I feel like I might be doing something rash. So how do I know that you're not?"

"I suppose you wouldn't think it excessively diplomatic if I were to point out that I'm not

you.”

“Ouch.”

“Look, Dennis, I’m just teasing. I’m sorry. You asked for a straight answer and I didn’t give you one. My motivations are simple. First, it’s the right thing for me to do. I mean teaching and counseling in general. Teaching, counseling, call it what you will — it helps people. It’s a fact that perspectives can be expanded, and that that can help people live better, wiser lives. It’s why I do what I do. Second: because you asked me and I trust your intentions. I don’t know you well, but I have some reason to believe that time with you wouldn’t be a waste for either of us. Third: I like you. I’d enjoy working with you, talking with you, plain and simple. It’s a bias, but I’m human. If you were a sniveling little brat who asked for help, I’d still feel obligated, but that third motivation makes it easier. And there you have it. And now that I think of it, that’s liberty, equality and fraternity. In the flesh. Not bad, if I say so myself.”

Dennis takes a moment to digest all this, or try.

“How much would you charge?”

“What would you be comfortable with?”

Dennis knocks on the formica tabletop as if he’s disclosing a deal-closing sum to buy a hotel. “Hundred bucks an hour.”

Tom laughs. “If we’re going to do this, I’d like it actually to happen. Forty.”

“Fifty,” counters Dennis, a little ashamed for having been so transparent.

Tom takes a business card out of his wallet. He places it on the table and covers it with his hand. “If we make a deal, I’m going to expect you to keep it.”

Dennis looks at the pale, delicate hand with the wedding ring. Under it is a commitment. No commitment is terribly pleasant, per se. One has to be very peculiar to make commitments

just for the sake of doing so. But some risks are worth taking. Taking the job in L.A. was a risk worth taking. Allowing himself into a conversation with this stranger was a risk worth taking. Dennis is vaguely aware that he takes more than enough risks that aren't worth taking. He pulls out his wallet and slaps down fifty dollars on the table-top. Not a \$50-bill, either, but two twenties and two fives. Minus a few singles, they're the last bills in his wallet. "That's for tonight. Our first session."

Tom doesn't move. "Oh no you don't. This wasn't work. Put that away."

Dennis doesn't move either. "Payment up front for our first session, then."

Tom thinks for a moment, or appears to. Then he slowly slides his card out across the table, covers the bills with it, lightly sets it down and draws them back, maintaining eye contact with Dennis all the while, his expression serious, smiling only in the corners of his eyes, all of it as careful and deliberate as if he were easing his hand down the front of Dennis' pants. The single gesture takes a dozen seconds, and it feels like half an hour. Dennis is paralyzed. It's not until the bills slip off the table and into Tom's wallet that Dennis starts to breathe again. He takes the card. "So how does this work?"

"There's nothing formal about it. That's my cell and my home address. Home office. Is that all right?"

"Fine."

"Would an evening after work be fine with you? Say, six?"

"Sure."

"Any particular day? Monday evenings I'm at a neighborhood clinic. Wednesday?"

"Fine."

"Great," Tom chirps lightly, noting Dennis' pallor. "Look, Dennis, there's nothing to

worry about. We just chat. I don't hook you up to a machine. I don't even have a couch for you to lie on."

"It sounds good. I'm up for it. I'm excited. I'm just feeling a little — tired. Dizzy. I think I'm a little drunk."

"I think you might be. But only a little. Did you drive?"

"I did. I planned on driving home, I guess, but — ah, I think I'm gonna call a cab."

"Didn't you say Culver City? Is that where you live?"

"Yeah. But I don't want to — "

"It's right on my way home. Really. Shall we?"

Tom rises, gathers up their trash and fairly strides toward the exit. Dennis stumbles along behind. He casts a backward glance at the table they've abandoned. There's nothing special about it. It isn't white, it isn't gray. It looks like all the others. It isn't even in a unique location in the restaurant — in a corner, or underneath a memorable bank of plastic plants. He wants to fix it in his mind. Maybe his life will change dramatically after this. Maybe he'll end up standing behind a stage festooned with red, white and blue, with a roaring, cheering crowd out front, and his dad will clap an arm around his shoulders and say "Dennis, you know, it looked like it was touch and go there with you for a while, but I have to say, you've done all right." Maybe he'll pass out and be raped and killed. Maybe his mother, standing in the kitchen doorway, will be deathly pale when his father takes the phone call — knowing what it is, stabbing her husband with her eyes, blaming him.

The sign on the door says simply: *come again*. He might, he might not. But with a million served, and then a hundred million served, and then two hundred million, then a billion, then 99 billion, and finally uncountable billions upon billions served, someone surely will.

* * *

The instant Tom and Dennis step through the doorway, they're assaulted by pandemonium, a hurricane of noise: honks, yells, cheers, jeers, screams, taunts, screeching tires, music tearing through the walls of a hundred clubs and a thousand gridlocked cars, distorted bass thumping raggedly out of torn sub-woofers, bongos, buskers, garbage cans, glam-rock, oldies, Muzak, punk and ska, house and tribal, merengue, conjunto, drum-and-bass, sirens, breaking glass, laughs, pleas, furious imprecations, shrieking giggles, screams that could mean anything.

It's late. The Strip has finally come uncoiled and is writhing like a rattlesnake with a severed head. Tom and Dennis hesitate in the parking lot, slathered with the margarine light of the golden arches glowing gracefully aloft, still cooing *fine, you're safe, come here* — but no one's paying attention to that now. Despite the apparent kaleidoscopic plurality of the mass, it moves in billions of directions with a single purpose: waiting. Waiting to be entertained. Waiting to be relieved of waiting. Waiting for death.

The sidewalk in front of the restaurant is a swirling mass of bodies moving in single files: one strand flows up the street, another down, another up, another down, interwoven but exquisitely unbroken, like a swirling mass of ants which, upon closer inspection, resolves into strands of insects locked onto pheromonal tracks. This human rope is fat, as if swollen with water. It pushes up against the cars in the street, which follow the same pattern: pushing, shoving, surging one direction then the other, lurching left or right then back again, nosing into the adjacent file, then back, then out, then back again, blinking, honking, signaling, signaling back, gesturing and shouting, shouting back, gunning, braking, slowing, going, slowing, going.

The ice floe of passenger cars — all with their windows open, all with bodies hanging out — is punctuated here and there by advertising trucks that loom above the traffic like soldier ants, festooned with self-directed spotlights illuminating mobile billboards giant plastic product-simulacra: a twelve-foot plastic can of Satan Energy Drink, a twelve-foot plastic bottle of Gesundheit Beer, a twelve-foot plastic Squiggles Raspberry Twist. Across the street, an identical swollen rope of bodies expands and contracts, pushing itself along the sidewalk like a rat corpse oozing through the body of a python. Fragments of colored spinning computer-synchronized lights and shards of laser escape through nightclub windows and flicker over the scene. On both sides of the Strip, phalanxes of blinking, twirling neon signs and billboards whose faces update every seven-point-three-six seconds (a figure arrived at after exhaustive scientific study by another phalanx of researchers at a marketing institute in Cleveland) pen the crowd in from both sides, up and down the street and away in both directions until sight fails.

Tom and Dennis advance to the edge of this manic surf. “I had not thought death had undone so many!” Tom shouts.

“Huh?”

They’re interrupted by a sinuous knot of five or seven or nine squealing girls, it’s impossible to tell, that curls out of the stream and winds around them. They’re mostly interested in Dennis, but that’s impossible to tell too. *Fresh blood, oh my god, wassup boyze, you’re cute, come party with us!* Tom is paddling forward into the main stream, but Dennis is relatively happy to let himself be caught in this particular squealing, squirming eddy. He’s trying to keep them separate and make out who said what, but they’re all different versions of each other, as if one master club-kid zombie had been cloned, butchered and reassembled in some nightmarish club-couture autopsy lab: different versions of the same straw cowboy hat subjected to the same

degree of factory faux-distress, different logos on identically tattered tank-tops, different versions of the same miniskirt, different versions of the same tan naked legs all wobbling in similarly oversized pairs of cowboy boots, identically tanned naked midriffs all punctuated with different belly-button studs intended to enhance sexual pleasure with a labor pool of identical sexual partners who wear interchangeable baggy pants, oversized sports jerseys and backwards baseball caps. If anything, the girls' faces should be their social fingerprints, but Dennis is having a hard time distinguishing any differences there either.

Downriver, Tom sees that he's lost his charge and transfers into a reverse-going file that carries him back to Dennis. The Hydra-headed club-kid clutch is swirling around Dennis now. He's told them his name, apparently, and they're running it teasingly/suggestively through various permutations: *Ooh, Dennis the Menace, Dennis Rodman, Dennis Quaid, oh my god!*

Tom shouts: "Are you coming?"

Dennis shouts that he's not sure that he's coming. That he thinks he'll take a cab after all. That he doesn't want to inconvenience Tom. That he'll catch up with Tom later. The Hydra is closing in for the kill, pulling at Dennis' clothes, pulling him into the crowd, writhing, squealing, *Dennis, Menace ME!*

Tom puts on a monstrous cartoon smile, sidles up close to Dennis, mock-slaps four or five Hydra-hands attached to various parts of Dennis, takes him by the arm, spins him to one side and declaims loudly, in a hammy gay-man voice that positively glitters with rhinestones, "EXCUSE me, ladies, but this one's MINE." He wags a finger at the Hydra. Although there's nothing like seducing a gay man to validate its sexual prowess, the Hydra merely giggles and retreats. There's Midori Melon still to drink, and there will be more fresh blood within the next fifty feet of body-pulsing sidewalk. Dennis lets himself be borne away on Tom's arm, mock-

protesting but secretly relieved. The Hydra dissolves back into the stream: *Oh my god, whatever, have FUN boyze!*

“There’s a name for what you just did, Tom,” shouts Dennis. “It’s called cock-blocking.”

“You owe me another fifty,” Tom shouts back.

* * *

They’re in Tom’s car, headed south on Fairfax Avenue. Tom, energized by his little cabaret performance back on the Strip, has resumed his lecture on the colorful history of that neighborhood. Dennis was engaged at first, when Tom was recounting the glory days of punk and glam rock on the Boulevard, the icons of American music who got their starts as house bands at places like Gazzarri’s and “the Whisky,” the famous bands and the hotel rooms that they trashed, the time when John Lennon was thrown out of the Troubadour for heckling the Smothers Brothers, the Curfew Riots of 1966. But Tom has been winding backwards in time, and now he’s on again about Dorothy Parker and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Dennis’ mind is wandering. Principally he’s trying to recall the three motivations Tom revealed at the restaurant. He remembers the tags of *liberty*, *equality* and *fraternity*, but he can’t straighten out what they were attached to. And what’s worse, the triad has gotten mixed up in his head with others. One’s from a marketing case-study Dennis knows: the three “lodestone concepts” that McDonald’s ad consultants focus-grouped to shape their client’s *i’m lovin’ it* campaign: *inspiration*, *passion*, *fun!* Also, Kim Krisco’s “Rule of Threes” for creating grassroots publicity: three messages, three media, three insertions. Dennis has trained himself to think in triads.

“Dennis.”

A two-part message says conflict: one-two punch. It's in motion: left, right, left, right. A three-part message is stable, like a tripod. It's complete: it's got *Snap, Crackle, Pop!* That's the seed right there of every story; that's world literature in three words. Even the meanings, sounds and word-lengths (all three) fit: you slip into a snappy start; you crrrrackles through the development, as cracks open up in the story and things get crackin'; and then you Pop 'em in the eye, send 'em out with a kick in the pants, *Biff Bam Boom!* Earth, Wind & Fire? *Three-cheese bagel*. Blood, sweat and tears? *Triple-Berry Blast*. Past, present, future? *Coats, soothes, relieves*. Father, Son and Space Ghost? *Triple-protection!* Three bears, three pigs, three mice, three meals, three Stooges, three strikes; what a *Breakfast of Champions*. *We Try Harder*. Why? *Just do it*: ABC, RBG, that's how easy love can be. Veni, vidi, vici with a triple-blade razor. *i'm lovin' it!*

"Dennis!"

"Huh?"

"Something's happening."

Tom's right: something *is* happening; something wonderful, as Dave Bowman said in *2001* (just before Jupiter exploded). At the moment, this alleged something-wonderful seems equally alarming to Dennis. There are police lights at the next intersection and helicopters thumping overhead. Searchlights swoop around the street. People are running along the sidewalk in ragged groups, all heading in the same direction. A bad sign. But they're running toward the ruckus up ahead, not away from it. A confusing sign. Dennis can't tell if they're laughing or screaming. One guy is pulling a woman by the hand and she's mock-resisting, and it seems like they're both laughing. The girl is hanging on to a stop-sign, the guy is pulling her, and another guy is either tickling her or fucking her from behind.

Also: everyone, more or less, appears to be in their underwear or bathing suits. A *very* confusing sign.

Dennis is alarmed. “Is it a riot?”

Thomas is bouncing in the driver’s seat, his head swiveling this way and that. “It’s an O.J.!”

Dennis doesn’t know what to say.

“An O.J. Simpson,” Tom explains. “A high-speed police pursuit!”

Dennis rubs his face and mumbles something.

As they approach the intersection, they can see that it’s not Fairfax that’s blocked off. It’s the cross-street, Wilshire Boulevard. The LAPD clearly haven’t been on the scene long. There are two police cars parked haphazardly, blocking off Wilshire to their left. The cops have thrown a few flares out on the pavement, and a couple of policemen are vainly trying to hold a flimsy stretch of yellow police tape across the street. Scantly clad pedestrians in groups of various sizes are jumping over the tape or ducking under it and threading swarming past a third officer who’s vainly playing short-stop in the middle of the street. Dennis can see that Wilshire Boulevard, on the far side of this flimsy barricade, is flooded with people and with light. A fourth officer is standing in the middle of Fairfax, trying to keep traffic flowing past: *Let’s go, people, move along!*

As they motor through the intersection, Tom is muttering: “This isn’t a police chase ...” He pulls abruptly over to the curb, wheels scraping at cement. “Let’s go!”

Dennis’ terror threat level escalates to orange. “Tom, what are you doing? It’s a police scene!”

Tom reins in his excitement and places a hand on Dennis arm. “Dennis: it’s not. And it’s

not a car chase. It's a spectacle. If you're not up for it tonight, that's fine. But if you are, and if you don't go because of fear, you'll wish you had. A *bona fide* spectacle is an L.A. institution that you don't want to miss. You'll be safe. Look, we're going to the same place that everyone else is."

"On the Strip, you said I owed you fifty bucks for *stopping* me from doing that."

"That was common. Simian cannon-fodder. You know what this is, don't you?"

"I have no idea what this is."

"This is *The Real Thing*."

Sold!

They tumble out of Tom's sensible station wagon and start jogging back toward the intersection. A crowd of teenagers in beach-wear rushes past them, whooping and wooting. As they pass, one shouts to Dennis: *Catch the Wave!*

As they're rounding the corner onto Wilshire, a police officer forlornly holding the limp end of a bit of yellow tape stops Dennis. "Sorry, sir, the block is closed."

Tom immediately interposes himself, flashing something from his wallet. "Is this the disturbance, officer? I got a call from the county."

The officer takes his flashlight from its holster and peers at Tom's card. Thomas Luciano, Counselor, L.A. County Mental Health something-or-other. Tom winks at Dennis. "What's the situation, officer?"

The policeman hands the card back. "Coca-Cola beach party, far as I know."

"I'm sorry, officer. I don't understand."

"Some kids — or some pranksters or some Tech students or some protesters or some environmental terrorists — we don't know — anyway, someone drove a truck full of Coke syrup

and dry ice into the pond at Hancock Park. Homeland Security thinks it's terrorist, so it's their scene. You'll have to ask them what they need. They're back in there somewhere."

"As It Should Be. Thank you, Officer."

"Enjoy."

Tom and Dennis head down the block toward what they assume is the pond, where the revelers are thickest and the lights brightest. Three or four news-channel helicopters are circling overhead, blasting the scene with million-candlepower nightsuns to make for useable footage. A throng of half-naked, slimy teenage boys rushes up to and past them, on to their next adventure, hollering "Yeeeeeah! *Coke Is It!*" A half-naked, slimy couple is heavy-petting in the middle of the street. Tom ribs them as they pass. "Apparently, *Coke Makes Good Things Taste Better.*"

"You Can't Beat the Feeling," they reply in unison.

"Coke really Is It, isn't it?" Dennis wonders aloud.

"C'mon, Dennis! It's *America's Real Choice.*"

They push their way through the crowd. The pond is, sure enough, bursting with *The Cold, Crisp Taste of Coke*. And with people. Pleasure-bathers of all ages are splashing about in the frothing black muck, rubbing it in their hair, churning up great blooms of foam with their arms and legs. It's a somewhat sordid affair; while this sea of Coke clearly *Adds Life*, it's not professionally mixed, so the results fall somewhat short of *The Real Thing*. But there's no doubt that the bathers are *Really Refreshed*, laughing and splashing each other with it, dunking each other in it. Across the pond, a street-side guard-rail has been busted through; there are skid-marks down a hill from it to the water, in which a truck of some sort is half-submerged. Frozen CO₂ is still bubbling furiously and harmlessly out the back of it, sending a lovely, wispy mist across the thoroughly carbonated pond. A few cops are standing around the perimeter, not doing

much more than looking on, amused, and doing a bit of friendly lifeguarding: “All right, ease up there, *Enjoy Life*, no dunking!” As the officer had said, it isn’t LAPD’s scene. The Department of Homeland Security agents couldn’t be more obvious: five or six men in business suits are huddled next to a Humvee guarded by two bored-looking soldiers in full-dress battle gear. Each agent has a finger plugged into one ear and is shouting into a cellphone pressed against the other. One covers his phone and grabs his partner’s arm. “Hazmat. I’ve got confirmation that it’s hazmat.”

“What?”

“Unmixed cola syrup. Class 3 hazmat. I think we need DOT in here or something.”

“But it’s mixed.”

“Fuck — one sec. Rogers! ... Hello? Rogers? OK: what if it’s mixed? ... Mike Indigo X-ray Echo Delta ... As in mixed, carbonated, CO₂, *Coke*, *Coca-Cola*, *Ice-Cold Sunshine*, *The Best Friend Taste Ever Had!* ... Repeat? Yeah I’ll hold, but hurry up, would ya?”

Tom and Dennis drift along the shoreline, Dennis bewildered, Tom utterly at ease, shepherding Dennis gently by the arm and stopping here and there to exchange pleasantries with some bather or another as if he knew them all, as if they were all the fellow-citizens of some small Midwestern prairie town. “Good evening ... Yes, it certainly is *A Sign Of Good Taste* ... Hello there ...” A little boy runs up to them, shouting “What is it, Mister? What’s goin’ on?” Tom tousles the boy’s hair. “*What You Want Is a Coke*, young man: *Refresh Yourself*” — and points the boy toward the shallows of the pond, where Coke fizzes safely ankle-deep. They pass a silver-haired gentleman in a business suit sitting serenely on a rock, his trouser-legs rolled up, his pale veined feet sweetly soaking. Tom nods to him respectfully. “*It Goes Along*, sir, does it not?”

The old sage beams, gesturing broadly out over the water as if toward an undiscovered continent, a new world of second chances — or an ancient golden age of unity, of Earth before Babel: “*Coca-Cola: The Great National Temperance Beverage. Delicious And Refreshing, it Revives And Sustains. Pure Drink Of Natural Flavors, Around the Corner From Anywhere, and Pure As Sunlight.*”

“Well,” teases Tom, pointing towards the deflated syrup-bags floating in the pond like dead jellyfish, “*Pure as Sunlight* at sunset, perhaps. But there’s no doubt, sir: *It Had To Be Good To Get Where It Is.* And do you find it to be *The Pause That Refreshes?*”

“*Thirst Asks Nothing More, friend.*”

Dennis, finding his voice, nervously offers: “May it *Add Life*, sir.”

The elder gentleman slips off his rock and stretches out his hand toward Dennis. Dennis flinches, but Tom holds him firm. The old man places his hand on Dennis’ shoulder. “*Whoever You Are, Whatever You Do, Wherever You May Be, When You Think Of Refreshment, Think Of Ice Cold Coca-Cola.*” Dennis and Tom both nod graciously to the man and slowly move on.

“What did he mean by that, Tom? Is it a metaphor for something?”

“It’s bullshit, Dennis.”

“Tom?”

“It’s sugar water sold at a thousand-percent markup.”

“But it all seems so ...”

“*Giving? Living? Loving?*”

“Totally. Everyone. Oozing it.”

“*Where There’s Coke, There’s Hospitality.*” Tom puts his arm around Dennis’ shoulders and gives them a squeeze. “I told you you’d not want to miss this.”

Circle 1: Limbo

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Dennis awakes gasping, panicked, heart racing. He's overslept. His adrenal glands have been trying to tell him that, bathing his brain in increasing levels of adrenaline for the last hour. He doesn't sleep through his phalanx of week-day alarms anymore, but there was a time when he did, and after one too many Wednesdays waking up half-drunk with the work-day half-spent and his voicemail full of increasingly angry messages from his soon-to-be-former employer, he's become conditioned.

But it's Saturday.

Dennis flops back on the bed, sighing with relief. The little System Operator in his head leans over a microphone: *Plumbing, cut adrenals, serotonin 40%.*

He sits back up. Did that little fucker knock again?

Hold it, Plumbing.

Dennis isn't sure if he dreamed it or not, so he decides not to waste a call to the management office. He lies back.

Sorry, Plumbing, go ahead.

How did he get here? Home? He sits back up.

Plumbing, cancel, adrenals 65%. A microscopic intercom crackles in his frontal lobes.

Plumbing to SysOp, make up your fucking mind, over.

Dennis remembers last night on Sunset Strip. He remembers Tom and most of their conversation. He remembers having agreed to meet, and most of the scene at the park. He's not

sure which strains credulity more. He doesn't remember coming home or upstairs. It did happen, didn't it? He's got a pretty talented imagination, but he couldn't have made all that up. Not Tom. He'd never heard of half the things Tom was talking about, and you can't make up stuff you don't know. Can you? What if it's stuff you don't know you know? Stuff you read once and forgot, or subliminal shit? Dennis groans. "Not before coffee." On the way to the kitchen, he checks the little dish to see if anything's missing. Everything's right where it's supposed to be. He only then thinks to check his wallet for Tom's card. It's right there: Tom Luciano and his number and address. "Weds. 6p" is written on the back of it, and not in Dennis' handwriting. Dennis remembers clearly that he agreed to Wednesday, but he doesn't remember Tom writing it on the card. This bothers him. "He took his card out. He put it on the table. I put the cash on the table. He took the cash. I took the card." The coffeemaker sputters like a small animal being drowned. "He could've had a pen in his hand." Dennis spends the rest of the morning reassembling the previous night. In the cab on the way to retrieve his car, he thinks he might call Tom, just to see if anyone picks up — if someone answers "Luciano Auto Parts," or something like that — but he doesn't want to look any stupider than he must've last night.

The rest of the weekend passes uneventfully. On Saturday night, out for drinks with Heather, he thinks he might mention Tom. But then thinks he might not until after he and Heather have finished their third obligatory drink before going back to her apartment to fuck, and they're making perfectly pleasant small talk about how nice L.A. is, and it occurs to him that talking about your therapist might not be the sexiest aphrodisiac. He lets it pass.

* * *

Wednesday rolls around and the marine layer with it, thick and damp and low, as if the Pacific were smothering the Los Angeles Basin in a warm, wet blanket. It's not the sort of fog you might find elsewhere — not the icy knifing fogs that cartwheel down the streets of San Francisco, so animated and charismatic that you can't help seeing the faces of murderers in them. Nor is it the static fogs of Massachusetts: monstrous banks hundreds of miles wide that silently materialize in place, not icy but just below the temperature of a human body, just enough to make you think that you can stay outside as the microscopic droplets of water on your skin silently suck the warmth out of you until you suddenly realize that you've lost core temperature and it's too late, you've got a cold or something seriously worse. No, the Los Angeles marine layer is more like an apology — more like the peaceful Pacific saying *Hey — sorry to bother you, but you're about to get a sunburn; you'd better cover up*. Or perhaps *You didn't forget what weather looked like, did you?* She just wants to protect you from the sun's harsh rays; she just wants you to be well-rounded. She doesn't want to ruin your day, so around mid-afternoon, she gathers her gauze up from the city and takes it back out to sea to keep it cool and damp, returning you to your regular programming.

By Wednesday evening it's gorgeous. The sun is leaning down toward the horizon, filtering his rays through the polluted atmosphere which mellows them to a beautiful merlot. The light ambles in from off the ocean, wine-golden and diffused; it wanders around the streets of Venice, caressing joggers, caressing couples strolling over bougainvillea-decked canals, caressing old ladies rolling grocery carts past murals of Jim Morrison. Venice: the *new* Venice, the new *true* Venice — not an Italian Renaissance theme park like the old one, suckeed dry of inhabitants by international luxury-realty speculators, but a living, vibrant, ocean-town where, despite the gentrification and the Hollywood-starlet mansions and the Louis Vuitton For

Toddlers, local homeowners still live and work and sleep. Will it last? In fifty years, will this new Venice, like its namesake, disgorge itself every evening of all Los Angelinos? Will shop-owners and bike-rental managers and cleaning staffs and panhandlers flood back to affordable suburbs, abandoning Venice to the tourists who come out of their hotels in the evening to walk its empty streets and peer and nod uncomfortably to each other? Sand-dollars aren't the only kind you find on property near water. What is it about water, anyway?

Time to stop daydreaming. To enjoy a stroll through (and get a sense of) the neighborhood, Dennis has parked a few blocks away from Tom's house, and now he's made his way to it, to an address on Cabrillo Ave. The name means nothing to him other than, vaguely, "goat" — a strange name for a street, even in a city with a substantial Hispanic past. The house is nice-looking but modest, a colorfully painted single-story wood-frame bungalow, slightly crowded by newer, uglier, multi-story, multi-tenant brick buildings on both sides. Dennis knocks.

In a perfect world, Tom would answer the door in some peculiar costume that would create a plot point in Dennis' life, that would require explanation, that would complicate the previous Friday night: a Renaissance-fair outfit, maybe, or a serial killer's hockey mask with fuzzy bunny slippers. Unfortunately, Tom answers the door looking entirely normal and very much like he did the Friday night before.

Dennis can't tell if Tom looks surprised that Dennis has kept their appointment. "Dennis! Great to see you. No trouble finding the place?" The interior of Tom and Susan's house suits what one would expect from seeing it from the street: it's modest but not spare, lived-in but clean, sunny and clearly home to two avid readers; if anything is in disorder about the house (and not much is), it's the turbulent stream of reading materials that courses through it

barely contained: a hopper over-stuffed with rumpled newspapers by the front door, piles of serious-looking periodicals leaning dangerously atop side- and coffee-tables, papers scattered on the dining-room table, and overloaded, unmatched bookshelves (none of the cinder-block-and-plank variety, but all, clearly, of unrelated provenance) pressed into service against every available foot of wall. Tom waves at them vaguely as they pass through the front room: “Fiction and art-books, mostly ... Cookbooks over there. Susan’s books are mostly in her office; I’m so itinerant, though, mine are spread all over the city ...”

Tom leads Dennis down a dark hallway. Dennis can see that it’s lined with photos, but he can’t make any of them out. They arrive at a brightly lit room at the back of the house. “I hope this will be all right. Can I get you something? Water, tea? I’m afraid you can’t smoke just now. I have an air purifier for precisely that, but it’s on the fritz at the moment.” Tom’s home-office is bright. Three walls are lined with books from floor to ceiling, with more books piled here and there. The fourth wall is mostly paned-glass windows and faces out into a back yard packed with flowers, fruit trees and a little garden, all of which is surrounded by a privacy fence over which the upper stories of the adjacent apartment buildings peer. Tom’s desk, facing the windows, is a chaos of books and papers. After a few more pleasantries, the men get settled into two comfortable chairs: Tom by his desk, swiveled around to face Dennis, Dennis in a corner facing out.

“Good *feng shui*,” says Dennis.

Tom predictably demurs. “Susan’s doing. When we first moved in, I had bookshelves covering the windows and the desk facing a wall. Susan came back here to see what I was up to and just shook her head. I’m afraid aesthetics isn’t my strong suit.” Dennis wonders how many times Tom has told this story and how much truth there is to it. “So how do we start?”

With preliminaries. Dennis starts to spell out *Dougherty*. Tom interrupts. “I’ve got it. Did I not mention? Susan’s a Dougherty.” Tom grins slyly. “I take it you know what it means.”

“Means?”

“In Gaelic. *Do cartach*. I’ll let Susan tell you.”

“Tell me.”

“Oh no. You’ll meet Susan eventually. What’s your phone number? In case I need to cancel for some reason.” Tom takes it down. “So.” His tone is chatty. “Where are you from, originally?”

“Worcester MA. About an hour west of Boston.”

“Sure. Home of the *Worcester Spy*.” Dennis’ expression is quizzical. “Sorry, historical trivia. Revolutionary-era newspaper. Ran until 1904, actually. Never mind. So what’s on your mind? You mentioned something about moving here being a fresh start, and not wanting to mess it up.”

“Ha! You can say that again.” Dennis is fighting dismissive fatalism and losing. Tom is silent; Dennis, uncomfortable, continues. “Bottom line is that I fuck everything up. I don’t mean — no. It’s not like that. It’s not like I’m some sort of miserable sad-sack. But I have — I have *tried* to make good decisions — but each time, it seems things turn out worse than before. And now I’ve moved to a new place with a good job for all of what seemed like good reasons, and I’m just worried: is this going to be another mistake, another catastrophe? It’s like my childhood was on this hill, and I keep making decisions to go up, and every one’s taken me farther down.”

“So you’re saying: golden childhood years, in comparison to which everything increasingly pales.”

“Pretty much.” Dennis looks sullen.

“Are you much acquainted with Thomas Dolby?”

Dennis starts. “*She Blinded Me With Science* Thomas Dolby?” Where is *this* coming from?

“Yes.”

“Uh, sure I do.”

“Do you know his song *Hyperactive*?”

“Sure. And *Aliens Ate My Buick*, for what it’s worth.” Where is this *going*? Who is this old duffer who goes from Revolutionary War trivia to pulp culture in sixty seconds? Dennis is starting to suspect anew how much he might in fact like this guy.

“Vell then,” says Tom, leaning back and adopting the goofy German accent that kicked off their acquaintance. “Vy don’t you me about your childhoot.”

Dennis decides that he definitely likes this guy. “Ah, you mean those golden years. At Winthrop.”

“Was that your school?”

“Winthrop Christian Academy for boys,” says Dennis, “estab. — well, I don’t know when. Sixties, I think.”

“And what’s a nice Catholic boy like you doing at a Congregational school like that?”

“Who’s Catholic?”

“I just assumed, with a good Irish name like Dougherty, and your being from the Boston area ...”

“My dad’s side’s Irish, though I don’t know how far back. He doesn’t talk about it much. But no, to the extent that we’re anything, we’re Episcopalians. Standard two-day Christians: my

parents don't talk about religion, but they'd *never* skip church on Christmas or Easter. Even Easter, not so much; going to church on Easter's for fanatics. But definitely, definitely Christmas." Dennis grins. "Unless it's too crowded."

"An Anglican Doherty," muses Tom. "Interesting. There's a story back there somewhere, more likely than not."

"Well, you won't get it from my dad. He sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus, as best I can tell."

"A bit of a Jay Gatsby?"

"*Gatsby*. It's been a long time. Um ... he has a closet full of brightly colored shirts?"

Tom laughs. "He's the Platonic conception of himself. Self-made man. No past."

"That's him."

"Well, you might ask him about it sometime. Might be interesting."

* * *

It was interesting — and in the literal sense, *inter* + *esse*, to be between. The Dohertys had already taken one step toward assimilation when they Anglicized their name, but that was generations back. The more startling conversion, from Irish Papist to the Church of Union Jack, was a more recent (and quintessentially American) affair. Alan Dougherty, Dennis' father, could be forgiven for knowing little of his family's past; he's a chip off the old block, and the old block, patriarch Peter Dougherty, was a good American and no more prone to wallow in the sentimental past than his son or grandson, good Americans both, would be.

The year was 1924. October, cold. The scene: a small kitchen in a working-class house in a working-class neighborhood of Worcester. If the sun had been shining, the house would have been almost in the shadow of a hulking, smoking factory where dust-black men loaded ore into machines that pounded it into sheets of steel. It was, however, late at night. Too late for working people to have been awake and sitting up in their kitchen, with all the lights on, but there they were: Peter Dougherty and two of his four brothers, Michael and Connor, sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, debating quietly but intensely and looking grim. Their young wives were in the next room consoling the girlfriend of the youngest brother, Sean. That evening there had been a Klan rally, the largest ever in New England, at the Worcester fairgrounds. Some local boys — a lot — had gone to rough the Klansmen up. There were reports of fires, cars smashed, people getting beaten to a pulp. Sean hadn't come back yet.

Peter was speaking. "The Pope can hang himself, Mike. I don't care. It's not our fight."

"Sweet Jesus, Pete," protested Michael, keeping his voice down both out of respect for his older brother and so as not to attract the attention of the women in the next room. "If it's not our fight, what is? Do we just roll over then? Is that why Da came here? What would he say if he heard you now?"

"Da was no fanatic. He'd say the same thing I'm saying now. He came to work, and that's what we should be about."

"Sure he came to work, and it killed him barely halfway through his life. He'd have lived longer starving back in Ireland." Michael's hands were balled in fists, his forearms lying as heavy on the table as sledgehammers.

Peter's hands, in contrast, fluttered in the air, placating, indicating, conceding, driving home, as if he could use not just his voice and reason but his gestures to shape and mold the

conversation. “All the more reason. He worked himself to death for what? For the Pope? For us. He’d want us to better our lot. Who knows how long this will go on? It’s fine for you, Mike. There’s hardly a man in that factory that’s not a Catholic. But I have to deal with people all over town.”

“Sure,” sneered Michael. A mild sneer, played off with a smile: Michael respected his brother. And was afraid of — and envied — him. “You have to be respectable.”

“I’m not the only one who gets guff. Mick? Papist? Fish-eater? And when they don’t say it but you can see it, it’s just as bad. But no, you’re right, brother: I’m not shoveling ore into a furnace. I have to have these people’s trust if I’m to do business with them. They have to know me as a friend. They have to see me on Sundays.”

Michael spat. “Business.” It sounded like a curse. “You have to be like them.”

“No I don’t. I have to make them think I am. And if the Pontiff and the Bishops and the Holy Mother church meant a thing to who I was and to what I believe, to I think is right and good for my family, by God I’d carve it into my heart with a soldering iron. But it’s not like that.”

Michael offered one last protest. “Sean won’t go for it.”

“Sean’s always gone his own way.” Peter nodded at the empty seat at the kitchen table.

Michael shrugged.

“Connor,” Peter said.

Connor was the second-youngest of the four. Michael and Peter were close in age, barely two years apart; they vied with each other for nominal power, but both relied on the consent of the governed. Sean, as you might have guessed, was the firebrand among the four; Sean was out on the front lines, smashing racists and being smashed. Connor was the quiet one, the

philosopher. “I don’t care what church I pray to God in, and I don’t believe that God does either.”

The three men sat back and sipped their coffee.

“Episcopalians seem to make out pretty well,” added Connor.

“That’s my sense,” Peter said, having already come to that conclusion.

Michael thought, then sighed and smiled. “All right, then. I’m not ashamed of what I do, but I’d be a liar and a fool if I said I’d mind putting my feet up on a manager’s desk. Not to mention that I rather relish the notion of sharing a hymnal with Larry Peterson.” Mike adopts a comic fawning brogue. “Top o’ the mornin’ to ya, Mr. Larry Sar! Mike Dougherty’s the name. I work on your smeltin’ crew. ‘Tis a reer pleasure, aye, to be liftin’ my voice with ye in prees o’ the Episcerperleen God, Sar!” Michael and Connor chuckled.

So it was settled. From this night, three branches of the Dougherty would go forward as Episcopalian “as far back as anyone could remember”; one went forward Catholic. It turned out that it wouldn’t matter. The 1924 meeting was the apex of Klan activity in the area. The local boys’ response proved resoundingly successful. Some fifty Klansmen wound up in the hospital. In a rare reversal (one not to be mirrored in states further south), it was the *Klansmen’s* windows which were smashed, *their* property attacked, *their* efforts to organize defeated. Following the ‘24 riot, Klan membership in the area dried up. These three Dougherty brothers were not, that night, the only Catholics to have such a conversation around such a kitchen table. Others decided as they did; others did not. There was a brief time when the virgin forests of this continent cranked out enough pure oxygen to fuel sectarian wars of faith. Those forests were felled for farmland long ago. The faith is gone but the sects remain, as numerous and as theological as soft-drink brands.

* * *

“And my second assumption,” Tom is saying. “Was that off-base too?”

“About what? About Winthrop?”

“About it being a Congregational school. Or Church of Christ. I assumed it was named after John Winthrop.”

“No, you’re right there,” says Dennis, “It was, it was. Originally. But no, it was non-sectarian when I went there, or non-denominational, whichever. Since I don’t know when. It wasn’t particularly religious. We had chapel service every morning, but it was mild. Generic Christian. Barely even Christian, really: generic moral, do-the-right-thing stuff. They read to us from *Narnia* for years ... ”

* * *

A point of fact: the Winthrop Christian Academy — for boys — was indeed a Congregational school, originally, and had indeed been named, once upon a time, after that famous and controversial Puritan who sold the English estate he had bought from Henry the Eighth and sailed across the Atlantic with an exclusive charter in his pocket to bring theocracy to America. But in 1958, shortly after Worcester’s liberal Congregationalists had voted to join their sect’s merger into the United Church of Christ, the Winthrop Christian Academy opened its doors to Christian boys of all denominations and its coffers to their parents’ tuition checks. Alan Dougherty wanted the best for his son, and though he was doing well in 1980, it wasn’t so well

that he could afford the \$16,000 annual tuition that, along with test scores, connections and a bit of luck, was required to place a child at the rather more prestigious Worcester Academy. But Winthrop had a good reputation, was by comparison infinitely reasonably priced and, as a co-worker had said to Alan, was just the right amount of “Christian”: enough to give a boy some morals and put him in a decent set, but none of the come-to-Jesus, speaking-in-tongues, laying-on-of-snakes hysteria that was boiling in the nation at that time. Alan didn’t micro-manage his son’s life, and thus wasn’t likely to have known if Winthrop had been mischaracterized to him, but it had not. What little he did know of the school confirmed to him that it was quite all right. Dennis seemed to be very happy there — and not just seemed to be but was: well-loved, well-cared-for and, up until his junior year or so, utterly enchanted. And by all appearances, he was learning; he was getting good marks and had halfway-decent manners.

In addition, there had been one interaction with the school, early on, that had confirmed Alan’s assumptions about the Academy’s satisfactoriness. Dennis had come home chattering in his typically incoherent eight-year-old way about an incident at school. Little Josh Dumaine had been kicked out of school. Dennis came home from school that day gleeful, scandalized, and excited entirely out of the fragile reasoning powers of an eight-year-old boy.

* * *

Tom interrupts. “Kicked out? In second grade? That’s one bad kid.”

“He wasn’t, it turned out. Kicked out. We didn’t know. He just stopped showing up, right in the middle of the school year.”

* * *

Dennis had been at Winthrop only two years, but Josh Dumaine already had a reputation. Unlike Alan Dougherty, the Dumaines had placed Joshua at Winthrop in *spite* of the school's reputation as a nurturing, open-minded, "non-denominational" (code for "secular") academy. Former Hippies who had ingested the 60s' drugs but not its doctrines, the Dumaines had been swept, in the 1970s, into the charismatic-Christian backlash: had been born again, had leapt in '79 to be a part of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, were avid watchers of *The 700 Club* and CBN and were ardent followers of the prophet Pat Robertson.

Josh never stood a chance. He lived in acute anxiety, as would any reasonable person who knew without a shadow of a doubt that the world was coming to a fiery end (and soon), that Jesus was coming to separate the blessed from the damned for all eternity, and that homosexuality, godless communism and Satan were lurking behind every corner, at every desk and in every heart. He didn't understand what "homosexuals" or "communists" were, but who cares? What moral, loving person could split such hairs? If they're damned for all eternity and that's a fact, who cares about extenuating circumstances? Who cares if it hurts someone's feelings to be warned when it's her immortal soul that hangs in the balance? When it's an infinity of torment? As Mr. Dumaine explained to his son: If your friend wanted to drive off a cliff and you told him that was stupid, he'd be mad, right? He might yell at you, right? But it'd be worth it, right? To save his life?

So no: Josh never stood a chance of "fitting in," nor should anyone expect him to have done so. Schizophrenia is a luxury reserved for grown-ups. Thus Josh, entirely to his credit, diligently pursued the salvation of his classmates at every opportunity. He constantly interrupted

class to beseech someone to pray with him. He exhorted his classmates about the perils of being “gay” and “commie.” On several occasions, he had climbed up on a table in the cafeteria at lunchtime to bear witness. And he was, as any reasonable person in his position would be, a frightened, desperate, nervous young man. Lucy Hartzell, the school counselor at Winthrop, had had him in time and again, trying to soothe his fears without openly contradicting what his parents had taught him. After a few attempts, she spoke to the Dean, who had a conference with the Dumaines, in which he tried to soften their eschatology with a bit of Winthrop’s easier, softer way. He failed. They countered: *Difficult for the boy? Difficult? And eternal hellfire, damnation, torment with spears and fire, eternal separation from God — that’s less difficult?* The Dean said something about moderation, but even he was frightened — by what, he wasn’t sure, but he was definitely uncomfortable, and his silver tongue failed to populate the Dumaines’ imaginations with benevolent fairies gliding along moonbeams in a magic twinkling pre-dawn of universal brotherly love.

Josh was not, however, expelled. Nor was he asked to leave, resign, retire or find a schooling situation where he might be more comfortable. That was not The Winthrop Way. No: at the end of that meeting, the Dumaines withdrew Josh from Winthrop. And no again: without rancor and not in retaliation. They had nothing but loving pity for the Dean. You didn’t assume otherwise, I hope? If so, it’s my fault. Perhaps I said something to imply that the Dumaines were anything other than ardent, credent and philanthropic. They were not hypocrites. They would not take the “easier, softer” way and school their boy at home, depriving him of the chance to save many souls, or even one, before the Rapture — not one whit more than you, my (I presume) moral and humanistic reader, would screw a can of poison onto an air duct connected

to a chamber full of Jews. The premises are different, thus the conclusions are different; the deduction is the same.

No: the Dumaines did not withdraw Josh out of rancor. It was mere coincidence. The Dean had called the Dumaines in to chat, but they had been planning to come in anyway. It was early November 1982, the month in which Pat Robertson had, for two years prior, foreseen the end of the world. It would be foolish not to plan for that, and cruel not to have Josh home with his family for their last few weeks on Earth together. It was selfish, true: that last week might have been a week in which Josh saved one soul from hell — but people aren't perfect. They can't be saints. Mr. Dumaine apologized to the Dean:

“We try to follow Jesus, but we don't have His strength. We can't say ‘Who is my mother?’ and ‘Who are my brethren?’ We've tried to teach Josh to put us down and to ‘Follow Him,’ but we love Josh and he loves us, and we have to hope that God forgives us these last few weeks together. He's a loving God and we believe He will. And we want you to know how grateful we are, how very grateful we are, for all the loving-kindness you've shown Josh while he was here.” And Mr. Dumaine took the Dean's hand in both of his and shook it warmly and repeatedly, his eyes tearing up, his wife's eyes closed while she whispered “Praise Jesus, Praise Jesus.” They prayed together.

The Dean felt eviscerated. He drove home trembling, his convenient guff about a benevolent Widget scored raw by the rasp file of the Dumaines' loving and uncorrupted psychosis.

But despair is a sin — God is mercy and love, and to forget that is to stray — so by the next morning, after a good night's sleep and a good breakfast, the Dean had recovered his benevolent Christian equanimity, and thus was ready when Alan Dougherty called. Alan's son

Dennis had come home full of breathless tales about some classmate who had been causing some sort of disturbance. One knows how eight-year-olds are, grain of salt and all that, but still —

The Dean interrupted. Yes (begin with Yes whenever possible): though young boys were prone to exaggerate, yes, there had been a student who came from a very expressive religious household, and this had produced some challenges. But they had been worked through: the parents had come in for a conference, and everyone had felt that a different school would be a better fit for all concerned. There were no hard feelings. Everyone was happy. This was what Alan Dougherty wanted to hear, so he was happy too, and he promised that he'd do what he could, should the subject come up with any other parents, to douse the fires of gossip and set the undramatic record straight.

* * *

It was around the time of the Dumaine Episode, but entirely unrelated to it, when the readings from C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series began to replace the regular programming of Winthrop's chaplain. Some explanation is in order. Now, Winthrop *was* a non-denominational academy, no doubt about it, and while by no means secular, it was seriously committed to a notion of traditional liberal-Christian-humanist something-or-other. Under the terms of its charter, it was required 1) "to insure that the faculty were conversant in the principles of Christian loving-kindness," 2) "to maintain in perpetuity a Chaplain" who would 3) "teach Religion classes" (whether these were to be elective or required was left unspecified in the charter) and 4) "to conduct morning chapel services no less than three times weekly." The charter left the denomination of the chaplain unspecified. The former Congregationalists

involved in the drafting of this charter, being more conservative, pitched a fit; their Unitarian colleagues on the committee pitched one back. In the end, the amoral majority won the day, and nothing inconvenient was committed to.

The chaplain for the past dozen years had been a crusty old traditionalist named Egan. Rev. Egan was all right, and not particularly out of line with The Winthrop Way: he had a pleasant sense of humor, and the occasional fire-and-brimstone jeremiad was to be expected, or could certainly be tolerated, from a Christian academy's chaplain. But he was also scrupulously old-fashioned, and one thing had set him off: the nasty language of little 1980s boys. Cocaine use among a handful of the seniors was something that he simply couldn't conceptualize, but "shit" and "fuckin-A" and "goddamnit" in the hallways were all too unavoidable. It was the latter that really set him off, and he made it the subject of one of Winthrop's most memorable chapel services.

* * *

"I wasn't there when it happened," Dennis explains, "or if I was, I was too young to remember it. But everyone knew about Rev. Egan's GOD DAMN YOU sermon."

Tom's eyebrows elevate. "I should imagine."

* * *

Yes: the Rev. Egan was determined to impress upon the boys the horror of hellfire that they were invoking when they god-damned this or that: that when they used these words, they

were cursing to eternal grief and torture the dry pens, broken pencils, torn bookstraps and fellow students at which or whom they leveled this curse — that in an instant of ungoverned temper, they were calling forth a fury that existed before time and would exist after it. Egan exhorted them:

“Consider what you’re saying when you say this. To a friend with whom you’re having a fight. Or to your parents when you don’t get what you want. God damn you. GOD — DAMN — YOU. GOOOOOOOODDD, DAAAAAAAAMMMMMN, YOUUUUUUUUU!!!!”

The students, naturally, were in paroxysms of delight. They hadn’t been paying the slightest attention to what the old man was nattering on about, but they damn well heard him bellow God Damn You at the top of his lungs, and that wasn’t something you hear in church every day! It was fucking-A excellent.

It was not, however, The Winthrop Way. The sentiment was quite right, as the Dean conceded to the chaplain, but it was simply too mature for young boys, who would merely derive titillation from the use — actually, the shouting — of expletives in church. (And of course, whether or not he was right, the Dean was correct.) Egan remained implacable. His retirement was coming up; he took it.

This was a windfall for the Dean, but they were stuck without a chaplain. So during the job search, they filled up the requisite chapel time with readings from C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* series. These turned out to be perfect: spellbinding (to children) and thoroughly (vaguely) Christian. When the new chaplain, Rev. Fox, was hired, he praised the measure to the skies and requested that, if the Board agreed, it be continued through to the end of the series.

Voila: three years of 20th-century mainstream Protestant religious instruction.

Of course, these readings were not by any means the sum of the boys' moral educations during this phase of their lives. They were merely enchanting, fanciful tales, with vibrant imagery and dramatic swashbuckling action, the sorts of things that stick in children's memories. But it was a small part of the boys' overall moral education; every other class, and all of the other hours of the day, were the larger and more important part. Consideration of what constitutes *The Good Life* doesn't stop at the chapel doors; it shouldn't anywhere, and it certainly didn't at the Winthrop Christian Academy. Conversations about the chapel readings frequently spilled over into classes, too. Not Math or Science or Social Studies, naturally, but English and Religion classes, yes: these were appropriate venues.

One such discussion Dennis, for whatever reason, always remembered afterwards. It was towards the end of the *Narnia* readings, circa 1986; Dennis would have been twelve years old or thereabouts. Rev. Fox had been reading in chapel from *The Last Battle*, the final novel in the series and one that draws much of its imagery and a few of its themes from the Christian *New Testament's* chapter "Revelation": the age of tribulation, the empire of the anti-Christ, apocalypse, soteriology, heaven, hell. But it was no such ponderous theological meditations that were roiling class discussion that day in Mr. Stroup's 7th-grade English class. No, it was a simpler and sadder question: Why didn't Susan Pevensie get to go to Narnia?

Susan Pevensie had been one of the children who had appeared in many of the previous *Narnia* adventures. Winthrop was, let's remember, a boys' school, and Susan Pevensie was young, slim, female, flinty and pretty. She had also, in this last book, been banned, damned, declared "no longer a friend of Narnia." These boys — pubescent Dennis Dougherty not least among them — wanted an explanation.

Other boys were had been more vocal in their disapproval, but Dennis was keeping his cards closer to his chest. “I don’t know, Mr. Stroup. It just seems weird.”

“Weird how?” probed Mr. Stroup.

“I don’t know. She’s been one of the gang and everyone else gets into Narnia. And she doesn’t.”

“That seems to be what happens in the story. Good, Dennis, very true. But *why* does that happen?”

Another boy interrupted. “It’s not fair.”

Stroup kept his temper; demons with pick-axes couldn’t have pried it out of him. “That might be true, Tyler, but we can’t say if it’s fair or not until we know why it happened. And I don’t think I saw a hand.” As in, raised. To speak.

Brandon Fleisch, the class’ gold-star student and close reader, had his hand up. He’d read the entire series, more than once, and was eminently prepared to return the data.

“Brandon?”

“Nylons, lipstick and invitations.”

“Could you expand on that, please?”

“On page 127, Lewis says that Susan was ‘more interested in nylons and lipstick and invitations’ than she was in Narnia.”

“And what do you think Lewis means by that?”

“That — well — that she was — that she was less interested in Narnia than those things.” Interpretation was not Brandon’s strong suit.

Tyler again broke into the conversation to move it along. “It means she wanted to go out on dates.” A general squirming and a distinct ripple of electricity passed through the class.

Stroub glared; Tyler raised his hand. “Tyler?”

“It means she wanted to go out on dates. Duh. And for that she’s banned from Narnia. That’s not fair.” The murky emotions of the other boys precipitate around Tyler’s words, and they quickly to grumble their objections.

Stroub backpedaled. “Now, Tyler, correct me if I’m wrong, but Lewis doesn’t say she’s banned. He says she’s ‘no longer a friend.’”

“And she doesn’t get in when the rest do. If Narnia’s heaven, she doesn’t go to heaven for wanting to go out with boys. My sister’s twenty. She goes on dates. Is she going to hell?”

Gary Cleveland muttered that it depended on what Tyler’s sister was *doing* on those dates — a comment followed by mutual arm-punching and general hysteria. Dennis waited in his corner for the melee to die down. He wanted an answer. After a minute or two, Stroub regained control of the class and sallied forth with one. “All right, you simians. Gary — Tyler — enough. Let’s go back to what Brandon said: Susan was *more interested* in these other things than in Narnia. It’s not that you can’t be interested in other things. It’s about moderation. Narnia comes first.”

Tyler didn’t know exactly what his point was, but he felt as if he still had one. “It doesn’t make sense. All she wants is some lipstick and panty hose.”

* * *

Dennis breaks the languid spell in Tom’s office by jerking bolt-upright and banging on the arm of the comfortable chair. “I can’t believe it!”

Tom is startled. “What?”

Dennis is shaking his head, eyes closed, head in his hands. “It’s too weird, too weird. It was you. Even way back then. It was you *then*.”

Tom sits back to listen. Dennis is clearly onto something and will come out with it soon enough.

Once Dennis has collected his thoughts somewhat, he continues. “When I was a kid — up until my senior year, about — Winthrop was this, this utopia. Everyone was kind, supportive, great. I loved going to school. It was like a second home, and the teachers were my parents and the other students were my siblings. They never condemned you, even when you were wrong, they were gentle. I cheated once on a test and I’ll never forget how they busted me. They called me in — the teacher who suspected that I’d cheated and the Dean — and they said ‘You know, Dennis, sometimes we all put our hand in the cookie jar when we’re not supposed to.’ I’ll never forget that. ‘Cookie jar.’ I knew exactly what they’d called me in for, and I was prepared to deny it to the death, but when they said ‘cookie jar’ I just busted out crying. And obviously there was no denying it then. They gave me a zero on the test and that was it. They didn’t even tell my parents. I never loved them or Winthrop so much as then.”

“So what happened?”

“But that’s just it. I never knew what happened. I hated Winthrop when I was in college. And ever since. Looked back and hated it. I felt like Winthrop had sold me this dreamy, hazy, children’s fairy-tale. Without ever admitting that’s what it was. Or even knowing it themselves. Like they’d taken advantage of a kid, of a child. Like I’d been molested. And I’ve never really known when the turning point was. Until now. And it was *you*, and now here I am doing fucking *therapy* with you ...”

Tom, though unruffled, is wearing a surprised expression. “Me?”

“Your book, you and what’s-his-name Levine — I mean, that I should meet you now, and be here with you now, in this context, and that it was you even way back then that was reaching into my head. And that’s just freaky as shit.”

“Aha. It’s Ron. Ron Levine. Now I’m starting to understand. *The American Idea*. But I don’t know whether to congratulate myself or apologize to you.”

“Oh, don’t apologize. That’s when it was; that’s when I snapped out it. Mr. Sprague’s AP U.S. History.”

“And what was it that provoked this epiphany?”

“Um ... Well, it was all over the place, but now that I think about it, ironically enough, it was Winthrop that got us started. Our esteemed namesake himself.”

Tom smiles. “John Winthrop’s a controversial figure. Very complicated. Certainly sufficient to stimulate a class discussion, if not a total revaluation of one’s values.”

* * *

And that’s precisely what John Winthrop had done, one day, among a handful of AP U.S. History students at an institution bearing that famous Puritan governor’s name. But it was only that — only a stimulus for a wider-ranging and more unsettling discussion. As before, in the *Narnia* debate — as usual — it was the firebrand Tyler Payne who was leading the charge. And as before, Dennis was quiet, non-committal, on the sidelines, taking notes. Young Tyler, ironically (or not), would eventually carry his skeptical agonies on to college, would not be able to let moral subjects rest, would like Jacob continue to wrestle with the angel every day, would go on from college to seminary school, would there secure his M.Div. and would go on to teach

at a Christian Academy much like Winthrop, eventually becoming a shining exemplar of the conscientious Winthrop Way. But that would all happen years later. In 1992, Tyler — a more idealistic version of Dennis — was being true to his testosterone, to his inner 18-year-old freedom-fighter-on-the-barricades. He had just lobbed a rather messy Molotov cocktail at Puritan theocracy in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the *ancien régime*, in the patient person of one AP U.S. History teacher Robert Sprague, was doing his best to defend the castle.

“What I don’t understand,” Tyler was saying, “is why this bas — this jerk’s name is on our school.”

“Jerk,” Sprague corrected with a smile, “isn’t a technical term we use much in the study of history. Could you expand on that?”

Tyler could. “It’s all just so radically different from the official version we get as kids. All this religious persecution among the Puritans, of other religions, of each other. When supposedly that’s why they were fleeing England. And it turns out that the Puritans were just middle-class folks who opposed the Anglicans in the English Civil War because the church was an arm of the state — the Crown — and these middle-class guys were trying to wrest political power for themselves. So they wanted separation of church and state because the state religion wasn’t *their* religion. But now here’s Winthrop in this sermon on the way over openly calling for theocracy — the ‘shining city on a hill.’ And it turns out it’s a city where only church members are enfranchised, where dissenters are banished, and these Quakers who keep poking around eventually get hung for preaching on street corners. It’s hypocritical. They want religious freedom and separation of church and state, and then they turn around and set up a repressive Puritan theocracy.”

“Good points,” Sprague quickly conceded, “good points all. All very provocative. There’s no question that the early Puritans are a difficult lot to get your head around. And that’s one reason, by the way, why we have to be careful about throwing around terms like ‘they’ and ‘them.’ They were a very diverse bunch. We need to remember that Winthrop, as much as he might seem out of step with our own times, was very much a moderate in his own. There were much more radical voices in the Puritan community then, and Winthrop held them at bay.”

Tyler was unimpressed. “Yeah, but that doesn’t make him right. If other people are ‘even worse’ — that only makes him ‘not as bad.’ And he’s supposed to be a Christian. He’s citing Christianity for all this stuff. It’s like the Crusades — but not a thousand years ago, way off in Catholic Europe, but just a few hundred years ago, right here in America.”

“Well, what would *become* America. And hopefully it’s not as bad as the Crusades.” Sprague got a welcome little laugh from the class.

“I don’t know, sir. It’s pretty bad. What about slavery?”

The class hushed instantly in the presence of the American word for *Nazi*. Sprague nodded gravely in assent, but cautioned: “Well, slavery in the period we’re talking about is still very much in its infancy.”

Unfortunately, Tyler had read the assignment recently, whereas Sprague hadn’t for a couple of years. Tyler had his book open, his figures highlighted, his data in order. Tyler was no longer a child; he had reached the age of reason and no longer fit comfortably into the gauzy, well-intentioned, muddle-headed limbo that was Winthrop. Good intentions can weave the most delicate, beautiful spider webs — gossamer threads of love sparkling with the dewdrops of universal brotherhood in the early morning light — but hard facts, like hard rocks, tend not to hang suspended in them very well. “Yeah — not so much. This is when the whole trade gets

established. And it's right here in New England. Boston's the country's major trading port, and the slave trade's the core, the most profitable trade by far. The New England Puritans are going around the Dutch to get slaves from Madagascar, and after the Brits knock out the Dutch, the field's wide open. Sure there are hardly any slaves in New England. They're traders; they're the ones selling them to the South, where slaves are a third of the population. It's how they built their fortunes. Faneuil Hall: built from slave trade money. Brown University: slave trade money. And not just slaves, but all the secondary markets that the slave trade makes. Shipbuilding and carpentry and rum. The whole rum industry in New England isn't for Americans. It's for selling to Africans in exchange for slaves, and —"

Sprague tried and failed to interrupt; Tyler had also learned how to deploy an *and* before taking a breath.

"— and what I don't understand is how these Puritans are doing it all in the name of God. Of Christianity. People like Winthrop and Cotton Mather saying these people are black and naked because God cursed them, so it's OK for us to make them slaves —"

Sprague tried and failed again: "Well it's —"

"— about how it's God's curse on the sons of Ham. And this 1641 law in Massachusetts that cites the Bible to justify slavery. And what about Cromwell? LL says he enslaved and deported 100,000 Irish men and women after the war with Ireland. All in the name of God. And it's not just Africans but Indians too. Winthrop says they're not Christians, so we get to take their land. And if they're not citing the Bible to justify slavery, they're citing Aristotle, and he's supposed to be the go-to-guy for moderation."

Sprague had been nodding sadly this whole time. "Yes." (The Dean had shared that bit of rhetorical method at a faculty meeting.) "He was, it's true. Aristotle's theory of natural

slavery did a lot of damage. And you're right: it's not just pre-Christian philosophers like Aristotle, or passages from the Old Testament that people used to justify slavery. There are Christian apologists for it too. Augustine, for one." There was a murmur among the students.

"Yes. Augustine adopted Aristotle's theory of natural slavery. And worse. Peter. Like a lot of Christian Romans, Peter disapproved of treating slaves too harshly, but he didn't oppose slavery itself. He said that slaves should be obedient to their masters, and proponents of slavery cited that comment for a thousand years. And Popes; I forget which one it was, but even before Christopher Columbus, there were Roman Catholic Popes who were blessing the Portuguese slave trade. But for every example like that, there are just as many of Christianity working on the other side. It's the Christian doctrine of the soul that lays the groundwork for universal human rights. That makes it possible for Jefferson to say 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.' It's Christian values that drive the Abolition movement. And that later, in the 1960s, would be the driving moral force behind the civil rights movement." Tyler moved to speak; Sprague raised his hand. "Yes, Tyler: when at the same time, white supremacists were citing Scripture too. Even if Scripture is the word of God, we still have to interpret it, and we're far from perfect. I don't want to step on anyone's toes here, but I've never understood people who say they 'read Scripture literally.' Scripture's not a diagram for building a circuit board; it's history and poetry and parable and memo. It's written by regular people like you and me, inspired by God. 'Read Scripture literally'? Can't be done. To read is to interpret. And which Scripture are they reading? Do they include the Apocrypha? Do they read Greek or Hebrew or speak Aramaic? A translation's a huge interpretation. And there are countless English translations. Different eras translate Scripture differently. Different people interpret Scripture

differently. But they're all working on the same project; they're all reaching to the same source. So there must be something to it, something we all know deep down is universal and crucial. How that works out in human affairs can be very imperfect. But that's what we are."

Tyler had been subdued and had become pensive. "It just seems sad that people's interpretations of Christianity can be so totally different."

Mr. Sprague took a moment to collect his thoughts. The boys were quieter than usual, so much so that he could almost feel their forty eyes on him. Or thirty-eight; Dennis was flipping back and forth through his textbook. "It can be frustrating," Sprague finally replied, "but we shouldn't be discouraged. It's what freedom means. We're free to disagree, to come to different conclusions. And there's hope. Each one of us has a conscience and a personal relationship with God. We ask Him to help us interpret, to help us understand the right way. What's more — "

Tyler started to speak, but Sprague raised his hand again and Tyler subsided. "What's more, you're also committing one of the cardinal sins of doing history: you're judging people who lived a long time ago by modern standards. Walk a mile in John Winthrop's shoes before you judge him; put your soul in his soul's stead, as Job said — live in his time and place, surrounded by the opinions that he had to mediate between, and see if you wouldn't do, in good conscience, exactly as he did."

"I wouldn't," Tyler said.

"You would," Dennis said simply.

Tyler was too shocked to reply, but his face clearly said *fuck you*.

Dennis apologized. "I don't mean just you, Ty. I mean we all would. I'm sorry, Mr. Sprague, but I think you're both wrong."

"Would you care to go into a bit more detail, Dennis?"

“I’m sorry. It just seems like — you’re both assuming that people are motivated by beliefs. But then we get stuck not being able to explain how beliefs can change so much. Or how people’s actions can be so hypocritical. But if you look at them as motivated by what’s best for them, everything falls into place. When it’s best for the Puritans to fight the Anglicans, they fight. When it’s best for them to set up a colony by their own rules, they do. When the planters need slaves, they trade slaves. When the economy industrializes, they stop.”

Sprague was nodding — it was always best to nod while a student was speaking — but his brow was furrowed. Tyler, however, was apoplectic. “But we’re talking *slavery*, Dennis — buying and selling and beating and killing thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people ...”

“No, no, I’m not saying it was right,” Dennis backpedaled, “I’m just pointing out that if you judge them by a fairer standard, then it was — ”

Sprague was still nodding and formulating a response when the clock buzzed. Saved by the bell. “Fascinating, gentlemen. Excellent discussion. For Thursday, LL Chapter 2 ...”

* * *

While Dennis is relating these events to the best of his recollection, Tom has risen and is pulling books down off his shelves. Dennis trails off. “No, continue,” says Tom, “I’m listening. You just reminded me of something.”

“That’s about it. It never came back up.”

Tom locates the volume he’s been searching for and sits back down. They take a minute to think before continuing. “So,” says Tom, “that was your religious education.”

“Yeah. Like I said, it wasn’t a devout or radical place. So what was it you were looking for?”

Tom starts flipping through the volume on his lap. “It’s simply that the conversation you were having reminded me very much of something Jefferson wrote about the foundations of morality. Where is it, now? Aha. Wait a minute.” Not unwisely, Tom scans the passage before offering it. “Yes, I think you’ll find this interesting. May I?”

“By all means. I had no idea that therapists were allowed to read from Thomas Jefferson.”

“Oh, we’re not. You mustn’t tell anyone. I could go to jail.” Tom winks. “At any rate. It’s from a letter to Thomas Law, who was — well, never mind. Jefferson’s writings are almost all in letters. He must have written thirty thousand of them over the course of his life. If you could organize them into books — but never mind, never mind. He’s writing to Law about exactly what you were just now relating. He goes through all the different things that people argue that morality is founded morality on.” Tom scans a bit more. “OK, here’s the first. ‘Of all the theories on this question, the most whimsical seems to have been that of Wollaston, who considers truth as the foundation of morality. The thief who steals your guinea does wrong only inasmuch as he acts a lie in using your guinea as if it were his own. Truth is certainly a branch of morality, and a very important one to society. But presented as its foundation, it is as if a tree taken up by the roots, had its stem reversed in the air, and one of its branches planted in the ground.’ Uh oh!” Tom chuckles.

“What, what is it?”

“Oh, Kant might not care for that. But never mind. Then Jefferson says: ‘Some have made the love of God the foundation of morality.’ But he goes on to dismiss that too, citing all

of these famous atheists — well: ‘Diderot, D’Alembert, D’Holbach, Condorcet, are known to have been among the most virtuous of men. Their virtue, then, must have had some other foundation than the love of God.’ So, strike two.”

“Condorcet I’ve heard of. The rest ...”

“Oh, you know Diderot. He invented the encyclopedia, and almost single-handedly wrote the first one. Anyway, to continue. Then he considers the love of beauty, which he dismisses outright: it’s ‘founded in a different faculty, that of taste, which is not even a branch of morality.’ Oh lord! I’d forgotten all this. This wouldn’t make him very popular with the Romantics, I’m afraid. At any rate, finally he considers — this is what I thought you’d find interesting — self-interest.”

“Self-interest? As a foundation for morality?”

“Indeed. And he makes an interesting distinction. First he comes out against it strongly: ‘To ourselves, in strict language, we can owe no duties, obligation requiring also two parties. Self-love, therefore, is no part of morality. It is the sole antagonist of virtue, leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others. Accordingly, it is against this enemy that are erected the batteries of moralists and religionists, as the only obstacle to the practice of morality.’ Not exactly a ringing endorsement.”

“No, but — ”

“Hold on, you haven’t seen where he lands yet. *‘Egoism in a broader sense* has been presented as the source of moral action. It has been said that we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bind up the wounds of the man beaten by thieves, pour oil and wine into them, set him on our own beast and bring him to the inn, because we receive ourselves pleasure from these acts. This, indeed, is true. But it is one step short of the ultimate question. These good acts give us

pleasure, but how happens it that they give us pleasure? Because *nature hath implanted* in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, *a moral instinct*, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses.”

Dennis is silent, trying to take all this in.

“Do you see what he’s saying?”

“I think so. He’s saying that morality is inherent. Instinctive. Hard-wired.”

“I think so.”

“That’s pretty optimistic.”

“You could say that. But when you consider all the astounding ways we humans have of silencing our instincts — of drowning or distorting or distracting ourselves from them — it’s a little less optimistic.”

“But is it even true?”

Tom closes the volume and leans back in his chair. “It’s a good question. We can certainly observe a lot of natural altruism among many species. Ants and bees and beavers, animals all the way up to primates, collaborate. Animals that live in colonies sacrifice themselves for the greater good all the time. Do we? What do you think?”

Dennis is reluctant to say. “Sure, maybe.”

“I can’t read minds, but I’d say you have a more honest answer.”

Dennis grins. This was definitely fifty bucks well-spent: it’s nice to talk to someone who can call you on your bullshit. “To tell you the truth, I think it’s dog-eat-dog.”

Tom nods sadly. “Could be. It often seems that way.”

And then Tom too, as was Mr. Sprague, is saved by the bell: a half-broken little alarm clock clatters incompetently on his desk. He reaches over and shuts it off. He offers to run long

if Dennis likes, but both men are exhausted. They agree to meet again next week. They stand up, stretch. Dennis feels a little sheepish now, in front of Tom — feels as he sometimes has when talking to a girl he's not sure whether he's had drunken sex with or not. They shake hands, and Tom claps Dennis on the back as they walk to the front door. A purse has appeared on the dinner table, but Susan's nowhere in sight. Outside, Venice is fragrant and cool. The sun has set, but its farewell is still glowing in the sky above the apartments across the street, behind the ocean whispering peacefully a few blocks west. Just as Dennis turns to leave, Tom places a hand on his arm.

“The thing is, Dennis, we're not dogs.”

Circle 2: Lust

Dennis had hoped to spend the work-week focus-grouping some keywords for the Congressman, but things haven't worked out that way. On Tuesday morning, an intern — all hush-hush, hugger-mugger and for-your-eyes, as if she were in some John LeCarre novel — brings a letter into Dennis' office. Dennis doesn't hold her self-importance against her; he's been a young kid in his First Big Job doing Important Stuff too, so he puts on a concerned face and thanks her, with gravity as heavy as cement, for bringing The Matter to his Attention with such admirable Discretion. She's not exactly a ravishing beauty, this intern, but you never know when you're going to have a slow Tuesday, and you can't reap if you don't sow.

The letter is clearly patent bullshit: someone purporting to be a male prostitute, who's purporting to have had some sort of "relations," type unspecified, with the Congressman, Dennis' client. No photos, no evidence of any sort, nothing that any legitimate (or at least competent) blackmailer would include. The Congressman's reputation as a family man is beyond reproach, and even if it weren't, the only way to handle something like this is to appear to ignore it entirely, to appear to dismiss it as if it didn't even rise to the level of ridicule. But of course you can't *really* dismiss it, not out of hand. Dennis checks with his boss, who's equally skeptical that the letter poses any real threat to their client, but who also, like Dennis, subscribes to the Reaganite maxim *Trust but verify*. "Don't contact the guy. Just check him out. Find the gay-bars he goes to or whatever, ask around, see if you can get a shred of corroboration, rumor, anything. If not, trash it." So instead of spending the week in an air-conditioned room playing videotapes of political speeches for soccer moms hooked up to electroencephalograms, Dennis

spends it tramping around gay bars, gyms and saunas in a seedy industrial neighborhood on the edge of downtown Los Angeles. Dennis doesn't use any names, but no one's ever heard of the Congressman coming around. They know the would-be blackmailer well enough, though, generally dismissing him, as one porn-shop clerk puts it, as "just some tweaked-up bag-whore."

"God's work for the Republic," Dennis mutters to himself as he steps out of a porn video store, having just endured half-an-hour's conversation about the cinematic merits of *Rambone 2: The Double-Penetrator*. Thank god it's Friday. He sweats his way back to his car. Some kid making three bucks an hour, or perhaps getting paid merely with the occasional hand-job from a girl who works at a glory hole in the back of, who knows, maybe the store that Dennis was just in, has been flyering cars up and down Alameda Boulevard. Dennis plucks a flyer off his windshield. *DOGS FUCK HORNY BITCHES. LIVE SHOWS*. So disappointingly literal, thinks Dennis. Even allowing for the weak dogs-bitches pun. So artless. They can't even say — whatever — *Watch Madame Carnivore take the pleasures of the hound*, for example. Or do something creative with that Roman image of Romulus and Remus suckling at the teats of a she-wolf. Anything. But no, it's just Dog Fucks Woman, QED. There's a blotchy, badly photocopied image of a large black dog mounting a naked woman. The dog's paws are bound up with duct tape, presumably to keep his claws from shredding the woman's forearms. Dennis wads up the flyer and throws it onto the sidewalk in disgust. TGIF indeed. The drive home's hot and trafficky and aggravating.

* * *

Back at his apartment, one shower, two hours, four microbrews and three sharp door-knocks later — again, it's after-hours, and Dennis doesn't even bother to call the management office — Dennis has cooled off and is feeling a bit more expansive. Heather has been safely neutralized: Dennis has been putting in long and strange hours on this most recent assignment, and Heather has been made to understand that it'll all be over soon, and that Dennis will call her when he resurfaces. So: a free Friday evening. Dennis texts the slow-Tuesday intern about some made-up office matter, but she doesn't respond. Presumably, she's out and about. It's just as well. He's wondering whether to have another go at — what was her name? Roxy85? Miss Sunset Strip and her squealing entourage. Cyndi. He wings off a text to her as well. Can't reap if. She doesn't reply either, but she eventually will. He's not particularly certain that he wants her to, but he doesn't have to answer the phone. He fires up his laptop and goes online to continue his research.

“Fucking *midgets*?” Nurse Porn Dennis can understand: Naughty Nancy Nightingale leaning bustily over some leather-faced and butt-ugly porn-dude made up as a bandaged soldier in a military hospital bed, surrounded by curtains so that you don't see the empty warehouse or cheap apartment where the shooting's taking place, the dude stroking his giant purple cock and murmuring that he's got an I.V. he'd like to stick in Naughty Nan. Nurses, French maids, fine. And BDSM, sure, that makes sense too: rape-fantasy makes a certain sense. In fact, in Dennis' experience, it's usually the biggest SNAGs (Sensitive New-Age Guys) and the shrillest feminists who get off on rape fantasy-play. It could be considered healthy, even: you play around in a safe, controlled, loving and respectful way with precisely those things you'd never do (as a “dom”) or (as a “sub”) want done to you. As for the more grotesque and/or denigrating forms of alternative sexuality — scat, watersports, red rhapsody, emetophilia: Dennis has never

understood them. It's not that he objects; he's no choir-boy. But shitting in someone's mouth, pissing on their face, smearing menstrual blood on them, vomiting on them? How's that sexy? But it must be — it is, to someone: there are whole sections at the “adult entertainment” stores devoted to it, videos of it, magazines about it, each distinct form of denigration is its own entire genre. But midget porn? That's new to Dennis. That can't be real. He's gone online to find out.

It is, as he discovers, in spades. It's fabulously easy to research porn: just type the four letters into any web browser and you're instantly inducted into an infinite regress of cross-linked websites, each of which when opened automatically opens links to another dozen. And what's more, midgets are nothing. Midgets are tame. Midgets are just one tiny segment of what must be a thousand different fetish markets. By looks: brunettes, blondes, big-breasted, flat-chested, anorexic, BB, BBW, TT, hirsute, shaven. By every body part and every article of clothing. By age: golden (60+), mature, teens, Lolitas, barely-legals, kids (other people's or your own). By race in every permutation. And by every other aspect of the human comedy you could ever think (or would never imagine) to fetishize: lactating mothers, MILFs, spanking, diapers, police, fire, EMT, incest, creampie, hard crush, preggo, saliva, bareback, bareback-HIV, rubber, squirt, upskirt, rimming, fisting, double-penetration and gang rape. From the look of all the sites devoted to it, “Illegals” seems to be a particularly popular sub-genre of gang rape: the same butt-ugly, paunchy, red-faced, buzz-cut porno actors, wearing official-looking Border Patrol baseball caps and raping a vaguely Latino-looking woman. On closer inspection, Dennis suspects that most of these guys aren't even “porno actors” at all (having no idea, however, what the bar for inclusion in that professional category might be), but that they're merely various good-ole-boys, in various rural communities around America, who happen to have access to video-cameras,

garages and hookers. Or maybe they're not even amateur film-makers, but just some guys who run a meth lab in a trailer down where County Road Something-Or-Other turns into dirt, and Juanita's come by to get some Chicken Feed, but she's short on cash, so they get her cranked, whip out the camera, everybody has a hoot and Juanita gets some free Ice, hell, can't beat that with a stick.

But that's all live-action, all of the foregoing, and it's occurring to Dennis that that's all a bit passé, a bit long-in-the-tooth. Computer-generated porn seems to be where it's at. And that makes sense. The phone rings somewhere in the middle of all of this — Cyndi — but this is all far too engrossing, and Dennis will just have to call her back. Sure, computer-generated porn makes perfect sense. Even considering the advanced state of modern medical technology, there are still physical limits to the human body. Aren't there? Surely there must be a few left. Either way, there aren't any limitations to the virtual realities that computers can generate — in three-dimensional high-resolution, with naturalistic shadows and lighting and photo-realistic textures bit-mapped onto every surface. Here breasts are bound by no physical limits of saline bags, here models need no quarter-inch of makeup, here photos require no retouching, here chainsaws are used as dildos and no one's the worse for wear, here every girl is fourteen and has eyes as big as saucers in fear and trembling anticipation, here every boy is not leather-faced and beer-bellied but handsome, young and cut, here children can be as young as you please and no one gets arrested, no one gets sued, no one needs anyone's permission or releases from models because there are no models and there is no anyone: there's nothing but 256 shades of red, blue or green light assigned to tiny rectangles arranged into a matrix, and behind that matrix the 1s and 0s of the language machines use to tell each other how to generate the matrix, and behind those 1s and 0s there's only more 1s and 0s, those of animation software packages and more machines —

there is no human original, sorry Walter Benjamin, no aura, no fragile bag of bones and blood somewhere back along the line that could wash away the sins of mechanical mediation, no physical or legal limit — no limit whatsoever save what the designer can imagine, what the machine can produce and what the market will consume.

Or Hentai. It requires hardly twenty clicks for Dennis to get a sense of its extent. He's a little bit embarrassed that he's never even heard of Hentai before; it's like never having heard of China. Turns out that Hentai was originally a Japanese genre of porn, but still, here it is with hundreds of thousands of websites, magazines, fanzines, videos, full-length films, discussion boards — all of it cartoon, animated, computer-generated or hand-drawn, its own entire category of pornography. With its own host of sub-genres, too: Manga, Anime, Yaoi, Yuri, Superheroes, Tentacles.

Superheroes? Familiar-cartoon-character porn. Here's Supergirl swooning as Superman fucks her with a Kryptonite dildo. Here's Peter Parker spewing Spiderweb to lash Mary Jane Watson's wrists and ankles to a chain-link fence. Here's an entire sub-sub-genre dedicated entirely to Jessica Rabbit, the animated seductress who disturbed the sleep patterns of many a teenage boy in 1988, her cartoonish wasp figure sultry enough to rouse even Walt Disney from his alleged liquid nitrogen slumbers, her voluptuous bosom teetering impossibly over her wrist-thin waist, her eyes as big as a giant squid's and her lashes like primordial ferns — here's Jessica Rabbit the way that Dennis, like every other boy his age, had always imagined her, and in quite a few ways he hadn't.

And what's a few midgets plying some girl's rectum with their stubby fingers next to Tentacles: almond-eyed anime children being grasped, gripped, groped and penetrated in every orifice by squiddy tentacles worming in from every corner of the frame. Tentacles? What kind

of a culture fetishizes being fucked by octopi? O Japan! Dennis' head is spinning. He had vague plans to masturbate, but that's pretty much off the table now. Is it a sushi thing? Or the fact that it's an island nation? Well, who fetishizes women being fucked by dogs and horses? English fox-hunters? American cowboys?

The whole thing is frankly too much, and Dennis finally snaps the laptop shut in something like disgust. But not before he's saved a Mrs. Rabbit pic or two to a hidden folder on his hard drive. Merely to share with friends who'd get a kick out of it. His college buddy Gary, for example. Jessica Rabbit with that paint-tight red top having slipped down off her breasts and her hands between her legs. It's not often that someone sees Jessica like that in real life, no matter how often he might have seen her thus in his mind.

The phone rings as he reaches for it. Cyndi. As far as Dennis can make out from the high-pitched screeching over the crowd noise on the other end of the line, he's being teased for playing hard-to-get. He makes a vague reference to working late. Which is, in a sense, true; he's been conducting necessary research, in a sense, to get inside the mind of a potential opponent. Also potential constituents, potential customers, potential clients, his fellow Americans. *This* is our country, after all; *this* is our society. It's our civic duty and our moral responsibility to understand it, to know what sells, what we want, what we buy, what we are. This deluge of degradation is our nation, is the face of Caliban in our mirror, is our face. It's not a cheaply titillating Henry-Milleresque novel that flies off bookshelves into the living rooms of the small percentage of Americans who still read. It's not a performance artwork designed to shock the bourgeoisie or give the mainstream-media critics a dose of highly marketable moral outrage. It's not an artistic gesture that, by creating a squall in the teacup of the cultural elite, can make a career: not a urinal exhibited in a museum, not a crucifix immersed in piss, not a blank canvas

that sells at Christie's for two million dollars, not a gilded statue of Michael Jackson and his pet monkey Bubbles. It's not a Hollywood starlet saying "fuck" on live TV at the Academy Awards or a breast inadvertently bared at the Super Bowl halftime show. It's our union — or at least, according to the guy at the porn video store, twelve billion dollars of it annually: more than the annual revenues of all professional sports industries combined. As the voice on the phone squeaks on, Dennis wonders: is porn *really* that big a slice of the American economy? He's heard that it was the driving force behind the magazine industry — that without it, we'd never have had the VHS tape or the Internet. He knows the bit about magazines is true: he's worked with quite a few printers over the years, and they've always told him that small-run periodicals like *Kitten Krazy* and *Yacht Aficionado* are thoroughly subsidized by titles like *Cumstains* and *Black And Tan Fantasy*, the printers' bread and butter, slender rags that are cheap to produce and sell wildly and have astronomical profit margins. I picked the wrong industry, Dennis thinks.

* * *

Half an hour later, without really having thought about it, Dennis is back in the car, on his way to meet Cyndi and her entourage. Back at his apartment, he had been able to make out that they were at the Manhattan Lounge. He hadn't heard of it? It was like, *so* famous. He had gathered that he was supposed to get a kick out of the place, whatever it was. He'd also said something vague about his being in "the media business," and it was clear that this was a matter of particular interest to Cyndi & Co. — aspiring actresses all, no doubt, and potentially worse, ones who imagined themselves to be aspiring screenwriters/producers as well: the sort who thought that having "stuff in their head" implied that it wasn't shit or that fucking someone with

money might make them a producer of something other than the corpse of a fetus in a vacuum cleaner. Dennis had searched for the Manhattan on his computer, but it had turned up only a hotel in a seedy neighborhood on the west side of downtown. But the address was right, so there he was, in his car, on his way and not even having to drive with one eye closed. Conveniently enough, Dennis' route is taking him up Fairfax to Hancock Park, scene of last Friday's surreal soda bacchanalia. He's felt strange about the whole thing all week and has been meaning to do a drive-by. Just to see.

And sure enough, as he approaches the intersection of Fairfax and Wilson, it all starts to come back: the clusters of revelers ducking under the police tape, the policeman that Tom talked them past, the circling media helicopters, the searchlights playing over the crowd as if it were a rock concert, the bathing and DHS suits. As Dennis rounds the corner, there it is: the park itself. And sure enough, there's a pond. The water's black, but that doesn't mean anything: it's dark. Plus he's only a few blocks from the La Brea tar pits, and for all he knows, the water here is suffused with the oil that originally turned Los Angeles from Junípero Serra's quiet little *pueblo* into the bustling 20th-century metropolis that at one point supplied a quarter of the world's petroleum. The street is deserted save for a couple of pedestrians and a woman smoking a cigarette. No wads of police tape lying in the gutters, no piles of trash, no deflated pool rafts sticking out of trash cans, no dead fish lining the shores of the pond, at least not that Dennis can see. The guardrail on the far side of the pond, if it was ever actually broken in the first place, has been repaired. Dennis clicks down a window to get a sniff. The humid L.A. night is neither more fetid nor more sweet than usual: what might be rotting fish and sugary syrup could just as well be restaurant offal and bougainvillea. He notices that his tires are making a lot of noise, however, crackling along the pavement as if he were driving on a strip of fly-paper.

The Manhattan Hotel, in harmony with its shabby surroundings, proudly advertises in neon that rooms can be had for \$20 an hour. The Lounge is a venue around back and down in the basement. Dennis' only warning is a small sign out by the street that says all it normally would need to: *Topless*. In this case, however, the advertisement doesn't do the venue justice. Comic understatement, maybe? — because, as Dennis discovers when he comes inside the bar and sees the middle-aged, morbidly obese women undulating half-naked on the stage, a square-rigger's sails wouldn't be sufficient to "top" the dancers working here. Are they really only half-naked? Only topless? Their flesh billows out in folds, utterly swallowing any part of their body where a G-string might be buried. They might as well be fully nude: no one would ever be able to see their nether parts. It's morally certain that the dancers themselves, for many years, have not.

Dennis is pretty sure that he sees Cyndi holding court at a table near the stage. He tries to play it cool, heading to the bar for a drink, but he's quickly intercepted: he's too nicely dressed, compared to the rest of the clientele, to be anything other than a bright young man moving up in "the media business" and as such in a position to give a struggling young actress if not a break then a crack, a crevice, a hairline fracture. A struggling young actress in this city is struggling indeed, competing with a half a million other physically stunning immigrants from Kansas and Michigan and Alabama with perfect tans, perfect teeth and perfect breast implants. Cyndi, like her minions, has all of the above.

"Don't I know you?" Cyndi says more than asks, leadingly, knowingly, mock-reproachfully: a perfect opening line for anyone she might or might not have had prior plans to meet. It so happens that she does "know" Dennis, but it wouldn't have mattered: her opener leads to the same banal conversation, and the same banal sex, that it would have if she hadn't

met him online and asked him to join her at the club. If Dennis had gotten out at Hancock Park and looked around for five minutes, or had merely slowed down for rather than sped through one too many yellow lights, he could perfectly well have arrived at the Manhattan to find no unchaperoned women waiting there for him, could have joined the stags at the bar, have had one too many to drive, have driven anyway, have had a wreck and have needed to take a taxi to meet Cyndi for a fuck the following Friday. But no: God's watching out for Dennis, so, after an excruciating hour or so of small talk about how *funny* the bar is and how *interesting* Dennis' work sounds, Dennis finds himself back at Cyndi's apartment, on her bed, with Cyndi straddling him and performing, to the best of her prodigious struggling-actress-from-Michigan ability, the most erotically off-putting rendition of the sex act that Dennis has ever audienced: moaning, gyrating, repeatedly running her hands through her hair (to lift, to separate and to best display her graduation presents), gasping *Oh yeah, Baby; Just like that; You know what I want; Harder harder* and whatever other phrases and gestures she's learned from watching porno videos with her girlfriends (and, for all that Dennis knows, from appearing in a few to make ends meet). The canned phrases are bad enough, but it's her expression that Dennis finds the most irretrievably distracting: eyes closed, teeth bared, upper lip curled. Between Cyndi's lip and her obligatory Pam Anderson barbed-wire tattoos, Dennis doesn't know if he's fucking an L.A. hootchie-mama or Billy Idol. He fakes an orgasm to end the show, lingers through the requisite post-coital dialogue about how good it was and beats as hasty a retreat as possible without seeming inconsiderate. There's lingering at the door, professions on both sides of hating to part, sorrowful but acceptant references to the necessities of work in the morning. In the car, Dennis sees that it's just past four: "Not too bad." He shakes his head, reflecting on what he's spent the past hour subjecting himself to. For the rest of the drive home, he can't resist burlesquing

Cyndi's pre-recorded ejaculations, giggling to himself in amusement and amazement: *Ennh, ennh, ennh, ennh! So tiiiiight!* Who, other than *American Psycho* Patrick-Bateman types, thinks that complimenting their own physique during the sex act is sexy? *Yeeeah — my cock is so big. Ooooh, my tan is so fake. Uuuuh, my tits so defy gravity. Eeeeeenh!* Why bother having a partner when you're the only thing you're interested in fucking?

And he can't help but wonder if it's really true — what Cyndi had said about labial plastic surgery. Is there really such a thing?

* * *

There is, as he discovers a few days later. It's Wednesday, and Dennis has left work a little early to kill an hour reading the newspaper at one of Venice's beachside cafés. The café is a Starbucks, designed from the same template used at the Starbucks across the street, and it's a few blocks from the beach, but the coffee's good, the music's quiet and quirky but not distractingly so, and the golden late-afternoon sunlight is diffracting off a hundred windshields and filtering through the café's tinted windows, making all his fellow patrons even more attractive than they would be otherwise, which is very. Dennis is leafing through an *LA Weekly*. He'd forgotten all about the strange performance he'd received from Cyndi a few days prior, but leafing through the independent weekly is bringing it all back. As so many do, the local independent weekly paper relies heavily on the advertising dollars of various "adult" services for its financial wherewithal: phone sex, strip clubs, escorts. But this one's different: it's more like reading a weird lampoon of a medical trade paper, as if area plastic surgeons had adopted the advertising tactics of grocery stores or used-car dealerships: *Special, Sale, Call Today, 20% Off,*

Two Boobs For the Price of One! And it's not just boobs, not by any means. Dennis had thought that there were physical limits to body modification, but now he's not so sure. Faces, eyes, skin, bone, hair, muscles, genitals, tissue, organs, metabolism, hormones, libido, psyche, memory, mood — every aspect of the bipedal hominid, it seems, can be Frankensteined. The hair-replacement surgeons market their wares like lawn-maintenance services, hocking combinations of chemicals and plugs and slabs of sod (*scalp implants?*) to produce *Rich, Thick, Luxuriant Results* (there's that three) which will be the *envy of the neighborhood*. Dennis doesn't have to imagine it: here's actually a picture of the balding neighbor peering over the fence at Frank, lounging in a deck chair on his verdant lawn, holding a drink in one hand and running the other through his mane, with the caption: *How'd Frank get his lawn like that?* And hair's not the only thing that modern medicine can thicken: penises top the list, of course, but they're not far ahead of lips, butts, chests, necks. Necks? Who'd want a neck-thickening, Dennis wonders? But of course the ad reminds him: *a pencil-necked geek*. And every body part, it seems, can go in either direction, can be either inflated or deflated, fertilized or starved, lengthened or cut depending on the need, depending on the desires of the client, on where the part stands in relation to fashion, in relation to the just-right bowl of porridge, the Platonic Ideal, the Aristotelian Golden Mean.

On his way to Tom's house, Dennis walks past Venice's ten-times-life-size mural of Jim Morrison. He looks butch. Tanned skin, ripped chest, six-pack stomach, cock bulging in leather pants. Dennis remembers The American Poet differently: paler, skinnier, haunted, strung-out on a diet of scotch and cigarettes and Rimbaud. The muralist has thoughtfully amended those deficiencies.

Tom greets Dennis warmly, as before, shaking his hand with both of his own. Dennis is

familiar with the winning gesture, one that says better than words can how sincerely pleased you are to see someone. Variations on it generally involve the differential placement of the left hand while the right hand shakes: left hand on the forearm, on the upper arm, on the shoulder. Dennis hasn't researched it carefully, but he recalls reading an study correlating higher placement of the left hand with a greater degree of intimacy communicated thereby: forearm = sincerely pleased to meet you; upper arm = my dear friend; shoulder = *mon semblable, mon frère*. From what he recalls, one hand clasped in two was a statistical outlier, registering all degrees of intimacy equally. Perhaps because of the unsettlingly public-private nature of the hand itself? They might say that the eyes are the windows to the soul, but what part of the body is more an extension of the self than the hand? It's what every primate extends — to greet or part, to give or steal, to caress a face or smash it. Dennis finds himself thinking about where Tom's hands have been and is suddenly ashamed, not because it's a prurient thing to think about but simply because he's inadvertently followed their touch into a room in Tom's life that he has no business being in, a room that Tom wouldn't want him to see. Would he?

Dennis follows Tom through the living room toward the back of the house. The lights in the connecting hallway are on this time, and Dennis gets a glimpse, over Tom's shoulder, of the photographs lining its walls. As far as Dennis can tell, they're not the standard family portraits that he'd assumed they were — moms and dads and siblings and cousins all dressed up and forcing smiles. No, it seems that they're all (all?) oversized, artistic black-and-whites of a dark-haired, pale-skinned, fierce-looking beauty. Dennis assumes that it's Susan and is about to ask, but Tom flicks off the light switch as they pass into the hallway. It's just an energy-saving habit, but it makes Dennis swallow his query for the moment. Something in him wants to glean more information from Tom before he goes down that road.

* * *

Dennis is picking absentmindedly at his shoelaces. “So where do we start? Or re-start?”

Tom smiles. “You know, it’s funny. You’d think it’d be more difficult to start than to resume, but in my experience, that’s never the case. It gets easier as time goes on, but second sessions seem always to be the hardest. Maybe it’s like jumping off a cliff: if you survive the first jump, you think twice about doing it again.” The joke seems to cheer Dennis up. “Anyway, in answer to your question, we can resume however you like. We started chronologically, but we needn’t continue that way. If I recall, we were getting into some interesting territory at the end of last week’s session.”

Dennis nods eagerly. “Yes,” he says, and not just because it’s good PR always to respond to any question with *yes*. He isn’t perfect, but his attitude is good: he’s not a prisoner, thank god, of denial or defensiveness. He doesn’t know where these sessions with Tom might lead — perhaps if he did he’d be more resistant — but he doesn’t, so he’s abundantly willing to participate. If there were a road to hell, it’d be paved with ill intentions, not loving ones: someone who’s capable and self-deluded does far more damage in the world than a well-meaning brute. Soldiers need generals. Unfortunately, generals were soldiers once. “Yes: I’ve been thinking about what you said when I left last time. About our not being dogs. I’m not so sure.”

Tom laughs, leans forward and smacks Dennis on the knee. “Well that makes two of us! Two among two billion, perhaps. I’m not so sure either, and I’m supposed to be a professional. We’ve all got our theories and suspicions and hopes on the subject. That’s healthy and normal,

and anyone who acts otherwise, regardless of how open-minded they say they are — well. I check to see that my wallet's still in place when I meet someone like that.” Dennis smiles. “But they certainly didn't teach you that it's a dog-eat-dog world at — was it Winthrop? So what happened?”

* * *

It wasn't as if that single day in Mr. Sprague's AP U.S. History class constituted any sort of single, Earth-shattering, sky-parting epiphany for Dennis. Nothing of the sort: it was a gradual process, and certainly a process more about exchanging one set of adolescent myths for another than of walking down the sidewalk of adolescence and suddenly having the piano of objectivity dropped on one's head. It was during Dennis' final year of high school, however, that the noble stones of Castle Winthrop's liberal-Christian optimism started to show signs of mildew and decay. It would never occur to Dennis that there was anything in the least bit decadent about mentors like Messrs. Stroup or Sprague. Dan King was another matter.

The towering, barrel-chested Daniel King — *that's Mr. King to you, son* — was the idol of many Winthrop boys and the terror of all of them. By the end of their tenure at Winthrop, every boy had had at least some sort of interaction with King: all because, as Winthrop's college counselor, King was the sole determinant of their post-secondary prospects; some because they had taken his Classics class and seen him wax nostalgic, nearly to the point of tears, when discussing the *φάλαγξ*, the phalanx, that Greek paragon of men surrendering their individual wills and acting in concert for the greater good like fingers on a hand; and a few students, it was rumored, had had interactions of a still more Greek type with King. And it was more than

rumored: Dennis knew, second-hand but for a fact, that King was, in the spirit of true intellectual honesty, a practitioner of what he preached, namely the ancient Greek system of education exchange, namely *paideia*. And why not? Old men have wisdom; young men quite flagrantly lack it, and not to their advantage, either. But young men do have young men's bodies, which old men do not. It's a sensible exchange. And is it not a more egalitarian one than exchanging wisdom, as we do today, for money? — because that's one thing that every young person most certainly does *not* have, any more today than 2600 years ago. Yes, times change, and values with them, and King wasn't insensitive to that. He didn't lie down (like Socrates) in the shade of an olive tree alongside a laughing brook with every boy who desired to partake of his wisdom. But if a young man expressed an interest in a more holistic education, it would've been uncharitable of him to deny the boy that wider knowledge.

This was not the nature of the exchange that Dennis had with King. Their transaction was entirely standard. Around the beginning of his senior year at Winthrop, Dennis dutifully reported, thirty minutes early, to the second floor of Sullivan Hall for his audience with the fearsome College Counselor. He sat down behind the other boys waiting in line for their turn to have their souls read and their futures unfolded to them. Like the rest of them, Dennis was nervously shuffling and reviewing the papers that he'd been instructed to prepare over the summer: a draft of his personal statement and a list of the colleges to which *he* thought he might be destined. Both had already been forwarded to King for inclusion in his File. King had been performing this service for Winthrop for longer than any of these boys had been alive. He would know. His recommendations could be ignored; people are as free as the fingers on a hand. But a boy wasn't going to Princeton to whom King had said *The U.S. Army, son, will put some lead in your pencil.*

Exactly thirty minutes later, Dennis was at the front of the line. The door to King's office opened and emitted an ashen-faced lad, followed by King. King ushered Dennis into his office, clapping him heartily on the back to give him courage (or to make him lose control of the vomit that was boiling nervously in his esophagus). The man's towering physical presence was terrifying, especially to any 17-year-old boy, but you mustn't get the wrong idea: his manner was entirely warm-hearted and genial. "Dennis! You look like you just ate a toad. Courage, son! You'll be fine. Your file looks quite all right. Have a seat." King seated himself behind his desk, opened Dennis' file and began laying out its contents, facing Dennis, like tarot cards. "We have no secrets here. There's a system we've been using and refining for twenty years now, and it's served us pretty well. Our objective is to optimize placement and minimize heartache and wasted energy. I want you to always remember that you're free to do whatever you want in the application process — but this is what the papers say." King went on to explain each document and its significance in the total picture. "SATs and GPA: respectable. They say *Not a Rhodes scholar*, but, in conjunction with the personal statement and the transcript, they say *Not a pot-smoking slacker, either*. The draft of the statement has a good tone. It says *Straightforward, works hard*. That's perfect for a certain type of school. One that's not looking for spoiled brats whose parents have a lot of money, or native geniuses who can't tie their shoes. Ditto for the amount and variety of the coursework on the transcript. Again: *Works hard, doesn't shirk challenge*. Also: *Well-rounded. Open to new experiences*. As opposed to totally specialized at the tender age of seventeen. Good way to be. Dead on the Golden Mean, and not many are. Usually you've got ballerinas on the one hand and goof-balls on the other. Follow?"

"Yes sir," Dennis trembled.

"Good man. And by the way, what's said in this office stays in this office, on both our

parts. Right?” Did you think that King said such a thing to prepare a way for him to stand up, move around the desk, seat himself next to Dennis, place a hand on the boy’s knee? Not at all: Dennis was hard-working, but he hadn’t indicated any ambition along those lines. It was merely that King read each boy’s character back to the boy in a way that the boy would find encouraging. To be told who you are is hard. And it was mildly embarrassing — or would have been to someone who cared more about diplomacy than honesty — when students compared notes and found that one boy’s *spoiled brat* was another’s *top-notch scholar*. King didn’t particularly care, but five seconds’ worth of insurance was a reasonable expenditure.

“Yes sir.”

“Good man. I think you can see where this is heading, and it’s not the U.S. Army.” Dennis couldn’t see that at all, and rivers of relief tumbled through his veins. “Last piece: parents’ financial statement. Again: respectable. Out-of-state tuition at a respectable state university won’t break the bank. Establish residency, better still. Premium private university tuitions, if even doable, would create financial pressures. But,” King cautioned, or comforted, “That’s not an issue with this ... and this.” King laid each of his massive hands on Dennis’ SAT scores and GPA report. “These numbers aren’t going to get your hard work a hearing at a Duke or Stanford. They’re numbers games, and without an alumnus parent, a philanthropist relative or a clear scholarship angle, it’s not going to happen. Which is good. Your strengths go to waste at a place like that. A big, well-respected state university is like a city. It has outstanding resources, and it’s a competitive environment where hard work pays off. Instead of graduating at the bottom of a class of 600 well-connected brats, you graduate at the top of a class of 6000 hard-working honest men. Follow?” King glanced at the clock. Next boy in two minutes.

“I think so, sir. So ...”

King cut to the chase. “So: any excellent state university. I recommend merely that you apply to a range. Here’s a list of rankings. Reaches like UNC, UCLA; solids like UMA, Penn State; and backups like Florida and Georgia. You have a strong file, so most state universities — not all — will be within easy reach. Here’s my report.” King handed Dennis a single sheet of paper with a slender paragraph mimeographed on it. “The main thing for you to consider is location. Do you get along with your folks? Need to be close to home? Want more sun?”

“We get along fine, but — ”

“You don’t have to answer now. Think about it, apply to a range, and above all, make some campus visits this spring. Take a road trip. You’re friends with Cleveland, aren’t you?”

“I guess Gary and I — ”

“He’s mentioned you. He respects you. And he’s looking at some similar schools. If you want to visit some together over spring break, I’ll speak to your parents.”

“That’d be great.”

“Done. Sorry to cut this short, but you saw the line in the hall. I’ll have you check back with me in a month to see how things are going. In the meantime, work hard.” King’s mind was not far away, but it was away: across town, on his wife. She too was a Classicist, though not a professional scholastic one: merely, like King, someone in step with more traditional values. The value that was presently distracting King’s attention was Mrs. King’s zoophilia, a proclivity he celebrated and supported, but also one that could leave scratches and scars that required explanation when dinner with another couple from the faculty was imminent.

“Yes sir.”

“Good man.”

* * *

Regardless of what was theoretically possible, King was a man whose determinations generally came to pass, so it should come as no surprise that, six months after his initial meeting with the college counselor, Dennis found himself headed south with Gary on U.S. Interstate 95. Both boys had applied, per King's instructions, to a dozen state universities along the eastern seaboard. Neither had as many options to choose from as they had hoped. There hadn't been any particular problem with their files. 1991 had merely been a difficult year for college applications. Placements were down across the board, King had said. The struggling economy, maybe. That couldn't help. Nor war. Or perhaps it was their first taste of what it meant to be a Boomer Baby. The children of the postwar-generation's pig in the demographic python were all starting to turn 18, and Dennis and Gary found themselves on the slopes of a nationwide upsurge in college applications. But, just as these Boomers hadn't been planning for their own retirements or old-age healthcare costs (financial time-bombs that, however, wouldn't detonate for another thirty years), they hadn't been planning for their children's educational expenses, either, having generally opted, as the nation's largest block of working and voting citizens, to run the economy hot, to slash regulation and spur growth, to take profits, to speculate in securities and real estate, to increase spending, decrease saving and rack up levels of personal and national debt that required the inauguration of a whole new family of *-illions* to describe. A hundred dollars is a lot of money: it's gas across a state, two weeks' groceries, a month's electricity. A hundred thousand dollars isn't; it's a pleasant afternoon in an air-conditioned office with lawyers and brokers, where everyone's nicely dressed and polite and there's a pitcher of ice water on the table. A million, billion, trillion? Meaningless: tiskets, taskets, little yellow baskets.

At any rate, there they were, these southbound boys, Dennis driving his slightly beat-up Jetta and Gary in the passenger seat, his shoes off, his feet up on the dashboard, smoking a cigarette, drinking a beer and reading aloud from a dog-eared issue of *Playboy*. “Well I don’t know what kind of college research you *were* doing, D,” Gary was saying, “because if you’d been reading this, you wouldn’t be surprised that Maryland was so lame.” *Playboy* magazine had recently come out with one of its periodic *Top Party Schools* rankings, and Gary had been using it as his bible.

“Why?” said Dennis. “Where’s Maryland?”

“Nowhere is where Maryland is. No Fucking Where. They did fifty schools this time, and I don’t even see Maryland in Honorable Mention.”

“How did Penn State do?”

“Dude, how do you think? Did we not get totally shitfaced? It’s not UCSB, where U Can Study Buzzed,” Gary winks, “but it’s in the top ten. That’s my favorite so far. I don’t care what my parents say. I’m *so* not going to Mass.”

Dennis tried to be as diplomatic as any 18-year-old boy needs to be among his peers.

“Yeah, but you got into Mass.”

Gary flicked his cigarette ash vaguely in the direction of the open window next to him, and some of it, to Gary’s credit, did exit the vehicle. “And UMA, thanks to King. Whatever, if you’re at Penn, I could come up to visit. Those dudes were a blast. What fraternity was that?”

“I don’t remember. I got them all confused. Fido Mica Marks-A-Lot or something.”

“Dude, you’re worthless. But whatever. You’re not going to Penn. You’re coming with me to UMA.” Gary pats his bible. “It’s got way better rankings than Penn State. Penn’s got eights for Booze and Books, but it’s like a five for Bitches. You heard what those dudes said

about coal-miners' daughters. And are you not fucking *sick* of snow? You just wait 'til we get south of the Mason-Dixon."

The boys lapsed quiet for a while, looking at the dreary, overcast scene surrounding the car, the film of mud and salt on the road, the salt-stained cars, the soot-stained berms of snow lining both sides of the highway. It wasn't Massachusetts, but even in Maryland, winter could drag on, extending into what's supposed, in more moderate climates, to be spring. UMass — which was, for financial reasons, the boys' parents' choice — had certainly been like that. Spring's a fine time to visit college campuses, but not northern ones, and not when one's considering points farther south. March in central Massachusetts is a grim affair. The upper reaches of the mid-Atlantic feature more sleet and slush; the earth is buried under a less final blanket of snow. Temperatures often let it turn to mud. And a footfall planted on a quarter-inch of snow that's dusted over two of mud is going to produce — well, a mud Slurpee. Latitudes further north were more pristine in spring, but it was the purity of death. The earth there simply didn't stand a chance: it was frozen solid under half a foot of snow, which was replenished as quickly as it sublimated. UMass and Conn and Albany had nothing to show the boys except a handful of parka-enclosed hominids of indeterminate gender trudging through snow-banks between frozen buildings. Maryland and Pennsylvania had only been a slight, and dirtier, improvement.

Dennis had been thinking. "Yo, G."

"Sup?"

"Maryland *is* south of the Mason-Dixon, dickweed."

Gary was undaunted. "Not enough."

And as if to second Gary's disregard for slavish historical nit-picking — as if to say *I've*

had enough of this, it's fucking spring already — nature, as the boys crossed the Virginia state line, reached down and peeled back the stratus cloud ceiling. As they drew closer to Winterville, home of UMA — the University of the Mid-Atlantic — the young men were increasingly stricken silent by their surroundings. It didn't hurt that the afternoon was mellowing, nor that the boys were navigating their way through the Shenandoah Valley, one of those few places where the aesthetic beauty of the name lives up to the beauty of the area it embraces. But no matter that. Spring in the mid-Atlantic is not to be trifled with. The mid-Atlantic is the region where nature takes its revenge on all those places which, in spring, refuse to get with the program. It's a place where Earth rebels against such dreary adjectives as "earth-toned." *I'll show you tones*, says a mid-Atlantic spring. Hectares erupt into white dogwood, lavender redbud, yellow forsythia, red and pink and purple rhododendron. Daffodils bloom, wild wood-irises bloom, swamp-lilies bloom, crocuses bloom, dandelions bloom, roadsides bloom, gardens bloom, parks bloom, hillsides and valleys, abandoned lots, cracks in pavement bloom; in a mid-Atlantic spring, the pavement itself, asphalt and cement and shredded recycled tires, blooms. Nature goes as haywire as a broken television. Something's wrong, insane, unsupportable about a mid-Atlantic spring. And insanity is what constitutes natural beauty. Mountains are beautiful because nature isn't usually towering and craggy or black-and-white. Oceans are beautiful because customarily isn't usually blue and as flat as an I-beam; deserts are beautiful because sane nature isn't deathless and infinite, rocky and red. If our Sun were a red giant, sunsets wouldn't be beautiful; if we lived on Jupiter, exquisite multicolored cloud formations wouldn't be beautiful. If we visited Earth from Jupiter's Europa, an icy Arctic wilderness would catch no eye; if from Io, a molten-rock-spitting volcano would be as boring as a lawn. Beauty is when nature acts unnaturally.

The boys found a parking spot near campus and proceeded toward UMA's main quad. It wasn't difficult for them to know when they had found it: it was a long, lovely, tree-lined lawn, flanked on both sides by warm red-brick Georgian buildings into and out of which students were noisily streaming. The lawn sloped gradually up and away from them, its top crowned by a scintillating white Palladian temple. But it wasn't the architecture or the landscaping that had most seized Dennis' attention as he and Gary walked through a light snow of cherry blossoms. "Jesus Christ, G, they don't wear clothes here." It wasn't literally true, but it was close enough. The two boys had never seen so much naked female flesh in all their short lives put together — and Gary had seen a bit, though generally not in person. It was, Dennis thought, as if the University of the Mid-Atlantic wasn't subject to the same laws of gravity that governed elsewhere — or better put, as if nudist aliens had installed a giant clothes-magnet in a geostationary orbit over the campus, and were slowly sucking all the students clothes out into space. The tops of everyone's shoes were missing, for one thing; Dennis had seen more closed-toed, laced-up shoes on New Jersey beaches than he was seeing here at UMA. He'd never seen so many feet before, all tanned and decked with toe-rings, ankle-bracelets and ladybug-spot toenail polish. Nor were pants any less subject to the aliens' magnetizing gizmo. In the space of a generation, dresses had contracted into skirts, then minis, then shorts, then Daisy Dukes; now, if the shorts these girls were wearing were any shorter, they'd be G-strings. The students' tops, perhaps because they were closer to the gizmo in the sky, seemed to have been completely shredded: nothing remained on shoulders, little above nipples and not much below them, either.

"G-strings, pasties and flip-flops," said Gary. "And no dudes! I'm home."

"Yeah. Where are the guys?" There were gentlemen scattered here and there among the students, but precious few of them.

“Well ask, Einstein.” Students all considerably more than half-naked had been sunning themselves on the lawn. The shadows were getting long, and most of them were putting suntan lotion and water bottles into bookbags, packing up to go. Gary nodded to the nearest group of girls and prodded Dennis. Dennis recoiled in terror from the prospect of an encounter with these sirens, these grown women who had sex and drank in bars and were on The Pill. “Fag.” Gary walked up to the girls and spoke; he was the sort of fearless boy who’d do that. “Excuse me, ladies, but we’re just visiting campus. Do you happen to know what the male-female ratio is here at UMA?”

The girls mostly giggled in reply, but one self-possessed brunette spoke up. “I think it’s like 60-40. Why, are you looking for a date?” The girls giggled some more. Gary laughed too, knowing intuitively that being teased was a far more inviting conversational opener than or disregard. “No, just wondering where all the dudes were.”

“They better be out buying kegs for tonight,” one giggler said.

Dennis had walked up by this time, and was leafing through the school’s brochure. “You’re only one point off, ma’am. Miss. Says here it’s 61-39.” Dennis made a little bow. More giggling ensued.

The girls hadn’t made any specific overtures, but Gary did notice that they’d paused in their putting-things-away-to-leave procedure. He peppered them with more questions about the university; he had learned at Maryland that his and Dennis’ status as high-school seniors was an attractive asset, not a liability, to many college girls. Perhaps because it made them safer; perhaps because many a collegiate co-ed, in the middle of her struggle to claim some power for herself, was all too happy to take a page from the playbook of the average college boy and *nail some chicken*, as the saying went; perhaps it was simply because such boys were from *elsewhere*,

from another level of the system. To Gary and Dennis, naturally, motivations were immaterial; it simply meant that they, as adorably clueless high-school seniors, as “fresh meat,” stood a decent chance of getting lucky with a college girl on a spring-break trip. And that was an accomplishment worth a hundred hundreds on quizzes back at Winthrop. Within ten minutes, Gary had made what passes for a date on college campuses: the exchange of names (the brunette’s, Dennis noted carefully, being Rachel) and a loose agreement to meet at the “kegs” of a certain fraternity around ten.

“Kappa Zeta Gamma,” Gary said to Dennis after the girls had departed. “Remember that, Einstein.”

“Catherine Zeta Jones?”

“Fag,” said Gary. Then: “That Catherine Zeta Jones had eyes for you, you know.”

“You think?” Dennis gulped, having a sudden vision of himself pursuing Rachel through valleys of towering, white-sport-shirted, red-faced, butcher-fisted fraternity boys. He saw himself meeting her by the keg. Rachel would be looking bored while some beef-faced frat-boy slurred small talk in her general direction. Dennis would cut in — no, not cut in, because that would get his ass kicked. No, he’d merely say something extremely witty, within her earshot, allegedly to no one in particular but clearly to Rachel. She’d look over. Dennis wouldn’t make eye contact, but he’d wiggle his eyebrows, turn on his heel and walk outside. Gary was saying something, but Dennis was five hours ahead of him, out on the front lawn of the KZG house in the moonlight, looking lonely and intelligent and old beyond his years, smoking a cigarette without coughing. Rachel would come outside and find him there. They’d start talking. Then there’d be the beef-faced guy, and then a fight — no, no fight. Dennis was a thinker, not a fighter. He’d say something ironic that would placate and in fact befriend Beef Face but that would

signal simultaneously to Rachel that he was really making fun. Yeah. And Beef Face would bond with Dennis, pronounce him a “good guy” and then depart — um — yes, to go get a bottle of tequila for them all to do shots from, perfect! — but by the time Beef Face got back, Dennis would have charmed Rachel with his boyish gravity and taken her off to — oops. Not to the Motel 6 where he and Gary were putting up. Sordid, lame. No: back to her room. No! Better. Rachel wouldn’t have a “room”; she’d be a junior. Have moved off-campus. So: back to her — apartment. The thought of the word, the mere concept, made Dennis quiver. An apartment. Which she’d share with only a housemate. Who wasn’t there. And there’d be — whatever. In the apartment. Whatever grown-up, sexually active women have in their apartments. Scented candles and Georgia O’Keefe posters of flowers that look like vaginas.

In the middle of this fantasy, Dennis walked smack-dab, face-first into a thick limb hanging low from a cherry tree. He wound up flat on his back. As he nursed his bleeding nose, Gary shepherded him back to the car. “Don’t worry, D-man, we’ll get you cleaned up for tonight.” Gary did. And Dennis’s fantasy, as it turned out, came to pass exactly as he had imagined it, right up to the part about going to Rachel’s apartment: she was a sophomore, not a junior, and the walls of her dorm room had Paul Klee posters, not Georgia O’Keefe. But her roommate was still out at kegs, and she *did* have scented candles that she lit before she and Dennis started making out — a little sloppily, since they were both still fairly drunk, but still, tenderly enough. Dennis thought it was the best sex that he’d ever had, though he hadn’t had much. Rachel liked it too, however, and actually saw quite a bit of Dennis during the three days that he and Gary were at UMA. That’s really the best way to see a college campus, or anywhere lovely: you really don’t see the beauty in a place unless you’re walking around it hand-in-hand with someone who’s descended from the clouds to smite you. There’s just something magical

about that cocktail of dopamine, adrenaline and oxytocin in the bloodstream that makes your lungs dissolve more oxygen, your pupils admit more light, your mind perceive the graceful forms in gnarled trees, magnolia leaves and white columns.

* * *

Tom is standing, hands clasped behind his back, facing away from but listening to Dennis, staring out the window into his lush, sheltered, florescent California garden. He's chuckling. "UMass didn't stand a chance, did it."

Dennis blushes deeply, down to his shoulders, like a woman after an orgasm. "No, it did, it's — I wanted to get a little distance — and Mid-Atlantic's got excellent academics — "

As always, Tom is quick to backpedal. "It does, it does. And there's not necessarily any harm in following your, ah, heart. It can lead you to some interesting places. It led you to one excellent public university rather than another. It's not as if it led you — " Tom turns around. Dennis is shifting uncomfortably in his chair. His hand is on the back of his neck. "Did you stay at UMA?"

"Yes," Dennis sighs. "It's not that."

"Did something happen there?"

Dennis shakes his head. "What fucking didn't."

Tom returns to his seat, remaining silent. Dennis sighs, rubs his face, runs his hand through his hair, returns it to the back of his neck. He sighs again, exhaling deeply, as if to try to expel some noxious gas from his lungs. Tom suddenly speaks up, lilting: "Say, I'm absolutely

famished for a little coffee. Would you like a shot? We've got a *caffettiera*; it'll take two minutes."

Dennis brightens, welcoming the chance to collect his thoughts in private. As expected. "A cafeteria?"

"*Caffetteria*. One of those Italian doohickeys that makes espresso on the stovetop."

"Love one."

"Stay here and relax. Back in a flash."

Five minutes later, Tom returns, bearing two steaming demitasses. Dennis still looks a little green around the gills, but more composed, more ready to talk. "So we're not dogs," he begins.

* * *

Dennis and Gary matriculated to The University of the Mid-Atlantic in the fall of 1992. Gary pledged at Kappa Z almost immediately, having done just enough research to confirm that KZG boys did in fact have the most money, the nicest cars, the best reputations and the wildest parties. Dennis held off pledging. Dennis' parents had been less strict than Gary's, and Dennis consequently felt less compelled to kick up his heels now that he was out of his parents' house and installed somewhere with alcohol, cocaine, X, no curfews or bedtimes and, above all, girls. What's more, Gary's having pledged so quickly and ingratiated himself so well at KZG took some of the pressure off of Dennis; he could enjoy the benefits of Gary's relationships without having to rush into a commitment himself.

And Gary's relationships, in a very short span of time, had become sterling. For the most part, the Kappas were well-born: the sons of lawyers and lobbyists, grandsons of financiers and tobacco industrialists, great-grandsons of planters and judges. They had inherited the morals that predisposed them to be decadent and the money that could pay for it, but they lacked street smarts. These were boys who had spent their childhoods scattered across a handful of Virginia's private academies, going to football games and gentlemen's clubs and the exclusive nightspots, such as they were, of cities like Richmond and Norfolk and Fairfax. Like their fathers, their ideas of decadence usually involved little more than getting themselves and their dates drunk. On special occasions, when one of the brothers had secured some cocaine or a stripper from one of Winterville's topless bars, they'd hire a couple of private security guards, station them at the fraternity's front and back doors to delay any unusually nosy campus police, and have a right old time. But Gary, this Yank with an emancipated imagination from far-off "Massachusetts," was able to teach the Kappas a few new tricks.

So where's the city around here, Gary had asked upon arrival. The nearest urban center of any significance was Richmond, home of the largest tobacco enterprise on Earth (second to China's state-owned National Tobacco Corporation) and the most profitable (second to none). Within a month, Gary had sussed out Richmond's seedier neighborhoods and was mining them for condiments to spice up his brothers' soirees. He lined up a coke supplier in Richmond who provided a vastly superior product for half of the price that UMA students were accustomed to paying for the corn starch that was being sold in Winterville. As for the local Winterville strippers that the Kappas had been securing for their parties: Gary quickly realized, after the first trip with his brothers to the local topless joint to find someone to work an upcoming event, that this was a score which was liable to serious improvement. Winterville was a small and formerly

agricultural tobacco-farmers' town, with little industry of its own beyond the university that was its economic engine, and the sex workers that it could provide were few. There were a handful of college girls stripping their way through school, and while they were generally quite pretty, a little topless dancing was all that they were going to do, and only in a bar; they weren't about to go stripping at a fraternity house where they'd been the night before for kegs. The local strippers, on the other hand, were entirely willing not just to work a private party but to "work" it properly — but they, being mostly haggard meth-fiends from the trailer parks surrounding Winterville, were generally the sort of women you'd rather pay to don, not to remove, their clothing. Gary had spent enough time under Daniel King's tutelage — and enough weekends in big cities near the coast, i.e. Boston — to have some idea of the imagination-surpassing treasures that a big wide world had to offer. After a month or so canvassing Richmond's adult-entertainment scene, Gary had found his source. He took up a collection from the brothers of a hundred dollars each (which amounted to a considerable sum), convinced Dennis to skip class (which wasn't hard, as Dennis was usually up for an adventure, no matter how much he whined about it) and, one crisp fall Friday morning, the two of them set off, along with Kappa Taylor T. Burrell (who was holding the cash and overseeing the planning for that evening's Special Entertainment), for Richmond.

* * *

While Taylor hadn't exactly cleared this course of action with the national headquarters, he was, from his perspective, working to protect the fraternity's best interests. It was only November, and already two brothers had been called in to see the Dean about acquaintance-rape

complaints that year; two had been similarly summoned the year before, and hardly a year went by when there wasn't at least one complaint. Taylor knew that such occurrences were part of the normal course of college life: college kids drink; college kids get drunk; college kids do things in blackouts that they wouldn't normally do. QED. Boys will be boys, he reasoned, and girls would be girls, and when it was just two people making out in a dorm room — two drunk people — you didn't always know Who Shot John. Fortunately for the fraternity, it was rare that these complaints passed from the Dean of Students, who served as a one-man grand jury, on to the full Judy Board for a formal hearing. Usually it was a matter of insufficient evidence: Jill's word against Jack's, with both their booze-corroded memories as full of holes as if they'd had spongiform encephalopathy; a torn blouse, proffered after the fact; perhaps a best friend stating *Jill came home crying*; but usually no hospital visit, no doctor's report, no rape kit. If Jill did go to the doctor, it was usually only after three days of sobbing, balled up like a fetus in the corner of her dorm room. Too late for tests then. And usually, at these meetings with the Dean, character witnesses too were missing. Most of a girl's friends belonged to the same sorority, and thus fraternized with the same boys. They knew Jill's Jack; their social life was populated by his brothers, who to a man affirmed that Jack was A Good Guy who would Never Do That, that Jill Got Wasted and was Being Hysterical. And you too, Friend, it was quietly implied, know that Jill's a tease; you can't go around looking like that and acting like that and not put out. You, Friend, don't act that way. No: to side with Jill was, nine times out of ten, to deactivate from the sorority, to push the reset button on one's social life, to start all over halfway through college as an "Independent." These friends were college girls: they could do math.

These were the sort of cases that usually came before the Dean. It wasn't an enviable job. The Dean knew that they weren't dens of rapists, these fraternities — that there were A Few

Bad Apples, and that soaking in stale booze at the bottom of the barrel didn't help. Still, it wasn't pleasant, rapping rapists on the knuckles and sending them back out into the field. But rape was a serious charge, punishable, naturally, with expulsion, and even to be formally charged with rape could be a permanent stain on a young man's career. Some of the young men who came before the Dean were clueless, frightened, guilt-ridden middle-class boys who were terrified of where they'd found themselves. Some were not: some had parents who were donors, and lawyers who'd apprised them of their rights and of the school's liability to libel. The Dean could tell when he was sitting with a boy who had been coached, who had had it drilled into his head not to take even the most friendly-seeming "information-gathering chat" with the Dean as anything short of deadly serious, both for himself and for The Family. And even in the absence of such defensive machinations, there were the university's statistics to consider. When certain published stats went up, female enrollment — more than half of their bread and butter — went down. Such headaches at the end of a day! It really wasn't a job that anyone would envy. If they only knew.

Taylor knew all this, or most of it. And the Dean had called him in, as Kappa president, and had used phrases like No Tolerance and Last Warning. And although Taylor knew, from previous presidents, that these threats from the Dean were something of an annual ritual, perhaps Taylor was a bit more of an idealist than I've given him credit for being. He knew that boys would be boys. And that Unfortunate Misunderstandings would occur. Perhaps they would occur less frequently — or perhaps not at all — if there were some sort of Outlet. And that's really all that needs to be said, isn't it? Which brings us to why Taylor was in his car, chaperoning this uncommonly street-wise new pledge and his pal to a strange neighborhood in Richmond.

* * *

Tom has his head down, his face between his hands. Dennis can't tell if he's listening or asleep. He breaks off. Tom looks up. He's drained of color. His eyes are red, teary. His expression is weird, strained, angry. Dennis is scared. "I, uh — should I ..."

"I'm sorry, Dennis. It's all right." Tom picks up his demitasse and makes to take a sip. It's empty. He replaces it, takes a breath. "It's all right," he repeats lamely. "It's just a sad story. Especially for someone — you know. In that field. Education."

Dennis is taken aback. Of course it is. It had never occurred to him. That he was reading the riot act. To Tom. To what he does. People he works with. Maybe even Tom himself. "Do you want to call it a day?" Dennis asks.

"No." Tom glances at the clock. "No no. Don't mind me. It's a sad story; a little emotion's not out of order."

Dennis, dry-eyed, nods. "So anyway, we, ah, we drove to Richmond."

* * *

On the highway, Dennis was unfolding to Gary and Taylor the wonders of a new invention called the "World-Wide Web." It was only 1992, and new to everyone, not least Gary; Dennis had always been, between the two of them, the more studious and, frankly, the geeky one. Dennis was the one who was dialing in to local billboards before the web existed; Dennis was the one who had come to school during their freshman year at Winthrop crowing about the

“286” his parents had secured for him — the IBM home PC with an 80286-series processor, with 1.4 megabytes of this and 8 megahertz of that and Gary knew not what. It would all have been Greek to Gary if he hadn’t had an older brother who was a gear-head, who’d been Frankensteining a second-generation 1970s Camaro for years, and who was always going on in this same inhuman, numeric language about torque and compression and power-to-weight ratios. While Gary didn’t himself speak any machine languages, he knew what machines could do, and respected those who could make them do it.

“So once you connect,” Gary was asking, “what then? What’s out there on this world-wide web?”

“Well that’s just it,” gushed Dennis. “Potentially anything now. Used to be that, with just Lynx and Gopher and Telnet and Usenet and such” — Gary and Taylor, sitting in the front seat of Taylor’s brand-new yellow Nissan Pathfinder, grinned at each other, at Dennis’ endearing geekiness — “you were limited to text-only on the internet: stock quotes, news, message boards. But a universal graphical interface blows the doors open. You could have — anything. Pictures, video, virtual reality. The whole publishing industry will go online. No more paper. You’ll read books online, magazines online, newspapers online.”

“You read books?” Taylor teased.

“And no printing costs,” observed Gary.

“Or distribution costs.”

The boys fell silent. Wheels turned, and not just underneath the car. Richmond interrupted their conversation, however, spiking out of the humid lowland forest like the masts of a great ship. Taylor followed Gary’s directions, navigating to The Top Rail, a fancy-looking topless club located among a whole strip of them. The club was cowboy/country-themed,

clearly, with fake rusted wagon wheels affixed to exterior walls made of weathered wooden planks, and neon trim along the edges done up in a braided-rope style. The boys pulled into the lot and parked. It was barely noon, and theirs was the only car.

Taylor looked skeptical. "You sure this is it?"

"This is it. They don't open until, like, midnight. Boris'll meet us here and take us to the ladies."

"Boris? The dude who runs this place is named *Boris*?"

"That's who I'm here to see. And look: he's Ukrainian or something, and he has a pretty thick accent, so be prepared. Let me go tell him we're here." Gary walked up to the front door and went inside.

Taylor and Dennis waited. "How long have you known Gary?" Taylor asked.

"A long time. Ten years maybe. He's cool."

Taylor nodded.

Gary came back outside and walked up to the driver's-side window. Taylor clicked it down.

"He wants the money," Gary said.

Taylor sighed but started getting out of the car. "OK."

"Just the money. He's funny about people he doesn't know."

"Gary, this is over a thousand bucks. I'm going with it."

"OK."

The two boys returned to the club, Gary giving Dennis a thumbs-up and Taylor looking a little pale.

In five minutes, they were back. "Everything go OK?" asked Dennis.

“Yeah,” said Taylor, “once I got my clothes back on.”

“They just checked him for a wire,” Gary explained, feeling very powerful to be able to explain such things. “They’ll probably check you at the hotel, D.”

“These must be some special ladies,” Taylor muttered.

“You just wait.”

A black Suburban with tinted windows emerged from behind the club. They followed it, twisting and turning and doubling back through empty residential neighborhoods. Gary and Taylor were chatting merrily about Dave Matthews’ most recent concert at UMA; Dennis was in the back seat, meanwhile, hyperventilating. Eventually the Suburban pulled up at a generic five-story hotel near the airport. They pulled up next to it and got out. So this was “Boris,” Dennis thought. Boris was a middle-aged man, slightly balding, with sunglasses, dress pants, a leather sport-coat and various gold chains nestled in a wad of chest fur sprouting from an open-collared shirt. “This Dennis,” Boris said. Gary nodded. Boris nodded. “After you, gentlemen.” They entered the hotel and got into an elevator.

Boris could tell that the young men were nervous. He clapped Dennis heartily on the back. “Relax, gentlemen! All friends.” They got off on the top floor and followed Boris to one of the rooms. Boris rapped sharply on the door. There was a murmur of activity behind it; after a moment, a man who could’ve been Boris’ twin opened the door. Besides the twin, the room was empty. It was a fairly nice space: nothing fancy, but a comfortable executive suite of some sort, ideal for a traveling salesman responsible for hocking the wares of a mid-level pharmaceutical company to the area’s hospitals — save for the women’s undergarments and personal effects that were scattered here and draped there. While Boris quickly and apologetically checked beneath Dennis’ shirt and trousers for — well, he didn’t say for what, but

presumably for anything other than Dennis — his twin tidied up the room. Boris invited the boys to seat themselves on a fake leather couch. As the twin bent over to pick up a high-heeled shoe, Taylor noticed a holstered pistol underneath his jacket. He elbowed Gary and pointed at the pistol with his eyes. Gary nodded, as if to say *I know, be cool*.

Boris gestured to the pint-sized refrigerator in the suite's half-kitchen. "Drink, gentlemens? Beer? Coca-Cola? No? I have beer." He took one out and nodded to his friend, who opened the door to the adjacent room, poked his head inside and said something unintelligible, presumably in Ukrainian. A moment later, five scantily-clad young women entered the room, tottering slightly on stiletto heels. Dennis gulped. Gary nodded appreciatively and gave Boris a thumbs-up. Boris beamed. Taylor looked confusedly at Gary, who explained: "We choose one."

"Yes," interjected Boris. "This time one, maybe next time, all five."

The women were heavily painted with makeup, but unless it was there to cover bruises, it wasn't necessary: these were obviously unusually attractive women, roughly college-aged. They clearly weren't children, but they weren't old enough for time to have worked any degradation, at least of the obviously visible sort, on them. They weren't attractive in that universal American fashion, either — that fake-tan, fake-blond, Britney-Spears look that 90% of young American women strive for and 80% successfully emulate. No, these were the sort of women who were at the top of their food chain. If they'd been sorority girls, they'd be the queens of the hive; the sort which every guy wants to capture; the standard of comparison; the sort whose boyfriends everyone envies; the sort which all the Britney look-alikes detest but would never criticize publicly; the sort which you were obliged to say you didn't find as pretty as your actual, and by comparison mediocre, girlfriend. The sort that you could never catch. That if you did would

erase a lifetime of social shortcoming, that would restore hope, would stay the knife, would pull the toe away from the trigger guard, would pluck the needle from the arm and the bottle from the mouth. For a time.

That sort.

Looks-wise.

The women didn't line themselves up or primp or show themselves to best advantage. They didn't need to. They didn't giggle. They simply stood, with blank expressions and slumped shoulders, in a little cluster off to one side of the hotel room. Boris clicked his tongue disapprovingly and the women brightened somewhat, smiling faintly and beginning to walk around a bit.

"How're we supposed to choose?" whispered Taylor.

"You're the boss, T" said Gary. "It's all you."

* * *

Back in Taylor's Pathfinder, sharing the back seat with a girl he had found out was named, allegedly, Oksana, Dennis spent, on the drive from Richmond back to Winterville, the most terrified hour and a half of his life. Oksana was pleasant, and smiled a lot, but never broadly, and didn't say much other than *Yes* to most of Dennis' questions. Gary and Taylor were nervous too, a little, but had the comfort of each other and the radio to keep them occupied during the drive. But Oksana was all Dennis', or vice-versa, in the back seat of the car. It was all very pleasant and polite and strangely formal for a woman they were all about to fuck, along with as many of their brothers as could fit into the twelve hours for which they'd rented her.

Taylor, always organized, had prepared a sign-up sheet. They had her for a night, according to Gary, with no restrictions save a one-rendezvous-per-45-minutes limit.

“Forty-five minutes?” Gary had asked.

“Fifteen minutes rest,” Boris said simply.

“All night? Does she not need to sleep?”

Boris tapped the side of his nose. The gesture was unclear; it could have meant *We’re in the know* or *She’s got coke in her purse if need be*, or perhaps something else entirely. “If you sleep, girl sleep. If you not sleep, girl not sleep. No problem.”

And now Dennis was trapped in the back seat of Taylor’s SUV, attempting to make polite small talk with a barely Anglophonic international supermodel with whom he was designated to have sex, after the senior brothers on the roster had had their turns, while Taylor and Gary, in the front seat, were forcing themselves to re-examine any nuances of Dave Matthews’ last concert that they might have left undiscussed.

Oksana was staring out the window, watching the Shenandoah foothills lope and leap and tumble alongside the car like antelopes or porpoises. Dennis lit a cigarette and held the pack out to Oksana. She flinched at the movement in her peripheral vision but, upon seeing that it was just a proffered smoke, took one, smiling.

“So — Ukrainian?” said Dennis.

Oksana shook her head. “Not Ukraine. Russia.”

“Moscow? St. Petersburg?” Dennis felt like an idiot; he had just exhausted the list of Russian cities that he could name off the top of his head. He kicked himself mentally: *Kiev*.

“Krasnodar.”

Although she was referring to a city with a million people, Dennis had no clue what Oksana had said. If he had been a good Virginian, and up-to-date on the news of his adopted state's biggest corporate resident, he might've known that Krasnodar was home to the factory from which Philip Morris International put Marlboros between millions of Russian lips. But Dennis had never heard of Krasnodar, any more than the average Russian had ever heard of Richmond. "Crush — ?"

"Kruh — snuh — dahr."

Dennis nodded, then shrugged, with an embarrassed expression, pantomiming *I don't know anything about it*.

Oksana searched for words. "Black Sea. Ukraine — close. Türkiye close. Istanbul."

Dennis nodded more, then stopped, feeling like a bobble-headed idiot. "Krasnodar. Is it nice?" Oksana scowled. "Pretty? Like this?" He gestured out the window at the pastoral scene rolling past the windows.

Oksana stared out at Dennis from underneath a cloud that had formed over her brow. Her eyes were neither blue nor gray but simply pale, silvery, like a shark's. When she looked at him, Dennis had the weirdly definite sensation that things in him were dying. Like he was full of furry little creatures, and every second that Oksana looked into his eyes, the head of a gerbil or a baby squirrel was crushed. A very definite image — very weird. As if there were an audible component to her gaze: little skull-bones crunching. But rabbits or rats he didn't know. That would make a difference. Or maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was simply that nervousness was making him dissociate.

“Not like this,” Oksana said flatly. She turned back to the window. Except for a few more niceties surrounding the proffering and lighting of cigarettes, that was the end of the conversation in the back seat for the next hour.

* * *

About twelve hours later, Dennis was taking a refreshing little nap under a bush in the front yard of the Kappa house. When they’d gotten back to campus that evening, Taylor and Gary had dropped Dennis off at his dorm and continued on to the fraternity with their precious cargo still staring out the window of the back seat. As they drove away, Dennis gave Oksana a little finger-wave goodbye. It seemed foolish, but he felt that they’d bonded somehow by sharing a back seat in silence, mutually excluded from the nervous prattle between the front seat’s alpha males. Oksana returned the wave, but Dennis couldn’t tell if she was mocking him or not. It didn’t matter much, he thought. She could be cold or silent or mock him if she wanted to, but he’d put his hundred dollars in. He’d come out on top.

Since then, he’d showered, shaved, scented, had dinner with Rachel, begged off early as “exhausted,” headed over to the Kappa house and joined the brothers, who were playing quarters to pass the time and work their courage up. They greeted Dennis warmly when he arrived, knowing that he’d been a member of the scouting party that had returned with this trophy, this booty, this force of nature which, installed upstairs, was slowly working its way down the list of names posted over the quarters table. Every 45 minutes, another hero would return, charging into the commons room sweaty and disheveled, pumping his fists in the air, jumping up on the quarters table, crossing his name off the list and summoning the next knight to face the dragon.

Which is what they referred to her as: “the dragon,” not at all because she was hideous or scaly, but simply because *The bitch breathes fire, dude, and no matter how many times you stab her, the bitch won’t die!*

But these waggish varsity hijinks had all come hours before. It was now closing in on three in the morning, and the quarters game had long since broken up, sending its players to various corners of the house to black out or empty their stomachs. The quarters table was now occupied by two high-tolerance brothers who were grimly shotting their way to the bottom of a fifth of Jack. Only a few names remained uncrossed at the bottom of the list on the wall. Dennis was next — and was not present and reporting for duty. A pledge nicknamed Three (so named because he was the fraternity’s third Taylor currently in residence) was sent to go find him. And did so under the hedges in the front yard.

Three poked Dennis with his toe. “D-man. Dennis. You alive, bro? You’re up. Time to face the dragon, dude.” Dennis groaned and nuzzled a little deeper into his soft soil blanket, but Three had his orders and meant to execute them. He roused Dennis, took him in the house, cleaned him up, gave him a Coke and propped him against the wall next to the door of the room upstairs that had been requisitioned for that evening’s entertainment. “You good, D?”

Dennis was quickly coming around. “I’m good. Thanks cuz.” He had no idea who Three was.

“Just wait here. She’ll get you when she’s ready.” Three beat a quick retreat back downstairs. He’d had his turn earlier, and had no desire to see his lady-love draw another man into her lair.

Not long after, the door opened. When she saw that it was Dennis waiting in the hallway, a glint of recognition passed across Oksana’s eyes — maybe even a smile, Dennis thought. He

introduced himself, shaking Oksana's hand and feeling stupid. "Dennis." Fortunately, he was able to check himself before asking how she was.

"Yes — Dennis," Oksana said. She opened the door wider and gestured him in: "Please."

It was just a regular frat-boy's college room, with sturdy institutional furniture and posters of UMA sports heroes on the walls. A big foam *We're #1* hand waved its index finger in a corner. Oksana took her purse from the desk, took some pills out, swallowed one. Not some love-drug, not amphetamines or Ecstasy — a little Ecstasy had been employed to get things started, but that had been hours ago — just some aspirin. She turned around; Dennis was standing frozen in the middle of the room. Sensing his nervousness — having gotten a very clear sense of it earlier that day — Oksana donned a seductively meek expression, lowered her eyes and moved toward Dennis to embrace him. He instinctively stepped back. Dennis liked gaming as much as the next fellow, but who can enjoy a contest so easily won? Unlike the next fellow, Dennis was accustomed to a more sophisticated field of play.

"Krasnodar," said Dennis without thinking.

Oksana stopped, her expression suddenly indeterminate.

Dennis took Oksana's hand and gestured for her to sit down on the side of the bed, then sat down next to her. She turned to kiss him, but he had pulled his legs up and was sitting cross-legged on the bed, facing her, elbows on his knees and chin in his hands, in what would've been, in any other context, his Quizzically Adorable pose. In this context, he didn't know what it was; it wasn't premeditated. "Krasnodar," he repeated.

Oksana didn't know where this was going, but it was clear that it wasn't going anywhere charted. And after ten performances in as many hours, her patience wasn't infinite. She slumped back into the pillows and sighed, "Yes, Krasnodar. Long way." She made a palms-up

gesture, looking slightly annoyed: *Why?* It was the first definite emotion that Dennis had seen her convey, and exactly what he was, unconsciously, pursuing. Does it sound slight, this gesture of mild annoyance? It wasn't. If Oksana had been a professional, she'd have known from much experience precisely what a "sensitive" and "thoughtful" guy like Dennis was after, and would never have let him come within a mile of it. She would have kissed him endless minutes ago, caressed him, engaged his hormone pump and rid herself of his pestering consciousness.

Dennis returned Oksana's palms-up *Why?*, adding to it a little *So what the fuck?* head-waggle. Oksana shrugged, but Dennis had the ball now. He put an index finger in the air to start his sentence. "Krasnodar." Dennis traced an arc with his finger: *going from here to there*. At the termination of the arc, he said: "Richmond." Then he repeated the palms-up gesture, which by now had been clearly established to signify *Why?*

Dennis had definitely gotten inside the young woman's screen: Oksana glowered and pulled a pillow to her chest. Meaning *Fuck you, Jack, I'm not discussing that with you?* Sure, absolutely, it would have — in a frat-boy game. In another, it was an ardent, even obvious invitation. Dennis gently pulled one of Oksana's hands away from the pillow and held it between his two. How else was he to say, or how better to say, *Trust me, I'm asking as a friend, I won't hurt you?* He put on a compassionate expression. (Who was the whore?)

Oksana was on the fence. Dennis just held her hand and looked at her. Just the feel of her strong, sculptured hand was enough sexual gratification to last him through many a future masturbation, and unbeknownst to him, his long-term memory circuitry was busily at work, storing away imagery like a squirrel busily burying nuts in the yard.

"Why?" said Oksana. "Why know this?"

Dennis paired a shrug with a humble smile: *I don't know why*. Nothing could be more off-putting.

Oksana shook her head, as if she knew better. But she had decided to give in, if asked, before Dennis even walked into the room. “Ship.”

“You came here on a ship?”

Oksana nodded.

Dennis wasn't exactly worldly, but he knew that you don't go from Russia to America by boat. “Cruise ship?”

Oksana shook her head. Dennis still looked perplexed. “Not cruise ship.” She lowered her voice out of habit. “Not passport.”

“What kind of ship?”

Oksana frowned and gestured: *Big*. Then: *Herself*. Then: *Little box*. Then she picked up the imaginary little box and placed it on the big ship.

Dennis' eyes widened. The tables had been turned, or restored to where they'd always been; he was out of his depth, or cast back into the depthless ocean where he had always stood in respect to this shark-eyed thing. If there had been anything even unconsciously insincere about his gameplay up to that point — if — it was eradicated in an instant to the tune of mammals' skulls being crushed in great wet iron gears. “A container ship?”

Oksana recognized the word and nodded. “Container.”

“But how?”

Oksana turned her eyes on Dennis. His open face read horror and confusion. A little boy. Who didn't understand. No one did. She reclaimed her hand. It didn't matter now. The game was over. She'd won, and having won, won nothing. She snorted in disgust. “Man come.

America, work, money, job. Good job! Car! Blah blah blah. Good; Krasnodar nothing. We go. Novorossiysk. Ship, box, mans, guns. Blah blah blah! Job?” Oksana barked out a laugh. “Yes, job.” She gestured, to herself, to Dennis, to *this*.

“But — ”

Oksana, grinning savagely, cut him off with a wagging finger and a disapproving tongue-clicking sound. Her wagging finger became a pistol barrel. She put it to Dennis’ forehead. “No but.” *Bang*.

Can you not say ‘But’? Or: But isn’t there somewhere you can turn? Dennis didn’t understand exactly what “No but” meant. Neither did Oksana, for that matter, and this constituted Boris’ power. But it didn’t matter: her time with Dennis was up. Another boy, hope to god the last, would be knocking soon. Dennis had gotten what he wanted, whether or not he knew he wanted it. If he didn’t know, tough shit. Oksana didn’t have the luxury or the power or the English to explain to these children their own desires. It was as much as she could do to fulfill them, and a few more thousand dollars of doing so and she’d be clear of that as well. But she pitied Dennis. He meant well. She gave him a kiss on the forehead where she’d placed the finger-pistol barrel and sent him away.

* * *

Dennis looks up. The clock on Tom’s desk says 7:25. He’s run long. And he hears someone stirring in the front of the house. Tom isn’t looking at the clock, however. He has his chin in his hand and is looking at Dennis. Through him.

“I’m sorry, Tom. We’ve run way over.”

Tom's absently waves away Dennis' apology. His expression doesn't change. He's lost in thought, troubled, looking at something through Dennis, on the wall behind him or more distant.

"Dr. Tom?"

"Force is law," Tom intones, "in every barbarous society. The stronger sex imposes on the weaker. And force is law."

"Jefferson?"

Tom nods.

Dennis thinks *barbarians, dogs*. But he doesn't say anything other than "Should we call it quits for tonight?"

Tom shakes his head, collecting himself, coming around. "Yes. I'd better get dinner on. We'll pick this up next time."

"Oh, there's enough to pick up," Dennis says. Then he realizes that he sounds like he's bragging. Or is. Tom just pats him on the back as they turn to leave the room, saying nothing. Dennis feels ashamed, ugly. It'll pass. The night outside, as always, is fresh and sweet, and he has a date with Heather in while. And Heather doesn't fuck like a porn star. She's not perfect. She has a tendency to nag. He doesn't know where he stands with her. But when he's with her, it's her he's with, not a market-tested male fantasy. Maybe.

Circle 3: Gluttony

It's a week later, minus half a day. Dennis is at the office — or, more specifically, in the lobby shop on his building's first floor, copping his daily lunchtime sugar fix. He learned long ago that there's only so much that caffeine can do. One can provoke one's system with more coffee than even Balzac drank (which was, according to reports, as much as fifty cups a day), but ultimately the body must have something to metabolize, and will feed on itself only when it's compelled to do so. After six hours of caffeination, Dennis' metabolism is revving like a hummingbird's and ravaging like a starved animal for fuel, having long since burned through this morning's Pop Tart and last night's at-desk Chinese takeout. Dropping a sugar-bomb precipitate into a bloodstream super-saturated with caffeine is as good as any line of coke. And what about the crash? Sure, there's that, Dennis would admit. But there's no flight without the risk of crash. You can't race without risking a blown tire or under-steered turn. Hell: you can't get out of bed in the morning if you can't accept the odds that a piano will fall on your head while you're walking down the sidewalk. It's all about knowing the odds and knowing yourself.

In the store, Dennis runs into another of the building's midday lobby-shop regulars: The Lotto Guy. Every afternoon, Dennis goes downstairs for sixteen ounces of Coke, a pack of Skittles, a couple of candy bars and a bag of chips or nuts or any salt delivery device — salt, with its blood-pressure hyperactivating properties, being a time-honored stimulant every bit as effective and ubiquitous as sugar. And every afternoon, there's Lotto Guy, scratching tickets. Lotto Guy buys a strip of brightly colored \$1 lottery tickets, scratches them with a quarter right

there at the counter, buys another strip. Every now and then a ticket yields a dollar back, and these he wisely reinvests. Lotto Guy is not a profit-taker.

Dennis feels sorry for Lotto Guy. It's such a miserable form of gambling. Dennis knows well that perfect play in blackjack or craps can get the house edge down to under one percent: still an eventually guaranteed losing game, but one you're not guaranteed to lose so quickly that you can't have a few hours of so-called fun before getting cleaned out. And even the most mindless casino tourist-trap cons-jobs — slot machines and Keno — keep the house edge under 25%. But the *best* odds for these lotteries — those for the smaller payouts — are wretched, averaging house edges as high as 98%. And the odds for winning the Super Mega Jackpot are absurd, millionths of a percent. You've got a better chance of spontaneously combusting. Still, the break-evens or "free" soda "wins" come every fifth try or so, so you keep buying and scratching because, see, you don't lose every time, right? A lot of these tickets really are "winners" — i.e. break-evens or returning prizes worth less than the ticket. And You Can't Win If You Don't Play.

"How's it going?" Dennis asks.

Lotto Guy shakes his head and scratches away. "Win some lose some," he says brightly.

Dennis really *does* feel sorry for Lotto Guy, but he can't resist teasing. "You know, you should try the Coke-and-candy lotto."

Lotto Guy looks up, interested. "Huh?"

"Every day I come down here; I stake a few bucks; and every day, I win a Coke and a candy bar. Never lost."

Lotto Guy is clearly burned but keeps his temper. "Yeah." Translation: *Fuck you, pal.*

* * *

After dozing along various freeways — traffic was heavy and slow, so the occasional five-second cat-nap behind the wheel didn't really present any terribly lethal threat — Dennis has successfully made his way once again to Tom's neighborhood. Venice, like so much of West L.A., is a place where slender and healthy people crowd sidewalks lined with health clubs and juice bars. These aren't people who eat three Baby Ruths a day, thinks Dennis. He's not late for his appointment with Tom, but he hasn't arrived early, either, so there's no time to relax for half an hour, to have an espresso or a shot of wheat-grass juice, to eat a hot dog or take a stroll along the boardwalk. That had been nice, doing that before. Mental note.

"Can I get you something?" says Tom as he ushers Dennis into the house. "Coffee, tea?" And then, with a grin and a comically excessive German accent: "Varm milk, perhaps?"

Dennis gets the reference — Frau Blücher, Cloris Leachman, Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* — and returns the serve: "Ovaltine!"

Tom's pleased. "I would've thought that was before your time."

"Well, *you* know a thing or two that happened before *your* time."

"A hit, a very palpable hit." Tom wiggles his eyebrows again, but Dennis has apparently missed this second serve.

"Actually, coffee would be great. I'm feeling a little foggy."

"Burning the candle at both ends?"

"Ha! No. I always say: I don't burn the candle at both ends; I pop that whole sucker in the microwave." Tom merely grins at the image, but Dennis hears himself boasting again. Why would anyone brag about his own incontinence?

“I think I might have given you the wrong impression,” Dennis begins, as the two settle with their coffees into their chairs, “about what UMA was like.” Tom just nods: *continue*. A dog is barking next door. Dennis is distracted. “Just that — you know — it’s not like it was like that all the time. A brothel. A den of sin. Strippers, prostitutes, date rape drugs.”

“You did the right thing, Dennis. About Oksana.”

The dog next door continues barking.

“How do you know I didn’t go through with it the next time?”

Yap! Yap yap!

“Did you?”

You’ve seen that Gary Larson cartoon, surely: two frames, two drawings of the same neighborhood with dogs scattered here and there. One has the caption *What Humans Hear*. The dogs are all saying *Woof! Woof! Woof woof woof!*

“No,” Dennis admits. “I had my share of drunk sex in college — who hasn’t? — but human trafficking? Sex slavery? No thanks.”

The other side of the cartoon has the caption *What They’re Really Saying*. Same neighborhood, same dogs, but this time, the speech bubbles all read: *Hey! Hey! Hey hey hey!*

At this point, both Dennis and Tom have become severely distracted. It couldn’t come at a more inappropriate point in the conversation. The dog next door yaps mindlessly away.

“Just a moment,” says Tom. He gets up, goes over to a stack of boxed books in the corner, and empties out one’s contents. “This will just take a second.” Tom rips the cardboard along its seams and crumples the box into a loose ball. He opens the back door, steps out into the yard with the cardboard ball in hand, aims carefully and pitches it up onto the balcony of a neighboring apartment. The dog — a spindly, hairless, yapping little object of indeterminate

breed — pounces on the wad of cardboard and begins gnawing it zealously. Tom steps back inside, closing and locking the door behind him. He doesn't comment. Does he need to?

"But there *were* next times," Tom continues.

"Yeah. Some. As far as I know. I wasn't always around. And when I was, I didn't sign up. I found better things to do."

"Such as?"

Dennis can vaguely sense a boast coming, but not in time to contain it. "Drink, of course."

* * *

The problem, obviously, was simply this: *sex* was more *difficult* than *hamburgers*.

Sex: women, hunting, dating, socializing, getting intimate or merely getting naked, condoms, birth control, pregnancy scares, HIV, making good impressions, figuring women out, being attractive, getting emotional, dealing with someone else's problems and peculiarities, controlling your temper, developing needs, depending on another independent and unpredictable person, fighting, breaking up, getting back together, harboring resentments, gossiping, tainting mutual friendships, yikes!

Difficult: complicated, disturbing, time-consuming, uncontrollable, unpredictable, exhausting, inconvenient, infrequent. In gambling terms, sex would have been the Super-Mega Jackpot in the pantheon of lotto games: maximum payout, maximum marketing, minimum odds. Dennis knew this, though not consciously; in the same way, Gary "knew" it, Taylor "knew" it, Three and Rachel and Messrs. Stroup and Sprague and every Dean at Winthrop "knew" it.

Consciously or not, it's something every American, save only the most hopelessly sex-addicted, "knows": that it's easier to feed your stomach than your groin. Is it something that every human being knows? By no means: it isn't true for every human being. No shoes, no work, no TV, no electricity to run one a TV if you had one? You fuck. But in a land where amusements gush from a million factory assembly lines, a land where spectacles are commodities cheaper than water, the calculus holds. Testosterone and estrogen are potent chemicals in a Rousseauvian state of nature, but add industrial quantities of salt and sugar to the cocktail. Love is nice, but follow the money: love can't compete with hamburgers.

Hamburgers. Let's say you picked a night at the UMA Kappa house, any night. And imagined that its exterior walls were made of cheese, and that a horde of cockroaches swarmed over the entire house, turning it into a writhing, seething, glinting mass of black and brown insects. Once they'd picked it clean, they disappeared, leaving the guts of the building exposed. Was a 24-year-old fraternity president fucking a Russian sex slave in a room on the second floor? Odds were slim. Was any brother "getting some," in any room, with any partner, drunk or sober? Odds were low. The bedrooms upstairs weren't empty, though. At least half of them were occupied by a brother, a hand feeding soda or beer and pizza or chips into one hole, a TV feeding pictures and sounds into four others. In some rooms, the hands weren't free to attach to foodstuffs; their use was demanded by TVs connected to game consoles connected to joysticks connected to hands connected to brothers. But there was just a fraction of the brotherhood in these upstairs cells. Where was everybody else? You looked downstairs and, lo, there were five or ten bodies clustered around a large-screen TV, stacks of pizza boxes separating them. Elsewhere was another cluster, another large-screen television, this one with a game console, two bodies connected to it and more looking on. In yet another commons room you'd find a dozen

bodies arranged around a quarters table or attached to a beer bong attached in turn, by means of a funnel and a plastic tube, to a standard 15-gallon (165-can) keg of beer. These boys were thirsty. And a thirst sated by beer produces both hunger, ergo more pizza and burger and chicken boxes, not to mention more thirst for beer, ergo the three commons rooms with open kegs, the fourth open keg on the back porch and the five untapped kegs waiting patiently in the kitchen.

On the night in question — this night laid bare by an army of cockroaches waiting patiently in the bushes for the partygoers to black out — Dennis wasn't around. Not yet. Dennis had been at the campus food court, taking part in a Cheese Championship with Gary and two of Gary's Kappa pals: Three, whom we've met briefly, and, as luck would have it, Two, whose name needs no explanation at this point. A Cheese Championship involved the consumption of as many different cheese-related foodstuffs as the food court had to offer: a double-cheeseburger from the court's on-campus Burger King, cheese pizza from its Pizza Hut, a Subway three-cheese sub, Taco Bell cheese nachos and Wendy's cheese chili (this even after the reports that a severed human finger had been found in it some years back). Even the university's own UMA Grill — which hadn't been advertising to the students since they were infants and thus enjoyed scant patronage in comparison to the national chains — had a generic food-distributor item (Sysco cheese fries) to contribute to the tourney.

Contestants would ante up five bucks to participate and would make the rounds of the court's eateries, eating every bite of every delectable above-mentioned dish. Once they'd finished, they started around again. The last man munching won the kitty. One last rule: *you spew, you're through*. (Vomiting after the competition had ended was permitted, but it was seen as neither manly nor fair to go to the food-court lavatory and unpack one's saddle-bags before riding another stretch.) How many rounds the game generally lasted depended on how many

contestants were involved. Tonight, there were just the four of them, playing more because the game provided a menu that required no thought rather than to win. And no one's going to go much further than one round for twenty bucks: it meant, essentially, a prodigious and potentially free (though violently lardaceous) dinner. But when ten or fifteen friends joined in, the pot could be considerable. A hundred bucks is nothing to sneeze at, and with their sumptuous if unrefined varsity lifestyles, many students — Dennis not least among them — had quickly come to need more money. One could either have loose-fisted wealthy parents, sell drugs, get some credit cards, take a job or eat a lot of cheese. Dennis didn't have the first option, didn't like the second and had quickly maxed out the third. That left getting a job or consuming sickening quantities of cheese for wealthier students' amusement. At the moment, he was burning rubber on the cheeseway to financial security. Unfortunately, there were hardier digestive tracts than his, but that wasn't stopping him from giving it the good old college try, and tonight his luck was good — or rather, his competition unmotivated: Gary had a profitable connect in Richmond; Two (one of Gary's customers) had been born with a silver spoon in his nose; and Three (also a customer), though a little less well off, was a Freshman and a lowly pledge, and hadn't yet had time to amass much of a secret financial burden. Thus none of them particularly minded paying five bucks, if it came to that, for half an hour's entertainment, i.e. to see Dennis force himself, with deadly earnest determination, to consume a small dog's weight in synthetic orange goo.

"Cheese Champion," said Gary, slapping Dennis on the back while passing him his winnings. "Don't spend it all on cheeseburgers."

"Fuck you," Dennis gurgled dully, his neurons lipid-clogged.

After a bracing stroll back to the Kappa house, punctuated by a refreshing pause to vomit in the bushes, Dennis was feeling more alert. There was drinking to be done downstairs, but

while your stomach was coated with cheese, there wasn't much point — one could hardly get fucked up on a full stomach — and furthermore, Two wanted to show off *Doom* on his new Pentium. The engineers at Intel — or, more accurately put, the marketing managers there — had realized “what's in a name,” and had finally started branding their microprocessors with names more catchy than 2-, 3- or 486. The Pentium was the first microprocessor with a proper, friendly English name, though Intel hadn't yet been able to wean itself completely (*pent-* for 586) from its numeric naming schema. It would, and would soon enough be naming microprocessors things like Photon and Crusher and Sasquatch. Casting about. But what *is* the right sort of name for a computer's CPU? Calling it a *central processing unit* might be accurate — it is, after all, just one unit among a thousand others — but it's hardly a name to conjure with. It moves no boxes off of shelves. Should it have a brainy sort of name that would befit a mind? Or a useful, tool-ish name? Or a magic-making soulful one? Dennis found himself thinking these things while mounting the stairs, no doubt because Two had been repeating *Pentium, Pentium* like a mantra. This thing had better rip.

It did. We'd sniff at it today, but by 1996 standards, the P-Box rocked, though perhaps it was in part the somehow vaguely shimmering name (invoking platinum, magnesium, titanium?) that made it seem so eminently capable of scooping huge amounts of audio- and photorealistic data into the eyes and ears: 3-D graphics, textured shading, shadows, reflections, gravitational effects, 16-voice polyphony, digital audio sampling, surround sound. Taylor Two had fired up *Doom* and was blasting his way, in service of the Union Aerospace Corporation, through demons and zombies in a Martian Hell. Dennis and Three were dutifully audiencing. Gary, thoroughly uninterested in video games compared to the prospect of a good stout beer bong, had remained downstairs.

“Lookit, look at that splatter,” crowed Two, pointing to the plumes of blood that billowed from behind each shotgunned zombie’s head.

“You can totally see his brain,” Three added admiringly.

“And you can do executions,” said Two. “Watch.” Two’s on-screen alter-ego charged up to a zombie, grabbed it and dragged it out from its hiding place behind a rusting barrel of toxic waste. “Ready?” He swung his gun around, bashed the zombie with the stock a few times, grabbed its neck, forced it to its knees, placed the shotgun to its head and blew it off. The zombie crumpled and fell forward in slow-motion, its jiggling neck-stalk spewing streams of blood to a deafening techno-metal soundtrack. “Eat that, bitch!”

“Yessss!”

Dennis, meanwhile, was distracted, looking around for Two’s other PC games. “Wicked graphics, but the storyline’s a little thin. Do you have any adventure games?”

“Like what?”

“*Indiana Jones, Star Wars.*”

“Aren’t those movies?”

“Games too,” said Dennis. “LucasArts.” Two shrugged. “The George Lucas people made them.”

“D,” said Two, pulling a zombie close and blasting his spine out of his back, “I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.”

“The guy who made the movies. The same guys made video-game versions. You like *Star Wars*?”

“I liked the second one. The third was shit.”

“You can kill Ewoks if you want to.”

Two dropped the controller, turned around and bumped fists with Dennis. “That would fucking rock. I’d be all over nuking those teddy-bear motherfuckers. I fucking hate *Return of the Jedi*. Fucking ruined *Star Wars*, that infantile shit.”

There was an obligatory bang on the door, quickly followed by Gary’s grinning face. “What are you fags doing in here? *Video* games? Would you fags come downstairs and drink already?”

“Don’t have to go downstairs just to drink, fag,” said Two, gesturing hurriedly, between kills, toward his dresser. “Bottom drawer.”

Taylor Three took the hint and opened the drawer to find two fifths of Jack nestled among boxer shorts and athletic socks. “You keep your bar in your underwear drawer?” Three said in disbelief as he removed the bottles from their downy nest.

“Gotta,” said Two, distracted by a second level of Martian demons coming at him thick and fast from all directions. “Campus police. Walking into any open room. Bottles out, busted. Here,” he continued, pausing the game. “Gimme one of those.”

The boys passed the first bottle around, each taking a throat-full and passing it on. After two circuits, it came back around to Dennis, who was starting to backpedal. “I’m out. The Cheese Champion doesn’t feel so hot.” Dennis’ reservation, naturally, was met with a chorus of cajoling. They finished the bottle, forgot about the game and went downstairs to pursue other distractions, the walls of the stairwell heaving in and out, it appeared to Dennis, like giant lungs.

* * *

“Let me guess,” Tom interrupts. “It wasn’t a very pleasant night.”

“I don’t remember,” says Dennis. “I’m sure there were worse.”

“That you remember?”

“Bits and pieces.”

Tom withholds reaction. By now, he’s gotten past the point of needing to raise an eyebrow to solicit more information (when, at least, said information is already near forthcoming) from his client. Tom’s reply is a non-gesture — a facial ellipsis that, in saying nothing, says *go on, continue*. Though used cardboard is as nearly-valueless as dirt, it, like any other resource (not least of which the energy required to gather up and toss it) isn’t infinite. In the long run, even the smallest probabilities, when there’s a weight in their favor, add up to a certainty. This is the true revelation of evolutionary theory: not a biological fact, but a mathematical one. It’s not just Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection; it’s every bit as much Charles Lyell’s, whose uncelebrated *Principles of Geology* describes the time-scale required for natural selection to function. Or to function, at least, in the selection of those characteristics that we pensive hominids most easily notice and care about: eyes, thumbs, a preference for Beethoven over Brahms. Humbler characteristics — the presence of a certain protein, the resistance to a certain pathogen — commonly evolve among short-lived life-forms in days or weeks. A chimp with a typewriter doesn’t need an infinity of days to type out the word *type*. But given paper enough and time, she’ll type *Much Ado About Nothing*.

But the monkey with the typewriter (that Golden Oldie of philosophical thought experiments) is a poor metaphor for evolution. Unless (*pace* Derrida) all script is ultimately hieroglyphic — unless the mere shapes of the typewriter’s letters “speak” to the monkey in some way — the chimp’s hunt-and-pecking is random, is a matter of pure chance. Whereas evolution by natural selection, of course, is nothing of the sort. Its vociferous critics’ ignorance of that fact

— an ignorance amendable simply by reading an encyclopedia entry on the subject — doesn't change the fact. Evolution might be unintelligent, but it's the furthest thing in the world from random, purposeless chance. Its purpose is, alas, all too determinate. As William Burroughs said, dripping both irony and sorrow: "Survive, that's the name of the game. What do I give a fuck about you people?" Let's electrify the keyboard so that every time the chimp types a letter that's not the correct next letter in the script of *Much Ado*, she receives a shock. Now that's a step toward a closer metaphor.

It's also the true nature of the house advantage or, in more technical casino terminology, the "edge": for every dollar that you gamble, win or lose, the casino keeps a penny. It's the tax you pay to play. The odds are always almost even; always almost. Each time you bet, somewhere as far from your consciousness as possible — somewhere in the bowels of the machine or in a far-flung exurb of your physiology, somewhere at the margins of the table, somewhere in one dead slot subtracted from 36 that pay, somewhere behind the three cocktails every two hours that are just enough to get you progressively more sodden — each and every single time, you pay that tiny tax: a quarter of a penny for the privilege, a calorie of energy stored in fat, a neuron decommissioned, an alveolus sealed with tar. And each time, that penny clinks in someone else's piggy jar.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Now's not the time for slide-rules and stopwatches; this is a feasting season. Suffice it to say that, like an evolutionary theorist, Tom's not as much a biologist as a mathematician; that, like a casino, the one business that Tom's *not* in is gambling. Put short, Tom's spare, and by not requesting a response from his client most effectively solicits one.

“It was the winter of my first year at UMA,” begins Dennis. “Bid Night. At the Kappa house. I remember that specifically because I *wasn’t* waiting on a bid. I wasn’t rushing. There didn’t seem to be any need to be. I was sort of a brother by proxy, through Gary. I went to their parties, drank their beer, hung out. Had all the benefits of membership without having to join. Go through the stupid hazing process, learn the stupid secret handshake and the secret motto, pay the dues, live in the house with them. I had a different set of friends through Rachel — independents. I liked them too. So I didn’t see any need to pledge myself to one or the other when I could have both.”

Tom nods noncommittally — a half-nod which says not so much *I understand* as *OK, stop skirting*.

Dennis doesn’t miss Tom’s under-reaction, though, and proceeds with a trace of defensiveness. “It’s relevant only because it didn’t make any sense why I’d gotten so upset.”

“You got upset?”

“That’s what Gary told me the next day. Taylor and the other officers had been upstairs giving out bids. I was downstairs drinking with the hopefuls and the rest of the brothers. They had this really low-gravity shit that they were serving, but they had five or six kegs of it, so that was the big joke: trying to find ways to consume enough of this horse-piss to get fucked up. I remember that much. That goofy shit like beer-bongs weren’t doing the trick, so we were just doing chugging competitions out of plastic gallon milk jugs. Ever drink an entire gallon of beer all at once?”

Tom chuckles. “It’s been a while.”

“It’s disgusting. Especially when you don’t even wash out the milk. Anyway, that’s the last thing I remember. The rest of it is fragments. I remember some time later — I have no idea

how late it was. I was leaning up against a radiator, raving about something. I have no idea what. There was a circle of kids around me, just watching. I don't know what I was going on about. Gary said that it was vicious and miserable, but that it was so incomprehensible that no one was taking any offense. That they were just kind of dumbfounded — all in a circle around me, just watching me going through a total meltdown right in front of them. I don't have any idea. What I do remember is at one point, someone says: 'Dude, look at your arms.' I'd been leaning against this radiator, right? Boiling hot. And I was totally impervious. I pulled my arms up to look at them and left two huge swaths of skin behind."

"Ouch."

"You said it. Of course, I couldn't feel a thing at the time. Flesh burning off my bones and I had no idea."

"Did they take you to the infirmary?"

"No. Maybe they tried to, but if they did, I didn't go. The next thing I remember is being outside in the snow. Yeah, it snows at UMA — not much, but it snows. Anyway, I was stumbling through the snow — on the way back to my dorm room, I assume — crying and puking and bleeding, all at the same time, while I was stumbling along. Even my nose was running. That's why I remember the moment, I think; because I was suddenly aware that I was emitting every possible bodily liquid from every orifice, and I remember thinking: this is as bad as it gets."

"And was it?"

Dennis hesitates, flipping quickly through a number of incidents in his mind. "More or less. That was pretty bad."

Tom nods.

“I don’t think I pissed myself, though.”

“So. A group session. Competition drinking.”

“If even. Pretty much for its own sake. A rite of some sort, maybe. It being bid night and all. But from what I recall, Tom, it was more a matter of having six kegs of cheap lager to dispose of. Waste not, want not.”

Tom grunts half a laugh in reply, not particularly amused. “Did you ever try faking it?” asks Tom.

“Huh?”

“Faking drinking.”

Dennis’ brow furrows.

“In a situation like that,” Tom continues. “Are you trying to erase yourself, or are you simply playing along with the group dynamic?”

“Ah,” says Dennis. “I understand. Um — a bit of both, that time, from what I recall. But I wasn’t generally a terribly depressed kid. Sure there’s pressure in college — the stress of a new environment, trying to define who you are and all that — but it wasn’t like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. I was more socially awkward than someone like Gary, say, but I was generally a fairly happy teenager. But I know what you mean — I’ve gone through phases where that wasn’t the case — where it was more about being really driven to, I don’t know, turn the brain off. So yeah, I’d say in college it was peer pressure as much as anything else. But what exactly do you mean by ‘faking drinking’?”

Tom leans forward. “Just a little trick that can come in handy in a situation like that. And by the way, that’s an important and under-appreciated part of what therapy, or counseling, is: not necessarily grandiose resolutions of childhood traumas or what-have-you, but just little

tricks. For example, in a situation like the one that you described in your friend's room: to lift the bottle and appear to take a great big swig, but simply not. Or: to be circulating around a party with a vodka tonic in your hand, when in fact there's nothing in the glass but club soda and a bit of lime. It can work quite well. Even when one's being tasked with gulping down a gallon of beer: one can take a few swallows and choke and laugh. And not finish — and pass it on to someone else, laughing about one's own inadequacy. It's all a big joke among good fellows. Right? 'What's wrong, Dennis? Can't hold your liquor?' Laughter ensues. Yes? Because it's not the successful accomplishment of the task that's required in a group situation like that; it's simply the willingness to participate in the ritual. It's a gesture of accommodation. Which is why even failure to complete the task, after what appears to be an earnest attempt, is usually met with acceptance, claps on the back, some good-spirited teasing perhaps. They don't actually want what they're asking you for. They want acknowledgement, and the gesture suffices. If you refuse to play along, they feel criticized. If you don't want to antagonize them, you can offer them anything instead. Club soda. Pantomime. They'll be perfectly satisfied."

Dennis' eyes have begun to gleam hungrily. He smells a score. "Like the dog and the cardboard."

"Yes!" Tom beams.

Dennis chews on this for a moment. He wants to formulate his objection carefully, not just belch it out. Tom's not lightly to be crossed. Not because Tom's testy; he's clearly one of the more temperate people Dennis could ever have the pleasure of meeting. Simply because he's clever. Better: bright. Actually wise, even, thinks Dennis. And that's a rarity. You can always score conversational points, if you're clever, even against someone else who's clever. But there's a price. You waste an opportunity. One that's not common.

So Dennis proceeds haltingly — abashedly, almost, but proceeds — compulsively, almost — like a good-time Charlie closing in on closing time who knows better but nevertheless slurs apologetically to the barkeep *Well, perhaps just one more ...*

“Like you did,” says Dennis. “With the cardboard. To shut up the yapping dog.” He keeps his sentences short: when sodden Charlie’s mouth attempts overly complicated discourse, at the end of an evening, it gives him away.

“Precisely,” chirps Tom. “I’ve always wanted to try tossing him a bag of sand, but I didn’t want to dirty the neighbor’s balcony.” Tom grins.

And what’s Tom in this exchange? The barkeep? The beer? The fellow upon whose sleeve Charlie accidentally sloshes a bit of beer? Or the unlucky stranger who steps off the curb in front of Charlie’s car as he’s driving home with one eye closed?

Charlie closes his eyes, takes a sniff and grins woozily to no one in particular. “That’s a little bit disingenuous, though, isn’t it?” says Dennis.

Tom knits his brow, thinks. After a moment, he sighs. He hears the car coming but steps off the curb anyway. Whatever Tom might be, he’s no bad sport. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Sort of treating people like dogs,” says Dennis, trying very hard to make it sound like a question.

Good-time Charlie feels a bump in the road, but when he re-focuses on the street, no obstacles swim in his vision; there’s just Steely Dan blaring on the radio and green lights as far as he can see.

Tom makes as if to speak but falls silent. But it’s only his voice that’s quiet; the gears in his brain are whirring audibly. Dennis has won the point, but Tom’s no sore loser. Quite the

opposite: like any good teacher or good counselor — both rarer than radium — Tom's pleasure lies as much (if not more) in learning as in teaching.

Dennis looks at the clock. "Should we pick this up next week?" Charlie looking in his rear-view mirror and seeing nothing in particular.

Tom nods. Pensive. Smiling. Sort of.

Dogs.

* * *

The following Wednesday, Dennis is back in Tom's home-office, a bit less sugar-crashed than the week before and sipping from not a demitasse of coffee but a cup of green tea. "Do you drink tea often?" Tom had asked. "It's very nice. It's not as sharp a high as coffee, but not as severe a come-down, either. It seems to last a little longer and be a little smoother. And green tea has all sorts of added benefits: anti-carcinogens, lowers cholesterol, suppresses appetite. Some say it's even good for your teeth. Not bad, for a stimulant drug."

By now, they've settled into their chairs. "So where were we?" Dennis begins. "Boozing and binging in college?"

Tom nods. "May I ask you something about that?"

"Of course."

"Is it still like that?"

"What, varsity life? Interesting question. Yes and no. It's a lot less *Animal House* than it used to be. Of course, it's been a while since I was there personally, but I know what I know from research, focus-grouping and the like, so I think it's pretty safe to say. It's more

sophisticated now. The clothes, the cars, the toys. It's not so much about pigging out on pizza and beer today. It's cigar bars and apple martinis. Hummers, satellite radio and portable DVD players. They spend like nobody's business. I don't know how they do it. Well, that's not entirely accurate; I know exactly how they do it. This generation spends its parents' money more than any previous. It's the first generation in American history that's *less* well-off than its parents were. But no, when I was in college, I didn't have all that swag, and I still had to work in college to make ends meet."

"I'm sorry," says Tom. "I meant it in a more personal sense. Is it still like that for you?"

"Ah," says Dennis. He's relieved to be able to say, with a moderate degree of honesty, that things today are different for him. "No. Barely. Sometimes; I won't lie. But not nearly as often. Hardly ever anymore. And never as severe as it was at UMA. That was a pretty toxic environment. It's just what we did there. It's what everyone did."

"Everyone *you* knew."

"Touché. I fell in with a certain crowd. But the binging and boozing with the Kappas — that didn't bother me so much then. I'm not sure it does now. I mean, 18-year-old boys, come on. It's what you do. It's having a lust for life. I'm not sure I'd want to be a teenage kid who didn't have that fire in the belly. It might be ugly sometimes, but it's drive."

"Better than being a milquetoast," Tom added helpfully.

"A who?"

"Milquetoast. A delightful term. Someone who's timid, passive, weak-willed. Like a soggy bit of toast after it's been dipped in a cup of milk."

"That's a real dictionary word?"

"Yes."

“I’m going to have to remember that. Anyway, yes: if you’re an 18-year-old boy and you’re not a voracious wolf, you’re probably running a pretty high risk of being a milquetoast. Don’t you think?”

Tom does, in fact, pause to think. “Perhaps. But you’re presenting very stark alternatives, and I wonder if you aren’t posing a false dichotomy.”

Dennis snorts. “You think the world isn’t black and white to an 18-year-old boy?”

“Touché.” The two men take a moment to digest. “But you said it’s not like that anymore. That you’re not now the ‘voracious wolf’ you once might have been. Did you just grow out of it? If it wasn’t second thoughts about the, ah, Kappa lifestyle, let’s call it, then what was it?”

Dennis barks a laugh. “Ha! That’s easy. It was Wal-Mart.”

Tom raises his eyebrows over steepled fingers.

* * *

Alan Dougherty — Dennis’ father — had done well in his Worcester legal practice and, while he wasn’t wealthy, had made his family what we’d call, in our class-terrified society, “upper-middle.” Alan didn’t spoil his son, but neither was Dennis required to pay his own tuition or cover his own cost of living while enrolled at UMA. This isn’t to say that Dennis didn’t work during school. He did, taking a part-time job about halfway through his college career, as much to augment his expenditures as to cover them. Not that those expenditures were anything unusual; Dennis’ lifestyle, despite Tom’s caveat about “everyone *you* knew,” was fairly standard. There had been a lawyer, yes, but only one, and she’d been retained to handle a mere

reckless-driving charge; Dennis had come close to but hadn't blown a DUI. The wreck set him back a fair bit and all at once, but it was The Lifestyle that, over the course of his time at UMA, accounted for the larger share. More than the expensive singularities, it was The Lifestyle — clubbing in Richmond, high-flying party weekends in Northern Virginia with Two's big-spending parents, plus of course the daily drain of going out, eating out, movies, bars, parties, beer kitties, clothes, toys, phone, computer upgrades, video games, dates, drinks you didn't drink, meals you didn't eat — that eventually compelled Dennis to find work, if only to cover his credit card interest payments. It was mid-year when he went looking for one, only to find that the standard college-student job banks around town — the bars and restaurants, the telemarketing and transcription stockyards — were full. Wal-Mart, however, out in the Winterville suburbs, was always hiring. The pay wasn't stellar, but it was better than at any of the fast-food joints clustered around the Fernglen shopping center at which Wal-Mart, along with a Best Buy (not hiring) and the UA Cinemas Fernglen 12 (also not hiring), was an anchor tenant.

Dennis was immediately assigned to join three other entry-level Customer Satisfaction Technicians — two other UMA students in the same boat as Dennis and one high-school graduate — on Candy Display Detail (CDD). Now, Wal-Mart is famous for its displays of absurdly low-priced made-in-China knock-offs: microwave ovens for \$15, portable stereos for \$9. The customer comes in and is immediately impressed. *Wow! This place is great. It must be true, what the sign says out front: Lowest Prices ALWAYS.* And since you can get the cheapest Whatever for a song, it never hurts to look at the slightly higher-quality Whatevers located conveniently nearby. And these, surprise surprise, are priced similarly to, and sometimes slightly higher than, the identical Whatever elsewhere around town. But since they start at such low prices, these name-brand Whatevers must be a better deal, no?

At any rate, it wasn't these displays to which Dennis was assigned, but to an equally important example of tactical product presentation: the giant bins of bulk-priced candy that lined up along the front of the store like a phalanx, strategically placed to interrupt every major thoroughfare of entry into or egress from the store. A tough neighborhood has its hooded touts who emerge from every corner mumbling "yaaright?" and "hook you up," and an ex-addict unluckily wandering through such a neighborhood would have to be lucky indeed to run such a gamut without stopping to make a purchase. The sugar addict passing through Wal-Mart is in a similar position, forced literally to bob and weave through towering mounds of Mounds and Butterfingers, Snickers Bars and Snickers Bits, Jolly Rancher lozenges and jelly beans and sticks and twists and rolls, Reese's chocolate-and-peanut-butter formula in every permutation that modern food engineering can devise — not to mention all of the shamefully inedible generic candy items in which barely any attempt is made to alter processed sugar from its native form: flavored sugar powder, marshmallow slabs, candy corn in two-pound bags.

Dennis had spent enough time in a college town to know the difference between the Kroger beer-and-wine aisle and the hard-knock liquor stores where Beast Ice was top-shelf and malt-liquor 40s represented, ounce for ounce, the most efficient dollar-to-alcohol ratio. If you wanted to see college girls selecting a fine \$11 bottle of Yellowtail Chardonnay for a special date weekend, you went to Kroger. If you wanted to see where it was bought in bulk, you went to the scary neighborhood where people stared hard at you, to the store where even buying cigarettes felt illicit. When it came to sugar, Dennis discovered, that store was Wal-Mart. He had hardly ever been into a Wal-Mart before, except a few times to buy a video game in the middle of the night. Being on the CDD, however, opened his eyes. The "impulse item" displays in the check-out lines at Kroger were precisely and merely that: the place where a non-serious user, a non-

addict, could buy an overpriced ounce or two of sugar as an afterthought, as a reward for having properly stocked up on compressed grains and toilet paper, as a little bump to tide him through the drive home and dinner preparation. They weren't for serious consumers. Serious consumers wouldn't pay Kroger's 30% markup plus Hershey Corp.'s 50% markup on a sugar delivery device when a similar one could be had at Wal-Mart for half the price.

And that was Dennis' job. To serve the serious consumers of sugar. He didn't have to be the tout; the display was its own tout, the result of millions of dollars of market research, psychological analysis, consumer observation, graphic design, product display and a lifetime of advertising. The display didn't need Dennis to sell it; it was a HAL-9000, a machine of human design infinitely superior in intelligence to that of its designers. The display needed Dennis merely to oil its gears, to replenish it, to bend it back into shape when giant arms slung with sacks of fat knocked or bent its edges, to reposition it when the motorized wheelchairs of the morbidly obese knocked it out of place. And that's what Dennis did, for twenty hours a week, at entirely various hours of the day and night.

This isn't to say that a little face-to-face or hand-to-hand doesn't have its place, that a little customer interaction doesn't help to make the sale, as Dennis had learned at a training session early on. That it doesn't at least help the customer to have a pleasant and more entertaining time during their shopping adventure. It does, and there were little rewards for that: stars, stickers, titles, levels of titles, even the occasional 25-cent-per-hour raise. Customer interaction is extremely important, the trainer had said. It was the responsibility of a CST (Customer Service Technician), Dennis had learned, to engineer the experience of the Wal-Mart shopper. It was in his power. And, the trainer reminded them, not one to be sniffed at. It was an awesome power, potentially. Awesome for Wal-Mart, sure; if people equate *Wal-Mart* with *fun*

and *nice*, it has an effect; if they do the opposite, it has the opposite effect. But it could be an awesome power, Dennis learned, for the customer as well, in their personal life and on a moral plane. Maybe a certain shopper was having a bad day, the trainer pointed out. Maybe one had been abandoned by his wife, or another by her children. Maybe one had had a fight with her boss; maybe one's Social Security was tied up in red tape and she was facing eviction. Maybe one's kids were crying for food. Maybe one was contemplating suicide. We've all experienced it, the trainer said: a kind word from a stranger — a friendly *Hello, how are you, are you finding what you need?* — can make the difference, can reassure someone who thinks that the whole world's against them, can help them make it through another day. The fact that human kindness makes for good sales strategy doesn't make it not human kindness. And this, the trainer noted, was a public-sector job, as much as that of any teacher, priest or social worker. A CST came into contact with the general public every day — with more people, probably, and more often even than a teacher or a priest. A minor interaction, to be sure: a second, a hello, a smile.

The trainer's speech started to take on King-James cadences. "But isn't that usually all it takes?" he pleaded. The CSTs nodded in unison. Dennis did too. It was more like a religious revival than an employee training session, and Dennis was feeling the movement of the spirit. And it was true, too, what the trainer was saying. It was manipulative profit-seeking horseshit, sure. But it was true, too. "Priests lecture, teachers lecture, parents lecture. But how often do we just want a smile? How often has it been your own experience that just a smile and a kind word was worth a hundred lectures?" The employee audience responded warmly, loudly, having to work now to repress their emotion. All that teaching, all that talk. It was all well-intentioned, but where was the love? "And do we live in such a time," the trainer said, his voice rising to a prophetic pitch, "— do we live in such days that we can no longer use the word *love* without

being ironic?” The employee audience was reaching its boiling point. “What we call *customers* — these are our *neighbors* who are coming through these doors. And aren’t we supposed to love our neighbor? Isn’t that what everyone believes, regardless of their creed or code? Isn’t that what we all — Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, even atheists — say? Love your neighbor? So don’t be afraid. Show a little love. Say *Hi, How are you today? Are you finding what you’re looking for? A cork board? That’d be in Home Office. Can I walk you there? That’s a nice shirt. Sure is hot! Hope we get some rain.* Don’t *show* interest; *have* it. Have a little interest in your fellow man. Right?” One new employee muttered a half-stifled *Hallelujah*. Ironically? “*Look* at who you’re talking to; *think* about what you see. Are they wearing a t-shirt with a slogan? They want you to comment on it. Are they dressed up? Did they do their hair? Do they look tired or energetic? Relaxed or in a hurry? Do they seem to want to chat? Chat. Do they want help? Help. Do they want to show off how much they already know about this product? Let them. The people that you meet are covered from head to toe in *Hello My Name Is* stickers. Read the stickers and respond accordingly. They want you to. Try it and see they don’t go away thinking *What a nice guy! He was so polite. Or: He was cool. Or: He was very sociable. Or: He didn’t waste my time.* Try it and see if they don’t open up like flowers. Remember: this isn’t a store. This is Main Street. And most people aren’t here to shop. They’re here to socialize, to interact, to see a friendly face, to be recognized, to be reminded that they belong, that they’re part of the social fabric, that they’re not invisible. Shopping is just the excuse, the side-effect. Don’t let your neighbors be invisible. *See* them.”

Twenty newly-hired CST heads bobbed vigorously. This was the best thing they’d ever heard. This wasn’t just a job. This was caring for the social fabric, being the glue that preserved the Union. They weren’t clerks here to move product; they were priests here to enrich human

lives, evangelists here to spread the Good News. They were here to make friends; there was a multibillion-dollar marketing industry that would take care of making sales.

And it did. All Dennis had to do, for twenty hours scattered between a week's binging and philandering and attending the occasional class, was to stand up front, be pleasant, make small talk, keep the candy bins piled high with brightly colored treasures and only occasionally clean up a mess when a careless dimpled elbow or errant wheelchair handle knocked confections to the floor. It was a pleasant job and, seeing as Dennis had chosen Sociology as his major, a fascinating one. Outside of their homes (where Americans were spending more and more of their time), retail establishments were by far the principal location of Americans in the national landscape, and Wal-Mart was by far the best-populated among retail establishments, so this, Dennis thought to himself, this was as representative a data set — no, better — than any of the ones used in his fusty 80s textbooks. America wasn't *Baywatch*; it wasn't anorexic starlets flouncing up and down Southern California beaches and performing fake CPR on suspiciously handsome bad swimmers in front of a phalanx of TV cameras and rubberneckers. America wasn't *Once Upon a Time In the West*, not even once upon a time in the west; it wasn't dusty streets snaking through hard-knock wood-frame towns where leather-faced aw-shucking cross-plains cattle drivers stopped to nurse a whiskey, play a hand of cards and take a woman for the night. It wasn't 1950s small towns with spreading oaks and quiet county courthouses where Trumanesque citizens, folks with whom bucks stopped, pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. It wasn't even shopping malls: it was still the middle-nineties when Dennis was conducting his informal study, so malls hadn't quite finished passing on into their twilight as day-care centers where parents could safely deposit their children for an afternoon, but Dennis didn't know anyone who went to the mall except out of nostalgia or as a joke. America wasn't any of those

places or faces, Dennis realized, as much as it wanted to think it was — as hungrily as it wolfed down such self-enchanted tales at home on television or, occasionally still, at cineplexes like the UA Fernglen 12 across the parking lot from Wal-Mart. No: in 1995, people did still leave their houses, for the most part, to socialize and shop, but it was to islands of asphalt surrounded by big-box retailers and fast-food joints that they navigated. America was Fernglen Shopping Center, was Blank Shopping Center (or, if you were in a slightly more “upper” middle-class neighborhood, The Shoppes At Blank), where Blank could equal anything as long as it sounded pastoral (Glendale, Glenlake, Lakewood, Beechwood, Peachwood, Beachcliff, Briarcliff) or sophisticated (The Galleria, The Esplanade, The Boardwalk, Midtown, Five Points, Union Station).

The names didn't matter. No one thought they did; no one thought about them at all. They were just placeholders, numbers expressed as proper nouns. Even the stores' names didn't matter. No one was bothered by the fact that Best Buy was as ridiculously hackneyed a name as Downy fabric softener or Ivory soap. It didn't matter. 1995 was long past the point where people took postmodern pleasure in mocking mid-century advertising literalism. It was the lifestyle associations that mattered, and the name that they were associated with was nothing but a handle, an icon, an empty plastic bucket. *Coke* could just as easily have been — was, in fact — *Pepsi*, *Snickers* *Baby Ruth*, *McDonald's* *Burger King*, *Popeyes Church's* *KFC*. Even Dennis' own employer's name was merely an unfortunate historical accident that no one paid attention to. It didn't matter if the founder's name was or wasn't Walton any more than it mattered that that long-dead man's long-dead company had once proudly wrapped its stores in banners that read “100% Made In America.” Buying American was a lifestyle myth once profitable to market to; no longer. Buying at *Chinese Prices Always* took its place. One day it too would die. It

wouldn't matter if the sign out front said Walton's Five-and-Ten or Shanghai Mart or Accenture Global Tradeplace LLC; the candy bins would always be up front. Across the parking lot, the Fernglen or Glenlake or Lakewood 12 would keep shoveling out ever-larger grocery bags of popcorn and hogsheads of fountain soda and keep tearing out seats to accommodate the wheelchairs of those whose ankles couldn't bear their body weight; on every corner, the McTaco Burger Churches would keep slinging ever-larger quantities of ever-cheaper salt-and-sugar delivery devices and keep adding additional drive-through windows for its ever-growing base of customers who were too ashamed to, or physically incapable of, getting out of their cars.

* * *

Restless, Tom has again risen from his chair and retrieved a large volume from a bookshelf. He's flipping through it.

"Had enough?" says Dennis.

"Just about," jokes Tom.

Dennis is ready to return the tease. "So what to the gods in your Enlightenment pantheon have to say about all that? Does the good Dr. Johnson care to weigh in?"

"Weigh in indeed. Johnson was a bit of a glutton himself, so he's perhaps not the best source to turn to for guidance on that score. But Jefferson was as lean as Lincoln, and I recall him saying something very amusing about the relationship between the English national character and its diet. Ah, here it is: a letter to Abigail Adams. Just a moment." As usual, Tom glances over the passage before reading it aloud. "I think you'll like this. 'I fancy it must be the quantity of animal food eaten by the English which renders their character insusceptible of

civilization. I suspect it is in their kitchens, and not in their churches that their reformation must be worked.”

“Ha! Beef-eaters?”

“Notorious,” says Tom. “And lamb.”

“So what’s the conclusion? That Americans are — what was the phrase? Incapable of civilization? Because of beer and burgers?”

Tom glances at the clock and, appearing to change the subject, says: “We’ve got another twenty minutes. Would you like to get some fresh air?”

“Love to. Need to.”

Five minutes later, the two men are strolling alongside a canal in the cool Venice evening. Bougainvillea as thick as kudzu grows up and over houses, propagates along backyard fences and tumbles down to caress the face of the water in the canal. The water is still and dark and utterly transparent. It doesn’t flow east or west; it merely pulsates slightly from the action of distant waves. Barnacles along its mossy sides crackle faintly like breakfast cereal in milk. A motorboat putters slowly by, well below the no-wake speed limit. A jogger passes, whisking her baby down the sidewalk in a sleek athletic stroller tricked out with bicycle tires. She nods and smiles to Tom and Dennis as she hustles past. Then another jogger passes, then a couple, then an entire rollerblading family, the kids armored from head to toe in multicolored protective gear like psychedelic riot police. Tom casts an inquiring sidelong glance at Dennis; Dennis merely shrugs. But as they round the corner onto the main drag, a street packed with tanned and toned Venetians and lined with juice joints, health clubs, sporting goods, athletic wear and organic markets, the spectacle of health and wellness becomes something requiring comment.

“So what do you think?” ventures Tom. “Are Americans incapable of civilization?”

“You know what I think,” says Dennis. “No one would ever think that if all they knew of America was Los Angeles. I still don’t know what to make of it. It’s like a different country. But at the same time, it’s 100% American. It’s like when America dreams about itself, it’s this: tan, healthy, summery blonde, slim, sipping juice, old folks enjoying their retirement, picking lemons from a tree in their garden, walking on the beach, watching the sunset. All the waitresses are pretty; all the cops are handsome. I know, not everywhere. But here in a neighborhood like Venice, for example. And that’s what I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?”

“Food and wealth. Traditionally, obesity and wealth go hand in hand. Kings are always portrayed as big fat bastards chomping on a turkey leg. Industrialists were always bursting the gold buttons on their three-piece suits. Hell, we even call them ‘fat cats.’ But here it’s precisely backwards. Here in a tony place like this, everyone’s fit as a fiddle. Or on the streets of Manhattan. But then you get out in the run-of-the-mill suburbs, and everyone’s overweight. And then you get out in the little rural towns, or the inner-city ghettos, and it’s even worse. Morbid obesity everywhere.”

Tom thinks. “Eating disorders are illnesses, Dennis. Wealthy people have the means to get treatment.”

“I guess. But what about the fact that for the price of one of these organic guavas,” Dennis says as he gestures to a display as they walk past, “you could get two regular cheeseburgers, fries and a medium Coke?”

“But that’s just it,” says Tom. “When food is scarce, obesity is a sign of wealth.”

“And when organic guavas are scarce — and crystals and hempware ...”

“Precisely.” Dennis doesn’t respond, instead furrowing his brow in thought. “It’s very

important to distinguish between supply and demand. Not just when we're trying to understand society; on a personal level, just as much. What we personally demand, consciously or not, versus what's foisted on us. But there's no question that such distinctions can be very difficult."

"You can say that again."

Circle 4: Hoarding & Wasting

“Hail Internet, lord and master! Hail Internet, light of nations, first among all things evolved and made! Basta samba, rakafili makaraka! Rangding crando, pingdong kingong gakaraka!”

Christ it’s fun to speak in tongues, thinks Dennis. You can see why these crazy bastards do it.

“Yes, I will!” shouts Dennis, one hand pressed to the screen of his laptop. He’s in his pajamas. His hair is sticking straight up, fleeing his skull as if electrically charged. Half-smoked herbal cigarettes and fully-smoked Camels jiggle like maggots in the ashtray as he pounds his desk with his free hand.

It’s Saturday! And surfing the internet is way better than cartoons.

“Al’aqua hallegelle quillingualla! Yes, Jerry! I SEE the eyes of Jesus. I WILL make my seed vow. I WILL harvest it a thousandfold!”

Self-entertainment comes naturally to Dennis, an only child.

Someone in a neighboring apartment raps tartly on the wall. There’s no accompanying “Keep it down in there!” or “Hey, wassamatta witchu?”; this place is too — we’re too — civilized for that. This is a yuppie apartment building in Los Angeles in our modern, civilized, psychologically mature, politically progressive, punctiliously polite era, not some 70s Archie Bunker tenement in Queens. *Rapum sapientus satus est*: a rap to the wise suffices. People don’t yell.

Granted: Dennis yells. But only when he's enraptured, in Rapture, suffused with The Spirit. "Sorry," he mutters, and turns his attention back to his computer. Dennis had been "working" (read: internet shopping, product-researching, price comparing) all morning and half of the afternoon when a particularly delicious bit of spam had come pinging into his e-mail inbox. "Subject: FINANCAIL TRUOBLES DISAPPAER!" The computers that generate junk-mail are programmed automatically to chop and garble (to make Spam, ironically) out of the titles of junk e-mails in an attempt to bypass junk-mail filters. It doesn't work, but that doesn't stop them. Junk mail is essentially free to generate, and if only 5% of the spam gets read, and only 5% of that gets acted on, they'll still make money. The audience is out there; all you have to do is reach it. At the moment, unfortunately, that audience is Dennis. The spam had a link directing him to the website of an internet-evangelist ministry, and it's that website (in addition to Dennis' general fervor about The Miracle of Internet Shopping, but more about that later) that has got Dennis speaking in tongues. He's been surfing the site for a few minutes. Other open websites and programs wait patiently in the background for Dennis to finish wasting time and get back to work.

Upon entering the electric church, Dennis had been greeted by a headshot of a smiling, grandfatherly man wearing a nice suit: Jerry Kingfisher, internet-evangelist, benevolent webhost and your humble-grateful Blessed-In-Christ conduit, should you choose to Help Him Help You to health and wealth in this life and the next. The pages that followed were about how you can't reap a harvest if you don't plant a seed, about how Jesus loves you and wants to help, how He needs to know you're ready. That was all prologue. The page that Dennis has his hand pressed up against now — this is the money shot. The page sports three large images: a life-size photograph of a hand, a blurry image of Jesus' face, and a big green button beneath that says

YES. In the corner of the screen, there's a little thumbnail version of the benevolent Jerry headshot. A helpful instructional talk bubble emanates from Jerry's head: "1. Place your HAND on mine. Electronic communication enables our ENERGIES to connect as sure as if we were TOGETHER in my church right now. 2: Look into the eyes of Jesus for 30 SECONDS. Focus on the FOUR DOTS. 3: Close your eyes. You will see Jesus in your mind's eye. This helps you focus on Him. 4: LISTEN! Jesus has a message JUST FOR YOU!"

Three sharp raps on the door break the spell. "Frick," Dennis mutters to himself, "I'm quiet already." He's not ideally attired or groomed to receive company, but he doesn't mind so much. He's never met any of his neighbors, and he'd like to. He's curious. He has a vague sense that they're attractive, professional, single women about his age. Seems that they all are, here in Paradise. More or less. There's certainly a higher concentration of women like that here than in other places Dennis has lived over the course of his life-long westward trek — almost as if there were a current of single, pretty, professional women flowing west, a complex river system fanning in from every city, town and village of America, its waters eddying around pretty women, gently loosing them from local streambeds and drawing them west, its waters whispering *west* as it floats them through the Adirondacks and across the Midwest plains, the river augmented here and there by tributaries, creeks and streams of more, more pretty women, single, young, professional, that's the mantra, west, the river bending now and then to wash around a city, Topeka, Dallas, Denver, the river becoming turbulent as it struggles up the Rockies' jagged eastern face, then spreading smooth and fast and doubly deep as it makes the final crossing through Nevada, now a deadly flood of women thundering toward a gap in the Sierra Nevada mountains, focused and compressed as it slams into Death Valley and breaks free

of the other side to finally bear down on Southern California like a tsunami, a mile-high roiling wall of chemistry and flesh, designer eyes and teeth and strappy sandals.

There's no one at the door. "Goddammit," Dennis says. There's no point in calling the property management office; he'll just get the answering service again. And it was probably just an annoyed neighbor who knocked and then retreated to the anonymous security of her apartment. And this isn't how he wants to meet one of his single, pretty, professional neighbors anyway: as Obnoxious Shouting Guy. In his pajamas with his hair aloft. Who interrupted the Single, Pretty, Professional woman's yoga. Who was probably shouting about some Saturday afternoon football game.

Dennis slippers back to his desk and reaches for a cigarette. His hand pauses above the two boxes sitting side by side, one with the familiar image of a camel and some pyramids (and isn't there supposed to be some optical illusion when you stare into the patterns of the camel fur?), the other sage green and blank except for some writing and a picture of some twigs. Rosemary? Oregano? "Regular or unleaded?" He takes a regular, sits, absentmindedly clicks an X that casts Jerry Kingfisher's plaintive ministry back into the boundless void of the internet and settles back down to work. He's already accomplished quite a bit thus far this sunny (so it would appear, through half-closed blinds) Saturday. From nine to noon, more or less, was taking care of introductory business. Firing up a podcast of the morning news. Which chattered in the background as he put some coffee on. Checking e-mail. Cleaning his inbox of the coating of spam that trickles in overnight, all night, a junk missive every few minutes pleading with him not just to Save Big on generic Viagra from our Online Pharmacy, not just to Keep his Man's Hose Steel or Make his Man-pole Hit the Ceiling, not just to Pleasure Her all night or Make her Worship his Rod, not just to Banish Lonely Nights or Remember the Days when his Wife called

him a Stallion — not just to Refresh his Life in every imaginable way with Super Drugs, to Stay Awake All Night or Sleep Like a Baby, but also to Refinance his Mortgage at Record-Low Rates, to Get \$250,000 Life Insurance for Pennies a day, to Download 1000s of MP3s 100% Free, to Earn his Nursing/Criminal Justice/Realtor's Degree Today, to Get Financial Aid, to Lose Weight Fast, to See Who Has a Crush on him, to Chat Free with Christian Singles, to Experience the Amazing Snuggie Blanket As Seen On TV, to Make his Business Recession-Proof, to Earn Big Bucks from the comfort of his Home, to Protect his Family, to call now to verify his order, to send his username and password, to confirm his account information at Reputable Bank by going to a URL in Nigeria, to act now to receive the free Iphone/Macbook/Playstation that he's won, *et cetera, et cetera*. Fifty junk mails, easy, silt up over the course of every night. The spam filter catches some; others not. They're usually worth going through, if only because of the occasional pearly gem glittering in a mound of repetitive dog-shit: Jerry Kingfisher's heartfelt attempt to reach out and touch his energy, for example. Then after the junk mail there's the humor-mail, the group-list mail, the allegedly funny or interesting or alarming items that are forwarded from friends to friends to friends to friends to friends in an ever-expanding blossoming of garbage: the internet scams, the kid with cancer who'll die any day but who's been collecting e-mails for over a dozen years, the BILLION DOLLARS that Bill Gates will contribute (if you forward this to all your friends) to some worthy cause that American taxpayers are too cheap to pay for, the BAD LUCK that will follow you to your grave if you don't forward something else, the breathless THIS REALLY WORKS!!! letters, the letters whose subject lines scream out DON'T DELETE!!!, the amazing e-mails that can read your mind — DON'T SCROLL DOWN until you read the whole thing!!! — the knee-melting descriptions of how PRAYERS CURE the little boy with cancer (who's still soliciting e-mail addresses), the outraged denunciations of EVOLUTION

or CREATIONISM poisoning our schools, the outraged denunciations of country-hating LIBERALS or freedom-hating CONSERVATIVES, of the chardonnay-swilling elitist LEFT, of the Bible-beating Christian RIGHT, the funny amateur videos on YouTube of any and everything you can imagine, of dogs eating sprinkler heads, of cats stuffed into flower pots, of children being run over by cars, the infinity of the human comedy, the internet.

Which takes a while. Dennis doesn't always keep up with all of it, but he tries to. It's important to keep your finger on the country's pulse.

But this is nothing, these first two or three hours of each day, at home or at the office, that Dennis (like so many other Americans) spends browsing, clicking, cleaning, communicating, communing with his countrymen: yes to this and no to that, save this and spam that, forward X with cheers or Y with horror, decry A or B for destroying our Republic, Blue or Red, Rams or Raiders, tax or spend — this is prologue, stretching, mental yoga, second-nature, background noise, warm-up for the day. Not important, nothing to see here, maintain the flow of traffic. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain; this is merely the Sports Section of the American day.

The kitchen timer on the desk rings. Dennis grabs it and resets it for another hour. He keeps the timer on his desk to help him impose some sort of limit on his internet meanderings, but the trick's effectiveness is liable to the shortcoming of all attempts at self-imposed discipline: it's not much of a jail cell when you hold the keys. He'd begun the day with vague plans to Get Out of the House and Do Something Healthy that afternoon — a walk along the beach, or even just a walk around the block — but today the timer's doing little more than keeping him from second-order wastes of time.

So back to business, such as it is.

Let's be fair. Dennis has already made a decent dent in his to-do list for the day. There was the customary business to take care of, requiring little to no research. He replenished his stock of cigarettes online. That was quick; they have his credit card number and his shipping information, and all he had to do was click "repeat last order." He's no fool: he buys in bulk. Look at these poor bastards who can't admit they smoke, he likes to point out; they pay a premium for buying smokes one pack at a time. Can't even buy a carton. Only *real* smokers buy cartons, they rationalize. But buying by the carton would save them at least 5%, and that's assuming they bought it in a neighborhood store, with all the local taxes and overhead added on. Why pay a premium for the privilege of self-deception? It had taken a month or so, years ago, for Dennis to ferret out the online discount cigarette retailers — the ones with the *real* price breaks, the ones operating out of warehouses on Indian reservations, thus bypassing individual state's tobacco taxes (to the infinite consternation of those states' Attorneys General) — but once he had, he'd started saving \$5 or \$10 a carton, maybe more. Even with shipping costs added back in, that's nothing to sneeze at. And what's more, you can buy online a decent name-brand smoke for what you'd pay in a store for generic Secretary Smokes (the off-brand, semi-generic Menthol 100s Lights that secretaries invariably seem to smoke, tucked away in little fake-leather, snap-shut cigarette-pack cozies in their oversized baby-bags). Now *that*, Dennis had thought — that's the sign of a real smoker. Not the carton. The cozy. And plastic lighters.

And what about the fact that he buys in bulk? That's not runaway addition, Dennis tells himself. That's thrift. It's not as if he's buying into the shopaholic's vicious cycle, the corrosive logic of *It's On Sale!*, i.e.: *It's marked down, so buy it! Look how much you're saving!* No: he'd be smoking either way. Perhaps a little less at \$6 per pack; probably not. Just as dead and twice as broke.

After the smokes, there was other quotidian business. The ordering, for example, of another pair of chinos and a few more brightly colored button-down shirts — the business-casual uniform of the Angelino young professional class. Dennis wasn't quite middle-management, not just yet — there was still an organizational buffer between Dennis and the Congressman. A buffer or two. If there were more, Dennis didn't know about them, which was in itself an unsettling thought. No matter: the Banana Republic website, like Peace Pipe online, has his credit card and shipping info. And his waist, inseam, arm and neck. Not a problem. And, unlike the store downtown, the website pulls from warehouses that have clearance items Not Available In Stores. Dennis often doesn't like the fads that sweep the city from one season of the #1 hit TV show to the next. He finds himself, half-consciously, liking last year's fads. And lo: there online was the solid sage shirt that all the local stores have discontinued. And the burnt orange and periwinkle, solids all. Stripes and plaids are back this year; next year, presumably, they'll be clogging up the warehouses. Dennis knows the grass-is-greener drill: knows it, plays into it when it can't be helped and resents it when he can. Solid colored shirts are something he can damn well help. And these were 10% off.

At this point it was nearing afternoon, nearing now, and Dennis was moving into more speculative research territory. There had been the smokes and clothing acquisitions, punctuated by small forays into neighboring territory: a case of wine from an internet retailer in St. Helena, shoes analyzed and held for purchase at a later date, a new MP3 player compared against its alternatives — weighed, considered and ultimately relegated to his Wish List rather than his Shopping Cart — a fate which, over the next hour of browsing, befell a new cellphone, a new bread machine and a nifty little electrified tray that (supposedly) charges the batteries of any pocket electronic gizmo laid in it, automatically, wirelessly, magically. In each case,

specifications were researched and noted — mentally, though, and not on any spreadsheet (an analytical weapon reserved for hunting bigger game). Next on the docket had been the acquisition (or researching the acquisition, rather) of various upgrades for his car — the little roadster, aforementioned and still, alas, under warranty, thus requiring a bit of investigation into not simply the various pros and cons of upgrade X or Y: not merely whether first to upgrade the OEM CAI (original equipment manufacturer cold air intake), the exhaust, the sway bars or the springs — not only what horsepower increase would result from A vs. B (quantifiable variables, at least) vs. the handling improvements that C vs. D might yield (more subjective but arguably more pertinent, depending on one's driving style) — not just all of that but, with the car still under warranty, the extent to which each modification would jeopardize his warranty. It's not straightforward: there are categories of modifications determined by the manufacturer, and colors assigned to those categories, and potential complications assigned to those colors, and percentages assigned to those complications, and degrees of warranty-voidance assigned to those percentages. Does it all gives you a headache? Then you'll undoubtedly be more forgiving of Dennis for opening up a spreadsheet and his first micro-brew of the day a few minutes short of noon.

Dennis ended up placing no order for any automotive upgrade, but saved the spreadsheet for future reference. And, his work ethic relaxed by a second micro-brew, checked his spam folder, felt the prayerful pull of Jerry Kingfisher's blatant money-harvesting scam and — well, you know the rest. And now, at last, it's now again.

That's how they get you. Dennis has spent enough time working on the marketer's end of the equation to know as much. It's all about exposure. Purchase rates are low, regardless of the medium. People are suspicious. Even a fool and his money aren't easily parted. The profit's

in the percentages. If every 20th pitch is a sale, 19 brilliant pitches means you might as well have stayed in bed. It takes time, exposure, repetition. Casino, shoe store, television show, it's all the same. How long can you keep the butt in the chair at the blackjack table? How long can you keep the body browsing through the aisles? How long can you keep the eyes glued to the screen? Time's the make-or-break. It doesn't matter how astronomical your price-to-cost ratio is if you don't make the sale. Well, a high P2C ratio never hurts; there's nothing wrong with selling a 5-cent cup of coffee for \$2.50. But you've got to sell it. And the internet, Dennis knows, is — from a time perspective, from a body-in-store perspective — a retailer's wet dream. How difficult is it to keep a physical body in a physical store? How expensive? Everything's against the bricks-and-mortar retailer. It's physically uncomfortable for a human body to be out and on its feet. Bodies tire. Waste products from cell metabolism build up in muscle tissue. Legs ache. Contact lenses dry in eyes. How long can you keep a body there, comparing shoes or backpacks or gizmos A and B? Stomachs grumble; dopamine levels drop; irritation blossoms. The music tinkling on the PA system, extensively focus-grouped though it may be, will nevertheless aggravate a certain percentage of auditory systems. Or maybe only on a certain day. Psyches are tricky machines. One craves a social interaction with a friendly sales clerk; another wants to be left the fuck alone. And the same psyche can flip-flop based on time, situation, mood, whim or random chance. On top of all of this, and worst of all: it's public. Not home in one's familiar cave, but in an unfamiliar environment filled with perils and distractions, predators, dangers, surprises, opportunities: the awful, wonderful Out. Guards are up, psyches wary; little sealed vials of fight-or-flight neurotransmitters are distributed throughout the brain, vials ready to be cracked open on a millisecond's notice. It's a wonder that any bricks-and-mortar retailer ever sold a stick of gum.

But Home, though, ah! — there's no place like it — truly, socio-biologically, neurologically. It's a whole different shopping beast. Home has all the comforts that only home has: you can smoke, drink, work in your underpants, stroll around the virtual store with a gerbil wriggling in your rectum or listen to a Contemporary Christian radio station, whatever you like. Most importantly, you can *sit*: sit on your ass, sit in your familiar chair in a familiar, safe environment, gazing into a visual landscape that couldn't be more familiar, one you probably gaze into for hours every day if not all day every day, a visual delivery device that's increasingly the locus of everything that makes life worth living: the landscape where you work, where you play, where you socialize with your friends, where you get your education and your entertainment, where you post the photos of your children or puppies or trip to the south of France, your familiar, your partner, the alter-image of your personality in 1s and 0s, your computer. And online shopping is the Platonic Ideal of retailing. Interact with the store however you like. Take your time. Don't like the music? Poof, it's muted, or the soundtrack's changed. Just want the thumbnail photos? Here they are! Cursory information? Right here! Detailed specifications? Click! Professional reviews? Voila! Customer reviews? Yes! Review a product you own? Yes! Pricing and availability? In stock now? How many? Near you? Near somewhere else? Shipping time? To you? To store? Price comparisons? From how many (allegedly) different retailers? Feature comparison? Warranty information? Similar products? Alternatives? Sales rank? Customers who looked at this might also like what? Customers who looked at this eventually purchased what? Add to your shopping cart? Wish list? Mail your wish list to someone else? Share a link to this with someone else? Add a personal message?

The genius of the rodent water-bottle; that's the genius of internet retailing. The bottle hangs in the cage, nozzle down. A ball bearing in the nozzle keeps it from dripping. When

Jenny Gerbil's thirsty, she noses the nozzle and it gives her a sip. Yum. That's all: no hard-sell, no water-boarding flood. Would you like another sip? Yum. Take your time; I'm not going anywhere. Yum. As patient as an intravenous drip. Mmmm. As passive as the button that releases cocaine into the chimpanzee's bloodstream each time he taps it. Tap! Yum. Tap! Yum. Tap! Yum. Tap! Yum. Tap! You know how the experiment ends: the monkey taps the button until it dies. Yum.

Ergo the kitchen timer, for whatever good it does. Which Dennis absentmindedly has reset a few more times.

The stars are out. So much for a walk or a bike-ride or a short drive — perhaps the PCH out to Santa Barbara and back (a pleasantly rolling ocean-side drive with only moderately annoying traffic on a Saturday) or, better yet, State Highway 2 up into the Angeles National Forest, out to Big Pines and back. A deliciously curvaceous road. Brilliant driving; highly technical; sightsee there and you'll sail into or off a cliff, or into oncoming traffic, in a blink. So much for 2. It's not a road to be driven at night, not for pleasure. It's all right; there's always Sunday. I wonder, thinks Dennis, if I spend less time less time driving the Little Roadster than researching driving: scouring maps to find the best driving roads within 100 miles, spec'ing out potential mods and upgrades. Perhaps. Time isn't an infinite resource, sure. But if something's worth doing, it's worth doing well. There's a pleasure — an honor, a virtue — in doing something well. Even something small. "Aristotle" flits across Dennis' mind. A name from college-study days. The Aristotelian notion of The Good. Excellence. Striving for an ideal. Other images follow. Zen tea service. Archery. Flower arrangement. Small arts, but worth perfecting. Not for the purpose of achieving better outcomes. Not to hit more bull's-eyes or to make a more pleasant cup of tea. Not for products. For process. For practicing perfecting.

He opens a well-stocked spreadsheet and navigates to his favorite digital-camera-review website to see how the pixel-count-to-chip-size ratio of Canon's most recently released digicam compares to the Nikon, Sony and Panasonic models he's been tracking. The camera manufacturers tout pixel counts like automakers crow about horsepower, but they're misleading. Stats for soccer moms. It's all about ratios. Pixels-to-chip-size, power-to-weight. Dennis has an excellent digital camera and even snaps a photo now and then, but his model is a year old and there have been some interesting developments. After three more hours, six more micro-brews and a dozen more cigarettes, Dennis totters off sleep the sleep of the just, groggy but pleasantly exhausted from a long day's work.

* * *

"Internet shopping as a form of meditation," says Tom. "Interesting."

"I take it you're not buying it," Dennis replies. "No pun intended." It's the following Wednesday, back in Tom's home office. Dennis is animated, loose, slightly wild-eyed. The weather's been bizarre; the marine layer has been raking back and forth across the city. First it's sunny and burning hot over the Los Angeles basin, and the rising hot air pulls the cold fog-bank in from off the ocean; then the basin cools and the fog retreats. Back and forth, back and forth. When the inland temperatures abate or the off-shore waters warm a bit, the cycle will end, but for the moment, the cycle's so absurd that it seems like it could never end. On the drive to work, the weather changes from roiling Oregonian fog to brilliant Cabo-San-Lucas sun four times. When you pull into your parking garage, it's like docking in an underwater submarine pen. By the time you get upstairs and into your office, it's as sun-baked as the Sonora desert outside

again. It's as if Los Angeles has become geographically unhinged and is sliding 500 miles north and south and north again, every half hour. Fascinating, but a little crazy-making. "Please. It's what, OCD at best? Aristotelian virtue. Zen archery. It's just obsession, addiction. Total waste. It must make you crazy."

Tom smiles, intrigued and half-baffled. "Perhaps. I'm not sure I follow you, though."

Dennis is riffing, shooting wild, throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks. "As an educator. It must infuriate you."

"Buying things on the internet? Actually, it's done wonders for second-hand book —"

"Consumerism," Dennis interjects. "Materialism. Shopaholism. The American obsession with spending, buying, shopping, consumer debt, jet-skis, hamburgers, movies, video games, blue jeans, cosmetics, whatever. We spend a gazillion dollars on every imaginable piece of crap and then complain and whine and begrudge every measly penny we eke out for education, health care, research. Infrastructure. Job training. Courts, police. Anything that matters. 'Basic health care so a homeless person's cold doesn't become pneumonia? A little money for courts and cops so some of these millions of unopened Rape Kits gets checked against the files? Oh no! Can't have that. I've gotta have my Barca-lounger!'"

Tom is nodding, but in understanding more than in agreement. "Ah! Yes. I see."

"I mean, to see things like education get shortchanged. Surely it makes you angry. Or does nothing make you angry?"

Tom's grinning, but the flash in his eyes makes Dennis pause. "I get angry," Tom says simply. "But education spending is complicated."

Dennis' pause is only momentary, though. Somewhere along the way, his tail has been set, if not afire, at least to smoldering. "How complicated can it be, Tom? Sometimes I think we

complicate ourselves out of what's staring us in the face. We bitch about our taxes, but we've got a lower tax rate than just about any other first-world country. And you get what you pay for. Crap healthcare. Crap infrastructure. An educational system that's a joke. I mean, isn't it? Everyone's heard about the studies where American high school graduates can't locate the United States on a map — how they think Uruguay is in Africa — how they think the Roman Empire was 500 years ago and the Earth is 6000 years old. I mean, I know I'm not just making this up. There were kids like that at UMA. And that was a halfway-decent college. Surely it's not all just urban legend."

Tom interjects. "It's not; it's definitely not. Our public education system shortchanges a lot of Americans." Dennis opens his mouth. "In answer to your question," Tom says pointedly. Dennis' mouth closes. "In answer to your question, yes. I have one or two students in every class who are like what you describe. I don't know about their not being able to locate the United States on a map, but who have never even heard of Galileo, for example. Who've heard of Darwin, but know nothing about him save that their pastor says he's bad. But — since you asked — it's not simply a matter of general education spending. Overall education spending in the United States, actually, is comparable to that of major European nations — somewhere around six or seven percent of GDP. That's lower than Denmark and Sweden; higher than Germany and Japan; in the same neighborhood as France and the UK."

"Really? I thought we underspent ..." Dennis trails off.

"We spend more than some and less than others. Our problem isn't one of general underfunding; it's one of distribution. You get excellent schools in wealthy school districts and disastrous ones in poor ones. A public education in the United States can be as good as one in Sweden or as bad as one in Pakistan." Now it's Tom's turn to be heating up under the collar.

“And that, if you want to know, is what makes me angry. That it’s an accident of birth. As far as I can see, education is the single most important factor in determining the quality of a republic’s citizenry. And if the citizenry is uneducated — if it can’t understand the problems it faces — it can’t pick leaders to solve those problems. And economic opportunity is worthless if you can’t take advantage of it.”

Dennis keeps his mouth shut. He’s never seen Tom this — angry’s not the word.

Agitated? Passionate.

“Jefferson,” Tom continues, warming further, his face brightening — he’s clearly hit a rich vein with this invocation of his namesake (and, presumably, at least one of the gods in his pantheon) — “Jefferson went even further. Much further. For him, happiness — one of the three things we have an inalienable human right to, along with life and liberty — for Jefferson, ‘happiness’ *meant* education. Which of course makes sense, right?” Dennis nods, though he has no idea where Tom is going. Fortunately, the question was rhetorical. “Because ‘happiness’ has always been the odd man out in the Declaration of Independence. After Life and Liberty — two weighty notions if there ever were any — here comes the apparently frivolous ‘happiness’ on an equal footing. It’s like saying Truth, Justice and *petit fours*.” Dennis struggles to recall what *petits fours* are. Little finger-cakes? “And this odd man ‘happiness’ sticks even further out since it’s a glaring departure from Locke’s formulation of the rights of man: to life, liberty and *property*. Who takes out ‘property’ and in its place makes ‘happiness’ a fundamental tenet of a social contract? What is this? Proto-Romantic sentimentalism?” Dennis is caught off-guard. What, was that not a rhetorical question? But Tom steams forward. “But of course not. ‘Happiness’ didn’t mean self-indulgence for Jefferson any more than it did for Epicurus. It meant self-development, self-actualization, self-perfection. For Jefferson, education wasn’t

some externally imposed chore: it was as natural as breathing. It was as natural for one's mind to grow as one's bones. And the Declaration is an enumeration of natural rights. It's natural to be alive" — Dennis nods — "it's natural to have free will, free agency," — Dennis isn't so sure about that one — "and it's natural to grow, progress, develop. To become a better person. Which means a better citizen. Right?" Dennis nods again, but merely to encourage; he has no clear idea where Tom's going now. "Right. Because the quality of a social contract depends on the quality of the citizens that enter into it. Bad people make bad contracts. And you'll notice now that Locke didn't build that into his formulation — nothing about the quality of the actual flesh-and-blood men and women who make up the contract. Replace the word 'happiness' in The Declaration of Independence with 'self-improvement' — make the document declare our inalienable rights to life, to liberty and to the pursuit of *self-improvement* — and you've got a better understanding of what Jefferson meant. So for education to be a crap-shoot is utterly contrary to the notion of equality of opportunity that our republic is founded on. For us to toss the quality of our citizenship to the winds of Fortune is pulling the plug on The Great Experiment that the United States was at its birth. It's because of that, in my opinion, that we're no longer a light unto the nations. We've passed the torch."

Tom is slightly out of breath, his face flushed. Dennis doesn't say a word. Tom's jeremiad deserves some time to hang heavy in the air, to be weighed, its circumference measured, its volume felt. It's a task that exceeds Dennis' powers of off-the-cuff calculation, a crown that's too big to fit in a bucket of water.

Finally, after half a minute that seems like five, Dennis speaks. But he breaks the silence carefully, gradually working up to it: a sympathetic sigh, a tragic nod, an appreciative murmur. "Yikes." He can't read Tom's expression: it's shifting too quickly between outrage about this

Fall and embarrassment. For having run on too long, presumably. He's looking away and fiddling with his pen. But Dennis is far from bored or offended.

"Sorry," Tom says. "We all have our hobby-horses."

"Don't be. That's some of the best political rhetoric I've heard in ages. I might have to plagiarize you." Dennis grins. Tom returns it. "And I didn't know that. About the U.S. ranking close to France and so forth. Still — I don't know. It just seems something's out of whack. I mean, how much do we spend on education?"

"For basic education — primary and secondary — I believe the figure now is about \$500 billion. The vast majority of that's raised from local school districts; that's why it varies so much from place to place. State and federal funds account for only a small percentage. I forget how much. Ten percent, perhaps."

"500 billion? But that's peanuts!"

Tom looks surprised. "500 billion is an awful lot of peanuts, Dennis."

Dennis fumbles with an explanation. "Is it? I mean, maybe it sounds like a lot out of context, but this is a — what, a multi-trillion-dollar economy?" Tom clearly has his facts at his fingertips. But Dennis has a few facts too, and he can't help reaching for them. "So — \$500 billion, then."

Tom nods, curious to see where Dennis is going with this. "For basic universal education. K through twelve."

"500 billion. Hmm. OK: \$500 billion is also what Americans spend at \$500 billion is also what Americans spend at gas stations every year."

"Well, transportation is a big — "

Dennis presses on. “Just gas stations. No trains, planes, buses, cars, roads, highways, bridges, no infrastructure, no airports. Just gas stations. And we spend another \$500 billion at supermarkets every year.” Tom begins to say something about food, but Dennis cuts him off. “Not restaurants. I don’t know how much that is. But fast-food restaurants are \$170 billion, I know that. Just fast-food. Which of course makes us have to go to the dentist: \$100 billion. Annually. That’s just dentists, by the way; not general physicians, hospitals, surgeons, anesthesiologists, physical therapy, insurance, MRIs, CAT scans, pharmaceuticals. We spend another \$500 billion — actually a little more, if I recall — on entertainment every year. Movies, TV, gambling, theme parks. Gambling is \$75 billion all by itself. Oh, and pets — that’s \$50 billion. Just pets! Not livestock. Pets, pet food, pet toys, pet clothes, pet healthcare.” Tom nods, interested, thoughtful, trying to keep a running total in his head. But Dennis isn’t finished. “And let’s not forget hair and nails! Do you know how much we spend at hair and nail salons every year?”

Tom shakes his head, amused.

“Another \$50 billion. On *hair and nails*. But this is all — these are all just individual drops in the bucket. There’s a thousand more market categories like this. \$10 billion on cosmetics. \$20 billion on telemarketing. \$20 billion on funeral services. Clothing, rent, cars, appliances, electronics, furniture, yard tools, oil changes, coffee, booze, cigarettes, newspaper and magazine subscriptions, interest payments, mortgages, day-care, nannies, nursing homes, home insurance, car insurance, life insurance. I don’t know about you, but after all that, \$500 billion for universal education starts looking like peanuts to me. *That’s* why I asked you if it pissed you off.”

Tom starts to speak, then stops himself, realizing that he needs a transition. Or, rather, that a transition would be more graceful. “\$20 billion on funeral services, eh. It’s not very lovely, is it. Not very Christian.” Dennis raises his eyebrows inquiringly. ““Let the dead bury their dead,”” Tom explains. “Do you know who said that?”

Dennis smiles. “If you hadn’t just told me, I would have guessed some warlike Shakespearean king. Henry the 5th or something. But I take it that it was Jesus.”

“That’s right. According to Matthew. And, if I recall, Luke also.”

The two men stare at each other for a moment. One middle-aged, allegedly wise, allegedly frugal, graying only slightly at his temples, the smile in his eyes for faith in man’s perfectibility tempered only slightly by delicately sad brows’ feet tightening their corners; the other a young turk, young but not as young as once, allegedly incautious-but-struggling, allegedly profligate-but-repentant, allegedly better-informed than wise, perhaps — but who’s to say, in the final analysis, whether it’s reasoning or fact that’s the better part of wisdom? And if fact, which, how? How do a hundred facts about yesterday weigh against one about today? Is history predictive? Is currency ephemeral? How much, in what proportion, in regard to what? Perhaps there’s no calculus to judgment. Perhaps it’s hopeless; perhaps there are quantities in contexts and further quantities in further contexts *ad infinitum*. But consider this. Do you know how a simple mechanical watch operates? Not in general, but specifically enough to describe and duplicate the forces that produce it: the size of the gears, the requisite tension in the spring, the precise ratios that make the object mark off time in just a certain way and no other? Do you know the requisite millimeters across a gear, the requisite micro-joules of potential energy that a spring made of a certain metal, wound in a certain way, produces? No? Look at your wrist. Someone does.

I do not understand, therefore it cannot be understood.

A true statement if made by God.

Have you spent your life in study? What of?

Would you prefer that things be a certain way? Familiar?

Do you love what's inhuman? Are you not a little fond of your own warm flesh?

So these two men square off. But not really. Not for more than an instant. They merely gaze at each other. For a moment. Not even gaze: there's no male evaluation in their stares. They've had an exchange with each other and they look. They think, each man, about what they've said and what the other's said. Not even think, in this long second: appraise. Not even appraise, but something more rudimentary still: weigh.

Dennis breaks the gaze first, glancing at the clock. "About fifteen minutes left, I guess."

Tom nods.

"Probably not enough time left today to go delving into my past."

"We can if you want to," says Tom flatly.

Dennis shrugs.

"Where did you get all those figures about the size of various industries?"

Dennis brightens. "Grad school. Marketing. Macro-economics class. At least, that's when I first learned them. For class. The teacher wanted us to have a sense of the shape of the American economy. 'Expenditure is character,' he'd say. 'You are what you buy.'"

"Or don't buy," Tom amends. "Which is perhaps harder to measure."

Dennis thinks for a moment. "Maybe. But there are ways to measure that too. Not just the obvious ones like savings rates and such. There's a whole economy of frugality. Probably as big and profitable — actually, much more so — than what we think of as the economy of

wasteful, self-indulgent stuff. Products that people who think of themselves as frugal gobble up. Frugality's just another lifestyle. And there's a universe of brands for every lifestyle."

Tom furrows his brow. "You can't opt out?"

"Maybe if you're Ted Kaczynski, living in a cabin somewhere. There's an economy for plaid shirts and letter-bomb explosives, but it's pretty small." Tom grimaces; Dennis gets a bit of gleam in his eye. "Who might be an example of opting out? You?"

"Oh, no," Tom demurs, not entirely convincingly. "Susan and I" — Dennis finds himself stifling a flutter of jealousy — "are hardly Luddites. We do try to keep our heads somewhat above the fray of modern marketing. Susan does, anyway. She's much more conscientious about it than I am." Tom nods toward the glossy white Apple computer on his desk, which seems almost to gleam in gratitude. There's something so queerly human about those Apples, thinks Dennis. Glossy, gleaming, white. Unblemished. Why would that have a human feel, a humanoid appeal? "She was quite frosty when I came home with that. Something to the effect of: 'You might as well plug a keyboard into a pair of designer jeans.' But we bought the house before property values here in Venice skyrocketed, the car's a Volvo station wagon that we've had for fifteen years and I'm terribly afraid will never die, and most of the furniture we inherited when Susan's parents died. We don't make money hand over fist, but between two professors' salaries — more Susan's than mine, the pay being rather better at UCLA, as you might imagine — we never want for anything we want. But then, we have fairly modest wants."

"Like the BMW sport bike in the driveway?"

Tom scowls. "I don't touch that thing, and I don't particularly approve. But we all make our concessions."

Dennis' mind lurches. He's seen Tom's black-and-whites of Susan scattered around the house, and he instantly imagines the lean, fierce, black-and-white woman, black-helmeted and black-leather-clad, zooming through a grayscale Angelino street scene on a bright red motorcycle. The black asphalt streets are sliced with pale gray painted lines. Neon signs pulse white. Gray steam rises from the occasional black manhole cover, certainly, not that that ever happens anywhere in Los Angeles. The whole colorized-vehicle-in-a-grayscale-world image comes from some car commercial somewhere, but Dennis can't quite place it and isn't interested. The figure guns smoothly up a black hill, weaves through a crowd of grayscale youngsters wearing poodle skirts and clutching books, and comes to rest in a parking lot at the edge of a wide lawn. The lawn is lined with trees and flowerbeds, but you have to look carefully — they all blend into each other, all mere shades of gray. The woman swings off the motorcycle, stands and reaches for her helmet. She lifts it off and swings her hair free, and just as she does, of course, the whole scene bursts into color, into an impossibly bright riot of oversaturated Technicolor. Purple and gold poodle skirts, red rubber bookbands, lush beds of indigo pansies and scarlet snapdragons. It's the woman from the photos, naturally, so familiar that Dennis feels he has to look away. But she's still in black and white. Maybe. Hard to tell, with her pale wolf's eyes and wearing all that black. But there's something drained about her face, something ghostly, not quite human. Maybe she's just pale, Dennis thinks. Maybe I'm accustomed to the photos. Maybe I'm afraid to imagine her in color? And what the hell is *that* about?

"Dennis?"

Dennis sputters out of his reverie, drawing in air almost as if he's been underwater or holding his breath. He hopes he hasn't audibly gasped. Tom's expression is pleasant, though, so he can't read anything from that. "Yes! Sorry." Motorcycle. Driveway. Dennis had assumed it

was Susan's, but — well? He tries to recall if Tom has mentioned having any kids. No sign of them around the house. Out of the nest? Or a nephew, maybe? He's about to ask, but stops himself. It seems too — too something. "Next week, then?" He starts to write out a check for the session.

Tom waves his hand. "This one's on me. You can make me work harder for my bread next time. Or rather," Tom continues with a grin, "you can make me make you work harder for my bread next time."

Dennis lifts his pen. "You're sure?"

"Certainly. Friendly conversation's free."

Dennis nods, but thinks to himself: nothing's free.

* * *

"Your father just came in from mowing the lawn."

Dennis winces, but his voice doesn't indicate anything untoward. "Put him on!" he says brightly. Two children in the back seat of the car in front of him are making funny faces at him. He makes one back. They giggle hysterically and disappear into the back seat to plot their next move. Everything's strategy.

"Let me see if I can get him to come to the phone." His mother's voice goes muffled on the other end of the line, but he can still hear her calling for his father in that sing-song way that grated on his nerves for eighteen years: that lilting plainsong reserved specifically for calling wayward pets and husbands in from the yard, for calling sons downstairs to dinner, and for calling anyone to the telephone. "Aaaaaaaa-laaaaan! Dennis-on-the phooooone!" In every

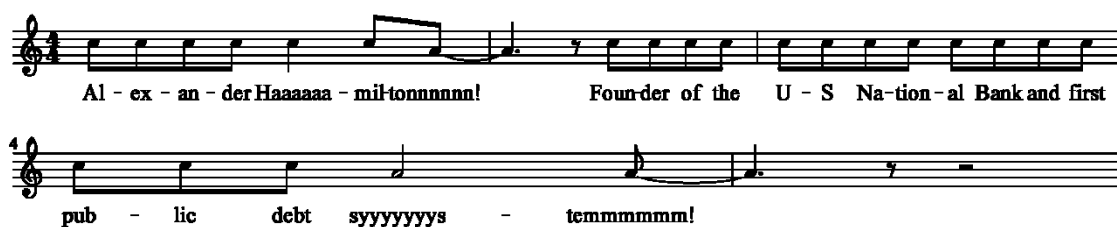
summoning situation, every mother in the world seems to use that exact same musical notation, as regular as Gregorian chant — always alternating between those same two notes a step and half apart and always going from high to low, from C to G, for example, never the reverse — and always adhering to the same metrical pattern, too: elongation of the name's stressed syllable plus its last syllable, plus elongation of the word of the message. Add it all up and you can score any Mother's Calling Song:



or



or



The two kids' heads again pop up from behind the back seat of the car in front of him. They have their fingers in their noses. A boy and a girl; brother and sister, presumably. Dennis

makes a mock-horrified face. They laugh. He picks an imaginary booger from his own nose and melodramatically flicks it at them. They shriek in delight and re-submerge. A woman in the front seat turns around sharply and yells something at them. Dennis sticks his tongue out at her, but she doesn't see.

Waiting for his father to change out of his grass-clipping-encrusted yard sneakers and come to the phone, Dennis wonders at the apparent universality and invariance of it — of the calculus of The Mother's Calling Song. Is it truly that invariant? Dennis tries to imagine an alternative, an inversion — to imagine his mother calling him from low to high, G to C:



No! Absolutely not. It sounds absurd. Operatic, weird, thoroughly unnatural. Dennis has little evidence to go on, but instinct tells him that no mother, anywhere, has ever called her son to the dinner table using the inverted notation. The inversion sounds — well, it sounds sung, ironically, whereas the normal Mother's Calling Song, though every bit as musical, doesn't sound sung at all. It just sounds like — well, like calling someone to the dinner table.

It must be something biological, Dennis thinks. Like birdsong. Some deep-structure phonetic something or other. Dennis is thinking and mutter-humming to himself — *baaaaa-deeeee, ba-da-da-da deeeee-deeeee* — when he realizes that his dad is already on the other end of the line.

“Dennis? Hello?” Then, muffled: “He’s singing.”

Fuck!

His father won't say anything about it, but that doesn't matter. It's been Noted. Just more evidence that, after all these years, Dennis is still immature, unreliable, unserious. When Alan's in a jovial mood, he says that his son's a little bit of "an odd bird," but that that's all right, that it runs in the family, that one of Dennis' uncles is a bit of an odd bird too, that it takes all kinds. When Alan's feeling that his paternal duty is to be somewhat more censorious, he reminds Dennis that he isn't seventeen anymore, that he's going to have to grow up eventually. What does he have to do or be, Dennis wonders, to be "grown up" in his father's eyes? A particle physicist? A captain of industry? A monk?

Dennis recovers instantly, putting on his hardiest and most cheerful hail-thee-fellow-well-met voice. "Hullo, pops! What're you doing out slogging around in the yard on a school-day?"

"Discovery finished early." (More family shorthand: 'discovery' as in the legal procedure of.) But Alan's not about to cede questioning; Dennis is his witness, not the other way around. "I could ask the same of you. Gossiping with your mother while you're at the office?"

"No, I'm sitting in traffic. I leave a little early on Wednesdays for a — for a regular meeting. With our Latino coordinator over in East L.A." Dennis wouldn't mind if his parents knew that he was seeing a therapist — they're mature enough to recognize therapy as something healthy and admirable — but getting therapy invariably implies needing it, even if only in some small way, and why raise those considerations? Just now? It's not as if there's any pressing issue; it's not as if he's wrecking cars, beating wives, burning bridges, screwing up at work. Why not just grow a bit and let his folks appreciate it? Or conversely — or perhaps simultaneously — go to hell? He's not doing it for them.

"How's work?"

The two kids reappear, eyes crossed, ears pulled out from the sides of their head. Dennis steers with his knee and gives as good as he gets. “It’s great.”

“Still doing God’s work for the Republic?” Alan asks. There’s some levity to his tone, but he’s not mocking. He’s simply quoting his son’s phrase, and sympathizes, to an extent, with its sentiment. It’s not as if Alan doesn’t believe in service work. He does: a churchwarden at St. Mark’s, a bit of *pro bono* work for a local legal clinic, a small but regular stream of charitable contributions made not entirely for their tax advantages. Alan simply believes that one should, in general, be properly compensated for work. There’s something about a life of too much service that smacks of zealotry.

“Give you a raise yet?” Alan knows that Dennis took a pay cut when he accepted his current job.

“Not yet, Pops,” Dennis says — again, making sure to keep his tone bright, cheerful, confident, unconcerned. “I’m sure they will eventually. Anyway, it really is fine for now, the salary. I don’t want for anything.” Not thanks to MasterCard and Visa.

“Did you cut up those credit cards?”

Dennis growls mentally. What, can the frigging man read minds? “One of them.” Not true. “I kept the other. You can’t do anything without a credit card these days. But I don’t carry a balance on it.” Also not true — of either of the two cards that Dennis has finally trimmed down to — from, what was it at one point in college, seven? But a couple thousand dollars here, a couple there — it’s a lot better than the \$15,000 of credit-card debt (much of that compounded interest, to be sure) that Dennis had finally consolidated, when he was 27, into a personal loan at a reasonable (read: non-predatory) interest rate.

“Well, I’m going to get out of these yard clothes. Keep up the good work. Do you want me to put your mother back on?”

“No, that’s all right. The traffic’s moving again.” It’s not, particularly. But Dennis is piqued, and the tiresome and endlessly familiar back-and-forth with his father isn’t nearly as interesting as the whimsical back-and-forth he’s engaged in with the kids in the car ahead. They’re brandishing their toys at him now — an action figure of some sort for the boy, a plastic puzzle-globe of some sort for the girl — and Dennis is searching melodramatically around the cabin of his car for a toy to flash back. Cellphone, Ipod, cigarettes, sunglasses, tire pressure gauge? He settles for the cellphone. The kids make scrunched-up disapproval faces. He waves his box of cigarettes; they shake their heads. Sunglasses? Tire gauge? L.A. street map? Nope. No deal. He sticks his tongue out at them. They shrug.

An hour later, Dennis is slouched sullenly in a springy Danish chair in Tom’s home office. A Fiesta mug full of green tea steams in his hand. It smells planty, chlorophyllic, like freshly stewed lawn clippings. The conversation’s already underway. Tom immediately picked up on Dennis’ mood and has been teasing it out of him like a clown drawing a 20-foot string of silk handkerchiefs from someone’s mouth. Violet, azure, yellow, pink. And then finally the red one, the red flag: dad. Or in this case, as it’s becoming apparent, it’s perhaps a green flag:

“Money,” Dennis grumbles. “We never had any issues except for money.”

“You and your father,” Tom clarifies.

Dennis nods. “Me and my parents. Things were pretty quiet in our house when I was growing up. We didn’t have the knock-down teenage fights that a lot of my friends had with their parents. My dad’s a pretty restrained guy. I could probably count on one hand the times I’ve seen him and my mom fight.”

“A happy marriage?”

“Um — sort of. More of a peaceful stalemate, I think I’d call it. Anyway, the one hot-button issue we *did* have was money.”

“Did your father feel that he was spoiling you?”

“No, I don’t think it was that *he* was spoiling me, so much. He does OK with his law practice, but it’s not like he was keeping me in coke and beemers. Tuition at UMA was pretty modest. He gave me an allowance, but that was pretty modest too. Too modest.”

“Ergo the stint at Wal-Mart.”

Dennis’ face is shadowed: eyes hard, lips compressed, jaws tight. “Ergo a lot of things.”

* * *

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuck!!!” shouted Dennis, Gary and Taylor Three in unison. They didn’t dive under their chairs, but they definitely flinched as the herd of velociraptors, each one large as life, came thundering into the college dorm room. It was as if one whole wall of the room had been peeled away to reveal another world. Save for the far wall glowing sunny bright, the room was bathed in darkness and stocked with the things you’d typically find in a college dorm room: matching fake wood-laminate bed, desk, dresser and chair; stereo, computer; an electronic keyboard and drum machine covered in dust; liquor bottles, pizza boxes and hamburger wrappers; wires, cords, cables, chargers and AC adapters of every variety, for every imaginable electronic gizmo; and on the walls, UMA football pennants; swimwear pinups and the requisite poster of dogs playing poker (what is it about dogs smoking cigars and playing poker that makes the image resonate with almost every male varsity psyche?). The far wall of the room, however,

from one edge to the other, opened up onto a lush, verdant, sun-drenched prehistoric swamp. A swamp out of which Sam Neill and Laura Dern had just run screaming, past the camera and into the darkened room — or into the consciousnesses, at least, of the room's four current occupants. Sam and Laura, past the camera and into the room — with a herd of screeching, leaping, bloodthirsty, eight-foot-tall carnivorous dinosaurs following hot on their heels. And the 'raptors were, literally, eight feet tall — or were, at any rate, by the time they reached the plane of the camera, which was the plane of the projection video screen, at which point they burst either into the room or out of sight. It hardly mattered, at that distance. When an eight-foot velociraptor has closed to within five feet of you and is about to take off your head in one snap of its massive, razor-toothed jaws, it doesn't matter, to your lizard brain, whether the predator has disappeared: in another split second, you'll have.

Ergo the boys flinched. Except for Taylor Two, who'd watched this Laserdisc of *Jurassic Park* on his new super-size video projector six or seven times by this point. Two simply noted his audience's reaction with satisfaction and went back to fiddling with audio dials.

Much ado about nothing, perhaps you're thinking — all this *Sturm und Drang* about a paltry bit of home theater. But there was a time, you know, if only from reading about it in books, when the sight of scarred, pock-marked, sweaty, carnivorous dinosaurs charging large as life into one's living room was uncommon. When it had the power to startle. If our sensory naïveté has dulled — which it certainly has for those of us who don't still live among the mechanical novelties of the nineteenth century — then what does it take, today? To titillate you? To make you catch your breath, to catch you off-guard, to catch you unaware? Because whatever it is, you can bet it won't be that tomorrow, as sure oft-flexed muscle mass will grow, as sure as oft-rubbed skin will callus, as sure as currencies deflate.

“That’s nothing,” boasted Two, cutting the video feed abruptly. The prehistoric jungle was instantly replaced by a wall of solid glowing blue. Digitized text cycled on the wall — *Vid1*, *Vid2*, *Aux* — despite the lads’ vehement demands to be redelivered to a world where ultra-rich hunter-tourists pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to be taken back 200 million years in time for the opportunity to kill a stego- or tyrannosaur.

“Put it back!”

“Why’d you stop it?”

“Where’d you fucking *get* this thing?”

Two just smiled and twiddled dials. “You gaywads ain’t seen nothing yet. Here — Dennis, Three — heads up.” The two boys turned around just in time to catch video-game controllers sailing through the air. “Maggots of Mars!” Two shouted. “Prepare for battle!”

“No fucking way!” They stared wide-eyed awe at Two, Merlin of merriment, wizard of wherewithal, the boy who slew the dragon Circuit City with nothing more than a credit card and the sheer force of will.

“Yes fucking way! Marines, prepare to meet your Doom!” Two flipped a switch on a video feed selector and the blue wall where the jungle had been suddenly gave way to a life-sized Martian landscape populated by zombies who turned ominously toward the boys and slowly began to close in. Crosshairs zoomed and flickered around the scene; the boys’ cries of delight were almost loud enough to drown out the zombies’ cries of anguish as blasting shotguns shredded their limbs, roaring chainsaws split their torsos open and blazing rocket launchers blew them to smithereens. The super-tweeters of Two’s over-amplified stereo system screeched while its sub-woofer thundered underneath the bed. No point in having a wall of video if you don’t have the audio to match.

It was the ear-splitting volume of the in-game audio, undoubtedly — the gunfire, grunts, howls and explosions punctuating a blaring speed-metal soundtrack — that prevented anyone in the room from hearing Taylor (Taylor One, Taylor the Original, Taylor the Kappa president), who had come into the room in the middle of the bloodbath and was hollering over the din in an attempt to get everyone’s attention. It wasn’t working. Taylor finally found the light switch next to the door and flicked it on, saturating the room with ugly institutional light and washing out the Martian martial mayhem.

“PEOPLE!” Taylor bellowed. “PEE-PUUUUUUUUUUHL!”

Two killed the game. Everyone turned around and blinked sheepishly at The Original, the Boss, the Man, the Sun King, the senior, the Caesar with a Praetorian Guard of upperclassmen Kappa brothers at his back. They peered around Taylor’s shoulders into the room, trying to get a glimpse of Two’s newest toy. Whatever it was, it would definitely be something that would need to be requisitioned and relocated to the Commons Room for the betterment and edification of all the Kappa brotherhood. Half a dozen mental notes were made.

“Yo T,” said Two, weakly. ““Sup?”

It was an impressive setup Two had here, no doubt, and it required further Looking Into. But now was not the time for that, and Taylor — “T” — was not about to let his imperious mock consternation be jollyfriended away by Two’s hail-thee-homeboy-well-met. He glowered over the assemblage. “It’s time,” he declared with the authority of office. “We’re moving out. Downtown. You have that Land Rover, yes?” An athletic finger singled out Two. Two nodded. “Seats what, nine? Two and three and four in the back?”

“I — ” began Two. I have to clean some stuff out ... He stopped himself short and simply nodded.

Taylor nodded in acknowledgement, still looking at Two. “Designated Loser.” (Frat speak: *designated driver*.) The eye of authority passed over Gary with a disgusted snort (for all his wiles, Gary was carless) and settled on Dennis. “Some little sedan thing, yes?”

“Yes,” said Dennis, “a Volkswagen — ”

Taylor shook his head dismissively and moved on. “Three.”

“Blazer,” Three admitted. As if Taylor didn’t already know.

Taylor did, and didn’t need to name this third-generation namesake pledge a designated loser. He merely looked at Three. Three nodded. “You know the drill?” said Taylor.

Three nodded. “An ounce an hour.” The designated-loser drill: one ounce of alcohol per hour: one shot, one mixed drink, one beer. No Spartan teetotaling, here, but little enough for the average young adult body to metabolize fully in an hour; little enough to blow a zero.

Taylor tossed the keys to his own Pathfinder to Gary with a significant look — Gary nodded glumly — and turned to the Praetorian Guard of brothers in the hallway. “Gentlemen, we have cavalry. Empty the rooms and mount up. Parking lot in five.”

The command was answered by a scattering of bodies, a flurry of activity and a hubbub of shouts up and down the halls. Taylor turned back to the dorm room. “One more thing,” he said. “Backpacks. Dump out your books and bring your backpacks. And wear your colors.” *Colors*: a holdover from the days when fraternities cleaved to a particular color pair as slavishly as any varsity football fan. By the last decade of the 20th century, however, that degree of sartorial slavishness was long gone, and a mere ball-cap or t-shirt with the fraternity logo sufficed. As for the backpacks, though, that was a mystery. Taylor bowed slightly to the room’s four occupants. “Gentlemen.” He turned his lanky body on its angular heel and disappeared.

Two looked none too pleased to have been interrupted in the middle of his *spectacle de son et lumière*. All the same, the boys began to gather their things. Someone lent Dennis a shirt.

* * *

Downtown. The word was a mantra among students, a benediction; better, a brand name. It was also a little bit of an overstatement. Winterville's downtown business district consisted of not much more than four or five blocks radiating in every available direction from the northern entrance onto the UMA campus. Which wasn't the university's front door, mind. No: the grounds of the college were organized, late in the Colonial period of these our fair United States, around a long, lovely green that had originally been the modest 100-acre front yard of a gentleman-farmer who had braved the Atlantic to make his new-world fortune in tobacco, yams, a bit of cotton and, what was frankly the most profitable aspect of his enterprise, a healthy trade in dark-skinned bipedal hominids. So handy for almost any task, what with 1600cc brains, opposable thumbs, extended larynxes and so forth; more teachable than the best German shorthaired pointer, if at times less docile.

This Colonial potentate had been an industrious, enlightened sort of gentleman, and his gorgeously neo-classical and scrupulously Palladian domicile had been built to face the dawn. The structure, by the way, still stood and stands today: as the core of the Old College, i.e. the UMA building that caps the sprawling lawn (The Green) that rolls down from the college, away and off toward the forest behind which, presumably, the sun will always rise.

The university, therefore, according to its ancient axis (not that history is determinative of anything), faced not north, toward the town of Winterville that fed its employees and watered its

students, but east; it was a horseshoe of knowledge and enlightenment founded upon ancient sins, a horseshoe-magnet of buildings clustered around an ancient park, around a carpet of well-tended emerald fescue that stretched from the steps of the Old College, that rolled past dorms and classrooms on its left and right, and that eventually terminated in The Entrance, the official front door of and grand gateway to the university: an intersection in the middle of nothing, marked solely by an imposing stone sign, a fountain and a flowerbed. Looking back west from the grand official entrance, a green esplanade sprawled off toward a Palladian palace. Looking north, through a thin screen of trees, you'd see an auxiliary parking lot. To the south, behind another thin screen of trees, another auxiliary parking lot.

To the east, across the street from the grand gateway, trees: a few hundred feet's worth undeveloped land owned by the University — a buffer, and one that it would never develop. Not in the foreseeable future.

East of the buffer lay a small apartment complex and a car repair shop carved out of the forest. East of that, more forest.

Further east still, eventually: a state highway, suburbs, a shopping center, a Wendy's, a Taco Bell, a Jiffy Lube, a sub-development of 200 identical houses.

Then the forest closed in again. Moving eastward still, you'd find a farm here or there, a small chunk of what passed for civilization borrowed from the always-encroaching primal forest.

Eventually, you'd come across an interstate. To the right, Charlotte and Atlanta, many hours south; to the left, Washington and Baltimore, hours north. You'd find an interchange here, at this point where an eastward gaze from UMA intersected with the north-south corridor of I-95 that carried cocaine and marijuana north from Mexico to feed America's insatiable addiction. An interchange where a state highway crossed the interstate. A place that used to be a

community, a small town proper: Clarkston VA, pop. 2,500 circa 1943, a small city with its own community college and regional orchestra. Now it was just an exit off of I-95, a Shell station with a Qwiki-Mart stocked, strangely, with fanciful medieval weaponry: scimitars with skull-and-crossbones hilts, daggers with fake Elfin curses inscribed on their blades, butterfly knives, brass knuckles. And lots of ephedrine. Ephedrine and gasoline. A quarter-mile away, the abandoned town of Clarkston slowly gave itself up, brick by brick, to gravity. In what once passed for Clarkston's suburbs — a few hundred feet from Main Street — trailer homes cheaply manufactured in the 1950s were now reduced to rectangular stains of rust on the ground, stains punctuated here and there by lumps that might once have been mattresses, furniture, appliances. Main Street Clarkston was keeping up appearances somewhat better, being made of limestone, bricks and mortar (defiant fuck-yous pitched hopefully and hopelessly, early in the 20th century, into Modernity's voracious, salivating, endlessly dissolving maw), but alas! — it was a façade: just rotting bricks and crumbling mortar and age-frosted glass windows fronting stores whose aisles hadn't felt a foot in forty years, whose cash registers hadn't felt a fingerprint.

Continuing eastward — now well over the curve of Earth from sight of UMA's Palladian citadel — forest eventually gave way to swamp. As you approached the coast, flying east over the landscape, you'd see the strands of Spanish moss hanging from live oaks lengthen slowly, growing like long gray beards on old men, even after death. Then, suddenly, a flurry of activity where channel-slashed swampland gave way to swaths of blue-brown brackish water, sawgrass, sand dunes, surf. If you kept going east, a strand of barrier islands hardly half a mile wide would soon flit by; after that, it would be hours over open ocean, even at the accelerated speed of imagination, before you hit the western coast of Africa. But we're not going to Africa. No need: Africa comes to us, or came, or was efficiently conveyed. Here on the coast of Virginia, on the

beach, a hundred miles from anywhere, at a place marked with nothing save an old dirt road now deeply overgrown, huge wooden pilings had been driven into the sand. A not-so-ancient dock. Up on the dunes, there were still remnants of a heavy wooden platform. Nothing left of it save the massive timbers that once supported it, and not much left of those. Leading eastward from what had been the platform, down the beach and into the surf, would have been a walkway, a chute for offloading cargo. Nothing of it remained save for some lumps in the sand where pilings would have been. And east from there another two hundred feet, extending from the surf out into the shallow margin of the ocean, a pier would once have stood, reaching out to greet the cargo-laden longboats rowing in from a square-rigger parked offshore. Sacks of human skin sealed tight with iron bands for safe keeping of their valuable contents — blood and bone, intelligence and terror — would have been hauled up from the longboat, prodded along the pier and herded onto the platform to be inspected, tallied and distributed.

This was what the Palladian palace faced, was where its long rectangular green pointed: this ancient fragment of a pier, like a thousand of its kind up and down the eastern seaboard of these United States, was what stood between America and the sunrise. The UMA campus turned its northern shoulder — or made as if to do so — to downtown Winterville, to the college town that clipped its lawns, that mopped its floors, that housed its faculty, that fed, that liquored up, that entertained its students. This north entrance to the campus was the busiest by far, and walkways servicing it were constantly having to be re-laid, repaired, widened. Proposal after proposal had come before the university's Board of Regents to go further still, to convert the rolling green into lacrosse fields or some such and reorient the campus toward its northern portal. To move a building here, demolish one there, to construct a new student center just so. It wasn't happening. For though the campus physically faced east — faced an Enlightenment sunrise set

behind a pastoral countryside laced with the traces of marketing unto murder — culturally, it faced north.

Downtown: the word on every student's tongue to conjure with. Campus was where you did your penance. Campus was where you paid the tedious price — classes — that going to college unfortunately demanded. Downtown was where you started the day, for a muffin and a frappuccino at Starbucks, perhaps. Downtown was where you repaired to in every open time slot; downtown was where you had lunch. Downtown was where you spent your quality time, which is to say your nights, in one of forty-seven bars packed into a five-by-five block square, having some drinks, screaming inanities over ear-splitting music, shooting some pool. Or where you had dinner at one of twenty-six eateries, ranging from grills, ice cream shops, burrito stands and pizza joints to five-star restaurants like Montparnasse — a tony place where you could take a parent (or a date, if you were proposing to or had cheated on her). Downtown was where you could spend as much of your parents' money as you could get a hold of: on beads, bongos, glass pipes, tennis skirts, pre-ripped blue jeans, cigarettes, magazines, newspapers, jewelry, CDs, DVDs, electronics, live music, futons, posters, fur-lined Velcro handcuffs, hiking boots, dreamcatchers, incense burners, watches, Band-Aids, nail polish, cellular telephones, skateboards, mountain bikes, you name it. If a consumer good had a function in an 18-to-24-year-old lifestyle, it was available downtown.

Ironically, downtown is where the Kappa cavalry was not. Not yet. While his Praetorian Guard was corralling plebeians in the Kappa parking lot and herding them into sport-utility vehicles, Taylor assembled his team of drivers. "Follow me to Perry's," he said. His foremen nodded. Perry's Bottle Shop. Purveyor of wine and beer only — profit off of hard liquor having

been restricted to the sole monopoly of the Virginia state government's Alcoholic Beverage Commission retail stores — but surely Taylor had his reasons?

He did. In the parking lot of Perry's, Taylor reassembled the troops. "Who's '21'?" he asked, using a V-For-Victory finger gesture to place scare quotes around the digit. Every hand went up, though barely a fifth of those assembled had reached the magic age at which, after three years of having been legally liable to die for or be executed by your country, you could legally drink a beer. Taylor shook his head. "All right. Who's actually 21?" A few hands remained. "You guys, then, plus four more. Work it out. Champagne duty. At least three bottles each. More if you've got room on your plastic. Go. Make it so." Twenty minutes later, the last of the champagne shoppers had returned. Empty backpacks and book-bags were filled with clinking bottles. The cavalry remounted. The Kappas were going downtown, and it wasn't gentlemanly to show up empty-handed.

The Kappas began the evening's campaign at Cinnabar, an upscale cigar/wine/martini/scotch bar. It's not that was no point in paying for the good stuff if you were too drunk to appreciate it. There was: if you could afford to get fucked up on snifter after twelve-dollar snifter of single-malt Highland Scotch ("The fewer vowels in the name," Taylor had observed, "the better the Scotch"), then more power (or, rather, more props — power + respect) to you. Gold credit cards and fake IDs shuttled back and forth across the bar as most of the brothers followed Taylor's lead. They wouldn't be able to keep up with him. In a refreshing nod to days of yore, days long before inbred kings had had to appeal to Divine Right to protect their fragile thrones, Taylor's power wasn't nominal, wasn't emptily official, wasn't humbly derived from The People or from God. Taylor ruled because he was the Alpha. He was taller, stronger, more handsome, more popular and, most importantly, had both a hollow leg but a hole

in the bottom of his foot. Taylor could drink. His eyes might glaze and his regal bearing sway a bit, but he would not topple. Not where any of his men could see.

Dennis ordered a chartreuse-green apple martini. The Kappas gave him amused looks. “What?” he said defensively. They just laughed.

Their stay at Cinnabar was brief. They went there mostly to start the night off with a touch of class, to avail themselves of some Scotch that even their own fathers wouldn’t buy (although they were buying it, and simply didn’t know it), to let the bar’s sophisticated atmosphere (cool jazz, little indoor waterfalls, koi) make them feel grown up, and above all, to Shanghai a few of downtown’s more elegant college women into their campaign. Rachel was there, as arch and icy and grown-up as ever, with her entourage. The comparatively homely girls that Rachel traveled with considerably enhanced her dark, sharp-featured beauty. Dennis often wondered if it was intentional. But he’d never ask. The girls that Rachel ran with were no lackeys; they were pre-med, pre-law, pre-business, bound for graduate school and Serious Women to the last. That was the answer that Dennis knew he’d get and, not feeling strongly that he could brag about the maturity and intellectual curiosity of the friends he’d fallen in with, he didn’t bring the subject up. As far as the evening’s campaign was concerned, Rachel declined. “We’re fine here,” Rachel said. “You go play with your little friends. We won’t be out late. I have a data set to work on tonight. But you can buy me a drink.” Dennis took her order for an apple martini to the bar.

Gary and Two were at the bar, noses deep in 150-proof Scotch, making observations to each other about oaky this and charcoal that as if they had any idea what they were talking about.

“You can’t keep drinking those girly drinks, D.,” said Gary.

“Drink your rubbing alcohol, fag,” said Dennis. “Anyway, it’s for Rachel.”

Two and Gary exchanged knowing smiles. Two made a bullwhip-cracking sound: *wh-kshhhhhhhh!* Gary nodded. Pussy-whipped.

“Fuck you guys,” said Dennis. “At least I’ve got a pussy to be whipped by.”

Gary snorted. “Precisely. ‘A.’”

When the bartender returned with the drink, Dennis fumbled through his last few crumpled dollars. “Dude,” he whispered in Gary’s ear. “Can you spot me 20 for the night?”

Gary looked at him as if he had gills. “Cash? Who carries cash? Put it on this.” Gary slid a sparkling gold credit card across the bar. The bartender nodded. “But you,” said Gary, turning back to Dennis “— you’ve got to get some fucking plastic, homes.”

Dennis nodded, hiding a scowl. He’d picked up that part-time job at Wal-Mart to make ends meet, but they weren’t meeting. Dennis ran with some big spenders, true; approximately 15,000 of them, though. Because it wasn’t just the Kappas who discarded money as if it were laced with anthrax; it was every kid on campus, more or less, with the exception of a few dreary work-study students who’d probably have spent their time in the library even when they weren’t there shelving books for minimum wage.

Getting some plastic was not going to be difficult. Quite the opposite. It had been a struggle to make it through two years in college *without* having succumbed to the ubiquitous offers of free money — a struggle, truth be told, in which Dennis had not been the victor. He’d gotten his first credit card the first week of school. By the end of orientation week, he’d amassed a sack of approximately fifty credit-card offers, their envelopes all barking carnival-colored promises of no this, no that, free this, free that. **NO INTEREST PAYMENTS!¹² CASH**

¹² For the first three months, dating from the day upon which the card is activated. Offer applies only to the first \$500 of expenditures on the card. Balances over \$500 unpaid at the end of the billing cycle will be charged interest at the normal rate.

MONEY BACK!¹³ **DOUBLE FREQUENT-FLIER MILES!**¹⁴ Some of the less visually compelling solicitations conformed to the standard envelope form factor, but most of them were weird-sized, oversized affairs. Each came with a cover letter congratulating Dennis for having been pre-selected, reminding him of how hard he'd worked, how responsible he'd been, how he now deserved the finer things in life. Accompanying each cover letter was a glossy little brochure replete with photographs of families enjoying those finer things: adorable moppets pulling a golden retriever from a gift-wrapped box on Christmas day, the family gathered around their 60-inch projection-screen television, mom and dad (or perhaps this was before they were mom and dad) sharing a candle-lit dinner at a fancy restaurant, mom and dad (or perhaps dad and his secretary) drinking daiquiris and soaking in the sun on a white-sand beach. Photos of CD players, porterhouse steaks, cruise ships, airplanes, passports, foreign currency, the Colosseum, the Eiffel Tower. And lots of point-of-purchase photos — transactions at shop counters piled high with treasures, gifts, goodies, kitchen wares, electronics, bottles of wine, even humble groceries, with the laughing, powerful consumer handing a little plastic card to a laughing, appreciative vendor. Credit cards precipitated laughter from thin air. Not laughter: respect. There's no way you were supposed to think that the shopper had really said anything so very merry at checkout. And in the photos, the vendors' laughing smiles always seemed forced. Not just because the photos were staged; of course they were. But the vendors in the photos were always pretty young white women in store uniforms with the top two buttons undone so you could see a bit of cleavage, leaning over the packages on the counter to take the proffered card,

¹³ On selected purchases, at a rate of \$0.02 per \$1.0 dollars spent with the card. See Appendix A for qualifying purchase categories.

¹⁴ On participating carriers, at a rate of 2 frequent-flier miles per \$1.0 dollars spent with the card. Cards participating in the frequent-flier miles program are subject to an annual surcharge of \$35. See Appendix B for a list of participating carriers.

laughing, eyes sparkling, looking up not so much seductively as appreciatively at the grinning grey-templed customer. You wouldn't get that sort of reaction paying with crumpled paper bills, oh no. You'd be too busy counting money out. It was clear from the photos that nothing could compete with the graceful, sexy simplicity of a credit-card transaction. You flicked the card out between two fingers. You slipped the card into a restaurant's little fake-leather bill folder and slid it to the edge of the table. You slapped it down on the bar and that was that. No counting, no tallying. When you were done, you signed your name. You didn't need to quibble over details. The credit card transaction was your word made flesh.

The solicitations had weaseled their way into Dennis' possession via every possible avenue that an envelope could get into the hands of a boy in college. He'd find one hanging from the doorknob of his dorm room in the morning. On the way out, there'd be a handful scattered on the table in the lobby. There'd invariably be a sodden one stuck beneath the windshield wiper on his car. They appeared in his campus mailbox: at least one a day, often several. Every single message board on campus had at least one oversized full-color poster with a stack of little brochures hanging from a cardboard pouch. At freshman orientation, a dozen different local and national banks had set up tables displaying their wares (the sumptuous little brochures that peeked into the sumptuous Good Life of grown-ups) as well as signing bonuses available only if you acted now: an additional month without interest, a free subscription to *Sports Illustrated* or *Vogue*, \$50 cash back on the card, the chance to win a laptop computer. And the swag, the promotional merchandise, the glorious Stuff We All Get — for free! — branded pens, T-shirts, coffee mugs, stadium seat cushions, beer cozies, book-bags, key rings, water bottles. It was amazing that these companies could stay in business, practicing such corporate largesse.

And why not? Why should they not shovel out truckloads of branded merchandise made in China, bought in bulk and costing pennies per unit? Why not paint every customer with free advertising if they volunteer their bodies for it? Why not pay every single cheese-faced 18-year-old who walked up \$50 to take their credit card? In six months, they'd be taking that much or more from them every month in the form of interest payments, at rates that even the most extortionary kneecap-smashing Mafia loan shark wouldn't dare to charge. Nor did they have to stop there: beyond the humble published interest rate, there was an entire universe of ways to charge for borrowing money: annual fees, late penalties, cash withdrawal surcharges and all manner of contract provisions in angstrom-tall lettering that could triple your interest rate overnight and without notice.

And why not? Why not charge double, triple, even four or five times the effective interest rate that you could have gotten on a line of credit somewhere else? The price is what the market will bear. If you're perfectly willing to pay twenty dollars for a stick of gum, then here's your chewing gum, enjoy! Is it not presumptuous to assume what a product or service might be worth to someone else? Condescending? Un-American, in point of fact? People are free to want what they want; they're free to value what they desire by placing a price on it that they're willing to pay. If you want to pay 23% interest to borrow money from someone when you could borrow it elsewhere for 7%, that's your right, and who has a right to proscribe consumers' freedom, to tell them that they can't have what they want? Who has a right to meddle in a legal private contract between adults?

So by the end of his freshman year in college, Dennis had two credit cards. He'd maxed them both out and put them in a desk drawer, but the issuing banks of both the cards had thoughtfully and automatically doubled his credit limit. After all, Dennis had worked hard. He

was a college student with significant earning potential. The fact that he was a dependent listed on the tax return of a Massachusetts attorney with a solid annual income and an excellent credit rating didn't hurt one bit.

He was a little bit wary of getting in over his head. How easy it had been to spend four thousand dollars in a nine-month school year — and where exactly (except for that chunk for the car repair and the lawyer) had it all gone? Not all to nights out on the town, surely. Though those could easily run \$30 each. And with at least three nights out per week, over the course of a nine-month school year ... \$30 times 3 would be 90, say 100, times four weeks per month is 400, times nine months is $9 \times 4 = 36$, so — \$3600? That couldn't be right. Still, it seemed a modest debt to carry. For a while. Not that Dennis could have told you what the interest rate was on either of the cards. Still. A modest sum. And they wouldn't have raised his credit limits if they thought he couldn't pay them back.

Dennis grimaced as he elbowed his way through the crowd packed three deep at the bar, Rachel's apple martini glowing greenish in his hand. Liquid money, Dennis thought. He delivered it to Rachel, who smiled and brushed his cheek with icy fingers. Who says you can't get something for nothing, Rachel thought. But it occurred to her that Dennis looked a little green around the gills. Cinnabar was a bit high-tone for him, perhaps. If he stuck around, she'd pick up the next round.

A cigarette girl — a cigar-girl, technically — flounced blondely by in a high-cut miniskirt and low-cut bustier, negotiating a tray of complimentary cigars through the crowd, which had become as dense and loud as a trading pit on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. All the gents (and half of the ladies) clamored for the free tobacco torpedoes. Management knew that those patrons who did not become nauseated from swallowing too much

nicotine-soaked saliva would come to love the feeling of sophistication that you get from lounging in a padded chair with a glittering mixed drink in one hand a smoldering Rod of Power in the other, or from holding forth at the center of a dense-packed audience of your friends while conducting the symphony of your monologue with a cigar for your baton, or from backing some deliciously shy boy into a wall and blowing a mouthful of smoke into his face as you leaned in to take his lips between your teeth, your cigar hand reaching around the back of his head and singing his hair. Once a strong-stomached young patron had tasted these and similar public-performance pleasures of the Rod, they'd find \$10 a pop a small price to pay for twenty minutes of grown-up glamour.

Dennis was one of the saliva-swallowers, and was glad to be rid of his complimentary cigar when Rachel appropriated it from him half-smoked.

Over the course of the next three hours, another three bars saw the Kappa squadron come and go, its entourage of fellow-travelers slowly swelling, two or three entertainment-consumption machines attached to it for every one whose blood-alcohol percentage had disabled it and sent it spinning back to the Kappa house or whose beer-glazed sexual pursuit of a crippled female separated from her pack had peeled it off from the main force and sent it slumming off to who-knew-what campus dorm room decked with Duran Duran posters and scented candles. Dennis left Rachel behind at Cinnabar or some other bar along the journey: at Stonewall's (named for the Confederate general), at Genco Pura Oil Co. (the name a *Godfather* reference that none of its patrons except a few film-studies majors caught) or at The Library (so named, obviously, so that its denizens could truthfully tell their parents that they were "at the library until two"). The last stop on the Kappas' evening's campaign, its masterstroke, was staged at Barcode, a booze trough/meat market/danceteria as generic as its name implied. This final

maneuver had been preceded by a visit to the brothers' caravan of SUVs parked at downtown's edge in order to retrieve their book-bags full of champagne. The once-chilled bottles had become unpalatably warm by this time, but that didn't matter. The liquid swagger wasn't to be for drinking, particularly.

Thanks to the good fortune of his owning a useless little economy sedan (and thus not having been one of the evening's Designated Losers), Dennis' consciousness was decidedly fragmentary by the time the Kappa unit reached its final nav point. The largesse of Rachel's and Gary's lines of credit had helped as well, spotting Dennis for another drink or four between Cinnabar and The Library, but what had really put Dennis over — what had truly facilitated his evening's psychic ataxia — was the generosity of the small army of beverage-company promoters who patrolled downtown's bars, doling out (or, rather, arranging with bar managers the doling out of) free samples of their wares, in quantity sufficient to get kids plastered and to impress upon them, in their receptive state, the brand name of their benefactor. The promotions weren't hard to find if you had a mind to do so. A manufacturer which had settled its promotional liberality on a bar for the evening emblazoned it with banners and filled the sidewalk out in front of it with company touts drawing customers in. *Hey dudes, it's Miller night at Stonewall's, Rolling Rock half-price at The Library, c'mon in!* A credit card was requisite for a night downtown if you wanted to get lit up on anything that didn't send you to the bathroom every ten minutes, but if you were temporarily broke, the industry could spot you when your friends' generosity ran thin. The next morning, you'd remember who your real friends were.

If you remembered anything.

For all the lads who weren't Designated Losers — and for them as well, to be honest — Barcode was mostly a blur. Dennis' brain had ceased recording sequential information in real-

time hours prior. Only fragments were written to the hard drive. Highlights. A Sparknotes version of the evening. At one point, in a grand flourish, Two had spotted every person at the bar a drink. Barcode's bar was small but crowded nonetheless. It must have cost him a fortune, Dennis thought — a few hundred bucks, easy. What made it memorable was that Two had told everyone that it was Dennis and Gary who had bought the drinks-all-round. Dennis and Gary had protested, embarrassed — well, Dennis had been — and trying to shift responsibility back to Two. Nobody was buying it. Guys clapped Gary and Dennis on the back and screamed unintelligible thanks over the thundering house music; girls winked and kissed the boys on their cheeks and went back to their friends, giggling and pointing. A few stayed, chatting up Dennis and Gary swaying at the bar, screaming half-flirtatious pleasantries in the boys' ears. Perhaps they were genuinely interested; perhaps they were just lampreys who could sense when the sharks were hunting, could smell money in the water and hope to pick up scraps. Ultimately, it didn't matter whether it was the two red-faced boys who were the ones throwing cash around or whether, as they protested, it was the boy they ascribed it to, or whether it was altogether someone else moving with the Kappa squad that night. Somebody was spending money. If you didn't wind up in Richie Rich's bed that night, you might wind up in his friend's.

Dennis couldn't keep the lampreys' names straight. Except for a Heather (perhaps two), they all rhymed: Britney, Brandi, Jenni, Christy. But at least one of them had suctioned her toothy orifice to him. He remembered being shocked. He was half-drunk, ineloquent, a merely moderately attractive 20-year-old barely able to do anything but lean unsteadily against the bar and nod and smile and not throw up. He was doing something right, though. The blood in the water made the lampreys writhe.

Bathroom. Dennis and Gary and the lampreys crowded in. And Two, singing “Here comes Santa Claus” while dispensing Ecstasy. Was Two wearing a Santa Claus suit, or did Dennis imagine that?

Two saying “I fuckin’ love you guys.” Group hug. “Come to New York this Thanksgiving. We’ve got tons of room. It’ll be awesome.” Dennis seeing Two and Gary bump fists. Feeling himself nod.

Dance floor. An orgy of lights. The techno soundtrack throbbed at 120 beats per minute, beating out a relentless full-run march. Over the machine-gun baseline, cascading synthesizers swept back and forth across the sound system from left channel to right and back again. The vocal track was a remix of coolly ominous clips from *2001 A Space Odyssey*: “Human error, human error, pod bay doors HAL, pod bay doors, afraid I can’t do that Dave, can’t do that Dave ...” Green lasers sliced flickering patterns through clouds of cigarette smoke and glycerin vapor spewing from an unseen fog machine. Computer-controlled banks of lights swooped and twirled in synchronicity with the deafening music. Thin tubes full of luminescent chemicals glowing green and pink and blue were wound around necks and wrists and ankles. Here and there, the occasional pale-green glowing cellphone faceplate bobbed in the darkness. A lamprey ground her pelvis into Dennis’. She said something. Dennis couldn’t hear, but he saw the inside of her mouth glowing green. She flicked the tiny lightstick over her tongue before pulling Dennis’ face close and passing it into his mouth.

A bank of couches in a back room. Various girls in various states of undress. A chemically tanned body was squirming on top of Dennis. Name escaped him. A drama major. Blouse off shoulders. Telling the story of each figurine on her silver charm bracelet. Racket for 9th grade tennis champ. Hummingbird for 10th grade best friend. Heart for first boyfriend who

was an asshole but she kept the heart. Ladybug for first car when she was 16. Other silver charms: a star, a peace sign, the letter H, a shoe.

So this was Heather, possibly.

Later, making out. With one of the lampreys. Still Heather? Britney/Brandi? Someone else entirely? Unclear.

Maybe also with Two.

Hopefully a phone number in his pocket the next day would tell him who he'd swapped saliva with the night before.

More group hugs.

* * *

"Surely that's not legal," Tom says.

Dennis, having been lost in the torrent of his soliloquy, doesn't quite catch Tom's interjection. When he finally gathers his wits, he sees that Tom is leaning back in his chair, pushing his notepad to the edge of his knees as if he wanted nothing more to do with it. Caught off guard — and aware that he has no awareness of how much time has passed — he waits for Tom to elaborate.

Tom observes his interlocutor's hesitation. "Liquor manufacturers providing free alcohol. To underage students. Surely that's not legal."

Dennis nods in understanding. "Ah! Well. It's not as if they're out on the street doling the stuff out. They make arrangements with different bars on different nights. Providing a bar with a certain number of free kegs or units or whatever, I suppose, to sell cheap or give away.

Good PR for the brand, good foot traffic for the bar. And of course free beer for the, ah, clientele.” Dennis’ grin is more of a sneer.

“It sounds like you’ve been on both sides of the bar. You weren’t by any chance one of those promoters at some point, were you?”

Dennis’ expression goes blank. “No. One humiliation I avoided.” He looks unwilling to continue.

This will be interesting, Tom thought. Someday. He pulls his notebook back onto his lap and makes a note without Dennis noticing. “You know,” Tom chirps, his playfully remonstrative tone heralding a change of mood if not subject: “you can’t hang a pistol on the wall in Act 1 without someone using it by Act 5.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry. Chekhov’s Gun. What were the champagne bottles for?”

“Oh! Gotcha.” Dennis’ face brightens with understanding, then clouds again when he considers his answer. “Um. Well. It’s — they were — it’s not that big of a deal. They were mostly just a prop. Once we got in the middle of a big group inside a bar, we’d break them out. And we’d, you know, just share it around. Fill up people’s plastic beer cups and stuff. Pour it on a few heads. Or t-shirts.” Dennis blushes. “Just stupid college kids playing at being big shots. The sound of those popping corks alone were like a dog whistle.”

It occurs to Tom that Dennis is exhibiting considerably more shame than he needs to be about some college hijinks that were, in the larger scheme of trouble that college boys can get themselves into, innocent almost unto quaintness. It’s almost as if he and Dennis have switched generational roles for a moment — as if Dennis were the 1958 college grad ashamed about sneaking drinks and putting his hand on some co-ed’s sweated breast, whereas Tom had spent

the better part of 1978 sharing hallucinogenic mushroom tea and Mallarmé with friends. Including lady-friends. Tom says as much to Dennis, stopping slightly short of full embellishment. Dennis seems relieved.

But Tom knows that it's not varsity antics with champagne that are dampening Dennis' usually ebullient mood. "I take it that you eventually retrieved the credit cards from that desk drawer."

"Eventually," croaks Dennis.

* * *

Seventy-two hours after the Barcode bacchanalia, Dennis' strong young liver had filtered most of the neurotoxins out of his bloodstream. Warm evening sunlight filtered amber through the red and orange leaves of the oaks that spread their branches protectively over UMA's main quad. A crisp, clear, perfect mid-Atlantic autumn evening. Somewhere off-campus, someone was burning leaves in their front yard. Dennis had spent Saturday recovering and Sunday reconstructing. A couple of phone calls to the banks that issued his credit cards, to verify the new credit limits to which they'd been raised, had been followed by a Me Day, a Mental Health Day, a restorative Sunday at the mall: haircut, Ralph Lauren chinos, button-down oxford shirt, a smart new pair of Doc Martens, a matching belt. None of which were particularly self-indulgent, so he splurged a bit and finally, having tired of being teased about it by Two and Gary all semester, made the wireless plunge and got himself a cellphone. One of the newer, slimmer models that were just then coming out. Dennis had always been simultaneously impressed and vaguely embarrassed by the brick his father lugged around. It made him seem so 80s. When

Dennis imagined his father, that's how he pictured him: in his car as he was backing out of the driveway; or standing in his office, looking out through a floor-to-ceiling plate glass window over downtown Worcester; or off behind the bleachers at some Little League baseball game; or out smoking in the back yard in his business slacks, tie and silk suspenders, blazer tossed over a lawn chair, sleeves rolled up — in every case, his giant war-hammer of a cellphone in one hand and a sheaf of documents in the other, dispensing subtle legal counsel via a three-pound toaster pressed to the side of his head. The newer models, finally, were ones that didn't require a shoulder bag to carry. He thought he might show off his sleek new toy to his old man, but probably not. "What do you need that for?" his dad would say. Or a lecture about how his allowance was for school necessities. Or worse, a skeptical frown when he asked how Dennis could afford a cellphone on his slender subsidy.

Rachel had a cellphone, of course, and Dennis called her on it as he hurried across campus to meet Rachel at the library. (The actual one.)

"Don't tell me you're still in your room," she answered, her annoyance managing to come across despite the fact that she was whispering.

"Nope. On my way. Just running a couple of minutes late."

"So you finally joined the modern age?"

"You'll see."

"Aren't you just full of mysteries this evening," Rachel said, still sotto voce. "Planning on telling me where you're taking me to dinner?"

Montparnasse. "You'll see." Dennis grinned at a pretty girl who made eye contact with him as he walked past. His first thought was that it was the cellphone, but it could have been the haircut or the fresh new duds. Or simply the fact that he was on his way to a spendy dinner at a

shmancy restaurant: that always gave you an attractive air, an aura of purpose and assurance and maturity. “You still at the library?”

“Yeah.”

“Wear something nice?”

“Yes.” Annoyance definitely came through that time. She always looked nice. She wasn’t some peasant, geek or slovenly frat-boy.

“There in ten.”

“I’ll be out front.”

Rachel gathered her books and went downstairs to wait. She wasn’t comfortable waiting, sitting alone on a bench out in front of the library. *She* knew that she had an objective, that she had Plans — that she wasn’t just sitting out there with nothing better to do than to take in the evening, to watch the shadows lengthen, to watch pairs of students giggle along the sidewalk and lone professors scurry in and out of the building with stacks of books clutched to their chests — but no one observing her would necessarily know that. Sitting alone, an attractive young woman might as well have been wearing a sign that said *talk to me, flirt with me, share my personal space, take off my clothes*.

A group of work-study students stood to one side of the library entrance, smoking cigarettes and conversing in some alien tongue. Every now and then one would look over at Rachel, regarding her without expression.

Rachel wished that Dennis would show up.

Normal, healthy, well-balanced college students — that is, students in whose wallets and pocketbooks plastic filled the lacunae left by fast-evaporating parental cash — cut not-too-wide swaths around these work-study students. It was all well and noble to say that you were “putting

yourself through school,” but really, that was the sort of thing that only 50-year-olds did — or had done, at any rate, “back in the day” (i.e.: a time longer ago than could appear real to anyone whose faculty of memory had been decimated by jump-cut editing and 30-second TV spots). The sophisticated credit infrastructure of the modern post-industrial economy had surely rendered unnecessary such medieval self-imposed hardship. They were second-class citizens, these work-study students, and normal students were uncomfortable around them in the same way that they were uncomfortable around any clerk or janitor, their condescension awkwardly hamstrung by their bloodlessly theoretical egalitarian political ideals. There was simply no comfortable way to behave around work-study students. What were they? Why, Rachel mused, did they cleave to this thousand-year-old notion of personal economy? Were they Luddites, Puritans? Was it ideological or merely their own form of stiff-necked counter-condescension? Every day, scattered here and there around campus, you’d come across see a cluster of them — smoking cigarettes on their break outside the library or by the back door of a university eatery, aprons greasy, hair done up in sanitary nets. Their amphibious status gave them access to an alien world, one of servers, teachers, policemen, university accountants: Townies. It was a world that existed in a certain way and for a certain purpose; it wasn’t one for a student to enter, to make friends in. The 50-year-old research librarian was a grown-up, was Staff, was one of Them. You were polite to her, as you would be to the middle-aged black woman who rang you up at the campus cafeteria, to the bespectacled old man who owned the independent bookstore, to the crow-footed forty-something woman who managed Montparnasse. You weren’t friends with these people. You didn’t walk them to their cars. You didn’t go over to their houses late at night after the restaurant had closed. They went to each other’s houses. You had your life and

they had theirs. Equal but separate. Work-study students crossed lines. Were interloping. Passing.

Rachel cast another sidelong glance at the group smoking by the door. They weren't harmlessly pitiable or merely queer. They were threatening.

But why? What nonsense. Rachel re-crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap, her jaws tight, ashamed of her irrationality. But the feeling was real enough: the sense of threat, of danger. Why, though? Surely it couldn't be because of any practical, material threat. If you pissed off one of these amphibious students who worked at the library, say, what risk were you incurring? That she might recall your books? That he might slap you with a 50-cent fine? If you responded coldly to the flirtation of a student in a greasy apron and sanitary hair-net, he'd do what, exactly? Intentionally overcook your grilled chicken sandwich?

What was it, then?

Rachel looked back at the work-study students by the door — not furtively this time, but inquiring, inspecting, questioning — and there it was, as plain as day. Perhaps they'd seen her turn her head or perhaps they were already watching her, but either way, they were looking at her. Not all of them. Just one. Just looking. Not smiling, not frowning, not curious. Another of the students noticed her friend looking away at something and followed her gaze; when it landed on Rachel, it was as devoid of expression as if she were glancing at a stop sign, a newspaper dispenser, a parked car. That's what it was, Rachel realized. The utter blankness of that expression. Immediately, a hundred times that Rachel had walked past them on campus came to mind. The way they looked at you. When you walked past a group of them huddled outside a doorway or clustered at a table in the cafeteria, it was the way their eyes regarded you. Flat, appraising. As if they disdained to read the signs you cultivated to signal yourself to the world,

whoever you might be: the backpack of a certain brand, color and style, or the absence of one; the worn-down sneakers, prim pumps or sexy strappy sandals; the grimy machine-distressed blue jeans or frilly miniskirt; the watch or silver tennis bracelet or colored rubber bands around your wrist to indicate your political and/or charitable allegiances; the silver charms on a wispy silver thread around your neck, or studded black leather band, or hemp braid with a crystal pendant with *Namaste* inscribed into the back; the hair and nails and face and friends you wore. It was as if these work-study students simply disregarded the lot of it, brushed it aside, pulled it away like wispy clothing to appraise your naked body. That's what the feeling was, Rachel realized, a little queasy. An image flickered in her head: being abducted by aliens who took her into a laboratory, cut her clothes away, measured her cervix with calipers, discussed her in an unearthly tongue.

At which point Dennis arrived, thank God. Looking unusually well-turned-out, too. Rachel couldn't help but smile, though she didn't go so far as to look over her shoulder at the work-study students. Not only would that be gloating, but unprovoked, as well: because who was to say that they envied her Plans, or that they paid any attention to her at all? Anyway, they were easily forgotten, more or less, Dennis shining like a newly minted silver dollar as he was. And Montparnasse, to top it off. That was something to throw back at her friends when they teased her about Dennis' part-time job at Wal-Mart. She was glad she had the disposable camera in her purse.

Montparnasse was as advertised: excellent, top-shelf. Much too high-tone to be conceited: the waiters there were, instead, disconcertingly informal. From their garrulous demeanor, you might almost have thought you were at Bennigan's until they recited the evening's specials — wild chukar in a Virginia blackberry coulis, Chilean sea bass garnished

with shaved truffles, chipotle-glazed venison meat loaf — or until you saw the prices. The servers didn't need to put on airs; the bill told you what Montparnasse was worth. And what you were. You weren't going to get out of there for less than \$100 for a Spartan dinner for two, and once you'd reached that point, what the hell? Why not start off with steamed mussels or raw oysters? Why not see if you could taste the difference between a \$13 5-liter box and a \$25 1-liter bottle of wine? As previously noted, there were only two reasons you'd take someone other than a parent (visiting/paying) to Montparnasse, and neither your marriage proposal nor your ploy to buy away an infidelity was going to encounter much success if you made your date skip appetizers and drink Sprite.

Between entrees and dessert and halfway through their second bottle of wine, Dennis popped the question. Not, fortunately/alas, to be wed. "I said I was gonna ask you something," he slurred.

Rachel's eyes widened (to the extent that wine-weighted eyelids permitted), but no particular verbal response was forthcoming. Her heart skipped a beat. Not in any fluttering romantic anticipation: merely worry, excitement, anticipation.

"Come t'New York this Thanksgiving," Dennis said.

Rachel's heart stopped fluttering and sank into her stomach like a wasp that had been foamed with a blast of insecticide. Not that Thanksgiving in New York was anything to sniff at. And certainly not because Dennis hadn't proposed to marry her. She'd half-expected that he might, and would have loved it if he had, but of course she'd decline. She had never given the thought of accepting such a proposal, should it be forthcoming, any serious consideration. It was out of the question. But Dennis didn't have to feel that way.

Dennis continued. “Gary and I. We’re going up to visit Two — uh, Taylor Bloom’s parents. In New York. He invited us. We’re gonna drive there instead of Massachusetts. You should come with us. He said we could bring, um, friends. Apparently they’ve got like a big apartment on Central Park or something.”

Please say you can’t, Dennis thought. Or rather, felt. It was definitely too callous a thought consciously to entertain. And it would have been perfectly fine — perfectly fun, probably — to have had Rachel there. But this was New York! It wasn’t as if Dennis hadn’t ever been before — he had, a couple of times — but not in the Inner Circle, not with someone who lived there, who had grown up there, who knew the cool clubs and the seedy dives.

“Is Gary bringing someone?”

Dennis suppressed a laugh at two simultaneous thoughts: one, Gary dating anyone seriously enough to spend an entire week with them; and two, Gary showing up for Thanksgiving at the Bloom’s allegedly posh Central Park apartment with some platinum-blond Richmond hooker poured into a red leather dress. “No, I’m pretty sure he’s not.”

“What about Taylor? Does he have a girlfriend up there?”

Dennis shrugged.

“It’s a lovely thought, Dennis,” Rachel said as she squeezed his damp-palmed hand across the table, “but I don’t want to be a third wheel. And I’m pretty sure that my parents would go into hysterics if I skipped town for Thanksgiving. Especially New York. And staying at some boy’s house they don’t know?”

“But aren’t your parents Jewish?”

Rachel gave him a quizzical look, as if to say *And Jews can’t celebrate Thanksgiving?* But she let it pass. “Sort of. But they’re not nearly as Jewish as they are Southern.”

Dennis nodded, doing his best to look disappointed.

* * *

Tom's scowling.

Dennis finally notices, realizing that he doesn't know how long Tom has been like that.

"What's wrong?"

"I put myself through school," Tom says absent-mindedly, lost in thought.

Horried, Dennis leaps to apologize. "That was Rachel's hang-up about work-study students, not mine. Not that it wasn't a pretty common attitude. But seeing as I was moonlighting at Wal-Mart, I kept my mouth shut when she went on about that. I didn't mean any offense ..."

Tom quickly comes back around and waves off Dennis' apology. "None taken. It's not that. I was just — it's — well, I suppose I was bottlenecked. Thinking about a number of things. Education in the 18th century, Jefferson's pastoral ideal ... the learned gentleman farmer ... how different things became in the 20th century. The whole model of education changed quite drastically, and it's difficult — perhaps it's impossible — to separate it from the changing ways that education gets paid for. Going from nobility and privilege to this flatter democratized social system. The evolution of education from the seven liberal arts of the classical and medieval periods to this explosion of disciplines we have today. Not all, but so many of them pragmatic. And how that's simultaneous, in many respects, with the very different ways that an education gets paid for in the 20th century. I need to think about it some more."

Dennis nods, half-understanding. "Marx troubles you, doesn't he?"

Tom is caught off-guard. “Marx?”

Perhaps Dennis’ understanding was better than half. On the other hand, he was swinging wild, a little. “Just the basic idea that ideology is shaped by material conditions. I can’t say I retained much more about Marx from college than that. But there’s something about that that’s unsettling.”

“To you?”

Dennis pauses. “I’m not sure. I think no — not to me. If a new breed of middle-class student is changing the face of education in the 20th century — making it more practical, trade-school-ish, whatever — I’m not sure I have a problem with that. I’m not sure I have a problem with trends. I don’t know. I never really thought about it. I guess I just figure that trends are there to be observed, not ...” Dennis, catching himself, trails off.

“Not wished away?”

Dennis makes the most noncommittal gesture he can manage, mortified at the thought that he’s on the verge of accusing Tom of wishful thinking.

Tom, however, doesn’t seem offended. He’s grinning and nodding. “Like I said, I need to give it some more thought. A most compelling session. And next week, if you don’t object, perhaps you’ll say a bit about autumn in New York. Why it seems so inviting.”

Tom’s eyebrows wiggle, so Dennis knows that there’s been a reference that he’s missed. He ignores it. He sighs, a bit more dejected than it would appear he has any cause to be. “If you like. I haven’t thought about that week in New York for ages. Which is weird. I think that’s when my plans to get an MSW got nuked.”

“Next week,” Tom says, looking at his watch. “Susan’s going to be home soon, and I should get dinner started.”

Dennis nods, abashed, scribbles out his check and hurries out, wondering as he goes at why he feels so anxious about Tom's wife coming home while he's still there, as if he and Tom were cheating on her.

* * *

"Oh for fuck's sake, Dennis, call up." Dennis was the one who'd been driving in circles around Two's block for twenty minutes, but Gary is the one who was impatient. Probably just because he hadn't peed since Philadelphia. Dennis had done so at Walt Whitman — that is, at the Walt Whitman rest stop off I-95 in New Jersey — and was thus comparatively sated. Gary, on the other hand, had been in the car for seven hours and hadn't gotten laid yet. The one small joint he'd brought had worn off hours ago, in Maryland.

"I'm looking for parking, dickweed. You call. Here." Dennis dug his cellphone out of a pocket. "The number's on that sheet on the floor."

Gary dialed. A woman answered. Two's mom, presumably. Gary would normally have just said *Is Taylor there?* but, being on the verge of meeting these people (and sleeping in their condo, and sharing their Thanksgiving dinner), he managed to dig some manners up from his Winthrop past. "Is this Mrs. Bloom?"

"Speaking. Is this Dennis?"

"No ma'am, this is Gary. Dennis is driving around in circles looking for somewhere to park. We were wondering if there was a lot around here that we should put the car in."

Elizabeth Bloom laughed, bright and clean and twinkling like shattered glass in a wind chime. "Just pull up in front of the building and let the valet take it."

Gary faltered. Valet parking on the Upper East Side would cost, who knows, \$100 a day? “Um, I’m sure we can find something on the street ...”

Twenty stories above the circling boys, Elizabeth set the high-carbon santoku knife and ceramic sharpener down on the kitchen counter, absentmindedly peering out the window as if she could have picked out her interlocutors from among the traffic twenty stories below. Street parking? Even if they found a spot, which they wouldn’t, they’d have to move the car — well, sometime or another. There was street cleaning, but it had been so long since Elizabeth had parked on the street that she’d forgotten what days it was. “You don’t understand. The valet will take your car to our garage. We’ve got extra spaces. I’ll call down and let them know.” She considered who she might be talking to for a moment and then added helpfully: “Just give him five dollars for a tip.”

Gary’s embarrassment was far outweighed by the prospect of not having to pay for valet parking on the Upper East Side. “Great! That’s great. Um — thank you.”

Well, Elizabeth thought to herself, Taylor *did* say that these boys weren’t from Boston. “I’ll send Nate downstairs to meet you guys.”

“Nate?”

“Sorry. Taylor. When his sister is — never mind. Long story. We’ll see you shortly.”

“Who’s Nate?” asked Dennis when Gary had hung up.

“Just drive around front.”

* * *

“Who’s Nate?” Dennis asked Taylor Two when they met him, beaming and nearly hopping in excitement, in the sumptuous wood-paneled lobby of the apartment building.

“Dudes! Road warriors! You made it!” Two chirped. Everyone bumped fists and punched each other’s shoulders. “This is fucking awesome. This is the first time anyone from school’s come up. This is going to be so fucking great!”

“Who’s Nate?” Dennis asked again, mock-impatient.

“Ah,” said Two. “I’m like The Man With Two Brains, with like six names or whatever. *I’m* Nate. But only when my sister’s in town. Don’t worry, I’ll explain.” Three porters in black uniforms were edging closer, eyeing Dennis’ and Gary’s overnight bags. “Don’t worry, Kem,” Two said to one of the porters. “We’ve got it.” Kemba bowed slightly and gestured to his two assistants. They withdrew.

In the elevator, Two continued. “All right, let me give you the thirty-second elevator treatment. My parents are totally cool. Michael and Elizabeth.”

“Do we call them that?” interrupted Dennis. “Or Mr. and Mrs. Bloom?”

“Um — actually I don’t know. I guess Mr. and Mrs. for starters. They’re cool, but don’t get my dad started on religion unless you want to be, like, prayed over. Here’s the FYI. My sister and her husband are here. They’re — um. Well.” The gorgeous old elevator, wood-paneled like the lobby, shuddered. It was too lovely to have replaced during the building’s most recent makeover. “They’re difficult. He’s got money. Carolina pharmaceutical heir.”

Gary laid a hand on Two’s shoulder. “Dude. *You* have money.”

Unable to restrain a smile, Two shook his head. “Not like this. They’ve got like private jets and shit. He doesn’t even work. They live in Carolina so he can do NASCAR. He’s a wanna-be racecar driver or something. Anyway, things are tense between them and my folks.

They haven't been home for Thanksgiving or anything else in like five years. They weren't even speaking for a while. It's not gonna be a problem, but just — just steer clear. Kay? Now you won't be ambushed. I love my sister, but she's become, like, a cunt on wheels."

Dennis and Gary nodded. "Names?" Dennis asked.

"Ah! Right. Megan and Taylor. Grabowski." Two's interlocutors grinned. Gary opened his mouth to tease, but Two cut him off. "I know, it's ridiculous. It's like she took the name Butt-Chewski or something over Bloom. But whatever, dudes, that's his name. And — "

The elevator finally reached its destination, its door lurching open with a creak onto a gorgeously remodeled hallway finished out in dove grays and halogen sconces. "And that's why I'm Nate here. It's my middle name." It occurred to Dennis that hallway was strangely dark. The sun had been shining outside, a full fall evening sun shining bright over New York, glinting silver off skyscraper windows and reddish-yellow off the canopy that carpeted Central Park. Curious, Dennis thought, that sunlight went at such a premium here — that the architects would never waste a drop of it on a mere hallway. They were twenty stories up, and they might as well have been winding through a subterranean intestine a thousand feet below ground. He felt a chill.

Gary was running his finger along dove-gray wainscoting. Two was talking. "It's what my sister started calling me when she married Taylor. Guess they didn't have the two-three system."

Two grinned. It was queer, Dennis thought. Two's new life as an independent young adult at college entailed being stripped of his name and given a number to replace it, and rather than feeling demeaned or anonymous, he felt proud. Was it the rationality of the system? Small chance Two admired that. Was it the most unique name that anyone had ever given him? The most personal? Taylor, sure; every second boy born in the 1970s must have had the name "Taylor" cribbed from the obstetrician's intake form belonging to the patient next door. But

“Nathan”? Dennis frowned. Two was the only Nate he knew. Maybe “Nate” was commonplace — was not-a-name — in a world Dennis didn’t know.

Taylor/Two/Nate pushed open the door to his parents’ 20th-floor condominium. Sunlight burst into the hallway as if it were an intestine that had ruptured. Gary squinted. Two motioned them inside.

“Greed, for lack of a better word,” said Gordon Gecko, “is good.”

This was the scene. Elizabeth Bloom had set down her high-carbon santoku knife and was flowing across the living room towards the boys entering the apartment. Taylor Grabowski, Two’s brother-in-law, sprawled scowling on a leather couch, half-watching Gordon Gecko’s climactic monologue from Michael Bloom’s favorite movie, *Wall Street*. Michael, home early from work to help Elizabeth manage the guest influx, was vacillating between unpacking *Wall Street*’s subtle Christian allegory to his son-in-law on the couch and greeting his blood-son’s friends entering at the front door. “Taylor,” Michael said. It wasn’t clear who he was addressing. Perhaps it wasn’t clear to him.

“Nate,” Elizabeth corrected, flowing forward, knife in hand, toward the boys. “So these are your intrepid road warriors. Please, come in. Welcome to New York.”

Grabowski didn’t turn his head. These new arrivals were of even less interest than the video of *Wall Street* that his father-in-law had been foisting upon him to make some fucking *point*. But maybe their presence would divert his father-in-law from his tiresome sermonizing. They’d only just arrived that afternoon, he and Megan, but he wasn’t sure how much of this he could take. Grabowski found his father-in-law insufferably — well. Grabowski couldn’t put his finger on it, exactly. Prying, plying, trying? Jewy. That pretty much hit it, Grabowski thought. And the fact that his father-in-law dressed up this Jewiness in some weird New-Age Christianity

shit just made it that much more annoying. Family get-togethers sucked. Everybody was fake. Smiles and manipulation. The apartment sucked. Too small, everyone in everybody else's business. New York sucked. Too many cars, too many people, too much hassle, too much noise. It was enough to make you claustrophobic. Grabowski would've given anything to blip out of this joint and spend Thanksgiving at the house that he and Megan had built in the Carolina mountains. Just the two of them, he and Megan, and their dogs: now *that* might be a tolerable Thanksgiving, if Thanksgiving weren't stupid to begin with. Mountains to look at and a forest to walk in and a couple of old Maseratis that he'd been fucking around with. Megan (and where the hell had she snuck off to, by the way, leaving him to fend for himself?) hadn't seemed any less aggravated by the whole New York scene than he was. The minute she gave the word, they'd jet. At least they had that. Escape was never far away. Just thinking about the Gulfstream parked at Teterboro Airport made Grabowski feel a little calmer. Yeah: like a cutter with razor blades tucked away for comfort in her bedside table, he thought ruefully, picturing his mother on the toilet, legs spread, jeweled hands on bleeding thighs, mascara smeared on Botoxed cheeks. He pushed the thought away. Fucking fucked-up world of shit.

"Greed," Gecko continued, his eyes piercing out from the oversized projection TV screen, "is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies — cuts through — and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit."

Two ushered his college buddies into the apartment. Introductions were made. A Filipina, eyes lowered, quietly collected the boys' bags and carried them off to the guest rooms. Dennis hung onto his bag a moment too long. Elizabeth set her knife down absentmindedly on an end table to greet her son's guests. As soon as Dali (i.e. Dalisay, the Filipina) returned, the knife would find its way back to the kitchen.

Dalisay was just one of many anti-entropic forces embedded in this universe. She felt no resentment about her role, only honor. It was an honor to serve well. It was profitable, too. Dali didn't clear six figures on her own, but she and her husband Igme (the Blooms' driver) certainly did between the two of them, and it had enabled them, a few years back, finally to move out of the traditional Filipino neighborhood in Jackson Heights and take their place among other normal middle-class Americans in a modest but tidy apartment on the Upper West Side. Very Upper, granted — but it was not Harlem, and there was a good Catholic school nearby where their children could easily be mistaken for Asians or Latinos. And it was not Saudi Arabia, thanks be to merciful Christ, where Dali had a cousin who worked for no pay whatsoever. She and Igme had tried to help this cousin get out of Saudi, but it was difficult. There were international politics involved. A nice man at the Filipino consulate just down 5th Avenue had said he would look into it, but that Dali's cousin was not the only Filipina to have her passport confiscated by her Saudi employers — not by any means, not by tens of thousands. Saudi Arabia was an important friend to the United States. It was all very sad. But it all made one that much more grateful to blessed Jesus for the good fortune that He had bestowed on her and Igme.

Elizabeth had crooked her elbows into Dennis' and Gary's and was leading them into the living room, soliciting information from them in mock-conspiratorial tones about whether Nathan was behaving himself at college, staying up late, studying hard, keeping his room clean, sharing his toys with friends, etc.

The video trucked right along, oblivious. Like Dali's Blessed Savior, Gordon Gecko — also an idealist, also a patriot — had little time for familial entanglements. "Greed, in all of its forms — greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge — has marked the upward surge of mankind, and greed — you mark my words — will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other

malfunctioning corporation called the USA.” Michael paused the film. Both in their shirt-sleeves, their hairdos slicked back à la Pat-Reily, their silk suspenders ribboning down their chests like the double-bars on dollar signs, Gecko and Michael Bloom were bright reflections of each other, separated more by the millimeter-thin screen of the projection television than by the fact that one was a so-called fictional construct and the other so-called flesh and blood. As Michael crossed room to greet the boys, he passed in front of Gecko and, for a moment, disappeared. “Gentlemen,” Bloom proclaimed. “Welcome to New York. This is our son-in-law, Taylor Grabowski.” Grabowski didn’t turn around, but did at least wave a hand to indicate his acknowledgment of people standing somewhere behind him. “You’re just in time. Taylor and I were having a fascinating discussion about Providence.”

Grabowski sneered, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Central Park. Discussion? The man couldn’t participate in a discussion if he were handed a script. A different script.

A pigeon coming in for a fast landing to join its buddies on the windowsill miscalculated, thrown off by the evening sky reflected in the glass, striking the window and bouncing off. Grabowski, the only one to notice, smiled.

“You’ve seen *Wall Street*,” Bloom stated. The boys nodded quickly, caught off-guard. Dennis was momentarily distracted by the doppelganger of Bloom looming on the screen over Bloom’s shoulder. Hadn’t Two said at some point that his dad was an investment-bank front-man of some sort? Not a movie actor ... until Dennis realized that it was Michael Douglas, not Michael Bloom, frozen mid-prophecy on the wall. “A fascinating, instructive film.” This can’t be real, Dennis thought. Parkers, porters, valets, a 20th-floor apartment on Central Park — and now this? An Upper East Side arbitrageur excising the villain’s speeches from a morality play

and holding them up as models of behavior? No, it was all too pat. Glancing at the movie behind the man, Dennis experienced a moment of queasy uncertainty. Which side of the screen was the fiction on?

“A film widely misinterpreted as a celebration of greed,” Bloom continued. “Nowhere more so than on Wall Street itself.”

So it *was* too easy. Dennis’ sense of relief was instantly followed by renewed wariness. But this *is* the million-dollar Wall Street financier dude, he thought. So what’s this frugal shtick about? False modesty? Fake, but hardly any less stereotypical. Maybe more.

Dennis would have to wait to find out, however. Elizabeth floated across the family room and laid a hand on her husband’s arm. “Give them a chance to catch their breath, Michael.” A perfect hand, Dennis noted. A hand out of a magazine. And legs to match. Elizabeth was Two’s biological mom, wasn’t she? She’d have to be forty-something, maybe fifty-something. The hands were usually the telltale signs of a woman’s age. Not Elizabeth’s. The nails were perfect but not gaudy: nails painted in the subtle French style, cuticles trimmed. Strong tendons webbed across the back of it and up her lightly tan forearm. Exercise, sunshine. Chemicals or surgery, maybe. Laser liver-spot removal. There was probably a small army of technicians responsible for that hand, Dennis thought: a phalanx of Korean manicurists, personal trainers, tennis coaches, plastic surgeons, nutritionists. Dennis was right.

Elizabeth pulled her husband aside. “Have you called about the car?” There was something about Elizabeth’s voice, too — something so superior as to be absolutely relaxed. It made her seem alien to Dennis, as if he were in the presence of a movie star or a Liechtensteinian duchess vacationing on the French Riviera.

Michael lifted the hand from his arm and kissed it tenderly, brushing his lips across the hulking diamond engagement ring. “Dali?” Michael said. Dali materialized. Had he been in the room the whole time? “Have Igme arrange for a Suburban. We’ll be seven tonight.”

“At 7:30?”

Michael nodded. Dali disappeared.

“Monica?” Elizabeth inquired. Family code, of a sort. Monica was the name of the restaurant (and its proprietor) where the Blooms customarily took guests that they didn’t need to impress. A nice place: intimate, Nouvelle American, just a few streets in from the Park; nice enough to be comfortable, but not so much that one would have to forego a new purse. Not that they had to count every nickel and dime, but still, prices *were* marked on things, and it was impossible not to notice them.

“Kenzo,” Michael said.

Elizabeth’s depilated eyebrows arched. “Kenzo?” She didn’t need to elaborate. *Recherché* sushi joint qua *de rigueur* emblem of conspicuous consumption, Kenzo could easily run to \$400 per person, after drinks and tax and tip. Not that that sum would secure you a feast of any Brobdingnagian proportions: a few six-piece *makizushi* rolls made from tuna flown in fresh that afternoon from the Sea of Japan, some *nigiri* slabs of similarly airlifted salmon or *unagi*, half a bottle of *daiginjō* sake made from the silky sand of rice grains that had been polished down to specks the size of ants’ eyes. It wasn’t that it was too expensive; any restaurant much under \$200 per person was probably geared toward the tourist crowd. That was the thing about living in New York — or, more precisely, about being a New Yorker. New York wasn’t just an international city, an open city. It belonged to the world, to other people: to busloads of tourists from Des Moines or Osaka, Vancouver or Frankfurt; to clutches of Midwestern

honeymooners taking pictures of their filet mignons or Baked Alaskas at Tavern on the Green; to swirling crowds of Jersey kids screeching and stumbling on the ice at Rockefeller Center. Worst of all, New York was the occasional long-weekend playground to just every upper-middle-class upper-middle-brow couple in America who thought they had it made, who'd extracted a tidy sum from one of America's late-20th-century speculative bubbles (transistor electronics, the Florida land boom, the Nifty Fifty, uranium, computer time-sharing, gold, oil futures, Texas skyscrapers, savings-and-loans, high-tech weapons systems, pharmaceuticals, biotech, Japanese and Kuwaiti securities, junk bonds, emerging markets, dot-coms, hedge funds, and now securitized sub-prime mortgages, credit default swaps and derivatives) or who, as was increasingly rare, had inherited and were slowly eroding vast fortunes extracted from soil and sweat a century ago. From Elizabeth's perspective as a Real New Yorker (i.e., in her case, a Bostonian by birth), these high-tone tourists, whether they were *nouveaux riches* or *anciens*, presented the greatest challenge to any New York plutocrat struggling to distinguish him- or herself in a city of a hundred thousand millionaires. New Yorkers were constantly in danger of these wealthy interlopers, never more than a few months ahead of them at the right shows, the right restaurants. At the moment, Kenzo was such a place; in a year, it would have expanded into larger quarters and would be catering to the Fodor's-and-Michelin crowd.

Michael gave his wife's immaculate hand a reassuring pat. "Young guests," he whispered. "Kenzo's fun." Meaning: Kenzo would be informal enough, dress-code-wise, that Two's young college buddies (not to mention their hosts) wouldn't feel uncomfortable. Even Michael's son-in-law, though heir to a half-a-billion dollar pharmaceuticals fortune, dressed more as if he were going hiking or quail hunting than as if he were spending Thanksgiving in New York. The culture of jacketless, open-collar informality that was prevalent on the West

Coast was spreading ever eastward — no less a clotheshorse corporation than IBM had recently repealed its dress code and implemented Informal Fridays — but it hadn't quite penetrated New York, where even Steven Spielberg in a black turtleneck could still earn himself a sneer at 21. And considering the abysmal corporate-catering depths to which 21 had fallen, that was saying something.

His hosts temporarily distracted, Dennis had taken the opportunity to quietly sidle over toward the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Central Park. Dali eyed him warily, as if suspicious that he might slip a Steuben glass dolphin into his pocket, but smiled obsequiously as soon as he made eye contact with her. The son-in-law — Garbinsky? Grab-ass-ky? — was ignoring him entirely. That was a bit of a disappointment to Dennis: Grabowski — hair rumpled, blue jeans slightly worn, shirt wrinkled and hiking boots propped carelessly on the coffee table — was one of the more interesting figures in the room. Out of uniform, apparently. Definitely not what you'd expect a zillionaire to look like. And his silence, his scowl and his hunched shoulders positively screamed resentment. Dennis was fascinated; he'd love to have known what it was about. If anything: it might be just a default setting. Or a pose: maybe that's what *hip* looks like in a young zillionaire. Dennis didn't know; Grabowski was Dennis' first zillionaire.

Dennis turned toward the window, looking out over the skyscraper-framed Park as if to find an answer there. Surely there was one: out *there*, in *that*. What was "that"? Nothing special; nothing more than the perspective on New York City that a multi-million-dollar condo on Central Park would afford: a panoramic view out over an undulating sea of evergreen and seasonally amber treetops, on the far side of which rose a mountain range of glass and steel, towers full of human ants, each little cell in view another million-dollar palace, many less, some perhaps infinitely more grand. A phrase popped into his head from an art history class:

Machines for living in. Le Corbusier. You couldn't even call these things machines, thought Dennis. Not these towers, with their hundreds of levels, thousands of cells, millions of systems: water, elevators, electricity, air conditioning, heat, security, telephone cabling, computer networking, trash removal. Who knew what else. Machines for cooking, fucking, fighting, sleeping, playing, writing poetry in. They were "machines" like the Space Shuttle is a machine, like the Midwestern power grid is a machine, like the Federal Reserve is a machine, like a university is a machine. Any one of these skyscrapers probably housed as many human beings, depending on the time of day, as a mid-sized university or modest city. A machine, then, fine: like the United States is a machine.

The sun was setting behind the mountain range of skyscrapers across the park, silhouetting the jagged rectangular horizon with a peach and pink and salmon sky. The buildings should have been dark, thus backlit, but they blazed with fire, their windows reflecting secondarily the setting sun reflected onto them from the windows of the East Side towers. It was a great big crucible, thought Dennis. Maybe if you stood in the center of Central Park, posted just the right distance from the Upper East and West sides of town, at just the right time of day, when the rising or setting sunlight was captured and boxed into this hall of mirrors — at just that time of day, in just that spot, lying on your picnic blanket or watching as your son used a stick to push his model sailboat back out into the center of the pond, you'd be burned to a crisp. Caught at the focal point of an infinite loop of solar radiation caught between mirrors fifty blocks long, instantly vaporized. Dennis grinned to himself at the thought. He couldn't help it. He imagined an NYPD beat cop posted to the fatal spot every evening, standing next to a blackened one-yard-square of Central Park blocked off with yellow POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS tape, shooing people away and looking nervously at his watch.

“You’ve got to be fucking KIDDING me.”

Dennis spun around from the window, startled by the abrupt intrusion of incivility into this idyll. His jaw dropped. Elizabeth — unblemished, willowy, urbane — had somehow transported herself away from her husband’s arm, across the living room and into, wonder of wonders, a startling change of costume: perfect naked high-arched feet, sweat pants, oversized NC State basketball jersey hanging loose over perfect breasts, blue-gray eyes fierce and furious, black hair pulled back into a severe pony-tail that splashed down over one bare tan shoulder. Her arms stuck stiffly down her sides, fists balled.

It wasn’t Elizabeth at all, though physically, it could have been her sister. If anyone could have perceived the difference of 27 years between Elizabeth and her daughter, they’d have been hard-pressed to explain how.

“Three THOUSAND dollars?” Megan widened her stance and planted her fists on her childless hips. “You people are” — she stopped herself from saying *fucked*. “Mother.”

Grabowski squirmed. This was precisely why he had avoided accompanying his wife to visit his in-laws for so many Thanksgivings in a row.

“Don’t look at me,” Elizabeth said lightly. “The shower curtain is your father’s affair. Megan, this is — ”

Megan was having none of Introductions. She turned to her father. “Daddy! You could feed an African family for a month on that!”

“Try a decade,” Michael said flatly.

Gary tugged at Two’s sleeve. “Shower curtain?” Gary whispered. Two shook his head: *Not now*. Dennis, suddenly alarmed and in no safe zone in the room, floated quickly back into Two’s shadow.

Michael was not about to let himself be so easily stripped of control of the room's conversational dynamics. It wasn't conscious; rhetoric came naturally to him. A question, of a sort, had been posed to him — an accusation leveled. With a gesture, he reclaimed the floor. He placed a hand to his midriff and bowed, slightly, to his daughter, acknowledging her discomfiture. "Megan," he began, buying time.

His daughter, unfortunately, had grown up with him, and was twice the rhetorician, not about to succumb to any of her father's parlor tricks. What she made up for in rhetorical intuition, however, she lacked in cleverness. "Don't Megan me. I don't want to discuss it." It was true; discussing the \$3,000 shower curtain about which her father was so proud — discussing anything, really — was the last thing in the world Megan wanted, not because she understood but disliked discussion so much as it darkly threatened her. In her experience, *discussion* meant *arguing with Daddy and being made a fool*. Whether or not she actually was a fool was immaterial; if the consequence of "discussion" was embarrassment, then discussion was nothing she wanted any part of. She'd graduated from college, five long years of intellectual humiliation; she'd married a taciturn if not overtly respectful boy; she'd had therapy. She knew what Boundaries she had a right to: whatever upset her, whatever enraged or threatened her, crossed those sacred limits. She had developed an acute awareness of when other people threatened her quietude. It didn't keep her from tossing her own word-bombs at them, however; if anything, it encouraged it. *Cash-register honesty*, she'd learned from her therapist; if other people can't handle Your Truth (that incontestable Gospel), then that was for them to work out with *their* therapists. Truth as whim: despite all her rebellion, Megan was her father's perfect daughter and logical consequence: the perfect Protestant. Sensing her parents' glares and soon-to-reply expressions, she forestalled them, repeating: "I don't want to discuss it. It's insane."

And it was true: she *didn't* want to discuss it; she simply wanted the last word. And thanks to Saints Plato, Peter, Luther, Nietzsche, Piaget and Chopra, she had every right to it. What the philosophically uninformed might dismiss as mere defensive petulance was the honorable inheritance of two thousand years of Western thought.

Twenty minutes after Megan's dramatic entry, followed shortly by her equally dramatic stalking-off, Two and his two college pals were gathered in the master bathroom, staring with quizzical expressions at the shower curtain like museum-goers puzzling at a Pollock.

"What I don't get," said Gary, "is why your parents don't have one of those walk-in shower things. You know — a shower that's, like, half a room. There's certainly enough room for one in here."

"They took it out," Two said simply. "They had one. My folks' interior designer found this antique claw-footed bathtub for them. I think it's French. Anyway, it needed a shower curtain."

"But three thousand dollars?" Gary squawked.

"It's not so much when you consider what the bathtub set them back. That could have paid for a year at Yale."

"Why didn't you go to Yale?" Dennis asked.

Two shrugged. "Grades. Anyway, Yale's for tools."

Gary laughed. "Word." He and Two bumped fists. "But still," continued Gary, sobering, "I can see how real collectible antiques might get pricey. But a shower curtain? That's like two bucks at K-Mart."

Two shrugged again. "I guess you don't put a \$2 shower curtain on a \$60,000 bathtub. From what my dad says, the designer picked some special fabric for the whatchamacallit. The

outer flappy thing. Anyway, that's not the whole story. My dad isn't proud of it because of how expensive it was. It's because of how cheap it was."

"Cheap?"

"He got it for half price. Some famous client of his has the exact same one, but he paid \$6,000 for it."

Gary plopped down on the edge of the bidet, shaking his head in wonder. "*Six* thousand dollars. For a shower curtain."

Another shrug. "I guess some of these dudes have expense accounts."

Meanwhile, Dennis was scrutinizing the shower curtain. "Maybe it's like a Rothko," he said, another memory from that art history class percolating up into his consciousness. The shower curtain did, in fact, slightly resemble a Rothko: it was mostly blue, but faded off around the edges, and there was a blurry band of purple across the top. And neither of the colors were perfectly monochromatic; there was tonal variation, when you looked closely. Though the curtain might simply have faded. Or been damp.

"That's weird," Two replied. "That's what my dad said. What's a Rothko?"

"Jesus, Two. Didn't you ever take even one art history class?"

Two shrugged.

"Mark Rothko. Painter. 20th century. His whole career he painted these — well, squares, pretty much. Fields of color."

"Which probably sell for a million bucks," Gary cut in.

"Many," Dennis said. "Anyway, he was like this Christian mystic. And these monochromatic paintings were supposed to be this spiritual experience." Dennis paused. "But I might be confusing him with Malevich. I could never remember."

“Another dude who painted blank canvases which sell for millions of bucks?” Gary sniped.

“Basically.”

“And how’s staring at a blank canvas supposed to be a ‘spiritual experience’?”

Dennis ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t really remember. It’s supposed to be like meditation somehow. Staring at the sun or listening to white noise. ‘Contemplating purity.’”

Gary snorted. “Sounds like contemplating your navel to me. Sounds like getting high by hyperventilating and then holding your breath. We used to do that shit in middle school. You’d see all sorts of colors that way.”

“Well either way, that’d fit my dad all right,” said Two.

* * *

Igme had the front seat of the Suburban to himself. Michael and Elizabeth lounged just behind him, sunk deep into the first pew of under-stuffed leather seats. Behind them, three across, Two, proud as a peacock, was flanked by Dennis, gawking out the window, and Gary, absorbed in twiddling with the executive accoutrements custom-built into the walls of the vehicle: minibar, cupholders, magazine rack, TV, fold-out walnut writing tables. Megan and Taylor Grabowski, looking bored and sullen, muttered to each other in the back-most seat.

As Igme piloted the four-wheeled luxury liner into the stream of 5th-Avenue traffic flowing past, Dennis elbowed Two. “Is that a museum?” Dennis asked, pointing at a majestic neoclassical marble palace squatting on half a city block of Manhattan real estate across the street from Two’s apartment building. It looked as if it had been plucked up off the National

Mall in Washington, DC and plopped down here. It would have seemed crowded, penned in on all sides by skyscrapers as it was, but a narrow band of lawn surrounding it held the towers at bay. Lawn? Who could afford a lawn in Manhattan?

“What, that? That’s Mr. Frick’s house.”

Dennis’ eyes widened. “That’s someone’s *house*?”

“Nathan is teasing you, Dennis,” Elizabeth cut in gently. “That’s the Frick Collection, and yes, it’s a museum. And we’re very fortunate to have it on our doorstep.”

“I should say so,” added Michael. “It has one of the best collections of 18th-century French porcelains in the world. You showed your friends the tub, Nate?” Elizabeth’s shoulders tensed. She put her hand on her husband’s knee, but it was too late. The muttering in the back seat stopped.

“Yeah.”

“The curator of the porcelains collection helped us find it. Private purchase, before it ever went to auction. Percentage-wise,” Michael continued in a slightly louder voice, making sure that his daughter in the back could hear him, “probably one of the best investments we’ve ever made. You’d have to play the tech stocks on NASDAQ — and successfully, that’s the hitch — to get a comparable return. And then,” Michael grinned, “you’d *really* be in danger of taking a bath.” He’d have to use that line in a pitch. Elizabeth smiled too. The boys showed no reaction. Grabowski, who was heavily invested in tech stocks, scowled. Not in worry; in disgust. All these prissy New York investment types were bashing tech stocks, just like they’d crapped on every good idea that wasn’t theirs. New technologies were changing the face of business. Not the face: the body. Faxes, computers, databases, corporate networking. Just-in-time inventory management. Modeling. Automation. Grabowski’s old man had retired from the

pharmco, but he kept a hand in. He was an investor too; a damn sight better one, Grabowski guessed, than Megan's father, this Wall Street rainmaker with his puns and pleasantries and faggotty Italian slippers. And according to Grabowski's old man, it was all computers now, even in the most physical of businesses, pharmaceuticals. Every department was getting overhauled to make the best use of the new technology. Computers to model new chemical compounds. Analog to digital, the great conversion. Computers to model markets and price points. Computers to model distribution systems. Computers to keep track of clients, inventory, personnel. It wouldn't be long before every business in America had a dozen super-computers, a terminal on every desk, banks of digital tape machines to back up data, stacks of modems to link far-flung offices. Grabowski's tech stocks had doubled in the last year. Maybe Bloom could realize a 100% return on his bathtub, but how many motherfucking bathtubs could you buy? Bloom was a fraud. One day, when he was old and frail and bankrupt, he'd come crawling to Grabowski to get bailed out. And Grabowski would stick his ass in a nursing home in some generic Charlotte suburb. Let's see how far his old-money New York faggotty boys-club bullshit would get him then.

Megan stared blankly out the window, thinking about how much nicer it would have been to spend Thanksgiving in Palm Desert.

"But Tay — er, Nathan's quite correct," Michael continued. "It *was* Henry Frick's private residence, which he left, along with his collection, as a museum when he died. Many of the great industrialists did that. Have you been to the Morgan Library in Midtown? Same idea. His personal collection of art and manuscripts, eventually bequeathed to the public by his son Jack. As if," Michael added, "General Electric and U.S. Steel weren't gifts enough."

Dennis was no Marxist — he wasn't even a liberal, *per se* — but he was a college senior, and a sociology major at that. And even though Mr. Bloom was his host for Thanksgiving, he calculated that perhaps a little push-back wouldn't go unappreciated. "I'm not sure I quite see how companies like G.E. and U.S. Steel are gifts to the public."

Dennis calculated right. Michael turned around and laid eyes on him, appraising him anew. "No? All those inventions? Dishwashers, toasters, generators? Hydroelectric dams? Skyscrapers? The ships and planes that won World War Two?"

A shot had been lobbed straight across Dennis' bow, but now was no time to give up. "I don't guess he gave any of those things away for free. Not with a fortune to show for it."

Michael nodded. "Fair enough. But what about when the corporation goes public? When every mom and pop in America can buy a share of a profitable concern?"

"But how many do?" Dennis countered. He didn't particularly know what he was talking about, and he certainly didn't have a political stake in the exchange. He had a personal one, though. Bloom, as far as he could gather, was a rich and powerful New York banking dude, someone who could open doors, could make things happen. A CEO type — and as such, someone who was used to being kowtowed to, flattered. He might appreciate someone who stood up to him. "Instead of making one guy super-rich, selling stock means a thousand guys just get rich. If U.S. Steel hadn't sold steel to make those warships, wouldn't someone else have? And maybe for less money."

Dennis was in over his head. Michael eyed him carefully. He knew. If there was one thing Michael had, however, it was manners. Polish, rhetoric, a sense of timing, audience. The boy's half-baked collegiate line of reasoning could be dissected in five minutes. But he wasn't a potential investor. He was Taylor's college colleague. Michael didn't need Elizabeth's hand

squeezing his knee to know to take the boy off the hook and release him back into the stream. And he did have chutzpah. “Maybe,” Michael mock-conceded. “It just may be. A very interesting exchange — one we’ll have to continue later. In the meantime, since you’re new to the neighborhood, let’s have a look around. Igme?” Dennis breathed a sigh of relief. “Take us up to Sinai and back down Park, if you would.”

“Certainly, Mr. Bloom sir. Should I call the restaurant and move back your reservation half an hour?”

Exhausted, put-upon sighing emanated from the back seat.

“Sure,” said Michael. “Thank you. Now, boys, if you’ll notice, coming up on your right ...”

Michael proceeded to give the boys, with Igme’s invariably pleasant assistance, a cursory tour of Millionaire’s Mile. It was quaintly named, Michael said, a million dollars being (in 1996 New York) the sort of thing that would qualify one as ‘wealthy’ if it were one’s annual salary, perhaps — not one’s net worth. A net worth of a million dollars wouldn’t secure a parking space on the Upper East Side, much less a habitation. Not with real estate there averaging \$1000 per square foot. Dennis did the math in his head as names of Golden-Age industrialists and modern-age financiers flew past. Many more men had left their imprint on Manhattan than just “America’s Most Hated CEO” Henry Frick, coal-man to Andrew Carnegie and pal of super-banker (and Secretary of the U.S. Treasury) Andrew Mellon ...

He’s hyperbolizing, obviously. A million bucks could surely get you a parking space here. Couldn’t it?

... John Jacob Astor, for example: furrier, real estate investor and opium trafficker, America’s first multi-millionaire, whose family owned the better part of New York City at one

time ... James Fisk and Jay Gould, who cornered the gold market and caused a national financial panic ...

Well, at \$1000 a foot, how much would a parking space cost?

... Edward Harriman, Morgan's fellow railroad monopolist ... John Rockefeller, of course, whose gushing streams of Standard Oil eventually slicked his grandson's way into the Vice Presidential mansion at Number One Observatory Circle ... Cornelius Vanderbilt, whose transportation fortune was equaled — was surpassed, in fact — only by his grandsons' capacity to squander it on million-dollar parties and billion-dollar houses ...

How big's a parking space, anyway?

... Medicine-man "Arm-and-hammer" Armand Hammer, socialist Republican, the only man in history to have been friends with both Vladimir Lenin and Ronald Reagan, convicted for illegal campaign contributions to Richard Nixon and pardoned by Bush the First ...

Well, you can just barely lie down crosswise in a car, and only if it's pretty big. So about six feet wide. Plus a couple of feet on each side to open doors, so ten feet.

... Billionaire "newsmen" (i.e. entertainers? No; i.e. investors) from Hearst to Murdoch to tobacco puff-piecing Laurence Tisch ...

And cars are about twice as long as wide, so we'll say a parking space is ten by twenty feet.

... Realty tycoons Helmsley and Trump, who made their billions selling postal addresses ...

10 x 20 = 200. 200 square feet.

... And O! the financiers! Soros, Icahn, Boesky ... They reproduce like maggots in the flesh of industry. Bloomberg, Milken, Perelman ... Once it took a Morgan or a Mellon, a

Carnegie or Rockefeller to harvest enough lumber to grow one's own money tree. Now money trees were the crop; now the pyramid of billionaires was scalable, and the pyramid of millionaires was as flat as a shadow. Kovner, Kravis ...

Times \$1000 per square foot: that's be — well, that'd obviously be \$200,000. Wait — ONLY a few million dollars?

"... also clients of ours at Allen & Company," Michael was saying. "Quite a few of these gentlemen have been, actually. At one time or another. To some degree or another. Sometimes it's an investment of only a few million dollars. Sometimes it's considerably more."

Can that be right? Two hundred — times a thousand — yeah, that's obviously two hundred thousand. \$200,000 for a parking space? Do houses even cost that much?

Above, beyond, behind and descended from every lord, every baron, every cattleman, tradesman, snake-oil salesman, coal man, steel man, railroad man, oil man, news man, every tinker and peddler, every builder and inventor is the money man, the ultimate realization of the human imagination, the alchemist who makes gold from lead, the magician who pulls dollar bills out of your ear, the facilitator, the capital investor, the grease between the gears and, ultimately, the grease between the grease. Wealth always eventually becomes its own profession. The business of business is making money, and physical commerce is a necessary, temporary, inefficient evil. Why make when you can trade? Let someone else dig the hole; let someone else deal with labor, shovels, sore backs, blistered hands, cave-ins, lawsuits, strikes. Pay the filthy-fingered laborer pennies on the dollar for his artifact; carry it to town, put on your Sunday best and sell it for dollars on the penny there. And why trade when you can finance? Let someone else make dinner, from soup to nuts; you provide the table. Create the space in which commerce occurs; create the possibility of commerce where none existed. Everyone wants to

survive, to make enough to eat, to support himself, his family. Enable him. He'll pay you fifty cents for the opportunity to make a dollar. Got a dollar? You're in business: you're a financier.

Every man who makes something — every man who smashes solar energy into useful bits or carries them where they're wanted — is simply a financier in its larval stage. The development of capital over generations of family wealth is atavistic; it's Darwinian evolution in reverse. So much for Intelligent Design; unlike natural evolution (where from a single common ancestor a million of the most wildly variegated species eventually derive), every branch of intelligent human action among the best and brightest human minds, employed in every enterprise imaginable, eventually becomes, in time, one strain, one activity, one job: capital investor.

And what's the next rung down the anti-evolutionary ladder? What happens when grease greases grease and machine gears rust in fields?

* * *

"Madness," says Tom. "That's what. Disaster."

Dennis is startled. His surroundings re-impose themselves on his awareness with a jolt: the paper-strewn office, the stacks of books, the threadbare chairs, the chipped coffee mug.

Tom's brooding. Dennis can't quite tell if he's talking to Dennis or to himself.

"Jefferson often said that greed for wealth degraded the mind. That it corroded the social contract. Proudhon and Marx and so on — these gentlemen only put it in more explicit terms. There's no such thing as private wealth. Not once you get beyond the most basic things: the food you grow with your own hands, the table you build with your own hands. If you can't

make it by yourself, with your own hands, using materials that don't impact anyone else — if you hire other people to help you make something; if you borrow other people's money; if your manufacture impacts others — then what you make isn't purely private. It's social; it has social consequences. That's all. And that's fine. But that's the only reason why greed's a sin."

Dennis ruminated. "I'm not sure I follow that last bit."

"Sure you do. Is something a sin if it doesn't harm anyone?"

"Ah! All right. I see where you're going. If a guy's greedy for potatoes and can grow a thousand by himself, he can pig out on them to his heart's content and no one's harmed. But if someone's greedy for things that impact other people, his greed extends beyond himself. To the people involved."

Tom smiles. "You won't mind if I steal your image and use it in class sometime. I'm always greedy for vibrant new imagery."

"Be my guest. But that doesn't answer your second question — whether something has to harm another person to be a sin."

"Doesn't it?"

"Mister Luciano!" Dennis chides teasingly, mock-scandalized. "I'm surprised at you! And from an alleged good Catholic boy. You've been rubbing shoulders with the chardonnay-swilling elites in the academy too long."

"All right, Mother Catechism," Tom concedes, grinning. "That which is offensive in the sight of God."

"I should say! Some Catholic you are."

"Yes, well, a bit lapsed, perhaps. But when you get a clear bead on God's sensibilities, you let me know."

“But we have one, Sir!” Dennis continues mock-blusteringly. “Scripture.”

“Thus do you reveal your Protestantism. And I’ll tell you,” continues Tom, “as both a Catholic and a therapist, I’ll confess: the difference between Protestant ‘inspiration’ and megalomania has never been particularly clear to me.”

Dennis has to think about that one. But not much. He doesn’t feel put on the spot. It’s all in fun.

The peculiarly American thing about this conversation is its exquisitely iron-clad balance of irony and earnestness. Both of these men — like the vast majority of Americans — are, in practice, overwhelmingly secular. Both, like most Americans, take pains to distance themselves not just from zealotry but religious earnestness in general. And both, like most Americans, take no less pains never to admit to this implicit irony. Belief is childish and naïve; dissent, however, is immoral. Poor Americans! — who have forsworn one god but not yet embraced another.

Between rungs, the hand grabs air. Between languages, the tongue barks. Between crops, kudzu. Between commercials, commercials.

* * *

Kenzo was as advertised. Not that Kenzo advertised. Not because it was hardly a block away from Madison Avenue and one doesn’t bullshit a bullshitter; not because its patrons were themselves ad men (or their employers or, more likely still, their owners); not because the manipulating class is itself immune to manipulation. It’s not, by any stretch of the imagination: it merely requires more imaginative advertising, and in the case of an upscale restaurant like Kenzo, that meant no advertising. No overt advertising, anyway. Official media buys were for

21 and Tavern, for the Burger Kings and Taco Bells of the New York upscale restaurant world. But a well-oiled and well-paid public relations agent would place a feature story on Kenzo's chef in *New York* magazine, you could bet, and opera-goers who knew who Murakasi Kenzo was would surely note his name as an underwriter for an evening's performance at the Met — merely one underwriter among many listed in the evening's *Playbill*, to be sure, but well-heeled opera-goers studied these lists of names in eight-point type with all the assiduousness of single moms poring over car loan contracts. If you recognized Murakasi's name in the list, you could elbow your spouse and point and smile knowingly — knowing, most importantly, that the person sitting next to you might have failed to fill in that line in their *Playbill* patron crossword. If you were supremely lucky that evening, the couple sitting next to you might be one you knew, and they'd be obliged to ask: *Do you have 14 Across?* In which case: "Kenzo," you'd get to say. "That new little sushi place across from the St. Regis. It's fabulous. Apparently this Murakasi's making his mark."

* * *

"It's always a two-way bargain, isn't it," Tom muses. "A venal bargain. A perverted social contract."

Dennis misses the turn and crashes into the conversational wall, stumped.

"Who dupes and who's duped. Usually it's these rich folks doing the duping." Tom has stood up and is staring out the window into his back yard, where a robust but ragged bed of zinnias thrusts up out of a blanket of turf grass that could have used a mowing two weeks ago.

“Who hock the garbage. And us regular Joes who gobble it up. But they’re not immune, are they? They dupe us, but someone else dupes them. Maybe it’s a consolation.”

Dennis shrugs.

“So how did it go? This first night’s dinner in the big city?”

“Went off without a hitch.”

* * *

At several thousand dollars for a party of seven, dinner had better. Dennis had initially been confused by the menu. (Not its deluge of untranslated Japanese; that was to be expected. For all he knew, everyone in New York spoke Japanese. And from what he’d heard about the Japanese buying up New York, it was well they did.) No: it was the right-hand figure of numerals that had thrown him off. The numbers couldn’t have indicated dollars-and-cents without the decimal: the figures were too small for that. But they couldn’t have been denominations merely of dollars, either; \$60 for a California roll? Perhaps they were in some foreign currency — Yen, maybe. That would be cool, and this looked like the sort of place that would do anything inexplicable and unwarranted in the name of novelty. Maybe they were calorie counts. Dennis settled on that interpretation and went ahead and ordered his dinner.

Conversation at the table stayed light and, like a Greek temple, open to all approaching from any direction. Michael would have much preferred a Roman-basilica sort of conversation — single grand front entrance, long approach, altar at the focal point — but Kenzo was a little noisy, and if he had to compete with his sonic environment — if the subtle modulations of his voice’s timbre were lost in background noise — it wasn’t worth it to take on any complicated

topic. Michael had one in mind — had a couple, actually, that perhaps might dovetail nicely: his warming-up-to-Providence exercise with Grabowski, a *coitus* that had been interrupted by the boys' arrival, plus his exchange with Dennis, a bright boy who (perhaps) was capable of doing more than toeing the communist party line common to the average American university experience. (Why did these die-hard university types have it in for capitalism, anyway? As if they didn't know who paid to keep the lights on during their lectures? But that was a consideration for another time.) Regardless, a guest's first night wasn't the time, and Kenzo wasn't the place, for any heavy conversational lifting. And there was always the possibility of a public scene — probably not from the colorful varsity rats that his son had dragged in, who were both, in their very different ways, quite interesting, but rather from his son-in-law and daughter, who seated themselves as far as possible and kept themselves as aloof as possible from the rest of the party. But they were listening; oh yes, they were listening all right, Michael was aware. For any excuse to pounce. To assert their difference, their unbelonging. It sounded as if an ill-tempered horse had been tied up down at the far end of the table, what with Megan snorting at almost every offhand comment that her mother or father made. *They brew their own soy, I'm told.* Snort. *Many of the items that aren't available locally are flown in daily from Japan.* Snort. *Sake's an acquired taste, Gary — meaning, ha ha, that it's probably awful and we convince ourselves we like it.* Snort! *But they have an excellent selection of Japanese craft beers which you might want to take a look at.* Snort.

If Megan understood a word of what anyone ever said to her, thought Michael, she might not disdain it all so much.

The evening's only threateningly rough patch was a brief and not entirely unfriendly argument between Two and his sister about whether a waiter at a place like Kenzo cleared six

figures. Megan, snortingly asserted that, “in a place like this,” the waiter surely must. (Why the waiter should or shouldn’t have done so was a subject Two and Megan didn’t investigate.) Two had no stake in the matter, but asserted that the waiters did *not* clear six figures in order to protect, in some dimly conceived way, his parents; the salary of a waiter at a restaurant of his parents’ choosing, he felt, reflected somehow on them personally. But mostly Two was just reacting to his sister: if she had snorted *surely they can’t make* such-and-such, Two would’ve pointedly maintained that that could. As it was, the truth on this particular matter lay somewhere between the two disputants: the waiter gracefully deflected the question about his salary in such a way that indicated that no, he didn’t personally make six figures, quite, but that the sake sommelier cleared that much, and by a comfortable margin.

Dinner ended with some confusion about how the parties would go their separate ways. The college lads were determined to go clubbing, Wednesday night or no. Megan, insisting that her younger brother wouldn’t know a velvet VIP rope if it were wound around his neck, invited herself and her husband along to chaperone the boys. Grabowski shrugged as if unconcerned either way, but in truth, both he and Megan were delighted to have any excuse to duck their hosts. Michael and Elizabeth thought it was a wonderful idea. Two protested weakly about being so accompanied until it became clear that his parents intended to send them all off with Igme and the Suburban.

“We can just take the subway,” said Dennis, trying to be helpful.

Two kicked Dennis under the table, glaring and shaking his head.

“Nonsense,” said Elizabeth. “There are five of you and only two of us. We’ll take a cab home. And the subway isn’t safe.”

At the curb, as the party was splitting up, Dennis pulled Two aside. “I didn’t mean to cross you in there. I just thought you wanted to ditch your sister.”

Two wrapped a conspiratorial arm around Dennis’ shoulders and pulled him close. “I did. Meg’s become a cunt on rocket fuel since she got married. But they’ll ditch us as soon as they get a chance. And we’ve got a stretch Suburban and chauffeur, D. The party girls will be on us like flies on shit. You wait. You’re gonna fuck a model tonight.”

The ends of Dennis’ grin nearly touched each other at the back of his head. “I could live with that.”

* * *

Two was as good as his word. As soon as they were on their way downtown, Megan pounced on the Suburban’s mobile phone. Within five minutes, she’d tracked down some friends and made alternate plans for her husband and herself — plans more appropriate for 30-year-olds than screaming out small talk in a crowded danceteria, even if it *was* behind VIP ropes. “You take the car,” she said. “And don’t get into any trouble. I’m supposed to be watching you.”

“No worries,” said Two. *You’re the one who needs babysitting, sheltered freak.* “Igme’ll keep us out of trouble. Isn’t that right, Ig?”

“That’s right, Mr. Taylor.”

“Taylor,” corrected Two.

“Nathan,” corrected Megan.

Igme nodded agreeably.

The night continued according to plan. Clubs were visited, drinks were bought, anorexic pelvises were ground on dance floors. Somewhere around midnight, Dennis' credit card started being rejected. Two's calculations weren't always perfect. The first club they visited had been a bit too far upscale: their chauffeured car was merely one among a dozen lined up at the curb outside, their drivers smoking cigarettes and chatting. The boys picked up some women there: a couple of investment-bank interns who'd come straight from work to blow off steam and were mostly just using the boys for stylish transportation to their next venue. But Two refined his appraisal of their (read: the Suburban's) market value as the night progressed. By two a.m. (the club-kids' noon), the boys were rolling up at a bleeding-edge danceteria in a warehouse on the margins of Alphabet City. Gaunt, pale women in their teens and early 20s, sunken cheeks emphasized with makeup, uniformed in skimpy black cocktail dresses despite the fall chill, milled about on the sidewalk with Goths and gangstas. When Two and his buddies pulled up outside the club in their gleaming black Suburban, the club kids assumed that they were either FBI agents or big shots. When Igme got out and opened their doors for them, the question was settled. Heads turned. Subtle gaps of negative space — signals, invitations — opened up between cocktail dresses and the baggy denims of former boyfriends. Lip gloss was surreptitiously applied. Two had finally landed them in the proverbial target-rich environment. An hour later, the three boys left with four targets attached: two actresses and two fashion-photography models who all shared an apartment in the West Village. The apartment wasn't exactly spacious — more like a kitchenette surrounded by four closets — but it had scented candles and Robert Doisneau posters and a box of chardonnay in the fridge. It would do the job.

"You don't need to wait, Ig," Two had said as his entourage, champagne flutes in hands, tumbled out of the Suburban.

“It’s no trouble, sir.”

“Jesus, Ig! You can’t sir me,” Two said, grinning. “I’m 20 freakin’ years old.”

Igme nodded.

“We’ll be late. It’s already late.”

“It’s no trouble, Mr. Taylor.”

“Just Taylor, Ig.”

Igme nodded. After Two’s repeated insistence, Igme had finally stopped calling him Mr. Bloom. But to address him by his first name, whether he was 20 years old or not, was unwise.

Two sighed and followed his friends into the brownstone. It didn’t matter what he said; Igme would wait. No doubt his father had told him to keep an eye on the boys, knowing full well that Megan had no intention of doing so. There was nothing for it. Igme was his father’s man.

Igme watched the door to the apartment building close behind the young people. A minute later, lights came on in a third-floor apartment. Someone came to the window to peek through the curtain. That would be Mr. Taylor, checking to see if Igme was still there. Or, more likely, one of Mr. Taylor’s companions doing the same. Mr. Taylor would be bragging about Igme. He’d appear not to: Mr. Taylor would be saying *I couldn’t get him to leave*, as if he were perplexed. But he was proud. That was just the way they expressed it here.

The young people had all been excessively polite to him, asking him questions, trying to include him in their conversation in the car, bending over backwards to indicate that he wasn’t just a servant, that he chauffeured them around as a favor, that he could do otherwise if he preferred. Igme smiled. They were silly, but it was a good sign for Mr. Taylor. It meant that they were poor. Or at least, not wealthy. Not enough to have servants. Which meant that they

would be impressed. Which was the point. What was the point of being wealthy if not to impress people? If not to celebrate it? They did so in a their own way here in America, that was all.

Igme reached into the back seat, fished out the mobile phone and called home.

“Igme?” Of course it was Igme. No one else would call this late.

“*Oo. Mr. Taylor and his friends are out late. Pasensya na.*”

Dalisay looked at the clock on the bedside table. “*Alas tatlo, Igme.*”

Igme sighed. The Suburban’s clock read five past three. “I know. *Huwag kang mag-alala.*”

“I’m not worried. Are you in the car?”

“*Oo.*”

“Are the doors locked?”

“*Oo.*”

“When will you be home?”

“*Hindi ko alam. Bukas.*”

Tomorrow? thought Dali. Igme was out babysitting that good-for-nothing. Every advantage in the world, and he couldn’t even get into an Ivy League school. “*Mahal kita.*”

“I love you too.”

Igme replaced the phone in its cradle and settled down into the supple leather seat.

Wealthy people in the Philippines — people for whom Igme had worked when he was a young man, before coming to America — these people knew their place. Or rather, Igme reflected, they accepted it. Well-to-do Americans, on the other hand, needed to seem embarrassed by their station, to constantly disclaim it, downplay it, to obfuscate class distinctions, to get chummy with

their subordinates. It wasn't real. They wanted to extend the courtesy of informality to you; they didn't want you to accept that offer. Igme had learned from his first American employer that there was no quicker way to start looking for a new job than to return an employer's friendly overtures. An American employer would never tell you to "remember your place" — not in a million years. They would sooner call you a worshipper of the Devil than to remind you of your place or openly acknowledge that you had one. It was just their peculiar American religion.

Igme was familiar with that — with national religions, with ways of thinking that imposed themselves across an entire society. The Philippines was wild with zealotry. Maybe Filipinos were grasping at something stable after so many thousands of years of cultures and creeds sweeping across their island: China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Portugal, Spain, the United States; animism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Bahai, Islam, Catholicism, secularism. Who knows. For whatever reason, the Philippine islands were more Catholic, today, than Italy or Spain — almost certainly more keenly Catholic than the Vatican itself. It was an excellent preparation for American culture, Igme thought. The only difference was that the Americans didn't have a name for their religion. They had a lot of 'religions,' sure, but 'religions' in America were exactly that: something you had, like a pair of shoes. Not something that had you. That was your real religion. That's what Americans didn't have a name for.

It wasn't important. What was important was to know what was expected, not what it was called. He'd be expected to be awake when the boys emerged. He fished a book out of his satchel, turned on the cabin lights and began to read.

* * *

“Michael, would you like to say grace?”

Michael smiled beatifically. Igme had delivered the boys home early enough in the morning for their night-long absence to have gone unnoticed. Hair was brushed and fingers scrubbed. Everyone was pleasant. Megan had begun the day by laying into her mother about the wildly inappropriate and unacceptable brand of hair conditioner that had been set out for her in her old bathroom, but had later gone back to Elizabeth (after a sharp word from her father, who didn't care to see his wife crying on Thanksgiving day) and apologized. And the Thanksgiving table burst with plenty: platters of ham and turkey, glazed and roasted to perfection and expertly carved by the catering service; tureens of butternut and pumpkin soup; salvers of steamed vegetables; bowls of mashed potatoes; casseroles of stuffing; porringers of gravy; and little silver patens for the bread. Here and there, little mounds of scarlet and amber jelly gleamed like gems in cut-crystal serving dishes. A phalanx of glassware defended every place setting: a water glass, a Burgundy glass, a white-wine glass and a champagne flute for toasting. Dali and Igme were ready at hand should a glass need filling or a plate replenishing, but for the moment they stood at the margins of the room, camouflaged by the wallpaper, as still and as invisible as deer in a thicket.

Michael most certainly did care to say grace. Thanksgiving was his favorite holiday. It was the purest holiday, to his mind: the most philosophically sound one. Unlike so many of the other holidays, Thanksgiving wasn't a sales pitch. It wasn't inflected with the dogmatic preoccupations of one religious sect or another, like Passover or Christmas; it wasn't just a middle-class marketing ploy like Valentine's Day or New Year's. Thanksgiving was pure. National. Purely spiritual. It was as if the Founding Fathers, in their secularism, had inadvertently but brilliantly stripped away everything from religion that was contingent,

historical and small — everything that was racial — leaving behind just the essential, perfect core: to give thanks for being blessed. Nothing could have appealed more to Michael's paradigmatically postcolonial New-Age Jewish Calvinism.

"I'd be delighted to," said Michael, "unless any of our guests would prefer to." He looked around the table. Except for Elizabeth's, every pair of eyes was averted. They were embarrassed. That was all right: it wasn't easy to openly express one's spirituality. It took courage. Long was the phase when, like most Americans, spirituality had been something that Michael was ashamed of too; he'd no more have prayed in public than masturbated there. But that was when his spirituality had been confused, impure, clouded by accidents of history and race. He didn't mind that his guests would sooner have cut their fingers off than say grace. His saying grace for them, to them, would be a small lesson, in its way. He had a text prepared.

"Blessed art Thou, Lord of all Creation, who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds of the sky; who leads the lambs to pasture and the deer to the waterside; who has multiplied loaves and fishes and converted water to wine. Through your goodness we have these gifts for our use. For food while some go hungry; for clothes while some go naked; for opportunity while some have none; and for blessing us with these Thy gifts, we give you thanks, O Lord. Amen."

"That was beautiful, Michael," said Elizabeth.

"Yeah," mumbled Gary, glaring at Dennis. *What fucking sort of Jew-For-Jesus bullshit is this?* Dennis frowned at Gary and shook his head in reply. *Keep your mouth shut.* Gary was a less observant Jew than even his parents were — and they had Reformed themselves out of any theological pretense whatsoever — but still, as Gary had said privately to Dennis after meeting Two's parents: you don't have to be a fanatic about it, but you don't have to betray the fucking

tribe, either. Maybe you don't practice, but switching teams? What's that about? Dennis had merely shrugged, agnostic about such matters.

Agnostic didn't mean uninterested. To the contrary: to Dennis, Michael presented a fascinating, problematic picture. The past 48 hours as a whole had done so, actually. Having initially felt only slightly out of place, Dennis' sense of estrangement from this little universe on the upper east side of Manhattan Island (with its thousand-dollar dog walkers and million-dollar interior designers, its gemstone pet accoutrements and its endless ranks of limousines and Town Cars idling at the curb, its black-jacketed bouncers and VIP ropes and \$20 rum-and-Cokes, its posh hotels where rooms went for \$5,000 a night and two cups of coffee cost \$60) had become acute. He realized that he had no idea what class he fit in here. None, he thought. He certainly wasn't one of the blue-bloods, the ultra-rich, the masters of this universe. He didn't belong to this place's class of servants, either. By dint of birth or background or education — he wasn't sure which — he was clearly, somehow, 'above' the servant class; they were at his disposal, by extension at least; he entered this world through the front door, not the service entrance, perhaps simply because he and Gary were social acquaintances of Master Bloom. But Dennis sensed that, even if he'd shown up at the doorway to this plenum sans introduction, he'd still have been an exile from its class of servants as much as from that of their masters. But dollar-wise, the servants here were incontestably *his* masters; he was morally certain that the meanest of them made as much as he might ever hope to, and that many of them earned double what his father did.

A strange world, this, mused Dennis — one in which a professional knife-sharpener who would come to your home to tend personally to your cutlery earned more in a month than a radiology technician in Jackson, Mississippi earned in a year. Blessed with "these Thy gifts"

indeed! Dennis had never for a moment — not until this moment — thought of himself as poor. He wasn't poor, he reminded himself. Not by any stretch of the imagination. But this place surpassed imagination. He'd never felt so much in common with the hungry and naked before. He sympathized, and hated that he did, and hated himself for hating that he did. The whole thing vexed him.

Having taken off from his benediction as a launching pad, Michael was waxing expansive on the subject of blessings and gratitude, obsequiously embellishing on and around the dinner table with homiletic filigrees: the lovely cabernet that we're so fortunate to have gotten hold of ... the precious little cut-crystal jelly bowls that the Allens were so generous to give us for our anniversary ... the caterer we're so lucky to have been referred to, who does this wonderful blood-orange-cumin glaze we're so lucky to enjoy ... and on and on: the thread count of the linens, the slenderness of the stemware, the loveliness of the day, the cleanliness of the windows, the marvelous blessing of every bauble and foodstuff a little dewdrop through which the sunlight of the Creator's beneficent generosity was refracted and gleamed and shone on them.

The man was insane, thought Dennis. This was an investment-bank executive? He sounded more like a preacher working the inspirational-speaker circuit. He was on a six-way overdose of smugness, as if vanity-packed heroin needles hung from his every vein: as a Jew, he was Chosen; as a Calvinist, he was Elect; as a Protestant, he was in personal communion with God; as an American, his destiny was manifest; as a New Ager, he was one with universal Energy; and as a successful capitalist, he was the animal at the top of the food chain. Any one of those things was enough to kill you. This guy appeared to be mainlining all of them at once.

Michael had finally brought his monologue back around to *Wall Street* — an interrupted homily from the day before that he very much wanted to complete. Elizabeth, at the end of the

table opposite from her husband, seemed enraptured: literally in rapture, swept up into the billowing silken sheets of her husband's spiritual eloquence. The Grabowskis were whispering to each other; no good could come of that. Worse, Dennis noticed that Gary was turning purple and seemed on the verge of speaking. Dennis sensed that that would be a disaster. Equally annoyed but considerably more diplomatic, Dennis cut in before Michael's monologue exploded like a jet engine with a warped turbine.

"Mr. Bloom?"

Michael stumbled slightly, unaccustomed to being interrupted, but he recovered quickly. He was happy to be questioned by this boy who, in his opinion, showed some spirit. It was often your opponents who became your most ardent allies. "Yes, Dennis?"

"I — ah, speaking of blessings and all. I just wanted to say how grateful Gary and I are for you and Mrs. Bloom welcoming us into your home." Yuck. *Home*. What a treacly word. Dennis hated it. It was almost as saccharine as *family*. But Bloom would eat up shit like that. "I mean, for letting us share Thanksgiving with your family." Michael raised an eyebrow. Elizabeth beamed. Gary choked back vomit.

"Why Dennis, what a nice thing to say," cooed Elizabeth, reaching over and giving Dennis' hand a little squeeze, while shooting a meaningful look at her daughter: *What a nice boy — and he hasn't had the privileges that you've had.*

The woman's rings were icy, invigorating pinpricks on the back of Dennis' hand. He pushed down images of her bending over to pick up tennis balls and pressed on. "I was just curious about something you said in your — when you were saying grace. I mean, you seem to have thought about these things a lot. About grace and being blessed and so forth."

Michael shrugged modestly: *No more than anyone else, but thanks.*

Dennis continued, his stumbling ineloquence as false as Michael's humility. "So I was just wondering. When you said grace. How lucky some of us are. To have blessings when others don't. I mean, why that is. I mean, if it really is just a blessing. Not what you do ... "

"You're asking about Fortune," said Michael. "Not as in wealth. As in *Fortuna*. The Roman goddess of chance. Luck. Good or bad."

"I guess so."

"It's an excellent question, Dennis." Michael nodded at Elizabeth. As if on cue, she patted Dennis' arm again. "A timeless question. One of the most profound questions a man can ask. Why does one man strike oil and another drill a dry hole?"

"Because one's a good geologist and the other isn't?" cut in Gary.

"I think it was a rhetorical question," Elizabeth interjected mildly.

"It's all right," Michael said. "Not necessarily, Gary. We've all seen how even the best planning, as often as not, can come to nothing. The Romans portrayed Fortuna as blindfolded, usually presiding over a wheel — a giant turning wheel, like a waterwheel, to which the fate of every man — and every nation, too — was fixed. As it turned, some were lifted, others cast down. Why do some men prosper and others starve? Why do some nations conquer while others are conquered? It's not the works of man. It's the tool of Fortune in the hands of God."

"So the Wheel of Fortune's not just a game show after all," Gary muttered.

"Not by a long shot. The pagans misunderstood it, but anyone who's lived for a few decades knows that Fortune's very real. 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.' In the Middle Ages, after our Savior had revealed himself to mankind, people came to understand that Fortune wasn't a god, but a force of nature, a tool of God. Fortune is the tool that God uses to distribute his blessings as he sees fit." Michael grinned. "A lot of folks I work with on Wall

Street talk about ‘creating opportunities.’ A lot of folks in business generally. I’m sure that comes as no surprise to you. That’s why so many of them have adopted Gordon Gecko as a hero and role model — ”

“To Oliver Stone’s horror,” Dennis cut in. “We studied *Wall Street* in film history. Gecko’s supposed to be a villain. Stone supposedly was dismayed that people made a hero out of him.”

“And adopted his motto *Greed is good* as a rule to live by,” Michael added. “Yes. And I can assure you of that first-hand, because we’ve done a fair bit of work with Oliver over the years, both investing in a couple of his projects and assisting him with his investments. Oliver, in my opinion, is half right. You don’t need to cheat to be successful. You don’t need to do anything except get out of bed in the morning, to put one foot in front of the other, to make yourself available to the universe. You stick yourself to that wheel. That’s all that work is: making commitments. That’s why, in my opinion, investment is one of the purest forms of work. It’s pure commitment. And what happens to those commitments, if I may say so, is in the hands of God. Struggle and strife are pointless. There’s only gratitude.”

“If you’re lucky,” Gary said. “What if you’re not lucky?”

Michael was unruffled. Naturally. Culturally. World-historically. A thousand-year river of the most self-congratulatory strains of Western thought had silted up a wall of shifting sand around the man as massive as the Nile River delta. It wasn’t clear that anything could pierce it. He bowed his head and lowered his voice fractionally, respectful of the tragedy of those condemned to dearth in life. He could have been a priest taking down the last wishes of a man on Death Row. “Then there’s hope and patience.”

Elizabeth, who as a perspicacious hostess should at this point have been shooting her husband looks to indicate that he should wrap it up and not harangue their guests, was nodding dreamily. It occurred to Dennis for the first time that she might be taking pills.

“Let me get — let me see if I understand,” said Dennis. “You’re a successful businessman who doesn’t believe in work.”

Michael grinned from ear to ear. “I’ve never had it put to me quite so plainly, Dennis, but yes, you might say that.” He twirled his burgundy in its globe a bit, warming it with his fingers, and took an offhand sniff, lost in thought. “But I’d put it differently. I’d rather say that we should understand work differently, the way that Christian monks or Zen masters do. Work shouldn’t be something you do for something else’s sake. For money or success. You should do it for its own sake, to do it perfectly, to perfect a skill. Nothing more. Like the Zen with their arts of flower arrangement, tea service, bonsai. Or to put it in more modern terms: Fortune’s a train and we’re waiting at the station. We have no control over when or whether the train arrives. All we can do is decide how we wait.”

Dennis nodded. He had no idea what this man was talking about. He couldn’t tell if Michael was a saint or the most smug sociopath he’d ever met. Gary, utterly (though mostly intuitively) disgusted, had turned his attention to a slice of smoked ham. Two had kept his mouth shut and his eye on his sister and her husband. The Grabowskis had been muttering to each other the whole time: Megan hissing things in her husband’s ear and he shrugging in response. Grabowski got up from the table and slipped away at some point, ostensibly to use the bathroom but actually to pack their bags and call their driver. When he returned to the dining room, he nodded to Megan.

She stood up.

“We’re gonna jet.”

Everyone at the table was dumbfounded — everyone but Two, who’d seen it coming but wasn’t about to try to head it off. A flurry of protests and questions and hurt feelings barely concealed with strained politeness ensued. Grabowski didn’t offer a word of explanation. Megan, at one point, offered glibly that they “Had a thing” with Grabowski’s family that evening. Within five minutes, they were out the door and on their way to Teterboro, to a time-shared Gulfstream with a well-stocked in-flight minibar.

That was, essentially, the end of Thanksgiving dinner. Elizabeth, black pools of mascara welling under her eyes, slipped away to another room to lie down. Michael followed her a few minutes later, leaving the three college buddies alone with each other at a table shrouded in brilliant white linen and resplendent with a feast and its mechanical accoutrements.

Once the elder Blooms had left the room, Gary and Dennis turned their eyes on Two. Two shrugged, fetched the champagne from an ice bucket on the side table, poured it for himself and his friends and raised a glass.

“To family.”

They drank.

“At least there’s *someone* in this family that’s not nuts,” Gary said.

* * *

Dali slipped into the kitchen and closed the door carefully behind her. Igme was seated at the breakfast table, reading one of his books. One of Michael’s books, actually: Mackay’s

Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds. Maybe *this* was their bible. It was heavy enough.

Dali was livid. “*That girl* has upset Mrs. Bloom again. She has left with her husband. In the middle of dinner.” She crossed herself.

Igme looked up from his reading, expressionless, considering. A newly minted block of ice cubes inside the freezer made a muffled *clunk* as it dropped into its bin.

“Do they need a car?”

“They’ve already left. They must have called for one.”

Igme considered again, then nodded. That was good. But he didn’t need to say so openly.

* * *

“Just stop,” Tom sighs.

Dennis pulls up short. Shocked. “Sorry? Did you —” Tom couldn’t have said that. There are so many ways in which he couldn’t have. It’s totally out of character, for one thing. And isn’t Dennis paying to talk? And it was Tom’s idea, anyway. All this rehashing of *temps perdu*. Not that it hasn’t been productive, but —

Tom’s staring out the window into his back yard, his back to Dennis, whose free-flowing narrative has halted as abruptly as if he’d choked on something. Tom turns to face Dennis, whose expression is strange, aghast. Something curious here, Tom thinks. “What is it, Dennis?”

“Did you just — didn’t you say ... ”

Tom's eyebrows flicker. "I didn't say anything." Dennis looks embarrassed and confused. "Did something else happen in New York?"

"No. We went out some more. Saw those girls again. That's about it."

There's something Dennis isn't saying. "Did you make it back all right?" Tom asks.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, we made it." Dennis picks at an imaginary loose thread on his cuff. "Blowout with my parents along the way."

"About your spending Thanksgiving away from home?"

"Money. Going out in New York broke both our banks. A gas station in Delaware refused my credit cards. All of them. Gary's too. We had to call my folks to wire us money. Dad wasn't pleased." *Irresponsible*, to be exact. *Spoiled. Worm, cheat.* Dennis had told his father that the cards were cut up. Well! They had been, as good as, at one point.

Tom pauses to consider. Dennis would've been a college senior at the time he's been relating. Not a good time to have predatory debt piling up on one credit card, much less many. Not an ideal time to have credit cards at all, frankly. "Your father didn't know about the cards, I take it."

Dennis shakes his head.

"Do you mind if I ask how much debt you were carrying?"

"I don't remember exactly. What it had gotten to by that point. Six on one card, two or three each on a few others."

"Thousand."

Dennis nods.

"And student loans?"

“A little. But those were manageable; the interest rate on them was almost nothing. But those cards — forget it. I tried to keep them in check. Doubled up on my hours at Wal-Mart. Even got a promotion to bait-and-switch guy” — Tom raises his eyebrows — “sorry, Options Educator — in Appliances. Wasn’t enough. Seems like the balances on those cards grew faster than I could pay them down.”

Tom smiles sadly, sympathizing. “They certainly can do that.”

Dennis reddens. “I can laugh about it now, but I wasn’t laughing then. It pissed me off. I was managing to live with it, but that Thanksgiving in New York was like prying a wound open with a fork. I was about to graduate. I’d wanted to do something noble with my sociology degree. Social work or teaching or something. Something good for the Republic. But those things don’t pay enough. Half of them don’t pay at all. \$15,000 would be almost a year’s wages for me at an entry-level job. But to someone like Two’s dad, it’d be nothing. He could spend that much on one big night out. He could spend that much on a fucking toaster.”

“You don’t sound exactly like you’re laughing about it now,” Tom ventures.

The color drains from Dennis’ face as quickly as it had risen there. He recovers himself quickly, settling back in his chair, smoothing out his trousers, his breathing slowing. His voice sounds dismissive, but the earthworms on his temples don’t subside. “Oh, it’s stupid. I brought it on myself. And it was a long time ago. Silly to get angry about it.”

“Perhaps, but I wouldn’t use the word ‘stupid.’ It’s easy to understand how being in a position like that can be frustrating.”

Dennis temper has fully receded now, leaving a vacuum filled by cool composure as surely as the boiling air rising over the Central Valley pulls the marine layer in over the California coastline. “That’s just it: understanding’s always easy.” Tom shifts. “But you’re

right. I shouldn't use the word 'stupid.' It's not a matter of ignorance. It's a matter of weakness."

Tom's eyebrows, arched already, become Gothic. "That's a strict standard, Dennis. Is it yours?"

Dennis shrugs, trying to downplay it. "It's just an ideal." Meaning: *If you want to let other people jerk you around by your heartstrings, go ahead.*

Tom isn't fooled, but it's time. "Let's pick this up next week."

* * *

Dennis has freeway'd himself back to his apartment in Culver City and is standing at the window, staring out over his little piece of Los Angeles. It's peaceful, from a dozen stories up. Even at midnight, everything's well and warmly lit by the general glow that emanates from street-lights and pool-lights, tree-lights and apartment-building signs. *The Windmere. The Chadaby. The Lofts at Charing Cross.* His computer's on, internet browser tuned to CellAccessories.com and a spreadsheet open with a list of a dozen cellphone headset models, their frequency-response ranges, milliampere-hours and prices dutifully transcribed. It's been a few weeks; it's time to check the market. At some point, the magic price-to-features moment will occur, he'll pass his sixteen digits into the ether, a server at a bank will murmur for a millisecond and a transaction will occur. But not tonight. His heart's not in it. A little human contact wouldn't be out of order. He picks up his phone to call Heather. Was it 248 or 842? He has to check.

As usual, Heather can see who's calling, so there's no need for *Hello*. But Dennis isn't expecting the greeting he receives.

"You fucking bastard."