

Time's Fool

HOTSPUR:

O, Harry, thou hast robb'd me of my youth!
I better brook the loss of brittle life
Than those proud titles thou hast won of me;
They wound my thoughts worse than sword my flesh:
But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool.



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PROLOGUE

SEPTEMBER 1996

*In which we are introduced to our protagonist,
in media res, mid-fight, mid-flight...*

"Bathroom Reading"

A man can be happy with any woman, as long as he does not love her.

Oscar Wilde

Gib's knee buckled as Reuben's foot chopped into it from behind. He had been half-expecting her attack, so he crumpled to the cheap carpet and rolled toward the kitchen. He tried to get back to his feet, but her heels followed him – *chok! chok! chok!* – like guillotine dreams chasing the ghosts of French noblemen. He kept rolling until he heard -- *felt*, really, in the small of his back -- one of her heels snag in the carpet. Instantly, he twisted around, grabbed her ankle where the carpet had trapped it, and *yanked*. When he did, she gave him a shot with the other foot, but she didn't have a lot of leverage. The heel dug into his lower stomach; awful, but not paralyzing.

Paralyzing? If she'd hit what she'd been aiming at, it might have been crippling. Castrating.

Reuben tried to pull her foot away for another strafing run, but it got caught in his shirt. Gib was able to trip her to the floor as she tried to pull away from him. A good hunk of his t-shirt stayed with her shoe, a ripped streamer of cotton connecting the two of them.

Her breath blasted out in a giant gasp as she crashed into the floor. Gib hoped she'd be out of breath long enough to recover from her vein-popping anger, but he wasn't willing to bet his reproductive capacity on it.

He decided to hide. But first, he yanked her business jacket up over her head, so she looked like the loser in a hockey brawl. Then he grabbed her gun out of her shoulder holster. When he jumping to his feet, the front of his t-shirt ripped away, a matching sound to the wheeze of Reuben sucking air back into her lungs.

With rhymes flying through his head –

He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.

He who runs and runs away, lives to run another day.

-- Gib ran through the kitchen and into the attached half-bath. He slammed the door and looked for a lock.

There wasn't one.

Gib jammed the side of his foot into the corner formed by the door and the yellowing linoleum floor. Luckily, he was wearing tennis shoes, so he was able to use more of his foot as a doorjamb than thick boots would have allowed. Just as he gripped the door handle with both hands, he felt Reuben slam into the door.

"Come out of there, you chickenshit!" she shrieked. After that, the words rose in pitch until they were incomprehensible -- homicidal threats from a psychotic porpoise. Gib felt the door handle start to turn in his sweaty grip, and try as he might, he wasn't able to hold it steady. He abandoned his tug of war with the handle and just leaned hard into the door.

Reuben screamed in triumph as the handle clicked open, slamming her shoulder into the door. It bounced open a bit, and Gib was able to see her red face pushing against the door in the mirror on the bathroom wall. Pumped with adrenaline, Reuben pushed the door further and further open. At least that's what Gib thought during a second of panic.

In reality, she wasn't moving the whole door. His foot was such an effective doorjamb that Reuben could only get the door to bow inward at the top. When Gib realized this, he slackened his effort a bit, fought back just enough to keep Reuben occupied.

After a few minutes of straining, Reuben let loose another furious wail and backed away from the door. Gib turned around so his fresh foot was the new doorjamb, and leaned comfortably against the sink.

As he looked idly at the magazine rack next to the toilet, he heard the sound of smashing glass. He laughed quietly to himself, satisfied that Reuben was going to break things less valuable than his bones. Unidentified smashes, crashes and thumps came from the kitchen, some directed at the bathroom door, but he felt confident he could wait her out.

After hiding her gun in the water tank for the toilet, Gib looked around for something to read. The only choices on the magazine rack were for gun nuts -- *Guns and Ammo*, *Deer Hunter*, *Shotgun News* -- or right-wing jackasses. The least rabidly right-wing available was the *National Review*. Gib leaned over and snagged the *Review*, figuring he could at least get a laugh out of the apoplectic arts coverage.

At one time, such second-rate bathroom reading material would have really irritated him, but Edward Gibson -- whose identification, from fake driver's license to false credit cards, all named him as "Gibson Edwards" -- didn't really expect any better from the FBI anymore. Being trapped in the half-bath of an FBI safe house by Reuben, his jealous supervisor -- *with nothing good to read* -- was just the latest disappointment. Ever since he had started working undercover, it was just one damn thing after another.

PART ONE

MAY-AUGUST 1996

*In which we learn how Gib got into
his complicated circumstances, and how family
may or may not be destiny...*

"Relatives and References"

About morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.

Ernest Hemingway

Let's back up a bit.

What chain of events wrapped itself around Edward "Gib" Gibson and dragged him to a half-bath in a generic row house in the East Bay? Undercover?

Nepotism.

Not that the provider of the nepotism would have called it that. Uncle Joseph would have called it *access*.

The undercover gig had been presented to him on a humid June day in 1996 while he was sitting in his Uncle Joseph's office. Uncle Joseph was Joseph Arlen, Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He wasn't really Gib's uncle, but the best friend of Gib's father Philip.

Let's back up a bit more. When you're talking nepotism, it's important to understand lineage.

Lineage

Philip Gibson and Joseph Arlen had been one of the most feared pair of Fixers in Washington DC for pushing thirty years. Usually, a Fixer takes a client's cash and spreads it around to get the desired result. Anyone who's read a newspaper in the last, oh, two hundred years isn't shocked by this. No matter how many editorialists want to trot out the ol' "End of American Innocence" tripe for another go-round, this is a country that has the following as part of its history: scalping; blacks defined as 2/3rds of a person in the Constitution; smallpox-infested blankets; barbed wire; the Middle Passage; the Haymarket Riot, the Red Scares, and Jim Crow. Not to mention the entire political careers of (short list) Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, James Buchanan, Ulysses S. Grant, Warren Gamaliel Harding, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton.

And Americans are expected to be shocked that Fixers with money can influence politics? Big deal. The main thing that offends most Americans is that the price list for legislators isn't a matter of public record. If the Capitol Dome could just add a drive through window, that would make it dead solid perfect. But instead, the prices are only known to people in the know, the Fixers.

That said, there are the common run of Fixers. They buy expensive dinners, provide nice boat trips, fine cigars, sleek whores. Guys you're happy to play poker with because they're sure to lose a bundle, every time. Then there are Fixers like Philip Gibson and Joseph Arlen.

Philip Gibson had met Joseph Arlen during 1966, when a liberal Congressman from California was up for re-election. Said Congressman had been declaring his opposition to the war in Vietnam. As well, he was calling for investigations into kickbacks in Defense spending. Captain Philip Gibson, then a member of Army Intelligence, had been assigned the job of finding dirt on the unpatriotic (mouthy) son of a bitch. Tracking down leads had put him in touch with Joseph Arlen. It turned out that

Joseph Arlen had much to offer. Both he and Gibson were vigorous in their agreement that no damn California Commie was going to derail the war effort.

(Not that either man actually fought in the war. As Uncle Joseph put it, "Dying in a humid jungle in some pissant backwater would guarantee an unsuccessful career.")

It was near the end of J. Edgar Hoover's long reign as Director of the FBI. And Hoover was getting a bit senile. Forgetful. For example, Hoover had to write down combinations. Which he would leave in his desk drawer. Where an enterprising young agent could discover them, use them to open the safe to Hoover's secret files, and to take photographs.

This took some serious balls, since it took Arlen eight months, a few minutes at a time, to copy the whole collection. Hoover had been collecting dirt for 50 years, after all. The file on Franklin Delano Roosevelt alone took Arlen two weeks to get on film.

Looking through the files, it had taken two phone calls to get the California Congressman to withdraw from the race to, as he claimed, "concentrate on my family". Which was odd, since the Congressman was single.

This proof of their newfound power decided Philip Gibson it was about time to start making a lot of money. Uncle Joseph had a similar goal in mind, but he didn't want to give up the access the FBI gave him. So the two men made an informal arrangement.

Philip Gibson instantly quit the Army with an honorable discharge (one phone call). He got George Washington University to issue him a law degree (two phone calls). Entry to the bar quickly followed, without a test (one phone call).

Then he married the richest ugly heiress who would have him: Susan Hayes, only heir to a toilet paper fortune. Her cousin was a member of an old establishment law firm, Hayes and O'Neill, which was happy to give a partnership to an up-and-comer with family connections. With the firm to give them an air of legitimacy, and the Hayes toilet paper fortune to fund further development of blackmail files ("research"), Gibson and Arlen made their first million in six months. That million bought four tax code changes, two changes to the Federal budget, and three Congressmen deciding not to run for more terms.

Within a year, Hayes, O'Neill was known as the premiere dirty Fixer firm in the whole city.

Normal Fixers are the kind of guys who get nicknames. Like "Big Al" and "Happy Johnny", or "Chester A. Arthur". Even the low level dirty Fixer will often get a nickname, like "Blackie Lawless" or "The Backdoor Guys".

Gibson and Arlen are made of sterner stuff.

Put it this way: Roy Cohn was one of the most infamous dirty Fixers ever. Roy Cohn never had a nickname. Unless "that slimy fuck" counts.

Many senior members of Congress, who have seen the scorched earth lobbying tactics of Gibson and Arlen – which include blackmail, slander, whispering, secret video and audio recordings, and files that go for miles – are even afraid to say the names "Gibson and Arlen" out loud. As if the very mention will summon them, like Rumpelstiltskin, to claim the first born of the household as well as all future campaign donations. When people want to reference Gibson and Arlen, they just say "Cancer".

What happened to John Johnson's vote on the environmental bill? I thought he was a lock. He even campaigned on that issue.

Cancer got him.

Growing up, Gib knew almost none of this. He knew he was part of a rich family, but thought Philip Gibson was a successful corporate lawyer who had to travel around 300 out of 365 days a year. Gib's mother, the former Susan Hayes, started drinking to fight off boredom around 1969. When she was pregnant with Gib, Philip Gibson had demanded she stay dry. (The demand included a threat to have her committed to an institution which would chain her to a bed for nine months.) After Gib was born, she filled her time with interior decorating and vodka. Sometimes with ice.

So Gib hung with Uncle Joseph a lot. In the expensive Virginia community where the Gibsons lived, the Arlen place was the next mansion over. Uncle Joseph had two boys and one girl, Wallis. As his sons, Joe Junior and Owen, got older, Uncle Joseph discovered he disliked both of them. And he was pretty clear about it, nicknaming both of them when they hit the age of five or so. Joe Junior was "The Chimp". Owen, "The Faggot". Uncle Joseph thought Wallis was fine, but had no real interest in her. Even though Wallis and Gib has always gotten along well.

So Uncle Joseph and Gib had grown very close. It was Uncle Joseph who first come up with the nickname "Gib", after he discovered Gib hated the name "Edward".

"We could try Ned. Or Ed," Uncle Joseph had said. "Eddie?"

"How about Ted?" then-Edward had asked.

"Nah, you don't want the same name as that Kennedy son of a bitch." Uncle Joseph had a distaste for all of the Kennedys. If a political family couldn't keep their dirty laundry secret, how could a Fixer make a living?

"Maybe Gib?" Uncle Joseph suggested.

Gib it was.

Philip handled the details -- paying bills, signing report cards, and making sure Gib got to dentist or doctor appointments (even if it was a secretary who took him). As long as Gib got high-enough grades, and was glib and gracious whenever he had to be seen socially with Philip, he was left alone. Which was just fine with him. But Uncle Joseph was the one there for his triumphs and defeats, his highs and lows.

Over the years, Uncle Joseph had been at most of Gib's public triumphs outside of school. He had been the person who congratulated Gib after he won win his first Little League pitching trophy, and had also been the only friend to see Gib lose the last game of the Virginia State Baseball championships his senior year of high school. They had spent many afternoons watching the Orioles play over the years.

For all of that, Gib didn't think of Uncle Joseph as a surrogate father. Because Philip Gibson had his own fatherly lessons to impart. Like the Sally Field Face.

The Sally Field Face.

Once, Philip Gibson had taken Gib to task for walking around with a perpetual smirk on his face. Worse, the subject had also come up during a public event. Gib's seventh grade home room teacher had specifically singled out his smirk as a cause for worry during a parent-teacher conference. Normally, showing up for those things was Gib's mother's job, but that was one of her Smirnoff Days. Philip Gibson's own concern was now amplified by institutional reproach. In Philip Gibson's world, allowing any kind of authority to have worries about you was not allowed. *Absolutely not allowed*

Philip had brought home a brand-new VCR, with as many Sally Field movies as he

could find. They had started with films, but Philip had called some colleagues in Los Angeles, and shortly thereafter, pirated copies of "The Flying Nun" and "Gidget" had started to arrive in Philip Gibson's Washington, D.C. law office by special messenger.

For months, Philip had demanded that Gib study Sally Field in excruciating detail, looking at her masterful earnest expressions. And then Gib was required to practice duplicating his own Sally Field Face for an hour every night before he went to bed.

Absence of Malice had been good to study. The *Smokey and the Bandit* films less so. But the champion of heart-felt earnestness had been *Norma Rae*. Gib had worn through six copies of that movie.

During the first month of the training, Philip had watched closely as his son spent hour after hour trying to duplicate the Oscar-winning expressions. Soon after that, Philip started the challenges.

It began one night during supper. While Gib's mother watched over the top of her glass, Philip began an innocuous conversation with Gib about school. Then, as Gib was smirking about a successful vocabulary test, Philip thundered, "LOOK EARNEST!"

Gib had gaped, open-mouthed, at his father.

"Look earnest, goddamn you! Show me the Sally Field face!"

Gib had broken out into terrified laughter.

"Damn it, Edward! Why do you think you've been studying this? Do you want to be perceived as a smirking idiot for the rest of your life? Show! Me! Earnest!"

Gib tried; he tried very, very hard to stop laughing and look earnest. He choked back the laughter, straightened his lips as best he could, and tried to look unthreatening. Then the giggles overcame him, and the humiliating release felt like he had pissed his pants. Philip Gibson's face went dark as Gib continued to laugh, with just a bit of hysteria mixed in.

"Come over here, Edward," Philip said.

Gib walked over, dreading whatever punishment was coming, even as he wondered why he didn't just turn and run. Or hide. Or scream, collapse, and pretend to be in a coma. Anything, anything, but walk up next to his father.

When he got next to Philip, he looked at the floor and tried to hold his breath to keep the giggles from coming.

"Look up at me, Edward."

As Gib met his father's eyes, he was shocked by a brutal slap across his cheek. It almost knocked him to the ground before he grabbed the tablecloth, pulling a china place setting to the floor where it shattered. The herd of giggles were instantly slaughtered by a startled gasp of pain.

When he regained his balance, he looked across the table at his mother, who merely shrugged and reached for the bottle of red wine to refill her glass.

"Edward," Philip began, "My son will not be perceived as a shallow fuckup. This is not a matter where laughter is a suitable response. If I have to, I will hire surgeons to cut the muscles in your face that allow you to smile. Do you understand how serious I am?"

His father slapped him again, though more lightly this time. This was clearly just to keep his son's attention. Gib felt scalding tears of humiliation spring into his eyes.

"Don't you cry, Edward. Crying is for women."

"No," Gib said, childish negation the only form of resistance he had left.

"No what? You aren't crying? Or you don't understand?"

"I don't understand."

Philip sighed. "Edward, no matter what you may think, the world is a very simple place. The powerful survive, and the weak die. Serious-minded people flourish, and frivolous ones fail. Nothing in the world is as important as being strong."

Gib said nothing.

"Now, you may be thinking, 'I am just a child.' That is no excuse. It is all about strength. Strength of will, and strength of purpose. Even you don't have strength, you still must be *perceived* to have it."

Philip caressed his son's cheek in some faint relation to affection. "Now, it is true that you are still a child in many ways. You have enjoyed yourself until now, haven't you? You haven't lacked for anything? Not for food, or clothes, or toys?"

"No."

"Well, now is when you begin to earn these things. Weak people will always follow the people they know to be strong, Edward. And my son is going to be a leader."

Gib felt a single tear run down his slap-reddened cheek, but his face remained motionless.

"Do you understand?" Philip asked.

"I think so."

"Fine. Now go study that earnest bitch some more. I never want to hear a teacher talk about my smirking son again. I never want to see you fart around or play the clown. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes." Gib turned and left his half-eaten supper behind. Just as he was about to step out of the kitchen, he heard his father call his name.

"Before you go, try your earnest face again."

Gib, knowing he would break apart if he tried to shift his face even the tiniest amount, simply stared at his father. Philip looked closely, satisfied.

"No, that's anger," Philip said. "But it will do for now, Edward."

Gib briefly thought about walking to his bedroom, burying his face in his pillow and weeping until his eyes felt like they would burst. Instead, in inexplicable combination of fear and stubbornness, he went to the bathroom instead. There, staring at the mirror, he spent the next hours leaching the anger out of his face. This blank, emotionless face was as far as he was able to progress for a few weeks, even though Philip Gibson's pop quizzes continued.

Gib would get ready for school, or baseball practice, and Philip would call out, "Sally Field Face!" Gib would turn and stare at his father, until his father gave a rating and dismissed him.

Six months after the incident at dinner, Gib came home to find his father waiting in the kitchen. His father had lightning flashing in his eyes, and Gib wondered what was wrong.

"I just had a meeting with your teacher," Philip said. "I wanted to get a progress report. When I asked her to describe you, do you know what word popped right out of her? Completely unprovoked."

"No, what?"

"Earnest'." Philip laughed loudly, the storm clouds replaced by blue skies. Or at least grey ones.

During the Sally Field Face quiz period, Gib had asked Uncle Joseph about strength and appearances. Surprisingly, Uncle Joseph had disagreed with Philip Gibson.

"Fuck what people think. You dad only starting thinking that when he started throwing cocktail parties," Uncle Joseph said. "The only important thing is to get what you want. Fuck all the rest."

A Meeting

This summer of '96 had begun with struggle for Gib to avoid what he didn't want. And what he didn't want was Philip Gibson. After Gib was graduated from Georgetown Law School (top third of the class, careful not to stand out too much), Philip Gibson had a choice of jobs lined up for him. Instead, Gib asked Uncle Joseph to get him accepted into the FBI cadet program.

Usually, the Bureau liked to see a candidate who had a little more going for him. Not that there was anything wrong with his resume, but nothing really stood out, either. All that he really had going for him was a good reference. Of course, that was like saying that all the sun had going for it was a little bit of heat.

Naturally, by this point, Philip Gibson and his son very seldom talked. Philip considered the FBI job to be a waste of time, and had threatened to disown Gib. He had even stopped talking to Uncle Joseph, for the time being. Except for work-related business, of course. Philip would never let personal issues get in the way of business.

After Quantico, Uncle Joseph had gotten him assigned to easy duty in DC. Gib spent his first two months as a Special Agent doing "research" on homegrown terrorist activity. Mostly, that meant he spent Monday and Tuesday of each work week combing the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other papers for topics that would lead to the kind of bland documents that had gotten him through seven years of college and law school. By Wednesday morning, he had skirted the edge of plagiarism, never came close to original thought, and was ready to turn in a report.

So his work week was done by Wednesday afternoon, usually. He spent the rest of the week sitting in his office with the door closed and reading Tom Clancy and Robert Ludlum novels. Also, taking long lunches to see his girlfriend Katy Maitland, who was getting ready for her third year at Georgetown Law.

After two months, he had eight reports under his name that were stunning in their careful mediocrity. The titles included "Militias: The Homegrown Menace?", "Bullet Proof Vests: A Case of Overconfidence?"; "Fundamentalist Islam: A New Jersey Case Study"; and "Basement Bomb Making: Could It Blow Up in Our Faces?"

That last title had worried him. Alliteration and dumb puns were probably more noticeable than they should be, but since he had made the title a question, he thought it was very clear that he would draw no actual conclusions, and present no actual opinions of his own. Besides, it was his eighth and last report, so he figured no one would even bother to read it. By that point, he was so bored that he had entertained the notion of titling the report "Bomb Making: On the One Hand, but On the Other Hand".

That next Monday morning, Uncle Joseph's office called. He went home before the meeting and changed into a clean suit, fresh from the dry cleaner's plastic. His white

shirt was starched, and his tie was a dull maroon. He wore an old Omega wristwatch with an expensive leather band. It had been a gift from Uncle Joseph many years ago, and Gib knew that Joseph would notice. The meeting wasn't until one, so he took the time to get a fresh haircut before arriving at Uncle Joseph's office.

As he checked his appearance out one final time in his car window, he noticed his hands were a little shaky. A little case of the yips. Gib knew this meeting was going to be the real launch of his career. So he had to show the right Special Agent style, or lack thereof. He got a cup of coffee as camouflage for his shaky hands.

As he walked in the front door, Gib thought about how the building itself was an impressive example of Joseph Arlen's ability to clout. Ten years ago, Uncle Joseph had used a report about "overcrowding" in the Hoover Building as an excuse to move his offices, along with a full complement of support staff to a building on M Street where DC started to rise toward Georgetown and Dupont Circle. The building had been a Quaker gathering hall at one time. When Assistant Director Arlen had moved in, the Bureau paid for the expense of moving all the other tenants to new buildings for "security reasons" and the massive rehabilitation of the building, including black glass walls that rose out of the religious-looking base of the building. When the renovations were done, the building looked like a space age Cathedral. And since the FBI now owned all this new office space, various working groups – like Bank Fraud – were moved from the Hoover Building to the newly-named "Arlen Building". And, of course, Joseph Arlen was put in charge of all these departments.

After it was all over, Uncle Joseph had told Gib the icing on that particular cake. He had commissioned the original overcrowding report himself, massaging statistics until they relaxed enough to give him what he wanted to justify buying the new building.

Uncle Joseph's office and staff took up the entire top floor of the Arlen Building. Gib waited in the lobby for an elevator that would bring him up to the floor exactly at eleven. Not a minute too early or a minute too late. He had to wait the standard ten minutes of obeisance time in the outer office, watching Joseph's various assistants, secretaries, and agents scurry around the office in an orgasm of time wasting. From experience, he knew that at least a third of any of the people he saw on the floor were actually there to report back to some of Uncle Joseph's political enemies in the Bureau and in other government agencies.

Eventually, Gib was escorted into the inner sanctum. Waiting only ten minutes was actually sign of respect in many ways. If he had just been one of the many Special Agents under Uncle Joseph's command, the wait would have been nearer to twenty, just on principle.

Joseph Arlen rose from behind his huge cherrywood desk (four foot wide by six feet long if it was an inch) as the secretary closed the door.

"Gib! God *damn* I'm glad to see you! Finally made it. Can't tell you how proud I am." Uncle Joseph often had a weirdly clipped manner of speaking, especially when he was excited. It was as if he didn't want to give out any more subjects, objects or predicates than were absolutely necessary.

One of Joseph Arlen's favorite ways to start any meeting was to wrap his meaty hand around someone's fingers and squeeze with all his strength. Gib made sure to get his hand deep into the crook between Uncle Joseph's forefinger and thumb. That way, no

matter how hard Arlen squeezed, it would never be more than he could handle. Best not to get into a pissing match, though. He squeezed Uncle Joseph's hand just firmly enough.

"Man's handshake, Gib. Always important. Sit."

Gib sat.

"Let's get right to it, Gib."

"Sounds good." Gib lightly echoed Uncle Joseph's cadences, easily falling into the rhythm.

"Been reading your reports. Impressive. Especially this last one, 'Basement Bombs'. Gave me an idea."

Gib was more than a little taken aback when Uncle Joseph pulled out the report he had turned in last Friday morning.

"How do you feel about the environment, Gib?" Uncle Joseph asked.

This was an easy answer. "Well, I like a picnic as much as the next guy, but I'm no tree hugger," Gib said.

Uncle Joseph grinned back. "Pretty good. But there's more than tree huggers out there. Terrorists. Monkey wrenchers, some of them call themselves."

"Throwing hard-working American loggers out of work is what that is."

"Exactly," Uncle Joseph snarled, his eyes glittering. "Knew you'd see. Knew you'd be ready for this."

"Ready for what, sir?"

"First field assignment. Under cover."

This was surprising. Undercover work was usually extremely dangerous. Gib wondered why Uncle Joseph wanted him to take this job, out of all the possible cushy assignments out there.

And that damn report! Gib had gotten the idea from the Section B of the *New York Times*. In fact, he had even lifted entire paragraphs wholesale, assuming no one would recognize them out of context. But to use it as the basis for Gib's first assignment was ludicrous, and more than a little alarming.

And worse, investigating eco-terrorists meant he was probably going to be stuck in some backwater town in Oregon or Montana, Not a glamour detail. What was the point of having a mentor like Joseph Arlen if it meant you shuffled off to Bumfuck, Oregon, trying to earn the trust of granola-loving dirt munchers? Gib was just about to object when Uncle Joseph continued.

"This group of bums in San Francisco. Who I want you to get. Very important. Very!"

San Francisco! It was a good thing he'd kept his mouth shut.

"Important why, sir?" Never can have too many "sirs" in a conversation like this, Gib knew.

"Got a report from local SAC in San Fran. This bunch of longhairs talked about blowing up a nuke plant."

"A nuclear power reactor? Really?"

"Yup. Ready to do some man's work, Gib?"

"Bet I am, Uncle Joseph!"

Arlen gave him a friendly glare, but he knew he had pulled out the familiarity at just the right time, as a show of solidarity. *I'm your guy, Uncle Joseph. Time to go do a*

man's work out in scenic San Francisco. Nice weather. Good-looking women Just give me the ticket. Maybe I can learn how to surf.

"Thought so," Uncle Joseph said. "Best part. Don't have to be there for a month. Take a vacation, drive out. See the country."

"Thank you, sir!"

Uncle Joseph stood up and walked Gib to the door, clapping him on the shoulder as he did. "Always been a son to me, Gib. Not like my real boys, useless shits. Chimp and the Faggot." For a minute, Uncle Joseph looked uncertain. "Fucking Faggot. Embarrassment."

Gib wondered what Owen had done this time. Another trip to rehab?

"Make me proud, Gib."

"I will, Uncle Joseph."

"Get sit rep from my secretary."

"Will do."

The two men shook hands once again, and Uncle Joseph got just a bit of an edge on his fingers this time, so he squeezed to his heart's delight. His almost-son was happy to let him do it.

Gib got the situation report from Uncle Joseph's secretary, and then went to his house in Virginia to pack.

Packing

Katy was supposed to be at classes all day, but he yelled out her name as he walked in the front door, just in case. No answer.

He got to work, changing out of his suit into a pair of jeans and a white tee-shirt.

Gib decided most everything should fit into a big garbage bag.

From the kitchen: two big plastic cups (one that had the Baltimore Orioles logo); a handful of utensils. Can and bottle opener. Into the garbage bag.

From the bathroom: disposable razors, two towels, a bar of soap. His toothbrush and toothpaste. Into the garbage bag.

From the bedroom: his baseball mitt, assorted balls, pocket knife. Into the garbage bag.

Clothes were an exception to the garbage bag. Suits and related fancy stuff got tossed into a big suitcase. All his other clothes, all the tee-shirts, socks, jeans, and underwear he would ever want, he threw onto the bed, then tied up the four corners of the blanket.

He hauled everything out into the living room. Looking at the bookshelf, he wondered if there was anything worth taking. The Riverside Shakespeare was Katy's, and Gib remembered that it had been given to her by a man she had been engaged to during college, before she had met Gib. He looked at the inscription.

To Katy,

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O, no; it is an ever-fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and
 cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and
 weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

*Love, ever-fixèd,
Steve*

Anyone named Steve, Gib decided, was bad news. A Steve was straight white teeth and inconsistent moral rectitude. As far as Gib was concerned, the best thing Katy had ever done in her love life was leave Steve. It would be better if she was never reminded of him again, really.

So, Shakespeare: into the garbage bag. It would be something to read on the trip.

His CDs and tapes were in a two milk crates next to the stereo. Gib had always been careful to keep his music separate from Katy's, so if any of hers were in the crate, it was her loss.

And that was pretty much it for the packing. He stuffed the bags into the trunk of his car, a '69 Pontiac GTO convertible. He fiddled with his keys before he decided he should leave a note.

Smoking a rare cigarette, Gib stood at the kitchen table and tried to compose a goodbye note.

Dear Katy:

*These past couple of years have been amazing. But I got assigned out of town,
and I'm not allowed to talk about it.*

*Love you much and I look forward to possibly seeing you again in the future.
Thanks for everything.*

*Love,
Gib*

No, too wordy. Plus, he probably shouldn't mention the job, either. There might be some kind of security problem with that.

Dear Katy:

These past couple of years have been great. I look forward to possibly seeing you again in the future. Thanks for everything.

*Love,
Gib*

Now it sounded like a business letter. Awkward, and overly polite. He tossed a few more sheets of paper in the garbage before he pared the note down to something that satisfied him.

Dear Katy:

Thanks for everything.

*Love,
Gib*

That said it all, really. Tossing away the cigarette butt, Gib used a magnet to stick the note on the refrigerator.

He was halfway down the driveway, and he was fucking around with the radio before he realized that he had forgotten his jam box. He parked the car on the curb next to the driveway and walked back into the house.

Looking for the box turned into a bigger-than-expected project. Not in the bedroom, not in the kitchen. Not the living room or back porch. Easily a half an hour of searching resulted in a big pile of nothing. Finally, he remembered that Katy had been refinishing an old table down in the basement. As he opened the door, he saw the box sitting on the chair itself, right at the bottom of the stairs. Two steps down, he heard Katy walk through the front door.

"Gib? Where are you? I saw your car outside!"

So much for a clean break. As quietly as he could, he stepped back up the stairs. When he heard Katy walk down the hallway to the bedroom, he stepped into the kitchen and carefully opened the back door.

"Hey, what happened to the blanket?"

After closing the back door, Gib ran for his car. He was just pulling away from the curb when he saw Katy come out the front door and wave at him to stop. He waved back, figuring she might think he was going to run an errand. Then he saw his note in her hand.

Step on the gas. No need to make a scene right in the middle of the suburban street. Gib drove to the huge mall complex at Tyson Corners and bought himself the best portable CD player he could find.

"Driving Lessons"

It is impossible to calculate the moral mischief, if I may so express it, that mental lying has produced in society. When a man has so far corrupted and prostituted the chastity of his mind as to subscribe his professional belief to things he does not believe he has prepared himself for the commission of every other crime.

Thomas Paine

Statistics about Gib's two week drive from Washington, DC to San Francisco.

Mileage: 3754.2

Major cities viewed: Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Gary, Chicago, Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City (Mo.), Kansas City (Ks.), Cheyenne, Denver, Salt Lake City, Reno.

Best meal: Pizzeria Uno, Chicago.

Worst meal: Jenny's Grub Steak, Reno.

Number of times pulled over: 5

Number of tickets avoided through use of FBI ID: 4

Women wooed: 127

Women successfully wooed: 6

Wooing Success Rate: 4%

Notable moments: 3

Notable Moment #1. Chicago.

Gib wakes up next to a drummer named Geraldine from a band called Meow Mother, who he saw play the night before. The drummer stirs and notices his erection. She smiles and grabs hold, ready for a wake up call.

Happy to perform, Gib hides the reason for the erection: he had been dreaming about the first girl he ever kissed. Wallis Arlen. Uncle Joseph's only daughter.

Uncle Joseph's two boys, Joseph Junior and Owen, were only friends with Gib because of close contact. Uncle Joseph's constant negative comparison of them to Gib hadn't helped.

Wallis Arlen was a different story. Uncle Joseph's had no real interest in his only daughter. Sons were the important thing, even if they were inadequate.

Wallis, however, disagreed. She thought herself a very useful subject indeed. From a very early age, Wallis tried out ideas. She would dragoon Gib and her two brothers into war games, into make-believe science experiments, and other creations of her imagination. Her brothers had varying levels of interest in the games she came up with, but Gib never failed to be fascinated by her ability to create whole worlds on the spur of the moment.

One night, Joseph, Jr. and Owen, had been playing pool in their basement while Gib (12 at the time) and Wallis (13) were upstairs watching *Star Wars* on tape for the millionth time. Wallis turned to him and said, "You want to try something cool?"

"Sure," Gib said.

"Close your eyes."

"Okay."

"Now hold your breath for as long as you can."

"That's it?"

"Trust me," Wallis said.

So Gib held his breath, and when he finally gasped for air, he felt Wallis cover his lips with her own. A slippery explosion enveloped him. Much later on, he would realize it was probably oxygen deprivation. But right then, it was the most important feeling he had ever had. Not like an orgasm, which he knew from masturbating. More as if every muscle in his body had gone slack except for his lips. White starbursts ignited on the back of his eyelids.

When he finally opened his eyes, he knew that the hunger in Wallis' eyes was reflected in his own, like the endless room created by two facing mirrors. The couch turned out to be big enough to hold them both, at least until their inexperienced flailing dropped them on the floor. All in all, Gib had been overwhelmed by the experience. He had been too nervous afterwards to ask her the two questions he wanted to know: Was this her first time, and had she liked it?

They had gone on having sex, though, which seemed to answer the second question. After a few months, Gib had told Wallis he was in love with her.

"Spade calling," he said. That was their personal code, that it was time to call a spade a spade. A time for whole, unadulterated truth from one another. Given their parents, it was an important ability for both of them to have. "I love you, Wallis."

"Never get sex mixed up with love, Gibby," she said. "You'll embarrass yourself."

Gib had kept his feelings about her to himself after that, and a few months later Wallis had gotten a steady boyfriend. And that was the end of that, what he laughingly called his first love affair.

Even without all the details, Geraldine the drummer didn't seem to mind the result.

Notable Moment #2. I-80, East of Cheyenne.

Driving 89 miles per hour with the top down, Gib drags out the file that he got from Uncle Joseph's secretary. He skims the first four pages and learns the following facts:

The "eco-terrorist" group has a name. They call themselves "Green Rage". There are only three members of the core group. Ethan Garrity, Stanley Campanella, and Frank Marion. The first two are white guys from Wisconsin, the third one a black guy from Chicago.

They are also a band. Garrity sings and plays guitar. Campanella plays bass; Marion, drums.

Quickly bored, Gib puts the file in the back seat. The loose pages in the folder promptly begin to swirl out of the car, showering six miles of the Wyoming countryside with confidential surveillance data from the FBI. When Gib finally realizes what the fluttering noise is, the first thing he thinks is relief that there's nothing wrong with the car. His '69 Pontiac GTO. The Goat.

The Goat.

Gib's '69 Pontiac GTO convertible was one of his oldest friends. When he was fourteen, just about to enter high school, he had decided that he needed an activity he could call wholly his own. Even baseball, as much as he loved it, was tainted by his father, who thought of it in terms of how sports looked on a permanent record. Gib learned to

hide his passions, to keep them from becoming assignments.

He picked cars, for two reasons. Because they would be a place to fuck, and because he knew his father would never want him to do it. Fixing cars would never get him into Yale or Columbia.

On the sly, he cashed some bonds, began stealing as many twenty-dollar bills as he could from his parents without them noticing, until he could finally buy himself a broken-down '69 Pontiac GTO convertible for three hundred dollars. He had become obsessed with getting a GTO after reading about it. The Goat was the kind of American that you pointed and fired. As long as you didn't have special requirements -- like being able to, say, turn tight corners at high speeds -- it was a beautiful monster. One reviewer of the original Goat had written, "I don't know what the top speed of the Goat is because, frankly, I didn't have the guts to find out."

Gib realized how beaten down the car had to be to go for as little as three hundred, even with an engine that wouldn't run, a missing rag top, and non-existent wheels. In fact, the only reason this Goat hadn't been trashed by the junk yard owner was because the man had owned a Goat himself, once upon a time. But regardless of how shitty the car was, Gib had confidence he could make it a worthwhile car again. He scoured libraries for books -- Chilton and Haynes and Mitchell -- and traded scut work at a local garage for storage space and off-hours access to equipment. Even begging for advice from every mechanic he could find, it took him six months to get the engine to turn over even once. But after that, he got the hang of it. Another two months and the engine started to sputter on a regular basis.

As long as he kept his lies consistent, his parents never noticed his late nights, his vaguely-explained activities, or his continuing assault on their twenty-dollar bills. Anyway, it wasn't as if they wanted him home any more than he wanted to be there. Baseball and training was an all-purpose excuse, as was going to the library to do schoolwork.

When the Goat was finally able to run with some consistency, if you ignored to occasional cloud of black smoke, Gib began his methodical approach to getting laid. One semester of high school later, after many sessions in the back seat of the Goat, he and Wallis were hanging out.

"Spade call," Wallis said. "You the girls are calling you the Test Pilot, don't you?"

"The what?"

"You're the guy a lot of them want to have their first time with. Because they know you'll be at least OK, and you'll keep your mouth shut."

"Test Pilot! Cool!"

Wallis frowned. "But none of them want to date you. I mean, you're fine in bed, but otherwise everyone thinks you're kind of an asshole."

"Well, mission accomplished, then."

There were a few snags in all his plans, of course. A bout with genital warts was kind of humiliating, but not as bad as the painful visit to a clinic in DC that took care of it. Vigilant, almost fanatical, condom use kept him from having any pregnancy scares.

His sex life entirely depended on the ongoing success of the car scam, though. The Goat was transportation, hotel, and confessional. He spent hundreds of dollars on getting the interior cleaned, though.

When he finally turned eighteen, near the end of his senior year, the car scam reached endgame. One morning, he found a brand new BMW waiting in the driveway.

"Nice new car," Gib said to Philip, who had followed him outside.

"Good thing you like it, since it's yours." Philip Gibson had an opened envelope in his hand addressed to Gib. "You've been accepted to Yale." Gib had gotten into four colleges, as it turned out, including Yale (two phone calls) and Virginia (none).

Gib's hatred for the BMW was intense. It was too perfect a symbol for how little his father knew about him, or cared. This foreign piece of shit couldn't measure up in any way to The Goat. His father hadn't even bothered to ask what Gib wanted in a car.

So one day, Gib decided to take care of it. One night, after his father's pleasure about Yale had faded back to business as usual, Gib headed out to take care of the BMW. Earlier in the day, he had driven the Pontiac to a mini-mall a junkyard. He had called Wallis to pick him up. When she had asked him why he needed a ride, with a brand-new car in his parents garage, he had brushed her off. Now, he pushed the BMW away down the driveway and away from the house before he started it.

At four in the morning, he found himself driving to the junkyard. When he got there, he pulled a sledgehammer, a crowbar and a carpet knife out of the trunk, and then proceeded to destroy the BMW as thoroughly as he could manage. He beat the shit out of it with a sledgehammer, shattering every light and window, bashing in every panel and door. With a knife, he shredded the upholstery and pissed in the slashes. The only thing he removed with care was the stereo and the speakers, which he intended to install in the Pontiac. Waste not, want not, and Gib had to admit that the stereo was much better than the shitty AM radio he had in the Pontiac.

After the destruction, he walked across the street to the mini-mall feeling much as the first bombardiers over Berlin must have felt in 1945 as they turned back for home. Mission accomplished, destruction rained down upon German industry, and now it was time for a beer. Just as he popped open to trunk to put away the tools and the stereo, he was blinded by a sudden pair of headlights. *Well, officer, it was my car. I don't why you would have a problem with me pissing on it.*

"I knew you were up to something. You *really* didn't like that car, did you?" Wallis asked from behind the lights.

He collapsed onto the lip of trunk with relief. "Jesus, Wallis. You scared the piss out of me." He dumped the tools in the trunk and slammed it closed.

"So," she said, ignoring him, "instead of just telling Philip you don't like the car, you're going to tell him it got stolen, right? 'Shocked, Philip, I'm *shocked!* Right from in front of the *Burger King!*' Spade call, Gibby. You're turning into one crazy son of a bitch."

"I don't know what you mean."

"We're *spadecalling*, and you're going to play dumb? Deny, deny, always deny. Our fathers would be proud."

Gib didn't say anything. She walked over to him and ran her fingers through his hair. "You're a mess. You know that? A different personality situation. Philip Gibson's perfect son. The star pitcher. The car thief. "

She kissed him. When he cupped her breast through her shirt, she gasped. He couldn't tell if she was offended or amused.

"And that's the Test Pilot." So maybe she couldn't tell, either.

After looking into his eyes for what seemed an eternity, Wallis sighed and pushed his hands away.

"I don't think so, Gibby. Certainly not until you oil up some of those rattles in your skull."

Patting his cheek, she walked back to her own car. A BMW, Gib noticed. As she was getting in, she hesitated and turned back to him. "Gibby, you can't do this forever. Soon, you're going to have to figure out who you are, and stick to it. Maybe our fathers don't see it, but they only understand the worst parts of people. Only what they see in secret reports and on secret tapes."

"Seems to work for them. If you want me to spadecall, that is."

"But is that what you want to be? The next Philip Gibson? Hell, you might end up being worse, because at least your father takes comfort in his dedication to being an asshole. You don't even have that much to hang onto." Wallis shook her head as she got into her car and pulled away.

The next day, Gib was shocked, *shocked* to discover his wonderful new car had been stolen. Philip let him buy his own car this time, using about ten grand of the insurance money. About a week later, Gib drove his dull-looking Pontiac into the Gibson driveway for the first time. Even though Gib found that revving the GTO's engine never failed to bring a look of distaste to his father's face, Philip Gibson didn't seem to care enough about the car to make an issue out of it. "Get a decent paint job," was all that he said.

And so, the car scam came to an end with Gib ten grand richer.

The Goat kept going through college. Gib avoided Yale and went to the University of Virginia on a baseball scholarship instead. Then law school at George Washington. As far as Gib was concerned, if he kept changing and replacing parts, the GTO would be effectively immortal. By this time, he knew the rumble of its engine better than his own heartbeat. He paid more attention to it, after all.

Notable Moment #3. Reno.

Maybe he was tired of the view. Maybe all the truck stops were starting to blend together. But by Reno, the trip had gotten creepy. He kept seeing UFOs out of the corner of his eye, waiting to swoop down and pick him up. He heard phantom sirens that disappeared when he looked for the State Trooper car. The road had taken on a hallucinatory quality.

Finally, in Reno, he stopped at Jenny's Grub Steak, a diner with pretensions. He ordered a cup of coffee and a hunk of meat loaf. Next to the bathrooms were a row of slot machines, and one had an old woman slipping quarter after quarter into it. Coming out of the bathroom a few minutes later, he had a direct view of the woman's face, which meant he had a prime view of the thin line of drool coming from the side of her mouth. Too disgusted to eat, he paid for the meat loaf and got the coffee to go.

From there, he drove straight through to San Francisco, where he parked near the Embarcadero and called the Golden Gate Avenue offices of the FBI.

"Enemies and Salutations"

A memorandum is written not to inform the reader but to protect the writer.

Dean Acheson

The Supervisory Special Agent in charge of the investigation into Green rage was Bob Maynard. That was one of the few things Gib had written down, and so the name didn't fly out of the car with the rest of the report.

They met in a cheap restaurant in Oakland. Bob Maynard had spent hard decades on the job, and they all showed on his cramped, florid face. He wore a toupee that fitted so poorly that his entire skull seemed misshapen. In the lapel of his threadbare green sports coat, he wore a small American flag pin with most of the white paint worn away. . In appearance and manners, he looked like a seedy salesman, the kind who would sell you a car that would run perfectly just long enough for the warranty to expire. If Bob Maynard were a car, he would have a sticker on his ass that read "If you can read this, call 1-900-EAT-SHIT". In short, Bob Maynard was one pair of slightly stained boxer shorts away from being presented to the scientific community as the missing link between man and ape.

Gib couldn't figure out how some one like Bob Maynard still had a job with the FBI. Until he thought: Maynard must have some files on people. Files and tapes and photos. Just enough to keep him on the job, but not enough to get ahead.

Maynard also had the filthiest mouth Gib had ever heard, combined with a bizarre tendency toward nicknaming. No one was ever a "suspect" in Maynard's vocabulary. They were a "cockgoblin' commie symp ." Or a "tree hugging pillow biter."

"Okay," Maynard said after they both had ordered food, "I've got the whole frikkin operation set up. Bugs and phone taps are in place everywhere, in all these ass-faced flag burners' apartments and their shithole warehouse space, too. Your direct contact will be meeting us here. Her name is Jan Reuben. For an affirmative action broad, she could be worse. She's got a hell of a pair, too. Two pairs, if you count her brass balls. You know what I mean."

"Sure." Gib had no idea. Tits? Ass? Eyes?

Maynard passed over two sheets of paper with addresses, names and numbers. "That first page there is all your contact information. Address of a safe house in Berkeley. Two phone numbers you can call. And the frikkin bureau is in the book, you know. So if your sweet white ass is hanging fire, you can always call collect. The other page is a flyer for these tree-fucking faggots and their club. The Space. They have a meeting or party or whatever you call a meeting of morons. Tomorrow night."

"They have parties every Friday, right?"

"Right. I guess you read my report, then."

The little he had scanned before the Wyoming wind took the report away had read like a weird parody of a FBI report. It was full of phrases like "threat to our American way of life", "strong show of force", and -- Gib's personal favorite -- "a cavity in the gleaming teeth of America." Gib had never had the guts to be that over the top in his report writing.

"Yeah, I read the summary. That's all I was given. I don't have the full report

with all the background material."

"What? Fucken DC buttlicking bureaucrats. You should have come out here fully briefed."

Gib shrugged his shoulders and said something plausibly generic. "You know the Hoover Building."

"Wouldn't know which end of a gun to pistol whip someone with." Maynard laughed. "That was a joke, kid."

"Right," Gib said. "Anyway, can I get a full copy of the report?"

"Post haste, you'll get one. PDQ, you hear what I'm saying? But I'll bet the broad with a badge will have a copy."

"Maybe you can give me your perspective before I read anything."

"*Perspective!*" Maynard mimicked Gib. "My perspective is that these plant porkers are gearing up for a major operation. That scene in front of PacPow was only the beginning. And the media whores gave them so much coverage, it makes you want to vomit like a street bum after three bottles of ripple."

Eventually, Gib talked Maynard into giving a summary. Obscenity removed from the story, the event that had first brought Green Rage to the attention of Supervisory Special Agent Bob Maynard was an recent impromptu protest march that had snarled traffic all over downtown San Francisco, and had led off every single TV news report that night.

Apparently, at the beginning of June, Green Rage had sponsored a free concert at their performance space/community center that had brought hundreds of people together to dance, drink, drug. In between the bands, the crowd heard some educational material about the environment. Which must have made nice background noise on the way to the bar or bathroom, Gib thought.

Green Rage came on stage last. Lead singer (or "the motherfucken mastermind") Ethan Garrity had screamed into his microphone about taking the protest to the source, and he had jumped off stage and led the crowd to the street. Outside, he had hired a fleet of flatbed trucks to take the entire audience to the headquarters of Pacific Power, known as PacPow. The trucks had blocked off the street for forty-five minutes while Garrity led the crowds in anti-nuke chants, directed at the controversial Devil's Arroyo nuclear power plant.

Devil's Arroyo had been in the news that week for some sort of safety scandal. But this scandal was just the latest in thirty years of protests, lawsuits and scandals involving Devil's Arroyo. Maynard's report was unclear whether the current scandal involved kickbacks or fault lines or radioactive waste disposal. Maybe a combination of all three. *Probably* a combination of all three.

"The fucken liberal media trumped up some bullshit," Maynard scoffed. "And this Che Guevara wannabe used it as an excuse to incite public unrest." The next few minutes involved convoluted comparisons to the Weathermen, the Black Panthers. All irrelevant ancient history to Gib, about the Bay Area and it's legacy of protest and Maynard's legacy of fighting the protestors.

Just before the police had arrived to break up the Green Rage event, Garrity had yelled to the crowd to scatter. "Time to go, before the cops bust things up." Shortly, the only remnant of the impromptu protest were the trucks and the backed-up traffic. Even

the TV crews hadn't been able to get to the site fast enough to get tape, but the other members of Green Rage, Stanley "Campy" Campanella and Frank Marion, had videotaped the whole event. So they happily provided footage on to every TV station, along with some anti-Devil's Arroyo literature. In the end, the city, as much through confusion as anything else, ended up only charging Garrity for having a parade without a permit

Based on this, though, Maynard had decided that Green Rage was a massive threat to American society. Bigger than unwed mothers, bigger than militias, bigger than Islamic extremists, bigger than the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations.

By this time, Gib felt ready to take a nap, and was desperately trying to find a waitress to get him a cup of coffee. Unfortunately, none of the waitresses wanted to hear Maynard rant, either. Maynard was about to begin another ear-curdling discourse on the state of American society (inadequate) when a woman slid into the booth next to Gib.

"Reuben," Maynard grunted, cut off in mid-obscurity. "Nice of you to show up on time. Were you too busy washing your hair or munching some rug?"

Jan Reuben turned to Gib. "I have to sit across the table from Maynard because the stench from his toupee always turns my stomach. Plus, it makes it harder for him to look down my blouse."

Maynard instantly turned the red of an infected fingernail, with scattered splotches of white. Then he pretended to laugh it off.

"Maynard, aren't you going to introduce us?" Reuben asked. She turned to Gib and shook his hand. "Jan Reuben. I'm your contact. All reports go through me to the higher-ups. Believe it or not, that description even includes Bob." She turned away from Gib to look at Maynard in mock surprise.

"Bob Maynard! Are you still here? I thought you had to get back to destroying your liver in your office with that bottle of bourbon in your desk you think no one knows about."

Maynard hurriedly got out of the booth, bumping the waitress who had just arrived with coffee. "Fuck you, quimlicker." Maynard snarled as he walked out.

Reuben stared bullets at Maynard's back until the door closed behind him. Then she crossed over to sit across the table from Gib.

"Is it his vocabulary?" Gib asked.

"Everything. Look, did he pull the "not bad for a broad" approach?"

"Uh, yeah."

"He pisses and moans about affirmative action, but if it weren't for the old boy network, Bob would have been out on his ass years ago. If he was a dog catcher, cocker spaniels would rule the world."

Gib didn't want to get sucked into somebody else's office politics, so he kept quiet.

"Sorry," Reuben finally said. "I'm just angry because Bob snatched this operation out from under me. It was my idea in the first place."

"Your idea? He was just telling me about the march on Pacific Power."

"Before the march on PacPow, Bob was using my report about Green Rage as an example of why women agents shouldn't write during 'that time of the month.'"

Reuben sighed. "Anyway, fuck Maynard. I think we'll work together just fine. I was very impressed with your analysis in 'Basement Bomb Making'."

That report keeps circulating, doesn't it? Gib thanked her. Then he asked, "Why

don't you give me your perspective on Green Rage. I wasn't issued the full report before I got out here."

Pleased to be the center of attention, Reuben began her description of the menace of Green Rage,

Which Gib ignored. He narrowed his eyes in a pretense of concentration and snuck looks at her chest under hooded eyelids. Every once in a while, he let loose with an "uh-huh" or an "I see", while he debated if Reuben was wearing a bra or not.

"Profiles in Courage"

A good face they say, is a letter of recommendation.

Henry Fielding

Not.

On his way to the Berkeley safe house (where Reuben had said he could crash for a couple of days), he picked up a pizza. Tomorrow, he would have to find an apartment, but with FBI resources, that shouldn't be that hard. Reuben had said the DEA had any number of apartments available, confiscated under RICO laws.

Over sausage and pepperoni, Gib read about the members of Green Rage.

As Gib scanned through all the background information, he developed a suspicion about Green Rage; that maybe to Ethan Garrity, Frank Marion, and Stanley "Campy" Campanella, Green Rage-the-band was more important than Green Rage-the-environmental-group. Maybe it was one bullshit artist recognizing the work of another.

Ethan Garrity.

Age: 26

Place of Origin: Madison, Wisconsin

Role: Lead singer and guitarist.

Notable Item #1:

Garrity had spent at least four years trying to maintain a status as a perpetual undergraduate at the university of Wisconsin. According to interviews with a Dean of Students, Garrity was a rich kid with too much time on his hands. After the usual four years, Garrity had carefully manipulated the university system to always keep at least one required credit away from graduating.

During one semester, though, the requirements for graduation had changed without Garrity knowing it, and one of his classes (Basic Brewing, which Garrity was taking pass-fail) suddenly and unexpectedly fulfilled his final requirement. Near the end of the semester, the Dean of Students had called Garrity in and gleefully told him that it was time to rent a cap and gown. And there was nothing he could do about it. Garrity threatened to fail Basic Brewing, but eventually resigned himself to his fate. Unhappily, Garrity had received his accidental degree. Under protest, of course.

Notable Item #2:

One of the reasons Ethan Garrity had stayed an undergraduate was his comfortable position in the Madison protest community. He wasn't a thinker, or a writer, or even very influential. But he could get out the crowds better than any one else on campus. Gib had known a guy like Garrity while at Virginia. There, it was Sam Pennyman, the guy leading every candlelight vigil, every sit-in strike, every petition to have someone removed from a job or appointed to one. Probably every college in the country – except for maybe Princeton or BYU – had two or three guys like that who made a full-time job out of being holier-than-thou, thou, and *especially* thou. (Actually, even BYU probably had a guy like that, but he was advocating *more* restrictions on dating.) The word for this kind of figure

at Virginia had been "a Frenchman".

The president of the Campus Greens had put it like this: "Well, you always need someone to yell loud, right? Garrity couldn't negotiate his way out of a paper bag, but he's really good at making authority figures nervous."

After conducting a full week of record searches and background interviews, the Agent doing the research in Madison had come to the conclusion that Garrity was a pest, but about as dangerous as a fuse with no firecracker attached. In fact, most sources had assumed that the reason the FBI was asking about Ethan Garrity was because he had sold out and gotten a government job.

In fact, the Milwaukee Agent's final conclusion was that the investigation into Ethan Garrity was a false alarm. One phrase had stuck in Gib's head: "If we want to waste time chasing after bullshit artists, why can't we at least stick the Chicago office with the job?"

Frank Marion.

Age: 23

Place of Origin: Chicago, Illinois

Role: Drummer. Engineer.

Notable Item:

Marion's record showed him to be a math prodigy who had gone to the University of Chicago lab school. Marion was also an accomplished computer programmer who had secretly been on a watch list of potential hackers since the age of fifteen. It seemed that as long as it involved numbers or machinery, Frank Marion could make it sing, scream or stand on its head.

Marion was graduated three years before Garrity, even though he started two years after him. Since then, he had been a freelance programmer for software companies from Chicago to Minneapolis. Other than that, he was a model citizen, and the investigating had found out next to nothing.

Frank Marion had met Ethan Garrity his sophomore year, when Garrity took an Introductory Programming course. Frank Marion was so established in the Math and Computer department at Wisconsin that he was the Teacher's Assistant for Garrity's section. Garrity had found out that Frank played the drums and recruited him for the band he had decided to form with his friend Campy.

Stanley "Campy" Campanella.

Age: 26

Place of Origin: Madison, Wisconsin

Role: Bass player. Songwriter.

Notable Item #1:

Campy was a childhood friend of Garrity's.

Campy had been a low-priority in state recruit to play linebacker for the badger football team. The newspaper article was about why Campy had eventually left the football team. Three games into his sophomore season, the two guys starting ahead of him had gotten injured in the first quarter against the Indiana Hoosiers, and Campy had gone

wild with his chance. 8 solo tackles, a sack and a fumble recovery. It was a Knute Rockne kind of moment. After the Badgers won, 16-13, Campy probably could have gotten a free blowjob from every Wisconsin fan, male or female, in the stadium.

But then the after-game prayer huddle formed.

Campy had forced his way into the middle of it, screaming and cursing. The captain of the Badger team, a devout Baptist cornerback from Macon, Georgia had tried to force Campy out of the prayer huddle. At which point Campy hit the captain in the face with his helmet. Two teeth went spinning across the sidelines, and X-rays later showed a fractured jaw.

A brawl ensued, which basically amounted to Campy against every player on the field who professed a belief in any god, from Christ to Kali.

The visiting sports reporter for the Indiana Daily Student had gaped in disbelief, then taken down just about everything Campy screamed as he taunted his teammates. Choice quotes from the story included:

To his own teammates: “Fuck prayer! Why don’t you hit the weight room?”

To the Hoosiers: “Admit it! God *hates* you because you lost.”

Thirteen guys had tackled Campy and beat on him as he started screaming “Fuck God” over and over until security cleared the stadium.

The Wisconsin college paper printed a bizarre manifesto written by Campy himself as a sidebar to the article about the game:

Item 1.

If any athlete ever uses the term “god” in any way, his team should take away 10% of that’s athlete’s salary and donate it to the nearest church as a tithe. Then he should be smacked with a Gideon Bible and told to keep his trap shut.

If it’s an amateur athlete who does it, he just gets the smack.

Item 2.

If any politician ever thanks any god in any speech, offers up a prayer, or speaks at a prayer breakfast, he should instantly be impeached and required to work in a church soup kitchen for minimum wage for five years or until he has written the words “separation of church and state” on a blackboard *one million times*.

Item 3.

If any busybody preacher anywhere – from Pat Robertson to the Pope – opens his yap about politics or sticks his or her nose in anybody’s personal business, the tax exemption for that preacher’s church should instantly be revoked and should be enforced *retroactively* to the founding of that church in America.

Item 4.

Have a Nice Day.

The President of the College Atheists praised Campy, but he was the only one.

Notable Item #2:

When Campy got kicked off the team and lost his scholarship, Ethan Garrity's rich parents paid for Campy's tuition for the remaining two years.

Green Rage.

Originally, in Madison, the band had called themselves "Yelping Goldfish". The investigating agent had not been able to find out why. As soon as they surfaced in San Francisco, the name of the group had changed to "Green Rage". They played a few gigs, but by all accounts, they were not just ordinary, they were spectacularly mediocre -- the very pinnacle of barely adequate.

However, they had one important thing going for them, and that was Garrity's parents. And their checkbook.

The Space.

After writing an ambitious business plan, Garrity got his parents to loan him a large chunk of cash to buy a warehouse, grease wheels for a zoning change, and run a performance space. Which he named, creatively enough, "The Space".

Garrity's parents had a fortune made from distributing bratwursts, and they were overjoyed that their oldest son had finally come up with some idea about a business. So as unlikely a profit center as The Space might be, it had more potential for success than another semester of college.

Naturally, Green Rage played a lot at The Space. But they also booked a lot of other groups that could actually draw crowds -- mostly dance club nights, jam bands, and a mix of others. In addition, The Space was used during the daytime for meetings, day care, AIDS outreach, art openings, and a host of other activities.

In her one trip to The Space, Jan Reuben had seen a lot of what appeared to be controlled substances passed around, but the most prevalent drug was alcohol. The Space also offered a wide variety of trendy foodstuffs, like independent soft drinks, smart drinks, herbal speed, and a host of other useful or entertaining substances.

These two aspects of The Space led to files of two other people involved with The Space besides Green Rage: Norman Haddal and Ruth Radley.

Norman Haddal.

Age: 34

Place of Origin: Lubbock, Texas

Role: Drug dealer.

Notable Item:

In 1994, Haddal had been finishing a Ph.D. in Chemistry at Berkeley, but he had dropped out after some scandal involving designer drugs. While his career as a chemist had ended in any legal sense, Haddal was known around The Space for his special mixes of mood enhancers, hangover cures, stimulants, and depressants. That, in addition to his

ability to provide crystal meth, cocaine, Ketamine, Ecstasy, or any other party drug.

Haddal had been running a lab somewhere in the East Bay for a year and a half, but the DEA had been completely unable to find it. Meanwhile, Haddal continued creating drugs so new that it was unclear that they were even illegal.

Ruth “Boo” Radley.

Age: 28

Place of Origin: South Bend, Indiana

Role: Manager.

Notable Item:

Ruth Radley's connection to The Space was much less sinister, even though she had apparently been a recommendation of Norman Haddal when he saw how poor a manager Ethan Garrity was.

She:

arranged for the deliveries, for the cleaning, and for booking many of the bands.

She:

ran all the accounts, signed most of the checks, and juggled the daytime schedules for all the meetings and community outreach.

All of this, with only one or two part-time employees. But many of the people involved in the daytime activities did volunteer work that made it possible for everything to run, if not smoothly, then just out of the reach of total chaos.

* * *

Gib only skimmed the profiles, but studied the surveillance photos with deep fascination.

Ethan Garrity was fashion model beautiful, almost too much so, until you saw the photos of him talking. Then, helpfully, he seemed as dumb as one would expect a model to be. Narrow eyes resting under a head of blonde hair. Teeth straight and white, his nose straight and narrow. Nice tan. Worst of all, from Gib's viewpoint, was that when he wasn't singing or making speeches, Garrity seemed to only have two expressions. A self-satisfied smile: the brownnoser putting the apple on the speech teacher's desk; or a look of total earnestness: the brownnoser delivering his speech to the class.

Frank Marion was a geek, plain and simple. He wore thick glasses, carried around a noticeable gut on his bird-thin frame, and had skin that looked greasy even in photos. Less Denzel Washington, more Urkel. The only break genetics seemed to have given him was that his tight, curly hair didn't look as greasy as it probably would have if it were straight and blond. His only noticeable features were his hands, which were huge, with long, delicate fingers.

Stanley Campanella, the bass player, was a brute. Meathooks for hands, and a huge muscular frame. His hair, shagging and thick, framed a face with intense, Old Testament eyes. Gib easily could picture him starting a holy war with his teammates. The only expression his face ever seemed to show was a numb hostility.

Norman Haddal was a medium-sized man, with a shaved head, a jutting beak of a nose, and a Scandinavian brow hovering over dark brown eyes. A Keane painting turned

drug dealer. He dressed simply, always in black and white. Sometimes just black. He was pale as notebook paper, and radiated calm, like a picture of the Alaskan tundra.

Finally, there was Ruth Radley. According to the report, she was 5'9", but she looked shorter to Gib. Possibly because her face had a certain monkeyish quality, which made her seem slighter. A *cute* monkey, but a monkey nonetheless, with her round face, wide eyes, and snub nose. Gib took a closer look at a series of pictures of her jogging, wearing shorts and a cutoff shirt, and was intrigued by the clean cut of her shoulder muscles, her lean legs, her washboard stomach. But other than that, she just looked tired.

He tossed the remnants of the pizza, along with the reports, into the garbage and looked at the final piece of paperwork. Jan Reuben had given him an easy-to-remember false identity, with a Virginia driver's license, by simply flipping his names. So "Edward Gibson" was now "Gibson Edwards". And either way, he'd ask people to call him Gib. Easy enough. The next day, he would scout The Space for himself.

"Kettle, Pot. Pot, Kettle."

Everything that is beautiful and noble is the product of reason and calculation.
Charles Baudelaire

The next day, Gib actually stated by tracking down a place to live. Through Jan Reuben, he contacted a DEA agent in charge of confiscated properties around the Bay Area. The agent, Bobby McDonnell, was a haircut of a man, with a suit (silk) and a car (BMW) to match.

"Nice car," Gib said.

"Yeah. Thanks to RICO."

"Who?"

"RICO. It's some law, means we can confiscate all of a drug dealer's things. Suits, cars, houses, whatever. It's how we got all these buildings and condos for you to choose from.

"So," McDonnell continued, "where do you want to live?"

"I have choices?"

"Sure. What's your cover?"

"What do you mean?"

McDonnell glanced over. When you go into a class, half-asleep, and the professor asks you a question;

and you don't know the answer;

and sitting next to you is some full-on frat boy;

and he knows you don't know the answer, and that the professor knows, too;

and the he looks at you with contempt unleavened with the slightest trace of pity; that's the way McDonnell glanced at Gib.

"If you don't have a cover planned, why don't you call yourself a writer? That gives you an excuse to ask questions. And you don't have to dress up."

Rankled, Gib asked, "Where in San Francisco does a writer with a bad wardrobe live?"

McDonnell considered. "There's always the Mission."

Shortly, the two of them were standing in an old warehouse that had been converted to other uses. The ground floor had a bar (Club Pied), while the top floor was a huge loft space. The loft had an unfinished look, with a minimum of furniture and decoration. As if a group of workers had put in just enough work to call the place finished, but not enough to call it nice.

It was huge, though,. Convenient walking distance to The Space. Plus, there was parking in back.

"Where do I sign?" Gib asked.

That night, he pulled out an old ratty Fishbone t-shirt, yanked on some jeans, and went off to The Space. The cover was ten bucks for three bands. After Gib handed over his ten to the doorman, he struggled his way through the hugger mugger until he got to the main performance area, where a shitty rock band was abusing the audience with the classic rock licks.

The Space was carved out of an old warehouse that had a similar look to Gib's new building. The main area held maybe as many as a thousand people. Plus, the balcony that overlooked the space probably held a hundred more. He was reminded of Irving Plaza in New York or the Metro in Chicago.

The stage was on the left as he walked in. More importantly, the bar was on his right.

A third of the bar was partitioned off for selling stuff besides drinks. After getting himself a beer, Gib walked over. Band t-shirts and CDs being flogged. Posters, stickers, "sign up for our mailing list". In addition to the band junk, there were also big piles of photocopies -- flyers full of environmental factoids, protest announcements, and contact information for various groups. Also, stacks of books with titles like *Monkeywrenching!* and *Spike the System*.

Gib turned to wander through the crowd. In the time it took him to drink his beer, he spotted enough drug dealing to anesthetize Timothy Leary, with enough left over to stun Hunter S. Thompson. He passed around some Jefferson and got back some Miranda Warnings waiting to happen. Penny-ante drug busts were bullshit, though. Busting pissant dealers by the dozens might be all right for a beat cop or a DEA jagoff like Bobby McDonnell, but neither Jan Reuben or Bob Maynard would care. If the Chairman of the Federal Reserve found a dollar on the street, it would be nice; but it wouldn't make the papers. Gib went back and got another beer, walked over to pick up some of the activist info.

As he was folding photocopies and stuffing them in his back pocket, there was a lull in the activity around the bar. One of the women behind the counter noticed him and he recognized her as well. Ruth Radley.

She took a lousy picture, Gib realized. If Indians had believed the camera captured a bit of your soul, Ruth Radley clearly had found a way to defeat that theft. It was the difference between reading a Rand McNally roadmap of Monument Valley, and watching a John Ford western set there. With one, you got vaguely familiar with the routes through. The other gave you all the life between the roads. Cowboys and Indians. Slapstick and tragedy.

Life and death.

Plus, a spirit that loomed over everything like the sun. The kid of energy that gave contrast and clarity. When it went away, the landscape existed only in the grey and ordinary.

John Ford westerns had John Wayne to fill that role.

And now Gib had Ruth Radley.

She walked down the bar toward him and he shook, like iron shavings fighting a magnet. He returned her grin as she grabbed the bar in front of him. He noticed how her biceps popped out as she swung back and forth on her heels. His eyes snapped back and forth, trying to capture every detail of her.

What the fuck IS this? Gib thought, watching his hand quiver.

"Hey, there!" Ruth yelled over the music. "You a narc?"

"A narc?" he sputtered.

"Yeah! You scored about a hundred bucks of shit in the last ten minutes. So how come you're here for a beer?"

He tried to laugh it off. "I'm not a narc! "

She shrugged, not believing or disbelieving. "Wouldn't make a difference anyway. Not with what you bought." Then she reached over and grabbed his beer out of his hands, took a long drink and handed the bottle back. "Here. Saved you the dregs."

"Thanks. Hey, what's with all the material?" He tapped some of the stacks of flyers.

"You interested?"

"Maybe."

"Here." She picked up one of the flyers that Gib hadn't seen. "Read this. There's a meeting tomorrow afternoon." She looked back over her shoulder. The band had finished its awfulness, so people had flocked over to the bar. "Hey, I gotta go. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hey, wait! Look!" As she turned around, Gib pulled a random dose of something out of his pocket and ostentatiously put it in his mouth.

She laughed.

He took a last drink of his beer and backwashed the dose back into the bottle. He carefully carried the bottle out of Ruth's sight before throwing it away and ordering another.

Wandered through the place, Gib looked for any of the other targets. As it turned out, there was also a bar up in the balcony, so he kept drinking while he looked. Two more beers and a shot of whiskey later, he hadn't seen any of the three members of Green Rage. But he had spotted Norman Haddal, who seemed to be the most popular dealer in the whole place.

Up in one of the corners of the balcony, the bald dealer held court, giving away fully as much as he sold. It was confusing until Gib saw one of the guys he had bought a hit from come up to Haddal and pass him a huge wad of bills. At that point, Gib realized the dealers inside The Space were franchisees, and Haddal was their Ray Kroc. And there was little chance the people who ran The Space didn't know about it. Maybe they were even involved. This was a lot better than just some low-level drug crap. By itself, it was probably enough to shut The Space down. And McDonnell and his DEA pals could swing a big RICO stick as well. Done right, the Feds could probably come in and confiscate everything. Though it still probably wouldn't impress Reuben or Maynard.

It was a pretty good beginning, so he called it a night. Maybe he hadn't spotted the three main guys, but he didn't want to push his luck any further. And the new band was the same as the old band -- maybe worse.

Then when he hit the main floor, he realized the new band was Green Rage. He smacked himself in the head ostentatiously, disgusted with himself. They had been standing right in front of him -- Ethan Garrity singing and playing guitar, Stanley Campanella playing bass, and Frank Marion on drums.

Green Rage played a generic kind of pop punk. Frank Marion and Campy were actually an adequate rhythm section, but Ethan Garrity was incredibly uneven. It took a full song before Gib realized what the problem was. If Garrity was just playing guitar, he fell into a pretty stable groove with the two other guys -- if you could call the stomping around a groove. The reason was clear if you looked close: Garrity was actually mouthing the names of the chords as he looked at his fret boards. "G, C, D. A, C D."

But whenever he sang and played at the same time, everything turned into sonic stew.

As for the lyrics, mostly Gib had no idea what the hell Garrity was saying, until he finally realized that the current song was in French -- until it hit the chorus. When Gib heard the awkward translation, he finally realized the lyrics were ripped off from Baudelaire:

*"I have my wet lips and have the science
to bury in your bed my worn-out conscience"*

He had liked the lyrics better when he hadn't understood them. Romantic pretensions presented in public made him wince. Unless you were actually dying of consumption, it was always better to keep your grand romantic gestures to yourself.

On the other hand, at least Garrity was smart enough to rip off something good like Baudelaire. Gib appreciated poetry for its use for first dates and 4 AM apologies, so he memorized it at every chance. He even got to like some of it, because in reasonable doses it was okay, just like tequila or jogging. Gib thought of it as the Showtune Theory of Life. A couple of showtunes here and there were tolerable, but whole evenings with drunk friends belting out the greatest hits of Mitzi Gaynor made Gib want to start dealing out tonsillectomies with a cleaver.

Campy took over the mike for the next song. It was a slow, moody song, and Campy spoke the lyrics as much as sang them, while Garrity played harmonic and feedback tricks with his guitar. The lyrics went something like:

“What am I thinking?
I'm in love with you. Can't you tell?
I'm in love with you. So I don't talk to you.
I'm in love with you. So I don't walk with you.
I'm in love with you. I don't look you in the face.
I'm in love with you. I will never speak your name.
I'm in love with you. So I will never tell you.
I will never tell anyone.
I will never tell anyone.”

Two love songs, and nothing about the environment. Gib didn't want to push his luck. He went back to his warehouse and gave Jan Reuben a call, figuring he had earned some takeout after such a rough night of work.

As it turned out, Reuben wasn't answering her phone, so after leaving a message on her machine, Gib selected a random pill out of the batch he had bought, figuring he should test what Haddal produced. He popped the pill, then settled down to watch TV.

A few hours later, higher than a Cessna, Gib found himself talking to Jan Reuben. The phone must have been ringing, but he had no memory of picking it up. He realized he had been dreaming about his conversation with Ruth Radley, filling in smarter answers on his side.

Reuben wasn't able to meet him and seemed genuinely distraught about it.
“Are you OK, Gib? You sound a little stuffed up”

“I’m fine, Ruth.”

“Ruth? Who’s Ruth?”

It was an ice cube in the crotch. “What? Reuben? I said ‘Reuben’! I think you’re right. I’m coming down with a cold. Stuffed up.” Sympathies and recommendation followed. Gib finally hung up after promising to take Zinc and Vitamin E. Or maybe C.

The buzz from Haddal’s pill was killed, but a clear weariness sprung out of the corpse of the high. Like waking up from a refreshing nap. Gib sat on the couch and entertained images of Ruth Radley. He couldn’t get her out of his head.

"Making Friends"

You can make more friends in two months by becoming genuinely interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.

Dale Carnegie

The next morning, Gib drove around. If you were a serious driver like Gib, you always had to know the best routes. Shortest routes, alternate routes, scenic routes, escape routes, every kind. In cities he had learned, he could have been drugged, dropped off anywhere in the city, and still been able to navigate.

He got to The Space at noon, about an hour before the meeting was supposed to start. The idea had been to case the area a little bit, but as he was getting out of his car, Ruth Radley pulled into the space behind him. She stared at him through the windshield for a second, clearly trying to place his face before she got out. She was wearing grey shorts and a black cut-off shirt that showed off her muscular stomach.

"Hey, you're the narc, right? How were the drugs?" she called out cheerfully.

Being called a narc again made his ass twitch. The way she said it made him feel like he'd just spent five minutes telling her a joke, only to have her ask if he was *sure* he had told the right punchline.

"Relax, man," she said. "I'm just joking."

"That's the thing," he said, trying to think of something clever to say. "You caught me. I *do* have ulterior motives. It's terrible you broke my cover so easily."

"OK, then, what do you want?"

"I'm a writer. I heard about Green Rage and The Space and thought there might be a story."

"You're a reporter?"

"No, no. Just a freelance writer."

"Really? Who have you written for?"

Gib hadn't even considered making up a fake resume. "Well, mostly... I'm just getting started. I used to work in New York, writing ad copy. Freelance."

"Who are you writing for now?" Ruth asked.

"It depends," he said. "Is there a story here worth writing?"

She thought about it. "Tell you what. Come on in. Help me clean up a little and set up for the meeting, and you can ask questions while you do. So you can find out for yourself if there's a story."

"Deal."

She had him get the bag of groceries out of her back seat. While she unlocked the front door, she wagged a finger at him. "You slack off, though, and you're out of luck. And you can't quote me, either."

"As long as I get quotes from Ethan Garrity and the others."

"Ethan'll give you more quotes than you know what to do with." She started up the front stairs. "What's your name?"

He caught himself about to say "Edward Gibson." *Man, I suck at this.* "Gibson Edwards. You can call me Gib."

"Nice to meet you, Gib. I'm Ruth Radley. Hope you don't have a weak back."

They spent the next hour sweeping the floor, brewing two industrial-sized pots of coffee, rolling out a huge -- and ragged -- rug in the middle of the dance floor, and setting up a keg at one corner of it. As they carried the keg, he watched her arm and stomach muscles flex.

"Hey," she said to catch his attention. When he looked up and saw her smile, he knew she had caught him looking. "I thought you had a bunch of questions."

"I thought I'd get some work done first. Build up some credit."

"Tell you what, help me get the rack of folding chairs up from the basement and that'll buy you a beer and twenty questions. How's that?"

They went down into the basement and rolled the chairs into the freight elevator. While they were going up, Gib asked what he figured was a good leading question. "This is a big place. Is it all just for music?"

"Oh, no. This place runs just about twenty-four hours a day, it seems like. The live music is most nights, but we rent space out for about anything. Art shows, theater, whatever. The basement is full of practice space which we rent out, too. But we want to bring in big crowds, so mostly it's music."

"Doesn't everyone want big crowds?"

"Of course." The elevator opened and she grunted loudly as they got the chairs rolling again. "But we're not in this to make money. We're trying to spread the word."

"The word?"

She looked at him curiously. "What were you planning to write about? I thought you were interested in Green Rage and the environmental work they do."

"Well, sure. That's a big part of it. But it's the whole, uh, zeitgeist."

She snorted as she walked over to the bar and found a stack of big plastic cups. "Zeitgeist. Jesus. That's one of *those* words."

"One of *what* words."

"Like post-modern. Every asshole and his brother uses it, and everyone thinks they know what it means." She handed him a glass and had him hold it while she poured beer from the keg.

"I know what zeitgeist means."

"Didn't mean to wound your ego, Hemingway." She blew foam off her beer and took a drink. "So what does it mean?"

"Aw, hell," Gib said, unable to remember. "You weren't supposed to call my bluff."

She patted his shoulder in sympathy. "Thought not."

"The point is," Gib said, "I thought the whole combination of performance space, political activism and so on, would be interesting to write about."

"'And so on' is always the best part of any story."

"What exactly is your job, by the way? You're sort of in charge, right?"

"The only thing better than 'and so on' is 'sort of.'" She looked over toward the back stairs and waved. "Afternoon, Ethan!"

Gib looked over and saw Ethan Garrity -- wearing only a pair of jeans -- walking across the floor toward them. Gib felt oddly comfortable. A cold beer and an interesting new woman had settled his nerves. He was getting the hang of being "Gib, the Amiable Writer Guy". Kind of a fuck up, don't worry about him. Eventually, he knew they'd get

around to talking about monkeywrenching, the state of the trees, and all that crap. For now, though, he just wanted to hang out and drink.

"Hi, Boo!" Garrity yelled to Ruth. "Who's this?"

"Boo?" Gib asked.

"Can't define zeitgeist," she said, "and you don't know *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I guess you don't have to pass a test to call yourself a writer, huh?"

"Oh. Ruth Radley. Boo Radley. Got it."

"Ethan, this is Gib. He wants to write about you."

"Really? Nice to meet you, Gib." Garrity shook his hand distractedly. "Boo, is there any juice? I'm really hung over." The only proof of that was that Garrity's eyes were bloodshot. Otherwise, he looked like a gymnast about to start a tumbling run. It made Gib -- whose hangovers had to be measured on the Richter scale -- more than a little envious.

"Yeah, it's in the bar fridge."

Garrity wandered over to the bar.

Ruth said, "Ethan will give you all the quotes you need, once he babies himself through the next few minutes. He'll probably have some free time after the meeting."

"What about you? You think you'll have any free time?"

"Was that an interview question, Hemingway?" Ruth went to greet the first people who were streaming into The Space. As around fifty people straggled in over the next ten minutes or so, Gib was interested to see the variety of people in the group. He had expected a bunch of saggy-ass hippies -- a mixed bag of luddites, folk singers, hemp growers, and tie die shirt manufacturers -- and he wasn't disappointed. But dirt wizards accounted for less than half the group. The rest looked like factory workers and accountants -- the kind of people who would go bowling in their spare time, not come to a place like this to talk about the environmental work they were doing.

The meeting, once it started, was a pretty loose affair, with everyone being given a chance to speak in a mostly clockwise order. In Gib's limited experience, this kind of overly democratic meeting always broke down. Because given the opportunity, most people would yap about personal "issues" and their feelings about everything from cats to conspiracy theories. Rambling from this to that to -- oh yeah -- the other thing. Surprisingly, almost everyone who felt the need to speak was direct and to the point. There were occasional rounds of applause when someone mentioned a successful event, publication, or signature drive. But mostly, people just nodded and took notes as information poured out.

The major exception was Garrity. He would pour out compliments on people, make rambling speeches about the need to "save Mother Earth from corporate greedheads" and other scintillating revelations.

Gib quickly found himself jittery and bored. He dreaded seeing Garrity open his mouth, because it meant another two or three minutes of spouting off. About a third of the group seemed to feel the same as Gib. The rest, though, looked on rapturously whenever Garrity spoke.

Luckily, only two or three worshippers at the Garrity shrine followed his lead, favoring the group with pointless anecdotes about how, for example, the choice between paper or plastic bags was a major ethical choice that would make the Great Goddess smile

upon people with favor. Or some such squirrely shit. And Garrity would always make sure to "validate their feelings", because it was important to accept all sort of differences of opinion, blah blah blah. Gib realized most people went to get more beer whenever certain self-appointed preachers to the converted stood up.

Other than those exceptions, though, everyone was all business.

For example, a freckled African-American woman asked for help passing out flyers in front of a furniture manufacturer in Oakland that was blasting out heavy pollution next to a junior high school. That got five volunteers, and a few mentions of other people who might be available. The woman nodded happily, especially after Ruth offered to print up the flyers at The Space.

"I think Frank Marion – you all know Frank – can come out and tape the whole thing and pass it off to some local stations," Garrity added. "Probably won't do much good, but what the hell. If there's little kids involved, there's always a chance we'll get coverage." It was the shortest speech Garrity gave the entire afternoon.

And that ended everything. As the meeting broke up, Ruth patted him on the shoulder and asked him to help her carry the keg back under the bar.

"That's it?" he blurted out. A couple people gave him suspicious looks. In retrospect, Gib realized how stupid he had been to expect to hear monkeywrenching discussions out in public.

"Hey, everybody," Ruth announced. "Before you all split up, I want to introduce Gib Edwards. Wave to everybody, Gib."

Gib waved.

"Gib here is thinking about writing a story about The Space. I'm sure you'll give him all the help he deserves."

The suspicious looks changed to a low-boil contempt.

"One more thing! I think he's a narc!" Ruth yelled.

Much laughter.

A little later, Ruth and Gib were sitting at the bar. At some point, Stanley Campanella had joined them briefly for a beer, but he had gone out to meet Norman Haddal for some unspecified business.. Ruth was finishing a beer with Gib while Garrity held court with about fifteen people. They were talking unhappily about a recent court Federal court decision involving Devil's Arroyo.

"It's a tragedy," Garrity said. "I wish Green Rage could think of something that could stop the place from opening. I hate to sound like a pessimist, but marches and protest can only accomplish so much."

There was general agreement.

Gib remembered that the anti-Devil's Arroyo demonstration in front of Pacific Power's headquarters had been what worried Bob Maynard. But the file hadn't gone into any detail about the cause of the protest. "What's Devil's Arroyo?"

Silence and stares.

"It's *nuclear power*," one of the women snarled.

"Well, sure," Gib stammered, "but what makes Devil's Arroyo any worse than any other plant?"

That was all the encouragement Garrity needed to explain the history of Devil's Arroyo at length. Ruth kicked Gib in the shin as Garrity started talking.

Boiled down to the essence, it was a thirty year fight about building a nuclear power plant. In 1963, Pacific Power had announced plans to build a series of nuclear plants Devil's Arroyo, about an hour south of the Bay Area.

When the Sierra Club members found out, they instantly pointed out irreplaceable features of the area, including a sacred Indian burial ground, a unique coastal wilderness biosphere (the last of its type in the state), the largest and oldest Redwood trees on the entire western seaboard, a bird habitat, and the largest abalone breeding ground between Seattle and San Diego. In fact, they announced, Devil's Arroyo area was beautiful enough to be a state park.

However, by that time, PacPow had gotten approval from the Atomic Energy Commission to start building. They hadn't spent much yet, but approvals weren't easy or fast to get, and moving the construction spot again would start to cost serious money. Plus, egos and reputations were now on the line. So the brawl began.

It was now 1965. PacPow estimated Devil's Arroyo would be finished and providing cheap electricity by 1973. By that year, construction was only about a third finished. The most eventful year in the intervening eight had been 1969. Geologists working for Shell Oil announced the discovery of the Hannigan Fault just off the coast from where construction was going on.

After that, things got really nasty.

When the existence of the fault was confirmed by the US Geological Survey in 1972, a VP of PR for PacPow announced "not even God could make an earthquake big enough to damage Devil's Arroyo." Throughout the rest of the 70s, this was mostly the level of the dialogue. Various lawsuits were filed by various environmental groups, which would take decades to went their way through the court system. In 1976, PacPow started doing hot tests of Devil's Arroyo One, killing abalone by the thousands each time, and local fishermen started filing their own lawsuits. The USGS tended to come down on the side of the activists, and they continued to show studies that showed Devil's Arroyo was not designed well enough to handle a "seismic event of any great size." The funniest response from PacPow was a claim that, because the foundation for Devil's Arroyo was so massive and wide, it would, in fact, *reduce* the effects of a major quake. The best known sound bite to come out of that contretemps was at the press conference for the announcement of this claim, where a reporter for the *Sacramento Bee* exclaimed in disbelief, "You can't think we believe this crap! It defies common sense!"

By that time, the current VP of PR (the third in five years) was burned out by the whole controversy and he replied, "This isn't common sense, it's geology!"

Over the years, the largest group of casualties in the fight over Devil's Arroyo, next to abalones, were probably PR flacks for PacPow.

The 80s were the decade of the protests. The first of the court cases were being shot down and moving up to federal circuit courts, but PacPow was getting tentative approvals to continue building, especially after Jerry Brown left the governor's office and was followed by years of Republicans. In 1986, Republicans became the majority on the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which assured smoother sailing for PacPow, even after Chernobyl. That year, Devil's Arroyo went online, twenty-three years after PacPow had first thought about building the facility. The original costs of One had been estimated to be about 160 million dollars. In 1988, the facility had cost PacPow

over a billion dollars, not even counting legal fees. Most of that extra cost was due to PacPow being forced to rebuild the facility multiple times to resist earthquakes. The court fights in the 80s revolved around the utility's desire to pass that extra cost onto the consumer, which resulted in a rare loss for PacPow.

In spite of that, the 90s mostly consisted of court failures for the opposition to Devil's Arroyo, from restraining orders to civil liberty suits. In 1991, the one of the largest and longest blockades of a nuclear plant took place over a span of two weeks, with tens of thousands of people taking part. Over two thousand people were arrested, but after it was all over, Devil's Arroyo kept chugging along. Even so, by the summer of '96, when Green Rage started leading demonstrations, the stories that were coming out of the operational facilities didn't fill anyone with great confidence about the place. Constant shutdowns were the norm, for reasons from overheating to pump problems.

Garrity concluded his lecture by telling Gib the impetus for Green Rage's large-scale protest in front of PacPow's headquarters.

"About two months ago there was another shutdown. You know what caused that one? Some *technician* took out the wrong fuses and all of Devil's Arroyo shut down for a whole day before they figured out the problem. The whole place is ridiculous, a Chernobyl waiting to happen."

Garrity's lecture killed any possibility for more socializing. People left, and Garrity went upstairs to the living area, leaving Ruth and Gib alone at the bar.

"So, what do you think of the act?" Ruth asked.

"Last night's show or the lecture?"

"Both."

"Well, as a singer, he gives a hell of a speech. As a speaker, he's a decent therapist."

"So you're not impressed."

"He's OK." Gib finished his beer and refused another refill. To his surprise, he realized he was a little bit drunk. Drunk enough to blurt out something before he had a chance to really think about it. "You can't tell me his charms seduce *you*, can you? I don't see you as going for the empty figurehead type."

For a second, he thought he had offended her. Then he realized for the first time that afternoon, she was actually looking at him seriously. Up until that point, she had been treating him like a mildly amusing fellow passenger -- the guy who sat down next to you when the plane left O'Hare, plied you with small talk about sports and politics until the plane touched down at LaGuardia, and then disappeared forever. Suddenly, she was looking at him as if she actually might want to remember his face.

"Oh, really? What do think my type is?" She was giving him her full attention, and her expectant grin was unnerving. Cynics wore that kind of grin during a rare moment of hope -- hope which they fully expected to be dashed.

In high school, Gib's regular catcher had been a cynical guy named Joe Meeker. Meeker believed the glass half-empty, and that someone had probably spit in it for good measure. The night before the regional championship game -- a game that Gib was pitching -- he had run into Meeker at a party. After taking one look at the 32 ounce beer can in Gib's hand, Meeker had, with the cynic's hopeful grin on his face, offered to drive Gib home. "Just so you'll be ready for tomorrow."

"Don't worry about me, man. I'll be ready to go tomorrow. I've only had a couple beers."

The next day, so hung over he could barely see, Gib had given up eight runs in one inning before he got pulled. It was the worst game Gib ever pitched in his years playing baseball. When Meeker had finally gotten back to the dugout, he had just looked at Gib and patted him on the shoulder.

"Just wasn't your day, I guess." Then Meeker reached into his equipment bag and handed Gib some aspirin and a bottle of water.

And now Ruth was grinning that grin at him. He knew that he had suddenly gotten into dark territory. Normally, the easiest thing to do would be to give an answer he knew was bound to disappoint, and then move on as quickly as possible. But this time, it was his job to win her over.

"What do I think your type is?" He trailed off, about to say "we hardly know each other", knowing it was a lurking fuck up. Putting off the question would screw things up. Jokes wouldn't work, false braggadocio -- "Hey, *I'm* your type! -- wouldn't work, and that meant the only real option was giving as plausible an answer as possible and hope his analysis was good.

A word popped into his head. "Mortar."

Ruth leaned back. "Hmm." The grin went away, but was replaced by neutrality, not rejection.

And that short pause gave Gib enough time to figure out the rest of his line of crap. "You're not the leader, or the life of this party. You're the mortar that holds the whole house together. Without you, this whole place is just a bunch of bricks, going nowhere." He held his breath while Ruth considered it.

Ruth kept silent for a long time. "Well, that's not a bad answer. I don't know how true it is, but it's a good answer."

"Influencing People"

Work is the curse of the drinking classes.

Oscar Wilde

Everything went very steady after that. Extremely steady, even.
His days were essentially split into thirds.

Third of the Day #1: Driver's Ed.

At the crack of eleven or noon, Gib would flounder out of bed, instantly ready for action after a couple of cups of coffee, and drive around the city streets and highways, learning the city. His method was to pick up the free weeklies, a method he had used in New York with the *Village Voice* and the *New York Press* and in Chicago with the *Reader* and *New City*. In San Francisco, he used the *Bay Guardian* and the *SF Weekly*. Taking the two papers to a coffee shop in downtown Berkeley, he cut out apartment ads for one or two bedrooms in a mid-range price group and taped them into a notebook. Then he clipped the restaurant reviews and any restaurant ad he could find and added them to the notebook as well. Finally, he just ripped out both music sections with all the club ads and folded them into the back of the book. Once he finished, he bought a really detailed driving map of the city and tried to find all the places he had collected.

He started with the apartments, because they would be the hardest. The first morning, he only found two places. Mainly he had been frustrated by all the one-way streets, which had screwed up whenever he tried to backtrack, and generally messed with his sense of direction and got him completely discombobulated. By the end of the fifth morning, however, he had found every apartment on his list, so he now had a pretty good idea of how to get around the city and what the neighborhoods were like: the Financial District, Downtown, the Haight, Now Valley, the Avenues, Upper and Lower Richmond, the Mission, and Bernal Heights. Those seemed to cover just about everyplace he might want to go in San Francisco.

He moved on to restaurants, and those took about four days. Clubs only took two mornings.

By the end of his scouting, he knew the fastest routes to cruise through the city, including Bush and Fell, the south part of Market, the Golden Gate Park paths, and how to use or ignore the highways. And he learned that San Francisco had the awful parking situation typical to any major American city.

The only thing that amazed him were how many muscle cars were still on the streets. Whenever he saw another GTO on the road, Gib made a point of waving.

"All those sixties cars last out here so well is because there's almost never any snow," Ruth later explained. "So there's no salt tossed down on the roads that messes up the bottom of your car. Plus, the muscle cars just fit the lifestyle. So people obsess about them."

Third of the Day #2: Mopping Up

During the afternoons, Gib would show up at The Space and either spend his time doing repair work – including sweeping, fixing things like plumbing, or mopping up the

floors (especially in the four bathrooms), or repairing holes in the walls. The last one was one of the weird anomalies about The Space. Cleaning up puke, stray streams of piss, spilled beer and crushed cigarettes were what Gib had expected. But every day after a show, there would be holes where drunks had tripped and cracked their heads, or just decided to shadow box with the dry wall.

With practice, he got quite skilled at using wire mesh and goo to repair the cheap walls of the converted factory space. Wherever there was paneling, he also got talented at slicing out the broken pieces and cutting new pieces to fit. Since Ruth hated that particular job, she was happy to let Gib do it. He considered planting bugs all around The Space in the repaired walls, until he walked to the end of that thought-path. At best, he'd get conversations between Trustafarian teens about which bands sucked and who had the best fake ID.

Gib wasn't the only volunteer, but he was easily the most steady and reliable, which he found bizarre: an FBI agent was providing the steadiest help to a bunch of suspected eco-terrorists.

The other volunteers were exchanging the work for use of The Space for meetings. There was one abortion rights group, two regular seminars about spirituality (one masculine, one feminine), a fledgling stripper's union, three small theatre groups who needed rehearsal space (and who got into wrestling matches with each other about stolen ideas), two art classes, and a mish-mash of others who needed a place to meet. They all met during the day, and the only ones who Ruth charged a nominal fee were the spirituality seminars and the art classes. All the rest traded work for rent.

At night, The Space had performances, including bands, lectures, poetry slams, DJ parties, and at least one art opening.

The upper floors were living and working space for both Garrity and Campy. Frank Marion had an apartment somewhere near the Haight, though he stored a lot of his equipment at The Space, while Ruth lived with two roommates in Noe Valley.

Third of the Day #3: Sexing the Superior

The last third of Gib's day was given over to his real job. He wrote notes on his day at The Space

Some sample notes:

TO: Jan Reuben, Special Agent, San Francisco

FROM: [Agent Code #: SF677-900-980]

Subject: Ethan Garrity

Subject appears to wake up every day at approximately 14.00 hrs.

When there are meetings of environmental groups, Subject in I charge.

Subversive meeting activities include:

- *Protest planning*
- *Anti-corporate rhetoric*

Note: specific anger is directed at Pacific Power's Devil's Arroyo nuclear facility. See separate report.

- *Anti-government rhetoric*

As of yet, there has been no violence advocated in public forums.

When no environmental meetings are scheduled, subject appears to see numerous films in secondary release. A representative list: Courage Under Fire, A Time to Kill, Independence Day, Twister. Subject has boasted of viewing Independence Day over 6 times, and this agent has witnessed Subject cheering at destruction of major U.S. landmarks, including the White House and the Capitol Building. The violent content in these films is clearly a mirror of Subject's violent potential, but further investigation is required.

TO: Jan Reuben, Special Agent, San Francisco

FROM: [Agent Code #: SF677-900-980]

Subject: Frank Marion

Subject has a job in the computer industry which keeps him away from The Space until late in the day. Subject's involvement with Green Rage and The Space appears to primarily be focused on electronic equipment.

Subject is clearly not a instigator in the group, but his facility with electronics may indicate an ability to build explosives and other destructive devices. This agent has witnessed Subject shooting fireworks from the roof of The Space in clear violation of city ordinances. This lack of respect for public welfare is likely indicative of a broader contempt for society, but further investigation is required.

TO: Jan Reuben, Special Agent, San Francisco

FROM: [Agent Code #: SF677-900-980]

Subject: Stanley Campanella

Subject begins day before this Agent can plausibly arrive at target building ("The Space"). Based on conversations with witnesses, Subject coordinates and assists environmental, anti-corporate and anti-government activities across the Bay Area, including financial and other assistance.

Subject is hostile to engagement with this Agent. This hostility is possibly indicative of a broader anger against society, but further investigation is required.

TO: Jan Reuben, Special Agent, San Francisco

FROM: [Agent Code #: SF677-900-980]

Subject: Ruth Radley

...

...

... further investigation is required.

At the end of the day, he checked in with Jan Reuben. They would meet at the Berkeley safe house, he would give her the report, make plans for the next day, have sex.

That was Gib's first two weeks in SF. He drove in the morning. In the afternoon and evening, he mopped and hung out, talking with Ruth, Garrity and Marion, failing to talk with Campy. Then he went home, took notes, gave reports, fucked.

End of Day of Thirds...

The second Tuesday of volunteering, Ruth said to Gib, "I don't know what you're getting out of all of this."

Gib answered, "I'm getting background information for the story."

"That's a lot of puke you're mopping up for a story."

"I guess."

Ruth thought about it. "You're angling for a job, aren't you? Look, we do all right, but we really aren't looking to hire anyone."

"I'm not looking for a job. I'm a writer."

Thinking about it some more, Ruth said, "I'm not interested in dating you."

Gib was startled. "Where did that come from?"

Ruth smiled. "I appreciate your help around here, but you don't strike me as the idealistic type. So if it's not money, it must be sex."

"I told you, I'm writing a *story!*"

"Sure. See you tomorrow, Hemingway."

The next day, Garrity started invited Gib to join The Card Game. The Ragers were fanatical card players, dealing out hands at the smallest opportunity. Sometimes it was Gin, or Poker, or Euchre, but the most common game to see the Ragers playing was Hearts.

"How do you play?" Gib asked. Ruth was out paying bills, so the Ragers were looking for a fourth. Campy had muttered something about Hearts being just as good with three people, but Frank Marion uncharacteristically told the bigger man to shut his pie hole.

Garrity saw Gib's surprise at Marion's ire, and explained, "Frank's a pretty good card player. He takes it pretty seriously. He beats Vegas when he goes."

Gib asked Marion, "Five dollar blackjack, Frank?"

Marion said morosely, "Blackjack is for idiots."

Campy laughed, and Garrity said, "Frank's on the black list for blackjack in Vegas. He got kicked out of three –"

"Four," Campy said, with a rare grin.

"—four different casinos for counting cards. What did you win that night at Caesar's, Frank? You started by going ten thousand down, right?"

Marion mumbled something.

"And then you ended fifteen thousand up, wasn't it?"

Marion shuffled the cards loudly and said, "Are we going to play or what?"

Hearing *fifteen thousand* made Gib extremely nervous to sit down at the same table with Marion. But the rules were explained to him: each Heart counted as a point, the Queen of Spades for thirteen, and that the goal of the game was to get the lowest number of points. First person to a hundred points was the loser, and the lowest point

total was the winner. Gib thought he understood the basic idea, as long as they weren't playing for cash.

"But the most fun is when you shoot the moon," Marion said. "That's when you *take* every single heart in the deck, as well as the Queen of Spades, and everyone else gets 26 points. It's great!"

"Frank likes to try and shoot the moon a lot," Garrity said. "He screw that up the time, because we know to look for it."

The Ragers played a hand to show Gib how to play. They played another hand with Garrity giving Gib advice on what card to play. Then they started keeping score.

Gib was impressively awful. When he finally broke the hundred point barrier, the next closest point total was Campy with 42. Frank Marion only had 12 total points, and he cursed his bad luck.

"I've gone cold, totally cold," Marion moaned as he started a new round of scoring on the sheet of paper in front of him.

Garrity shuffled the deck and said to Gib, "We used to play poker a lot, but Frank got too upset. Then Gambler's Anonymous started having meetings here, so it sort of felt wrong to be playing poker when GA volunteers were sweeping up."

After an hour, Gib had lost five straight games, and both Marion and Garrity were telling him what a good sport he was. Then Garrity invited him to "the usual Friday night party".

"What's that?"

"Oh, well, on Fridays we usually don't have bands, so we throw a little party. It's usually pretty fun. Relaxed."

When Gib showed up at one-thirty on Friday, the music was going full blast and about forty people were still dancing out on the floor. Another ten or so were hanging with Campy at the bar and passing a bottle around. Gib stood awkwardly at the entrance. Campy looked over at him at least once, but the look was so nakedly hostile that Gib didn't walk over to the bar.

Ruth suddenly appeared out of the lights of the dance floor, as if teleported. Holding out her sweat-beaded arm, she pulled Gib onto the dance floor. Luckily, Gib had had a beer before he came, which was usually his bare minimum before he could force himself to dance. Even though he knew dancing would assist his lifelong goal of getting laid, he had never been able to break the clichéd white guy dancing discomfort. The lights were still flashing on some automatic program that Marion had set up, so his spastic butter churning was nicely camouflaged. Every once in a while, Ruth would open her eyes and grab his arms and swing the both of them around. Sober, even half-blitzed, Ruth was probably a pretty good dancer, but she was burning bright tonight, and her swinging arms caught him painfully in the nose at least twice before he stopped noticing.

After about three generic dance songs, the DJ put on King Floyd's "Groove Me", which led into the R&B equivalent of classic rock radio. Even an autistic quadriplegic could dance to Aretha Franklin or Sam Cooke. Then Marvin Gaye started crooning and most people paired up. Ruth grabbed Gib and put her head on his chest.

When the song ended, Ruth shook her head blearily and smiled up at Gib. The DJ put on some meandering jamband and turned down the volume. Most of the remaining dancers fled instantly, and the rest wandered over to the bar. Gib turned to follow, but

Ruth spun him around and kissed him.

“Thanks for dancing,” she said as she took her tongue out of his mouth and led the way to the bar.

At four in the morning, Gib found himself playing cards with the Ragers upstairs in the kitchen. There were four or five people crashed on couches in the living room, and Garrity had put Ruth into a spare bedroom after she laid her head down on the bar and said “nighty night” to the whole group.

Though all three Ragers were clearly drunk -- Campy still drinking straight from a bottle of rum -- Gib was still losing badly at Hearts.

During a shuffle lull, Garrity said to Gib, “I really appreciate all the help you’ve given us. I wanted you to know that. We appreciate all our volunteers.”

Campy grunted, which sounded like disbelief to Gib.

Garrity said, “Ruth says you’ve done a great job, too.” Then he stared at Campy until the big man grumpily handed the bottle of rum over to Gib, who accepted the peace offering.

When Gib handed the bottle back after taking a long drink, Campy asked, “Why *are* you volunteering?”

It was the first complete sentence Gib had heard the big man complete in his presence, so he took special note of it. Campy had a deep, booming voice, a Paul Robeson, James Earl Jones kind of voice, a voice that you heard announcing: “In a world ...” for movie trailers. Soothing as the voice was, the suspicious nature of the question would have given Gib conniptions if he had been less drunk.

“Trying to see the inner working of this place,” Gib said breezily.

“You learned a lot, have you?” Campy asked.

Gib mimed deep cogitation. Finally, he said, “Learned how to play Hearts.”

They all laughed except Campy.

"Fitness"

Justice is incidental to law and order.

J. Edgar Hoover

So that was the first two weeks of investigating at The Space. Driving, Cleaning, and Jan Reuben.

One of the really annoying things about Jan Reuben as a boss her intense concern about things that Gib gave less than two shits in a pigeon's ass about. Such as qualifying on a pistol. Or talking investigation strategies. Or working out. Worst of all was combining all those activities into one

The day after the Friday Night Regular, Reuben called at quarter to five in the morning. Since he had only been asleep for about a half hour, Gib was let the machine pick up. What finer words in the world than these: "let the machine get it".

Gib only listened to the messages if the mood struck him. More often, he would just hit rewind on the machine. Which sometimes caused troubles.

One weekend during his first year of law school, Wallis had showed up at his front door.

"I left you three messages last week!" Wallis told him as they sat down to dinner in an Indian restaurant in Adams-Morgan.

"You called?" Gib asked. "Sorry, there was this girl I was avoiding."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"Well, anyway," Gib continued, "it was just this big hassle, all right? It wasn't worth listening to the messages. Just a lot of 'You bastard', 'I can't believe you did that', on and on and on. Fine, I'm a bad guy, let's move on with our lives, all right? Who needs the stress? So I just hit rewind every time I came in the door last week."

"So you just erased all the messages without listening to them? All week?"

"Sure."

"Then what's the point in having an answering machine?"

Gib shrugged. "It makes other people feel better."

Wallis laughed in horror. "Why not just get Caller ID?"

Gib scoffed. "There's no deniability in *that*. The if I told someone, 'I didn't get your call.', I'd just be *lying*."

"So you never pick up your phone, never check messages."

"Not never. It just goes in waves. Phones are for getting pizza delivered, not hassles."

"That's crazy," Wallis said. "You missed all my messages. What if I had shown up at your front door and you weren't home?"

"Well, you did, and I was."

"But that was luck."

"If you say so," Gib said. "I prefer to think of it as the way the universe works when it's working right."

"But what if you hadn't been home?"

"You could have crashed somewhere else."

"But we would have missed each other."

“That would have sucked. But this isn’t the last time you’re ever coming to D.C. is it?”

“No.”

“So we would have hooked up some other time. Everything usually works out. You just have to keep a positive attitude.”

Wallis was interrupted by the waiter arriving with the wine. After the two of them ordered, Wallis said, “Gibby, do you have any friends where you’ve known them for years, and then one night you sit down with them to dinner, and you realize how little you know about the depths of their insanity?”

“I seem insane to you?”

“Well, most of the time I think of you as Edward Gibson, my good, solid friend. And then there are times like this when I realize you’re ten times more fucked up than anyone else I know. And that’s including my drug addict brother Owen.”

Gib just poured the wine.

The day he arrived in San Francisco, Gib had gotten a new digital answering machine. He replaced the “my machine is broken” excuse with the modern digital excuse, “oh, my machine must have been filled up; sorry about that”. He figured he could call up his own machine and leave long message so the machine itself could offer up the excuse for him. Very satisfying. Hitting DELETE for every message was more satisfying than pressing rewind, even if it involved a bit more effort. Plus, the machine was totally silent when it picked up a message, which made it easier to sleep in when getting calls from supervisors at unreasonable hours.

So when Reuben called him at 4:45 AM, he let the machine pick up. It was quite a surprise when he was woken up by a pair of his stink-ridden workout shorts being rubbed into his face. The stench was too awful to contain in a dream, so he woke up.

He sat up in bed and saw Reuben pawing through his pile of clothes.

“I’m amazed,” she said when she saw him move, “that someone with so few actual belongings can still have such a messy living space. Just look at all these dirty clothes. Where do you keep your clean clothes?”

“What the hell time is it?”

“It’s just after 5:30.”

“I slept all day?”

“AM.”

He stared at her. “You’re in my apartment – hey, wait a second, how did you get into my apartment?”

“I picked the lock.”

“You’re an FBI agent. Where did you learn how to pick locks?”

“I took a class.”

“Oh.” Gib looked around for a cigarette.

“Get dressed,” Reuben said as Gib found the pack and tried to fish out a smoke. “We’ve got some work to do.”

Gib finally got a cigarette lit and took one puff before Reuben snatched it out of his fingers and crushed it out on his floor with her tennis shoe. “Cancer, cancer, cancer. Come on, get off your dead ass.” She grabbed the covers and yanked them away, taking the opportunity to make a critical study of Gib’s naked body. For a brief moment, he

thought this might have been the point of Reuben's dawn break-in, a uncontrollable early morning desire to ravage him. Then she said, "For a former college athlete, you really are in terrible shape."

"I'm in fine shape," Gib instantly responded.

"How many miles can you run?"

"I dunno."

Reuben's smile had a nasty edge. She leaned over and slapped Gib in his chest. "Let's get moving."

Gib grabbed up the sweats and got dressed while enduring Reuben's taunts.

"Come on, flabby! Move it, move it!"

While he balanced on one foot and stuck the other through one leg of his favorite shorts, a pair he had gotten from UVa baseball, he finally recognized Reuben for what she was. He wasn't used to hearing this kind of hectoring in a soprano register, but Reuben was showing all the signs of being the worst, most unpleasant species of jock..

The Hard Worker.

Fuck.

Reuben drove them over the Golden Gate Bridge into Marin County, saying she had a great route for their run. As Gib drifted off, he realized he should have known Reuben was big into jogging. She had the build and having seen her naked, he knew her body had the runner's look – strong calves, stringy but muscular arms.

Hard Workers almost always gravitated to jogging as a passion, because it was a sport that required not much more than the ability to stay upright and in motion. They could feel like they really accomplished something after running for miles and not once falling down. Not once!

Jocks fell into some pretty basic types, from "Beauty in Motion" to "Date Rapist Walking" to "One Step Removed from the Primordial Ooze", but a sizable percentage of the ones who played high school sports and tended to round up the junior varsity teams at the college level were the Hard Workers. They were the ones who believed everything a coach told them, did every rep one hundred (and ten) percent, yelled with all their energy every time because they were always embarrassed when a coach yelled out "I can't hear you", arrived early to the weight room and left late, and were generally more enthusiastic than a bucketful of cheerleaders on speed. Oh, and they uniformly lacked any kind of actual talent or sense of the game.

It was important to recognize the difference between the Hard Workers and the Smart Workers. The Smart Worker were the guys who knew they didn't have quite as much talent as the next guy, and worked that hard to give themselves an edge. The Smart Worker studied and worked at their game so that they could sense the moment to jump in front of a pass, to pick a runner off first.

A Hard Worker, by contrast, was the cornerback who did everything to the letter during the week, then on game day would blow a coverage and give up the game-winning touchdown. Or who would blast out home runs in batting practice and then go 0-for-4 in the crucial game and make at least one devastating error. And there was always someone else to blame for the mistakes.

Another common name for them was The Asshole.

Coaches tend to like Assholes, because Assholes are invariably yes-men who

would suck the shit out of a Coaches' bunghole after he'd eaten a bean burrito. And then compliment the Coach on the quality of his crap.

Gib, on the other hand, had been a Talented Loafer. In his case, a pitcher. He would take part in the sprint drills, do just enough in the weight room. He would go through the motions of practice, waiting to turn on his concentration for the game itself. His senior year of college, he had ended up with a decent record (10-4, with a 3.23 ERA), but the Cavaliers themselves had been only an adequate team during Gib's four years. He had no shot at the majors, and no real interest, either. So in the last game he had started during his last year, there wasn't anything on the line besides "Pride", one of those nebulous and dubious concepts that coaches used to motivate players.

Gib didn't much care about pride, he just played to play. If the team won, great. If it lost, well, that was probably all right, too, as long as everyone played hard. It wasn't something important like birth, death, or sex; it was just baseball.

That last game, though, Gib tapped into a vein of skill he had never seen before. With one inning left in the game, he realized everyone on the bench had stopped talking to him. Not even a pat on the ass or a glove smacked into his thigh in appreciation of a well pitched inning. Gib had thought he was doing pretty well, but the rest of the team was acting like he had creeping leprosy.

Then he looked at the score board and realized he didn't just have a good game going, he had a *perfect* game going. With one inning to go, he had faced the bare minimum of hitters. His team was ahead, 3-0. If Gib got up the next inning and got the first three batters out, he would have pitched a perfect game. That would be one for the NCAA record books.

And Gib didn't even feel nervous. He felt warm. Comfortable.

Then he looked up at the pitching coach and saw the sheer panic on the man's face. Gib looked up and down the bench, and half the players looked like they were going to throw up.

Then Gib realized. None of these guys were going on to pro ball. They'd head off to law school or get a job, and only pick up a glove for the company softball team. They'd just be ex-jocks who had played on a mediocre college ball club. For guys who had gone 20 years with sports as their whole life, it must have scared the shit out of a lot of them. But players on a mediocre college baseball team that had had a *perfect* game, *those* players could live on that memory for years, regularly taking the moment out of their mental trophy case and polishing it fondly. They would all have been, however tangentially, been touched with perfection.

As the team headed out for the top of the last inning, the head coach stopped Gib for a second.

"You feeling strong?" Gib's guts suddenly started churning. Up until that time, about the only things the coach had said to Gib all year were two phrases when he got pulled for a relief pitcher: either "good job" or "you just didn't have it today".

"Sure. I feel fine." Gib waited for the coach to let go of his shoulder. When the man finally did, Gib ran out to the mound and tried not to waste time collecting his thoughts. Thinking too hard would only kill the groove.

Gib struck out the first batter.

Just like that. So simple. Two more outs for a perfect game.

Then the shortstop called timeout and summoned the infield to the mound for a discussion.

The shortstop, a guy named Dijanski, was that year's Chief Asshole, the biggest Hard Worker on the team. He was batting .273 on the year, had hit a paltry four home runs. But after each homer, he had run the bases at a sprint with his head down, eyes focused on the ground. Arrogance in guide of modesty. Dijanski, in spite of his mediocre stats, was convinced he was going to get drafted. He was, inevitably, Team Captain.

When the entire infield had gathered around, Dijanski had announced, "I think we all know how important these next two outs are. So let's *do* it, guys. Gimme a shout!"

The other infielders, giving Gib furtively embarrassed looks, had stuck their gloves on top of Dijanski's. Dijanski had waited for Gib to put his glove on top of the pile so they could cheer and go back to their positions. Gib futilely tried to communicate the sheer level of burning hatred he was cultivating. Finally, he just said, "Get your ass away from me, you dumb fuck."

Dijanski let out a loud whoop – "Let's do it!" – and the meeting on the mound broke up.

Joe Meeker, the catcher who had followed Gib from high school to UVa, stuck around for an extra moment. "Don't let that asshole into your head, Gib. Don't think. Just throw. You know how to do the right thing." Then he trotted back to the plate.

Gib took a long look around the ball field. There were only a few fans in the stands, but the sky was a bright blue, no clouds in the sky. He tried to capture every detail, hoping he would remember this moment forever.

Gib turned around and walked the next batter on four straight pitches.

There goes the perfect game, Gib thought, as the batter ran down to first. But he still had a no-hitter going. Even with a walk, you could still get a no-hitter. Maybe it wasn't perfection, but it was still pretty good.

The next batter swung and missed at the first pitch. Gib saw his Meeker leap up to throw to second before he stopped himself and flipped the ball into his glove in disgust. Gib turned around, dreading. And of course he saw a shame-faced Dijanski standing flat-footed while the runner slid into second base. The shortstop had forgotten to cover second so Meeker had no one to throw to.

Gib's next pitch was his best fastball. The batter cracked it screaming into left field, and Gib covered his face with his glove, staring out through the webbing. The left fielder made a diving catch, the stuff of legend and highlight reels. When he got to his feet, the runner had easily advanced to third base.

So it was two outs, man on third. Still a no-hitter.

Gib took a deep breath. Threw.

The pitch was an routine grounder to short. Gib dived at the ball as it went by, hoping he could end this himself. But it squirted past him, rolling through to Dijanski. Gib lay in the grass and watched, knowing – *knowing* – Dijanski would muffle the play.

Dijanski fielded the grounder cleanly, like a slow roller hit in practice.

Gib felt relief wash through him.

Then Dijanski bobbled the ball trying to dig it out of his glove.

And once he got it out, he started to throw to home, to try and cut down the runner from third. But the guy on third had taken off as soon as the ball had left the bat,

so Dijanski had no chance. Meeker was screaming and cursing and pointing for Dijanski to throw to first.

Gib dropped onto his back. As he lay on the ground, staring up at the sky, he saw a flash of white in his peripheral vision that indicated Dijanski had finally thrown to first. Gib vaguely wondered if the throw had been any good.

After a long while, Gib climbed back to his feet in total silence and walked back to the mound. The first baseman gently tossed him the ball. The runner had made first easily.

Gib struck out the next batter on three straight pitches, fastballs right down the middle. Easy. They won the game, 3-1.

While the team hit the showers, Gib sat and stared at his locker.

If it had ended there, it would have just been another vagary of the game. Dijanski couldn't help being an Asshole, and it was idiotic to hate an Asshole for being true to his nature and blowing a big play. It would be like hating the Welsh for singing, the Irish for drinking, the Polish for having jokes made about them.

But of course, Dijanski couldn't let it lie. He was Captain of the team. He was a Hard Worker. An Asshole. He had to define where the mistake had really been made. Or that no mistake had been made at all. How they were all still winners, looking on the bright side.

Gib felt a hearty slap on his back. He turned around and saw Dijanski standing in front of him, a smile on his face.

"Well, I checked with the scorer, and they gave me an error," Dijanski said, shaking his head at the craziness of scorers. "So at least you got the no-hitter. That'll go into the old record book."

Dijanski raised his hand for a high five. Gib punched him in the face.

When the rest of the team eventually pulled Gib off Dijanski, the shortstop had a broken nose, two cracked ribs, and was wedged so tightly in a locker that an emergency crew with a cutting saw designed to rescue people from car crashes had to be called to get him out.

Dijanski wanted to press charges for assault, but all the other players in the locker room had told the cops that he had slipped on a bar of soap and fallen into the locker. The cops decided not to inquire too closely, and Uncle Joseph had quickly handled the ensuing lawsuit.

After all that got settled, Gib was sure that now, just a few years later, Dijanski went to bars after 8 hours of sweaty stock brokering or banking and regaled his co-workers with his stories about the no-hitter he had played in. He had probably made the crucial play to save the game in the end.

Jan Reuben showed every sign of being that kind of Hard Worker.

Gib woke up some time later hearing the wind blowing hard against the car. Grabbing the back of his head and stretching, he realized the nap hadn't done much for him. It just confirmed exactly how tired he was. They were in the empty parking lot of Point Reyes National Park. It was a beautiful day, with a bright sun and a fresh breeze. A great day for sleeping in, Gib thought.

Reuben had acquired some bags full of food while he napped, which made Gib happy with her for the first time that day. When he reached into the bag to grab an apple,

Reuben looked annoyed at him. As he crunched, she said, "That's the last thing you get until we reach our picnic area. Get ready for a great run."

While she ran him through a series of stretches that were unpleasantly good for him, Reuben packed the food into two backpacks, handing one to Gib. After a bleak look, he slung the bag onto his shoulders and followed along as Reuben as she started jogging toward the Point Reyes paths.

Gib fell into a half-asleep trudge where he only knew where he was going by lowering his head so that his eyes faced the backs of Reuben's shoes. Half-focusing on the Nike swoosh, he just kept his feet moving in rhythm.

The run took the better part of an hour before the two of them emerged onto a beach. Reuben pulled the pack off Gib's back and tossed him another apple before spreading out the food. No wine, Gib noted, but bottled water.

The best that could be said for that food was that it was probably very healthy. And a sun-dried tomato sandwich on thick five-seed bread, with a sports bar for dessert, didn't exactly wet the whistle. Gib wished he had savored the oil and vinegar from the salad a bit more when he had had the chance. He choked two bottles down his grain-paved throat while before Reuben stood up and took off her workout clothes. Gib was too exhausted to be excited, but she was wearing a one-piece swimsuit underneath in any case. She pulled him to his feet and browbeat him into stripping down to his underwear. Dragging him into the water, she said, "Isn't this romantic?"

"Wait! Wait! Appendix point!" Gib yelled as the water got deeper.

"Appendix point?"

"It's a theory I have. The appendix isn't a useless organ in men. It's where your dick goes when you're in cold water. The appendix point is when your dick is about to enter said cold water."

Reuben smiled briefly, the polite way you do at a joke you didn't quite follow but don't want repeated. "I can help," she said, and grabbed Gib by his cock to drag out into deeper water.

Walking out to the point where the water lapped at about heart height, Reuben massaged Gib's penis in a way she clearly thought was erotic, but which he found annoying and on the edge of painful. After many years of experimentation, Gib had concluded that, as a rule, women didn't know how to give hand jobs. There was a bit of a thrill in having someone else touch your penis (unless it was a medical professional, though even that was attention getting), but in general, no one was better than the guy attached to it, since they had the most practice stroking it.

Moving her hand from his penis, Reuben pulled his underwear down his legs to his knees. Then she took a deep breath and Gib saw a future full of friction. Mouth open, Reuben dived beneath the surface of the water and wrapped her lips around him. Unfortunately, Reuben was not only proof of Gib's Theory of Lousy Handjobs, she was also evidence of another part of his Unified Theory of Fuckin': Most women give lousy blow jobs, too. Gib grabbed her head and tried to rescue his dick. In response, Reuben grabbed his buttocks tightly and pulled him deeper into her mouth. Then, holding his penis tightly in her mouth, she started blowing bubbles.

Gib yelled and tried to jump away, but with his legs underwater and Reuben's arms wrapped around him, the best he could do was thrust slowly back, then be pulled back.

He knew Reuben would think that meant he was enjoying himself, but he just couldn't help himself.

When Reuben came up for air, she said, "I'll bet you never did something like that before, did you?"

Gib shook his head. Of course not. Who would?

Reuben led him back into slightly shallower water. The she pushed herself up into a floating position on her back and wrapped her legs around Gib. He stared at her in disbelief.

She can't want to have sex in salt water, Gib thought, dreaded, feared. She can't. She can't think salt water will do as well as lube, can she? Oh god.

Reuben leaned her head back into the water and closed her eyes. Without looking, she pulled the crotch of her swimsuit to one side and slid his penis into her. The she took her arms and let them drift out to her sides in the water, as if she were making a melted snow angel.

It was fully as painful as Gib expected, but he hadn't foreseen the added discomfort of her swimsuit rubbing the shaft of his penis as he slowly thrust in and out of her. It was like fucking a tube of sandpaper soaked in water. Reuben didn't seem to mind, though, as she moaned and splashed in pleasure.

Gib could only imagine the imminent shark attack if he started to bleed.

After a while, Reuben's moans reached a crescendo (which sounded faked to Gib) and died down. In a little bit, she said to him, "That was great!"

Reuben slowly paddled away while he started to feel himself for damage.

"I'm going to take a swim," she said. "Do you want to come along?"

"No," Gib said, trying to keep his voice affectionate. "I really am pretty tired."

She shrugged and rolled over to start a messy crawl out into deeper water. Before she went too far, Gib said, "Jesus, Reuben, what the hell is your pain threshold?"

Reuben turned around. "My pain what?"

"I said, you must have a pretty high tolerance for pain."

She stood up and walked over to him. She put her arms down at her sides, her fists clenched, and said, "Punch me in the stomach."

Knowing better than to try chivalry, Gib punched her lightly in the gut.

"No!" she said. "Punch! As hard as you can!"

Gib set his feet and punched about half as hard as he could, and pulled the punch anyway. Reuben clenched her teeth when he hit her tensed stomach muscles, and stood stock still for a moment, the muscles in her neck and arms taut.

Then Reuben said, "You punch like a girl," before she turned and dived into the water to start doing laps.

"Prospects Park"

There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men ... who start life with perfect profiles, and end by adopting some useful profession.

Oscar Wilde

Monday morning, Gib was passably recovered from his Saturday workout, and he was bored with driving around. He thought about what he wanted to do, and decided he wanted to see if Ruth was around The Space. He brought coffee and bagels and newspapers to The Space and found her cleaning up the bar area. As he spread cream cheese on an onion bagel, Ruth asked him how his weekend went. He avoided the question.

After some companionable silence, Ruth asked if he was looking for a job.

"Here?"

"No, no. I was thinking you might want to meet a friend of mine. He's starting up a company, and he needs someone to write some marketing material."

"Really? I don't know if I'm qualified."

"Qualified? It's *marketing*."

"OK," Gib said dubiously. "Give me his number. I'll give him a call."

"Christ's sake, Gib, don't give me that pawn-off voice. I never see you working, except for volunteering here. So do you need a job or not? Because if you're independently wealthy or something, I want to know about it. That's what Campy thinks, that you're just a slumming rich kid."

Gib looked around. The sun was streaming in the high windows, flashing off the clean floors and walls. He impressed the scene in his mind, thinking it would be nice to cement in his memory the exact moment when his cover story fell to shit. Taking this job would likely not sit well with Maynard or Reuben. And he couldn't think of any plausible way to explain to Ruth that he wasn't *really* a writer.

On the other hand, he considered, he was good enough at writing fake reports. How much harder could this be? It would make his cover seem more realistic, or at least he could explain it that way.

"What's the guy's name?"

"Sidney Pinkwater. You've met him at the Friday night Regular. You had a long conversation with him."

"I did? What does he look like? What did we talk about?"

"I think you talked about Kerouac."

"I don't know anything about Kerouac. I must have been drunk."

"Probably. Besides, it was mostly Sidney doing the talking. He's very good at grabbing your ear in his teeth and hanging on for dear life. I'm surprised you don't remember him, though. He's the biggest guy in the world."

"You're telling me I talked about literature on Friday night. Here. With a fat guy."

"Not fat. Well, yes, fat. But mostly Sidney's just big. How can I describe him?"

Ruth thought for a minute. "It's like this. Say you were a homeless guy."

"Five minutes ago, I needed an job. Now, I'm out and out homeless."

"Right. So you're standing on the sidewalk. Three guys walk down the street in

front of you, right in a row. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Sidney Pinkwater. When you asked for change, Sidney's the one you would call 'Big Guy'."

Gib thought about it. "He has presence, is what you're saying."

"He fills a room. And he wears these awful Hawaiian shirts most of the time, so you can spot him three blocks away."

"I wish I remembered meeting him."

Ruth finished the last of her bagel and stood up. "Here's your second chance."

"Right now?"

"I have to go over and look at some work Sidney is doing for us, so you might as well tag along and meet him."

It was past eleven when they got to South Park -- long past rush hour, and the streets were almost empty of people in this generic-looking industrial area southeast of the Moscone Center. Gib found a parking space on Second Street just north of the park, and then Ruth led him into the park itself. It was small, but had a pleasant canopy of leaves that filtered the light that had been glaring out on the street just a second before. The industrial feel of the neighborhood was leavened by some upscale-looking shops, and a few restaurants that looked to be serving a younger crowd.

"Nice park," Gib said.

"Jeez," Ruth said. "Don't you feel the power of the digital future flowing all around you?"

Gib took a long look around, trying to figure out what she meant. The only two groups Gib could specifically tag seemed to be bunches of punk kids and older men. The men, who had the look of retired dockhands, sat on park benches and talked among themselves. The kids -- though as Gib got closer look at some of them, he bumped their ages higher and higher -- all seemed to be drinking coffee or eating takeout while they were on their *very important* way to somewhere *extremely important* where *frighteningly important* business would be discussed. Clumps of people gathered around, pecking at laptops and playing with cellphones. They looked like a bunch of rhythm guitarists finally given a chance to play lead.

"You don't have a clue what I'm talking about, do you?" Ruth asked.

"Not really."

"These are all new media people. Don't you read? The future is now, here in this proud year of 1996. Web sites, computers, the Internet."

"Oh, OK, sure. Geeks."

Ruth sighed.

Gib said, "I'll tell you one thing. This would be the perfect place to open a bar. I even have the perfect name. Ask me what I'd call it."

"Okay" Ruth stopped, stood still, opened her eyes wide, and asked, in a breathy voice, "Gib, what would you call your bar, if you ever opened one here?"

"*Gentrification.*"

Ruth laughed. "With this crowd, half the people would moan about the quality of the house salad, and the other half would bitch you didn't have Pabst Blue Ribbon on tap."

As they walked around the park, Gib noticed the usual dissonance whenever a working-class neighborhood gets overrun by people looking for cheap rents. The whole area was summed up by three buildings just south of Jack London Alley. Two of the

buildings housed restaurants. The restaurant on the right looked like it could exist in any area with pretensions to hipster status. Gib had seen coffee joints just like it in Adams-Morgan, the East Village and Wicker Park. The one on the left was similar, but looked more crunchy. Without even going inside, Gib knew the menu listed food that would only appeal to lactose-intolerant, vegetarian anorexics. Etruscan turd salads with dirt appetizers and seven different brands of mineral water. Maybe a turkey burger to placate the meat-eaters.

Then smack in the middle of the two cafes was a residence hotel called the Gran Filipino. That was probably where all the dock workers lived. Gib was surprised the Gran Filipino hadn't been replaced by a smoothie shop.

As Gib was looking, a huge, grey-haired man in a Hawaiian shirt walked out of the café on the right. Actually, walked was the wrong word. The man's shoulders were just a bit too wide to easily fit through the crowded front door, so he twisted just a bit and sidled through with a practiced ease. The huge man had a large cup of coffee in one hand, but it was hard to see it past the reach of his fingers. Following him were two Armani drones with hundred-dollar haircuts. Gib was reminded of the oompa-loompas following Willy Wonka around his factory, only these oompas had sold out and were cell-phone using, BMW-driving suitboys, from the crease of their collars to the drying ink on their MBAs.

Gib tapped Ruth on the shoulder. "Big guy in a Hawaiian shirt across the street. Is that your pal?"

"Cool! That's him. Sidney! Hey, Sidney!" Ruth walked across the street, dragging Gib with her.

As they walked up to him, Gib realized that Ruth hadn't been exaggerating. Sidney Pinkwater was built like a bear -- six and a half feet tall, and as he'd already seen, wider than a door frame. His face was surprisingly lean, though -- tanned, clean-shaven and covered in wrinkles. When Pinkwater heard his name was being called, he turned, spotted Ruth, and waved. Gib was amazed by Pinkwater's hands. They had thick, brutal-looking fingers that jutted out from blue-veined slabs of hands, like sausages arranged on a pancake. Gib realized that Pinkwater was missing the top the ring finger on his right hand, and the little finger was gone entirely.

"Ruth, you're early! Wait, I mean you're late! Or are you right on time?" Pinkwater laughed easily, a low rumble that came from deep in his chest.

"We never quite decided on a time, Sidney," Ruth said. "Are we interrupting something?"

"No, not at all. Let me introduce you. Ruth Radley, meet Jameson Feyrer and Rick Bodio." Feyrer and Bodio shook hands like they were giving peace at church on Sunday, practiced looks of tolerance on their faces.

Pinkwater said, "Ruth, you have to illuminate us all as to the name of your friend."

"Hi," Gib said. "I'm Gibson Edwards. Most people call me Gib. Ruth told me you needed --"

"Time enough for shop talk later, Gibson," Pinkwater interrupted. "Mr. Feyrer and Bodio have an appointment they have to scamper off to. Can you and Ruth give me a moment?"

Pinkwater put his arms around the two suits and led them away, speaking in a low voice, before he finally patted them both on the back and shook hands. The two suits

slithered into a BMW parked just up the street and drove away.

Pinkwater came back to Ruth and Gib. "Gibson, haven't you ever learned not to talk business in front of strange suits?"

Gib felt a roiling embarrassment in his gut. "Sorry. Did I screw something up?"

"I doubt it. But you can never tell what will frighten off money people. They're perpetually nervous, like elderly virgins."

"That's nice, Sidney," Ruth said. "What does a jaded libertine like you know about virgins, elderly or not?"

"Even jaded libertines had to start somewhere. Besides, virgins are one of the banes of any sensible man's existence."

"I thought I was the bane of your existence, Sidney."

"Virgins are one bane. Smart women are another." Pinkwater and Ruth grinned like two tennis players sharing a glance after a hard fought point.

"That reminds me of a story," Pinkwater said.

Ruth turned to Gib. "Sidney is about to tell you a story with a moral, which probably also has no morals. Make sure to forget every word."

Pinkwater ignored her. "Years ago, I was besotted with a lovely French girl. It was a charming and somewhat surprising connection we concocted. Because at the time I was a clean living young lad who always voted Republican. So, obviously, things had been a bit lacking in the department of coitus."

"In other words, you reeked of desperation. But luckily it didn't translate into French," Ruth said.

Pinkwater considered looking offended. "Is that any way to talk?" he asked.

"Is it accurate?"

"I'm afraid so," Pinkwater said grudgingly. He looked over at Gib. "It happens to the best of us." Gib nodded his head, which was all the agreement it took to cheer Pinkwater back up. "In any case, one thing led to another, and we found ourselves -- how shall I put it?"

"About to fuck," Ruth said. "Is this going to be a long story?"

"As wit all satisfying activities, it will be just long enough. As you know, Ruth, my policy is one of total honesty. As long as the timing is right, of course. So, just as we were about to commence with the festivities, I casually mentioned to the mademoiselle that it had been quite a while for me. After I explained what I meant, she started to laugh and told me, 'That's all right. It has been a long while for me, too. *Pour toujours*.'"

"What does that mean?" Gib asked.

"Forever," answered Pinkwater.

"Jesus," Ruth moaned. "Poor woman. She must still have emotional scars from having you as her first lover."

"Hardly! I told her it was essential that we change "*pour toujours*" to "*encore et encore*"! In the end, all concerned were quite satisfied."

"Satisfied. Boy, that sure is romantic."

"That's exactly my point. She was romanced by one of the great American lovers of the twentieth century -- someone who will be memorialized with Don Juan, who will be as legendary as Ovid, as -- "

"De Sade," Ruth interrupted.

"The moral of the story is: without all the hymen-breaking stress, I'm sure the experience could have been momentous for her, even earth-shaking. It would have made want to write wondrous poetry and pain soulful canvases. Instead, she was merely satisfied." Pinkwater sighed, and a significant percentage of all the air for five cubic meters around swelled his lungs. "Poor dumb frog will never know what she missed."

The banter between Ruth and Pinkwater had such a well-practiced quality that Gib felt awkward just listening. He cleared his throat, which got both of them to turn toward him momentarily. At which point, the best he could do was to awkwardly say: "Ruth said this place was crawling with geeks."

Pinkwater looked completely confused, and behind him Ruth rolled her eyes at Gib, who felt a blush rising in his face.

"What, the coffee shop?" Pinkwater asked, looking around.

"No, South Park," Ruth said.

"Oh. Gibson, 'geeks' isn't the preferred term this month. All the beautiful people who are whoring for venture capital are calling themselves 'digerati' now."

"That's Latin for asshole, right?" Ruth asked.

Ignoring her, Pinkwater grabbed Gib by the shoulder and turned him to look out at the Park. "Let me point out a few people as we walk, Gibson. You've heard of Silicon Valley, I'm sure. Well, this is Multimedia Gulch."

"Oh."

"You don't seem fascinated, Gibson! Have you gotten special inoculations that protect you from hype?"

"What you said Gulch doesn't mean anything to me."

"Well, it should! It should make you dance like St. Vitus! This is where we're building the future! Cyberspace! Wiring the world! What we all build this year will determine how we all live through the 21st century. When the first web browser came out two year ago, it was as important as the first steam engine."

"If you say so. It never sounded that interesting."

"How could it not?"

"For one thing, I don't own a computer."

Pinkwater actually stopped. He grabbed Gib by the shoulders and squeezed in horror. The look on Pinkwater's face was the look Martin Luther had just before he started nailing complaints to church doors.

"You," Pinkwater choked, "don't own a *computer*? Do you hunt and forage for your food? Do you drive around in a horse and buggy? I'm surprised you're wearing pants that have *zippers*!" Pinkwater turned to Ruth. "You didn't tell me he was a hysterical historical! I can't have a *Luddite* working for me!"

"Now, Sidney --"

"I'm deadly serious, Ruth! How can a *caveman* possibly sell the future to brain-impaired suit-wearing shitheads like the two who just drove away?"

"Now, look!" Gib interrupted.

"No offense, Gibson, but --" Pinkwater tried to continue.

"Hey, shut the fuck *up* for a second, okay? I never said I *wanted* your damn job! I just came down here because Ruth said it might be worth it. I didn't come here to be insulted! I'm not a damn caveman. I know how to *use* a computer. I just don't *like*

them!"

At least three people with unique haircuts walking nearby looked around in amazement and horror at the last sentence. They quickly walked on, like tourists skittering past a masturbating bum on the street. Even Pinkwater shut up for a second. Then he laughed abruptly, and his earlier anger was gone as quickly as it arrived.

"Well, where do you usually go?" Pinkwater finally said.

"What?"

"To be insulted, I mean. Ruth, is he always this good a straight man?"

"Sure. He's good for two or three of those a day."

Pinkwater looked even cheerier. "Superb! Gibson, do you work cheap? Please say yes."

"What's the job?"

"Please say yes."

Gib finally said, "Probably." As long as being treated like an asshole wasn't in the job description, Gib figured he had nothing better to do. He could still volunteer at Te Space later in the day. And picking up some extra cash wouldn't be too bad a thing. Even if he had to work cheap, it would give his cover more credibility. "But first I want to know what the damn job is."

"Gibson, I --"

"And that's another thing. Don't call me *Gibson*. I told you most people call me Gib."

Pinkwater stared in shock again. He started to say something, then caught himself. "You don't own a computer, so of *course* you've never read *Neuromancer*," Pinkwater said, more to himself than to Gib. "I'll bet you don't read science fiction at all, do you?"

Gib shook his head. He blurted out, "No. I could never figure out why people never grew out of that Star Trek shit."

Pinkwater laughed and rubbed his hands with a proper movie villain style. "Oh, perfect. You're going to be a wonderful little project for me, Gibson. And I'll continue to call you that, unless you truly mind, because it's the name of one of my favorite authors."

"No, I guess I don't mind."

"Wonderful! Let's all go back to my office, so I can show Ruth the final designs for The Space's web site."

Pinkwater wrapped a huge arm around Gib's shoulder, and they both started to walk. Gib looked over back and gave Ruth a completely baffled look. In response, she gave him a happy thumbs up.

As they walked through the park to Third Street, Pinkwater seemed to know and be known by just about everyone walking past. He called out one loud, hearty greeting after another at the range of people wandering around. At the same time, he kept up a continuing commentary in Gib's ear.

"You see that skinny wretch there, in the short-sleeved shirt? Yes, the one with the duct tape on his glasses. He's probably one of the richest people within thirty square miles. About six years ago, Richard there invented a piece of hardware that allowed networked computers to talk to each other at five times the speed they could before. He licensed the patents to three different companies. Two of the companies fought like cats and dogs, while the third marketed the hell out of the product. In the end, the marketer

bought the other two, and Richard made millions in stock, over and above the regular licensing fee. A frighteningly rich man before he was 27. Unfortunately, Richard, being such a hideous specimen of humanity, has probably spent 50 grand a year on high-priced hookers since he made his millions. Poor bastard. He'll probably blow through the fortune in another couple of years."

It was like listening to a sports nut ramble on, Gib realized. You just had to know how to nod and murmur in the required spots.

Two men -- one with a shaved head and a goatee, the other with green hair -- who would have looked big next to anyone besides Pinkwater walked past, laughing uproariously about nothing in particular. Pinkwater related that one of their CD-ROM games had sold like gangbusters the year before, and they had made a tidy fortune. Not billions, but tidy nonetheless.

"What do they do now?" Gib asked.

Pinkwater shrugged. "I think they're recording an album. Mostly, I just see them at parties."

A woman wearing combat boots pedaled a mountain bike past them. Her hair had that unnatural yellow-white color of a heavy bleach job, except where purple and dark red highlight had been added. She waved at Pinkwater.

"That's Angela. She's like you, a fellow writer. A fellow scrivener. But she also does a lot of tech things. A lot of people in the Gulch are jacks of all trade. Programmers, artists, writers." Pinkwater rolled his eyes back and forth, looking for spies before he whispered in a carrying voice, "Even *businessmen*. I shudder to say it."

"What do *you* do, then?" Gib asked.

"Ah, well, I'm the unusual one. I'm just a boss."

Ruth laughed, but Pinkwater ignored her.

"I started the company, you see, so I have the luxury of being the unskilled and uninformed person in the office who makes all the decisions."

"Don't let him bullshit you, Gib," Ruth chimed in. "He's a programmer, a geek just like all the rest of them. Sidney created *Lane Changer*."

"Oh, hey, I remember that game," Gib said. "I played it back when I was a...uh..."

"Oh, you can say it," Sidney said. "Back when you were a kid. A teeny-weenie, itty-bitty child. I've been getting royalty checks for thirteen years. I can measure the time in grey hairs and my ever-expanding belly. Hey, you see that guy over there drinking coffee? That's Louis."

"What does he do?" Gib asked, expecting some tall tale.

Pinkwater looked surprised. "Do? Nothing. He's just an asshole. He thinks he has *ideas*. Avoid him at all costs."

Gib rubbed his face in frustration. "Are you going to tell me about this job anytime today? I mean, I don't have anyplace to be, but I can hear gossip about people I'm not interested by watching TV."

"Yeah, Sidney. Stop playing tour guide and let's get back to your office."

Pinkwater assented and led them into a ratty-looking warehouse building on the southeast corner of Third and Brannan. Even the clattering of the choogling freight elevator couldn't stop Pinkwater talking, as they slowly rose to the fourth floor.

"After I wrote *Lane Changer*, I kept working, did a lot of consulting. About three years ago, I was doing some consulting for IBM, and one of my clients -- he was a big fan of *Lane Changer* -- invited me out to take a look at some of the things they were working on out at the Watson Research Center. Go behind the wizard's curtain to see this and that. Everything from electron microscope magic to machines that will be calculating the value of Pi until the sun goes dark."

The elevator stopped, and Pinkwater had to slide the gate and door open, holding it until Ruth and Gib stepped out.

"The last thing they showed me was some huge networking design project they had. They were talking about linking up all the pharmacies across the country. So if you were horseback riding in Missoula, Montana and you got socked in the chest with a myocardial infarction, the sawbones in the ER can punch up your record and make sure you're not allergic to penicillin or shellfish or something. So far, so good, so Orwell, right? So the blue suiter --"

"What's a blue suiter?" Gib asked.

"Someone who works for IBM. The Blue Suit Force. Anyway, he's demonstrating these amazing simulations of data flow across the country when he looks up and realizes I'm off in my own little world. A little offended, he asks me what I'm thinking.

"I say, 'Chips implanted in people's heads. Black helicopters flying around the countryside. That kind of thing.' The guy doing the demo doesn't have the slightest fucking clue, but his partner does, and he suddenly thinks he's in a room with a Michigan Militia member or something. Looking at that guy's placid face gone horrified, I knew I had to get the hell out of corporate work. It made me too twitchy.

"So a couple of years ago, I purchased this building and hung out my shingle."

Pinkwater stopped at a rusty metal door at the end of the hall and pointed to the simple two-color sign just below the peephole.

Black Helicopter Productions.

The inside of the office was a wide-open converted factory, but the cinderblock walls had been painted various bright colors overlaid on white. The heating ducts still hung from the ceiling but brand-new, multicolored wiring snaked around the ducts and down to the computers, like digital IVs pouring nourishment into the computers. The people sat at lines of tables, with partitions on rollers to give the impression of cubicle space. Gib could envision the original sweatshop workers who had pieced together shirts and pants in the same space decades before.

"Luckily, the building was originally wired for an industrial spec, but I had to redo everything on the inside..." Pinkwater rambled on about the impressive quality of his sweatshop.

There were about thirty people in the huge loft. Three different types of music engaged in a struggle to the death in the air above the clicking of the keyboards and mice. Over against a far wall, four people were playing a pickup game of basketball, shooting at a rim bolted into the wall, and the sharp thump of the ball set the chaotic pattern for all the noise. There didn't seem to be much talking, because most people were hunched near their monitors.

Pinkwater put burly arms around both Ruth and Gib and led them into one of the few enclosed rooms on the whole floor. Both rooms had walls made of thick, transparent glass. In one room, Gib could see a pool table with accessories, a bar, and large black speakers. The room that Pinkwater guided them into contained a conference table with black leather chairs scattered around it. The table had a both a huge monitor on it as well as a stack of empty pizza boxes. Pinkwater picked up the boxes and dumped them in a 30-gallon garbage can hidden behind the door. The chair he settled in creaked under his bulk and its two arms barely seemed to contain him.

Pinkwater talked to Gib while he started up the computer attached to the huge monitor.

"We have a monstrously large presentation coming up in a few weeks in New York, and I have preliminary materials due in two weeks. Unfortunately, while I have any number of talented artists, programmers, designers and so on, I don't have a single person working for me who can skillfully string two sentences together. Humiliating. Embarrassing. That's where you come in. I'm going to give you a mound of papers about twelve feet high and I need you to diet it down to approximately six inches."

"That's not really how it works," Gib said, knowing that even if that *was* how it worked, Pinkwater wouldn't know, either.

Pinkwater waved his hand. "I don't really care how it works. I just need it done."

The computer blared out the first four notes of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze", and Pinkwater looked over to start up a program.

"What's your day rate?" Pinkwater asked, while the program was starting.

"Uh, I don't --"

"Look, I won't pay hourly. That gets crazy. And I can't set a project fee, because I want to leave this open-ended. How about four hundred a day?"

"What?" Four hundred dollars a day? That was crazy. Before Gib could calculate how much that would be over a year, Pinkwater anxiously continued.

"Not enough? I don't want to lowball you. Five hundred?"

"Five hundred is fine," Gib choked out. "But --"

"We can talk about it again once you know how big the project is. And you can come back to me if the hours you put in get too crazy. Don't hesitate to do that." Pinkwater turned to Ruth. "Ruth, Ruth, beautiful Ruth. Would you like to see the site we built for The Space?"

"That would be great, Sidney."

An hour later, Gib knew more than he wanted to know about web pages, the Internet, and various other silliness that made him wish he had turned down the job. After signing a hastily-read contract and confidentiality agreement, he also had a loaner laptop in a carrying bag, and a garbage bag full of what did indeed appear to be a twelve-foot tall stack of paper. In about a week, Pinkwater wanted him to come back with a written plan no more than two pages long for breaking down all the information into proper marketing materials. He was also supposed to bring an invoice.

In the first 24 hours of reading through the technical specs and descriptions of the product that Black Helicopter was dedicating its time to, Gib picked up the phone four times to call Pinkwater and quit. The only thing that stopped him was the thought that it might sour his relationship with Ruth. So instead, he sucked her into the process.

For breakfast on his third day of cutting through Pinkwater's papers, Gib brought pages of questions over to Ruth, who did her best to answer them. She turned out not to know very much about the technical details, so they called in Frank Marion as a technical consultant. Gib discovered Marion was doing consulting work for Pinkwater, anyway, so Gib got an enthusiastic, if not effective, explanation what Pinkwater was trying to create.

Gib had never seen Marion so enthusiastic, in fact. Usually, Marion was usually so totally focused on whatever was right in front of him that the rest of the world vanished. Where Campy watched and reserved judgement, or Garrity effused explanations about the way the world should work, Frank Marion never seemed to know that judgements or explanations were required.

But once he got heated up about Pinkwater's project, he sounded like a revival tent preacher. Unfortunately for Marion, every time he paused and listened for the righteous to give him a "hallelujah", he got a peevish objection from Gib instead.

"Basically, it's a whole new paradigm for computers," Marion said.

"Okay, first of all, we are *not* using words like paradigm," Gib said. "To me, 'paradigm' rhymes with 'unprofitable'."

"They don't rhyme at all," Marion objected.

Gib looked at Ruth, who shook her head. "If Frank doesn't get it, maybe it's not as good a joke as you think," she said.

Gib sighed. "Fine. Frank. It's simple. There are only two things a money guy cares about. Profit. Power. Profit and Power. Paradigm shifts are holes to throw money down."

"Gib, you don't understand. What Sidney is proposing will throw everything we know about software, hardware and networks out the window! It will finally make computers fulfill on their promise!"

"*Frank!* I. Don't. Care. That's not what I'm trying to figure out here. I just want to be able to present Sidney's ideas so that suits will piss hundred dollar bills and shit certified checks. So they have to be convinced that if they fund Sidney, they'll end up either swimming in money like Scrooge McDuck, or wielding power that makes God crap his pants. Anything else is a waste of time."

After the first day, Gib had spent most of his time reading every business magazine he could find at the San Francisco Public Library. Just to get an idea of the mind set and the language, so that when he started to write, he could find the rhythm of the language, the same way he had while churning out reports like "Basement Bomb Making". It was a poetry of meaningful meaninglessness. Mostly, he figured he would write what Philip Gibson, Senior would want to hear before he invested money. Gibson Senior was the devil's advocate in his head, who shot down any idea or explanation until it was simple and appealing enough. Also, intimidating.

Sullenly, Marion said, "So what are you going to say instead of paradigm? It's the right word!"

"Jesus, Frank."

Gib and Marion went back and forth for another few days, until Gib was finally able to put some pages together to bring in to Pinkwater. When Gib entered the warehouse space of Black Helicopter, he saw Pinkwater playing basketball with five other people. As Gib walked up to the basketball players, Pinkwater grabbed for a rebound and

slammed one of the other players into the wall behind the backboard.

"Nice block, Sidney," Gib said.

Pinkwater turned around and noticed Gib standing there. Tossed the basketball toward one of the other players. "I am sometimes overcome by my own enthusiasms. It's a fault, I admit it. Do you have something for me?"

Gib handed over the papers, and tried not to appear nervous while Pinkwater read through them. The two men walked through the warehouse space toward the conference room.

Sitting down at the conference table, Pinkwater slapped the papers happily with his hand. "Gibson, this is horseshit!"

Gib could hear the pleasure in Pinkwater's voice, so he knew to wait for the punchline.

"It's unmitigated nonsense. Verging on outright lies. Genius!"

"So you like it, Sidney?"

"Adore it. Would you like a fulltime job crafting falsehoods like this?"

Gib thought about it. For the first time, he found himself vaguely grateful for some of the things Gibson Senior had tried to teach him. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

"You would come in here every day and listen to me and my people jabber. Then you would make it sound nice and profitable."

"Well, if that's all you need, then why should I take a fulltime job? What does that give me that I don't already have?"

"Steady paycheck?"

"Sure, until you don't need me anymore."

"Health insurance?"

"I don't get sick a lot."

"Stock options?"

Gib smiled. "Sidney, I listened to Frank Marion explain your project for days, and you see what I came up with. Do you think I would have written crap like that if I thought you were going to make billions?"

Pinkwater leaned back in his chair and thought about it. "Well, Gibson, I don't know what to tell you. The only thing left to offer you is not exactly tangible."

"I thought you were going to offer me free beer on Fridays."

"Free beer? Well, of *course* we have free beer on Fridays. Do you think I'm *nikulturni*?"

"Then what's left after free beer? Hookers and blow?"

"Fun."

"Fun?"

"Fun! This is a fun place to work," Pinkwater said. "As long as I see you once a day, you will have total freedom to play around and come up with ideas. I noticed you cut the web publishing out of the proposal."

"Seemed like a waste of money."

"Perhaps, but it's money I'm willing to waste to capture hearts and minds. I want to be a thought leader in this industry. You can write for that, too. I'll pay you extra for each piece you write for the web over and above your salary."

Gib felt absurdly complimented. Pinkwater was rolling over and exposing his belly, for no reason that Gib could puzzle out. "Why the hell do you want me so badly?"

"Because I think you will be an entertaining addition to the group."

"That's it?"

"It's my business. I run it in such a way as to please myself. I'm rich enough to do that."

Gib thought about all the drawbacks. On the one hand, if the FBI found out about it, it would mean he was scuba diving in a shit quarry unless he came up with a good explanation. And taking this job would take him away from *The Space*, which was the point of the investigation in the first place.

On the other hand, Pinkwater entertained the shit out of him. And it would finally be a reasonable cover story for Ruth and the Ragers. And he might even be able to pump Pinkwater for information about Ruth. And Green Rage, of course.

On the third hand, what the hell.

Gib said, "All right. I got nothing better to do."

Pinkwater laughed. "Superb. That's the kind of enthusiasm that gives me the courage to go on."

"Black Helicopter Productions"

"...an organization which will serve to centralize and crystallize the efforts of those who would meet the exigencies of our changing times by a pooling of all of the wisdom and power of the guardians of civilization, the protectors of Society."

J. Edgar Hoover

So Gib started work for Black Helicopter Productions. The company was a stupidly run company, that was one of the first things that Gib learned. Most of the employees were overpaid and overworked. The attitude in the office ranged from elated to enraged, with very little time in between. Screaming matches and fights seemed to break out every day between the Suits, the Gearheads and the Creatives.

The main business of Black Helicopter was doing digital projects for clients, including CD-ROMs and kiosks. And now, the Web was taking over. The new business people were constantly out talking to clients and pitching the wonders of Black Helicopter, so Gib never really met any of them, but the client service people were around all the time and were at the center of most of the fights. And the theme of the battles tended to be: "Why *can't* we do that? The client wants it." Which tended to be code for: "I didn't know what the hell I was talking about, so I promised something, and now you have to make me look good."

The Gearheads, who didn't really have a leader, were the chief opponents in most of those fights. Technically, the senior Gearhead was Greg Igoe (known as OddGreg), but Greg's response to a question he considered stupid was to walk away from the person who asked the question, walk into his office (which also held all the servers), close the door, and not come back out for days at a time. There was a rumor going through the office that OddGreg had a secret entrance to his office, because the longest recorded example of his door being closed and locked was eight days, in which time not one person saw him leave or anyone, not even food delivery people, enter. But when he finally emerged, he had the same crisply ironed white shirt on, the same shined wingtips, the same skinny black tie, the same close shave. It was one of the great mysteries of the offices.

The main Creative was Taylor Jackson, an athletic guy in his mid-30s who had moved back to his native California from the East Coast, where he had spent over a decade working in advertising. While Jackson oversaw a department of around 12 designers, including freelancers, his main job seemed to be attitude adjustment. Free Beer Friday always began with Jackson ran sounding off an air horn and demanding everyone come and start drinking.

OddGreg told Gib of a rumor that Jackson had gotten fired from his last job for throttling a Senior Account Executive at a Major New York Ad Firm who had described one of Jackson's ideas to show off a well-known luxury car as "too street; too black." When the blond, blue-eyed Jackson had asked the Executive what he meant by that, the Suit had replied, "We don't want pimps and drug dealers buying our car, like with BMW." That was when Jackson went over the table at the guy.

After he started coming to the office every day, Gib ended up being seen with suspicion by the Suits, because he was working on both of the two projects at Black Helicopter that were taking up a ton of man hours, bushel baskets full of money, but

weren't bringing any revenue back.

The Black Box was the easier of the two projects, because all Gib had to do was let OddGreg demonstrate and describe to him, put some words together with a design from Jackson and voila!, they had a business plan, marketing documents and other piles of nice looking and reading paper. Gib found out that Black Box was the project that Jameson Feyrer and Rick Bodio had been talking to Pinkwater about on the first day they had met. Those guys were the ones who were on the receiving end of the faxes and FedExes of material that he produced about the Black Box project. Sidney claimed that with the venture capital he would get from Bodio and Feyrer's company (Bennett, Jaffe, and Geller Investments), he could make the Black Box a product ready for mass production, after which they could go public and everyone would be rich.

Every time Sidney talked in those kind of grandiose terms, Gib would just nod his head and try to leave as quickly as possible to go play pool. He liked Pinkwater well enough, but the man had a bad tendency toward pep talks. It was a minor enough failing, though.

Even Sidney Pinkwater was hard pressed to claim anyone would get rich off his other pet project, the Black Helicopter Webzine. At most, Sidney expected it to break even if they could sell ads, though he wasn't entirely sure how to go about that. If nothing else, the zine could be a loss leader for developing other corporate clients, showing what kind of cutting edge work Black Helicopter was capable of doing.

They still hadn't picked a name for the thing, even though the zine was about to launch its initial content, with articles about how to burn your own CD-ROMs, vintage clothing, and an obscure Latin American who had made Esquivel-style lounge music for three years in the mid-70s before dying of a Xanax overdose. Oh, and Taylor Jackson was writing a history of the ukulele.

"The name of the thing has got to start with an S," Pinkwater proclaimed.

"Why?" Taylor Jackson asked.

"Because that's the best letter to start the name of a zine with. Salon, Stim, Spiv, Suck and all the other best webzines."

"Best?" OddGreg asked. "You mean like Feed, Word and HotWired?"

"Shut up, Gregory. The other reason is that Success also start with an S, and that's what I want this webzine to be."

The rest of the table groaned.

So Gib and OddGreg went to the Internic registry with a dictionary in hand. Gib would call out an interesting sounding name and OddGreg would look to see if the domain was registered. The list of potential names that were already registered was amazing. Gib suggested, and had shot down, among others: sanguine.com, sane.com, salve.com, sachem.com (Gib: "Oh, come on! *Sachem.com* is taken?"), sap.com, saute.com (OddGreg: "No frikkin' French!"), sauce.com, saucy.com, savor.com, scald.com, scatter.com, scattergun.com, scorch.com, scour.com, scram.com, seize.com, say.com, shakedown.com, shaken.com, shay.com, shellac.com, shifty.com, slack.com, shoofly.com, and stoat.com (OddGreg: "*Stoat?*" Gib: "I'm getting desperate.").

After a cigarette break for OddGreg, they settled on five finalists to present to Pinkwater: SCALDED.COM, SHERPA.COM, STOOLIE.COM, STRAWBOSS.COM, STREW.COM. Since Pinkwater had given them no idea at all what the zine was

supposed to be about, they figured these names were both aggressive and vague enough to satisfy. The reader could add their own meaning, if they felt the need.

Pinkwater wasn't overly happy with his choices, but Gib and OddGreg also gave him the list of their other attempts, which shut him up quick. ("Sachem.com is taken?") After much hemming and hawing, he decided that "Scalded" would do fine.

"We can try something without a "S", Sidney," Gib suggested.

Pinkwater shook his head. *Scalded* it was.

It was only a couple of days later that Gib was dragooned into becoming *Scalded's* first regular columnist. During some of his free time waiting around for OddGreg or Taylor Jackson, Gib had been checking out the potential competition for *Scalded*, and he had run across a zine-style web site targeted at teenage girls. The site was amateurish, unbearably so, and it used a coy, overly enthusiastic voice, kind of like a 45-year old man's idea of how a 12-year old cheerleader would speak. It made Gib's skin crawl. And when he checked out the "About Us" section (which was confusingly called "Dear Diary"), the site turned out to be the product of a holding company based out of Houston, best known for making 9 mm ammunition, a popular brand of malt liquor, and tampons. The tampon brand was the sponsor for the site. So Gib sent an email to Pinkwater, OddGreg and Jackson, making fun of the site. Then he forgot about it and kept surfing.

About an hour later, Pinkwater came charging over to Gib and shouted, "This is great! I didn't know you could write like this!"

"What?"

"Funny! This essay about the tampon company! I especially like the line "this company should be legally required to announce their presence as soon as they move into a new neighborhood, just like any other child molester". That's fantastic!"

"If you say so." Upon reflection, Gib thought it sounded awfully dumb -- and worse, awfully self-righteous -- being read back to him.

But Pinkwater was overjoyed. He decided then and there to make Gib a regular columnist for *Scalded*, no matter how much Gib objected. Three times a week, Gib would produce 500 words about stupid things. In fact, that became the name of the columns: "Stupid Things". Gib figured the name would describe both the subjects and the column itself. But he completely balked at using his real name on the column.

"Why not?" Pinkwater asked.

Gib could hardly tell him he was worried about web surfers from the FBI running across his name. So he said, "I don't want to get heat from the people I'm mocking."

Pinkwater frowned. "That's kind of gutless."

"So I'm gutless. I don't want everyone to know me as the "mean guy" because of this. And you can't tell anyone I'm the one who writes these things."

"If you say so. What name do you want to use?"

For a brief second, Gib thought about saying, "Make it "Edward Gibson", but those kind of jokes go better with silence. "I don't have any idea."

"Well, since you'll be writing about the Web, how about you call yourself "The Spiderman"?" Pinkwater suggested.

"That's fucking *awful*, Sidney," Gib said.

Pinkwater looked offended. "Did I ever *say* I was the writer here? Did I ever *say* that?" The man was actually upset, Gib realized.

To placate Pinkwater, Gib temporized. "I didn't mean Spiderman was so awful. It's just a copyright thing. How about we make it a proper name? And we spell it differently."

"Like how?"

Gib grabbed a piece of paper. "Speiderman, like this. And we just put an initial in front of it."

"Like J. Peterman," Pinkwater said.

"Sure. J. Speiderman. It even vaguely looks like a real name."

The column kicked off the next day. Within three columns (and with Pinkwater emailing all his friends in the industry), it had been mentioned on fourteen "Cool Site" pages. Then, based on the amount of hate mail it got, Pinkwater had "Stupid Things, by J. Speiderman" moved to the front page. A lot of the hate mail centered around the fact that the name was a pseudonym, some of it was about the actual content of the columns, but the majority of it was people antagonistic about the nasty tone. And, inevitably, some of the mail was even positive. The thing Gib didn't understand is that the amount of mail seemed increase, no matter how nasty he was. In fact, the nastier he was, the more mail he got, both positive and negative. It was like poking a hornet's nest, but a nest where half of the hornets came out and offered to buy you a beer and ask you how you got to be so good at poking.

Within two weeks, he ran out of things to write about, but the his e-pen pals solved that problem. At first, they sent him URLs to abuse. But even so, Gib ran out ways to say, "Boy, this is ugly. Dumb, too. Dumber than paint. And did I mention it was ugly?" So he started responding to the email in the column. And finally he just started making fun of random things that came across his radar. TV shows? Trends? Tits? You name the topic, Gib was able to come up with a hackneyed, yet hostile attack on it. He was absurdly pleased at how idiotic his arguments were, when he even bothered to advance an argument instead of just spewing bile.

The week he wrote his tenth column, OddGreg, Taylor Jackson and Pinkwater took him to a meet-n-greet party thrown by some local investor at a bar called Zeitgeist. Terrifyingly, Gib met one of his readers. A bearded guy name Douglas, who knew OddGreg from a former job, saw the four of them walk in, so he introduced them around the party. Douglas had a thick unruly head of hair, a thicker beard that crawled around his face as if it had been sprayed on from a couple feet away, glasses that were thicker yet, and a belly that was the thickest of them all. It made Gib tired just to listen to him, as Douglas described new technologies that were coming, movies he had seen, books he had read, cool websites he recommended, and so on and so on. After ten minutes, Gib started thinking about how to make a graceful exit. That was when Douglas felt the need to include Gib in the conversation.

"So," Douglas asked, "what do you do?"

"I work with Taylor and OddGreg."

"But what do you *do*?"

Gib figured he might as well greet his public. He was sure Douglas was a person who read something like "Stupid Things, by J. Speiderman". So he told Douglas that he was "J. Speiderman."

Douglas stared at him. "You?" he blurted. "You don't look like an asshole!"

That was the last time Gib felt the need to hang out with the new media movers and shakers. He kept writing the column, though, and the next one was about bad grooming and manners in new media circles, complete with illustrations from OddGreg. Douglas sent him an enthusiastic fan letter.

At the same time, Pinkwater started asking Gib to sit in on the meetings with Bodio and Feyrer, which Gib hated. The two young MBAs seemed like callow copies of Gibson Senior. Gib found himself shocked to actually compare his father favorably to somebody. Gibson Senior was a prick bastard, but at least he was good at it. Bodio and Feyrer were so confident in their world and their place in it, based on so little evidence, that it made Gib want to bash them with a recoilless hammer. During the meetings, Gib made full use of the Sally Field face.

The most frustrating thing was seeing Pinkwater deal with them. Or, more accurately, be dealt with by them. During the meetings, they consistently showed Sidney a veiled contempt. (Gib himself wasn't even on their radar.) Mostly, they complained about the money Sidney was already spending and the cash influx he expected to get from Bodio and Feyrer's firm. They complained about the results, the time it was taking, the value they were getting, Pinkwater's *lasses-faire* management style, and any other nut-cutting topic they could come up with. Worse, Pinkwater's personal banker, a short, fat and sweaty man named Dick Moran, sat in and seemed to agree with his two peers rather than his client. Moran twitched and nodded his head, like a puppy begging for a bone, every time Bodio and Feyrer picked apart the finances on the Black Box project.

Gib spent his time in the meetings listening with only half an ear, because he knew Sidney only wanted him there for some half-assed moral support, so that it wasn't one against two (or three, depending on how you counted Moran). OddGreg whipsawed between bored and panicked around the bankers, which had developed into a habit of nervous vomiting. During the meetings. And Taylor Jackson just shook his head "no" every time Sidney asked him to sit in. Based on the rumors about Jackson's temper toward suits, Sidney eventually decided to stop asking. So until Gib started working for Black Helicopter, Sidney sat through the abuse in the meetings, alone and unsupported.

So Gib pursued time-killing techniques. His most method was "Dear Sidney" letters. Gib would pick an idiotic topic out of the air, then write a letter for an imaginary suggestion box. Like Cross Dressing Wednesdays, or Mandatory Mud Wrestling Mondays. The letters weren't particularly funny, but Gib still ended used most of them for J. Spiderman. Gib had learned the phrase "copy hole" from Jackson Taylor, to refer to the words that had to be produced for every issue of a magazine. Sit down at the keyboard, start shoveling in words, phrases, whole sentences. Eventually you filled up the hole.

The "Dear Sidney" letters were as good as anything else to fill the Spiderman copy hole, though Gib was careful to change the name from "Sidney" to "Stanley". (It amused Gib to think about Stanley Campanella reacting to all the letters.) Best of all, writing "Dear Sidney" letters looked like taking notes, so Gib couldn't get busted for paying absolutely no attention to what was going on.

"Dear Sidney.

"It has come to my attention..."

Gib started every "Dear Sidney" that way: "It has come to my attention". It was a

mantra, like “Once upon a time”. By starting the letter that way, it cleared his head from distractions, from irritation at Bodio and Feyrer, from weariness, from the hole world, so he could find the rhythm of the writing.

“It has come to my attention that members of the Creative Staff have been taking older monitors home for personal use. I believe that a sounder use of our resources would be to take each outdated monitor, strip out the machinery, turn them upside and use them as either bird habitats or aquariums. Furthermore...”

And then Bodio interrupted Gib’s rhythm, with a raised voice and a manicured stubbed at a spreadsheet full of disbursements and impedimenta. Gib put down his pen. One of his other time-killers was to picture these meetings how they would appear in a Tex Avery cartoon. Sidney Pinkwater was a huge bear, Hawaiian shirt and all, beset by vicious wolves. But that was giving Bodio and Feyrer too much credit. They weren’t predators, just silk-tied flunkies of New York money people. So Gib downgraded them from wolves to foxes. Then dogs. Then Gib declared them ferrets and to hell with them. So Sidney was a brightly colored bear, beset by sniping ferrets. At best, Dick Moran was a fearful possum, watching how the fight went so he could choose the winning side.

That was where Gib’s head was when he realized Bodio was staring at him. He had clearly asked a question, and was waiting for an answer. Gib looked around and the rest of the table was staring at him. Pinkwater looked grateful for the interruption.

“Could you repeat the question?” Gib asked.

Bodio rolled his eyes. “I asked you what you were grinning about. This is very serious business.”

Ah. Pissing match. Gib had vaguely expected this. Bodio and Feyrer either wanted Gib gone, or his presence at the meetings explained. Just another way of putting Pinkwater on the defensive.

It reminded Gib of Uncle Joseph’s son, Joe Junior. Growing up, he had always tried to get his way by this kind of browbeating and bullying. It had worked on Owen, Joe Junior’s younger brother, but Wallis had never tolerated Joe Junior’s shit, and Gib had been shielded by default.

Joe Junior never stopped trying, though, no matter how much he got smacked down. The month Gib had graduated Virginia, he had gone out to dinner with all three Arlen children, Wallis, Owen and Joe Junior. Joe Junior had picked the restaurant, a steak place named Tooley’s near Times Square, even though Owen had been a Vegan for at least six years and no one besides Joe Junior had liked the old-boy clubbishness of the place. The dinner had gone miserably, with Owen walking out on the verge of tears after a half an hour of being called a “faggot” by his older brother. When dinner arrived, Joe Junior spotted some of his bosses from the trading house walking in to have dinner, so he abandoned Gib and Wallis to their filet while he went to go brown nose.

When Joe Junior finally got back to his ribeye, he found it cold and congealing. So he called the waiter over and loudly upbraided him. Wallis and Gib would have walked out, but by that point they were only hanging in to see that the waiter got a decent tip. Joe Junior tried to resist, but Wallis grabbed the check out of his hand and calculated a 40% tip, and wrote an additional note: “Sorry for my asshole brother.”

Just another night out with Joseph Arlen, Junior.

Though Uncle Joseph had never said anything, Gib was sure that this was at the

heart of Uncle Joseph's disappointment in Joe Junior. Not only was he unable to impose his will on others, he was also too stupid to stop trying. Weak and dumb was not a combination designed to impress Uncle Joseph.

Bodio was still staring at him. That was what Gib hated most about these meetings: seeing Pinkwater like this. The huge man was a dominant force, he filled a room, everyone wanted to talk to him, to buy him a drink, to hear what he had to say. But during these meetings, he diminished, shrunk, faded away. It was appalling. Because Pinkwater was smarter than Bodio and Feyrer, was a good man, was frankly *better* than the two suits. If the bear would just think to turn around and roar, the two ferrets would back off at supersonic speeds. It was embarrassing, like accidentally walking in on a friend and finding him with his cock in his hand, furiously stroking away. Portnoy's Taint.

Gib heard the voice of Gibson Senior talking to him. *Edward, nothing in the world is as important as being strong. And even if you don't have strength, you still must be perceived to have it.* And Gib didn't owe Bodio or Feyrer a dime.

So fuck him. "I was probably grinning because you're such a goddamn clown."

Around the table, there was a drawing-in of breath.

"Clown?!" Bodio yelled.

"It's common sense," Feyrer interrupted. "If this company wants our investment so badly, we should be entitled to see all of the financials for all of Black Helicopter. Not just the project."

"Oh, that's a steaming pile of horseshit. Where'd you learn how to lie that badly? Harvard Business School? Oh, wait, I've seen your resume. You couldn't get in."

"What's wrong with *Wharton*?" Feyrer started.

So Gib decided to let loose his inner Gibson Senior.

"Frankly, Sidney, I don't know why you don't toss that little prick out on his ass for asking to see your books." Dick Moran gave a breathy little gasp.

Gib continued on into the silence, "They're trying to nibble you to death to get themselves a better deal, when we all know that you're in the catbird seat. You have something they want. You can smell it on them. Just *look* at them, Sidney. Why don't you ask them what their bosses back in New York would do if you took the Black Box project to some other investment firm? They'd shitcan these two assholes in a second."

By that point, Bodio and Feyrer had gathered up their papers in to the briefcases and walked furiously out of the meeting. Dick Moran ran after them, only sparing the time for one anxious glance at Sidney and Gib before he went.

There was silence in the meeting room. In fact, there was silence outside the meeting room, because everyone at the desks nearest to the conference room had turned to watch the two suits storm out.

After two full minutes had passed, Pinkwater asked, "Gibson, are you utterly, utterly mad?"

"No. The only thing vipers like that respect is strength. Once you show them the whip hand, they'll roll over like good little doggies. You should try it, Sidney."

Sidney's face was pale as he looked at Gib. "That money is important, you know."

"I know that, Sidney. You know how I know that?"

"Because you're working on the Black Box, too."

Gib rolled his eyes. "No, I know it because of how you act whenever those two

assholes come around.”

Pinkwater looked startled. “How do I look?”

“Desperate. Have you ever gotten laid when you’re desperate, Sidney?”

Sidney groaned and lowered his head into his arms on the table. “I’m doomed,” he said through the cover of his burly forearms.

“Sidney, get up. Let me show you something.” Gib stood up and dragged a limp Pinkwater to his feet, then herded him outside to the reception area, where they could see the elevator area. Bodio and Feyrer were still standing in the hallway, waiting for the elevator. Dick Moran was gesticulating helplessly at the two younger men.

“You might ask yourself, Sidney, why two guys who seemed so angry when they stormed out are calm enough to wait around for an elevator.”

Pinkwater stared at the spectacle. “Why don’t they just take the stairs?” Pinkwater asked quietly.

“They might work up a sweat. And then their suits wouldn’t look perfect. They’re *Suits*, Sidney. Image is all. And *those* are the people who have you so worried?”

Pinkwater shook his head. “They are a pathetic pair of pricks, aren’t they?”

“They’re smarmy Armani ferrets. You’re a grizzly bear in an ugly Hawaiian shirt. The bear wins every time. Except maybe a beauty contest.”

Pinkwater laughed. It sounded unfortunately hysterical to Gib’s ears, but it seemed to do Pinkwater a load of good. And he looked a lot less desperate when he stopped.

“And what’s the worst that could happen?” Gib added. “So they don’t fund you. You go to some other firm. Even if the whole Black Box thing goes in the dumper, you’re still rich. You can just sit back and watch TV until something good comes along.”

“Good grief,” Pinkwater said, after a brief pause to think. “I feel tremendously better. Gibson, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Does that mean I can stop coming to these meetings?”

“Certainly not.”

"Battle of the Stars"

Space. The final frontier

Gene Roddenberry

For all the uproar and foofaraw at Black Helicopter, things at The Space were going very smoothly. Frank and Garrity seemed to have accepted Gib as a junior partner in their enterprises, since he was around so regularly. Only Campy still seemed suspicious. He alternated between completely ignoring Gib or staring blankly at him with what looked to Gib like incipient cannibalism. Anger or hunger, it didn't keep him from playing Hearts when Gib sat down to join them.

Gib did notice that his reports about Campy had started to get more or less hostile base don how much the big man mocked Gib's ongoing losing streak in Hearts during the card game that day.

For Ruth's part, she treated like an assistant, and regularly teased him about "the article".

"So, writer-boy, you pitched the article to anyone?"

"I've got a few letters out."

Ruth smiled. "I get you a job, and you're *still* looking to get paid here, aren't you?"

Days passed.

"So, writer-boy, any answers from those letters yet?"

"Not yet."

"Still looking to get laid, aren't you?"

"Nope."

"Ain't gonna happen, Hemingway."

The regularity of these exchanges seemed to reassure her. She started asking Gib to handle tasks of increasing responsibility. Gib would open up the doors to the public, collect cover charges or tickets, wrestle with kegs and cases of beer, set up speakers with Frank Marion, help pack boxes, and so on. Of all the jobs, he liked helping out Frank Marion the best, because it was both the most interesting and relaxing.

The sound and light boards were combined and tucked into a cul de sac underneath one of the staircases leading up to the balcony. Marion would do sound checks for each band, and set up light shows for those that requested it. Frank had programmed a few standard light show patterns for the shows. If it was a Deadhead-style jam band, Frank would tell Gib to do the "Dirtwizard" setup (psychedelic, multi color lights in no particular rhythm); for sludgy, thick guitar rock bands, it was "Ferro Lad" (the patterns were triggered by the bass monitor, and usually involved big spotlight going off like flares); for punk bands, Frank called the light array the "Asshole" setup. (This was the pattern he always chose when Green Rage played, for example.) There were four or five others, but often Marion just fiddled and tweaked during the show.

One night, Gib and Marion were sitting in the balcony, watching the lights flicker and incite the crowd. Gib spotted Norman Haddal holding court in the middle of the floor, a lone spot of immobility amidst the frenetic. Purple and yellow lights highlighted Haddal's shaved head, like a marshmallow in a pile of charcoal. Gib pointed Haddal's head out to Marion.

“Oh sure. I always look for Norman’s head, too. I use his bald head like a white balance. Just so I know the lights are going right.”

Gib asked why there wasn’t a special techno setup, since there were a lot of those at The Space. Marion told him, “I just take ‘Dirtwizard’ and triple the speed. That works just fine.”

The first time Gib saw Marion run a show, he asked how pre-programmed patterns could work for so many different bands. Marion explained, “It’s chaos theory and human perception. I flip a bunch of switches, and the audience *makes* the lights make sense. Just like people fill in the spaces between comic book panels.” At least, that was what Gib thought Marion said. Marion was like that. The superficial appearance of oblivious geekery was only a thin layer over a deep and abiding geekery, one that was based on research, education and passion.

After weeks of working for no pay, Gib wondered if it looked suspicious that he was hanging around so much for so little in return. When he broached the question with Marion, Frank happily answered, “Ruth figures you’ve got some scam running. Probably unemployment checks and learning how to run a club. I dunno.”

“Is that what everyone thinks? That I’m just loafing on unemployment? Even though I’m working with Black Helicopter?”

“Oh, no,” Marion said, surprised. “That’s just Ruth. She’s a little too cynical sometimes. *I* think so, anyway.”

“What’s the consensus with everyone else, then?”

Marion shrugged. “No consensus. Ethan thinks you’re a sincere volunteer and you’re trying to help us out so we can spread the word about the planet.” When Marion said the last few words, they sounded by rote, a line from one of Ethan Garrity’s speeches. If Gib had learned one thing about Frank Marion, it was that he was part of Green Rage because he was friends with the other two men. He agreed with them that something “needed to be done about the environment”, but only in the vaguest of ways. If necessary, he could quote statistics and reports about everything from global warming to deforestation, but it was obvious he didn’t have the deep-seated feeling about it that the others had, even Ruth. But Marion enjoyed the planning involved in the Green Rage actions and activities, from filming tree-spiking expeditions, to editing the videos, to running shows at The Space.

At the beginning of September, the two of them were hanging out in the balcony and watching a new light design go through its paces (“Daddy-O”, for a night of cocktails and swing bands that Ruth had booked, a trend that Gib disliked and that Marion was indifferent towards). Marion had stuck in a swing band demo tape and watched to see if the lights would be OK.

“That looks all right, doesn’t it?” he asked Gib, who had just brought a six pack of beer into the balcony. Gib handed a can of Budweiser to the sweaty other man, opened one for himself, and propped his feet up on the guard rail before he answered.

“It looks good to me,” he said. “Maybe you would want more blue lights, though. Smoky lounges, vodka martinis, and all other trappings of an idiotic trend about an idiotic decade.”

Marion smiled. “I was thinking it needed more blue, too. Nice to have agreement” He drank some beer. “You’re wrong about the fifties, though. That’s just a

cliché, that the fifties were about conformity. The Fifties had Kerouac and the Beats, and Charlie Parker, and they had the first important victories for civil rights. 1954. Brown versus Board of Education.”

It was already the longest discussion Gib had had with Frank Marion that didn't involve some reference to math. Gib tried to keep it going.

“It's funny everyone wonders about me. I wonder how you got involved in this.”

“You mean, a black guy?” Marion asked.

“Sort of.”

“You know what my middle name is, Gib?” Marion finally offered.

“No.”

“Thurgood.”

While Gib thought about it, Marion continued, “Maybe saving the environment isn't the struggle for Civil Rights, but it's important. And if I get to have a good time doing it?” Marion grinned. “In the words of the Negro spiritual, Free at last, free at last, Great God almighty, I am free at last,” he quoted in a carrying voice.

TO: Jan Reuben, Special Agent, San Francisco

FROM: [Agent Code #: SF677-900-980]

Subject: Frank Marion

Subject has a family history of civil unrest...

It was a few days after that when Ruth asked Gib how he felt about being a bouncer.

“Why? What's going on?”

“We have this religious seminar tonight, and I think it might get ugly,” Ruth said

“Religious? What kind of religious?”

“Um, they say they're teaching about Forces.”

“Some kind of New Age crap, then?”

Ruth nodded, and kept nodding just a little too anxiously. “I booked this thing because they offered a lot of money. More than we normally get for a night. I should have checked them out more thoroughly, but I got sucked in by the damn money.”

“Confused the kind of green you care about, did you?”

Ruth kept nodding for a second, then snapped her head around angrily. “What? Hey, fuck you!” She stomped away.

Gib followed along, finally stopping her by grabbing her arm. “Sorry! I was just making a joke.”

Ruth threw his hand off, but then screamed inarticulately and slapped her palms against her thighs. “That's what pisses me off. You're right. I got my greens mixed up.”

Ruth was really pissed, Gib realized. She was clenching her fists, and didn't even seem to be aware she was doing it. “Hey, relax. Just tell me why you need a bouncer.”

“Well, there's some religious group that's opposed to the one we're hosting. And

these two groups fight a lot, I guess. Like, really fight.”

Ruth was looking away from Gib, and he realized she was lying about something, leaving something out, and doing it badly. Overcome by the sympathy a professional feels when an amateur is playing way above her head, he tried to bail her out.

“Like the Middle East?”

Ruth made a ‘maybe so-maybe no’ motion with her hand. “More like they believe the same general thing, but different details. The danger is always in the details.”

“That’s what the Pope said to Martin Luther, I’m sure.”

Ruth laughed, but only politely. “So can you look threatening? Once I booked this group, I started getting threatening letters. It’s probably bullshit, but I want some extra people here tonight just in case.”

“Sure. I’ll dress all in black and look menacing.”

At eight, he was back at The Space, dressed and glowering as promised. Outside the front door, the gathering crowd didn’t look too dangerous. In fact, they looked downright respectable for a bunch of freaks involved in a nutty religion. There were a lot more men in the waiting crowd, by a noticeable margin, but both genders were dressed conservatively – jeans and button-down shirts predominated. The one thing that caught Gib’s eye, though, was that many of the women had strange haircuts, which he wasn’t able to place in his memory until after he had let himself into The Space and was walking up to the stage level.

They were Princess Leia haircuts.

Then he walked into the performance area and saw all the Star Wars™ decorations. For a minute, he thought he must have gotten the nights confused. There was a huge white curtain stretched out across the back of the stage and a huge projection was being shown on it from the balcony in the rear of the room. The projection looked of professional quality, but it was hard to tell with the lights still bright. Projected to a height of over 20 feet were two figures, one dressed all in black, from his metallic mask to his flowing robes, and the other figure dressed in a white shirt and tan pants and boots. The dark figure on the left had his right hand upraised at his side and a glowing red beam pointing straight up, while his left hand beckoned toward the viewer tantalizingly. The white and tan figure to his left was a mirror image, only the upraised beam was green instead of red.

They looked like medieval pictures of the saints, blessing the flock, missing only the yellow halos.

They were, of course, Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker.

Gib sought out Ruth. She was behind the bar, but she tried to sneak away when she saw Gib’s face.

“Hey!”

Ruth didn’t turn as he shouted. He ran to catch her before she escaped down into the storage area, tapping her on the shoulder before the stairway door could close behind her.

Ruth turned around with a guilty smile positioned on her face like bad plastic surgery. “Hey, Gib! Thanks for coming out and helping.”

“What the fuck is this?” Gib shouted. He liked the sound of it so much he shouted it louder, “*What the fuck is this?*”

"It's the religion I told you about," Ruth said in the careful manner you use talking to a hostile drunk in a bar at 4 AM. "Didn't you see the parishioners outside?"

"Parishioners?"

"Well, sure," Ruth said cheerily. "They have a religion they feel very strongly about. And they have some people who don't like what they're doing.

"How *about* that?"

"It's the history of any new religion, really. I was thinking you would stand in the back of the audience with Campy in case of any trouble. Would that be cool with you? We'll have five other guys around the area, plus one at the front door at all times. And then Frank will be watching from upstairs."

"What aren't you telling me?" Gib demanded.

Ruth looked him in the eye and said, "I swear I'm not keeping anything important from you. This is a religion, they have some enemies who have started brawls at the last six Follower meetings. That's it."

"Really?" Gib asked, still dubious.

Ruth took one of his hands and held in both of her own. "I promise you."

Nodding his head, Gib walked off to find Campy. The big man was talking with a medium-sized, brown haired man in dark brown robes. When Campy saw Gib come along, he stopped speaking, except to introduce the shorter man.

"Gibson Edwards, this is Force Leader Wedge."

Gib shook the man's hand with a twisted smile.

"I see you find this as funny as Mr. Campanella does," Wedge said.

"I'm not sure funny is the right word. What kind of a name is Wedge'? Is it from the movies?"

"Every Force Leader takes a movie name for the meetings. But not the major characters. That would be egotistical."

"Heretical," Campy added, with a straight face.

The Force Leader continued, "In any case, Wedge was a follower of Luke, and so am I."

"So in your day job, you go by your birth name?" Gib asked.

Force Leader Wedge shrugged. "If you'll excuse me, I have some work to finish before the ceremony begins. But I think the coffee and snacks are set up in the back. Is the front door open?"

"Not yet," Campy said.

"Open it, please. I don't want the other Followers forced to hang around outside."

Force Leader Wedge walked off casually and conferred with some other men in brown robes who were setting up life-size cardboard figures representing all the major Star Wars™ characters on the stage. Wedge started testing the microphone.

Campy signaled to Gib to follow and the two men went down to let in the rest of the Followers.

"Do you know why they call themselves the Followers?" Gib asked.

Campy said, "Followers of the Force."

Campy opened the door, waving the Followers inside. A few hundred people walked calmly and quietly into The Space as they murmured among themselves. Sprinkled amidst the crowd were some people who looked embarrassed or confused, many of whom

were carrying flyers. One guy in a blue sweater walked back and forth while the line steadily reduced in size, until the only choices were to join the end of the line or walk away. He walked away.

Later, while Gib stood with Campy at the back of the rows of folding chairs, he saw the same indecisive man in his blue sweater walk furtively into The Space and find a seat. By that time, the lights had dimmed and Force Leader Wedge walked out onto the stage, flanked by two men dressed in robes, their faces obscured by hoods.

Wedge raised both his hands to the crowd in a benediction and said, "Welcome, everyone. May the Force be with you." Once the crowd responded with the same phrase, Wedge nodded toward the balcony. Gib turned around to see Frank Marion, grinning, respond to the cue.

The lights went dark and John Williams' brass fanfare for the movie filled the room. Then the whole orchestra swelled and started playing the main theme to the movie, brass thundering and strings wailing. A flickering light came down from the balcony, and Gib flashed back twenty years to when he had seen Star Wars™ for the first time. The projector in the theater had been cheap, and the sound system had been blown, but Gib had still screamed and shouted in delight with the rest of the crowd.

If nothing else, Gib admitted to himself, they know how to put on a show.

On the curtain, white words appeared in a familiar, moving scrawl against a black background full of stars..

"Chapter 0," the words read. "A New Beginning."

"On Earth, a small planet in the Milky Way galaxy, the Followers of the Force gathered."

A spotlight snapped on, pinpointing Force Leader Wedge.

"The Force has two sides. Not good and evil, not order and chaos, though both of these are related dichotomies."

Gib started in surprise. That was a pretty big vocab word to hear in the middle of a freak show.

The projector started up and a scene from the fight scene between Luke and Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back* played out on the curtain above Wedge's head.

"The two sides of the Force are light and dark. But both sides are not equal. The dark side is easier; it provides quicker answers, simpler solutions. But it is *not* more powerful. A parent comes home from a long day of mind-numbing work to see their child waiting for them at the front door. The wave of love that courses through the parent is a powerful thing, as powerful as any hatred. And that love is as surely part of the light side as the hatred is part of the dark side.

Wedge turned around and watched some of the fight scene carry out. When he continued his talk, the sound from the projection went away, but scenes from the various movies continued to show above him, reinforcing, even in peripheral ways, the rest of his talk.

"As humans, most of us think we live in a world of concrete. Walls, desks, chairs, sidewalks. But really, we are also living in a world of metaphor. A world of stories. We all accept that these texts that are playing out above me are stories, but the underlying meaning has resonance for all of humanity in a way that is pure and untainted. In our perceived worlds of only concrete, we are also constantly choosing between the dark and

light sides of our nature, of our communities, of our world. We all know, in our hearts, which choices are good and which are bad. And naming those choices as aspects of the light or dark side of The Force is as useful a metaphor as any. It is a metaphor that allows us to name ourselves as the architects of our own destinies.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Gib muttered to Campy.

Without turning his eyes away from the man on stage, Campy said quietly, “It’s basically rugged Manichaeism individualism. Except they’ve eliminated the excuse of God or Satan.”

“Uh, what?” Gib asked.

Force Leader Wedge continued sermonizing for about fifteen minutes before the dark side of the Force suddenly stood up in the middle of the crowd, wearing a blue sweater.

“Heathens! Heretics!”

The screamer yanked his sweater over his head, revealing a yellow polyester shirt with black trim around the wrist and neck and a stylized arrow on the left breast.

“Oh, damn,” Campy said, mildly.

Force Leader Wedge yelled into the mike. “Trekkies! It’s the damn Trekkies!”

“Trekkers! *Trekkers!*” screamed out the guy in the yellow Kirk shirt.

Gib turned to Campy. “This is going to get bad, isn’t it?”

Campy turned, nodded, and showed Gib a happy smile. A screaming mob of Trekkies burst out from the staircase where they had snuck into The Space and plowed into the audience full of Followers. Mayhem ensued.

The next twenty minutes flashed by in bits and pieces for Gib. While a collage of Star Wars™ scenes played out on the curtain, the combatants argued about the Stars with screams, punches, and kicks.

At one point, Gib saw Campy holding one Trekkie under his arm while he punched another in the face, all the while screaming happily, “Live long and prosper, my *ass!*” Gib fought his way out of the main mass back to the bar, where he shouted at Ruth to call the cops before he noticed she was already yelling into the phone.

“Just get your asses over here!” she finished and slammed down the phone.

Gib followed her as she ran up to the balcony and found Marion stunned and staring at the display going on below him.

“Frank!” Ruth shouted, “turn on the spotlights. Turn ‘em up all the way! And patch me into the sound system!”

Spurred out of his stupor, Marion flipped a couple of switches, lighting The Space up bright enough to read the want ads, and handed Ruth a mike. Gib looked down over the balcony and saw that some of the combatants were already stopping and covering their eyes. Gib eyes watered in the sudden bright light.

“Hey! Assholes!” Ruth yelled into the mike. Her words had no effect on the brawl, but the vicious whine of feedback that cut through the speakers did. A goodly portion of the crowd slapped their hands over their ears. *Eyes covered, ears covered*, Gib thought giddily, *if she can only get the rest of them to cover their mouths, we’ll have every kind of monkey.*

“The cops are already on their way,” Ruth continued. “All you Trekkies –“
“Trekkers!” came the yells from the crowd.

“Whatever. You’d better start running or you get to play blue alien lady with all the Captain Kirks in the jail downtown.”

Dozens of Trekkies in red and blue shirts staggered toward the door, looking like a high school drill team after a street fight. Some of the Followers wanted to harass their retreating enemy, but Campy and the rest of the security team dissuaded them. The last Trekkie to leave was the ringleader, the only one in a yellow shirt. “You’ll be sorry! Next time, I’m bringing a trademark lawyer from LucasArts!” When two or three Followers started for him in spite of Campy’s efforts, Yellow Shirt waved both his hands in a large ‘V’, the “live long and prosper” sign, at the crowd. Then he ran.

When the cops showed up, Gib and Campy met them downstairs and explained what had happened. The first officer on the scene groaned. The Followers refused to press any charges.

Then, after cleaning up the worst of the mess, most of the Followers departed as well, along with the temporary security people. Force Leader Wedge hung around for awhile and drank with Ruth, Campy and Gib. Frank Marion had left for home, freaked out.

“Thanks for all your help,” Wedge said to the three of them. “That was quick thinking with the lights and the feedback.”

“The feedback was an accident,” Ruth admitted.

Wedge drained a shot glass full of whiskey and slapped the empty glass on the bar. “Either way, it worked. The last ceremony we had, in Golden Gate Park, the fight with the damn Trekkies lasted for almost twenty minutes before we all ran away from the cops. That’s why we tried the ceremony indoors this time, to try and cut down on the Trekkie contingent.”

“Why the hostility?” Gib asked. “Aren’t you all kind of into the same thing?”

Campy laughed at Gib, and Wedge looked offended. “Of course not. They’re into juvenile theater – learning fake languages and dressing up in makeup.” Wedge put on a falsetto voice. “*Oh, my, I’m a big, fierce Klingon warrior.* You can tell because I’ve got latex on my head.” He grabbed for the bottle of whiskey and refilled his glass. “Morons.” After he took another sip from his glass, he continued, “We don’t believe that Star Wars™ is *real*, or that we’re actually pretending to be *part* of it. We use the role-playing and the metaphors of the films to explore our human natures.”

Ruth shrugged and grabbed another cold beer out from under the bar. “It’s all New Age to me. I’m just a good lapsed Catholic.”

Force Leader Wedge smiled. “Me too!”

"Full Fathom Five"

If you want to organize anything, assume that everybody is absolutely stupid. And assume yourself that you're stupid.

Bayard Rustin

One of the things that being an undercover agent had in common with freelance writing was that you didn't have to wake up particularly early. In fact, by the time fall grabbed a firm hold of 1996, Gib took it as a personal affront if someone called him before one in the afternoon, when he could be assumed to have had his first cup of coffee of the day.

Luckily, no one needed him to be a morning person. Nothing really started up at The Space before the early afternoon. And neither or OddGreg Igoe or Taylor Jackson got to Black Helicopter much before noon themselves. The only exceptions to his sleep were Jan Reuben and Sidney Pinkwater.

Pinkwater would call any time of day or night and leave a messages full of suggestions, requests, corrections to earlier messages and occasional friendly greetings and inquiries about Gib's welfare. At some point, Gib got into the habit of deleting any message the instant he heard Pinkwater's voice, then calling him right back, because Sidney would always repeat everything he had said on the message. Half the time when Gib called back, it was after 3 AM, and Pinkwater would still pick up the phone after the first ring, seemingly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and ready to talk business.

Jan Reuben was nearly as bad. They were nearly two months into the investigation, and while Gib's reports were saying all the right things, it was clear that Reuben wanted more. And if she was pressuring Gib, then she was certainly getting pressure from Masturbatin' Bob Maynard.

Bosses. Maynard giving pressure to Reuben meant pressure on Gib. Bodio and Feyrer giving pressure to Pinkwater meant pressure on Gib. Gib figured that the pressure would eventually turn him into a diamond or crack him like charcoal. But Green Rage didn't seem to be ready to *do* anything. And there were only so many ways Gib could punch up Garrity's speeches.

Then...

On a Wednesday during the second week of September, there was a free night at The Space, so Gib invited Ruth out to dinner. Dinner was nice, at a family-run Mexican restaurant deep in the Mission. The Mama who ran the place with an iron hand came by the table more than once to urge the two of them to "eat, kiss, enjoy!" Gib initiated much flirtatious conversation. Outside on the sidewalk, waiting for a cab, they had kissed, which was nicer than dinner. But then Ruth broke away and smothered a burp.

"Hemingway! You caught me!"

Then the cab finally arrived and honked at them until Ruth jumped in, which made for an early evening, which was not so nice.

As Gib drove home, he luxuriated in the kiss, which had been redolent of beans and tequila. When he got home, the phone was ringing. Gib was I a "pick it up" kind of mood, so he did.

Ethan Garrity asked him, "Have you ever been scuba diving?"

An hour later, he had parked near Ghiradelli Square and walked through thinning groups of tourists to Fisherman's Wharf, where Garrity had said to meet the Ragers. Sure enough, there they were, loitering with intent. Frank Marion had an ice cream cone with three scoops on it (all vanilla), and it was dripping all over his fingers.

"Scuba diving?" Gib said.

"Sure!" Garrity said. "Where'd you learn how?"

"A trip to Hawaii," Gib said.

Campy glowered. "This isn't Hawaii. You're here to work."

"How was dinner with Ruth?" Frank Marion asked Gib, glancing at Campy out of the corner of his eye. The big man stomped off angrily.

The rest of them followed Campy off the main tourist drag and back toward what appeared to be a marine supply warehouse. The lights were off, but as the four of them trudged past the counter and into the back room, they emerged into a well-lit room where Norman Haddal was filling a scuba tank with air.

Gib was surprised. He had seen Haddal around The Space almost every night, but he hadn't ever thought the drug dealer was actively involved in Green Rage activities. At most, Gib had thought Haddal would be something to offer up to Reuben and Maynard if Green Rage turned out to be a bust of an investigation.

Without speaking, Haddal pointed at a group of beaten-down looking tanks, which the Ragers picked up and carried out to a house boat that was tied up to the dock in the back of the supply store. Gib grabbed tanks of his own and joined in the work. The five of them loaded suits (Haddal looked at Gib and tossed a size L on the pile of suits), goggles, fins, and various other tools. Eventually, Haddal looked at the piles of equipment and declared the group ready to cast off. Campy untied the house boat and Haddal carefully navigated their way out into San Francisco Bay.

"Whose boat is this?" Gib asked.

Haddal grunted, then muttered, "Keep your voice down. Sound carries a long way on water."

The only one who didn't suit up to dive was Norman Haddal. Frank Marion prepared a video camera designed for underwater work, while Garrity and Campy got dressed and backpacks with gallon cans of paint.

"Where are we going?" Gib asked, when they were finally a good way out.

Instead of answering, Haddal pointed to an island west of them, out in the middle of the bay.

"That's *Alcatraz!*" Gib said.

"Yup," Campy said. The big man was finally over his pique on the Wharf. He grinned as he sprayed anti-fog fluid into his mask and shook it out. "We're going to tag the place. Now why don't you shut up and help us pack?"

As the Green Ragers and Gib got ready to go into the bay, Campy was a checklist of nervous tics. He tapped his feet, clenched his fists, stood up, then sat back down, paced back and forth on the small confines of the boat, checked his equipment over and over, checked everyone *else's* equipment. Eventually, Gib decided it was a kind of stage fright.

The houseboat had a top speed of lethargic, and even that strained the engines, so Haddal kept the throttle mainly in the mopey range. While Gib knew they couldn't have

very far to go, it still took twenty minutes before Haddal cut the engine and threw a dive marker over the side.

As the houseboat settled, Campy took a chemical light stick out of his equipment bag, snapped it and shook it up so that it glowed a grim green.

"It's supposed to be a clear night down there, so just follow our lights. We all have red lights attached to our vests, but I didn't think to get one for you. I hate to use these chemical lights, because they're bad for the fish. So don't drop this. In fact..."

Campy turned Gib around and taped the green stick on the back of Gib's tank. Then he broke another stick and taped it to Gib's vest, his buoyancy compensator.

"There, you have two lights. You can see your gauges with the one I taped to your BC."

Campy handed a bag full of two paint cans to Gib. Garrity had already fastened a bad full of paint to his weight belt.

"All you have to do is tote these cans, plus a mop, and follow us," Campy said.

"All right, that's it," Gib said. "Before I go into the water, I want to know what the hell we're doing."

Campy grimaced, but Garrity cut in before the big man could answer. "Have you ever been to Alcatraz?"

"Yes."

"So you've seen the graffiti from the Indian takeover in 1969. They painted words that face toward the East Bay. We're going to paint one of the walls that face San Francisco."

"Why the hell don't we just drive this boat right up the island?"

Garrity said, "Because someone might see the boat, and –"

"And because it's more entertaining this way," Norman Haddal interrupted.

"More entertaining?" Gib demanded.

Campy nodded his head, his good humor firmly back in place. Then he grabbed a long mop from the deck in both hands, put on his facemask, stuck in his mouthpiece and stepped in the water, quickly followed by Garrity and Marion. Wanting more of a explanation but knowing that Haddal would, at best, offer nothing but a superior smile, Gib picked up a mop and stepped over the side of the boat.

Campy set the level of the swim no more than fifteen feet below the surface of the water, so Gib had to inflate his vest a bit to reach the level of buoyancy he wanted, (especially with the cans of paint hanging from his weight belt). Fifteen feet wasn't very deep, but the water was pitch black and completely disorienting. Gib was anxious to stay near the three other men, their lights, and being close to the surface of the bay was also just fine.

Gib settled into a swimming rhythm behind Garrity, and the time passed quickly. Frank Marion was the only one of the group not loaded down with equipment besides his camera, and he swam back and forth to various angles to film the other three swimmers as they made their way to the abandoned island prison.

Gib's green chemical light combined with the red lights from the other two men to make for a Lovecraftian glow in the water, equal parts bloody mayhem and demons from other dimensions. Gib looked down into the depths of water and imagined beats with hundreds of tentacles and thousands of eyes rising up from the blackness top envelop the

intrepid little band of swimmers.

Haddal was right. It *was* more entertaining this way.

Gib was startled by a large ray gliding through the outer radius of his light. He had never seen a ray that closely before, not outside of an aquarium, and he couldn't remember if they had a sting on the end of their tails.

The chemlight on his chest was just starting to dim when he saw Campy leading the way upward. Gib's fists emerged into the air with the mop. A little more swimming, and then they were walking up the rocky side of the island.

All four men took off their fins, piling them up with a lit chemlight that would only be visible from the island, so they could find the equipment later. Frank Marion took the opportunity to open up his waterproof camera and put in a fresh tape. Then Campy led the way up the hill and produced a screwdriver to open up the cans of paint.

Gib watched as Campy grabbed a mop and started to paint the walls of Alcatraz prison with bright red paint. With the mop, Campy extended his height to make the tops of the red letters nearly twelve feet tall. The three of them (Marion was busy as a documentary filmmaker) alternated with the mops and sloppily painted the words "SAVE THE EARTH" in tall red letters. With the green paint; with the green, the words "GREEN RAGE" were added to the left and right the red letters.

The two Es in the "GREEN" on the left were so messy that the word ended up looking more like "GABBN" where the lines of paint had rolled down the wall. But they all agreed that most people would be able to figure the word out from context.

Back at the pile of fins, they packed up their refuse, not wanting to leave any extra evidence of their tagging trip behind for authorities to poke through. Gib put up a bitter argument, but they ended up bringing the empty cans of paint back to Haddal's houseboat. If they dumped them on the bottom of the bay, Garrity reasoned, they might poison a striped bass or two.

As they shuffled back into the water, Gib asked about the kinds of fish that lived in the Bay. Garrity reeled off a long list, while Campy grunted agreement.

"What about sharks?" Gib asked. "I meant to ask about that."

"Sure, there's a bunch of sharks!" Garrity answered, happily. "Leopard sharks, seven gill sharks, blue sharks. Fisherman's Wharf has a great aquarium where you can find out all about the fish in the bay." Casting a nervous glance at Campy, Garrity added, "I know that zoos and aquariums are supposed to be awful and artificial and all that, but some of them are pretty informative."

Campy didn't appear to hear Garrity's slight heresy.

"Are rays dangerous?" Gib asked. "I saw one while I was swimming out here."

"Enough talk," Campy said.

The big man let the other three walk into the water ahead of him, before he said, "Gib, if a ray comes for you, the sting's the least of your worry. Some of those bastards get to be over a hundred and fifty pounds. Bigger. They could drag you right out into the ocean, probably."

Gib turned around and looked at the big man, who smiled.

Back on the boat, Gib and Garrity pulled up the dive line while Haddal turned the houseboat and headed for shore.

Gib figured this might be a good time to investigate, while the Ragers were

celebrating a successful mission. Garrity and Marion were happy to describe how they planned to edit and distribute the tape Marion had made.

"It'll be a great media hack." Marion said.

"Media hack?"

Garrity said, "We try to use the tools of the establishment against them.

Advertising, video, all that. Frank's holding an incredibly expensive camera right there to make sure the video is of high enough quality to look right on the evening news. The more we can get our message out on the airwaves, the more people can start to ask questions about the environment." Garrity looked about ready to go into a longer speech, but he and Marion were exhausted. Campy was never Gib's choice for conversation. So Gib started talking to Norman Haddal.

"Norman, do you live on the boat?"

"Yes. Actually," Haddal said with a smile. "you could say this boat is zoned for live-work. Below decks is where I create my finest products."

"You have a lab below decks?"

"I do. That's so if something happens to ignite, there's a lot of water to put out the fire. I have life vests stashed all over this humperdinck, so even if the damn thing blows itself to bits, I figure I can jump in to the Bay and take my chances with the sharks and the narcs."

"What would blow up?"

Haddal looked puzzled. "Campy? Are you sure about this guy?"

Campy shrugged.

"Ruth likes him," Frank Marion added.

"Well, Gib, the designer pills I sell at The Space are only my hobby. And I practically *give* those away. In my actual business dealings, I follow strict rules of economic supply and demand. If it's in demand, I supply it. Right now, I'm making a lot of meth. And good meth means ether. And ether means *boom*."

Gib asked carefully, "Is there a lot of ether on this boat right now?"

Haddal said, "The life vest nearest to you is right behind your left shoulder."

Silence followed. It continued until Garrity said, "Gib, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"What's that?"

Garrity exchanged looks with Marion and Campy before he continued. "We just wanted to say."

Campy snorted unhappily.

Garrity ignored the big man for a change. "We *all* wanted to say that we think Ruth is excellent. She's really important to all of us. But we've decided that you're OK, too."

"Thanks," Gib said, uncertainly.

Campy looked over at Gib and glowered.

The rest of the boat ride back to the dock went without any more small talk.

TO: Jan Reuben, Special Agent, San Francisco

FROM: [Agent Code #: SF677-900-980]

Subject: Norman Haddal

Subject has been under observation by local agents of the Drug Enforcement Agency. DEA has been unable to locate subject's lab...

"Scotch, Condoms, and Company"

I find it extraordinary that a straightforward if inelegant device for ensuring the survival of the species should involve human beings in such emotional turmoil. Does sex have to be taken so seriously?

P. D. James

This is how it finally happened. If you like, it could even be described as a victory. When 145, 211 men died in three and a half minutes at Antietam, the North called it a victory. When 65 million men died in 44 seconds on the third day of fighting at the Sorbonne, the English, with characteristic humor, called it a victory after they carefully measured and found their front lines had moved ahead an average of three and a half inches.

You get the idea.

Two nights after tagging Alcatraz, Gib had spent a night with Reuben, describing the Alcatraz swim, and promising to get a copy of the video tape when Marion was done editing. Then he had avoided having sex with her and had gone home to watch porn instead.

When the phone rang, it was late enough that Thursday had turned into Friday. Gib thought about letting the machine pick up, but he didn't think anyone was currently pissed at him. And it might be Reuben, looking for longer night after all. The porn had made him think more positively about her – about any female, really. So Gib fumbled for the remote, figuring the sounds of pay-per-view porn wouldn't go across so well.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Gib. It's Ruth." Ruth was speaking very carefully, pronouncing each word distinctly, and Gib realized she was loaded. That afternoon, Frank Marion had told Gib that Ruth was going to a party for a friend that night.

"Hi, Ruth, what's --"

"I have three questions for you," she interrupted. "Please answer very carefully." Ruth cleared her throat.

"One: Do you have scotch?"

"Yes. Ruth, is there --"

"Two: Do you have condoms?"

At that distinct moment, Gib went both limp and rigid, depending on what part of him you were talking about. The languid excitement he felt sweeping over him still caused beads of sweat to pop up on his forehead.

"Yes."

"Fine. Three: do you have company right now?"

"No."

"I'll see you in fifteen minutes."

Ruth hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, Gib had swept away all the dust bunnies; stacked all the empty pizza boxes and hid them in a kitchen cabinet; kicked, screamed and thrown all the loose magazines and assorted crap under his couch; and carefully placed a box of condoms, a bottle of scotch, and two glasses on the coffee table in front of the couch.

This was the longest seduction Gib had ever attempted. If a woman wasn't

interested in the first ten minutes or so, Gib was ready to move on and find more fertile soil. But because of the job, because of proximity, because of reasons he couldn't quite explain to himself, he had kept at this one, no matter how resistant she had seemed.

Would have felt relieved if he wasn't so goddamn nervous.

He stood in the middle of the room, hopping from left foot to right, before he finally went and grabbed a couple of condoms from the stash in the bookcase next to his bed and hid them in the couch cushions.

Finally, he was standing at the front door and making one final assessment of his place when the buzzer rang. He buzzed Ruth in, unlocked his door and went to sit on the couch.

That's when he looked up at the TV and saw the porn.

Then he realized he had put the remote away in the crazed cleaning frenzy.

Somewhere.

The concepts backed up in his head, stunned at his stupidity. Gaper's block of the brain.

Put the remote. Away. Somewhere. Somewhere he couldn't remember.

The words all ran together. Puttheremoteawaysomewherehecouldn'tremember!

He rolled off the couch and started digging through the crap he had shoved under then couch. There was no time to be delicate, so he hauled out handfuls of magazines, dust and loose change in a search for the remote. Nothing.

He jumped to his feet, ran across the room, and pressed every button he saw on the front of the TV. A documentary about monkeys flashed onto the screen, then a *Friday the 13th* movie, then a cooking show, before Gib got himself under control.

"Idiot. Calm down." He leaned around the back of the TV and pulled the plug out of the wall.

Then he looked around at the scattered crap he had flung out from under the couch, realized the place was back to the mess it had been before the cleaning fit. He shrugged, went back to the couch to pour himself a scotch. As he took his first sip, he heard a knock at the door.

"It's open," he yelled.

Ruth walked in, focused carefully on him, then smiled as she closed the door behind herself.

"So," Gib started, "how's it going?"

Instead of answering, Ruth walked over, sat down next to him, and took the scotch out of his hands. She took a long drink, then looked at Gib with a dreamy look in her eyes.

"Shut up."

Gib shut up, his teeth clicking together in his haste to follow instructions..

Ruth took another drink of scotch. "Good boy. That's an amdirable -- no, an addirable -- uh, it's a *good* quality. For you to shut up."

Suddenly, her face turned pale.

"Where's your bathroom?" she asked in a watery voice.

Gib pointed to the requested door.

Ruth stood up and ran. In a moment, noises of distress came from behind the door. Then after a long while, Gib could faintly hear the sounds of running water.

Another long while after that, Ruth came back out. Her eyes were red-rimmed and teary, but her smile was bright, and she was walking much more steadily.

"Are you all right?" Gib asked again.

"Much better," Ruth said. She sat down next to him, took his face in her hands, and when she kissed him, Gib tasted a layer of toothpaste and mouthwash over stomach acid.

A few hours later, Gib woke up in bed alone. The shades on his window were wide open, and sunlight was pouring in on him. For a minute, before he shook off the sleepiness, he was stunned at the depth of loss he felt because Ruth wasn't laying next to him.

Then he smelled coffee being brewed.

Ruth walked back into the bedroom, carrying two cups of coffee, wearing one of his grey Virginia t-shirts. She handed a steaming cup to Gib.

"Hey, did you know you had pizza boxes in your kitchen cabinets?" she asked.

Gib drew a blank for a second, then remembered the cleaning. "Have to keep them someplace."

"Why are you saving *pizza boxes*?"

"Don't *you* save your pizza boxes? Good for the environment."

Ruth laughed, until she stopped short and put her hand to her head in pain.

"Good party?"

"Yeah. We're all pretty proud of Corinna"

"I can understand why," Gib said.

Ruth looked at him cynically. "You can, huh? I'd love to hear why. Since I'm pretty sure you have no idea who Corinna is."

Gib groaned quietly. "Sure. My take." He sipped some coffee before continuing in a pompous TV voice. "Isn't the need for -- it *is* Corinna, right? -- for Corinna's project *obvious* to anyone who looks closely? "

"Amazing. Open mouth, spew bullshit. You're an artist. A bullshit artist."

"After hours of studying all the data," Gib continued, "and of course giving extra attention to the public testimony, any concerned citizen can see that not only does Corinna *deserve* the grant, it's practically our *duty* to help. By the way, what the hell is she doing?"

"Youth center programs for sex education."

Gib waved his hand in the air importantly. "Oh, well, then it's *patently clear* that *not only* should the community be involved in teenage sexuality, they should *encourage* it on *every* occasion."

"Should I assume you're interested in educating large-breasted eighteen year-olds?"

"Well, certainly they're a high risk demographic, yes?" Gib asked. "However, speaking for myself, I find that I am personally interested in blondes in their mid-20s. With rock-hard abs."

Ruth lifted her borrowed sweatshirt and patted her stomach. Gib noted with a dry throat that she hadn't borrowed any underwear.

"Abs like these, you mean?" Ruth asked. "or did you have some other ones in mind?"

Later.

She: "Hold on."

He: "What?"

She: "Stop!"

He: "Why? What's wrong?"

She: "You're banging my head on the bookcase. Scoot down."

More later, more better.

Gib lay next to Ruth, his arm wrapped around her. He was controlling his breathing, keeping himself calm, trying to figure out what was going on inside his head. He looked out of the corner of his eye at Ruth's profile: her sweaty forehead, her long, straight nose. Looking at her gave him pangs he couldn't identify.

Maybe I'm coming down with a cold.

Ruth opened her eyes and caught him peeking. Her lips slowly built up a grin. She turned to face him, grabbed and turned his head so that they were staring straight into each other's eyes.

Blue-eyed hypnotism, he thought.

Yes, Master, he thought.

Ruth got an extremely serious look on her face, and Gib thought he knew exactly what she was about to ask.

"What are you thinking?" It was an awful question, one that every woman asked him after sex. Am I beautiful? Am I good? Then tell me what you're thinking, because we should be as close as possible, our bodies, our minds, ourselves. Gib had learned that honest answers ("Nothing") never satisfied. And funny answers ("Pancakes?") were ten times worse.

Gib desperately hoped he wouldn't have to use one of the standard responses ("I was thinking about how beautiful you are.") he had developed. Even remembering some of the hackneyed phrases made him want to cringe.

Then he caught himself. Because for the first time, it was actually a good question. What the hell *was* he thinking?

Ruth opened her mouth to speak. *Please, he silently begged, please don't ask.*

"Do you have any aspirin?" Ruth asked.

"Sure," he said. "In the bathroom." When she walked out into the other room, Gib reconsidered over twenty-five years of atheism, as he had plainly witnessed a miracle.

Ruth came back into the bedroom, set down a glass of water and crawled back next to him.

After a long silence broken only by a few sips from the glass of water, Ruth asked, "What the hell was *that* all about?"

"What was *what* all about?"

"Just before I asked you about aspirin. What was that look on your face? Like I was about to blow up Congress or John Wayne Bobbitt you."

"Oh." Gib thought about it. "I was wondering why you decided to come over last night."

"You're lying again," Ruth said.

"No, I'm not," Gib said hotly.

Ruth looked closely at him. "Why did I come over? Because I finally decided that you're reliable enough, you aren't working some scam at The Space, and you can keep your mouth shut." Ruth drank some more water. "Plus, I was pretty drunk and it seemed like a good idea at the time. Now what did you really want to ask? What? If I had herpes or AIDS or something?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then what? You were white as a sheet."

Gib blurted out, "I thought you were going to ask me what I was thinking."

Ruth considered that while drinking more water.

"Well, no offense," she finally said, "but that's very weird. Why would that be any of my business?"

And with that response, Gib finally identified what he was feeling. Smart, funny, beautiful, took no shit, had passion, and gave passion, but minded her own business. Ruth was perfect, his fantasy, his perfect woman. He had only felt this way once before, when he was just a kid. *Aw, crap*, he thought.

"I guess I've just been asked that a lot after sex."

"Hum," Ruth said, to herself. Finally, she said, "Well, you're a pretty open book, Gib."

"How do you mean?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, first of all, you're funny. And smart. And nice enough, I guess. So let me just say that first. I do like you."

"But?"

"But you've never exactly struck me as deep."

"So you're saying," Gib began, carefully picking his words, "that you don't really *care* what I'm thinking."

"You don't owe me anything. I don't owe you anything. This was a fair exchange right here. Anything else gets messy."

"Messy! How can you know things would get messy!" Everything was roller coaster loop-the-loop.

"Stop shouting, all right?" Ruth said. "My head is killing me. If it means that much to you, what were you thinking?"

Gib stopped short. "Pancakes!" he blurted out.

Ruth stared at him goggle-eyed until she finally burst out laughing again. This time, even the hangover couldn't stop her.

"Well, *that's* certainly earth shaking," she whooped, and she pounded on the mattress in amusement.

Gib could feel it building inside him, as if he'd drunk far too much. He fought to keep it down, but as Ruth kept laughing, he found it harder and harder until at last he burst out, "Shut up, okay? I was going to say I'm in love with you."

"Ohhhhhhhhh, shit," Ruth said.

"Shit?"

She smiled comfortably at him.

"I told you things would get messy."

PART TWO

SEPTEMBER 1996

*In which we finally catch up to Gib in the bathroom,
with a fuller understanding of the metaphorical shithole he
has dug for himself; further amusements, declarations and
photography sessions ensue;
also: the first betrayal.*

"Linty Fresh"

Between lovers a little confession is a dangerous thing.

Helen Rowland

Messy.

That afternoon, Gib crossed the street to meet Jan Reuben at a Berkeley café, little knowing he would soon be hiding in a bathroom. He had parked the GTO at the safe house and walked to the café so he would have more time to plan. While waiting for traffic, he admired her muscular jogger's legs from across the street. He tried to convince himself that Reuben was OK, even if she was a Hard Worked. He would just have to tell her. She wouldn't let it get in the way of the job. Reuben would obviously realize they would have to set aside their half-assed relationship because Ruth might get suspicious.

And there was no way he could keep it secret from Reuben. She had been pushing to install bugs and wiretaps for weeks, and he knew she would find out soon enough. And, he admitted to himself, it would be a way to get her to leave him alone. He wished he hadn't ever slept with her, that first day in San Francisco.

Best done quickly, he thought. Like ripping off a bandage.

He sat down across from Reuben and announced cheerily, "I finally fucked Ruth Radley."

Reuben nodded blankly, holding the full cup of coffee in both her hands. Hot coffee started spilling over her clenched fingers. She didn't appear to notice.

"It was the only way to get deep into their operation."

That was when the thick ceramic handle cracked off in Reuben's hands. The full cup of coffee fell out of one hand, with the jagged edges of the handle cutting her other hand.

Gib yelled for a towel. When the startled waitress rushed over, he grabbed the towel out of her apron and wrapped it around Reuben's bleeding hand. He had to force her other hand to hold the towel firmly on the cuts. After a minute, when the waitress had gone to get paper towels to clean up the spilled coffee, Gib whispered to Reuben, "What's *wrong* with you?"

She looked at him coldly and took the towel away from her hand. The bleeding had already stopped, and Gib tried to signal the waitress that everything was okay. When he turned back, Reuben slapped him hard enough to knock him down, if he hadn't caught the edge of the table. When he touched his face, he was shocked to see blood, before realizing she had slapped him with the cut hand.

Under his breath, he muttered to her, "You're making a goddamn scene. We should get out of here and go talk at the safe house. Give me your keys. You're in no shape to drive."

After a second, she nodded angrily, handed him her keys and walked off. Gib tossed a few bills down on the table as the waitress walked up.

"Nothing to worry about," he said cheerily to her.

She sneered at him, though the bolt through her upper lip made that a challenge. "Guys like you are a fucking menace," she said.

Two women sitting at the table behind her started to applaud the waitress'

sentiment. After a second, the man sitting behind them joined in, though he snapped his fingers instead of applauding. Gib decided to cut his losses.

He caught up with Reuben as she got to her standard-issue federal Ford. All the way to the safe house, Gib tried to draw Reuben out, but she ignored him while simmering in her anger. So in the silence of the short drive back to the safe house he worked on his Sally Field face.

That distraction got Gib ambushed by Reuben when they walked into the safe house. But he had been paying just enough attention, and he got to the bathroom in reasonable safety and settled down to read newsmagazines while Reuben raged on the other side of the door.

In Medias Res Resolved

In the bathroom, Gib read and waited.

After reading a few essays about the collapse of society, Gib realized that he couldn't hear any more sounds of destruction coming from the kitchen. Before opening the door, he carefully went over the various threads of the argument he had prepared.

If he kept his bullshit solid, tightly packed, and impossible to scrape away, he'd probably end up in the sack with Reuben, clearing up the problems with a final goodbye screw. But if he only produced a weak trickle, a sloppy mixture of excuses and whining, he might end up in the hospital.

He heard Reuben crying quietly, so he decided to give her a few more minutes alone. To kill time, he counted the words that rhymed with "grovel". Novel? Shovel? Hovel? Hobble? Vaclav Havel? It wasn't very entertaining. So he just counted off seconds to himself. *One thousand one; one thousand two* until finally he reached *one thousand five-hundred*. Finally, he ventured carefully back out into the kitchen.

The wave of destruction had included cupboards full of pans, cutlery, and crockery, he discovered. Shattered corpses of plates and dishes covered the floor, with dented pots and pans serving as mourners and pallbearers. A lone butcher knife was stuck point-first in the floor like a warning. *Abandon all hopes of lunch, ye who enter here.*

Reuben was sitting in the breakfast nook with her face in her hands. There were no longer sounds of crying; just hoarse, shuddering breaths. Gib wasn't surprised her throat was aching from so much screaming. Both of Reuben's hands were bleeding now, probably the last revenge of some dead dish warrior, and the blood was streaming down where she held her face, forming a small pattern around her elbows.

Start with the back rub, Gib thought. He sat down and started massaging Reuben's shoulders.

"Don't touch me, you son of a bitch", she said. The screaming had turned her voice into an awful croak, like a UCLA cheerleader after the Rose Bowl. She tried to shake him off, but he knew her adrenaline had crashed. He kept his hands on her. Contact was essential for selling the line of crap he had prepared in the bathroom. It didn't matter what the lyrics to a song were, as long as the singer *meant* it.

"It's my job, Reuben. That's what I'm here for. You *know* that. You know it because it's your job, too." After the back rub, the appeal to patriotism, to dedication.

"It wasn't your job to fuck her."

"Wasn't it? Without complete trust, these people won't bring me into the inner

circle." Inner circle, that was a good one.

"That's just a excuse."

True enough, he thought. *But at least she didn't say it was NO excuse. Let's go with Paranoid Patriot. C'mon, Reuben. Close your eyes and think of J. Edgar.*

"Look, do you want me to give up? To let these bastards just go?" he hissed. "Because if that *is* what you want, I'll *do* it. For you. Because I love you that much." He made sure to gasp just a little bit on the word *love*. Making it sound like the manliest of manly men was struggling with his hidden passionate nature. Gib imagined how it would sound in a romance novel, and let that be his guide. Funny how the word sounded entirely different than it had in front of Ruth. It didn't bother him at all to say it here, to Reuben.

Gib took a deep breath. He tried to put a macho huskiness into his voice, with just a sprinkling of heavy, *heavy* emotion. "I love you, Reuben. If I have to let these *traitors* go, then I'll do it. Whatever the consequences to the country." *Careful! Don't oversell it!* "It's not as important as what you and I have together."

Reuben started crying openly now. Gib recognized it as guilt, and decided to go for the quick turnaround. "But you and I both know how dangerous these people are. They're not going to stop with demonstrations and protests. Don't we both know that?"

Gib could feel Reuben's muscular shoulders start to loosen under his massaging fingers. He had to keep the flow going. She was poised on the precipice of repentance, which would lead to forgiveness, and he had to push her over.

He stopped massaging for a second and took a deep, sincere-sounding breath.

"I had to do it. It was either that or have her completely distrust me. We would have had to abort the whole operation." He wondered if he had ever heard someone use the phrase "abort the operation" out loud before. By this point, he was almost on autopilot

Gib finally felt her shoulders go soft and knew he had hooked her.

"I didn't exactly get a chance to finish my report, did I?" Gib asked wryly.

Reuben laughed in embarrassment, and began to apologize. Gib tuned out the rest, and buried a smile inside a kiss on the nape of her neck.

Minutes later, they were naked in the bedroom upstairs. As he kissed her, Gib could still see how troubled her eyes were. *Duty to country* and all that, sure, and of course we couldn't *abort the operation*. But wasn't it his *also* his duty not to fuck other women if he said he loved her? She was a Bureau fanatic, but not a complete idiot. Reuben needed something more to reassure her.

A idea came to him. It was something new, but he had nothing better to try. So instead of stopping his kisses at Reuben's neck, Gib continued to move downward.

"Hey, what...?"

"Lie still," he growled. *Good growl*, he thought. That was the kind of stylized macho shit that would wipe the doubts away. If her prepared her properly, her orgasm would be a emotional eraser.

Gib straightened Reuben's arms at her sides, then arranged her legs together, as if she were laying at attention. He crawled down to the bottom edge of the bed. Then he started kissing her toes. While kissing them, he massaged the soles of her feet as hard as he could without actually hurting her. He heard her groan in pleasure and knew he was on to something.

His lips moved up to the tops of her feet, where thick blue veins curled, then to her ankles. He moved all the way up her muscular legs with his lips and tongue, composing out a melody while his hands set the rhythm – sometimes softening up her knees with his strong fingers while he kissed her shins, sometimes loosening her calves while he began to kiss the inside of her thighs.

During the entire route from bottom to top, there were only two times where he almost broke the mood.

Once, while concentrating on her groin, he knew he was having a powerful effect so he kept on licking her long after he had lost interest. He started thinking about lunch.

Gee, a tuna sandwich might be nice.

Instantly, he drew in a breath to keep himself from snorting out laughter. But the sudden cold from his inhalation made Reuben twist in what was clearly delicious discomfort, and the pause let him get his concentration back.

The second time was when he kissed her belly button. He darted his tongue into it, and was rewarded with a tongue covered in lint.

God damn it, he thought. That's awful!

Gib choked back a cough, but he couldn't wash the taste out of his mouth. A little nauseated, he jumped up past Reuben's ribs to her breasts. He spent just a cursory bit of time there. Reuben was ready to go anyway.

He used his teeth to scrape the lint to the front of his tongue just as Reuben opened up her mouth to kiss him. As he spit the lint into Reuben's mouth, he used his hand to insert himself into her. He wasn't quite sure which was more entertaining, but he knew he would remember the lint a lot longer than the sex.

Once he was inside her, he lost a lot of his interest.

Grind, grind, grind. Moan, moan moan

Thirty-five minutes later, he was in the Goat, top down, driving back over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco. The tape deck was blaring out a Fishbone song ("Lyin' Ass Bitch."). Before he had gotten on the highway, he had stopped at a sandwich shop. His t-shirt, ripped during Reuben's shoe attack, drew some stares while he placed his to-go order. As he sped across the bridge, Gib kept only one hand on the wheel. In the other was a large tuna sandwich.

"Choose Your Own Adventure"

The transition had been so sudden and so unexpected that it left me for a moment forgetful of aught else than my strange metamorphosis. My first thought was, is this then death! Have I indeed passed over forever into that other life! But I could not well believe this, as I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs from the exertion of my efforts to release myself from the anaesthesia which had held me. My breath was coming in quick, short gasps, cold sweat stood out from every pore of my body, and the ancient experiment of pinching revealed the fact that I was anything other than a wraith.

E.R. Burroughs

A day later, Gib got a party invite from The Space, which struck him as odd, since he was there every day. The invitation read:

Be Your Best Burroughs
You are cordially invited to a costume party
@
The Space
All proceeds to go to save the earth.

Gib loved the idea, because Burroughs was one of his favorite writers. He had read many paperback copies of his novels to painful deaths. So he found a costume shop in the Haight where he could get a Confederate cavalry hat, a fake moustache, thick leather musketeer boots, a brace of fake revolvers, and a realistic-looking stage saber. But when he arrived at The Space the night of the party, he found a room full of people wearing slouch-brimmed fedoras, carrying typewriters and plastic syringes, or made up as hallucinogenic insects of varying sorts. Gib couldn't figure out what books the costumes were supposed to be from.

Over at the bar, he found Frank Marion dressed up in a futuristic-looking uniform, complete with what looked like an admiral's cap.

Marion looked morose. "God damn that Campy. He should have been more clear on the invitation." He angrily finished his beer.

At that point, Campy, Ruth and Garrity walked up to the bar, and Gib felt a pang of envy run through him when he saw their costumes. While he himself had not had the guts to wear a costume that made him half-bare, showing off all his developing beer muscles, the other three looked stunning in their minimalist costumes.

Ruth was wearing a pink bikini top with translucent, billowy pants tucked into black leather pirate boots. Garrity was wearing a kilt made out of strips of leather that came to triangular points at their lowest ends. Adorning his body were three wide belts, two over his shoulders and one around his waist, a real-looking saber hanging from it. He wasn't particularly muscular, but the getup favored his lean build. Campy was dressed exactly the same as Garrity, but with his lineman shoulders and chest, he looked massive and intimidating where Garrity looked sleek; it was an effect heightened by the differences between costumes. In addition to the bondage warrior clothes, Campy had a set of huge fangs jutting down from his mouth. He had two fake sets of arms strapped to the sides of his torso. And his entire body, including the four extra arms, was painted the color of a

cocktail olive, his red contact lenses serving as dual olive pits.

"Hail, Tars Tarkas, warrior of Mars," Gib said.

Marion pointed at each of them in turn, . "Campy is Tars Tarkas, you're John Carter, Ethan. I guess Ruth is Dejah Thoris, Princess of Mars. I'm Lieutenant Turck from *The Lost Continent*, but I'm not sure who Gib is supposed to be."

Campy said something completely unintelligible.

"Take out the fangs, Campy," Ruth said.

After Campy did, he said again, "Gib is John Carter, not of Mars. John Carter, the confederate captain, hiding out from Apaches in a cave in Arizona. Pre-Mars."

Gib cursed. "I didn't think it was that obvious."

Campy shrugged. "I know Burroughs very well. Both of them."

"Both Burroughs?" Gib said, before he finally got it. While the five of them had gone for the Burroughs of Tarzan and John Carter, most of the other people in the room had expressed their admiration for the Burroughs of Interzone.

"It's nice to see," Garrity said, "that so many people appreciate Burroughs. Either one. Anyway, let's go. Time to put on a show. Hey, Gib you think you can pretend to be a giant spider?"

"Uh, sure."

"Come on, then."

They all walked up on to the stage and Marion turned on the sound system. Ruth walked over to the light panel behind the bar and flipped on a spotlight.

"Hey, everyone! Welcome to our Burroughs party!" Garrity announced.

Cheers rang out.

"As you can see, the three of us were thinking of a different Burroughs than most of you. But, in a way, aren't both William and Edgar Rice more alike than not? Remember, both Interzone and Tarzan are from Africa. So in that spirit, we'd like to put on a little skit for you. We call it 'Scoring Junk on the Red Planet.'"

Campy produced a rubber tube that he proceeded to wrap around one of his bulging green (real) biceps. Norman Haddal appeared from backstage undressed as Tarzan (a bizarre choice given Haddal's bare skull and almost albino skin). Haddal walked across the stage and handed Campy an oversized syringe. Campy proceeded to mime shooting up smack while Haddal moved to the front of the stage and announced, "Because the Martian physiology is so drastically powerful, the amount of pure smack that would kill you or me, for them is like drinking a watered-down Zima. Our heroic protagonist here just shot up the last of his stash. The play begins."

Haddal bowed and moved to the back of the stage, sitting down in a chair next to Marion and Gib. Campy simulated a heroin high, announcing to the crowd, "The last time I felt this good was when I ripped out the throat of the Jeddak of Helium to escape from his nefarious pit o' doom."

"What's that you said?" Marion yelled out.

"Doom!"

"Whaaaat?"

This time the crowd joined in, "*Doom!*"

Suddenly, Campy started pacing back and forth. "No fair! No fair! It's wearing off! Now I gotta score! I gotta score!" He grabbed the mic and tapped it like a phone

pad. "Ring, ring," he said.

Garrity moved closer to his mic. "Hello?"

"Hey, John Carter! Dude! I gotta score some stuff. I'm coming down, and I'm gonna crash hard, I know it. I know it!" Campy's head twitched around, as if being stung. "The giant spider creatures are breaking down the door!"

Behind him, Haddal, Marion and Gib mimed the antics of giant hostile spider creatures.

"Tars Tarkas!" Garrity yelled. "It's just in your head, man! We killed all the spider creatures."

Campy looked around his feet. "Spiders lay eggs, dude. I'll bet there's eggs all over this place."

"Hey, man, why don't you let me call the clinic..."

"No way, dude! All I need is some of that black tar you got from the weapon makers of Ishkandar. Gimme some black tar for Tars Tarkas."

"That stuff is dangerous, man. Your arms could fall off."

"I don't care, dude! Just gimme a hit! One hit, that's all I'm asking for!"

"Oh, all right, man." Garrity walked off stage while Haddal and Marion chased Campy around the stage, Campy crying out helplessly, "Dude! Duuuuuuuuuude!", until Garrity came back on stage and walked over to Campy.

"Here you go, oh mighty Martian warrior." Garrity held out his hand. But before he dropped anything into Campy's waiting palm, Garrity asked, "Hey, man, wait a minute! I thought you were broke. How are you gonna pay for this?"

Campy tried to look crafty. "I figure the spider's gotta some stash I can rip off."

Garrity groaned. "Dude, first of all, you're Tars Tarkas, the most feared fighter on the whole Red Planet. So you don't rip anything off. It's not your style. Second, no cash, no carry." Garrity turned to walk away, at which point Campy tackled him, which the extra olive arms made look all the more impressive. Garrity and Campy pretended to fight for a little bit until finally one of the fake arms connected and Garrity went down.

Campy instantly sucked down the junk that Garrity had been carrying, at which point the big man screamed and his four fake arms fell off. Tubes hidden behind the belts started spraying gouts of scarlet fluid onto the stage. Campy did a death scene that made Jimmy Cagney in *White Heat* look like a restrained performance of *Waiting for Godot*, with limbs and screams flying everywhere. Haddal and Marion danced around his spasming body, making giant spider noises and miming big fangs.

After Campy's chest heaved its last breath, the crowd broke into raucous applause, at which point Campy and Garrity got up, and all four men walked over to the two mikes.

"This skit has been sponsored by Mothers Against Drunk Driving," Garrity said. "Remember kids:"

The other men yelled out, "Say No to drugs!"

The crowd laughed and clapped, and Haddal began to throw plastic bottles into the audience, yelling out "Free samples! Special Red Planet mix! Try some! Free samples!"

Gib said to Ruth as she shut off the stage lights and the DJ started the first record, "Well, that was educational."

"Stupidity in defense of the earth is no vice," Ruth said.

"The Path to Redemption"

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Near the end of the Burroughs party, Gib staggered around The Space -- drunk beyond the point of speech. He had reached that special level of drunkenness where he thought everyone was watching him, making notes about his behavior. So he pretended to himself that he was just wandering around, even though he was looking for Ruth. He had worked out a idiotically clever routine for when he finally found her. "Wow! Imagine seeing you here!" After that, the plan sort of fell apart, but he figured he could easily improvise from such a stellar intro.

After ten minutes or seventeen days of searching -- his sense of time had already packed it in for the night, throwing up its hands in disgust -- he found himself sitting on one of the upstairs couches, a fresh beer in one hand, a bottle of Jack Daniels in the other. As he stared at them, trying to decide which one to drink from, the two bottles faded in and out of focus. Finally, the word "Tennessee" came into clarity, and he used that as the deciding factor. Something from Tennessee could be trusted. The Volunteer state. The white type on black background got closer and larger, until he finally bonked himself in the forehead with the lip of the bottle, spilling whiskey down his face. He licked the streams that made it all the way to his mouth, tasting his sweat as well. With his forehead as a reference point, he dragged the mouth of the bottle across his brow and nose until he got his lips around and tilted his head back.

The first couple of gulps didn't even faze him. Then the full taste of it burned into his sinuses, and he pulled the bottle away, coughing, tears filling his eyes. When he got rid of the tears, rubbing most of them away with his arm, blinking away the rest, he was startled to realize that Campy was sitting on the couch next to him. The big man had reattached his extra four arms, but his green body paint had streaked with his sweat.

"Redemption. That's the word!" Campy confided in a carrying voice.

Hearing Campy talk was surprising enough, but as Gib tried to pay attention, he realized that Campy was talking to *him*, and had been for a while. Gib repeated the name "Gibson Edwards" a few times to himself, trying to make sure he was in character, but then he broke out into giggles thinking about Campy talking to him and not even realizing that Gib wasn't his real name, even though it also was. Replaying that last sentence in head a few times, Gib concluded that Campy must be very drunk. Drunker than he thought. Very, *very* drunk.

Maybe Gib had had a few too many drinks himself, but at least he wasn't breaking character. Campy was the strong, silent type -- John Wayne or John Wayne Gacy, depending on the moment. So hearing Campy break into a talking jag was like hearing the Pope fart during a baptism.

"What did you say?" Gib slurred. He felt a collection of drool slide out of his mouth, but when he tried to wipe it away, his lips were perfectly dry.

"I was talking about America, and I couldn't think of a word, and you said the word was redemption. That's the word!"

"Oh. Great. Glad to be helpful." Gib closed one eye so he could focus more

clearly on Campy. The big man looked jittery. As Gib watched, Campy's right leg started to twitch to an unheard beat, until Campy clamped down on it with his right hand, the two fake right arms shaking in a supportive way.

"That's why this country is going to shit. It's not capitalism or communism or anything so simple."

"Simple?"

"It's God."

"Uh..." Gib felt the whiskey roiling around inside him. So he took a long drink from the cold beer, hoping that would settle his stomach. As he felt the last taste of barley trickle down his throat, he backed up a couple of thoughts. *Wait a second. Drink some beer to calm down an upset stomach?*

Uh-oh.

This was probably going to end badly.

Campy grabbed Gib's shoulder to get his attention. "I mean, I don't believe in god, or at least not in some fucking guy with a beard and an unreasonable set of rules farting around up in the clouds and debating whether or not the duck-billed platypus would do a better job with the planet than humans have. You see my point."

"Sure. Campy, can you tell me --"

"I'm telling you right now! It's not the fucking environment. Fuck that! That's just the front!" It's slavery and Jim Crow! That's our sin! The environment is just our sin coming to light!"

Now, Campy was unable to contain himself, and he started punctuating every other word with a wave of his various hands or an emphatic chop.

"Are you drunk or something?" Gib asked, in spite of himself. Impeding sickness put aside for the moment, Gib realized he had never seen a drunk like this before. Campy obviously thought he had solved the great problem of the age, but whenever Gib had seen that before at a party, it was quickly followed by vomiting and then a blessed passing-out. And Gib couldn't understand Campy's weird shaking. Both legs had started to jump around now, as if invisible doctors were testing his reflexes. Campy stared at his dancing legs for a second, then jumped to his feet. He looked down at Gib, then grabbed his free hand (the bottle of beer seemed to have vanished) and roughly pulled him to his feet.

Even standing, though, Campy's legs continued to tap around on their own, so finally, rather than fight his own legs, he started walking around. His bellows carried over the music (the Mighty Mighty Bosstones at that particular moment) and some of the remaining dregs of the party that were lingering in the balcony area began to drift over.

"What is poisoning the root of us? What is this goddamn curse that rots every one of our blessings?"

Campy grabbed Gib by the shoulders and started shaking him.

"Do you understand? Am I getting through?"

This sudden transformation of a man who wouldn't say shit if he had a mouthful into a raving street preacher was a new one. Maybe it was one of Haddal's special creations that had Campy burning with the flame of missionary zeal.

"The *problem* is, we fucking Americans can't ever admit we're wrong! Motes in other eyes are as large as I-beams in ours! Thomas Jefferson could write the Declaration of Independence, but he couldn't free his slaves! Slavery! That's the lingering curse!"

Campy put one of his arms around Gib's shoulders and started to pace back and forth with him. The crowd, by this time stretching out into the hallway, leaned back to form a path for the two men. Dozens of goateed hipsters drinking smart drinks mixed with vodka cheered like football fans, while many of the rest started agreeing with every high point of Campy's rant, in a deliberately ironic imitation of a black church congregation.

"We paid the price of our sins once, in blood, at Chickamauga and Antietam. At Gettysburg and Bull Run. And at the end of it, Abraham Lincoln was ready to lead us to redemption. 'With malice toward none.' We could have finally paid off the blood debt. It would have been an apology that wasn't just lip service! But what did we do?"

Campy's shout got a dozen responses from the crowd.

"What?" "What did we do?" "Say it, man!"

"*We did it all over again!* We stepped right over the mounds of hundreds of thousands of corpses littered all over the countryside and put Americans right back into chains. Invisible chains! Chains of the soul!"

The crowd cheered, and a group of guys near the back tried to start a Wave.

"I think we *cursed* ourselves, just like some city in a Greek myth. We were given a chance to repent the sins of our fathers, but we carried the stain forward instead! And now the earth is bleeding for our sins!"

So much spittle was flying out of Campy's mouth that the front of the crowd backed up to get away. The guy who had assumed it was meth causing the preaching both agreed that Campy was about to lose it. "The crash is coming. He'll either be unconscious or punching walls in the next two minutes," the first guy said.

"Maybe both," corrected the other one.

Campy spun around and pinpointed the two speakers.

"Don't you hear what I'm saying?"

The two guys, spindly specimens, backed away from the rage of the big six-armed green man.

"I am saying that God, or whatever karmic bullshit passes for a higher spirit power is *not satisfied* with our pathetic excuses and justifications! He will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream! Until we repent, all of us, we are doomed to this slow rot of ideals, and the degradation of the natural world.

"Do you think it's a just a *coincidence* that the biggest, most dangerous nuclear power plant in the world is called *Devil's Arroyo*? *Of course not!*

"Either we save the earth from our sins, or we will *burn!* Burn in fire!"

That was when Gib's stomach finally said to hell with it. It was time to make amends for all he'd been drinking. The sound of Campy's mad ranting faded away in the background as Gib moved quickly away. Too drunk to remember where the bathrooms were, he started running in what he thought was the right direction. He wouldn't have made it, except that he finally found Ruth. She was coming up the stairs as he was running down them.

"Gib! I've been looking for you," she said happily, before she noticed his sheet-white face. "Is something wrong?"

"Wow! Imagine seeing you here!" Gib yelled. Then he clutched his stomach.

"Where's the nearest bathroom? I'm lost."

"Bottom of the stairs!" she yelled, shoving him along. "Turn right and ignore the line!"

When staggered into the bathroom, one guy tried to argue. "Hey, buddy, there's a line here!"

Gib turned around, and said, with desperate finality, "Okay by me. Who should I puke on?" The arguer blanched, then spun Gib around and shoved him toward the sinks. And then came the first wave of vomit. Gib was still a few steps away from porcelain, so he tried to arch his head and hope his aim was better than his vision. With one step to go, Gib let fly. The first stream of bile hit one of the mirrors and splattered all around. After that Gib was lucky enough to trip and fall with his head in the middle of one of the sinks.

The rest of the evening went about as you might expect.

"Moving Party"

San Francisco isn't what it used to be, and never was.

Herb Caen

A couple of days later, the Alcatraz video hit the airwaves. It was an instant hit, being played all over the local TV stations for three solid days. "Green Rage Strikes Again!" was the headline on the Chronicle. After that kind of success, there was nothing to do but to throw another party. Gib volunteered.

The first party for any apartment is a very important thing, like the dress a debutante wears to the ball. It shows off the quality of the apartment, certainly, but also says volumes about the sense and taste of the apartment dweller. People check out the decorations, the music collection, the furniture, the whole megillah. Gib had a vague sense this was what people talked about when they used the term *feng shui*: record collections and couches.

After a three second internal debate ("Should I go for classy? Shit, I barely have furniture; fuck classy."), Gib opted for kegs of beer and salty treats. Gib had a nice Visa in his fake name, so he decided to see if he could get the Federal Bureau of Investigation to pay for kegs of Rolling Rock. Gib went on shopping spree that would have felled nine out of ten recovering alcoholics. The purchases included the afore-mentioned kegs of Rolling Rock (4), bottles of various clear and not-so-clear booze, liter and two-liter bottles of tonic, juice, and pop for mixers, bags of ice, and pounds of chips. Then he bought four bags of plastic cups, the big kind.

After he got everything into the car, he went back and bought more cups. If there was one rule Gib had learned in years of throwing and attending parties, you could never have too many big plastic cups. They were the duct tape of keg parties, serving as beverage holders, ashtrays, and many, many other purposes. Once people got more drunk, the poor cups got abandoned quicker than a litter of retarded kittens. Gib knew the next-morning cleanup would primarily consist of dumping hundreds of cups half-full of beer and cigarette butts.

When he finally got all the party fixin's up to his barren apartment, he arranged the first keg in a garbage can full of ice, opened up a bag of cups, and poured himself the first beer of his first party in his first apartment in San Francisco. A big moment.

Ahhhh. Frosty.

If he had one worry, it was that the Ragers and the people he had called at Black Helicopter hadn't told anyone about the party, that he would end up in the humiliating situation of having all this party preparation with no actual party to go along with it. So when his buzzer rang promptly at ten minutes after nine, he hoped it wouldn't be just one person, half-stoned already, who had heard about the party from a friend of a friend of a friend. When Ruth led fifteen people through the front door, Gib's relief and elation tasted as good as the beer. Then Sidney Pinkwater arrived with an entourage. OddGreg and Taylor Jackson both brought crowds, as did Garrity and Marion. Campy showed up by himself, unless the bottle of Jack Daniels counted.

One distressing thing: Taylor Jackson showed up with ten people who claimed to be a ukulele band named Humuhumunukunua'pua'a, and they whipped out the

instruments to prove it. Luckily, the loft was big enough to give the uke band a corner all their own, though (frighteningly), their arrangement of Led Zeppelin's "Over the Hills and Far Away" turned out to be a huge crowd pleaser.

Hours later, there were probably over a hundred and fifty people packed into the loft. Every window in the place was wide open, and people were strewn on the fire escape. Smoke hung in the air like a woolen blanket, faintly reflecting the glowing of the minimal light. The stereo was cranked up as loud as it could go and was still barely audible above the sound of conversation. Gib had long ago lost control over what was being played, but he didn't much care.

The biggest surprise was the large group of people actually dancing, something not incredibly common at your average keg party. At one point, Gib was shouting small talk to Norman Haddal, who had shown up with a large contingent of his own, and Haddal answered, "There's a lot of queers here. Queers always dance."

Since Gib had assumed Haddal was gay up until that point, he wasn't sure how to react to the epithet. Gib wasn't sure he shouldn't show a negative reaction, just to prove his sensitivity to such issues.

I'm using the word 'issues', Gib thought. I must be fucking hammered.

In the end, all he said to Haddal was "Oh. That makes sense."

Soon afterward, Ruth pulled him into the mass of dancers, and he shambled along in his best nondescript style. Garrity was also part of the group, and he actually seemed to know what he was doing. Much like his guitar playing, Garrity had ability as long as he concentrated. But whenever he made eye contact with someone, he would automatically smile, and try to make some gesture of acknowledgment, at which point he lost all awareness of the beat and started flailing around like a striped bass on the hook.

At one point, Haddal and Frank Marion congratulated Gib on his luck to live in such a nice apartment, but they followed it up by getting technical about San Francisco apartment minutiae. Which meant Gib ignored them in favor of tapping the third keg. He had done his fair share of emptying the first two, so he was officially and with no argument drunk off his ass.

"See, originally these kind of lofts were for artists," Haddal shouted. "They were supposed to be affordable housing for painters and writers. Then the fucking stock brokers and bankers got involved."

"It's always the goddamn bankers!" Marion added.

That was when Ruth grabbed his shoulder and yelled into his ear: "Gib, there's some guy at the front door, he says he's your uncle."

What would Uncle Joseph be doing here? Gib asked himself.

When he got to the door, he saw the "uncle" in question was Masturbatin' Bob Maynard. Maynard dragged Gib out into the hall and tried to shut the door, but a group of people spilled out after Gib, and enjoyed the coolness of the hallway.

Maynard tried to keep his conversation quiet. "You stupid son of a bitch, the cops were about to break this thing up, before they saw this address is on the FBI contact list. What were you thinking? What the hell kind of investigation is this?"

Maynard screamed for a while, but all Gib was able to do was stare at the broken veins in the agent's bulbous nose. When Bob screamed, the veins turned alternately bright red and blue, like the lights on a cop car.

When Bob paused to take a breath, Gib suddenly realized he need more beer, so he abruptly turned away from Bob and walked back into the apartment where he topped off his cup. Seeing that Bob had followed him, Gib filled another cup and handed it to his Supervisory Agent. Haddal spotted the both of them and the drug dealer walked over, joined by the two beautiful women who had been conversing with him.

“Gib, is this the uncle Ruth was talking about?”

Gib looked around in confusion, then understood Haddal meant Maynard. “Yeah, sure, this is Uncle Bob. Uncle Bob, say hello to Norman Haddal.”

Maynard, who was dripping lust as he looked at Haddal’s two well-rounded companions, distractedly shook the drug dealer’s hand. The two women, who must have been taking some special concoction of Haddal’s, reacted positively to Maynard’s stare, and complimented him on his “cool vintage clothes”.

“Gib, can I have a word with you?” Haddal asked as Maynard tried to carry on a conversation with the two women, one of them saying, “That’s really great polyester!”

“What do you need, Norman?” Gib asked, as he bent down and moved a guy who had passed out in the open refrigerator.

“I think you’ve got a great place here. Very industrial. I wonder if I could shoot some photos here?”

Gib was caught off guard, so he just nodded his head.

The party started to break up around four, approximately six seconds after the final keg gasped out its last stream of beer. The exodus was interrupted by angry shouting.

Of the fifteen or twenty people left, two of them were unfortunately Norman Haddal and Bob Maynard. When Gib got to the door, Campy was holding Haddal by the biceps and Garrity had his arms wrapped around Maynard. Maynard was shouting incoherent epithets at Haddal, and Haddal’s lips were peeled back from his teeth in a snarl. The two women who had been admiring Maynard’s polyester were standing behind Haddal, eyes wide.

Angrily, Gib grabbed Maynard and dragged him to the elevator.

“You crazy bastard,” Gib said. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“That blonde wanted to go home with me. And then that bald fuck started dragging her away.” Maynard tried to push his way past Gib, so Gib grabbed the older man by the shoulders and shoved him back against the wall hard enough to rattle his teeth.

“Bob, look” Gib said in a low voice, “You’re a Supervisory Agent with the FBI. How do you think it’s going to look if you get into a brawl with a known drug dealer?”

Maynard raged, but Gib kept talking to him, smelling the beer on the man’s breath, and finally bundled him into the elevator and sent him down. He walked back to the other group of people. Haddal looked completely calm by this point, as he lit a cigarette and rubbed his hands across his hairless scalp.

“Gibson, I apologize for causing a scene, but your Uncle was frightening Tina.”

“It’s all right.”

A few minutes later, Campy was the last one out the door, just behind Garrity and Ruth.

“Nice party,” the big man said.

“It really was,” Ruth added over his shoulder.

Ethan Garrity pushed past Campy so he could shake Gib’s hand. “Great party. I

wanted to tell you how happy I am you're working at The Space. You've been a real addition." Garrity would have rambled on, but both Campy and Ruth grabbed him and led him out of the building.

Gib went over to the window and watched Campy pull the Green Rage van around so Ruth and Garrity could climb in.

Look up, look up, look up, look up, look up, look up, look up, Gib urged Ruth. When she got into the back seat of the cab, Ruth snuck a quick peek up at his window, and flashed a wave at him. After that, he happily passed out on the couch.

"Aftermath Arrangements"

Life could be worse. You could be on the street drinking Woolite.

Bruce Campbell

The next morning, Gib woke up early, against his will. When the sound of the door buzzer first drilled into his hangover, he desperately tried to wish it away. Half-consciously, he worked it into his dreamscape. The noise transmogrified into a fire alarm coming from a plane flying above a raging forest fire. When the alarm stopped, Gib found himself running along the forest floor, surrounded by a stampede of rabbits, deer and other animals fleeing the fire.

Suddenly, he came across a lumberjack chopping uselessly at a tree. When Gib looked closer, he realized the lumberjack was made of metal, was some kind of robot. Gib, heedless of the fire racing to catch him, walked closer to the woodsman. The panel over the chest cavity swung open on its hinges to reveal not, as Gib expected, an empty space, but a bright red Valentine's Day candy heart with the words "Help Me" written on it in blue letters.

The woodsman turned to Gib and begged, "We need a firebreak, or we shall be overcome!"

"There's no time," Gib explained in his most reasonable voice.

"There's time if you *help*," the woodsman screamed.

Instead of answering, Gib turned and ran after the last of the fleeing animals of the forest. Even so, he could hear the woodsman pick up his ax and return to his task.

CHOK! CHOK! CHOK!

The sound of the ax blows chased Gib along until he entered a clearing and found a faucet sticking out of the ground with a green gardening hose coiled around it. Gib grabbed the end of the hose and turned the spigot, but no water came out of the hose. He could feel the pressure inside the green rubber, but in spite of all his cursing, not a single drop sprayed out.

Gib looked up just as the fire crested the ridge in front of him.

He woke up on his broken couch. His bladder was screaming for his attention and someone was knocking on his front door. The remains of the party were still strewn about, and the place looked like the basement of a Berlin building, circa 1945. Gib's clothes stank of cigarettes and beer.

Great party.

The knocking at his door continued.

"Cut out that fucking knocking!" he yelled.

"Then answer your door!" came the reply.

Pissed, Gib walked to the door and swung it open, ready to slowly murder whoever was waking him up at such an obscene hour. It was Norman Haddal and two of the most beautiful women Gib had ever seen in person. Norman was dressed as usual: black pants and a skintight white t-shirt. His sunglasses were mirrored, and Gib could see in them how awful and hungover he looked. The two women were dressed in loose-fitting jeans and tight t-shirts.

"Aren't you going to invite us in, Gibson?" Haddal asked with a smile.

Gib moved out of the way and invited them inside.

"We discussed a photo shoot last night at the party. All this empty space was a perfect place to try out some new ideas I had."

"Now?"

"It will only take a few hours."

"Well, the place is a mess."

"Great party. Don't worry about the mess." Haddal continued, "You have the look of a man in dire need of a shit, shower, and shave, Gibson. Why don't you hit the head for as long as you need. I'll just clean up a bit and get set up. What do you say?"

Gib wanted to say no, but he didn't want to alienate Haddal. The Alcatraz trip had made it clear Haddal knew more about Green Rage than Gib had thought. Anyway, Gib was about ready to start hopping up and down he had to piss so bad. He didn't have time for an argument.

"Yeah, all right, fine."

Haddal grinned happily. "Thanks. I appreciate this."

Gib walked off to the bathroom, finally moaning in relief when he stripped off his jeans and let loose with a stream of piss that felt like it could drive rivets into girders.

45 minutes, a shit, and a long hot shower later, Gib finally felt like he was approaching the borders of humanity. A towel wrapped around his waist, he walked into the bedroom and began to kick around the various piles for a clean set of clothes. The best he could do was a pair of jeans that were only somewhat foul, and a black t-shirt that was only marginally less disgusting than the pants. Sighing, he collected all his clothes into one large laundry pile.

Gib found his laundry bag and was about to stuff all the clothes in when he realized there were people in his bed, hiding under his blankets.

"Who's there?" Gib demanded.

In response, a pair of feet emerged from underneath his blanket. Then some calves and thighs. They spun around on the bed and lowered to the floor before the naked woman who was attached to them sat up in the bed. She stood up, stretched so hard Gib could hear her back crackle, then brushed past him to unconcernedly search through his pile of clothes until she found her own and got dressed.

Gib vaguely recognized her from the party the night before. When she stood up and got dressed, he actually remembered her ankles better than her face. Her face was thin and drawn, but interesting. Her ankles, however, were thick and somewhat fleshy. Gib wasn't a fan of thick ankles.

"Hi," Gib said. "Hope you had a good time last night. You need anything?"

The woman smiled quickly and shook her head.

"Can you get home all right? You don't need a cab?"

"No, my car should still be out front," she said in a husky voice. "Thanks, though. *Great party.*" Then she walked out.

Gib walked over and nudged the now unmoving pile with his bare foot.

"Hey, buddy, time to go, okay?"

Supervisory Agent Bob Maynard, toupee still perched on top of his head, peeked out from underneath the clothes and blearily stared at Gib.

"Don't just stand there gawking, you idiot," Maynard complained. "Give me some

clothes or a towel or something."

Stunned, Gib pawed through the pile of clothes until he found polyester. He carefully avoided anything that looked like it might even consider being Maynard's underwear. He tossed the collection of flammable clothes to Maynard.

As the older man dressed, Gib saw the scars that criss-crossed the agent's back. They were clearly ancient, but still inflamed looking. Gib turned his head and put on a pair of tennis shoes so he wouldn't have to watch any more of Maynard getting dressed. When he heard the older man clear his throat, he assumed it was safe to turn around and ask questions.

"Bob, how the hell did you get back in here?"

Maynard looked shamefaced. "Look, I shouldn't drink like I did last night, but yesterday is the anniversary of a bad day for me. It happened back during Nam."

"I didn't know you were in Viet Nam."

"I wasn't in Nam. I was right here investigating all the hippies running around the place. In September of '71, I got a phone call from this informant, right? He tells me there's this bomb planted in a dorm at the U of San Francisco. I got my ass over there. Toot sweet, like the Frenchies say. Anyway, I clear the dorm, and while I'm waiting for the bomb squad, I go to the door of the dorm room the bomb's supposed to be in, and I think, what if it's bullshit? A snipe hunt. That'd be a black eye, wouldn't it? So I open the door, toss the room. There's nothing there. I get back out in the hall, and when I'm closing the door, there's this sudden heat behind me.

"I wake up in the burn ward. You saw my back, right?"

Gib nodded.

"Thought so. Anyway, we never caught the fuck who left the bomb. And I started drinking pretty heavy after I got out of the hospital. I mostly quit the sauce a bunch of years back. But yesterday was the anniversary of me getting blown up." To his credit, Maynard wasn't looking for sympathy, which contradictorily made Gib somewhat sympathetic toward the greasy old man with the foul mouth.

"Sometimes it just gets to me. After you booted me out of the place, I was fuming down on the sidewalk. I run into this woman you just saw, because she's just come out of your place, too. So we hit it off, she says she likes my clothes, and I ask her if she wants to go somewhere, and she says yes. My apartment is all the way out in Oakland, and that little honey was ready to go. So the only place I can think of is here. You were sacked out on the couch when we snuck past. Hell, you should thank me for locking your doors for you."

That was the point when the Sympathy for the Maynard went away.

"Anyway, kid, I don't see we should make a big deal out of this, right? Seems to me we can benefit by a mutual bout of forgetfulness."

Music to Gib's ears. "Forget what?"

"Forget what? Forget all *this* --" Maynard started to yell before he got it. "Oh. Right."

"Exactly. But you'd better forget *after* you make sure sign off on expenses for the beer and booze."

Maynard thought, then nodded. "Fine." Maynard was almost to the bedroom door when Gib grabbed his arm.

“The guy you almost got into a fight with last night is out there. I don't want him seeing you.”

Maynard paled. “What the hell do we do?”

“The only way out here besides the front door is through the living room window to the fire escape. It's either that or you wait here with my dirty laundry until the guy leaves.”

Maynard grimaced. “You go distract him. I'll sneak out.”

Before leaving the room, Gib filled up his laundry bag and found his detergent.

Haddal had been as good as his word. The loft was spotless, with full bags of garbage piled near the door. He had set up blazing lights, and was shooting pictures of the blonde and the brunette who had walked in with him. They were sitting on a wooden bench, taking turns painting each other with bright primary colors, and they were both completely naked. Haddal had even spread out a huge plastic tarp, so the paint didn't spatter the floor.

Ah, hell, Gib thought to himself. I should have guessed. What kind of pictures would you expect a drug dealer to take?

The thin-faced woman who had slept with Maynard was standing next to Haddal and whispering into his ear. The bald man shrugged his shoulders and smiled. The thin-faced woman began to strip as well.

Gib slowly walked over to Haddal and said “This isn't what I expected.” Grabbing the man's attention turned his head away from the bedroom. Over Haddal's shoulder, through one of the windows, he saw Bob Maynard sneak out of his bedroom, gape unbelievably at the display of flesh, then go out the window to the fire escape.

Haddal asked, “Does it bother you?”

Gib thought about it. “Nah. I'm gonna go do some laundry.”

"Mock Mau-Mauing"

Painting and fucking a lot are not compatible; it weakens the brain.

Vincent Van Gogh

When Gib got back to his loft, his warm, clean clothes soothing his back, Haddal had turned off the lights, but hadn't put away the cameras. He was on the phone, and the three women were trying to stifle laughter.

Haddal waved good-naturedly at Gib and the women made gestures that he should keep quiet. So he walked to the bedroom, dropped off the clean clothes, put some of them on, then walked back out.

"Hi, yes, I'm still on hold," he heard Haddal say. Gib padded over to the refrigerator and was surprised to see that there was still some beer left. Gib pulled a beer out, then scoured through the kitchen cabinets for some more aspirin. When he found the aspirin, he sat down next to the three women. He chased the aspirin with the beer and listened to Haddal talk.

"Yes, I'm still on hold. Are you the person in charge of marketing or public relations? Maybe I can speak to you about this situation, then."

Gib tapped the blonde woman on the shoulder and motioned for her to lean down.

"Who's he talking to?" Gib whispered in her ear.

"The Council for a Drug Free America, I think," she whispered back. "He already called the local DEA office." Then she signaled he should just sit back and listen.

Haddal said, "First of all, let me just start by telling you that I'm a drug dealer."

Noises exploded from the receiver.

"Yes, that's right, a drug dealer. And I find all these stereotypes about my profession in your TV and radio spots extremely offensive."

Haddal let the other person speak for a moment, then broke in.

"But that's simply not the case. I'm providing a public service for discerning adults, and I don't see why that's any of your business."

Silence.

"Oh, well, certainly children are something else altogether. But I only serve adults."

Silence, then: "Excuse me, I don't see the need for you to be rude."

Then: "I suppose we shall have to agree to disagree. However, would you be interested in seeing some of the pamphlets I've prepared on this issue? Hello?"

Haddal, looking vaguely satisfied, hung up the phone.

"Haddal, she," Gib pointed at the blonde, "tells me you already called the DEA?"

"That's right. I just like to engage some of the people in charge of the so-called 'war on drugs' in a vigorous debate."

"Haddal, you're a drug dealer. What you do is illegal. And that leaves out the fact you're apparently a pornographer, too. What in hell makes you think anyone is interested in your opinion?"

Haddal looked both offended and amused. "You certainly say exactly what you think, don't you?"

Gib realized honesty might not have been the best policy here, but he was too tired

to care. "Right now, anyway," he said.

"What you don't realize is that those two activities are by far the most important professions in America right now. Politicians, lawyers, doctors, scientists, artists, writers - none of them hold any power to rebel anymore. The only true rebels left in our society are drug dealers and pornographers."

"Um."

"The nature of a rebel in any society is to point out what essential elements that society is missing, destroying or abusing. A rebel holds up a mirror to society and says, 'There, there! Don't you see?'"

Gib had thought just one or two aspirins would be enough, but now he was reconsidering. "Okay, fine. What does any of that have to do with drugs and porno?"

Haddal laughed. "Well, nothing is being destroyed or denied faster in modern America than sex and imagination. Drugs can jump start one, and pornography the other."

Gib considered his response very carefully, and finally said, "Well, it's very nice that you have a philosophy about the whole thing." Then he ate some more aspirin.

Haddal shrugged and called for the women to come back so he could take more pictures in the light of early afternoon. Haddal asked Gib to turn on some music, and they all finally agreed on Beck's *Odelay*.

Gib found some magazines and sat down on the currently unused couch. After a while, he dropped off into a sort of half doze. When he woke up, he realized someone was sitting next to him. He drowsily assumed it was part of a dream, but when he looked over and saw bare legs, it brought him back to full wakefulness. He looked up and breathed a sigh of relief that the blonde standing in front of him was wearing a bathrobe. Even though the robe was tiny. And made out of some sheer, shimmery material. But at least it covered the important parts. Mostly.

"Do you mind if I ask a question?" Gib finally asked.

The blonde's smile was guarded. "You want to know how I got into this line of work?"

"No, not really. I was just wondering where Norman sells the pictures."

"Oh." The blonde thought about it. "Europe, mainly. Europe tends to pay better for this stuff."

Then they just sat for awhile, quietly.

After a while, Gib fell asleep for real, and only woke up when Haddal and the now-dressed models wondered if he wanted to join them for dinner. They all ordered takeout from a local Chinese restaurant. Haddal paid for everything, telling Gib that he should consider it a payment for use of the space. Over hot and sour soup and steamed dumplings, Gib asked Haddal why he shaved his head.

Haddal looked surprised by the question. "Why? Does it make you nervous?"

"No, I've just seen a lot of shaved heads around recently at The Space. I figured it was just a hip way to avoid comb overs."

Haddal laughed. "I'm sure that's true. But my hairline, when I have one, is fine. My shaved head is more by way of a professional requirement. Your hair can be tested for drugs. It's one of the most common ways, besides urine. And while both generally require a warrant, it's very easy to get hair, while piss is a bit more difficult. And ignoring the authorities, I have a lot of competitors. Some of my designs stay around in dead tissue

like hair, and it's possible to analyze their recipes."

"You're afraid a competitor is going to steal your design? Like industrial espionage?"

"Certainly," Haddal said. "Call it superstition, but I haven't had a design stolen since I started shaving my head."

The meal moved on to General Tso's Chicken, moo shu pork and other delicacies while the conversation moved on to sex industry anecdotes. Carol, the brunette, and the thin-faced woman (whose name turned out to be Dianne) had stories involving their work as dominatrixes. As far as Gib could tell, the punchlines to dominatrix stories involved shoes, pee, or in a most cases, making a guy drink pee out of a shoe.

After all the Chinese food was gone, Haddal set up for a few more shots, but called it off fairly quickly, as he wasn't satisfied with any of the ideas he wanted to try. So Carol, Betty and Dianne took off. Dianne gave Haddal her card, and told him to send her a check if he sold any of the photos involving her.

"Normally, I'd ask for cash up front, but Carol says you're good for it."

As Gib was helping Haddal pack up his equipment, he asked if it wasn't unusual for someone in the sex industry to trust him about a payment.

"Probably," Haddal answered. "But I'm not really in the sex industry. The drugs are my day job. I'm just sort of an amateur photographer. Besides, if the photos don't sell, I'll still send all the women a check, and they know it."

"Really?"

"Certainly. I make an extremely good living, and I'm not doing these photos to make money. But the models are, so why not send them a check? I can afford it."

Gib thought about that while they finished packing up. When they were done, Haddal helped Gib clean up the residue from the takeout meal, and told him to keep all the leftovers. Then, with Gib's permission, he quietly smoked a cigarette while sitting next to a window while Gib had a beer.

"Gib, I have to say, you've been a very good sport about this."

"Oh, sure. Some of it was even interesting. And I learned a few things."

"So did I."

"Oh? Like what?"

Haddal hesitated. "Let me see. I suppose it won't harm anything to tell you that the photos were something of a Judas Goat today."

"Oh?"

"I wanted to check you out," Haddal said.

"Norman, I hope you know I like girls," Gib said.

Haddal broke into laughter. "Ha! That's why I'm checking you out. Because of one girl in particular."

"Ruth."

"Don't be offended. Because you give me the impression of someone who is not particularly good to women."

"What?" Gib asked, incredulously. "You're a *pornographer*!"

"Yes, I am. And I treat everyone I photograph with a great deal of respect and professionalism. Surely you don't think women like Carol, Dianne, and Betty would work with someone who cheated them or treated them like garbage. Did they appear to you to

be weak-willed?"

"No."

"No, of course not. And I must say that even after today, that while I feel much more positive about you, I still have some causes of worry."

"Like what?" Gib asked. Haddal was getting to be a real pain in the ass. "It wasn't like I was leering over your shoulder or anything."

"No, and that's to your credit. Though Carol thought it was odd that you didn't."

"Fine, whatever. If my manners check out, then what's got you nervous?"

"While Ruth is a very smart person, she is not very good with liars. She recognizes obvious deceptions, but I'm not sure she understands how truly deceptive people can be."

"Norman, why is this any of your business?"

"Because Ruth is my friend. I just want to make it clear that if you *do* continue to court Ruth, and you end up treating her badly, things will not go well for you. Do you understand me?"

"Is that a threat?"

"Make of it what you like. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Then I don't see any reason to speak of it after this."

That, Gib thought, is a guy I need to get rid of.

"Gathering Moss"

Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something

Pancho Villa's last words

The next Wednesday, Gib was thinking about the three Furies. Maynard, Reuben, and Haddal.

What to do, what to do. Fury Reuben was less and less satisfied with the reports, since there was no indication of when the FBI could move in with handcuffs and warrants. Fury Maynard would certainly come to regret any bargain making, Gib knew that for a fact. Fury Haddal was a wrench waiting for its chance to mess up the gears running Gib and Ruth's burgeoning relationship.

He went into Black Helicopter to drop off some Speiderman columns and a Dear Stanley when Pinkwater called him into his office. Sidney asked Gib what he thought about magazines.

"*Sports Illustrated* and *Playboy*. For the articles."

"Gibson, don't be difficult. I was curious if you had written for magazines before. Ruth had given me the impression you had."

"Sure!" Gib said instantly, then backtracked so quickly it sounded as if his words were overlapping themselves. "Well, no, not really."

"Perhaps this would be your chance. I have this ancient friend. I first met him during a Brontosaurus barbecue, if you follow. And this cretaceous companion of mine is currently:" Pinkwater ticked off each point on a thick finger. "A), an editor at *Rolling Stone*; and B), in town."

"*Rolling Stone*?"

"Yes, indeed. And he thinks J. Speiderman is a fresh, new, hip, hep, now, rad, groovy, etcetera young voice. Potentially," and Pinkwater took a long dramatic pause before finishing, "a voice for a new generation. Fully the equal of Mark Twain, Hunter Thompson, or even Elizabeth Wurtzel."

"Speiderman? *Speiderman*?"

"Enough japery."

"Japery? *Who's japing*?"

"Here's his number. If you want to pitch him a story, give him a call. He's staying at the Hotel Triton." Pinkwater waved Gib out of his office. "Remember: Voice of a Generation."

Gib took the piece of paper with the editor's number on it and folded and unfolded it nervously. Writing a story for *Rolling Stone* had a perverse attraction for him. But it was such a public thing. It couldn't be something that would make Jan Reuben happy, let alone Masturbatin' Bob.

But hell, *Rolling Stone*! That would be pretty neat.

And in any case, who said Reuben or Maynard would ever know? The editor wanted J. Speiderman, so why not let Speiderman take all the credit?

Gib asked OddGreg if he could use his phone.

An hour later, he was sitting down for food at an Italian restaurant in North Beach with Gerald Rutsey. From the faint smell of pot to the grey ponytail tied back with a

bandanna, a man who clearly still wished he were back in the ancient day, when he and Sidney Pinkwater had first met, fighting off the menace of the deadly saber-toothed tiger police and scoring cheap acid from the thundering woolly mammoth. Still, he was nice enough to Gib and spoke very highly of the Speiderman work. Figuring that liking Speiderman indicated Rutsey was a bit of an idiot, Gib relaxed completely.

"I'm doing an issue as a Guest Editor. So I want some fresh new voices. You have to write about the whole new media scene here in San Francisco. It's the new rock and roll."

The new rock and roll? "I never thought of it that way before."

"We'd commission maybe, I dunno, 1500 words? Would a grand be OK?"

"Wait, what do you want me to write?"

"Just a longer version of the Speiderman columns, taking the piss out of the whole scene."

"But I don't know shit about new media! I've only done this work for a month!"

Rutsey looked confused. "So?"

"Why don't you get someone who actually knows the scene to write about it?"

"Why would I do that? J. Speiderman is the name I want."

Gib tried to change the subject. "There was a story idea I had."

Rutsey leaned back, clearly willing to wait Gib out until he stopped with the crazy talk. "Fine, man, fine. Go ahead."

Gib explained The Space, and Green Rage and their media hacks. Rutsey liked the idea well enough. "Yeah, that'd be cool. Filler is fine. Fuck it, man. Let's do it. Same length, 1500 words."

"Great."

"Here's the thing: I need them both in two days. For next week's issue."

It took Gib an hour to crank out the Speiderman bullshit that Rutsey wanted to see, which was essentially a whine about how rough new media people had it. Every time Gib thought he was making sense, he backed up, erased the rationality and added more fuel to the bitching engine. Long hours! Repetitive stress injury! Not enough money! No respect! He threw in a couple of quotes from OddGreg, because he thought it would be cool to appear in a magazine.

He sent the copy in, got an approving email back from Rutsey, then set to work on the article about The Space. But he found himself in an awkward position. The Speiderman junk was easy to crank out. And e wrote like Speiderman, he could finish an article about Green Rage in record tie. For starters, getting embarrassing quotes out of Ethan Garrity would be easier than matching a black shirt with black pants.

But Gib didn't want to make fun of either Frank Marion or Ruth. Especially Ruth.

So he decided to cut back on the Speiderman attitude and write something nice. If he was capable, that was. Writing something honest would be all right, too, but he was afraid that if he did that, Garrity would *still* end up sounding like an idiot.

He went to The Space and explained what was going on to Ruth, who turned out to have mixed feelings.

"I don't want to be in any magazine, Hemingway" Ruth stated emphatically.

"But you've been making fun of me about this forever. I'm finally getting it done."

“Not interested. Ask me again and I’ll tell you the same.”

“But you don’t expect me to quote *Ethan*, do you? I’d sooner steal lines out of the pamphlets you give away at the shows.”

Ruth wiped sweat off her face. One of the beer taps had gotten shackwacky, so Ruth was taking the thing apart to see if she could clear the line. “Why don’t you go to the source? The guy who wrote the pamphlets.”

“I thought Garrity wrote them.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Campy turned out to be as resistant to the idea of publicity as Ruth. Ruth helped Gib talk to him. “Stanley,” Ruth said in a hectoring voice, “how do you expect to get your environmental message out if you don’t speak to the press?”

“It’s not under our control. The mainstream will fuck everything up.”

Ruth stared at the big man. He tried to avoid her stare for a long while. Then she started tapping her foot. Finally, he threw up his hands and yelled something that sounded like “blargh”. It appeared to translate to: “I’ll do it, but I still think it’s a bad idea.”

Campy waited until Ruth had left before he indicated Gib should pick up his pen and paper. Campy wiped off his sweaty face with a towel and started taking in a low and slow voice.

“Just listen, because I don’t want to repeat anything. Green Rage is about two things. It’s about using music to bring the environmental message to a public filled with sheep and drones. And it’s about direct action. Direct action in defense of nature.

“Our world is being killed by corporations and consumers. Green Rage trying to do anything to slow that process until the human race grows up and stops shitting where it lives. Frankly, I doubt we’ll do any good. In about a hundred years, everything will collapse into a sewer and drown in its own filth and waste.”

Campy looked to make sure Gib was getting everything.

“And I’m as guilty as anyone else. I drive the band around in a gas guzzling van while I’m passing out pamphlets about carpooling. I’m a fucking hypocrite just like all the rest. And I don’t even think my awareness of my hypocrisy makes me any better, either. I’m just an asshole with awareness, that’s all. Any questions?”

Gib looked down at his notes, and after thinking about it, asked, “Don’t you have any hope at all?”

Campy tightened in his lips. “Sure. I have hope. I hope that in the next ten years every single corporate polluter will suddenly wise up. I hope that America will start investing in useful public transportation that doesn’t break down every third mile and actually takes people where they want to go. I hope the first world will start working with the third world to stop the destruction of the rain forests and the oceans. Do you see that happening? Hope? More like I have fantasies.”

These were the most words Gib had ever heard Campy string together, and every sentence was more depressing than the one before it. On the other hand, Gib thought he was finally getting a real glimpse at the linebacker who had started a holy war during a Big Ten football game. Or maybe it was just the first time Gib had heard Campy like this while Gib was sober.

“Why do you even bother?”

Campy didn’t seem surprised to hear the question. “You played baseball, didn’t

you? Ruth told me that.”

“Yeah, I played college ball.”

“Pretend you’re playing for the Brewers. That’s my team, the Brewers. And in July, you’re 20 games out of first place. You lose one more game and you get mathematically eliminated from the race.”

“Sounds like the Brewers,” Gib said.

“So you’re a guy who gets called up from the minors. You really can’t handle major league pitching, so you’re a .180 batter. And suddenly you’re facing Randy Johnson or Tom Glavine or Greg Maddux in the bottom of the ninth, two outs, and the Brewers are down by three runs. No one on base. Pretty hopeless, right?”

“Right.”

“So, at that point, knowing that there’s almost no chance you can win, do you give up?”

“I take my swings,” Gib said. “You always take your swings.”

“Of course you do,” Campy said. “That’s what I’m doing. I’m taking my swings.

“One more obvious question.”

Campy waited.

“How far are you willing to go? What are you willing to do?”

Campy paused. Then, grudgingly: “Whatever it takes.”

Gib thanked the big man and left him to his workout. For good measure, Gib talked with Garrity, but he could have written down Garrity’s quotes without even talking to him. Frank Marion was kind of tongue-tied at the idea, and asked Gib not to quote him. But he gave Gib copies of some of his photos of Green Rage in action at The Space.

Then Gib went back to the loft and locked himself in. He didn’t shave, didn’t shower, didn’t brush his hair or teeth, slept only in quick naps. He probably wrote over ten thousand words in the marathon session, but threw out draft after draft. Using his borrowed laptop, he used the Web to research other environmental groups from the Sierra Club to Earth First!, making sure that every word in the article was exactly perfect and correct. The morning, he cleaned up, and went down to Black Helicopter to email the article to Rutsey in New York.

When the next issue arrived, the cover read “San Francisco Reborn! The New Spirit in the City by the Bay.” The Spiderman piece was passed around the Black Helicopter office proudly, but Gib was only interested in the Green Rage piece.

Gib spotted a picture of Garrity on page 30. The original photo was a shot of all of Green Rage playing during a charity show in August, raising money to save a breeding ground for abalone. Here, the picture was heavily cropped and enlarged. The article was one of two on the page, but the Garrity photo dominated the page, sweat flying from his hair as he leaned into a microphone. Half of Campy’s face was barely visible in the background, and Marion was nowhere to be seen. The article that accompanied the picture had hacked Gib’s original draft down from 1500 word to about 100.

The entire article:

‘We’re all about direct action,’ says Ethan Garrity, lead singer of the San Francisco punk band Green Rage. ‘We want to show the world that rock and roll can still make a difference.’ Garrity and his bandmates bass player Stanley Campanella and drummer Frank Marion are putting their instruments where their mouths are, performing

songs with a radical environmental edge at a club owned by Garrity himself, where a big part of all profits go to environmental causes. 'It's the bottom of the ninth for the earth, man, but Green Rage is still in there swinging,' Garrity declares.

And that was it.

Gib got on the phone to New York. After twenty minutes of arguing and yelling, he found himself talking to woman with the title of assistant associate managing editor. As soon as Gib started in on his tale of woe, she interrupted, "This is about Gerry Rutsey, right?"

"Right."

"He no longer has any affiliation with *Rolling Stone*." The editor's voice was like a hammer left out in a snowstorm. "No affiliation of any kind. If I can get your name, I'll make sure you get paid promptly for your article, however."

"Wait, what happened?"

The editor took a deep, frustrated breath. "There were major changes to your article, correct? Quotes that were altered. misattributed or made up outright?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Let me ask you, does it sound like you're the first call I've gotten about this?"

"Uh, no."

"Fine. Give me your name, and I'll get your payment right out to you. I want to assure you this was a bizarre aberration at this magazine. Gerry Rutsey was only a guest editor for that special issue."

Gib hung up the phone without giving his name or particulars. He knew he was going to take some serious shit about this whole fiasco from Campy. And blaming an editor who had gone over the edge wasn't going to do any good. He printed out a copy of his original article and went down to The Space, and of course, everyone had already seen the article. And no one was really interested in reading the abused original.

After erupting at Gib, Campy's nicest response was to Ruth. "I'm *really* pleased the way the media got our message out there, Ruth. It's really *wonderful*. Thanks for talking me into it!" Then he went to his gym, while Ruth gave him the finger behind his back.

Garrity, by contrast, was enthusiastic. "Hey, it's not your fault there was a nut editing you! And I think Frank took a really great picture!"

"Thanks, Ethan," Marion said.

"It's not all about you, Ethan," Gib said morosely.

Garrity turned on the serious face. "No, of course it's not. And if you think I'm happy with how moronic I sound here, then you're very much mistaken. But you know what? I don't care what Campy says, I agree Barnum with Barnum. Any publicity as long as the names get spelled right. Sure, most people look at this and think, 'Idiots.' But maybe some people come down to The Space. Maybe they pick up a brochure. Maybe they learn something. Maybe they get involved."

Even though he knew how badly his original intent had been fucked up, even though he knew Garrity was just turning on the charm, Gib was still cheered up by what Garrity said. Gib still didn't feel like hanging out at The Space, though, so he went home.

When he got there, the phone was ringing. He let the machine pick up, convinced it was Campy calling to yell at him some more. It turned out to be Bob Maynard.

“Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone!”

Gib decided he didn't want whatever had heated Maynard up to start burning out of control. So he picked up.

“Hi, Bob. I just got in the front door. What do you need?”

“Some kid in the office showed me a copy of a magazine, some hippie rag,” Bob screamed. It sounded like he'd been drinking. Gib wondered if this were the anniversary of some other major injury.

“Would that be *Rolling Stone*, Bob?”

“Yeah! Do you know what's there? An article about Green Rage! These fucking bastards are stating to reach out to a *national audience* with their rabble rousing! National! Audience! Listen to this: ‘We're all about direct action.’ Do you know what *that* mean?”

“No, Bob,” Gib said wearily.

“It's a call for armed insurrection!”

“Oh. If you say so.”

“I do say so! Mark my words, these people are getting ready to kick their activities up to another level! Dangerous! I need you to keep a real close eye on these people.”

“I've been doing that, haven't I?”

At that, Maynard's voice turned oddly silky, as if he wanted to have a heart to heart. “It's very funny you should say that. I've been reading your reports, and they sound real good. But I was thinking maybe you're not cut out for this. About replacing you. Cause you don't seem to be able to find anything we can bust these scumbags on. But now, seeing these snakes in the American grass leering out at me in a national magazine, even this junkie rag, convinced me we don't have that kind of time.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Bob.”

“Reuben really fought for you, by the way.” Now Maynard showed off his best insinuating tone. “That rug muncher sounds like she's really got the hots for you. Who knows? You might change her back to liking men, if she ever did.”

Gib rubbed his forehead. “I'll take that as a compliment, Bob.”

“Anyways, put some elbow grease into this! Double your effort! I want something we can prosecute real soon. And then we send all four of them away.”

“Four?” Gib asked, confused.

“Sure. The three guys and the bitch who runs the place.”

“Ruth?” Gib said, his throat suddenly constricting. “What does Ruth have to do with anything?”

“That broad is hip deep in the green crap, is what it looks like to me. She goes down with the rest.”

“Ruth's not involved with anything!”

Maynard didn't respond for a while.

“Kid, not to sound suspicious, but I'm maybe hearing more personal involvement than good cop work. I'm thinking I got all these reports saying how dangerous everything is, but you ain't too good at finding stuff. But now I'm thinking maybe you didn't *want* to find stuff. So how about it, kid? You found anything? Was it moist?”

Gib thought about what he could sacrifice. And it came to him easily, as easy as

boiling water. "What about Norman Haddal?"

"Haddal?"

"Right, Bob. The drug dealer you got into a fight with at a party. You do remember that, don't you?"

"I remember," Maynard grumbled out. "The DEA wants him, so does the SFPD. They can't find it."

"Didn't Reuben tell you? I found the lab."

"Ohhhhhh," Maynard moaned happily. "That's something."

"So get off my ass. We all know I'm doing a good job. Just read the reports. And you know there's no time to replace me. And I know Ruth's not involved."

"Fine, kid. That's fine for now."

Ten minutes later, they had a temporary understanding.

As soon as Gib hung up, the phone rang again. Gib let the machine pick up. This time, he *hoped* it was Campy calling to yell at him.

"Gib," Ruth said from the machine's speaker, "are you screening? I guess you must not be home yet. Anyway, I was just calling to tell you I read your article. The original one, I mean. And I thought it was good. Really good. That's all I wanted you to know. Bye, Gib."

Days later, on the first of October, the DEA raided Norman Haddal's houseboat.

PART THREE

OCTOBER, 1996

*In which Gib roadtrips with Ruth to places of nature,
nudity and imagination;
Then he and she meet Green Rage in a place of excitement
and embarrassment, threats and suggestions...*

"Jesus Jumped Over the Moon"

Religion, oh, just another of those numerous failures resulting from an attempt to popularize art.

Ezra Pound

Two days after Haddal was arrested and held under a million dollars bail, Gib woke up with Ruth crushing his ribcage.

"Wake up! It's Disneyland time!" she yelled.

Instead of answering, Gib rolled her off and staggered to the kitchen to make coffee.

"Did you say Disneyland?" Gib asked after the first cup had been poured.

"Yep!" Ruth said. "The Ragers decided to media hack it."

"What don't they like about Disneyland?"

Ruth stared at Gib's forehead until he realized she was looking for where the word "retard" had been tattooed.

"Corporate predators, squeaky-clean image? What's not to mock?"

"I still don't get it. Who doesn't like Mickey Mouse?"

"Any sane person! He's *creepy*. The whole Disney bunch is creepy."

"What about Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck?"

"Those are *Warner* cartoons," Ruth said in exasperation. "Bugs Bunny may be emasculated *now*, but at least he started out with some anarchy in his soul. Mickey Mouse is a castrated corporate shill -- just listen to the voice -- and always has been."

Gib shook his head to clear it, then went back in the bathroom to splash some water on his face. When he came back out, Ruth was in her bedroom packing a black backpack with her name spraypainted on it in hot neon pink.

"As much fun as this sounds -- making fun of animated characters and all -- I don't think I can spare the time," Gib said. "I have a lot of work to get done for Sidney."

Ruth picked up the phone from the bookcase and dialed.

"Sidney? It's Ruth. I'm taking Gib away for a few days. Cool?" Ruth nodded her head at the response, said, "Thanks", and hung up.

"Any other ineffective gambits you want to try?"

Gib thought about it.

Ruth added, "You don't have to go if you don't want to, but I thought we would take a long drive south and spend some time together. Campy is pretty mad about Norman, so the Ragers decided they needed a vacation. They'll meet us down in southern Cal. Come on, it'll be fun. When was the last time you had a vacation?"

There was no good answer for that, since Gib had thought of all of his time in San Francisco as one big vacation. But then he added up all the time spent on his fake and real professions, and he started to wonder how he ever found time to sleep.

"You know, I not only need a vacation, I *deserve* one," Gib said.

In a short while, Gib's backpack and camping equipment were added to Ruth's bag in the trunk and they were accelerating south on Highway 1. They stopped for an early lunch at a seaside seafood shack.

Ruth said, "I'm not sure I can take much more of this gorgeous scenery."

"Correct me if I'm wrong -- and I'm sure I am," Gib said, spearing a piece of fish

with his fork, “but isn’t that an odd thing for an environmental chick to say?”

Ruth smiled as she smashed open a lobster claw and sent juice flying all over the table. “It’s not about scenic vistas, you know. This environmental chick is looking for something different.”

“Like what?”

“Like desert. I want to look at a long stretch of nothing for hours and hours. Maybe there can be a cactus or a shitty diner every once in a while just to break the monotony.” Ruth popped a pale chunk of lobster meat into her mouth and grinned as she chewed.

Back in the car, Gib checked out his atlas.

“Let me see the map,” Ruth said. She looked at it and stabbed down at a blue spot east of Yosemite National Park. “There. Mono Lake. I’ve never been there. That’s where we’ll sleep tonight. And I don’t want to take a single major highway.”

Gib figured out a vague around-the-mulberry-bush-and-into-Yosemite-National-Parks route that he wasn’t sure would work, but he decided to leave it up to chance. As it turned out, chance turned out to be Ruth with the atlas. She kept the atlas in her hands and would call out a new route to turn onto every once in a while.

They drove south ten miles, then cut east. East soon turned north, and then east again, with Ruth calling out the turns and connections as they appeared. After a few hours of driving, Gib felt like he was using his tire rubber and gas fumes to write some secret message on the twisting roads that only astronauts and CIA satellite researchers would ever be able to read. During most of this, the landscape had very little variation – only from strip mall to strip mining, it seemed – and Ruth fell into a half drowse. She’d respond when Gib said something to her, but mainly with non-sequiturs and satisfied murmurs.

Gib fiddled with the radio, discarding tape after tape from the deck, filling a big chunk of time with REO Speedwagon, the Stones and Metallica on stations that seemed to have as their slogan: “It Don’t Got To Be Good To Be A Classic”. Shortly after the third time he ran across “Take It Easy” by The Eagles, he started trying anything different. He finally settled on a shit-crazy preacher and listened to that for a passel of miles.

Gib found listening to the preacher comforting, because he liked listening to truly accomplished bullshit artists. Life after death, healing the sick, angels and devils. The only thing missing from Bible stories was a good fire-breathing dragon and a decent plot. He wondered if that was how L. Ron Hubbard had gotten started.

Maybe it was a poor attitude, but Gibson Senior had not been a good religious role model. The Gibsons had attended St. Paul’s, an Episcopalian church in Virginia, along with many of Gibson Senior’s peers in law and politics. The Arlens also went to St. Paul’s, even though Gib knew that Uncle Joseph was actually Catholic. But you could meet a better connected class of people at St. Paul’s.

When Gib was eleven, the longtime pastor at St. Paul’s had been put out to pasture, and Reverend Petersen, a new, easily excitable young man of God, had been recommended to the congregation. Gibson Senior had been part of the interview committee that had approved the new pastor as acceptable to the St. Paul’s. But six months later, Reverend Petersen was gone. Too many morals, as it turned out.

Gib heard about it driving home from Church with both Gibson Senior and Uncle

Joseph one rainy Sunday. Gib's mother had been feeling "too sickly" to get out of bed, and the Arlen kids were being taken to tennis lessons. So Gib sat quietly in the back seat, watching the scenery in vague focus through the driving rain. Reverend Petersen's sermon had been about the cleansing nature of forgiveness, and for a change, Gib hadn't fallen asleep. So as he watched the landscape roll past, he thought about what it would be like to be able to reveal his deepest, darkest thoughts and secrets in the realization that there would be no repercussions. That would be interesting.

As Gib's mind wandered, he heard Uncle Joseph say to Gibson Senior, "So Petersen is gone, right? That was his last sermon?"

Gibson Senior nodded.

Gib asked from the backseat, "Something's wrong with Reverend Petersen?"

Both men in the front seat looked back, as if they had forgotten Gib was there.

"Yeah," his father finally answered.

"Why?"

"Because he didn't fit in," Uncle Joseph said. "He didn't understand the way the church works. Unforgiving little bastard."

"I don't understand," Gib said.

The two men exchanged looks, and Gibson Senior finally shrugged his shoulders.

Uncle Joseph nodded. "Gib, priests are just guys, okay? They say one thing on the job, but they still live in the real world. Priest Prick Petersen talked about forgiveness today, but it doesn't mean he practices. You know Charlie Marsters at the church?"

"Sure. He drives that big Mercedes."

"Well, he and Mrs. Marsters don't want to be married anymore. So they're getting divorced. Happens all the time. Couple of rubber stamps and some legal work. No big deal. You know kids at school with parents who're split up?"

"Sure," Gib said.

"Thought so. The Marsters are about to sign all the papers, make everything finished. Then all of a sudden Pastor Petersen calls Charlie. And do you know what he tells him? Tells him if he gets a divorce, he's not welcome at St. Paul's anymore. He can't get communion, he can't sit in the pews, he can't hear his kids sing in the choir. The whole shooting match. That sound forgiving to you?"

"Um, no. I guess not."

"No, I guess not, too. He even told Charlie that as far as the Church was concerned, Charlie was going to go to Hell! You just don't say that to someone like Charlie. Charlie's a big shot at the State Department! So a few of us got together and called the Bishop. Told him Petersen wasn't working out."

"But he's the pastor. Isn't he in charge? Because he talks for God?"

The two older men laughed.

"Kid, I got no problem with God," Uncle Joseph said, "but if you ever hear someone say they talk for him, that guy's full of shit."

Gibson Senior added, "Edward, there is a difference between God and the Church. You might have noticed that our religion is not the only one in the world."

"Sure. There's Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans."

"And Jews and Muslims and Hindus and all the rest. Quick now, who's right?"

"What?"

“If we have one Almighty God, but the Lutherans and the Catholics think we’re wrong, let alone the Hindus and the Muslims, who is right? And what makes Jesus any more believable than Thor?”

“Public relations,” Gibson Senior snorted. “And if all these people through history believe very different things, the most likely answer is that they’re all wrong.”

Even Uncle Joseph looked troubled at that. “Yeah, but you gotta go to church anyway. You know why, Eddie? Just in case.”

Gib saw the look on his father’s face and realized with a surprise how relaxed the man looked. “Joseph, please do not fill Edward’s head with nonsense,” Gibson Senior said.

“Dad, are you saying that God doesn’t exist?” Gib interrupted.

“Nothing so grand. The Bible is a lot of nonsense, of course. There may be some true stories in it. But certainly the idea of some sky god who has *any* effect here on Earth is a load of garbage.”

Uncle Joseph turned around to look at Gib. “Your father read too much Nietzsche in college.”

When Gib just gave Uncle Joseph a blank look, the older man sighed and said, “You’ll get that joke when you’re older.”

Gibson Senior looked annoyed. “This has nothing to do with Nietzsche.”

After that, Gib had made a regular habit of watching shows like the *700 Club*, seeing if they knew something Gibson Senior didn’t. And after watching them, he hadn’t learned anything about god, but he did identify a big part of the magic. A sincere face.

Sally Field would have made a wonderful Messiah, Gib thought.

So as he drove along, he listened to the shit-crazy radio preacher talk to his invisible congregation. The preacher was one of the familiar types; the “Jihad” Christian, as opposed to the “Hate the Sin, Love the Sinner” strain. Gays were a problem, along with drugs, feminists, and Democrats. And send all possible cash, because Hamilton, Franklin and Grant couldn’t save you from burning in the steaming magma of eternal damnation. Gib thought that the preacher mentioning Franklin was a case of wishful thinking, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

As the Goat climbed into the mountains, up and up toward Yosemite National Park, it didn’t seem like they’d make the park before nightfall.

After a time, he stopped trying to find a decent radio in the middle of all the titanic interference from the mountains around him. Turning down the volume, he loudly cleared his throat while looking over at Ruth, who eventually dragged her attention away from the rocky landscape speeding past them and waited for his question.

“I’ve been listening to hours of crazy-ass preachers, and we’re ascending into the sky, so I figured it was time for deep thoughts. Do you believe in God?”

Ruth said, “I’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“Like what?”

“Like my friends. Clean water and air. Saving the environment. Racism, sexism, ism, ism, ism. How to lose the extra five pounds I’ve gained over the last month.”

“You don’t need to lose weight,” Gib said automatically, then said, “Sorry, habit.”

Ruth smiled, “Anyway, I guess what I’m saying is that God is just a distraction from important things. Like what’s going on with us.”

"Us?" Gib asked cautiously.

"Oh, don't be an asshole. Why do you have to talk in codes and whispers all the time?"

After waiting a long while for Gib to answer, Ruth continued. "The time has come," she intoned, "when there is more than just "you" and "I". We are pushing on into the uncharted territory of Us. Close to Iowa, Ohio and Oz, and other vowel-y lands, the land of Us is full of frightening and dangerous creatures like the Crazy Beast of Commitment, and the Ravening Horde of Shared Closet and Dresser Space."

"Terrifying," Gib said neutrally. "But I don't think I talk in codes and whispers."

Ruth leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. "Really? Tell me about your parents."

"What?"

"Tell me their names, even. Name me three of your best friends from college."

"Wait--"

"Tell me the name of the first girl you ever kissed. How about your first lay?"

"What?"

"My point, Mr. Gibson Edwards, is that when it comes to talking about yourself, you wouldn't say shit if you had a mouthful."

"Maybe I don't talk about myself that much. But it's because I'm interested in the here and now. And here and now, *I'm* the one who's been left hanging out on a limb. I believe your exact response to me saying 'I love you' was: 'Oh, shit.'"

Ruth smiled. "I just needed some time to think."

Gib waited about a mile and a half before finally asking, "And...?"

"Hold on, I need to see something." Ruth turned sideways so she could put one hand on Gib's thigh and one on his chest.

"What are you measuring?"

"I just want to see your reaction."

Ruth paused, and leaned close to Gib's ear before she whispered, "I think we should get married."

Involuntarily, every muscle in Gib's body tensed as he whipped his heads around to stare at her.

Ruth laughed. "Was that a seizure? I'm glad the car didn't spin out of control." She leaned back onto her side of the front seat. It wasn't quite a smile she built on her lips, but it had the shape of one. "So you can say 'I love you'. That's wonderful. I notice you don't seem to react very well to the natural consequence of that."

Eventually, Gib turned off the radio and let the silence take over.

After some time, Gib noticed dusk sneaking up on his left. He turned on his headlights, amused as always to picture the headlights flipping over like James Bond rocket launchers.

"OK," Gib said, "Are you serious, or are you just fucking with me?"

"Oh, I'm completely serious," Ruth answered. "I figure we should try it out during the vacation, and see how it feels."

"Try it out? Marriage isn't a car. You can't test drive it."

"You can in Nevada. It's been a while since I've done this, but I'll check the details again. A license costs under ten bucks. I was thinking about finding a nice Elvis to

do the ceremony. Then before we go back home, we get the thing annulled. Actually, we don't even have to mail the marriage certificate in. Until we do, the marriage doesn't count."

"You want to get married for the weekend? Why?"

"Trust me. It has a way of focusing the attention. Hey, turn here!"

Startled, Gib looked for the turn.

"Right, right, turn right!" Ruth shouted.

Gib had been abusing the GTO's speedometer, so they fishtailed a bit as he slammed on the brakes. Gib saw that Ruth was pointing at a pulloff where there seemed to be some major construction going on. Every piece of metal inside the car moaned and shuddered, but Gib got the GTO to a full stop without any real mishap. They were about thirty feet off the road, with a large river on the other side of the road. Mountains loomed to either side of them, and the sun was behind them and to the left.

"What are we looking for?" Gib asked.

"You'll see," Ruth answered. "You're not in a hurry, are you?"

After a few minutes, Ruth stood up in her seat and leaned out over the windshield. The wind blew the t-shirt up from her stomach and Gib caught a glimpse of Ruth's muscular belly. As usual, he found himself fascinated.

Ruth shielded her eyes, watching the setting sun. "Look at that purple. Have you ever seen a purple like that?"

Gib looked where she was pointing. It was purple, all right. Nice enough. "No, not one like that."

Ruth took his hand and squeezed it in excitement. "There it goes. Wait for it, wait for it."

The final ray of the sunset flashed over the mountain behind them, and then disappeared..

"Yes! Perfect!" Ruth grabbed Gib by his hair, pulled him up to stand in the car and kissed him. Then she gave him a high five.

"That was a *great* sunset!" Ruth yelled, then sat back down, chortling. She looked up at Gib and said, "OK, you can keep on driving."

Vacation Ruth was a whole new experience, Gib finally understood.

The entrance to Yosemite National Park came upon Gib suddenly in the gathering gloom. The guardhouse was empty except for a sign saying, "Drive on in." For a mile or so, the road was a tight two-way, and the two or three trucks that passed Gib going the other way made him extremely nervous. Luckily, there wasn't much traffic.

Ruth kept calling out for a stop in many of the pulloff areas, to look at a particularly nice view, or a river rock. Gib expressed a vague appreciation for the scenery, but he was mainly happy to have the chance to stretch his legs.

When the road turned into a one way, Ruth casually said, "Boy, I hope the road going east isn't closed."

Gib goggled at her. "Closed?" he asked in disbelief.

"They close these roads during the winter. Too much black ice. If you hit a patch of that stuff, you could skid off the side of a mountain like *that*." Ruth snapped her fingers.

Involuntarily, Gib slowed down and started looking around nervously in the dark.

Then, far behind him, he saw the headlights. The idea of driving all the way to Yosemite Village with headlights shining in his eyes was an unpleasant one, so he sped up to 40 or so, feeling his buttocks clench with the effort of holding the car on the road.

The headlights never caught up, and he got to Yosemite Village without mishap. Ruth got out of the car and stared at the stars for a long while.

"It's really beautiful out here," she said, as Gib raised the roof of the convertible. "You never see this many stars in San Francisco, because of all the city lights. Even on the beach, you don't see this much."

Gib got tired of waiting for her and walked into the gift/grocery store and studied the coffee mugs. Then he was struck by a perverse urge while looking at the postcards. He bought a scene of a Yosemite waterfall at night, got directions to a stamp machine a short walk away, bought some stamps, and scribbled on the card in the dim light.

"Dear Bob: Investigation going smoothly. Wish you were here. Love, Mr. X."

Then he wrote Bob Maynard's name and the Golden Gate Avenue Address of the FBI in the address space and slipped the postcard into the nearby mail drop.

As it turned out, the road to the east, 120, was open. When they passed a sign listing all roads as open, Ruth laughed. "Got you!" she said. "It's still too early in the season for the roads to be closed."

"You were just fucking with me?"

"Sure. Don't get me wrong, sometimes a cold front whips through here and they do have to close the roads, but it isn't real common until later. Boy, I had you going!" Ruth proceeded to lean back in her seat and fall back asleep.

Gib was annoyed until he backtracked to the turn onto 120 going east (which also appeared to be Tioga Road). The traffic didn't get any thicker – in fact, Gib saw only one car between the time he got on 120 and the time he emerged on the east side of Yosemite – but the drive itself was much more nerve wracking. The 40 mile ride took nearly two hours, because he kept driving slower and slower. Ruth's joke aside, the regular warning signs for snow and ice disturbed Gib. And the road wandered. It wandered left, turned sharply back right, then back right, went up, went down, went all the way around, and it drove Gib crazy. The GTO was a car best suited for straightway roads the length of Kansas, and the tires squealed even going as slow as 30 during a sharp turn.

The dark didn't help, because Gib couldn't see what lurked past the edge of the road. His imagination told him it was a swift drop into oblivion. One jerk of the Goat's wheel, and he and Ruth would Thelma and Louise out into a bottomless valley. The GTO would hit the side of the mountain, roll for a million feet, then explode into a trillion pieces. And then even the pieces would continue to fall for a century and a third before hitting the bottom. The regular signs announcing what height he'd achieved only added fuel to the fantasy, culminating at the sign that said 10000 feet. *10,000 feet.*

Yup, that was sure was a long (*way to fall*) way up. He thought they got even higher later on in the drive, but by that time Gib was doing his best to ignore every sign on the road.

Descending was even worse, because the car wanted to go faster and faster, so Gib was riding the brakes constantly. Plus, "going down" was too close to "falling" for Gib's comfort.

It was probably weariness that caused the most insane moment during the trip.

One sign he didn't ignore indicated that the town of Lee Vining wasn't many more miles away, which gave him a small weave of peace. So he looked over his shoulder in a quick glance, wanting to bid farewell to Yosemite.

Even the brief glance over his shoulder showed the silhouette of a huge mountain looming back in the distance. Then Gib made the mistake of looking again, and the mountain (which he discovered later was Mount Conness) appeared to be closer.

As if it were moving. Chasing him.

Chills ran through him. A long turn to the right put the mountain squarely behind him, so he couldn't look, but when the road turned back right, the mountain jumped out at him the instant he looked, as if it were waiting for him.

You're spooking yourself, Gib told himself. He turned on the radio to dispel the weird fear the mountain had put into him. But a quick search through the radio dial produced only static, and the added sound was extremely distracting. *Especially if a mountain is stalking you*, he heard himself think, and it caused him to clench the wheel and throw himself back in his seat.

Stop thinking like that! Gib admonished himself. Carefully staring only at the road ahead of him, he found the next spot to pull over and stopped the GTO. He even turned off the engine, so the only sound was the wind blowing outside the window and the ticking of the engine.

Gib opened his door and stepped outside, his eyes on his feet.

Then he looked up.

This time, the mountain didn't seem so bad. It loomed far above him, sure, but it was just a lump of inanimate rock. That's what Gib told himself, anyway, but the eight year old kid inside him was telling a different story. The kid was saying, "What if?", two of the most dangerous words in any language. "What if the Norse myths were right? What if that isn't a mountain out there, but a crouching rock giant, his arms wrapped around his knees?" As he looked, Gib could almost make out the curve of the giant's elbows. And was that a gleam of light? The kind you would see indicating a slitted, staring eye?

Gib jumped back into the GTO, started it back up and raced down the mountain. He risked glances back over his shoulder only during the occasional straightaway, and the mountain always seemed to be looming higher and higher, getting closer and closer. He knew the mountain was watching him, waiting for a moment to hurl a thunderbolt, or just lift one huge foot and crush the GTO beneath it. Gib's breath came in short gulps of air and his heart raced in a mild panic. It was almost like hallucinating, but not once did Gib entertain the notion of stopping the car and getting himself back together.

When he hit the ranger station at Tioga Pass, the panic went away. Somehow he the Tioga Pass was the barrier that monsters, mountain-sized or not, couldn't cross. It made no more sense than keeping your feet tucked under the covers so the monster under the bed couldn't grab them. But it had the same logical illogic.

The road got wider, and the rest of the ride to Lee Vining went without any problems or panics. When Ruth woke up, Gib never even thought about telling her about his mountain panic.

"Let's get to the lake and set up camp," Ruth said after Gib got gas in Lee Vining. "Isn't the area closed at night?"

“It’s a big lake. Campy’s been here before, and he told me where to go set up camp where we won’t be hassled.”

With Ruth giving directions, they eventually parked and then hiked to an empty picnic area near the lake, where Gib set up his tent. They thought about going to see the lake first, but food was required. Ruth made a reasonable effort with the portable stove, but they both agreed that the result was not much better than a TV dinner. And then they decided it had been a long day of driving, and it would be better to go to sleep, and see the lake bright and early the next day. In the tent, Gib found himself noticing how the taste of the food stayed in their mouths as they kissed. And while the inflatable mattress was decent enough to sleep on, once thrusting motions were added to the mix, Gib found himself more concerned with his back interacting with the stony ground than with his genitals intercouraging with Ruth’s.

Still, he told himself, it was sex in a tent, and he could add that to his checklist of places he’d done it.

Some time later, he rolled over and realized Ruth was gone from the tent. Strangely, Gib was convinced she was gone for good, that she’d ditched him. He pictured her crawling cautiously, cautiously out of her sleeping bag, slipping into her clothes and walking off into the night, never to be heard from again by man or beast.

Then he noticed her clothes were still heaped up near the entrance flap to the tent.

So – cautiously, cautiously – he crept to the front of the tent. Through the mosquito netting, he saw Ruth laying naked – except for her tennis shoes – on a blanket she had draped over a nearby picnic bench. Her hands were curled behind her head like a pillow.

He wondered what she was looking at, and curled his head up to try and see the same sky she was staring at, but it was an impossibility. His twisting made the air mattress squeak unexpectedly, and Ruth’s head spun around to look at the tent. Gib froze, half upside down.

“Gib? You awake?” Ruth asked curiously.

Gib considered producing a fake snore, but knew it would *sound* fake, so he just breathed steadily and quietly.

After trying to peer into the dark interior of the tent for what seemed an eternity, Ruth turned her sights back to the stars. After a short time, during which Gib had untwisted himself, Ruth rubbed her hands across her arms in a warming gesture and pushed herself off the picnic table. Wrapping the blanket across her shoulders, she walked toward the lake. Once she was out of the line of sight of the front of the tent, Gib poked his head out and looked up at the sky.

It was drenched in pinpoints of light, as if a crazed offspring of Georges Seurat and Jackson Pollock had decided to work in silver and black. The picnic area was steeped in starlight, with hints and pockets of light amidst the shadow. But there was no moon that Gib could see, and when he waved his hand close in front of his eyes he could barely make it out. Yet Ruth had been clearly visible laying on the table.

It seemed like a dream, but Gib had never had a dream which he didn’t instantly recognize as one – a three dimensional movie where he was both actor and audience. So he knew he wasn’t dreaming. The uncomfortable grit underneath his knees proved it. But he had never seen a night or a light like this before. The stars looked bright enough to

read the classifieds, but that sense of clarity vanished when he tried to focus on something in particular. He grabbed the zipper on the front of the tent with his fingers, but was unable to see it with his eyes only inches away.

Clarity in the distance, murkiness up close. A metaphor for something or other, Gib thought.

Gib pulled himself fully out of the tent without taking the time to dress, except for his shoes. He was able to pick Ruth out only because she was the only moving over the landscape. Because the further away she got, the more silvery her skin and hair looked, and the blanket was a shadowy black.

The night was warm for the beginning of October. Still, he would have liked to have had a blanket to match Ruth's. In a crouch, he trailed her for quite a while until she stopped at what looked to be the edge of the lake and dropped the blanket from around her shoulders. She looked up at the sky for minutes, then began to slowly turn around, as if imprinting the entire area on her consciousness. Gib had no choice to freeze in place and hope she didn't pick him out from the rest of what she was seeing. When her face turned toward him, he knew that on this odd night, he was just far enough away to be seen, not close enough to be invisible.

"Gib? Is that you?" Ruth asked.

For a brief second, Gib thought about staying silent, but quickly realized Ruth would see him trying to sneak back to the tent before her. So he stood up out of his crouch.

"Yeah, I'm here," he said.

"Always the voyeur," Ruth said, but Gib could hear the amusement in her voice.

"What are you doing out here?" Gib asked.

"Just looking," Ruth said. "Come here. Let me show you."

Gib walked over and Ruth took his hand. The merest brush of the back of her hand against his thigh excited him, but now he knew he was close enough to hide his arousal. Though he wondered why he would want to.

Ruth pointed at the stars out over the strange growths that seemed to be coming out of the lake.

"What the hell are those?" Gib asked, pointing at the surface of the water.

"You don't know about Mono Lake? This place got screwed in the early forties when Los Angeles needed more and more water. The main streams that feed into this lake were diverted so they went to water LA lawns instead of fill the lake basin."

"Isn't that *Chinatown*? 'Mymothermysistermymothermysister'?"

"The movie is totally mixed up about what went on. I don't know *what* that incest thing was all about. But yeah, when the streams got diverted, the level of the lake went down, and all those things you see sticking up were suddenly visible. They're called tufas."

"What are they?"

"Some kind of limestone development."

"Huh." Gib stared out at the tufas. They looked like mountains created by a giant child dribbling limestone through his hand like sand. Not quite castles, more than mounds, they glistened in the starlight like an aquatic lifeform. Gib found them creepy.

Ruth dropped the blanket, walked ahead into the water, swam out into the lake.

“Come on and try it, voyeur,” she said, as she floated. Gib could see intriguing body parts sticking above the surface, so he walked out into the water and dove in.

The water was about as cold as he had expected, but he was so surprised by the huge amount of salt in the water that he swallowed a whole mouthful and thrashed around until he stopped coughing. His eyes stung from the salinity.

“What’s all this salt doing here? This is worse than the ocean!” Gib yelled.

“Keep your voice down,” Ruth said, “and float your ass over here.”

Gib found it hard to adjust to floating in the lake. It was much more buoyant than anything he was used to, and his excitement at being naked around Ruth kept poking out into the air. He felt vulnerable. He eventually got close enough to grab Ruth’s hand.

They floated for a while. Then Ruth hesitantly pointed out constellations, until Gib said, “I know the stars.” He corrected her mistakes and pointed out the other major constellations she had missed.

“I didn’t know you stargazed,” Ruth said

“I did during college,” Gib said. For a moment, he thought about undercover tradecraft, then decided to forget all about that for a night, or an hour, for at least a few minutes. “University of Virginia. That’s where I went to college. Since you asked before.”

Ruth squeezed his hand.

“We used to go into the hills, some of my friends. I went to high school with one of them, Joe Meeker. He was my catcher, both in high school and college. I always liked Joe, but I don’t think he ever liked me. But we’d hung out together for so many years, you could call it friendship.

“Anyway, Joe majored in astronomy. When a group of us would go out to the hills to get high or drunk or something, there would be a bunch of us laying on our backs, looking at the stars. Joe would name all the constellations, over and over. So that’s why I know them.”

They floated quietly for awhile. Then Gib said, “Is that the kind of thing you wanted to hear?”

Ruth squeezed his hand again. “You don’t have to tell me all at once, or tell me everything, but yes, I’d like to know a few more things like that. Joe Meeker. What happened to Joe Meeker?”

“No idea. He ripped up a ligament in his knee his junior year. I don’t even know if he graduated. He could be anywhere right now.”

“He could be sitting in an observatory right now, watching this same sky.”

“Sure. But I’ll bet he’s not as cold as I am.”

Ruth glanced over at Gib, then started kicking into shore while still floating on her back. Once they were there, Gib picked up the blanket and wrapped it around them both.

Ruth said, “Beautiful.”

“What?”

“The tufas. The stars. The lake. The whole thing. If god exists, she’s a hell of an artist.”

"King and Country"

To be an American (unlike being English or French or whatever) is precisely to *imagine* a destiny rather than to inherit one; since we have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history.

Leslie Fiedler

The next morning, they went for another swim. In the daylight, the tufas looked much less creepy. They were just rocks with their camouflage stripped away. Ruth was full of information about them, until Gib finally had to tell her to stop lecturing.

That morning, Gib got to the atlas before Ruth had a chance, and he saw that I-395 was close by. It looked like he had three choices. He could follow 395 south through California and then cut back east on I-15. Go south on 395, then north on 6 into Nevada to reach I-95. Or he could cut across on state road 120 which would cut into Route 6. The only problem was it looked like 120 wandered around just as much outside Yosemite as it did inside Yosemite. After fleeing Mount Conness at 25 MPH the night before, Gib had had a bellyful of wandering around. He wanted to get the Goat up on some federal tarmac and let the engine wail.

Ruth thought it would be more interesting to take 120, of course. But she didn't argue very hard, which was good, because Gib was reticent to explain a mountain scaring him stupid the night before. She seemed content to get in the GTO and sleep after their active night.

Gib drove down 395 for about twenty miles before he hit the traffic. He kept getting stuck behind a group of cars going 50. Or 45. In all the lanes. He had to struggle and wiggle his way through each group, weaving back and forth between lanes. Then he hit the back of a funeral party. Then a wedding party.

At that point, he was pissed. After eight miles of wedding party fumes, his temper blew. Which must mean, he realized, that Ruth has got me freaked out with this wedding talk. Even a wedding that only lasts a weekend.

With judicious honking and shouting and gesturing, he got past the wedding party and raced away from it at 95 miles an hour. By that time, though, he was near Bishop, California, and an Indian Reservation. Which meant the speed limit dropped, and Gib found his anger evolving into rage. Speed was the need, and some goddamn government highway engineers had designed a highway where he was trapped behind jerkoff after asshole after moron, trundling along at tortoise speeds. And now the town of Bishop spawned shitty pickup after pickup with speedometers stuck at 45 mph.

His muttering woke Ruth up, and she sleepily asked, "Where are we?"

"Bishop."

"California or Nevada?"

"California."

"Oh," Ruth said. As she drifted back to sleep, she murmured, "I guess we should have taken the scenic road. I'm sure we'll make better time once we get into Nevada."

There were very few things worse than sleeping passengers who criticized your ability to put the miles behind you.

He took the turn onto Route 6 going north, and the road opened up. His fury

faded into the zen of driving. He blew past the state line, passing Boundary Peak, in a quarter the time it had taken him to drive from Mono Lake to Bishop.

After about twenty miles, he grabbed for a random tape from the backseat. Without looking, he shoved it into the tape deck. Once he heard it, he instantly turned it up.

Once Ruth heard it, she instantly woke up.

“What in the hell are you doing with a Rush tape?”

“Beats me. I don’t think I’ve listened to this for years. Every guy I knew who started college listening to Rush ended up listening to Frank Fucking Sinatra.”

“Can we turn this down?” Ruth asked.

“No. I’m finally going a decent speed. I want good driving music.”

“Good? *You’re listening to Rush!*”

Gib did his best to imitate a Sunday Speedway announcer. “You wanted to learn more about me, baby. Welcome to the abyss-iss-iss-iss.”

Ruth tried to ignore the tape and fall back asleep. Gib turned it up some more and decided to see how well-tuned he’d kept the engine. He cheered when he hit 110.

With a snarl, Ruth turned the volume down.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Speeding.” He turned the volume back up.

“Very fucking funny. Do you know how much gas this cranks into the air?”

Gib didn’t say anything for a second. “Don’t start in on the Goat.”

“Cars are the single most destructive thing for the atmosphere.”

“Sometimes there’s beauty in destruction.”

“What?”

“Take yesterday. It’s shame LA had to grab water from Northern California, but if they hadn’t, those tufas would still be hidden, wouldn’t they? And you loved that sunset yesterday, didn’t you?”

“The most beautiful sunset I’ve ever seen was in Gary, Indiana. It was the most amazing fire of purple and orange. You know why? All the crap spewed into the air from the steel mills.”

“That’s your story? Sunsets in exchange for emphysema?”

“I guess that’s it.”

Ruth snorted.

“All I’m saying is, I love this car. We don’t have to listen to Rush, though.” Gib turned the volume down and drove for a while.

“You know,” Ruth said after a while, “this music is kind of hypnotizing, once you get used to the voice.”

“Sure.”

She turned the volume back up, just tiny bit. “So, what crawled up your ass and started decomposing back there?”

Gib smirked, tilted his head at her, and said, “Would you like to get married for the weekend?”

“Oh,” Ruth said. “That.”

Soon, it was time for lunch. “Grease! We need grease!” Ruth decided as they saw a diner in the distance.

The diner was named “Phil’s”, and looked constructed out of sand bricks, dried grease for mortar. Ruth declared it perfect.

Before they walked in, Gib asked, “Are we going to keep fighting? Because we can get the food to go.”

“I’m perfectly happy,” Ruth said. “I’ll prove it!”

There were a couple of empty booths, but Ruth led them to two empty seats at the counter. The plump, red-haired waitress wandered over and pulled a pencil out of her curly hair. She had a name patch that said “Harriet” on her light-blue blouse.

“What can I get you?” she asked cheerfully.

“I want a big greasy double cheeseburger with a strawberry shake,” Ruth said. “And fries!”

“Sure, honey.” She took Gib’s order for a grilled cheese sandwich, and yelled back into the kitchen.

“Watch me spread the love,” Ruth whispered to Gib.

When Harriet turned back to Ruth and Gib, she saw Ruth looking excitedly around at every part of the diner. Harriet looked amused as she crossed her big arms.

“Whatcha looking at, honey?”

“This place is great!” Ruth pointed at a wall covered with old and new license plates from various states. “How old are those license plates?”

“Well, the original Phil – that’s the current Phil’s granddaddy – put the first plate up back in the 20s, after he got his first Model T. Since then, we get people coming through here from out of town, we ask some of them to send their plates, and sometimes they do.” The waitress looked them up and down. “You two look like you’re from out of town yourselves. What kind of plates do you have?”

“California,” Ruth said.

“We got a ton of those already.”

Then Ruth noticed the polaroids on the wall near the cash register, and she asked about them. Harriet brought them both over to look at pictures of celebrities and visitors who had stopped at Phil’s for a burger or a cup of coffee. The only person Gib recognized was an extremely bleary-eyed Hunter Thompson, who had a cup of take-out coffee in one hand and his other hand hidden in a large jacket pocket that bulged suspiciously. Harriet, a big smile on her face, had her arm around Thompson. The other celebrities were primarily Vegas “superstars”, according to Harriet.

Back in their seats, Ruth and Harriet made small talk while they waited for their food. Gib kept his mouth shut and listened to various stories about the perfidy of the male gender, even when Ruth described his own failings, from dirty socks to falling asleep right after sex.

Ruth and Harriet would often look over at him and, in unison, say, “Hmmp.”
Maybe he twitched a little.

Gib breathed a sigh of relief when the burgers were finally laid in front of them, and the conversation trickled off. Harriet went over to kick the jukebox into playing a few songs and to see to the customers in the booths. While she was gone, Ruth dug into the dripping mass of meat, cheese, and bread on her plate. The jukebox started playing Elvis, and Ruth suddenly stopped chewing, her mouth hanging open while her eyes gleamed. Gib nudged her shoulder curiously, but she shrugged him off.

When Harriet wandered back behind the counter, Ruth had already finished the burger and was picking at the fries while she sipped her shake. Harriet observed that Gib was only half done with his food and shook her head in disappointment.

"So," Harriet said, putting the coffeepot back on the burner, "where are you two kids going? Vegas, I'll bet."

Ruth smiled winningly. "Well, that's just part of it. I'm not sure I'm supposed to talk about the rest."

Gib looked at Ruth with wide eyes, but Harriet missed his disbelieving look as she leaned forward, almost involuntarily. "It's some kind of secret, is it?"

"Yeah. Also, I don't know if anyone will believe the whole story." Ruth looked innocently frustrated. "But it's the truth!" she almost wailed.

Gib was amazed to see tears forming in the corners of Ruth's eyes.

Harriet considered. "Why don't you tell me, honey? I got a pretty good experience listening to bullshit – you can ask my first ex-husband. So if I believe it, other people probably will."

Ruth looked at Gib for reassurance. In a monotone, he said, "Why don't you tell her, hon? She looks really sympathetic." He even put his hand on her back in a way he hoped looked supportive.

Harriet barely noticed him, except to nod her head. He only had a bit part in this drama, so if he was badly cast, it wasn't going to bother her.

"Well, me and Tony," -- here, Ruth nodded at Gib -- "we're going down to Vegas to get married."

"Married!" Harriet whooped. "That's fine! I married my first two husbands in Las Vegas. The first one at the Flamingo, and the second one at that nice Debbie Reynolds's place."

"Really?" Ruth semi-squealed. "Is it wonderful? Is it everything people say?"

Harriet spent the next few minutes educating Ruth as to how perfect a place Vegas was to get hitched. Easy licenses, fun chapels, room service -- and slots!

Eventually the drama got back on track. Ruth said, "When I told my Momma, me and Tony were getting married, she forbid it. 'Tonya, I absolutely *forbid* it', is what she said."

Harriet clucked. "Honey, your Momma just wants what's best for you."

"That's what I thought! But Tony's got a good job. He works on cars!"

Harriet clicked her teeth and looked at Gib with grudging respect. "Mechanic, huh?"

"But when I argued with her, Momma told me why I couldn't get married. It was legal stuff about my Daddy. Momma finally told me who he was."

Ruth leaned over the counter, and Harriet bent down to meet her. Ruth looked around, then nodded her head toward the jukebox, from which Elvis was currently stating he had a hunka-hunka burning love (a flammable piece, a slice, a chunk). He hankered for a hunk of love, he did.

Harriet gasped and stepped back from the counter, her hand grasping at her heart. She looked closely at Ruth, studying her features.

"You mean..." Harriet trailed off.

Ruth said, with the widest, most guileless eyes, "Ma'am, you must know that the

devil sometimes got into the King. I don't want to speak ill of my Daddy, but it seems he strayed from his marriage once or two times. Once with my Momma."

"I surely know that. A beautiful man like him, how could he resist all the temptations people put in front of him?" Harriet said. Then she blanched. "I don't mean no disrespect to your Momma."

"That's all right," Ruth said. "Momma didn't want me to marry Tony because of some kind of legal paternity thing."

"Her Mommas shouldn't stand in the way," Gib chipped in, pretty sure Ruth needed a second to keep her story straight. "It just ain't right."

Harriet looked at him sympathy and patted his hand. "Of course it isn't, honey. But that's the way love is sometimes. A crooked path and no one's got a map to what's right or true."

"And that's the worst thing, ma'am," Ruth continued. "I know my Momma believes what she told me, but I don't know if I do. I don't think I look too much like the King, do I?"

From his own experience as an accomplished bullshit artist, Gib was impressed at Ruth's ability to let Harriet take over the tale.

"Are you crazy? You're the spitting likeness!" Harriet said. "Phil! Phil!"

The cook stuck his head out the opening to the kitchen.

"What's that, Harriet?" he asked.

"Don't this little girl here look like The King?"

"Like who?"

"Like E? Like Elvis!" Harriet said, impatiently. Then she waved her hand in the air, as if to grab some of the music that was playing and throw it at the cook.

The cook looked at Ruth dully for a minute, then shrugged his shoulders. "Sure. I guess."

Phil exchanged a "these women are nuts" look with Gib, then vanished back into the kitchen. Harriet didn't notice, as she stormed out from behind the counter and pulled friends and customers up to their feet to look at The King's Secret Love Child.

Quickly, Ruth was posing for pictures that Harriet took with her Polaroid. Gib volunteered to take a group shot of the whole diner population, as they circled around Ruth in one huge group pose. Everyone was smiling and laughing.

As they were getting ready to leave, Gib pulled out his wallet to pay, and Harriet waved him off.

Ruth said, "Ma'am, I appreciate it, but I know my Daddy would pay all his bills. Whoever my Daddy is."

Harriet argued, but Gib ended up paying. He also left a big tip at Ruth's urging.

When they got back in the car and pulled out of the parking lot, Gib turned to Ruth and said, "Tony and Tonya?"

"It was improv."

"Oh."

Gib pulled out onto the highway, then asked, "What the *hell* was that all about?"

Ruth leaned back in the passenger seat. "We're on vacation, baby. Did you see what a good time everyone was having? And at least you weren't thinking about getting married for a while. Don't you feel better?"

“Don’t you want to get away from yourself sometimes? To be a different person?
Someone better, or nicer, or hell, just someone *simpler*?”
Gib just drove.

"Titans in the Sand"

Someone once asked me why women don't gamble as much as men do, and I gave the common-sensical reply that we don't have as much money. That was a true but incomplete answer. In fact, women's total instinct for gambling is satisfied by marriage.

Gloria Steinem.

They arrived in Vegas a few hours later. Stopping in North Las Vegas, they pulled into the parking lot of an ice cream stand where Ruth spotted a pay phone. While Gib was getting two cones, Ruth arranged for a room at Caesar's Palace. When they got to Caesar's, Gib gave the car to valet parking, grabbed their two backpacks out of the trunk, and followed Ruth into the lobby, where he was amazed and annoyed to see a long line of people waiting to check in.

"It's *Wednesday*," Gib said, amazed.

Ruth shrugged. "It's Vegas. We were lucky to get a room."

As Ruth was about to join one of the long check-in lines, Gib had a thought and drifted away to find a pay phone. When he came back, he stoically refused to answer Ruth's questions about who his call. After a few minutes, a woman walked out from behind the check-in counter and called out, "Is there a Gibson Edwards here, please?"

Gib waved, and the woman motioned for him to come to a separate check-in station reserved for VIPs. Everyone in the reg'lar folks lines stared at Gib and Ruth with naked hostility and bitter envy, which suited Gib just fine.

The woman at the VIP counter had them registered in their rooms in under a minute, handed them their card keys, and asked if they wanted their bags taken up to their rooms. Gib shook his head, hefted both bags, and thanked the woman.

In their room, Gib threw the backpacks on one double bed and laid down on the other.

"So how did we earn the VIP treatment?" Ruth asked.

"I called Sidney. Frank Marion told me Sidney's blown through bushels of money at most of the finer casinos in Vegas."

"Well, thank you, Sidney!" Ruth said, jumping on the bed, her feet straddling Gib. "Let's hit the streets."

For the next few hours, they wandered down one side of the South Strip and up another, in the process seeing Vegas versions of Rome, Camelot, Egypt, and – oddly – an older Las Vegas. On one of the garden paths at the Flamingo Hotel, Gib found a historic marker for Bugsy Siegel.

"Pretty daring for a Hilton Hotel," Ruth said.

Then they spent time:

Checking out the rest of the casinos and hotels on the Strip; Losing about a hundred bucks on blackjack; Taking a cab to Fremont Street to see the neon there; Winning about eighty bucks at the craps table; Fending off aggressive suggestions for strip clubs while cabbing back to the Strip; *Experiencing an interactive ride* (which, after they walked out of the place, Ruth summed up by grabbing Gib by his shoulders, shaking him back and forth and shouting in his face, "Look! It's an *interactive ride!*"); Witnessing hookers being tossed out of a mini-mall parking lot; Watching with pleasure a live fake

pirate show as well as a live fake exploding volcano; Listening to a neo-swing band maul Louis Prima's "Jump Jive and Wail" until it cried Uncle and agreed to pretend to be the Blues Brothers' version of Big Joe Turner's "Flip Flop and Fly"; Settling down for a big prime rib (Gib) and a huge fresh lobster (Ruth); Losing fifty bucks playing more blackjack; Scoring tickets for a Vegas revue, complete with showgirls; Winning thirty dollars in quarters at a slot machine while killing time waiting for the revue to start; Realizing neither of them wanted to carry thirty dollars in quarters and so feeding every single quarter back into the machine; laughing and enjoying the revue – especially the costumes (said costumes being the highlight of the show, since the show itself seemed to be about large disasters from history, and the costumes were nothing if not the Hindenburg-ian fashion); And finally watching white tigers prowl around a styrofoam-looking landscape.

As the tigers stared back at them and the other tourists going past on the walkway, Gib and Ruth compared notes and realized they were bored.

Less than twelve hours in Sin City, and they were already bored.

"Well," Gib said as Ruth announced her ennui in a surprised tone, "how much do you like gambling?"

"Not very much," Ruth admitted. "It feels like math class with money."

"Yeah. Me, I started to get a little bored about the time we had to watch that idiot magician between the fall of Babylon and the sinking of the Titanic."

"But it's Vegas! How can we be *bored*?"

Gib shrugged. "I don't like being the guy who gets clipped in the clip joint. And that's 99 percent of what Vegas is about. Separating the suckers from their coin. You know why I don't like gambling?"

"Math is hard," Ruth said in her best squeaky barbie voice.

"Because even if you put down a hundred bucks and win the bet, what have you got? Just more money. I mean, who cares? I don't get that thrilled about money."

"I feel the same way, I guess. But I knew Vegas would be like this before we got here."

"Knowing isn't the same as experiencing. Look, at The Space, you're the heart and soul. You know everything about everything and everyone; you know all the secrets and the tricks and the sleight of hand. Here, you're the audience. You just don't like not being in charge."

Ruth colored. "Fuck that!" she said heatedly. "I can be as good an audience as anyone."

Gib shrugged, condescension masquerading as agreement –effectively rediscovering two thousand years of French civilization in a gesture.

Ruth grabbed Gib's hand. "I *refuse* to be bored in Vegas. If gambling won't do the trick, what else has this place got?"

"Um, desert scenery?"

"That's right! Sex!"

Visions of Ruth asking for directions to the Mustang Ranch trudged horribly through Gib's head. So when they got into a cab and Ruth asked the cabbie to recommend a strip club, he actually felt relieved.

He paid the cover for both he and Ruth as they walked into the Paradise Cabaret. He had lied to Ruth in the cab when she had asked if he'd ever been to a strip club before.

Now, as he walked into his first one, he felt on edge. What do you do in a strip joint with your girlfriend?

The club was lit blood red and velvety. Basically, it looked like the Marquis De Sade's rumpus room. There was one long stage dominating the large room, with chairs all around it. Ringing the stage were semi-circular booths with small round tables.

They spotted an empty booth and sat down. Ruth started pointing out various women and asking Gib what he thought of them. They ordered a couple of drinks from one of the waitresses. After she left, Ruth stood up.

"Where are you going?" Gib asked nervously.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"You went in the casino before we got here."

"No, I mean I *have* to see the bathroom in a place like this. I wish I'd brought a tape recorder."

Ruth walked away, and Gib tried to figure out the best way to remain unnoticed. He leaned forward on the table and studied the drink specials at length.

The question was, how did you remain cool at a strip club? Gib looked around and checked off the various facial expressions that seemed to be his only choices. Slack-faced lust was the most popular. Other choices were:

"Too Cool for Titties"

A thin grin lingering under hooded eyes. Besides their expressions, the one uniting characteristic of these guys was t-shirts under suit jackets. Most of them affected a casual lean, way back in their chairs, one hand stroking a chin speculatively, while the other occasionally reached out to stroke a bare thigh or to offer some kind of denomination.

"On Leave from the Seminary"

Rigid posture, hands clenched on a table top or in their laps, while the face was static except for the flickering of the eyes. When a dancer would offer a dance, denial was conveyed with a short, sharp shake of the head. Whenever companions would browbeat the seminarian into a dance, he would grip the sides of his chair like vice grips grabbing a drain pipe as the dancer polished his lap to no avail.

"Laughing Through the Lust"

This guy had a drink because it was required, watched the dancers because it was the purpose, and every once in a while let out a pleased whoop, surprised to find something entertaining going on.

"Dumbstruck Drunk"

They peered through their drunken haze and would occasionally smile at a stretch of bare flesh or a pleasant smell.

"Married Khakis" / "Too Old for the Frat House"

Basically, this was the only way to tell the difference between married and single guys in khaki shorts. The married khakis were afraid that if they grabbed, groped or giggled too much, word would get back to the little women in Iowa, Indiana or Idaho.

The single khakis had no such worry. Half of them seemed more anxious to get naked themselves than have the dancers do it. All around the club, drunk khakis were howling, tying their t-shirts around their heads and shrieking for the DJ to play "Cherry Pie" just *one more time*.

Next to Gib's table, a group of five guys laughed as two dancers grinded the sixth guy in the group like a sharpener grinds a pencil. The redhaired guy who was the object of attention was obviously a Married Khaki, but he did his best to present himself like a Too Cool for Titties.

After the song was over, one of the dancers grabbed one of the group and led him off to a back room, while the others turned their attention elsewhere. The one dancer left on top of the redhead sat on his lap and Gib heard her say, "You know, if you take me into the VIP Room, I can make you come."

The redhead gave the dancer a cynical look, and said, "Ma'am, that's a nice offer, but there are two things I have promised never to do in a strip club. Never have lunch, and never come."

The dancer looked puzzled. She was young and overly thin, and her heavy black eyeshadow gave her face a particularly dim look. "But I can do it really fast."

The redhead laughed. "*Really fast?* Wow! Great!" He continued to laugh until the dancer, still giving him a puzzled look, excused herself and looked for another patron.

Thankfully, that was when Ruth came back. "So, point out the ones you got a dance from," she said.

"What? None of them."

Ruth sighed. "Gib, come on. You're in a strip club. You have to get some dances."

"Why?" Gib asked. "Don't you think this place is just a little bit creepy? And don't you think it would be creepy for you to be sitting there while some naked chick is sitting on my lap?"

Ruth considered it. "I don't know. Why don't we find out?"

She waved at a dancer who happened to be looking at them.

"Hi," Ruth said to the dancer. "I'm Sandy. My boyfriend here doesn't talk, but he'd like a dance."

Gib looked over. Ruth smiled and put one finger over his lips. "It's OK, Duncan. I'll handle everything. You just sit back and relax."

The dancer, who was dressed in a neon pink bikini with the requisite four inch lucite heels, introduced herself as Barbie. Ruth asked her for the name again, looking the dancer up and down. Barbie had jutting fingernails painted a pink to match her bikini. Her blonde hair – an obvious wig – fell down to the middle of her shoulders, the bangs covering her entire forehead down to just above her (carefully plucked) eyebrows. Barbie's false eyelashes were so long and so heavily overlaid with black that her eyes were almost completely shrouded, though they appeared to be either a dark blue or a dark brown. The lights made it hard to tell. Even with the bikini top camouflage, her breasts were clearly the result of NASA technology, levitating out from her ribcage like two small soccer balls.

Ruth congratulated Barbie on an excellent choice of names, and discovered that the scent was a cheap knock-off of Poison. The two women made small talk while Barbie

sat on Gib's lap until the current song ended, at which point Barbie stood up, leaned her forearms on Gib's shoulders, stared him in the eyes, and asked, "You ready, honey?" Gib nodded, his face as blank as he could make it. *Too Cool for Titties*, he told himself. Barbie unhooked her bikini top and showed her bizarrely large nipples (so large that Gib made a note to ask Ruth if there were such a thing as nipple enhancement surgery).

For the next four minutes or so, Barbie, with half-closed eyes, shook her ass in Gib's face, ground it across his lap, brushed her tits across his face, overwhelmed his nose with the smell of cheap perfume, and generally simulated sex in a way that Gib found vaguely ridiculous. He was almost embarrassed to realize the dance actually half-aroused him. Not hard enough to make him think he was actually turned on, but hard enough to show he was enjoying himself.

After the dance, Ruth handed Barbie a twenty, and thanked her. When Barbie asked if Gib would like another dance, Ruth took one look at Gib's blushing face and politely sent Barbie packing.

"What was wrong with Barbie?" Ruth asked. "She did all the things you guys like."

Gib sputtered before he realized Ruth was kidding.

"God, she was terrible, wasn't she?" Ruth asked. "*Perfectly* terrible! Fake tits, fake hair, fake height, fake eyelashes, fake fingernails, and topping it all off, the totally fake name Barbie. How could you be any happier than being able to say you got a bad lap dance from Barbie, the Bionic Stripper?"

Gib thought about it. "Well, when you put it that way, it is pretty cool."

At that point, a bodybuilder dressed in a tuxedo politely stepped up to their table and asked, "Pardon me, but we have a large party of VIPs coming in. Would you mind if I relocated you to a smaller table in back so we can use this one?"

Ruth looked annoyed.

The bodybuilder quickly said, "I can offer you some free drink tickets."

"Oh, in that case," Ruth said. The bodybuilder led Ruth and Gib to a table in the back room.

Ruth started questioning Gib about the various dancers as they walked past.

How about that one? No.

What about the blonde? No.

The tall one? No.

The skinny one over there? No.

What about the one on stage? No.

How about the one in the green spandex? No.

The evening gown? No.

Finally, Ruth said, "Gib, you're not gay, are you?"

Annoyed, Gib said, "Look, I just don't want to pay for it."

"It? What it?"

"A woman. Sex. Simulated sex. It doesn't really turn me on, and I feel like a sucker."

"But you like porn, don't you?"

"No, not really."

Ruth waited.

“OK, yes,” Gib said. “I can’t explain it, but porn is different.”

The both of them sat in silence for awhile, drinking their drinks and idly watching the flesh game.

“Well, hell,” Ruth finally said. “At least we’re not bored.”

A dishwater blonde just coming out of the VIP room heard Ruth, stopped still. Leaning over the table, she asked, “Did I just hear you say you’re bored?”

“Well, we’re working on it,” Ruth said.

Scooching Gib over so she could sit down, the dancer said, “It’s against the law to be bored in Vegas. What can I do to help?”

“I don’t know,” Ruth said. “He’s the one that’s bored.”

The dancer glanced at Gib, then looked back at Ruth, drooped her eyelids and said in an deep voice that would have been seductive, but for the Elmer Fudd accent: “I bet you I can waise his intewest .”

Ruth laughed, then reached over to shake the dancer’s hand. “Hi, I’m Ruth. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Joanie. Is this your boyfriend?”

While Ruth and Joanie compared notes, Gib took a long, if surreptitious, look at the dancer. Without the heels, Gib thought she was probably a bit short, but she was built strongly for her size. Where Ruth was lean and muscular, Joanie had her muscles hidden away. The word voluptuous came to mind. Her hair looked natural enough, falling below her shoulders, and she was only wearing just a touch of makeup on her eyelids. And with her short nose, and normal-looking eyebrows, she gave off a girl-next-door impression, all except for the slinky black gown she had on. The girl next door at her prom.

Suddenly, Gib realized both two women were looking at him.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

They burst out laughing.

“We’re telling jokes,” Joanie said. “What did the one lesbian frog say to the other one?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey, we really *do* taste like chicken!”

A short time later, Gib found himself getting another lap dance. And while Joanie wasn’t a Bionic Stripper, she had a skill Barbie would never approach. Gib was careful not to paw at the dancer, but even so, at the end of the dance, he felt like he’d been immersed in her. When she rested her arms on his shoulders for balance, her breasts would come as close to his face as he could imagine without actually touching, and Gib could smell the faintest scent of flowers and sweat. Then when she would twist away, her nipples grazing the tip of his nose. When she turned around again, he could tell by her faint grin that the touch had been deliberate. It wasn’t sensuality so much as comedy, a sense of both of them, lap dancer and lap, being in on the joke.

Somehow, Gib didn’t feel like a sucker.

When it was over, Joanie calmly slipped back into her dress, put the money Ruth handed her into her purse, and sipped at the chilled tequila that Ruth had ordered for her.

“Still bored?” Joanie asked Gib. He shook his head.

Gib got up to go to the bathroom. As he walked through the club, he realized that the three rounds of Jack Daniels with a beer chaser, had delivered him to the outer borders

of groggy.

He took a long, slow time to piss, trying to clear his head. While he was there, two khakis came in and took the two free urinals, laughing loudly. One of the khakis was actually wearing a pair of jeans, and his friend said to him, "I been meaning to ask, why the hell are you wearing pants?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dude, it's Vegas, not fucking Phoenix. The strippers here get really physical. If you're wearing shorts and boxers, they can tickle your balls, man."

Gib looked down at his black t-shirt and his faded green army pants cutoffs. He looked like one paycheck away from homeless, but maybe wearing shorts made him look like an experienced club goer.

He shook the last drops of piss onto the porcelain and zipped up. The attendant at the sinks asked him if he wanted a mint, or a pack of cigarettes, or anything else from the tray in front of him. Gib thought about it, decided that if he was going to be debauched, he might as well get a pack of Marlboros to go along with it. He took the cigarettes and the matches out of the bathroom to light up.

Gib turned around to head back to Ruth and Joanie. As he did, he bumped into a short, older man, spilling the man's drink. Gib murmured an apology for bumping the man, and handed him a drink ticket to replace the spilled drink. The man looked at the ticket in amusement, which was when Gib realized who he had just handed a drink ticket.

Gib gaped at the wavy, greased hair, streaked with grey, the tanned skin of the short man's face that looked as if it had happily earned every wrinkle, the black shirt with the loosened collar, and all Gib could think was *I always thought he was a lot taller*. But then again, whenever Gib had read the man's magazine, he had always paid more attention to the women in the centerfold.

Gib stared while the magazine publisher looked around without a sign of apprehension of self-consciousness. In fact, the publisher had a look of total confidence that something interesting was about to happen to him. When one of the thick men arrived and gave Gib a baleful look before he hustled his charge away, the aging Playboy seemed to accept this pedestrian payoff to his expectation with cheerful aplomb – just one more timewaste on the road to fascination.

When Gib got back to his table and told the two women about who he'd seen, they asked him what the publisher had looked like.

"Like a cheery little porn gnome," Gib said.

A few minutes later, Gib was sitting at a corner booth in the VIP Room, his wallet lighter by two hundred dollars. This appeared to guarantee him three dances – "They let a lot more go on here," Joanie avowed – and a hundred dollars worth of drinks – which was about three rounds, Gib realized, for all three of them.

Joanie was clearly feeling the effects of the tequila, so she excused herself to go to the bathroom and make some song requests for the VIP room.

"What the hell is going on?" Gib asked Ruth. "What are we doing?"

"I wanted to see everything," Ruth answered. "Including how VIPs get treated."

Interestingly, Ruth wasn't the only woman in the large room. Two booths away, a skinny couple dressed all in black spoke in French to each other while a large-breasted woman danced for the man. Both of the French speakers appeared to be aroused, but

trying to be sophisticated about it.

"I haven't been making faces that dumb, have I?" Gib asked Ruth.

Ruth considered the question for so long, Gib finally said, "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Gib ended up shelling another two hundred over the next few hours. While he moved on to coffee, Ruth joined Joanie in drinking tequila. Even so, the evening took on that random diassociative quality that any really good night out takes on, when the evening jumps around, seems thick with communication, changes tense.

"Joanie, are there such things as nipple implants?"

"God damn, I hated *Showgirls*. First of all, cocktail waitresses make good money. They don't live in *trailers*."

While giving Joanie a backrub, Gib notices she has a mole just to the left of her spine right below her neck. Even after five lap dances (Ruth takes one just out of curiosity, and she and Joanie collapse laughing after it's over), he knows that more than breasts or lips or buttocks, he will remember the small brown mole. It will be his secret, something that will cement the experience in his memory.

Joanie hums along with the music during one dance to an Aerosmith song.

"I thought you were supposed to make fake orgasm moans."

"Oh, I never fake moans." Joanie pauses and thinks about it. "Well, *sometimes*."

All three of them crack up.

Gib looks down as Joanie has her head lowered between his legs and is rubbing her skull into his groin. Her hand sneaks up the left leg of his shorts and tickles his testicles. Gib remembers the khaki talk in the bathroom and breaks into a wide smile. *It's not Phoenix, dude.*

During one dance Gib looks over at Ruth and finds her resting her head on her hand, studying him up close. When he looks at her, she closes her eyes and kisses him. For Gib, it is the most unbelievably erotic moment of the entire evening. It takes them a long while to finish kissing, and when Gib looks back at Joanie sitting on his lap, he is expecting to see a smirk, and is surprised to see a happy smile.

Joanie: "All topless dancers I've ever met are crazy."

Joanie: "Including me."

Ruth: "So if all topless dancers are crazy, what kind of crazy are you?"

Pause.

Joanie: "You don't want to know. I'll maybe tell you later."

Ruth is in the bathroom, and Joanie is drinking her tequila.

"I hate to say this, but you're really a nice guy."

"Normally, I'd take that as an insult. But not here."

Joanie smiles.

“But what makes for a nice guy in a strip club?”

Joanie thinks about it. “You came in here with no expectations. Once you relaxed, anyway.”

“I’m always tense before I get on a roller coaster. But once the coaster’s going, I don’t demand to go on my own special track.”

“Yeah, but at this place, there’s a lot of different tracks.”

Ruth: “You know what I like about Joanie? She’s *real*.”

Joanie: “No, I’m not!”

“What time is it?” Gib asks, always the wrong question to ask when you’re having a good time.

“4:30,” Joanie says. “Actually, I was going to leave at 5.”

Ruth and Gib look at each other.

“Wow,” Gib says.

“Yeah. *Much* better than Siegfried and Roy.”

“All right, we should settle up,” he says.

“The tab’s all covered. And you gave all your money to Joanie,” Ruth says.

Gib raises his eyebrows. “All of it? No, I don’t think so. I should end tonight flat broke on the Vegas Strip.” Gib pulls out his pockets and empties a five, three ones onto the table onto the table. Ruth gives him a warning look, but Joanie laughs and grabs up the bills. But even she shakes her head when Gib pulls all his change out and dumps it on the table.

“Hell, I don’t want to carry change.” Then she reconsiders. “Well, I can always use the quarters for laundry.”

Tense Sense Restoration

Near the exit, Gib stood and waited for Ruth to get out of the bathroom. Joanie said to him, “Was that really all your cash?”

“Yup.”

“Can you get something out of the ATM?”

“Nope, already withdrew the limit today.”

“So you can’t even pay for a cab home?”

Gib thinks about it. “Nope. I thought I’d walk.”

“Walk? Where are you staying?”

“Caesar’s.”

“That’s miles from here! Just wait here, and I’ll give you a ride home.”

Joanie walked up the nearby stairs and left Gib to ponder. It was awfully kind of her to offer, but he thought it would kind of destroy the image. Flat busted in Vegas, hoofing it. And he wanted to see if there was a part of the clock that was even too late for the Strip.

So he took off walking. He figured Ruth would get the ride from Joanie. One of the guys at the front door asked him if he wanted a cab. Gib shook his head and asked the guy which direction was south.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a little turned around, is all. Which way is Caesar’s?”

The guy pointed, then looked confused. “Are you walking?”

“Sure.” Gib gave a salute and turned south on the Strip.

The first thing he noticed was how far away all the lights seemed. He could see Circus Circus, Treasure Island, the Stardust, and a bit of the Caesar’s Palace sign, but they finally were a manageable size. Scenic strip malls advertised gourmet chocolate and check cashing. Mini-mall security guards in yellow jackets shooed hookers and their potential customers out of the parking lots. He studied sexual impotence clinics, bar after bar after bar, and then stopped at a donut shop where he tried to get a jelly donut and a large cup of coffee before he remembered his pockets were empty. He went back outside and lit up a cigarette to smoke while he walked. Soon, he found a rhythm that ate up the yards.

After about ten minutes, he hit the first big landmark, the Stratosphere, a neon palace with a tower attached. The building looked like a abandoned toy for Titan children, who forgot to turn off the lights in their toy when they left.

A picture formed in Gib’s mind of the ultimate Vegas casino, a mammoth project that would overwhelm the landscape, even dwarfing the nearby mountains. The lights from such a mammoth building would, on a clear night, be visible in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The hotel would be able to host the entire House of Representatives and the Senate in the pool area alone, with room for every player and coach in the NBA, and fifteen randomly selected baseball and football teams. It would have two huge towers, the shortest of which would be twice the size of the Sears Tower. The larger one would be used to launch satellites and shuttles.

The theme of the hotel would be reminiscent of Italy, or Greece, Or Ireland or Arabia, or some other damn place half-remembered from travel magazines and childhood stories. But where any of the source material was close to human size, for human needs, the Vegas descendant would be smooth where life was ragged, bright where the world was shadowy.

Dragging on his smoke, Gib realized how oddly safe he felt. The ravenous Vegas Beast had been fed enough cash during the day and was half-asleep, taking a couple of calm hours. Gib stopped, and smelled the desert air, reveling in how pleasant the fall night was.

As he got closer and closer to Caesar’s Palace (passing the “Check Casher to the Stars” on his way), he noticed the street names for the first time and was amazed at how prosaic they were. In Vegas, it seemed if a street was named Church Street, all you had to do was look and there would be a cathedral waiting for your worship. And most casinos had their own streets. Sahara Avenue, Circus Circus Drive, Desert Inn Road.

Though the streets were relatively empty, the people who were out and about were a bit more intriguing than the khakis. Aside from the people just getting off shifts from the hotels, standing at bus stops, there were characters. Like the guy with a metal detector who Gib first saw covering the lawn at the Sahara. Later, the guy, having donned a surplus army jacket and a leather bomber helmet, sped past Gib on a beat down bicycle, his metal detector held out in front of him like a lance. Don Quixote de la Spare Change.

One of the wonderful things about walking along Las Vegas Boulevard is that he never had to search very far to find a bathroom. Gib happily got rid of some beer at the

Sahara, pissed away some more at the Desert Inn, and he took a crap at Harrah's.

When he finally arrived at Caesar's, dawn was struggling its way over the horizon, though from the middle of the strip, it was hard to tell. The act of walking into his own hotel made him realize how tired he was. At the front door of his room, he could hear laughter from inside. When he opened the door, Joanie was just handing a fresh bottle of tequila back to Ruth.

"Hey, walker! You ditched us!" Joanie called out. She and Ruth both fell out laughing.

"Hey, Gib! You know Kathryn, don't you?" Ruth yelled.

"Kathryn?" Gib asked.

"My real name is Kathryn," Joanie said, carefully enunciating her words, but even so, she slurred quite a bit. "My parents live in Vegas, so just to be careful, I use a stage name. It's no big deal. Joanie stands out because it's so normal. Especially surrounded Emerald, Ruby, Diamond, Sapphire, Topaz, Candi, Barbi, Cyndi, Mindy, Mandy, Mustang – hell, there was even one girl who changed her name to match every time she traded in her car, so she's been Chrysler, Dodge, Cadillac, and Cherokee."

"Come on, Gib, have a shot!" Ruth yelled.

"No, thanks. I'm really beat."

"Well, we girls have got some partying left to do, so either you have a drink or you go sleep in the bathroom."

With a blanket stuffed under him, and two pillows, the bathtub wasn't so bad. With the door closed, he only heard the women when the laughter got really loud. So he tried to relax in the tub and stared at the orange night light.

As his mind drifted away, he thought about fake names. He was a little disappointed to hear Joanie was a stage name. It didn't seem like the kind of name you could build some elaborate and mythical tale behind. Breathy voice: "Oh, no, mister, I'm dancing to pay for my degree in meteorology. You can call me Cirrus."

And of course, thinking about fake names got Gib to thinking about his own fake name. Like a rock star or a film star whose fake life was bigger than the real one, Gib was becoming a bigger success in his fake life than in his real one. Friends, a good job, a woman like Ruth who wanted to spend time with him. If you looked at it objectively, the only thing getting in the way of a perfect life was the FBI.

Luckily, before that conclusion could penetrate deep enough into his consciousness to really depress him, Gib fell asleep.

"Imperfect Permanence"

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them.

George Bernard Shaw

Gib woke up, tossed the sheets and pillows out of the tub, and turned on the shower. The instant spray of cold woke him up better than a pot of coffee. As the water got hot, he let it spray down onto his head, pleased at the lack of hangover.

When he emerged into the main room, a towel wrapped around his waist, it was clear Ruth couldn't say the same. As Gib pulled his backpack out of the closet and found a clean shirt, he saw Ruth only as a shapeless lump under her blankets. Only a few strands of blond hair poking out from under the covers gave any indication the lump was human.

Deciding that it wasn't safe to try to wake her up, Gib went downstairs to scare up some food. After scrambled eggs, a bagel, some sausage, and cup after cup of coffee, he picked up two muffins (one blueberry and one corn), two cups of coffee to go, and headed back up to the room. He set the muffins and the coffee down on the table between the two beds, taking the lids off the coffee and waving some of the steam toward the lump of Ruth. Then Gib stripped all the blankets and sheets off his bed, threw them in the corner, and stretched out to watch TV.

Flipping around, he finally found an old Walter Matthau movie, *Hopscotch*, about a disgruntled CIA agent. He vaguely remembered when the movie first came out on cable, in the early eighties. One night, he and Uncle Joseph had watched Matthau outwit the CIA while Gibson Senior had been meeting in his home office, browbeating a Midwestern Senator about a desired chunk of pork. During the movie, Uncle Joseph had analyzed the plausibility from the perspective of a lifelong member of the American security establishment. After it was over, Uncle Joseph had declared, "What a great piece of junk!"

"I thought you liked it."

"Loved it! Plot would never happen, though. In real life? That guy would have a bullet in his head in about a day. Still, that was fun. Got the characters just right, especially how the idiots are in charge."

"But aren't you in charge?"

Uncle Joseph looked over sharply, before he realized Gib was asking an honest question, not taking a cheap shot. "When everyone else is an idiot, it makes it easier for smart guys like me and your Dad to run things. *Actually* run things, not just make speeches about it."

Watching the movie on TV now, years later, Gib was amazed to see Walter Matthau playing not just the lead, but the *romantic* lead, with Glenda Jackson apparently lusting after Matthau's wrinkled face, with its hound dog eyes, jowls, and potato nose. Just another example of how weird the early 80s were, Gib thought. Or maybe all those polls were right when women claimed to value a sense of humor most.

Gib heard a stirring to his right, and looked over to see Ruth's bloodshot eyes staring at him just over the edge of the blanket.

"Mm mell mofffy," Ruth's muffled voice said through the covers.

“What?”

Ruth carefully peeled the blanket down the necessary amount. “I smell coffee.”

Gib pointed to the bedside table. He watched Ruth’s eyes slowly roll over to look at the by-now barely steaming cup of coffee. The they shifted, diamond cutter careful, to the two muffins, corn and blueberry, sitting next to the coffee. Her eyelids slowly closed.

Seconds passed.

Then Ruth exploded out of the morass of bedclothes and ran to the bathroom, moments before her stomach began to expel its unruly contents.

Gib listened for a bit before he went into the bathroom, ran some cool water over a washcloth and handed it to Ruth. He walked back out of the bathroom. After about ten minutes, he asked if she needed anything.

“Just go away,” Ruth gurgled.

Gib killed a few hours in the casinos, losing money.

When he got back, Ruth was gone, and, blessedly, the room had been cleaned. After playing with the TV for a while, Gib got some ice, stuck some of it in a fresh cup, and poured a couple fingers of leftover tequila after it. It wasn’t sipping whiskey, but it was that or water.

While Gib had been gambling, Ruth had gotten in touch with the Green Ragers and had left Gib a note. The Ragers were at a campground in Pomona, just off the 10. After looking at a map, Gib figured it would be about a four hour drive, depending on how fast he wanted to drive. Since the plan was to get into Disneyland the minute it opened at 9 AM, Garrity wanted to be in the parking lot around 8 AM. Calculating packing up time, breakfast, and the drive from the campground to the amusement park, Garrity thought Gib and Ruth should get to the campground around 6 AM. Which meant they should leave Vegas around 2 AM.

After planning the drive, Gib dozed off in the chair for an vague period of time until he heard Ruth come back. Without opening his eyes, he could tell she felt better. Her walk had its usual energy, and he could hear her vaguely humming to herself as she went into the bathroom. He dozed back off again.

“Open your eyes,” Ruth said, waking him. “I have something to show you.”

When Gib opened up, Ruth slid a piece of official-looking paper across the table at him. He only had to read “Clark County Marriage Bureau” to know what the paper was.

“So you got a marriage license, huh?”

“Well, it’s not official. Here’s my idea. Tonight, we go through the ceremony. I found an Elvis who’s a pastor at a chapel over near Fremont. Then we see how it takes. Being hitched, I mean. If we decide we like it, we can always fill out the paperwork later.”

“You really want to see how far I’ll take this, don’t you?”

Ruth smiled. “I *triple* dare you.”

In three hours, Ruth moved like a wedding-planning demon.

The Preacher

Pastor Elvis agreed to schedule the ceremony at midnight on the dot.

Guests of Honor

Ruth got a hold of Joanie, convincing her not only to be the Maid of Honor, but to bring along a Best Man for good measure.

Wardrobe

Ruth got the hotel staff to recommended a dress shop. It took Ruth fifteen minutes to emerge from said shop with a box under her arm, the contents of which she refused to let Gib see. Shoes took a bit more time, but a shop in North Las Vegas provided a pair of platform tennis shoes that made Ruth bounce around as if she were spring loaded.

It cost an extra twenty to convince the guy running the tuxedo rental place to let Gib drop the tux off at 2 AM.. But he walked out with monkey suit in hand, along with a pink and black polka dot bowtie-and-cummerbund combination.

Catering

Hand rolled cigars were found at a small store along the Strip with pictures of boxers and entertainers along the walls. In a Vons supermarket, Gib found two round white cakes of different sizes. Then, as directed, he went to the baking aisle and grabbed a can of white frosting. More importantly, he found a cheap "bride and groom" cake candle. It looked waxy and unpleasant, but it was also recognizably a bride and groom, so Gib snatched it up and brought it back to Ruth and the shopping cart. She had found four bottles of Moët champagne in the liquor section.

"All right, we're ready," Ruth decided. On their way out of the store, Gib remembered to get shoe polish and a couple of dish rags.

Back in the room, Ruth took over the bathroom while Gib climbed into his tux in the main room. As it turned out the cummerbund was too tight and the pants were too loose, but a shoelace extender fixed the first problem, and Gib decided he'd just have to live with second one.

He took off his clothes back off to put the wedding cake together, slathering on huge gobs of frosting to glue the two cakes into one two-layered whole. When he finally stopped, the cake looked a lot like Richard Dreyfus had sculpted it out of mashed potatoes. But with the Bride and Groom candle on top, at least the idea got across.

Then Gib polished his combat boots up to a decent gleam. After lacing the boots up, Gib put the shirt, tie and jacket back on, slicking down his hair with some melted ice. He looked at himself in the mirror. *Pretty slick*, he decided. *But who doesn't look good in a tux?*

When Ruth reappeared, Gib's jaw went slack. After a few seconds of staring, he felt drool starting to run over his bottom lip, so he pushed his mouth closed.

Ruth had applied some fake tan lotion, so her legs, face and arms were a light brown. She had done her blonde hair up in a twisted cruller spiral that would have made Marie Antoinette's hairdresser curse in bitter envy. Perched on the top of her platform tennis shoes, she equaled or surpassed Gib's six foot of height.

And the dress.

The only way to describe the dress was by where it ended. The neck ended just above the line of Ruth's breasts, showing off her cleavage to great effect. The sleeves ended just past the distinct muscles of her shoulders, calling attention to her biceps. The bottom of the dress ended just inches below the curve of her ass. And the white spandex material of the dress ended just millimeters past the surface of Ruth's skin.

Ruth looked as if she were wearing a solid sheath of water that had been magically dyed to look like a dress. Gib could see the curve of Ruth's belly button (an outie), count the muscles of her abdomen, and gape at where her pectoral muscles flowed down from her arms and became the swell of her breasts.

The white fishnet stockings weren't half-bad, either.

"I guess," Ruth said, as Gib continued to stare silently, "I don't have to ask how I look."

"No. But I'll tell you anyway. You look mythical. I didn't think actual human beings ever looked that good outside of a movie screen or a magazine."

"That's good, then," Ruth said. She looked Gib over. "You look okay, too."

"Standing next to you, I could have the crown jewels of England and the Hope Diamond on my head and still look like a bucket of shit."

For a few minutes, they just stood around and looked at each other.

Eventually, Ruth said, "I hate to ruin all this, but it's 10:30 already. We've got to take all these clothes off and do one last thing before the wedding."

"Do what?"

"I'm not about to consummate this marriage in the back of your damn car. SO we're taking care of it now."

In seconds, Gib discovered the ragged lines where Ruth hadn't bothered to apply the fake tan.

The wedding went off without a hitch. Joanie/Kathryn, the Maid of Honor, came in black leather, while the Larry, the Best Man was a glorious sight, in between sets where he performed as Joan Crawford.

They all had cake and talked while Pastor Elvis got ready. The smell of cheap bourbon wafting off Pastor E's black wig and sparkling clothes notwithstanding, he performed the ceremony without a hitch. At the stroke of midnight, he pronounced them man and wife. While bride kissing was happening, Pastor E pulled out a guitar and sang "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You", followed by "All Shook Up". Larry the Best Man knew the songs well enough to sing harmonies, which pleased Pastor E so much he played "Burning Love" (which wasn't part of the standard fee).

Joanie/Kathryn kept crying, and saying, "This is just *beautiful*."

Ruth handed out cake as Gib and Larry popped the bottles of champagne, at which point Gib realized they'd forgotten to buy glasses. So they just handed the bottles around instead. Pastor Elvis complimented on their choice of bubbly.

At 12:30, Ruth and Gib ran out to the car, with Pastor Elvis, Joanie and Larry throwing rice after them. Gib started up the car, but then heard Joanie shout.

"Can you give me and Larry rides?" she asked.

After driving the Maid of Honor and the Best Man to their jobs, Gib and Ruth

went back to the hotel. They had already checked out, but they had to pick up their bags. As they walked through the lobby, members of the hotel staff clapped and cheered.

“You’re making quite an impression,” Gib said to Ruth, who just smiled.

Gib changed back into a black t-shirt and army shorts in the bathroom, but Ruth stayed dressed in the spandex. “I want to savor the moment a while longer,” she said.

At the tux shop, the clerk was sleepy and prepared to be surly, but he took one look at Ruth, and all thoughts vanished from his head long enough for Gib to get his deposit back.

By quarter to two, Gib was pulling onto I-15 heading toward Los Angeles. It was a cool night, but he kept the top down while Ruth drank champagne out of the bottle and looked up at the stars.

For a long time, Ruth made no sound except for an occasional contented sigh. But when they crossed the state line into California, she turned to Gib and said, “Thank you. Best wedding I ever had.”

"Disneyland"

At Disneyland one creates (with a great deal of help) the idea that Every Thing Not Required Is Forbidden. And so we see, as in any other totalitarian state, the internalization of authority, and its transformation into a Sense of Right.

David Mamet

The Goat pulled into the campground around 6:30 AM. Gib decided he probably could have shaved a half an hour off the time, on the desert road between Vegas and LA, but he had mulled over the wedding for most of the drive, picking out moments of enjoyment. As he indulged in instant nostalgia, his speed would drift off. He would eventually glance down at the speedometer and see he was only going 75, and curse his inattentiveness. He would accelerate back to a more reasonable speed of 95 and apologize to the GTO for embarrassing it. He said the words quietly, though, so Ruth wouldn't hear him and make fun of him.

A medium fog was lying over the campground, and it made the drive through it exceedingly spooky. To get to the Ragers's site, Gib drove past roads full of campers with senior citizens sitting outside already, even at the early hour. The camper people watched Gib and Ruth through the early morning fog without any expression -- not hostility, nor friendliness.

Finally, they saw a crowd of people standing around a cookfire and a picnic table. Almost all of the people had grey hair except for and two families with little kids and the three Ragers. Marion and Campy were cooking a huge breakfast, including oatmeal that was steaming in a huge pot on the fire, scrambled eggs, bacon and hot coffee. Garrity was serving out the food from the table and holding court. In the mist, it looked like a party that had started the night before and was still going strong.

Once Gib and Ruth walked up, Marion and Campy started to clean and pack everything while Garrity said goodbye and a couple of words to each person. Most people looked startled for a second when he brought up the environment, but Garrity charmed even the most reluctant of them. He left a stack of photocopied pamphlets on the table as he waved goodbye. Some of the older folks even picked them up and started to read.

"Come on," he said to Gib and Ruth as he put his arms around their shoulders and steered them toward the car. "Campy and Frank will follow us in the van."

"You're riding with us?" Gib asked, irritated but trying not to show it.

"Sure! You've got a cool car!"

Gib looked across at Ruth and she rolled her eyes as she mimed a chattering mouth with her hands. After helping Campy and Marion load up the van, they made their way back to 210 which would turn into 57 and head south toward Anaheim and Disneyland. Gib hoped against the odds that Garrity would nap, but instead he leaned over the back seat with his head between Ruth and Gib and started a non-stop talkathon.

"You ever been to Disneyland before, Gib?"

"No, World."

"Right. Epcot Center and alligators, the whole shebang. I'll bet you loved it."

"Not really."

Garrity looked shocked. "What? A kid not loving anything Disney? What was

wrong?"

"It was a class trip for high school and I was sixteen. The only thing a sixteen year old can do at Disneyworld is try to buy beer and hit on girls in front of her parents. And fail miserably at both."

"Geeze, Gib. Didn't you have any sense of fun? Amusements parks are great! Disney, Six Flags, Great Adventure. Anything."

"Ask Ethan about roller coasters," Ruth said.

Garrity's eyes widened with delight. "*Roller* coasters! I *love* roller coasters! They're the best thing in the world. When I was a kid, my Dad would take me along on business trips if they went anywhere near a roller coaster I'd heard of. I mean, one time in Cleveland, he ditched out on reservations at a four-star French restaurant when the Maitre D' told him about a rickety old wooden deathtrap at a traveling carnny thirty miles south of there."

"It's almost heartwarming," Ruth said.

"You can't tell me you don't like roller coasters, Gib."

"They're okay, I guess. Like cheesecake. I like it fine, but I never think to have it on my own."

"Wow, that kills me. I think they're as good as sex!"

Ruth laughed.

"No, seriously!" Garrity said defensively. "Maybe even better, cause they're reliable. Speed and centrifugal force."

"Wait, let me tell you my best roller coaster story. My Dad took me on a trip to New York when I was eight. I had read everything I could about the Coney Island Cyclone -- it was my whole life for the month leading up to the trip. The Cyclone opened on June 26, 1927. It's not the oldest wooden coaster still in existence -- there's one in Alltoona, Pennsylvania that was built in 1902. But it's a legend."

"That's pretty good," Ruth said. "How'd you remember all that?"

"I told you, this is my favorite roller coaster story. And the Cyclone is my favorite roller coaster. Here's what happened. We flew into LaGuardia at night, and we stayed in the Waldorf. I have this memory of staring up at the huge clock in the lobby of the Waldorf."

"My father had a business meeting at 7:30 AM, and he said he would be back by eleven to take me to Coney Island for the afternoon. I had found out there was an all-day price for the ride, where you could ride for as long as you wanted for most of the day, until about four o'clock. So at 10:30, I was ready and waiting in the lobby of the Waldorf. I was too excited to sit down, so I started pacing around, and every few minutes I would look up at the clock -- made out of this dark, dark, wood. They must have just polished it, because I remember that it smelled of lemon oil. I even remember asking one of the clerks if the clock had the right time. Because eleven came and went and Dad didn't show. I found out later the meeting ran long."

"But all I knew was that he wasn't there, and that the Cyclone was rolling up and down without me. Every time I looked up, it was like being stabbed."

Garrity paused and looked at both Gib and Ruth. "No, that's not right. That's me trying to be clever. I'm not a writer like you, Gib, so I probably sound stupid trying to make a metaphor or something."

"No, you're fine," Ruth said. Gib just nodded.

"Except I'm not telling the truth," Garrity said. "It didn't feel like being stabbed. It felt just like walking home from elementary school and having to pee. Maybe home is only four or five blocks away, but it feels like forever. You cross your legs and limp along and try not to think of waterfalls or rivers. I'll bet every little kid who walks home knows what that feels like. Unless maybe little girls pee differently, and it's easier for them to hold it."

Both Gib and Garrity waited for Ruth to chip in, but she just shook her head.

"Trade secrets, gentlemen."

Garrity said. "So at twenty after eleven, I just took off. I got in a cab and asked the cabbie to take me to Coney. He didn't even look at me, just took off. About ten blocks south, he finally realized I was just a kid in the back seat. We were stopped at a traffic light and he gently asked me if I had enough money to pay for a ride to Coney. I didn't have any idea, so he took me to a subway, and told me to get on the train at this exact stop, and take it to the end of the line, and that would be Coney. He didn't even charge me for the ten block ride -- imagine a New York cabbie doing that.

"It took about an hour, but at the end of the line, I followed the crowd, and there was the Boardwalk. Nathan's hot dogs, freak shows, all that. I ran all the way to the ticket seller, and got a full pass. It didn't cost all my money, but I remember it was close to it. I didn't even have money for the subway ride back. But I didn't care. I just rode and rode for hours.

"Here's what I love about the Cyclone. The first drop. Some people even capitalize it." Garrity held up his hands and framed his words. "The Drop. It's amazing. There are taller drops around and crazy loop-the-loops and all sort of stuff, but The Drop is always the best. You hit the first crest and drop eighty-five feet."

"Eighty-five feet?" Ruth asked.

"Oh, that's actually not that big a drop for a roller coaster. Some of the big steel one are a lot higher and drop further. But the Cyclone does it at a sixty degree angle. It's amazing. And at the bottom, the whole area looks like a blown up lumberyard, with debris everywhere. Then there's another drop and then a third one. There's only one spot that isn't breath taking, and I think that's deliberate, so people don't die of heart attacks."

"Ethan, what's fun about that?" Ruth asked. "Dropping a long way at high speeds sounds crazy to me."

"Oh, no. I told you it was like sex. You get pulled up to the top, the chains clacking the whole way, and that's like the foreplay, but it doesn't waste so much time. And then you get this huge blast of speed and terror and gravity where all your muscles lock and clench and you can barely breathe but you just disappear into the sensation. And then you get another moment of that, and another. Sounds like every description of a multiple orgasm I've ever heard. What's not to like about that?"

Ruth didn't look convinced. "What was your dad doing during all of this?" she asked.

Garrity laughed. "That's the craziest part. He got there at about noon, if I remember right. When he couldn't find me, he went ass over teakettle. Called the cops and everything. The cops get there, and they get pretty hopped up, because a kid vanishing in the Waldorf would be pretty big news.

"So they were calling all cars or sending out APBs or whatever it is cops do. Then the desk clerk tells them he saw me walk out. So they ask the doorman, and he says he got me a cab. And they track the cabbie down on the radio, and he tells the whole train to Coney story. The upshot is, a couple of hours later, I'm coming into the last turn and I see all these cops at the entrance to the Cyclone, and when I finally step out of the last car, there's my Dad, his face white as a sheet.

"He walked right up to me, and while he did he started cursing. It was quiet at first, but then he got louder and louder until finally he screaming out 'Fuck, shit, goddamnit' and standing right in front of me. Then he grabbed me up in a big bear hug and started bawling. I didn't know what was wrong, so I started crying, too. The cops were worried they were going to have to pull him off of me, like he was a crazy child beater. Dad was shaking, so we got a hot dog and sat and ate it while I said how sorry I was for leaving without him. Because, you know, the Cyclone was so cool and it was a shame he missed it."

Ruth burst out laughing. "Not because you got the cops involved, or because you'd almost frightened him to death, but because he couldn't ride the Cyclone with you."

"Yup."

Ruth kept laughing, and Garrity had a satisfied smile on his face. Gib chuckled a little bit, but mostly, he tried to imagine Gibson Senior laughing, crying or hugging, all at once, and couldn't do it.

Finally, Garrity patted them both on the back and laid down in the back seat. Gib thought he was sleeping, but Garrity had one last thing to say.

"The only decent roller coaster at Disneyland is Space Mountain, and it's just average. There's some other okay rides there. We'll make sure to hit them all, if we don't get kicked out quick for causing trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Gib asked.

"You'll see. Make sure to get one of the cameras out of the van. You guys are our backup if the main cameras get taken away. We've heard Disney is notorious for confiscating tapes."

"Seriously, Ethan, what's the plan?" Gib asked. "What's going on?"

"Gib, Gib, Gib. If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise. I'll tell you this, though. First we're going to stand in line, and then we're not going to stand in line." In a couple of minutes, they could hear Garrity snoring loudly, even over the wind.

They got to Disneyland a while later, parked and waited for Campy and Marion to join them. When the van finally showed up, Garrity walked over and jumped in the side door. Gib assumed the Ragers were doing some Spicoli action, until the van door opened again. Both Marion and Campy had large bags full of video equipment, including stacks of blank tapes and extra batteries. Marion handed a third bag to Ruth, showed her how to use the camera. Then they all walked to the gate.

"You ever been to Disneyland, Campy?" Ruth asked.

"Yeah." Campy's face invited no more conversation, and he walked to the front of the group.

At the entry gate, Garrity made sure that Gib and Ruth were a few admissions behind. "We don't want anyone to know you're with us until it's too late. You're our ace in the hole," he said with a grin.

When the three men had walked a bit ahead, Gib commented to Ruth, "Do you have any idea what they're going to do?"

Ruth shrugged. "Who cares? Just try to enjoy yourself."

And for a few hours, they did. They followed the Ragers around, and talked about nothing in particular, and made dumb jokes while they stood in lines. The lines were already getting long, even this early in the day. But the five of them, in their separate groups of three and two, rode every ride that was even marginally exciting, finally finishing with Space Mountain before the Ragers led Gib and Ruth to a restaurant in Main Town, USA, where they all sat down together.

The restaurant was meant for the family crowd, and most of the tables were filled with parents trying to keep their kids' screaming down to tolerable volumes. The combined effect of all the excited children was like standing on a runway at an airport, listening to planes take off. Gib felt a headache developing.

Annoyed, he asked Garrity, "I thought we were supposed to stay far away from you guys."

Campy grunted agreement. He seemed surprised to agree with Gib about anything. Garrity waved it off.

"It's just breakfast. I don't see any surveillance cameras, do you?" Garrity asked.

Frank Marion said, "There's one over by the hostess' table. There's another one out in the main area. That's it."

Gib, not having thought about it, twisted around but couldn't spot anything.

"Nothing to worry about," Garrity said. "Disney has surveillance on everything, all the time. Just make sure not to pull out your pee-pee."

"Let's just enjoy lunch, okay?" Ruth said, annoyed.

After the drinks arrived, Garrity decided to make small talk.

"Gib, we've been wondering how you heard about The Space."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we know you hung around originally because you thought there was a story. Turned out to be true! But Campy was wondering how you heard about us in the first place."

"I don't really remember."

"Oh come on! Everything about The Space must be really important to you! You do all that volunteer work. And we all have a pretty good idea of why you're still hanging around." Garrity winked at Ruth. "When are you two crazy kids going to tie the knot?"

Gib, desperately trying to change the subject, blurted out: "Yesterday!"

Ruth looked at him with horror. Both Campy and Marion looked extremely interested, but Garrity hardly noticed.

"Yesterday?" Garrity laughed, clearly thinking Gib was making some sort of joke. "Oh, so you're *newlyweds*! That's really sweet." He winked broadly. The other two men, reassured because Garrity thought it was a joke, leaned back in their chairs.

"So this is your *honeymoon*?" Garrity said. "We should get you a gift. What's the day anniversary? Gold? Silver? Paper? Wait, I think it's 'keychain'."

Marion laughed.

"I'll bet I can find something in the gift store outside." Garrity got up just as the waitress arrived with their food. Before anyone could say otherwise, Garrity was off and

running. When Gib saw him stop and talk with the hostess, he groaned. Whatever Garrity was planning, it was going to be extremely embarrassing -- no question about it.

As the rest of them ate, the only bit of conversation was Campy, who at one point snorted, said to himself, "Married," then laughed quietly as he drank his coffee.

Suddenly, Garrity reappeared and presented Gib and Ruth with matching Mickey and Minnie keychains.

"Thanks, Ethan," Gib said. "Hey, what were you talking about with --"

"No time, Gib. Food's getting cold!" Garrity ate quickly, keeping his mouth too full to talk.

Just as the waitress was clearing the plates, a large group of Disney characters walked into the restaurant and started posing for pictures with kids and their families. Gib tried to drink his coffee, but the flashes fanned the flames of his headache. He put his face in his hands and tried not to look.

When he finally looked up, he was surrounded. On one side of the table, near Garrity, were Goofy and Pluto. Snow White, Belle and one of the three pigs were helping Ruth out of her chair. Campy and Marion were laughing uproariously. Gib found himself pulled gently out of his seat and listened as Snow White announced, "We have a pair of *newlyweds* here today!" The restaurant broke into a wave of applause and cheers. When the applause died out, there was a tiny little voice that asked, "Ma! What does 'newlyweds' mean?"

The hostess and a couple of waitresses wheeled in a cake and presented a knife to Gib. Stunned and confused, he had no idea what to do with the blade. As if she expected that reaction, the hostess passed the knife on to Ruth, who sliced into the cake. She asked the hostess to hand out slices until they ran out.

At that point, Garrity jumped up and yelled, "We need a picture!" He herded the characters into a group behind Gib, Ruth and the cake. Campy walked behind the whole group to stand next to Garrity while Marion pulled out his non-video camera and started asking people to move in closer together.

Garrity was behind Pluto, and he couldn't see over the big dog's head. Finally, desperate to be seen, Garrity jumped on Pluto's back right when Marion yelled, "Say cheese". Piggybacking, Garrity wrapped one arm around the dog's neck, swung his other hand and his face around the plushy dog's shoulder, and flashed a peace sign at the camera just as the flash went off.

No one except Marion had noticed what Garrity had done until the group was breaking up, all full of smiles. Garrity slid off Pluto's back and let go. Pluto took an angry step away, bumping the Little Pig into an adjoining table in the process, then turned around to face Garrity.

Garrity had the strangest expression on his face as Pluto angrily stood in front of him, furry fists clenching. Garrity looked over at Gib and blurted out in a wondrous voice:

"Pluto's got *tits*!"

At which point, Pluto punched him right on the chin.

Garrity went spilling over the table behind him and crashed to the floor, which kicked off a general pandemonium in the restaurant. As Pluto ran out of the restaurant, knocking over the wedding cake as she ran, Campy picked the stunned Garrity up off the floor, then shoved him toward the exit. Stopping only to pick up the camera bags, Campy

tossed a pile of money on the table and dragged Marion with him as they followed Garrity.

Snow White ran off after Pluto, while Goofy and the Little Pig turned angrily toward Gib and Ruth. Belle just tried to keep a smile on her face. Evidently, it took all the control she had, because she didn't move a muscle, except to pull her smile tighter and wider.

Gib grabbed Ruth's hand and pushed his way past the costumed actors, yelling, "We don't know them! We were only sharing a table!"

The two of them raced for the exit. Goofy and the Little Pig tried to follow, but they kept tripping up on their oversized feet. The last thing Gib heard as he left the restaurant was a high-pitched voice asking, almost crying, "Mommy! What did he mean, 'Pluto's got tits?' What are tits, Mommy? What did he meeeeeeeean?" The final wail followed them out into the park.

Gib and Ruth couldn't find the Ragers at first, until Ruth finally realized the obvious destination. Back at Space Mountain, the line had stretched out longer than seemed possible, but Garrity and company were only a few feet ahead when Gib and Ruth joined the line. Garrity was standing just behind a family of four. The father was a rigid-looking sort, his hair in a buzz cut and his khakis neatly creased.

As they watched, Marion pulled out his video camera and started focusing and setting levels, preparing to film Garrity as they stood in line. After about ten minutes of the gradual crawl toward the front of the line, Garrity started talking in a loud, self-involved voice.

"You know, *statistically*, this is one of the safer rides in the whole park."

That gave Gib an idea of where things were heading. He felt really unpleasant watching Garrity go into a familiar character -- the loud, trouble-making pedant. Campy played along while Marion hung back and tried to act like a specific kind of camera-obsessed misanthrope, needing to film every single minute of his Disney trip.

"Really?" Campy said, and looked ready to receive wisdom.

"Oh yeah. Far as I remember, the only bad thing ever to happen at Space Mountain was one kid fell off the ride and ended up a paraplegic. Space Mountain isn't too deadly, not like the Matterhorn. And don't get me *started* on the PeopleMover."

The buzz cut father turned around to say something, but ended up staring directly into Campy's chest. Campy looked at Buzzcut like an ape observing his first banana of the day. The hostility faded from Buzzcut's face to be replaced by weariness.

The sun was beating down on the guy's head, he was herding two kids around, and to add to the fun, there were a couple of assholes talking about unpleasant stuff in front of the kids. *Big* assholes, though. Buzzcut's wife took one look at the situation, and put a pleading hand on his arm. Buzzcut rubbed his face, then announced to the kids that the line was too long; they'd come back later after getting a coke. The kids were unhappy, but Buzzcut added a bribe of ice cream to the coke, and that quieted them down.

Gib turned to Ruth and murmured in her ear. "This is making me really uncomfortable. I'm going to go get a drink. Hold my place?" He took the guide rope and lifted it up so he could limbo under.

"Maybe I will," Ruth said, "and maybe I won't."

Gib dropped the rope and turned around. "Uhhhhhh...?"

Ruth grabbed his shirt and pulled him close. "I can't believe you opened your big

mouth about getting married."

"Sorry! I wasn't thinking. I was thrown off by the whole restaurant scene."

"The *scene* wouldn't have happened if you'd kept *quiet*."

"Ruth, it just popped out. I'm sorry, okay? I wasn't thinking."

He looked into her eyes for a long minute until she finally let go of his shirt as the line made a spasmodic lurch forward. Her eyes were still tight with anger, but she indicated she was willing to let things go by smoothing his shirt over his chest.

Gib sighed quietly in relief and stepped over the new section of rope. "Do you want me to bring back a cold drink or something?"

"Fine."

Gib took a long time to find a drink stand, not wanting to get back to the line any sooner than necessary."

"Give me a large coke and a beer."

"We don't sell beer here, sir."

"I can't get a beer? Jesus Christ."

The vendor looked offended at his language. "Do you want two cokes, sir?"

"Fine."

By the time Gib got back to the Space Mountain line, Garrity's act had advanced up the line so far that it took Gib five minutes of walking just to find Ruth and the Ragers. Garrity's act had finally bogged down behind a Japanese family that appeared to think he was part of the entertainment provided by the park. Every time Garrity emphasized some statistic, they laughed and applauded. Frank Marion had even stopped filming.

Gib handed the drink over to Ruth, who looked grateful to see him. She held his hand and whispered in his ear, "Sorry for losing my temper. They didn't know you were telling the truth."

As Gib watched, the man he had built up as one of the biggest terrorist threats to the United States since the bombing of the Murrah Building was jabbering in front of a family of Japanese tourists who thought he was the cuddliest thing since the Pillsbury Dough Boy. By this time, even the people behind Garrity were laughing at him, people who had previously seen he and Campy as fairly threatening. As Gib watched, the Japanese father had his wife and two children pose with Garrity while he snapped their picture. Even Campy smiled.

Suddenly, Gib realized how on the edge everything was. Gib knew that, by now, if he was honest with Masturbatin' Bob, the worst he could get Green Rage arrested for was noise pollution. Norman Haddal had been all he had.

And Reuben would be no help. Garrity had spouted some environmental marketing, caused a traffic jam, showed some videos, and she had seen him as someone who would be bombing the White House as soon as he was ready. Maynard had agreed with her because he saw Green Rage appear on TV and in magazines. And Gib had fed their paranoid flames because it made his life easy.

Because Gib could feel that Maynard and Reuben were anxious to move. It was clear from the way Reuben had been reacting to his reports, and the way Maynard blew up after the article came out. If Gib didn't have something to give them soon, they would move with what they had. It might only amount to harassment, but it would ruin everyone involved, from the FBI to The Space.

Worst of all, Gib realized, this would all reflect badly on Uncle Joseph, who had as much as hijacked this investigation and put Gib in the catbird seat. When Gib was shown to be a complete flop, Uncle Joseph would lose a lot of clout. Gib had no illusions that part of the clout that remained would be used to grind Gib like hamburger.

If only Garrity and Green Rage had been something real! Something beyond an image and a nice haircut! If Green Rage had some big plan, some grand idea that Gib could present to Maynard and Reuben, then Gib knew he could work this case to whatever outcome he wanted. He could keep Ruth out of it. Garrity and Campy would have to be arrested, but Gib might even be able to keep Frank Marion out of trouble.

If he had something to offer.

Instead, he had these twerps.

Under air that felt like lead, Gib hunched his shoulders and looked at the back of Garrity's head, wondering what it would be like to punch him there as hard as he possibly could. No, punching him in the head would break his knuckles -- better to club him with an elbow and then kick him when he dropped to the ground. But then Campy would get involved, the damn dirty ape, and he would grind some Hamburger Gib. Even so, for the whole time it took to get to the boarding area for the ride, Gib contemplated mayhem.

The Japanese family was just about to board the ride when Campy started speaking to them, in what sounded like fluent Japanese. For the first couple of sentences, the father laughed happily, but he got entirely still and silent, while his wife gripped her children defensively. The little girl broke out into hysterical tears and had to be forced onto the ride. The attendants stood by, unsure of what to do, while the father and sat the purple-faced child next to him, pointedly putting himself between the girl and Campy.

After the train had left and Campy was standing at the head of the line waiting for the next one, Gib heard one of the attendants ask the big man what he had said to the family. Campy stared emotionlessly at the smaller man for a few moments. Then he said, "I told them about the 50-year old woman who was thrown out of the rear car of one of these things and bounced along the track. She wasn't able to get to her feet before the next train car hit her dead on, and dragged her along the tracks until her corpse, which was wedged under the lead train car like a doorstep, finally stopped the car after a full train length."

The next train car pulled in.

"That's a lie, of course," Campy said to the stunned attendant. "That didn't happen here, it happened on some other roller coaster."

Gib was glad he didn't have a gun.

Campy and Garrity got into the front car, while Frank Marion climbed into the next car -- alone, as no one else seemed to want to get too close to Campy.

"Better strap me in tight," Campy said calmly to the attendant, who got away from Campy as quickly as his duties would allow. He was still muttering to himself when he strapped Gib and Ruth in, one car short of the rear.

The ride itself went without incident.

Afterwards, the Ragers trucked off into the park, looking for more chances to wreak havoc. First, they stood in a few more ride lines, following the pattern they had started at Space Mountain. Mostly it was death statistics, but Garrity also crafted special spiels for particular rides. In the Small World line, he talked about kinds of child

prostitution and slavery from around the world, spending particular time describing what he called the "famous child whores of Thailand." During the ride itself, he called the out the sexual position trick most associated with each country.

"Hey, kids, French Kiss. That's when a boy and a girl tongue wrestle! In Amsterdam, prostitution is totally legal, did you know that? Do you know what Dutch Treat is?"

Waiting for the Pirates of the Caribbean, Garrity went into a graphic description of exactly what was involved in being "keelhauled." He included a specific description of what the "gizzard" was. There was also a rant about the nature of Caribbean slavery, using the phrase "the most overlooked genocide in history" more than once.

In the line for the Haunted House ride, Garrity described -- in excruciating detail -- an execution by lethal injection. Then he moved on to the intricacies of the electric chair.

Oddly enough, Gib noticed that the kids in the lines either ignored Garrity, or clapped and shouted approval at his graphic descriptions. A few looked as if they might have cried, but Garrity was too cheerful as he talked. The parents were another story, but Campy's ability to loom defused those situations. At Pirates of the Caribbean, Campy had also gulped down some pills that looked like Norman Haddal special mixes, chasing them with a large cherry drink, which spilled over his cheeks as he drank. The red drink had dried on his cheek like streak of blood, which he declined to wipe away. That alone had driven six families out of the line ahead of them without Garrity saying a word.

At least Garrity kept quiet during the rides themselves -- or, more precisely, the only sound he made was delighted shouting. As they followed along, Ruth explained to Gib the basic idea behind Garrity's antics.

"Campy told me they're demonstrating, let me see, what was it?" Ruth pulled a red colored pamphlet out of the bag of video equipment. "They've been dumping these handouts all over the park. Here's a quote. *We oppose the stultifying fascism beneath the surface of any controlled environment, especially one that tries to control nature instead of living in harmony with it.*"

"That sounds like a bunch of crap to me," Gib said. "They're just making people look uncomfortable on film. And what are they going to do with the footage, anyway?"

"Frank said something about taking the funniest stuff and editing it with some information about how Disney destroys the environment both in Florida and California. Then they'd send it to public access TV shows, film festivals and so on. Maybe try to get it on HBO."

Late in the day, all five of them were standing around the central circle of Disneyland, looking up at Snow White's castle and having ice cream. As far as Gib could tell, the pills Campy had taken gave him the screaming munchies, an occasional twitch (as if he were fighting off the impulse to dance), and a incongruous merry grin. Campy still hadn't wiped the scarlet streak from his cheeks.

Garrity didn't seem to notice anything wrong, but Frank Marion was handling Campy with kid gloves and had signaled for Ruth and Gib to join them. With the daylight starting to fade, Marion had told Garrity that they probably had enough footage. Campy was sitting on a bench eating a slice of pizza, a hamburger and a coke, in addition to the ice cream that the other four had gotten. As he ate, he was watching a bunch of teenagers with glassy intensity.

Gib wondered what Campy found so fascinating about the group of kids. They were just Goths. The park was full of Goths. Ruth claimed it was an example of how *everyone* came to Disneyland, even those dedicated to black makeup and vampire lifestyles. For all of that, the Goth kids didn't look to be having a good time. Their pale skin, their black clothes and makeup, all of it combined to make for a glum-looking bunch of people who milled around the park grimly, sneering at passers-by. They seemed to enjoy the sneering, though.

"It's very depressing. Why are they here?" Garrity said about the Goths while Frank Marion was loaded up a fresh tape into the camera.

"Maybe they just come here to get cheered up," Gib said. "That's what Disneyland is supposed to be for, all of your fun and games notwithstanding."

Garrity looked at Gib. "You don't think today's been fun? You don't think we're doing something meaningful?"

"Meaningful? I think you're just getting off on being an asshole. You don't care whose day you ruin so long as you look good on film."

Campy leaned into the conversation suddenly. "You think these kids are here to be cheered up?" Campy asked.

"Yes," Gib answered angry to be intimidated. "I do."

"Well, hell, we should help," Campy said. "Don't you think so, Ethan?"

"Absolutely!" Garrity instantly agreed.

"Wait, that's not --" Gib said, trying to backtrack.

"You're absolutely right, Gib," Campy said. "We're not seeing the true spirit of Disneyland. We should get with the program. We should join in and be good little Mouseketeers."

Campy was near-shouting.

"Maybe these little middle-class fucks who claim to be so depressed they have to *dress* that way need to be cheered up! So let's buy every little Goth kid an ice cream! And then we can dance!"

Campy went back to the vending area and bought two fistfuls of vanilla ice cream cones.

"Start filming, Frank. Let's show Gib how cheery we can be, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Campy," Garrity said agreeably. Now even Garrity looked a little nervous at Campy's sudden intensity, but he was clearly determined to go along with whatever his friend had in mind.

Campy walked over to the nearest group of Goths and, with Garrity's help, shoved ice creams into their hands. Campy ended up one ice cream short, so he said, menacingly, to the last two Goths in line, "I didn't bring enough for everyone, so you two better share." The kids might have been dressed up like vampires, but they recognized a monster when they saw one. Not a one of them dropped the ice cream cones, though two of them tried to edge away. Campy walked over to those and squeezed them close with each arm.

"Hi, kids!" Campy shouted. "My friend over there doesn't think you look happy enough for Disneyland!"

All the Goth kids suddenly had the look of Siamese watching a St. Bernard for any signs of which way to start running. Trapped in a bad situation beyond their control, they

clearly hoped whatever was about to happen would at least be over quick. Like going to the prom or losing your virginity.

One Goth, a tall boy with no eyebrows and heavy pancake makeup, tried to placate the big man. "We're not unhappy," he said. "Thanks for the ice cream, but we should get going."

"Go? Oh, no! Not until you're good and *fucking cheery!*" Campy grabbed the tall boy's hand. A Goth girl behind Campy ran away, terrified.

Frank Marion cackled happily as he filmed it all.

Gib suddenly remembered seeing Campy like this after the Burroughs party, ranting about redemption and blood. The Goths were almost cowering in fear as Campy herded them into a circle -- a group of kids being emotionally mugged by a man demanding they cheer the fuck up.

Garrity and Campy grabbed the hands of some of the kids and started to dance stumbingly around in a large circle. Campy sang the Mickey Mouse Club theme as a rhythm. He didn't seem to quite know the words, and the tune came out more like a chain gang song.

"Here's the *club*, that *bangs* a *drum*, that 's *made* for you and *me!* Come on, sing along!"

The Goth kids unhappily joined in the chorus. "M-I-C-K-E-Y, M-O-U-S-E."

"Mickey Mouse, Mickey *Mouse*," Campy shouted. "For *ever* let us *hold* our cherry pies! *High, high, high!* Come along and smoke a bong and join the jubilee! M-I-C-K-E-Y, M-O-U-S-E!"

More than a couple of the Goth kids were crying now, the tears cutting lines through their white pancake makeup. One girl tried to break out of the circle and run when Campy shouted "high, high, high" directly at her. But the tall Goth boy who had spoken earlier held her hand and desperately whispered into her ear. She shook her head at him, and twisted away, but didn't break the circle of dancers.

The singing drew a crowd of laughing park guests who applauded the unwilling dancers. They didn't notice the terrified expressions and awkward stumblings of the Goths. Maybe it was the naturally pale demeanor of the Goths that confused the audience, who couldn't seem to realize the faces were white with fear. Maybe they thought it was a dance about the Haunted House. The audience clapped a rhythm for the dancers, and other gawkers sang along with Campy. Almost all of them snapped pictures.

Gib's temper broke. He walked up to the dancing circle and grabbed Campy by the arm, stopping the dance. The audience booed the interruption, but all of the Goth kids used the opportunity to escape. The sound of black boots running as fast as possible was a paradiddle drumbeat that inspired the watching crowd to break into a long round of applause.

"Leave them the hell alone!" Gib shouted, one hand digging into Campy's shoulder.

The big man laughed contemptuously and slapped Gib's hand away. "I'm just cheering them up. Isn't that what you wanted?" Campy poked Gib in the chest. "Didn't you say we had to get in the spirit of things? I just forced those kids to be fucking happy. Walt control freak Disney would have loved it."

Furious, Gib cocked back a fist and prepared to throw it.

That was when Disney security showed up.

"Power (of) Suggestion"

Never 'for the sake of peace and quiet' deny your own experience or convictions.

Dag Hammarskjöld

Ethan Garrity and Frank Marion were the last ones to be kicked out of the park. Security pounced on Gib and Campy right away, because they were about to start brawling right in the middle of Main Street USA. Garrity and Marion took off running. Later, Gib would see Marion's steady camera work as Garrity ran back to Space Mountain, eager for one more ride. Somehow, Ruth got away.

Shouting, "Fight the power! Cut in line! Fascism with a smile is still fascism! Cut in line!", Garrity ran to the front of the long, long line waiting for the roller coaster and hopped into the first open seat.

The kids running the ride had no desire to play rent-a-cop, so they stopped the line, buckled Garrity and Marion in, and sent them down the line. Garrity whooped with childlike glee the whole way. As the two men exited from the ride, a platoon of security guards were waiting to confiscate the video tapes and take them to Disney jail.

None of the Goth kids wanted to get involved, so the guards figured it would just be easiest to kick all the troublemakers out of the park. So they did, after confiscating all videotape and issuing their sternest of warnings. Luckily, none of the guards connected this particular ruckus with the near-riot involving Pluto earlier in the day.

When the four of them were escorted through the underground tunnels, they emerged a short way from the front gate. After being kicked out with a warning never to return, the four of them found Ruth waiting for them at the cars.

"So they stole all the video?" Campy asked.

Frank Marion smiled, and reached into the front of his pants. He came back out with three videocassettes. "They only got the blanks."

Campy and Garrity cheered.

"Celebrate some other place, okay" Gib suggested. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Campy looked over at Gib. "What's the problem? You afraid Mickey and Donald are gonna come out, gunning for revenge?"

"Fuck you!" Gib shouted. "You and your goddamn bullshit!"

Garrity, realizing how upset Gib was, finally stopped laughing. "Hey, guys, let's not get upset here. What's wrong, Gib?"

Gib sputtered. It had been a long, ridiculous day. He had been humiliated, irritated, and enraged.

Fuck it.

"What wrong is all this superficial, self-serving *bullshit*. You guys are about as radical as an enema, and ten times more unpleasant!"

Garrity tried to interrupt, but Campy put a hand on his shoulder.

"All this environmental shit is just an excuse for you three to fuck around," Gib continued. "You play your fucking awful music, drink, and fuck and get high, and instead of people seeing you as the *posing shitheads* you are, you get *praised* for being socially *conscious* you are!"

"Well, *fuck you!* I've been watching you useless turds for weeks now, and you know how environmentally conscious you are? You don't even water your own plants!"

Gib paused for a moment, trying to catch his breath. He felt like he'd been running for hours, but he could feel more words burning in his gut, like molten bile. He looked around at the four people in front of him, expecting to see anger, but all he saw were neutral, wondering faces.

"All you want to do is get on TV. Maybe it's more important that 10 million couch potatoes see the smug, smirking face of *Ethan Garrity* than something *meaningful*. Maybe that's true! Maybe it's more important for Stanley Campanella to ruin some poor Goth kids day than for Disney to have ten more satisfied customers. Maybe so!

"But I'd like you fuckers to be a little less self-righteous about it!"

Again, Gib had to pause to catch his breath. This was months of pressure relieving itself, like lancing an ancient boil. All these weeks of pretending, of being one thing to the FBI, another to Garrity and the boys, another to Pinkwater and the Black Helicopter folks, and, most importantly, pretending to be whatever he was with Ruth. He couldn't stand it anymore. And the pus was bursting out.

His eyes felt as if he were crying, but when he put fingers to his cheeks, he couldn't feel any tears.

He heard a voice ask a question.

"What?" Gib asked, looking up.

It was Campy. Garrity and Marion had backed up, but both Ruth and Campy had stepped closer to Gib. Ruth had a look of worry on her face, but Campy looked curious, even expectant.

"I asked what you think we should be doing," Campy repeated.

"What? I don't know. Why don't you do something Devil's Arroyo? That's how I heard about you people in the first place. You were protesting Devil's Arroyo."

Gib lowered his head again to try and get his breath back. When he glanced up, Campy looked electrified, but Garrity and Marion were staring at each other uncertainly.

"Devil's Arroyo?" Campy asked in a careful voice. "What would you suggest?"

"Who cares?" Gib said, angry at hearing yet another excuse. "Blow it up! Do I look like a fucking strategist?"

"No, you don't. But you finally don't sound like a narc anymore, either," Campy said.

Gib could feel his face turn white. "What?" he gargled out. "What did you say?"

"Campy," Garrity said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing? I'm still not so sure --"

"Ethan," Campy interrupted, "I don't think anyone could fake a performance like that, do you? That was a spontaneous suggestion if I ever heard one. And, as I think more and more about it, it's exactly what we've been waiting for. What could be bigger than shutting down Devil's Arroyo? Blowing it up?"

"It's a nuclear power plant, Campy," Marion said. "None of us know shit about how dangerous that could be."

"Well, I think I know just the person to do some research," Campy said.

"Someone who wants to prove he's not a narc. Someone who thinks Green Rage doesn't do enough."

"Open Mouth, Insert Plan"

He entered the territory of lies without a passport for return.

Graham Greene

So Gib started researching Devil's Arroyo. On the way up from LA, Gib stopped and took a some photographs of the Devil's Arroyo area. Then he trucked into Black Helicopter as soon as he got back into town. He used the Web to rediscover all the information Ethan had told him the first day he went to The Space. The ongoing legal battle, the blockades, the seismic fault, the whole thing. After 10 hours of research, Gib came to two conclusions. First of all, the woodsy area didn't bear the vaguest resemblance to an arroyo, so whoever named Devil's Arroyo was a complete idiot.

(Not far from the truth: In 1843, an alcoholic Spanish missionary named Diego y Garcia and a mind-boggling stupid explorer from Virginia named James Whirter encountered each other on the exact spot that would house the Reactor #1. After exchanging bottles of liquor, they had argued about what to name the area.

"We'll call it Whirter-Garcia Arroyo," Whirter had suggested.

Drunk as Father Garcia was, he knew that the tree-lined coastal area was a lot of things – full of trees, empty of people, full of frightening animals he couldn't identify -- but it definitely was not an arroyo. The two men quickly came to blows. The marginally less drunk Whirter beat the priest bloody, then loaded the half-conscious Garcia on his burro and sent him on his way. At the top of a ridge, the priest had regained awareness enough to scream, "You are a devil! A devil!"

"And it's my Arroyo!" Whirter said. "A Devil's Arroyo!" The name stuck like dog shit on a shoe.)

His second conclusion was that he was totally stymied. Because the list of what he needed from a plan, included:

- 1) Satisfy Campy and Garrity by shutting down Devil's Arroyo.
- 2) Satisfy Maynard and Reuben by getting Campy and Garrity arrested.
- 3) Not be too dangerous.
- 4) Keep Ruth out of it. And maybe Frank Marion, if possible.
- 5) Cure cancer and get elected Pope.

He fell asleep on the couch, the reading material he had collected scattered around him. By the time he woke up, things were out of his hands.

He awoke with Jan Reuben sitting on the couch next to him. She was dressed in workout clothes, clearly ready to run him ragged. Reuben had grabbed up a sheaf of papers and was studying them.

"Devil's Arroyo, huh? What's going on?" Reuben's tone was hostile and aggressive.

"They want to do something about Devil's Arroyo, and they asked me to come up with a plan."

"They asked *you*?"

"Yeah. It's kind of a challenge. I thought maybe they could try and stage

blockades, like what happened back in '91.”

Reuben considered. “Doesn’t sound big enough to me. If they want you to plan, why not plan big?”

Reuben made some aggressive phone calls and they both drove down that Saturday morning to a VIP tour of the Devil’s Arroyo facility.

Beef.

Their tour guide was an affable engineer named Wellington Fan.

“Call me ‘Beef’,” he said as they introduced themselves. “What can I do for you folks?”

Reuben asked, “Tell us the best way for a group of terrorists to shut down Devil’s Arroyo.”

It took a half hour for Beef to believe they were serious. And then *another* half hour to prove they were classified enough. But after that, Beef seemed to take a certain glee in planning the destruction of his workplace as he toured them around the facility in a golf cart (rigged to go 35 mph). Gib sat in the back of the cart, craning his head around to try and keep track of the conversation.

Beef: “What kind of explosives will they have?”

Reuben: “Who knows? Maybe just dynamite. Maybe a van full of fertilizer. What would a truck bomb do if it crashed the gate?”

Beef: “Oh, that wouldn’t work. Security would stop a truck in a second. I’m not saying people couldn’t sneak onto the grounds if they really wanted to, but not with a truck.”

Reuben: “What about things they could do outside the grounds?”

Beef: “Well, you could try the access roads. If you trashed them, no one could get in or out.”

Reuben: “Aren’t vehicles going up and down this road all the time? They’d be spotted right away.”

Beef: “Probably.”

Gib (trying to stick his two cents in): “What about the power lines?”

Beef slammed on the brakes, and Gib almost went flying into the front seats. The engineer turned around and looked at Gib in horror. “Are you *crazy*?”

“What’s the problem? The attack cuts off the power going out from the reactor by knocking down the lines. They can claim it shows how nuclear power doesn’t supply enough power to be worth the danger. The poles are outside the facility area, so security isn’t an issue. And that way, the facility isn’t damaged at all.”

Beef said, in a strained voice, “Not unless you count melting down, or spewing radioactive gas all over Northern California.”

Both Reuben and Gib stared at the engineer in confusion. He sighed.

“The cooling towers and software controls aren’t plugged into the reactors. The power grid’s just not designed that way. You can’t just plug shit directly into a nuclear reactor. We get our power from outside, just like any other business.”

“Um...” Reuben said.

“Those lines are bringing power in, not sending power out.”

“Don’t you have backup power? What happens when a power line gets knocked down in a heavy wind?”

“We can handle that. But backup generators only go so far. We can do a controlled shutdown, maybe, but that’s not really something you want to do on a whim. And this isn’t just a line getting knocked down. And what happens if blowing up the lines sends a huge power surge down the line? It might short out containment equipment, or maybe all the computers so we’d have no control. Hell, I don’t know. I’m a nuclear engineer, not electrical. Thank god this is all theoretical.”

Gib said, “So you’re saying that, theoretically, if these theoretical terrorists blew up these non-theoretical power lines line, it might theoretically turn this place into Three Mile Island West.”

“Three Mile Island wasn’t such a big deal. More like Chernobyl.”

Gib gaped. “How the hell did you people get approval to open up something this dangerous?”

“Aw, it’s not that dangerous.” Beef looked around involuntarily, as if someone might be listening. “The main problem isn’t the technology, it’s that PacPow doesn’t want to spend the money to keep this place totally up to date. They spent so much on legal fees to get this place opened, that they’re always trying to cut costs, including keeping the tech up to date. They try to run Devil’s Arroyo like it’s a coal or a hydro plant, some kind of old, well-developed utility.”

Gib just stared at the engineer.

Reuben said, “Well, in any case, I think we’ve found what we’re looking for. I think you’ve got your plan, Gib. Write it up.”

Beef said, “I’d appreciate it if you don’t put my name on anything.”

Gib left Devil’s Arroyo with a bag full of marketing material, including a coffee table book that PacPow had published in the early 90s. It was full of beautiful nature photography of the Devil’s Arroyo area, and PacPow had tried to use it to show how they weren’t treating the area badly at all and how all good conservationists should support the friendly and helpful Devil’s Arroyo nuclear power facility.

It didn’t take long for Gib to write the plan down. Complete with colorful illustration ripped out of the book. He turned a copy of the plan into Reuben in two days. She promised to read it and decide whether to pass it on to Masturbatin’ Bob Maynard.

Then Gib sat around the rest of the week, ducking calls.

That Saturday, the Ragers were throwing a barbecue in Golden Gate Park, which they were calling “Taste of Wisconsin”. They had wheeled kegs of Point and Leinenkugel (shipped especially from Wisconsin) into the park, set up a few charcoal grills and asked for a small donation that would go to a variety of environmental organizations, including Green Rage itself.

“I miss Madison sometimes,” Garrity had confided to Gib one day during a game of Hearts. “I get real nostalgic.” So this was a party to alleviate a bit of homesickness on Garrity’s part.

When Gib showed up at the tent, Garrity was dressed in a white chef's hat and apron, dishing out brats to a winding line of people. During the walk from his car to the party, Gib had thought long and hard about his plan. There were just too many things that could go wrong, he decided. This wasn't "Basement Bomb Making: Could It Blow Up in Our Faces?" If he gave a plan, even one designed to be as safe as possible, to Stanley Campanella, the big man might mutate it into something entirely beyond Gib's control.

As Gib joined the brat line, he folded the sheaf of papers and held it unseen below the level of the grill. He decided he wouldn't show the plan to the Ragers after all. It would cost him some face with Ruth, maybe, but that was probably all right.

That was the key to all of his reticence. Ruth.

And more than that: all of his life in San Francisco. If he dumped this plan, he would make a quick trip back to the DC to give Uncle Joseph his resignation. After that, he could work with Black Helicopter, with Pinkwater and all the rest. He'd have to find a new apartment, but that couldn't be that big a deal in a big city like San Francisco.

So that was it. He took the folded pages of the plan, stuffed them in his back pocket and planned to keep them there.

At the front of the line, Garrity handed him a brat and welcomed him to the party.

Gib got a beer to go along with the sausage and joined a table where Ruth, Marion and Campy and some regular Space volunteers were eating and talking. Ruth cleared some space on the picnic bench and Gib sat down next to her, across from Frank Marion and Campy.

As soon as he took a bite of the brat, Gib heard Campy address him in a snide voice.

"So," Campy said. "Do you have a plan for us, Gib? Or is this going to run out like that *Rolling Stone* story? More hot air promises, followed by piss poor execution?"

Gib looked Campy in the eye and shook his head. "I didn't really come up with anything."

Campy smirked. He turned to Marion and Ruth and said, "Told you. Pay up."

Ruth and Frank handed over twenty dollars each. They both looked at Gib with real disappointment. Campy folded up the money and slipped it into his pocket.

"What's going on?" Gib asked.

"I bet Ruth and Frank you wouldn't come up with shit. You inspire real faith in them." The big man leaned back and drank some beer. "With Frank, it doesn't surprise me. Frank's an optimist. He thinks the best about everyone. He's really kind of lovely that way."

"Shut up, Campy" Marion said. "You won your bet. Just leave it alone."

Campy ignored him. "But Ruth, that surprises me. I know she and you are *going steady*" – the big man's smirk widened at the phrase – "but Ruth's a realist. She's always prepared for the worst."

Gib could feel Ruth staring at the side of his face, but he resisted the urge to turn and face her.

"So when I bet them you'd punk out, I was surprised she took me up on it. She must think you're really something. Whereas I know better."

Marion said, "Gib, ignore him. If you couldn't come up with anything, then there must not have been anything there." Gib appreciated the gesture, but it made him feel

much, much worse. Frank looked like a kid who sat down on Santa's lap, only to have the drunk bastard try to feel him up.

And still Campy wouldn't shut up. "I think you've shown admirable taste to fasten on Ruth the way you have, but isn't this just about over? You're not interested in what she does, in what we do. You just want to fuck her. Tell me I'm wrong." Campy leaned back with a disgustingly self-satisfied expression.

An expression like that needed something. A punch, a slap, some kind of attack in response.

So Gib took the papers out of his back pocket and threw them at Campy. The papers bounced off the big man's chest and scattered across the table.

"You know that shit-eating grin you've got on your face right now? Use this to wipe it off." Gib barely resisted adding "you cheap fuck".

Campy slowly gathered up the pages and skimmed through them. After a few pages, he stopped grinning and started reading in earnest. When he was done reading, he looked at Gib and said, "This is interesting." The big man looked shocked, as if a spaniel had started explaining Einstein's theory of relativity to him.

"Give them their money back," Gib said.

"What? Oh!" Campy pulled the two twenties out of his pocket and handed them back to Frank and Ruth.

Gib turned to look at Ruth. He expected satisfaction, or pleasure, or pride, or any number of good things.

Ruth looked worried.

That's when Campy said, "But where the hell are we going to get bombs?"

"Confession on the Street of the Gods"

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machines will be prevented from working at all.

Mario Savio

That was when Gib made a deliberate decision to start drinking a shitload, a pantload, a freightload of beer and liquor, as much as his gut could hold, vomit, and refill. This process -- drink, vomit, repeat -- lasted for two and a half days. With a day-long time out dedicated to the hangover, Gib didn't see anyone who he knew until Thursday morning.

When Gib got into Black Helicopter that morning, he found a celebration going on. It wasn't Free Beer Friday yet, but the beer was flowing, music was blasting through the place, and people were even dancing. Shockingly, not a single work station was occupied by scrivener, coder, doodler, or scribbler.

Gib spotted Taylor Jackson dancing with three nubile young junior designers.

"Taylor, what's going on?"

Jackson jerked a thumb at Sidney and OddGreg, who were on a table top, spraying champagne at people.

"Black Box," Taylor yelled above the sounds of Soul Coughing.

Gib twigged. Black Box was ready to go. Today must have been the fully successful test run. Gib wished he'd been there to see it, though he'd seen earlier version of the box go through the motions any number of times. Still, it would have been nice.

Hours later, the party moved to dinner in Chinatown, which was spectacular. Pinkwater was friends with the owners of a place deep into the alleys, and they cleared out their banquet room and prepared a feast. Pinkwater appeared ten foot tall and nine foot wide, his arms wide enough to hug the world, as he toasted the development team and everyone else in the whole company. He had dressed up in a tuxedo, though the bowtie and cummerbund were still in a Hawaiian pattern

"Stars you are, my people! Bright and fine and glowing! And in this pleasure palace, I decree that we will celebrate as if this night will never end! Some of you may not be aware that tonight is also my fiftieth birthday! But aging stops tonight while we celebrate! No corruption, no death, no sadness, just this one night of perfection in which we can live forever!"

Loud agreement followed as to the splendid nature of all gathered around, including the birthday boy. Fifty-odd people yelled and clinked glasses in celebration of fifty (probably odd) years.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: Its loveliness increases; it will never Pass into nothingness.' We are a thing of beauty, all of us here! And you'd all best remember that for the rest of your lives. Remember how we shine right now, tonight! Cheers! A toast to you all!" Pinkwater lifted his bottle of champagne and sprayed everyone nearby.

After that, everyone got in on the toasting action. The good ones were loudly

applauded, boring ones genially booed down. Taylor Jackson was assaulted by dinner roll artillery for announcing, "Here's to our wives and girlfriend! May they never meet!"

Eventually, every scrap of food was consumed, they pushed back the tables, turned down the lights and started dancing to music the management let them pump in. At one point, Gib was amazed at how Taylor Jackson was burning up the dance floor. During one of Jackson's few drink breaks, Gib complimented him.

"Magic of pharmaceuticals, my son," Jackson said, and handed Gib a handful of pills. "Try for yourself!"

Gib looked at the four large pink pills in his hand. Shrugging, he threw one into the back of his throat. In five minutes, when nothing kicked in, he threw another one after it.

At midnight, the party showed no signs of dying down, so the owners of the place gave Pinkwater a set of keys and asked him to lock up after himself. Gib was so impressed he decided to take the third of the pink pills. Two of them has sent his head to a lovely, happy place, with lots of nuclear energy to power his arms and limbs without his brain having to work very hard. Gib liked that just fine.

Hours later, he found himself in being lugged into the alley behind the restaurant by Sidney Pinkwater.

"Come along, Gibson," Pinkwater was saying. "Fresh air should help."

Fresh air didn't help. With Pinkwater holding him up by the armpits, Gib desperately tried to force his eyes to focus. With both hands, he clawed into Pinkwater's thick biceps and gripped so tightly that Pinkwater grumbled in annoyance.

"I'm not a life preserver, Gibson. You do not have to hold on so fiercely."

"Yes, I will, Sidney. I'll drown upwards." Gib could feel his feet leaving the ground, gravity reversing for him alone, while the full moon whispered seduction in his ear. "The moon *wants* me."

"You're not going to float away, Gibson."

"Yes, I *will*! Gravity doesn't affect me anymore!"

"Gravity is lying to you, Gibson, but I am not. You are tightly attached to Mother Earth." Pinkwater sighed. "And my right arm, unfortunately. How much did you have to drink?"

Gib felt his brain spin a roulette wheel and spit out a number. "Forty gallons, Sidney! *Forty gallons!*"

Pinkwater sighed. "I suspect it was a bit less."

"And eleventy pills from Taylor!"

Pinkwater said, "Eureka! The mist clears. What color was the pill that Taylor gave you?"

"Purple! No. Orange! Sidney! My hands are trapped in the fourth dimension! Every time I move them, they go out to Alpha Centauri. But at the speed of light! Alpha Centauri is light years away! I have to stand here for all the years it takes for my *hands* to come back!"

Pinkwater turned Gib around and leaned in so close that his face snapped into focus in Gib's vision.

"Gibson, listen to me. If you keep shouting, I am going to drop you here. I don't mind helping you out in a bad spot, but I can't countenance shouting. It's rude, and it will

wake up innocently sleeping citizens all around us."

Gib could suddenly feel the angry stares of awakened residents burning into his back. Twisting around in paranoia, he tried to pull away from Pinkwater, who effortlessly held on to him.

"Gibson."

Ignoring Pinkwater's hold, Gib started to walk anyway. When he tried, his feet moved out from underneath him, but Pinkwater's strong hands kept his upper body in place. It meant Gib was dancing like a cartoon character, with only his bottom half jitterbugging. Gib began hatching plots to pry lose from Pinkwater, but all his potential plans involved the use of his hands, and *they* were apparently still somewhere around Jupiter. The traitorous bastards.

"Gibson."

Suddenly, Gib felt his hands return, and the relief was so great that he forgot all about escape, about the angry glares of sleeping citizens, about everything but twiddling his fingers as fast as possible, proving to himself over and over again that all ten digits were intact after their interstellar trip.

"*Gibson!*"

Gib finally looked again and saw the intense expression on Sidney Pinkwater's face. It was enough to bring on a moment of wavering clarity.

"Thank you for helping me get my hands back. You're very good at this." As Gib looked at him with awe, Pinkwater sighed again, and Gib saw light emanate from the big man's mouth. Looking up, Gib realized that Pinkwater also had a halo of light around him. "Why, Sidney," Gib said, tears springing to his eyes, "you're a saint."

"Jumping Jesus H. fucking Christ on a pogo stick. Taylor gave you the pink pills, didn't he?" Pinkwater grabbed Gib by the face and spoke clearly and carefully. "No, Gibson, I'm not a saint. Don't be an idiot. I've just been going to parties like this for twenty-five years. I've learned a little bit about being high in that time. And you clearly aren't ready for Norman Haddal's Special Blend."

Gib went limp. "Norman Haddal! He's in jail! Did he send the pills for me? *Norman Haddal sent me poison pills from prison!*" Gib fell absurdly proud to be the subject of such an elaborate plot.

"No, poor Norman isn't making anything in prison. Taylor just had some of Norman's last batch left over."

"How does Taylor Jackson know Norman Haddal?" Gib demanded. "Are they in league? In *cahoots*?"

Pinkwater looked surprised. "Norman loves the idea of revolution, and you know how revolutionary the Black Box will be. Norman was one of our first investors, before we started looking for venture capital. Hell, Norman was probably paying your salary."

"Huh." Gib was stumped and amazed. He started turning around in place, looking for enlightenment.

Pinkwater led Gib over to a red entranceway with a staircase. Gib looked up and saw Chinese decorations and a sign that said "temple" under some Chinese lettering.

"Are you taking me to heaven, Sidney? Why is your church Chinese? Is China on the way to heaven?"

"I'm not taking you any further than this step right here," Pinkwater answered.

Steering Gib by his shoulders, he sat the smaller man down, then rested one meaty haunch on a lower step.

The gravity reversal effect was back for return engagement, and the only way Gib kept from disintegrating entirely was to grab hold of his head with both hands, rest his elbows on his knees and concentrate on moving as little as possible.

Pinkwater said, "That temple *is* Chinese, but the decoration is a front, a pretense. Around 1880, the local Chinese businessmen in the city decided to embrace their ethnic heritage -- in the hopes it would increase the tourist trade. That why all these fancy pagoda tops have been grafted on the tops of perfectly lovely Italianate buildings."

"Tourist trade?"

"Of course. Up until then, Chinatown had been perceived a place for two things, drugs and slaves. You don't sell a lot of egg rolls to lotus eaters."

"Why not?"

Pinkwater stopped short in his lecture. "Hmmm. Point taken. Perhaps you *can* sell egg foo yung in an opium den, but the middle class tends not to show up there for dinner after a night of Gilbert and Sullivan.

"In any case, aside from historical trivia, here's one of the lessons I've learned in a quarter century of parties, Gibson. When someone is as fucked up as you are, the only thing worth doing is to tell them a story. What kind of story do you want to hear?"

Gib looked at Pinkwater's unruly, thinning hair and saw where the halo had hidden itself, burrowing into Pinkwater's scalp. The big man's light fringe of blondish hair glowed in reflected light from the street outside.

"Your halo's hiding, Sidney Pinkwater," Gib pointed out, delighting in how much fun it was to pronounce the big man's name. "Pinkwater. Sidney Pinkwater."

"Yes, Gibson. Do you want to hear a story?"

"Sure I do, Sidney Pinkwater. What kind of a name is Pinkwater? You are so very, very Pinkwater. Tell me how you got to be so pink, Pinkwater, how you got to be so Sidney Pinkwater." Gib listened to himself giggle, and somewhere, far back behind the barricades of drug-induced stream of consciousness, he recoiled in humiliation at such drooling idiocy. Whatever Gib was thinking about himself, however, Pinkwater took Gib's gibberish in stride.

"That's a very extremely horribly odd question, Gibson. Even more horrible is the timing of it. As I turn fifty tonight, I am beset by an irritating case of nostalgia. Irritating because for many, many years, I have had no interest in my past at all. That is most likely why no one knew tonight *was* my birthday. More proof that coincidence is just another name for the interconnected patterns of the universe. I am a backward-looking fool tonight, and so you ask me a question about my past."

Gib didn't have the slightest idea what Sidney was talking about, so he merely grunted agreement.

"Gibson, are you sure you can be trusted with the answer to such a weighty question? You've been very helpful to me, and I think very highly of you, but can I trust you? Can you be trusted?"

"Can I be trusted?" Gib asked. "Well, I think --"

"What you think isn't quite relevant, young man. Interesting, but absolutely tangential to answering the core query. What lovely Ruth Radley thinks about you, what

steady Frank Marion says about you, what Norman Haddal appeared to think, what I have witnessed of you, all these weigh upon the decision, but your personal, heartfelt opinion of your own trustworthiness is of no earthly use to me."

"Uh, okay."

"So tell me anyway."

"What?"

"Tell me if you're trustworthy. I'm curious to your opinion on the matter."

Gib tried to think of what Sidney would want to hear. A rogue thought fired up like a bottle rocket: did he actually *have* an opinion? Who would bother to have an opinion about his own trustworthiness? Obviously, lying was a job requirement for what he was doing, but he liked to think of himself as honest about the important things. Whatever they were.

Maybe love. He was honest about that, mostly. To Ruth, anyway. He was in love with her, and he'd been honest to her about that. Maybe not truthful about his real job, or his real name, or any of those kind of petty details, but about what really mattered, she could trust him, trust what kind of person he was.

Of course, what kind of person was he? Edward Gibson? Who was *that* guy? He got laid a fair amount, and he liked his car. Past that, Gib wasn't sure anymore. That guy had thought he was pretty satisfied with his life, and in control. But Gibson Edwards had learned the pleasures of being out of control of his life, his emotions, and his body.

Finally, he decided what he thought probably wasn't very important. Sidney was waiting for some kind of answer, and Gib wasn't sure he had one. So he answered with a nervous shrug of his shoulders.

"I guess so," he said. He could feel his focus drifting away. Gravity was normal again for him, but his mind was still a bit unmoored.

"You guess?" Sidney laughed. "Such confidence truly bursts my heart with joy. Especially after all that serious cogitation. Let me pose you this pop quiz, Gibson. And you have to answer right away, without thinking. Without *guessing*. Have you ever been honored with someone's deepest, more painful and private secret?"

"Yes." *No?*

"Did you betray them?"

"No." *Yes?*

Moments after he answered, Gib wasn't sure which words he had actually said.

Pinkwater considered the situation at greater length. When he finally spoke, Gib already knew what the answer would be. One of the lights in the street outside the alley was on a timer, for the light winked out. But Gib could still see the remains of the halo light in Pinkwater's hair. With this continuing evidence of Pinkwater's sainthood, Gib knew the big man would reveal some dark soul secret, in full expectation of being betrayed. That was the role of saints, after all, to be martyred and betrayed.

His mind came back into focus as Gib's awareness of Pinkwater's thoughts brought out a smoldering anger in him. Sidney Pinkwater thought that Gib would find the Judas costume comfortable. *Well, fuck him*, Gib thought. There was no guarantee the Iscariot clothes would fit him. In any case, what awful secrets could a saint have? That was the problem with saints: they were men with an exalted sense of their own sin.

Finally, Pinkwater looked up at Gib, and even in the now-dark alcove, Gib could

see the gleam of Pinkwater's teeth. "I suppose I will tell you," Pinkwater said.

Gib smiled to himself, thinking that Jesus must have used the same tone of voice at the Last Supper. Irritating, self-righteous prick.

Pinkwater continued, "It's my birthday, after all. I'm fifty, and I would like to tell someone the story of my name. It will be my gift to myself."

"Then you think I'm trustworthy?" Gib asked, wondering what Pinkwater would decide to tell him.

Pinkwater smiled again. "Frankly, the deciding factor is that I don't believe you'll actually remember this conversation, Gibson."

"Oh. Fair enough."

"Let me tell you the story of my name." Sidney drew in a deep and dramatic breath.

"My name," Sidney Pinkwater said, "is Saul Hampton."

Gib wondered what the punch line was.

"That was my name from the day of my birth until 1966. In 1966, I killed a man."

Gib sat very, very still.

Pinkwater chuckled. "Oh, mercy me. I'm being overly melodramatic, and I do hope you'll pardon me for it."

"Sure, Sidney." *Saint Sidney.*

"In 1966, I was an undergraduate at Berkeley. But let me give you an idea of what I was like. Before I went to college, I worked for Goldwater. Law and order, something like that, was what appealed to me. At the time, I thought that extremism in the defense of liberty was a virtue. But when I left for college, I didn't have politics on my mind. I wanted to do two things: drink beer and play football."

"Football? You? Really?"

"Why does that surprise you, Gibson?"

Gib thought about it. "Well, you're so...placid."

Pinkwater laughed. "Years of practice. Plus, I don't drink as much as I once did, and no one's more hostile than a burly drunkard. In any case, I was a defensive lineman. And for that time, I was larger than the norm."

"For this time, too. Wait, are you going to tell me you killed someone playing football?"

Pinkwater's stare told Gib that in the history of the world, perhaps the only dumber question ever asked out loud had been when George Armstrong Custer had asked his chief scout, "That don't seem like that many Indians, does it?"

"No, I killed someone with stupidity, which makes a very lethal weapon,"

Pinkwater said. "If I had killed someone in football, I wouldn't feel guilty about it. Hell, I might almost be proud. Would have been a good hit, right?"

Gib felt a bit queasy. "You're kidding, right?"

Pinkwater peered at Gib. "Maybe. Anyway, after the last game of the year, I found out my grades were for shit. I had to stay and take summer school."

Gib noticed that Pinkwater was speaking very differently, less verbose -- less Wilde and more Butkus. He tried to picture a 20-year old Sidney Pinkwater and failed, before realizing that he was trying to visualize someone who had never existed.

"That summer I fell in with a permanent student crowd -- 26-year old sophomores,

that kind of thing."

"Like Ethan Garrity in Wisconsin."

"An accurate comparison, from all reports. All these guys were a lot older than me, and they could score anything, anytime they wanted -- drugs, women, anything. Because they had a cause, a revolution. Very seductive. I could quote you chapter and verse of their manifesto, but it wouldn't mean anything to you now. Frankly, it probably didn't mean that much at the time." Pinkwater looked around. "Shit. Wish I had a smoke. I haven't smoked in thirty years."

"So what happened? "

"I know, I know. I'm delaying. It's just such a cliché, that's all."

"What?"

"I dropped acid that summer, and it changed my whole perspective. A embarrassing cliché. After that, when school started back up, I got involved in a bombing plot."

"A bombing? What were you going to bomb?"

"The physics building, I believe. Some building where there were guys working on Department of Defense contracts."

Pinkwater smiled, sort of. "Wait, not the Department of Defense. The *War* Department. It was important to call things by their real names, not 'the bullshit rationalization of The Man'." I've tried to purge this from my memory for so long that I hardly remember why we chose the target. We stole some dynamite from a construction site, and I figured out how to jerry-rig some sort of mechanism and put it all together. But I had no idea what he was doing. I had just gotten some advice from a vet turned anarchist who was taking classes in summer school with me. It was a shit bomb. Nothing but shit."

"And someone died?"

"Oh, yeah. A grad student in Physics, plus five other people. But not in the building."

"What happened?"

"Since I was the one who built the bomb, the other guys claimed the 'honor' of setting it. So the four of them are driving over to the building to plant the bomb, at three AM. And because this was so important, they weren't stoned for a change. And of course, that set their nerves twitching like guitar strings. They were driving with their headlights off to avoid being spotted, and some woman walking her dog crossed in front of them. The driver -- that was a guy named Alex -- was so surprised he slammed on the brakes."

Pinkwater looked at Gib, who noticed that Pinkwater's eyes were desert dry.

"Boom," Pinkwater said. "That's how shitty the bomb was. Slamming on the brakes too hard set it off. Took out the car, my four friends, the dogwalking grad student, and most of the crosswalk."

After a few moments of silence, Gib said, "You don't look that upset."

"What?" Pinkwater demanded. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You don't look that sad about it. That's all I meant."

Pinkwater looked disgusted. "What did you want, a goddamn TV movie? Should I think about dead puppies and long dead students and let the ersatz tears rain down? I

think not. All these things happened thirty years ago."

"But it's pretty serious stuff. It's pretty powerful."

"Powerful. What the fuck does *that* mean? It's not Shakespeare. It's not tragedy; it's slapstick with explosions. The Three Stooges. It was just a traffic accident, with extras."

Pinkwater stood up and stretched, his shirt riding up over his belly. "I was once told that the French have a saying, Gibson. Picture the deepest, most heart-rending sorrow you can imagine -- your wife, children and parents are all wiped out in an earthquake that destroys your house, your car and your business. Fill in the tragic blank if that disaster doesn't suit you. Even that deepest, darkest of sorrows lasts for approximately three seconds. That's all the sorrow that the human soul can really take before it bursts. All the rest? That's just self-pity."

Gib thought about it. Somehow, in the last few minutes, his brain had gotten back to a state where it was able to process information again.

"That's a pretty harsh view of the world, Sidney."

"Maybe so. That's the French for you. After the bomb went off, I went underground. Five years later, I found myself getting a computer degree under a new name using ID I had bought from a member of the SDS. Ridiculous name, isn't it? But it's all I could afford at the time. No one else wanted such a silly-sounding name for an identity, so I got the papers cheap. And that's the story of Sidney Pinkwater."

Something popped up into Gib's head, a question. "Wait, you said the bomb killed five people. The grad student and your four friends. Who was the other one?"

Pinkwater shook his head in disappointment. "Isn't it obvious? Saul Hampton, failed revolutionary. That bomb blew him up along with the rest, and I sculpted the leftover bits of shrapnel, flesh and blood into Sidney Pinkwater."

Pinkwater reached out a hand and pulled Gib to his feet. "Come on, the pink pill should be starting to wear off by now. None of Norman's pills last very long. That's one of their charms. Let's go get a beer. Pissant nostalgia is thirsty work."

"Between Bob and a Hard Place"

We can't be so fixated on our desire to preserve the rights of ordinary Americans.

Bill Clinton

The next day, his bladder thicker than a New York bagel, his legs shakier than a banker's ethics, his eyes bloodshot like a Jackson Pollock hangover, Gib awoke to the sound of the Inquisitor Telephone. It was Masturbatin' Bob Maynard, calling for a chat, which meant that he was full of threats and innuendo.

"This is it, the final lap, kid, the last chance saloon, the last roundup, the end of the road. All I've gotten from you so far is promises, promises. I can take that from my wife, the slimy cunt, but at least *she* sucks my crank every once in a while -- not that *you* ever better try something like that. And while you're shining me on, these terrorists in training are attacking people at Disneyland. *Disneyland!* What kind of sick fucks don't like Disneyland?"

Maynard went along in a similar vein until finally Gib's aching head got the better of him and he shouted "Bob! Bob! Bob!" into the phone until Maynard finally shut up.

"Yeah, kid? What do you got to say for yourself?"

"Did you talk to Reuben?" Gib said, hoping to put Bob off.

Clearly, Bob Maynard and Jan Reuben hadn't been talking, because Maynard launched himself back to Planet Rant. He spoke over every one of Gib's objections, overrode every one of Gib's explanations, scoffed at every one of his evasions, until finally Gib lost his temper.

Maybe it was the hangover. Or residue, either of the pink pills, or Pinkwater's unusual confession. No matter. Gib lost his temper and yelled back.

A single event, action, or sentence can often set into motion a whole morass of idiocy and tragedy. And so it was that with his next words, Gib, metaphorically assassinated Arch-Duke Ferdinand.

"Bob, you fucking jackass, they're going to blow up Devil's Arroyo!"

From thought to plot in one easy sentence.

Twenty minutes of explanation later, Masturbatin' Bob was convinced that Ethan Garrity and Green Rage were about to send all of California toppling into the sea.

"China Syndrome!" Bob shouted. "Mass murder! Armed insurrection!"

And then, quietly, Bob postulated, "Career advancement. Major headlines. Medal of Freedom."

Until finally, Bob asked, "Why didn't that cunt Reuben give me the paperwork? When do think it's going to happen? How soon?"

"Well," Gib hedged, "there is one major problem they have." This would be good. Bob would be convinced that Green Rage was still worth investigating. And that would give Gib more time to figure his way out the of the mess.

"What's that?" Maynard asked.

"They don't have any explosives, and don't know how to get them," Gib said, then held the phone away from his ear, expecting an explosion of sound.

The silence surprised him, and he carefully put the receiver back to his ear. After a minute or so, Bob finally said, thoughtfully, "Maybe that's even better."

"How's that, Bob?"

"Kid, you gotta know that if they're just making plans, it's just a heave from midcourt. No jury really cares about that, about *plans*. We need a slam dunk case, headlines and outrage. And for that, they gotta have the boom-boom.

"So we'll give it to them," Masturbatin' Bob Maynard said. Then waited in a happy silence.

"Uh," Gib finally asked, "what?"

Bob sighed. "Kid, you got no imagination. If we just let these nutbars go out and try and find boom-boom, it's not under our control. And if we have it under control, no one can get hurt. No fucking liberal reporter is gonna say we endangered the public."

"So," Gib ventured very carefully, "the FBI is going to supply explosives?"

"Shit, yes! It's goddamn genius."

After another long pause, Gib asked, "Real explosives?"

Slowly, as if talking to an addled child, Bob answered, "If it's not *real* boom-boom, those fucking terrorists will find out somehow. And without real explosives, there won't be as much jailtime. Plus, it'll blow your cover."

"Blow my cover?"

"Yeah. You been telling me all along that the biggest problem is getting these fuckwits to trust you. You bring them the semtex solution to all their plastic problems, and you are gold in their eyes. Gold! But if it's fake stuff, you're done and this whole thing is done with you."

Gib was silent again instead of answering.

Bob didn't seem to mind the silence, though. "Kid," he said, "There's just one thing."

"What's that, Bob?"

"This sounds real good, but how do I know it's not just a bunch of happy horseshit?"

"You'll just have to believe me, Bob."

This time it was Bob's turn to be silent for a while. Finally, "Kid, I just don't think that's going to work. It's now come down to this state of affairs, where you got one of two choices. Either you give me something that makes me full of shits, grins and trust, or I torpedo you."

"Torpedo?"

"I hammer you, kid. I take what I got already and then beat you like a rented mule. I pound you like a sailor with a two dollar whore. You're the guy who fucked up a major sting."

"That's bad, Bob, but it could be worse," Gib said, thinking that he could burn Maynard just as easily as Maynard could burn him.

"You bet it could, kid. How about jail time for drug offenses on federal property? It really was a nice party you at that DEA apartment that night. How long do you think it would take me to scare up some witnesses? Like that drug dealer pornographer on his way to lockup right now? You think he'd grab "get out of jail free" card if all he has to do is testify against the "rogue" FBI agent who set him up?

"Or maybe I just get you on misappropriation of funds. How much did that party cost, what with the kegs and the rest of the shit? Maybe it's been hidden for now, but I

didn't sign anything to cover up for you. And I didn't throw away any records. If it was more than a couple thousand dollars, it might even be felony fraud."

"I guess that's worse, Bob."

"Hell, let's go for D), all of the above! And better yet, I can toss in that blondie you've been tomcatting around."

"Leave Ruth out of this, Bob," Gib said. The coldness in his voice surprised him. He had been about to agree, saw no choice, until Bob mentioned Ruth.

"I *thought* you were sweet on her. Oh, maybe I can't touch her, maybe I can, but we've been bugging the phones."

"You've what? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Need to know, kid. I got tapes of her and you doing the dirty talk. And that'll get that cunt Reuben on your ass. Because we both know she's sweet on you, and the dirty talk will piss her off. The two of us can bury you lower than the devil's dick. And best of all, kid? You know what's best of all?"

"No."

"How do you think your uncle will react to all this? Your fucking associate director uncle? I'll bet he won't like it at all."

"I guess," Gib said, "I have to give you some kind of appetizer, then, don't I, Bob?"

"I guess you do, kid."

Bob waited while Gib thought about what he had to offer.

"If I give you something," Gib said, "Ruth is left out of it. Out of *all* of it."

"I don't know if I can promise that --"

"Bob," Gib cut him off, "I'm not asking. Without that, I'll torpedo this whole thing myself. I'll go from "rogue" FBI agent to "whistle blower" in five minutes on one nightly newscast. You can hammer me as hard as you want, but you can also suck my dick on the front page of the New York Times. Are those the kind of headlines you want? I don't think so, because that way, you get *nothing*. Nothing except the taste of my dick. After that, you and your bad toupee can go beat off in the Bay."

"All right, kid," Masturbatin' Bob said, easily. "For some reason, me and my toupee believe you. But you still gotta give me something."

"I already gave you Norman Haddal. Isn't that enough?"

"Old news, kid, and that's a DEA bust, anyway. So I ain't satisfied yet. Not enough to let you have the girl."

And so, finally, Gib tried on the suit of clothes that Sidney Pinkwater had measured him for the night before. At first, the suit seemed a bit tight, so tight it cut off his air. But Gib knew if he started talking, and kept talking, it would stretch to fit.

"How would you like to solve a thirty-year old murder case, Bob?"

"Make It There, Make It Anywhere"

New York is a field of tireless and antagonistic interests—undoubtedly fascinating but horribly unreal. Everybody is looking at everybody else—a foolish crowd walking on mirrors.

Wallace Stevens

As part of the deal they struck, Bob Maynard called in a favor with an old friend of his in the bureau. Telling Ruth that an aunt of his had died unexpectedly, Gib got a plane ticket and flew out to New York City to pick up some explosives on loan. Somehow, in a half-empty flight, a blond suitboy still ended up trying to use Gib's knees as a headrest. Throughout the entire flight, the suit would press the button on his armrest and try to lower his seat, at which point Gib would hit it as hard as he could and bounce the suit back to a fully upright position. During the endless struggle of the flight, Gib reviewed his conversation with Masturbatin' Bob over and over, trying to see if there was any way he could have gotten out of the trip.

"Kid," Maynard had said, "the only guy I know who'll give us the boom-boom, no questions asked, is an old buddy of mine in the Big Apple. Guy named 'Late Night' Carson."

"Is his real name Johnny?"

"Johnny? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Um, why do you call him 'Late Night'?"

"Ask him when you see him," Maynard had laughed. "'Johnny'. I don't know where you come up with this shit, kid. Anyway, Late Night is expecting you tomorrow morning. I got you booked on the red eye into JFK."

"Why do I have to go to New York? Why can't they just, I dunno, *ship* the damn explosives?"

"For one thing, the fewer people who know about this, the better. That way, we get all the credit without some damn Supervisory Agent or U.S. Attorney butting in and stealing all the glory. And two, UPS ain't exactly qualified to handle semtex."

"Well, neither am I!" Gib had yelled.

"Kid, relax. You got nothing to worry about. Late Night'll set you up with a van, and all the shit will be packed up and safe. No detonators. You could get into a ten car pileup, and it wouldn't even bother the boom-boom a bit."

"OK, two things," Gib had tried again. "One, I still don't see why I have to drive. And two, could you please stop calling it 'boom-boom'?"

"You don't like what I call things, go fuck yourself. And the reason you drive is because I don't want some nosy son of a bitch delivery man taking a peek at his cargo."

"Jesus Christ, why don't you just mark the cargo as top secret, and put it on a plane? We'll have it tomorrow!"

"Fuck tomorrow! I don't trust anybody with this kind of thing, kid. I don't trust you, I don't trust me, I don't trust anybody!"

"Then why are you trusting this Late Night guy to give you the explosives?" Gib had asked.

Maynard had been silent for a long while.

"I'm done arguing," Maynard had finally said. "This argument is over. You only

got a couple hours to make the flight. Either you go, or we start the pissing match."

Gib had sighed. "I'm going."

Gib had the time to stop and get a bag full of food before he got on the flight, so at least he ate well. Over Kansas, he unpacked the sandwich fixings, the chips and dip, and the beer. The plane staff confiscated the beer, but only after he'd had three of them. So he slept, if badly, across most of the Midwest.

Gib woke up around the western edge of Pennsylvania when the blond suitboy in tried to lower his seat again. Half-asleep, Gib kicked up so hard with his knees that the suitboy flew forward and smacked his face into the seat in front of him. The two of them unbelted and rolled into the aisle, ready to start fighting, but the flight attendants moved in quickly. They moved the suit to a seat in first class, which was fine with Gib.

When he got off the plane around 10 a.m. at JFK, there was a slender, sandy-haired man waiting for him, with a sign that said "FBI Agent Gibson", which Gib found kind of embarrassing. The man introduced himself as Dennis Berg. "But I'm not Jewish", Berg was at great pains to point out.

"Did someone happen to mention to you that I'm undercover?" Gib asked.

"Of course," Berg responded in a brisk tone. "That's why I had the sign. I assumed you wouldn't be dressed like an FBI man." Berg looked at Gib's jeans, t-shirt, and tennis shoes, which confirmed his assumption.

Agent Berg led Gib to a Chevy that looked like it was owned by an anal-retentive with paranoid tendencies. The paint job had the gleam of a fresh wash, and Gib noticed that even the hubcaps were polished. When he slung his carry-on bag into the immaculate trunk, he spotted a small dustvac and what appeared to be a set of clean clothes. Sliding into the car, ready to sleep all the way to the FBI office, Gib banged his knee on a small trash bin hanging from the glove compartment, and felt guilty when dirt from his sneakers speckled the spotless floor mats.

As Agent Berg drove out of the airport, he started to regale Gib with questions, opinions, and outrages. It was better than a white noise machine. Gib closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them, the car was parked in a garage. Agent Berg got Gib out of the car, then spent five minutes shaking out the car mats and vacuuming the seats with the hand-vac from the trunk, before finally leading Gib up to the FBI offices.

Upstairs, Agent Berg walked him through a series of cubicles until they reached one of the corner offices. After knocking five or six times, Agent Berg eased open the door, which had a name plate that read "Agent Steven Carson".

"Wait here," Agent Berg said, then slipped through the door trying not to allow Gib a view into the office. While he waited, Gib leaned against the wall and tried to rub away the grainy feeling from behind his eyes.

As he looked around the floor, Gib saw a bustle of activity all over the floor, except for the area near Carson's office. Here, there were only two Agents, one of whom was reading a well-thumbed copy of *Hustler*, and a number of empty cubicles. The Agent not reading porn leaned forward in his chair, smoking, while he angrily stared at the phone on his desk, willing it to ring. After a minute, the smoking Agent noticed Gib's attention, and hid the side of his face with the flat of his hand.

After ten minutes or so, Agent Berg came back out of Carson's office. Without a word to Gib, he walked down to the Men's bathroom. Irritated, Gib looked around some

more before turning to open the door.

"I wouldn't do that," said the *Hustler*-reading Agent.

"What? Why not?"

"Just trust me. If you want to get out of here without teeth buried in your ass, don't open that door." The Agent hadn't bothered put down his magazine while he spoke to Gib.

Gib tried to stare down the Agent, but the man only had eyes for his glossy girlfriends. Finally, Gib leaned back against the door and closed his eyes.

After a short, grey time, Gib felt a hand shake his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he saw Agent Berg standing in front of him, holding a glass of water.

"Sleep at night, why don't you?"

Get off my ass, you little twerp, Gib thought, but only muttered an ambiguous sound, which seemed to satisfy Berg.

"Look," Agent Berg said, "I don't care if you're some kind of undercover hotshot who can ignore the dress code. You should be aware of one thing. Agent Carson is a fine man with a long and distinguished record. When you go in there, I want you to show some respect."

Both the *Hustler* Agent and the smoking Agent laughed, which caused Agent Berg to spin around to confront them. Gib saw Berg's mouth open and close as the two other Agents looked up expectantly.

Finally, Berg said, "Idiots" before he turned back around and walked into Carson's office, waving for Gib to follow.

Getting his first look at "Late Night" Carson, Gib wondered if the man had been on the redeye flight with him. Thin as a two by four, Carson wore a rumpled grey suit that looked like it might have started out in Armani territory, but now, after few bankruptcies, had moved further and further down until it was begging for change on the street. Both Carson's shirt and eyes looked yellowish, though neither had started out that way. The tie, blue with little grey handcuffs on it, was the only thing in the entire office that looked fresh and clean. Gib suspected it Agent Berg had pulled it out of a desk drawer only minutes ago. Berg had probably tied it, too.

Agent Berg handed Carson the glass of water. Carson stared at it bleakly, then waved at Gib to sit down while he rummaged in his desk. Slowly, Carson pulled out an unmarked bottle of pills and handed it to Berg, who dutifully opened it and shook out three pills into Carson's outstretched hand.

Looking at Gib, Carson carefully enunciated, "God damn this ulcer." Then he threw the pills into the back of his throat and drank the whole cup of water in one long draw. Some of the water spilled out dribbled onto his neck and shoulders. Agent Berg had some tissue paper waiting to dab up the spill.

After that, there was a long silence, broken only by Carson finally clearing his throat. It sounded like a steel I-beam being dragged over five miles of bad road.

"Um..." Gib began

"What can I do for you, Agent?" Carson shouted. "Don't just sit there! Spit it out!"

Agent Berg coughed quietly. Carson looked back at him.

"I believe you said this had something to do with the call you received from Agent

Maynard, sir. In San Francisco."

Carson thought about it for awhile. As he did, his fingers started to beat out a jittery march on the desk top. Then he reached into his desk again and fumbled around some more, this time with a growing manic energy.

With a yell of triumph, Carson produced a white envelope. He bared his teeth in feral expectation and threw it at Gib. Instinctively, Gib stabbed out and caught the envelope, hearing keys jingle inside it. Carson looked disappointed that he had missed Gib's teeth.

"There's directions in there," Carson said. "Now beat it."

Gib got up to leave, when Carson stopped him.

"Tell that prick Maynard," Carson said, "that this is the last one. If I ever hear another word from him, I'll track him down, crawl up his ass and eat his black heart."

Then Carson stood up, leaned over the desk and demanded that Gib repeat the message word for word ("...eat his, uh..." "Black." "...black heart"), until Carson was sure Gib had it memorized. Then Carson collapsed back into his chair, deflated, and weakly signaled to Agent Berg to shake out a few more pills.

Gib walked to the door while Carson dry swallowed a few more unmarked "ulcer" pills. As he opened the door, Gib looked around at Carson and decided to ask a question.

"Sir?"

Carson looked up, and Gib saw his eyes were a glowing red, as if all the blood vessels in his eye were desperately trying to escape.

"Why do they call you 'Late Night'?"

Carson leaped to his feet and lifted his chair up over his head in a manic rage. Gib barely got the door closed in time before the heavy metal chair flew from Carson's hands and smashed against it. As Gib held the door closed, he could hear the sounds of a rampage going on inside. Agent Berg's voice rose above the sounds of destruction, and Gib thought it sounded like a marmoset trying to herd a gorilla stampede.

The *Hustler* Agent stared up at Gib in open admiration. Even the smoking Agent had stabbed out his butt so he could give Gib a sarcastic round of applause.

"Jesus, you called him 'Late Night'? To his *face*?" the *Hustler* Agent asked.

"Not really," Gib started, but the *Hustler* Agent interrupted.

"You got some *balls*, man!" The Agent stood up and shook Gib's hand. "I'm Bobby Zivojinovich. You got to come out with us tonight. This is Bar Night. You gotta come out. The guys have *got* to meet you!"

"I'm busy," Gib told Agent Zivojinovich.

"Fed's Night Out"

I like it here in New York. I like the idea of having to keep eyes in the back of your head all the time.

John Cale

The drinking started near Wall Street.

"We always meet here, get a couple of cocktails in, maybe some food to lay down a base," Bobby Zivojinovich told Gib.

Gib had reserved a hotel room after trying to reject Zivojinovich's invitation. But he was exhausted from the flight. So when Zivojinovich had suggested Gib crash in one of the few empty offices, Gib had wearily agreed. He slept for a few hours on top of a desk. When Zivojinovich woke him up, it actually seemed like a good idea. Better than drinking alone. And god knows, Gib need needed a drink.

Gib unpacked and put on a suit for the first time in months. Hell, he realized it was the first time in months he had even tucked in his shirt. The suit felt like a Halloween costume now, which Gib found disturbing. He filed the observation away to be examined later.

Zivojinovich's crowd was a mix of young agents, lawyers, and bankers. There was no easy way to tell which was which, except perhaps the labels on the suits. Zivojinovich started Gib out on martinis.

After the third one, Gib decided it was foolish to keep count, and decided that he would only judge his evening by whether he "needed another" or had "had too much". He took his fresh drink back to the table and found Bobby Zivojinovich telling everyone how Gib had gotten into a brawl with "Late Night" Carson and had left the Senior Agent screaming, bleeding and defeated in his office.

"Hey, is Berg coming tonight?" asked one of the Agents.

"I hope not," Zivojinovich replied.

"Then fuck it, everyone's here. It's time for nudie!"

The group started up a chant of "Nudie! Nudie! Nudie!" while those who had drinks finished them off. Then the group stormed out into the street and piled into cabs. Gib found himself crowded into one cab with four other guys in the back seat and Bobby Zivojinovich in the front. The cab driver, whose name on the hack license was Peter Desjardins, but whom Zivojinovich insisted on calling "Mohammed", told Zivojinovich that four was the legal limit on passengers in a New York City cab.

The guy next to Gib, an assistant district attorney named Roy, laughed and muttered to Gib, "This happens every week. Watch Bobby go to town o the towelhead."

"I think the driver's French."

"Whatever. Just watch."

"Look, Mohammed..." Zivojinovich pulled out his FBI identification and tried to browbeat Desjardins into taking the entire party to the "Honey Doll Exotic Lounge" where, Zivojinovich assured the cabbie, there was a major sting operation in progress even as they spoke. The entire back seat broke into giggles.

"What kind of 'sting' operation uses drunk frat boys?" Desjardins asked.

Zivojinovich stopped, puzzled, and Gib jumped into the conversational gap.

"Look, sir, we're federal agents. If we look like drunk frat boys, then our cover is pretty effective, isn't it?"

Desjardins looked over his shoulder and through the protective glass at Gib, who shrugged his shoulders. Desjardins returned the shrug.

"As long as you can fix the ticket, I guess I don't give a shit," the cabbie relented.

At the "Honey Doll", Zivojinovich gave Desjardins a lousy tip until the rest of the group shamed him into adding a few dollars.

"If you're gonna act like an asshole, Bobby, you at least gotta tip big!" a lawyer named Roy said. The cabbie Desjardins added enthusiastic agreement.

Gib had wondered if his experience in Vegas could be repeated, but it didn't seem like that was possible with Zivojinovich's group. All the dancers who came by to offer dances maintained hard, brittle grins in the face of Zivojinovich and his pals. It was kind of awful.

After an hour or so, Zivojinovich got up and announced to all nearby that this place now sucked, and it was time to move on.

"Bobby's just tired of the dancers calling him names again," Roy the Lawyer announced.

"What do you mean?" Gib asked

Roy the Lawyer said, "I'll bet every dancer in the whole city has a nickname for Bobby."

"Like what?"

"Well, here at Honey Doll, they call him 'Cheap-o'. Bobby likes to gets his dollar's worth."

Outside the club, the group got into an argument over where to go next. Zivojinovich wanted to get more drinks "where they don't water them down", and four bankers wanted to go straight to the next strip club.

Roy the Lawyer continued his epic tale of Zivojinovich nicknames. "At Third Base, the dancers call him 'Captain Cheapskate'. Tie and Tails, they call him 'Wet Spot'. That was a bad night, let me tell you.

"Hey, does anybody remember what they call him at Tommy's Topless?" Roy the Lawyer asked three other guys standing around on the sidewalk.

"Isn't it 'One Bill Bobby'?" said one guy.

"No, that's the Ritz and Tits," Roy the Lawyer argued.

Zivojinovich heard the discussion and herded people into cabs, suddenly letting the bankers win the argument. The next place, Tommy's Topless, was a dive. The stage, an uneven piece of carpentry with a solid wood banister six inches away, appeared to be covered by a faded orange indoor-outdoor carpet with an indistinguishable pattern on it. The stage held three dancers at a time, who moved down the stage in three shifts of more or less ten-minutes each, two songs. One dancer would start fully dressed, which generally meant some sort of gown, spandex, or short dress, at the far left. The first shift would be given over to stripping down. Then, topless, the dancers would dance at the second and third stations until they got off stage after the third and dressed. The dancers carried clean blankets with them, which they carefully laid down at each new dance spot on the stage.

Assembly line stripping.

As Zivojinovich and his friends began hooting and passing out green, Gib realized with striking clarity that he was hanging out with the Khaki Team, the fraternity of assholes he had laughed at in Vegas. In Vegas, Zivojinovich would trade in his suit for a polo shirt and a Gap khaki shorts (for easy access).

This is no good, Gib thought.

The dancer in front of him, a blond with long black hairs sticking out from under her wig (making her a blonde brunette), suddenly leaned to one side and grimaced. She dug her fingers into the back of her knee. To Gib, it looked like she had a cramp and was trying to massage it out. As he watched her, he saw her notice him watching. She frowned briefly, then stuck her tongue out at him.

Gib asked her, "Was that a cramp? In your knee, I mean."

She nodded her head, then lowered herself down to accept a ten from Roy the Lawyer, before his attention was drawn away.

As she danced, Gib noticed that she had a scar in an unusual place. Many of the dancers had obvious implant scars, but the blond brunette had a long, nasty scar on one side of her left knee. The baseball jock in him was intrigued.

"That's a great scar," he said, and she gave him an odd look, then pulled out the side of her g-string while Gib put a dollar between the string and her hip.

"On my knee?" she asked.

"Yeah. Ligament?"

"ACL tear. Soccer," she said. Then she sat down on her blanket and did a series of splits. Gib recognized them as stretching exercises, though he had never seen someone doing them quite like that.

"Hey, I can show you a couple of things to help with the knee," Gib said to the blond brunette. She looked at him, judging how much of a come-on he was making, then nodded her head.

"Buy me a drink while I sit?" she asked.

"Sure."

Gib's group was one of three large groups in the place. One of the groups was a bachelor party with two women, the only women wearing pants in the whole place. As the last song of the shift ended, the tape at the bar ended a side, and one of the women in the group yelled out, "Start the music! My god, you're hanging these women out to dry! For god's sake, start the music." The whole bachelor party laughed.

Why can't I be hanging out with them? Gib thought, thinking about Ruth.

The blond with black roots sat down in an empty chair next to him. She had put her clothes back on -- a white bikini top underneath a ripped black sweatshirt and a high cut leather miniskirt. She signaled the waitress to come over, and the waitress took both their drink orders -- a beer and a screwdriver.

"I assume that's just orange juice, right?"

"Not even that. Some generic orange drink mix. Like Kool-Aid, but nastier."

"How'd you fuck up the knee?"

"Well, I was on a breakaway, and this bitch chopped me from behind, and my knee just buckled. They red carded the cunt, but that was the last time I ever played soccer. You said something about being able to loosen it up?"

"Yeah. Give me your leg."

"OK, but no fucking around."

The blond brunette put her ankle up into his hands, and Gib rested her calf on the top of his thigh. After taking off her high heel shoe, he dug deep into one of the muscles just above the ankle, and she let out a small yell.

"Sorry, I should have warned you that was going to hurt. It'll feel OK in just a second."

She relaxed as the muscle loosened up. "Hey, that does feel better."

"Yeah. Just sit back and relax. Drink your cheap-ass Kool-Aid."

Gib felt a little better, if still bleary and a little teary, while he massaged the blonde brunette's lower leg, careful not to let his hands wander any higher than the top of her scar. She laughed every time he noticed his hands drifting up the scar tissue and moved them back down. Gib also kept buying her drinks and giving her dollar bills to hand to the dancer on stage.

Gib realized what the problem was. In Vegas, Ruth had found a way to stop them feeling like total suckers, like cash machines on legs. But Zivojinovich and his buddies had no interest in being anything but an audience. They probably conceive of any other role.

After a while, Gib figured he had done as much good to the knee as he could. So he put the blonde brunette's leg back down, he suggested, "You know, you really shouldn't dance without a knee brace."

When she started laughing, Gib realized what an unlikely image that was. But he pressed on, regardless. "OK, that was dumb. But I'll bet you're not warming up well enough before work. You should stretch more, loosen the muscles out."

Gib felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, is this bitch giving you trouble?" Bobby Zivojinovich asked.

The blonde brunette curled her lip. "You're here with Limpdick Bobby?" she asked.

"Don't call me that!" Zivojinovich yelled. "You fucking cunt!"

The bouncers moved in.

Gib helped drag Zivojinovich out of the bar before things got totally out of hand. Zivojinovich's tantrum continued until the group ended up at a bar south of Houston on Allen that was still crowded even at three in the morning. As they all walked up to the bar to get the first round, Bobby Zivojinovich announced to Roy the Lawyer and Gib that he had decided it was time to start drinking *seriously*. Both of the other men gave each other wary looks at hearing this statement. Gib was having trouble focusing, and Zivojinovich was in much worse condition.

"Good thing he's not carrying his gun," Roy said into Gib's ear. Gib nodded.

Zivojinovich's volume increased with every new shot of whiskey, every fresh bottle of beer. At a certain point, Gib went up to the bar to get another beer and decided to stay there for a while to get some respite.

His alcoholic flameout probably wouldn't be quite as bad as Zivojinovich's, but Gib was feeling no pain. Numbness was okay, but he wondered if that meant he was feeling no pleasure, either. That got him to thinking about Ruth. And that led to thinking about Sidney, and what was probably going to happen to him. At that point, Gib even started to feel guilty about turning Haddal in.

Ruth was going to find out everything, he realized. That he was a Fed. A Fed just like Bobby Zivojinovich or Late Night Carson or Masturbatin' Bob Maynard. And Ruth probably wouldn't be exceedingly grateful about him keeping her out of jail, since it was for a plan that he had concocted, and that she wasn't even involved in.

Feel no pain, feel no pain, Gib repeated to himself. He ordered two shots of Jack Daniels and pounded them one after another. Novocaine for the brain.

He waited a few seconds, then pinched his arm as hard as he could.

Nothin. Din't feel a fuggin thing. Good job, good job. No pain, he was feeling no pain. What about pleasure? He had better be sure there was numbness there as well.

Quickly looking for some assistance in what was turning into an important (and attention-diverting) scientific experiment, Gib turned to the good-looking redhead sitting next to him and realized from her curious expression that she had been watching him pinch himself. He gave her what felt like a reassuring smile and asked, enunciating each word carefully, "Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?"

She tapped her teeth with a finger once or twice, thinking, then shook her head. "I suppose not." She had a nice, amused contralto, Gib noted. "But only if I can ask two. One before your question, and one after."

"Two for one? Well, okay." *Anything for science*, Gib thought. "Ask away."

"Why were you pinching your arm like that? It looked pretty nasty. You've already got a bruise."

Gib smiled. It was clear he had asked the right person to help him conduct his experiment. "I just realized, that right now I'm feeling no pain. Had to prove it, though. I was making sure I was feeling no pain."

The woman considered the answer for a moment. "Oddly enough, that actually makes sense."

"OK." Gib shook his head, clearing. The red-head looked really familiar. "Here's the thing. OK. I want to see if anything else I am feeling besides pain." Gib thought about that last sentence, not sure if it actually tracked. "If I am feeling anything else."

"What else did you have in mind?"

"Well, with no pain, I gotta test the opposite. Pleasure."

She tapped herself on the side of the head with two fingers. "I should have figured that out. So you need me to do something, is that it?"

"In the name of science, yes. Would you kiss me?"

She leaned forward, grabbed Gib by the back of his head, and stuck her tongue in his mouth. After a few minutes of rigorous scientific testing, she leaned back, grinning.

"So?"

"Turns out it's just pain I'm not feeling," Gib said, suddenly more awake than he'd been in hours.

"Anything for science," the redhead said. "And here's my second question: would you like to come home with me? Right now?"

Gib said, "Anything for science."

"Old Friends in New Bottles"

Or, "The Robert B. Parker Tribute Chapter"

I regret to say that we of the F.B.I. are powerless to act in cases of oral-genital intimacy, unless it has in some way obstructed interstate commerce.

J. Edgar Hoover

Gib's first thought the next morning was, "This is a *great* apartment." Sunlight streaming in through the huge windows was what had woken him up in the first place. The walls were of uncovered brick in a New York-style that Gib had always admired during his visits to Wallis during college. The walls were covered in bookcases and framed prints. The furniture in the room was made out of walnut with a rich, shining tone. Gib was very impressed. Whoever he had come home with, she had spent a lot of money, both on the apartment and on the furnishings.

Gib realized that he was alone in bed when he reached over carefully with his hand and felt only stacks of pillows next to him. Quietly, he lowered himself out of the high bed and looked around for his pants. All of his clothes were on a Queen Anne chair next to the large windows.

As he was lifting his left leg into his boxer shorts, Wallis Arlen walked into the room carrying a glass of orange juice. Standing on one leg, frozen, his eyes tracked her as she walked over, set the glass on the window sill next to him and kissed him on the cheek.

"Get dressed. I'm making breakfast out in the kitchen." Then she walked back out of the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Gib stared at the bedroom door.

"Guh," he said.

After a while, he lowered his leg, the boxer shorts still caught around his ankle. He leaned down on the window sill, his ass half on the sill, half pressing up against the pane. Then he crossed his arms.

Then he stared some more.

His brain churned a strange white noise, until he felt a cold liquid suffuse the right side of his ass. Looking, he noticed that the orange juice Wallis had formed condensation, which had trickled down to kiss his hip.

"Gib!" Wallis shouted from out in the apartment. "Come on! The eggs are done! Get your ass out here!"

Gib picked up the orange juice and drank it.

Then he got dressed and went out to have breakfast.

The bedroom opened up into a large living area, where Gib followed the smell of eggs into the kitchen. There, he found Wallis and the redhead, who was now dressed in workout clothes, looking like she'd just finished a run. Even sweaty and disheveled, the redhead struck Gib as extremely sexy, with muscular legs and a flat stomach. Her breasts looked small, just as he recalled from the night before, but nicely shaped. She had an Orioles cap on, a ponytail hanging out the back, and it obscured her face so that Gib could only see her eyes when she happened to glance furtively up at him. She seemed to be holding in laughter.

The redhead had a plate piled high with scrambled eggs, sausage, potatoes and a

toasted bagel with cream cheese. Ignoring Gib's faint attempts at small talk, she walked past him into the living room, sat down, turned on the TV to Saturday morning cartoons, and began eating.

Gib turned back to Wallis who was filling a plate with food herself.

"Is this your apartment?" Gib asked.

Wallis nodded.

"Is that your roommate?"

A nod.

Nonplused, Gib decided to try another tack.

"Is all of the rest of that food for me?"

Wallis finished arranging her plate. Another nod, but this time with a smile.

"Toast your own bagel," she said.

A few minutes later, they were all sitting out in the living room, eating and listening to multicolor mayhem. Once, Gib started to ask questions, but Wallis just shook her head, nodding at the TV and her food. Shrugging his shoulders, Gib got up to get more coffee for everyone.

As he poured, getting grateful looks from both Wallis and the redhead, he felt an extreme level of apprehension, like a man with Tourette's Syndrome sitting in a room with two voice-activated nuclear bombs. Luckily, neither of the bombs in question seemed to be angry at him. Wallis seemed to be carefully thinking, and the redhead was just enjoying the cartoons.

As he speared the last of his sausage into his mouth, Gib realized that this situation was somewhat unique in his experience. He was sitting in a room with two women he'd both slept with, yet no one was pissed off. And if he felt apprehensive, well, he had felt that way during every breakfast growing up with his parents. So apprehensiveness almost added to the comfort. It made the scene familiar.

Gib leaned back on the couch and rested the warm mug of coffee on his chest. As he sipped from the cup, he forced his thoughts to baseball, and he started building his personal all-star team again, the best players he had ever personally see play (even on TV). Cal Ripkin at short, of course, though Trammel and Yount were right there. Mike Schmidt at third, Ryne Sandberg at second. He couldn't decide who he wanted as the #1 starter, but Rick Reuschel would always be the guaranteed #5 guy, just for the entertainment value. His thoughts drifted away like the steam rising from the coffee mug.

Gib finally drifted back to the here and now when Wallis turned off the TV, and said to both Gib and the redhead, "All right. We have to talk."

"Awwwwwww," the redhead complained.

"Shut up, you," Wallis said to the redhead. Then she looked at Gib. "You still haven't figured it out yet, have you?"

Gib looked expectantly at her.

"Don't give me the Sally Field face, for shit's sake! You try that on me again, and I'll slap it off your face with a frying pan."

The redhead started laughing.

"And *you*," Wallis said to the redhead, who stopped laughing and lowered her head so the cap hid almost her whole face. "What in the holy name of *hell* were you thinking, Alice? Do you really think someone like *Gib* is going to be able to deal with this?"

Glancing up from underneath the cap, the redhead said, "He's an adult. Besides, he looked so damn sad last night. I thought I was doing him a favor taking him home."

Wallis threw her hands up in the air and stalked over to one of the huge windows looking out onto the street.

Just like breakfast with the Gibsons, Gib thought. Now that the explosion was here, he felt perfectly fine. *Now someone has to go find a bottle of vodka. Just start talking.* "Wallis, if you're jealous I had sex with your roommate --"

"Jealous?" Wallis asked, spinning around from the window. Both she and the redhead broke down in laughter.

"Same old Gib," the redhead choked out. She lowered her voice to impersonate Gib. "Are you jealous or something? Duhhhhhhhhh..." Something about her voice suddenly sounded familiar.

Just when the laughter was about to fade out, Wallis looked at the redhead and said, with a perfectly straight face, "Jealous."

That was when both women completely lost it and moved from the Duchy of Giggles to the Kingdom of Howling Laughter. The redhead slid off the couch, holding her stomach.

Five minutes of whooping later, Gib asked, "OK, what's so funny?" in an aggrieved voice. That just set them off again.

Eventually, they got themselves under control. The redhead was sitting Indian-style on the floor, holding her side, saying "Ow. Ow. Ow." in a happy voice and breaking out in subdued giggles. Wallis wiped the tears from her eyes as she sat down in a chair next to Gib on the couch.

"Gibby, my love, can you keep quiet for just a second and just listen?"

Gib was about to answer when he thought better of it and just nodded his head.

"Good. Are you still working for Joseph Senior?"

"Well," Gib said, not wanting to talk in front of Alice. "I'm here in town on business, anyway."

"I was afraid of that. Joe Junior told me you had started working for Daddy Arlen a few months ago, but then nothing. I hoped you had come to your senses and quit."

"Why would I quit?" Gib asked.

Wallis looked at his face closely as he spoke. "Senior has really got you in the shit, hasn't he?"

"No. Why would you think that?"

"Because once Sally Field went away, Peter Lorre showed up."

"Peter Lorre?"

"That's what we always called your 'trapped rat' face," Alice said.

"We'?" Gib exploded. "Do I know you?"

"Yes, you know her," Wallis said. "Meet the sister I always wanted to have."

Alice tilted her Orioles cap back on her head, and Gib stared into a familiar face.

"Owen?" he asked, quietly.

Alice nodded.

Gib said, "Hell."

Then, "You know, you're looking pretty good."

Then he got up to refill his coffee cup.

Gib heard Alice say to Wallis, "I *told* you he'd be able to handle it. *Your* problem is, you fuck someone, and you think you know everything there is to know about them."

"I do *not*."

"Yes, you do. How about that guy who stole your stereo and all your CDs?"

"That was *different*."

Gib poured the coffee. "Anyone want any more coffee?" he called.

"Gib, get out here!" Alice yelled. "How have you been? What kind of shit has our father gotten you into now?"

Gib walked back, deciding he should avoid that topic. "Some guy stole your stereo, Wallis?"

"Gibby, stop trying to change the subject," Wallis said.

"*She* thought he was going to ask her to *marry* him," Alice said.

Wallis looked pissed. Gib decided it was best to move off that topic as well.

"Weird that I would run into someone I know, isn't it?"

"New York's a small town, Gib," Wallis said. "People in our groups tend to congregate around certain trains. The 1/9, the 2/3, the F. It's almost weirder *not* to run into somebody you know."

Alice added, "If you'd been paying attention, you would have seen Joe Junior last night, too. Don't you remember? Joe Junior had a bachelor party at Tommy's Topless last night."

"Joe Junior's getting married?" Gib asked.

"Sure. I'm sure he'll invite you to the wedding."

"And he took you to a strip club?"

"For Joe Junior, the world doesn't change. I'm still his brother, even if I've got tits. And any brother of Joe Junior would obviously would want to go to a bunch of strip clubs with him."

"Hey, wait a second," Gib said. "Were you the one screaming about the music?"

Alice laughed. "Sure. Boy, that Tommy's is a real skanky place, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Gib paused. "I was surprised. You sounded like you were having a good time."

"Well, I'm bi."

"Oh." Gib thought about it. "So that makes you a bi-sexual transsexual. A bitranssexual? A transbisexual?"

"I think you covered everything. Anyway, I followed you guys outside after that friend of your –"

"No friend of mine," Gib interrupted.

"The guy who started the fight. You were already in a cab with him by the time I got outside. So I asked the guy who seemed to be in charge, and he told me what bar you were going to. I showed up about an hour after you guys got there."

Gib leaned back and drank some of the coffee.

"Well," he said. "Okay." Then he drank some more coffee.

Wallis looked at him. "That's it? That's all you have to say?" she asked.

Gib thought about it. "I guess not. Alice, do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

"Go right ahead."

"Did we actually, uh, do anything?"

"Sure!" Alice made a circle with one hand and pumped her other forefinger through the circle.

"OK." Gib said. He drank his coffee, thinking about whether to ask the next question.

Alice started giggling again. "Uh-oh. I know where this is going," she said. "Come on, ask already!"

Gib sighed. "How was I?"

Wallis shouted something incoherent. Alice got up and shook her fist in the air. "I *knew* you were going to ask that!" She danced around the room. Finally, she turned to Gib and said, "You were fine."

Gib nodded his head, satisfied.

Wallis gave him a bleak look. "Don't look so smug, asshole."

The rest of the morning passed in comfortable discussion of surgery and cosmetics and work. When Gib's stomach started growling, they all realized it was lunch time. So they ordered in Chinese food.

"How did you afford everything?" Gib asked. "Uncle Joseph?"

"Are you kidding? No." Alice looked chagrined. "He more or less disowned me after I went into rehab for the last time. That's where I finally admitted why I was so unhappy. This was about four years ago. I still have a trust from Mom's side of the family, and I get paid pretty well to do what I do."

"What are you doing?"

"Building web sites."

"Really? Weird. I'm kind of, uh, working in the industry, too."

"Really?" Wallis asked. "I thought you said you were still working for Senior."

"No, I don't think I said that. Hey, I should really go check my messages. Can I use your phone?" Since Wallis stared at him suspiciously, he actually did check his messages.

There were twelve. Three of them were the inevitable hangups from marketing computers. Two were from Ruth, one was from Masturbatin' Bob, both of them "just checking up on him". The rest were from Sidney Pinkwater.

"Gibson, where *are* you? We have to fly out and give a pitch in New York on Sunday. The venture capital people called the meeting all of a sudden. I think they're going to back out. Now, of all times! But they're making a special Sunday meeting, just to hear what we have to say. I think those bastards Bodio and Feyrer are trying to fuck us.

"Ruth told me you were already in New York for a funeral. I am sorry to hear about your aunt. I am in desperate need of moral support, Gibson. I need you at this meeting. I need you!

"Call soonest, call quickly, call right away. Call, call, call."

The other messages were more of the same, only more and more frantic. At one point, Pinkwater referred to Gib as a "good luck charm", which made Gib grimace.

Gib dialed the 212 number Sidney had left and got the front desk of the Waldorf. In a second, he was on the phone with Pinkwater. He tried to argue his way out of the situation, but Pinkwater wouldn't stop until finally Gib agreed to help with the pitch. Gib

arranged to meet Pinkwater in a hotel the next morning to get ready for the pitch on Monday.

Gib walked back to the two women, sat down and groaned.

"So what are you doing on the web?" Alice asked.

"I'm kind of writing a column."

"What column?" Alice asked.

"It's called 'Stupid Things'."

"Jesus Christ, you're J. Spiderman?" Alice said. "I read that column every day! You're an *asshole!*"

Gib decided to take it as a compliment. Non-disclosure be damned, he told Alice what he was doing for Pinkwater, about Black Helicopter, and about the Black Box project. Alice was suitably impressed.

"That's amazing," Alice said. "How did you get involved in that?"

So Gib described how Ruth had introduced him to Sidney Pinkwater, trying to leave out exactly how he had met Ruth in the first place. Wallis honed in on the evasion.

"Why were you at this 'Space' in the first place? It doesn't sound like your kind of place."

"It's really not important. Hey, did I mention I wrote a piece for *Rolling Stone*?"

That got Alice so excited that Gib was able to escape from Wallis' interrogation. Wallis didn't look happy about it.

"Gib," Alice said, "it sounds like you have a pretty successful writing career going on. I never even knew you liked writing. You seem really happy."

I have two successful careers going, Gib thought. *I'm happy about one of 'em.* "You seem really happy, too, Alice."

"Years of therapy."

"Having it Out"

Everybody wants to see justice done, to somebody else.

Bruce Cockburn

A short while later, Alice announced she had to go to a meeting. When Gib asked what kind of meeting she could have on a Saturday night, Wallis looked at him pityingly. Alice explained it was a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, made up mostly of transsexuals.

"I may be a woman now, but I'm still an ex-junkie," Alice said. "I used to go to a regular meeting that had a lot of transvestites in it, but they get so bitchy. It's all about finding a community where you're comfortable."

Alice leaned over and kissed Gib on the cheek. "Maybe we can do this again some time," Alice said. Then she left.

Wallis didn't wait a second. "Spadecalling. Can you take it?"

Gib said, "I can take it. Can I get a drink first?"

There was a pause while the Oban scotch was broken out, along with some lowball glasses.

Then Wallis asked, "How freaked out are you that you slept with Alice?"

Gib thought about it. "You were the only member of the Arlen family I ever expected to do that with."

"But ...?"

"I don't know why, but I don't feel freaked out at all."

"Will your girlfriend mind that you slept with Alice?"

"How do you know I have a girlfriend?"

"Gibby, you *always* have a girlfriend."

Gib thought about it a long time. "I don't know what Ruth will think. It's not like we're married." Gib hesitated, thinking about that. "But I don't think I'm going to tell her. I'm not the same person in San Francisco. This was the old me that did this."

"All right. If you say so," Wallis said. Then a light of comprehension glowed in her eyes. "Gibby, are you in love with this girl?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"Spadecalling!"

"I know. The answer's still yes."

Wallis stared at him for a long while. "Don't look so sad, Gib. It happens to everyone sooner or later."

"If you say so. I still don't quite know what's going to happen, but I'm going to see it through."

"Good. Are you still working for Senior?"

"Yes."

"I knew it, damn it. The next question has to be: how many people are going to get hurt?"

"I don't know. None, I hope."

Wallis snorted in disbelief. "Spade calling, remember? How many people are going to get hurt?"

Gib leaned back and close his eyes. After a while, he said, "Maybe a lot. It

depends on me."

Wallis said, "Hell, I figure you're the one who's going to get hurt the most."

Gib had drunk just enough to take a chance. If he saw pity when he opened his eyes, he thought, then the conversation would end right here. He would manufacture an excuse and go drink until he had to meet Pinkwater the next morning. But he hoped he would see something that meant he could tell Wallis everything. He needed to tell her. Tell someone.

He opened his eyes. No pity. Sympathy, perhaps. Concern. But mostly, he saw in Wallis's eyes what he expected Catholics must hope to see on the other side of the confessional screen. Awareness. And if not forgiveness, then at least judgement.

Gib told Wallis all about it, spadealling all the way, from the time he left Virginia, included every bit of what he'd done in San Francisco, and then ended with what he was doing in New York.

At first, she asked questions, but as he went along, she just listened. The only movement she made was to pour more Oban in their glasses.

After over three hours of talking, Gib finished by telling her about the call he'd just had with Pinkwater. Then he reached for something more to say and realized he'd said it all. He looked at the bottle of Oban and realized that it was empty. He pushed himself up off the couch and stumbled into the kitchen, where he vaguely remembering a bottle of Isle of Jura.

"Holy shit," he heard Wallis finally say. He cracked the fresh bottle of scotch, filled his glass with ice.

Walking back with the glass and bottle, he said, "Holy shit. I agree."

Wallis didn't seem so much stunned as overwhelmed.

"This all wasn't quite what you expected to hear, was it?" Gib asked.

"No," she finally said. "I expected you were just fucking over another girlfriend, like Katy."

"Who?"

"There, that's what I expected," Wallis said. "Katy Maitland. You lived with her for the last year, remember? Then you disappear one day in August and all she finds is this ridiculous note. *Dear Katy, thanks for everything.* For at least a day, she thought it was some bizarre practical joke. When she realized it wasn't, she called me in a panic."

"Oh, Katy. Right. Sorry if she bothered you. I'd forgotten about her."

"About three seconds after you walked out the door, I'd imagine. Just another situation where you don't give a shit. I'll bet you remember what sex with her was like, though."

"Sure. She liked to lick my asshole."

Wallis stopped short. "She *what*?"

Gib shrugged. "Why are you looking at me? It's not like I *asked* her to lick my asshole. I think she just liked everything to be clean. The house, her clothes, my bunghole. Did you know she changed the sheets once a day? She was a little obsessive."

Gib drank some more scotch while Wallis gathered her thoughts.

"Okay," she said, shaking her head. "Let's move on from *that*."

"Fine by me."

"What are you going to do?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Gib, you can't deliver *explosives*, for god's sake."

"Why not? The only thing I really care about in all this is..." Gib paused.

"Is what?"

He said, "Ruth."

"Oh," Wallis said.

"I guess I'd like to get out of this with my skin intact. But all I really care about is Ruth."

"That's not good enough."

"Of *course* it's not," he shouted suddenly, angrily. "Don't you think I know that? Why the hell do you think I told you about all this? Just because I thought you might be *amused*? Christ, Wallis, what am I going to *do*?"

Wallis sat still for a long while.

"I really don't know."

Gib's anger collapsed. "Great. Thanks."

He looked at his half-full glass. Got up.

"Then I'll guess you'll just have to trust me to figure out what the right thing is, Wallis, and to do it."

"Gib, how can I? How often have you ever done that?"

Gib shrugged. "This time is different."

"How?"

"Well," and Gib smiled deadly as he said it, "This time I actually give a shit."

Wallis looked at him. He looked back. No help there.

"Thanks for your hospitality," he said. He drained the rest of his glass. Set it down. "Thank Alice, too."

"Nothing Like Enthusiasm"

You will find it a distinct help ... if you know and look as if you know what you are doing.

IRS training manual for tax auditors

At the Waldorf the next morning, Gib called up to Pinkwater's room. Sidney picked up and started yelling excitedly into the phone. Then he told Gib to wait, that he would be right down. Sitting underneath the huge wooden clock, Gib thought about the story that Ethan Garrity had told him, about running away to the Coney Island Cyclone. The more he thought about Pinkwater, the more he wanted to go outside and hail a cab to Coney. Gib checked his pockets, found three twenties. That should be enough to get there.

Gib had just stood up to ask the concierge how easy it would be to arrange a car ride when Pinkwater stormed into the lobby, bellowing his delight at seeing Gib. The lobby went silent as half the people in it turned to watch Sidney Pinkwater, resplendent in his glaring Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts, charge across the lobby and lift Gib off the floor in a bear hug. Actually, it was a bigger hug than that. If a group of Grizzlies had been sitting in the cocktail lounge, wearing Armani and sipping martinis, they would have seen the hug, shrugged their hairy shoulders, and agreed, "OK, from now on, we call it a Pinkwater Hug."

When Pinkwater put Gib down, he looked at Gib's bedraggled suit and shook his head disappointedly. "Now that suit will never do. You look like the accountant for a traveling carny," Pinkwater said. "It's *my* job to look like a crazy, visionary bastard. You, on the other hand, have to look like a million dollars in diamonds. Right now, you look like you're hiring temps to run the Tilt-o-Wheel."

Pinkwater dragged Gib off to the gift shop, bought him a t-shirt and a pair of shorts, then dragged him back to the lobby.

Pinkwater leaned on the desk and squinted speculatively at the concierge. "I have a belief," Pinkwater said.

"The concierge said, 'Yes, sir?'"

"What I believe is that this sorry specimen of a suit can be made to look as if it just came off the rack at Barney's."

The concierge nodded her head before Pinkwater added, "In an hour." The concierge head's switched from nodding yes to shaking no. She was about to speak when Pinkwater raised on meaty hand.

"Before you say anything," Sidney said, "let me show you the bedrock of my belief." He brought up his other hand and slid three hundred dollar bills across the desk. The concierge went back to nodding yes.

"Will an hour and a half be acceptable, sir?" she asked.

"That will be just fine," Sidney said.

Then he looked back at Gib and said, "Strip."

"Take off your suit, and give it to the nice young lady here."

"Are you crazy? Right here in the lobby? No!"

Pinkwater leaned in close and whispered in Gib's ear. "Gibson, smell me. Take a whiff. Do you know what that sour smell is? Do you recognize it? It's desperation. You

are smelling a man with the potential for poverty."

"What do you mean, Sidney?," Gib said in confusion. "You're rich."

"I was rich. Most of the money that has gone into Black Helicopter is mine. And I took out loans which I personally secured with all my assets, including my house."

Gib pulled back and stared at Sidney, who gave him a demented, sickly show of teeth. It was an addict's smile, the smile of a gambler trying to scramble out of a deep, deep hole by taking bigger and bigger risks who now realizes it's time to put everything he's got left into the pot and wait for the cards to come.

"You secured loans with your personal assets? What kind of fucking idiot are you, Sidney? You can't trust a fucking bank with your life!" No wonder Pinkwater had been so deflated, so acquiescent in all those meetings with the venture capital people.

"That's not who I'm trusting with my life, Gibson. I'm trusting *you* with it."

"What?" Gib asked.

"You're doing the pitch. I saw how you handled Bodio and Feyrer. These people don't frighten you. Jackson and OddGreg just aren't able to lead a pitch like this. And I'm too damn frightened. That means you have to be perfect, or as perfect as I can make you. So if you don't strip off that suit *right now* and give it to this nice woman, I am going to shred it off you and then we'll go buy you a new one instead."

Gib got undressed.

As Gib was slipping into the shorts and t-shirt, Pinkwater looked at his boxer shorts and clucked disapproval.

"We'll have to replace those entirely. Then we'll get the shoes shined, and get you a haircut."

Pinkwater's list of improvements continued as he led Gib to the elevator.

Up in the suite, Taylor Jackson and OddGreg were playing Quake against each other using two Black Boxes connected to a laptop and a desktop. Both he and Beef had attached portable speakers and cranked the volume up as high as they could without blowing out the windows. As each digital rocket impacted, the speakers overloaded and distorted, and the room was filled with the grunts and screams.

Pinkwater sat Gib in a chair and started talking to him, quizzing him about the Black Box. He ran Gib through the demonstration that Gib had seen performed a thousand times at the Black Helicopter offices. After forty minutes, he declared himself satisfied. Then he took Gib to the shower, tossed him in and threw hotel soap and shampoo bottles at him until Gib turned on the water.

Ten minutes later, clean and refreshed, Gib walked out to find a barber waiting in the room. He was about to object to a haircut, but one look at Pinkwater's face convinced him otherwise. While Gib was getting the haircut, Pinkwater jumped into the shower, then came out of the bathroom wearing a clean seersucker suit and a Panama hat. Pinkwater had also put on a tan-from-a-bottle, darkening his skin to the color of a walnut.

"With my face this dark," he whispered to Gib, "I hope they won't notice how terrified I look."

Then he bullied and terrorized Jackson and OddGreg into getting clean and dressed for the presentation. They put on matching black suits, white collarless dress shirts, and freshly shined Doc Martens. When they were finished, Pinkwater announced, "You look like new media hit men. Perfect!"

When they were all done, a knock on the door announced the arrival of Gib's suit, Lazarus rising from the grimy grave. It looked better than new. Once Gib had it on, Pinkwater refused to let him sit down, in fear he might ruin the perfect creases.

Hired delivery men arrived to pack up all the computer equipment and take it to the venture capital firm (Bennett, Jaffe and Geller). After watching the equipment being carefully packed, Pinkwater closed the door to the suite and sighed with his head lowered against the door. Then he gathered the four of them into a circle in the middle of the room. He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a silver flask. He carefully unscrewed it, then reached back into his jacket with his empty hand and produced a butterfly knife. Pinkwater flicked open the blade over the back of his hand and it gleamed evilly in the middle of the circle of men.

"It come to this, then. Today, all of our work, our investment of time, effort, sweat and love, all of it is put to the test. Here, fortify yourselves."

Pinkwater took a drink from the flask and passed it around. Both Jackson and OddGreg looked nervously at the knife and drank quickly. Gib smelled the flask first, discovered it was full of Jack Daniels, then tipped it in a salute to Pinkwater before drinking and handing it back to the big man.

Pinkwater held out both the flask and the knife, as if presenting them as sacrifices. "These are the possibilities, the final options. A celebratory drink or the knife. I earnestly hope that after this meeting is over, it's the celebration."

"Or what, Sidney?" OddGreg asked.

Pinkwater held out the butterfly knife. "Or I shove this up some venture capitalist's ass. And if I can't catch one, this knife'll do for *seppuku*."

"Selling the Suits"

I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.

Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943

Sidney took and folded Gib's jacket over his arms while Gib carefully worked his way into the rented car. Pinkwater had announced that he wanted the lines of Gib's suit to be as perfect as they could be, so Gib had given over his jacket and held himself as rigidly as possible for the duration of the cab ride. While they traveled, Pinkwater passed out breath mints to everyone to get rid of the odor of the scotch, then watched them carefully to make sure they chewed.

Bennett, Jaffe, and Geller Investments had an office in the Flatiron Building, at the junction of 23rd Street, Fifth Avenue and Broadway. The men who had picked up the Black Helicopter equipment at the Waldorf were waiting in the lobby, boxes at their feet.

"Jesus Christ," Pinkwater said, helping Gib back into his jacket, "those fuckers were supposed to take the equipment upstairs already. I'm gonna kick some ass over this."

As Sidney started toward the two movers, Gib decided he had finally had enough of Pinkwater's self-indulgent case of The Fear. The man's personality had been given way to irrationality and terror. Gib had to do something about it. If Pinkwater wanted to force him to run the pitch, then it was tie to start running it.

Gib walked up behind Pinkwater, who was fiercely cursing the delivery men and the scum who spawned them. Gib grabbed the bigger man by the arm and grunted as he turned him around.

"Gibson, I'm busy here."

"Sidney, I need you to do something for the next hour," Gib said as he dragged Pinkwater away. "I need you to keep your *fucking mouth shut*."

Pinkwater was poleaxed, stunned into silence.

Taylor Jackson and OddGreg were lurking just close enough to hear what was going on, but not look like they were listening. Gib signaled to them to come closer, then turned to the two delivery men.

"You two, get the equipment upstairs."

"Fuck you, we don't have to take that kind of abuse," one of the guys said, pointing at Pinkwater.

Gib restrained Pinkwater with a hand on his chest, then got twenties out of his wallet and threw them at the two men.

"Shut up and get those boxes in the elevators."

The men picked up the twenties and lifted the boxes.

Gib said to Jackson and OddGreg, "Follow those guys. Get up to those offices, and set up the equipment wherever they tell you. We'll be right behind you."

Jackson, OddGreg and the two delivery men piled into an elevator.

Gib continued to talk to Pinkwater, "Sidney, I'm tired of this shit. I know you told me what's on the line for you if this meeting doesn't go well, but that still doesn't explain how crazy you're acting. The Black Box works! So how can they *not* give you more money? So there's got to be something else. Either you tell me the whole story, or I'm

gone.”

Pinkwater turned white and looked nauseous. “Gibson, I –“

“Right now, Sidney. Or we’re done.”

“Feyrer and Bodio know about my money problems,” Pinkwater blurted out. “I said something that made them suspicious, and they checked up on me.”

Gib stared at Pinkwater in disbelief. “You did not.”

“Shit I didn’t. I got a phone call from them, telling me they knew how desperate I was. I *must* have let something slip.”

Gib lost his temper. “Sidney, they know your banker! That’s how you *met* them! They must have gotten a look at your bank records.”

“That’s impossible,” Pinkwater said. “Dick Moran has been my banker for ten years.”

“He’s a banker, Sidney,” Gib said, in disgust. “You’re not a member of his tribe. To him, you’re just a civilian. Hell, I’ll bet he’s convinced you he’s helping you out.”

“It just can’t be.”

“It is. But you know what? It doesn’t matter how they found out. All that matters is that you have the rotten stink of desperation. This whole morning, you’ve been playing the part of a guy who wants to get bent over a snowy log by these money fuckers. Well, enough.”

Pinkwater looked offended.

“Cut out the fucking whining, stop freaking out, and let me do all the talking.”

“Gibson, I –“

“I have three rules for you. One, get your Oscar Wilde attitude back together. Two, only speak when you are spoken to. Three, anything you say had better be goddamn cheery, or I’m walking out of that office. I need you to look like the most confident motherfucker in the universe. Like Babe Ruth, high on cocaine and confidence. If you can’t give me those three things, then you are going to get eaten up like shark chum.”

Pinkwater bristled, clenched his fists, and clearly thought about swatting Gib away like a bothersome insect. Then the huge man turned around, his shoulders hunched. With his back to Gib, he stretched out as high as he could, his joints cracking like a crumpling sheet of paper. Then he took off his Panama hat and ran his hands through his hair. With a deep breath, he turned back around, his eyes brightly glazed.

“Gibson, I am entirely in your hands. Let the bullshit fly where it may, and whoever is still standing tall and untarnished at the end of this meeting will be declared the victor.”

Gib measured Pinkwater’s attitude. “Better. Smile more. They’ll be expecting a guy on his last legs. I need you to be Tiny Fucking Tim on Christmas Day.”

Pinkwater smiled as wide as he could, and said, “God bless us, every one.” He looked shithouse crazy, but it was still a step up.

Gib pointed toward the elevators. “Let’s go.”

Rick Bodio and Jameson Feyrer were waiting in the reception area, looking sleek and confident.

Bodio said, “We sent your guys back to the conference room.”

“Great, we appreciate it,” Gib said.

Bodio and Feyrer looked confused, not recognizing Gib in his suit. “Have we

met?" Feyrer asked.

Gib answered, "I work with Sidney. Where's the conference room?"

Bodio looked startled, then said, "This way."

The conference room had a light breakfast prepared on one side, and a cabinet full of electronics on the other side. Gib conferred with Jackson and OddGreg, then went and got a cup of coffee.

After ten minutes of shuffling around, eating, and small talk, the Black Helicopter people were sitting on one side of the large, highly polished black conference table. Facing them over clear carafes of water and bronze-colored pitchers of coffee were the assembled hosts of Bennett, Jaffe, and Geller Investments, including Bodio and Feyrer, a couple of junior suits there to take notes, and two of the three principals in the company, Edward Jaffe and Marc Bennett.

Bennett and Jaffe's faces were grim, their hands hidden below the table. Gib thought about how that kind of thing would piss him off in a card game. Under the table, reality changed. A hand of cards would suddenly have extra aces, inside straights would be filled, face cards would teleport into sweaty palms. Decks could be stacked.

Gib realized that Gibson Senior would be proud to see him in his freshly pressed Italian uniform, staring down his lesser across the table. Of course, Gibson Senior, would dismiss Gib's anger about stacked decks with a breezy wave of his hand. Gibson Senior stacked the deck in every hand he played, or he wouldn't play at all. It was like cheating on your taxes or fixing parking tickets; not only desirable, but required activity for men of power. He would have been quite pleased with the work of Bodio and Feyrer, sniffing out Pinkwater's financial distress with the skill of truffle-hunting pigs.

Gib finally realized that, regardless of heritage and nepotism, he would never be one of the wise and powerful. He couldn't take the boredom, the certainty. Instead, he was a gambler. His definition of success was to raise to the limit and let the cards fall. If the deck was stacked against him, that would just make the victory that much sweeter.

Shoot the moon, Gib thought. *Shoot the moon*.

"Gentlemen, ladies," Gib began. "I can't begin to tell you how surprised I am to see you all here. Most financial people wouldn't have the guts to risk their reputations on a meeting like this."

Gib could sense Sidney Pinkwater freeze in his chair in horror, as he realized that Gib had no intention of sticking to the carefully rehearsed script. *Too late, Sidney*, Gib thought. *Time to play*.

"But the first thing we need to do," Gib said, "is get rid of the minor league players." He stared at Bodio and Feyrer. "Beat it. You're a couple of second-rate pissants. We already know you won't have the balls to go ahead on a project like this. But we're talking to the big boys now."

Gib was betting that neither Bodio or Feyrer had told their bosses about Sidney's finances. They wanted to spring it out during the meeting, showing off how smart they were. Based on how pale their faces got, Gib realized he'd bet correctly.

Marc Jaffe, one of the principals partners, said, "We would rather keep our junior associates in the meeting." That was just pissing match games, Gib knew. Just trying to establish who was in charge.

"Oh, all right, then."

Jaffe relaxed.

“Pack it up, boys,” Gib said to Jackson and OddGreg, turning his back on Jaffe and the others. Gib stared daggers at Sidney, who finally turned to Jackson and OddGreg and said, “You heard him. Start packing.”

The two of them started packing.

Jaffe said, “Hold on, hold on. Don’t get all bent out of shape. Just a minute.” He took Bodio and Feyrer outside, there was some agitated shouting, and then Jaffe came back in. Alone.

Gib buried his smile under a Sally Field face. He motioned to OddGreg, indicating they should stand up. They did so, uncomfortably. “If you haven’t met him already, allow me to introduce Gregory Igoe. He is the technical genius who Sidney Pinkwater’s vision and helped kick and prod it into a working model. Greg, could you turn on the Black Box, please?”

Beef leaned over and flipped the on switch. The Black Box hummed quietly for a moment, then the power light cycled from red to amber to green.

“Look around at this room,” Gib announced. “Years from now, people will ask you to describe this exact scene. What color were the walls? What were Sidney Pinkwater, Edward Jaffe, Marc Bennett, and all the other famous names really like? They were visionaries.

“Because the world just changed with the flip of that switch.”, Gib barked.

Shoot the moon, Gib thought. *Shoot the moon.*

"Straight and Suddenly Flush"

The best thing in life is cashing a bet. The next best thing is losing a bet.

Nick the Greek

Hours later, the Black Helicopter guys walked out of the Flatiron Building. Jackson and Beef were carrying the equipment. Gib was looking for a cab.

Sidney Pinkwater was holding a signed contract -- and a check -- in his trembling hands.

"Pissed Off and Passed Out"

Love your enemies just in case your friends turn out to be a bunch of bastards.

R.A. Dickson

At the nearest bar, Pinkwater decided to buy champagne for everyone. Not just Jackson, OddGreg and Gib, but the whole bar.

"First thing I'm going to do," Pinkwater said as he received his glass of champagne from the bartender, "well, what *will* I do?"

Pinkwater thought for a moment, then took a deep, heaving breath. When he continued, he stood in a hipshot pose, one hand on his side, and began declaiming in a poetic manner, with great volume.

"The *first* thing I am going to do is *fire* Dick Moran, that traitorous rat-fucking, cock-sucking, dick-licking, rug-munching, quim-licking, sister-slicing, motherfucking, oath-breaking, lie-making, liberty-taking, pillow-biting, butt-pirating, ass-kissing, shit-eating, shit-licking, shit-kicking, dipsticking, scum-bagging –"

By this time, Gib, Beef and OddGreg were just sitting back in their chairs, their drinks forgotten, lit cigars burning in their hands, watching the words and spittle fly from Pinkwater's mouth in an amazing paroxysm of enraged obscenity. The rest of the crowd had also gone silent. Finally, a few people stated to clap along with Pinkwater's cursing rhythm.

"-- back-stabbing, heart-breaking, friend-cheating, Iago-impersonating --"

Gib thought that last one was stretching things quite a bit, but at that point even he had to put down his cigar and join in the clapping rhythm, which started to speed up, driving Pinkwater ahead of it like a mad, shrieking Ahab at a open mike poetry night.

"-- cunt-sticking, meat-beating, pud-whacking, masturbating --"

As the clapping got faster and faster, people started to whoop and cheer. The combination of syncopation and swearing reached an almost perfectly orchestrated climax during which Pinkwater screamed out, "and *finally!*" which stopped the clapping in its tracks.

"Dick Moran is the rat bastard son of a syphilitic, rancid whore! *And he is fired!*"

The bar erupted in cheering and applause.

Pinkwater took a deep bow, slipped the magnum of champagne into his briefcase, and strode confidently out of the bar.

"Holy shit," Beef said. "I don't think he repeated a single word."

"Well, he used 'licking' a lot," OddGreg said.

"That's true," Gib said. "but I never knew there were that many lickable things."

"There are," Pinkwater said.

"What's the *second* thing you're going to do, Sidney?" Taylor Jackson asked.

Pinkwater said, "Deposit the check. At some other bank than Moran's."

After a while, the adrenaline ran out, and they settled up the tab, accepting congratulations from bar patrons on Pinkwater's behalf on their way out.

Gib went back to his hotel and took a nap. A few hours later, the ringing phone woke him up.

"Is this Gibson Edwards?" Gib heard a voice ask him.

"Who is this?"

"Is this Gibson Edwards? The hotel has you listed as Edward Gibson."

"They must have miswritten it," Gib said, waking up. "I'm Gibson Edwards."

"You rotten motherfucker! I'm gonna sue, you bastard! I'm going to kill you!"

Gib found he couldn't resist the joke. "Dad?"

"What? This is Dick Moran. I just got off the phone with Sidney Pinkwater. He tells me you've been spreading lies about me."

"I don't think so. Did you tell Rick Bodio and Jameson Feyrer about Sidney's financial matters?"

"No! Well, yes, but it was for his own good!"

"Fine, then I haven't spreading lies. We just disagree about what's best for Sidney. Having friends who stab him in the back isn't it."

Gib hung up the phone. Then he thought about what he'd just said, and couldn't figure out whether to laugh or shoot himself in the head. Love, hate, happy, sad, all those covered a lot of bases, but it seemed there hadn't been an emotion yet invented to cover his situation. What were you supposed to feel when you were living irony like this?

Friends shouldn't stab each other in the back. What a laugh.

Maybe that was why he was so relaxed in the meeting. No matter what kind of check Sidney deposited, Bob Maynard was waiting back in San Francisco for him.

The phone started ringing again. Gib unhooked the cord from the receiver. Looking at the clock, he realized it was almost nine in the evening. He thought about everything he might do in New York City. Theater, movies, culture, the city that never sleeps.

He went over to the closet to pack his bag and get the hell out of town.

"Second Going"

How hast thou helped him that is without power? how savest thou the arm that hath no strength?
How hast thou counselled him that hath no wisdom? and how hast thou plentifully declared the
thing as it is?

To whom hast thou uttered words?

Job 26 2-4

King James Bible

Gib hooked the phone back up long enough to call Wallis. Her machine picked up, so he left a message: "I'm going back to San Francisco. I'll think some more about what we talked about. That's it. Hi to you, too, Alice."

After checking out of the hotel, Gib took a cab to the address Late Night Carson had given him. It was a parking garage south of the World Trade Center, near the southern edge of the island of Manhattan. He searched through the garage for about forty minutes before he found the bright yellow Ryder rental truck. He debated the wisdom of checking to make sure the explosives were in the storage compartment, finally decided it was better to know for sure. He opened up the back, sniffed the unfamiliar greasy smell, and saw the packages marked "Danger! High explosives". That was enough to convince him.

Throwing his bag into the cab of the truck, Gib climbed in, started it up, and drove to the exit. As he paid the lot attendant and moved toward the street, Agent Berg stepped into the street in front of him and motioned for him to stop.

Gib considered gunning the engine, but finally decided to be polite, knowing it would be a bad idea. He wondered if Berg had been tailing him for the past few days.

"Agent Gibson," Agent Berg greeted him. "I wonder if you might give me the chance to talk you out of whatever idiotic project with which you have involved Agent Carson."

"With which'?" Gib asked. "Even your grammar is clean. My god."

Berg smiled politely, as if unsure exactly how to form his lips into the proper shape. "Am I to take that as a 'no'? I have to inform you I have discovered the nature of your cargo. Personally, I think Agent Carson's choice of trucking company is his personal commentary on the cargo, and the kind of people who would use it."

"What?"

"Never mind. Just a little historical terrorist reference. In any case, I confess I don't fully understand your mission, but if Agent Robert Maynard is involved, I know it is a foolish and dangerous enterprise. I can only plead with you not to involve Agent Carson. He's only three months away from retirement."

Gib thought about, if only for the sake of appearing sensitive. But in reality, he didn't have any real choice. But he figured Agent Berg at least deserved the truth. "Look, I actually admire that you're looking out for Carson, but Maynard has got me trapped. But if I can keep Carson's name out of it, I will."

Agent Berg considered it, then slowly nodded his head. "I suppose that's better than nothing." He opened his door to get out of the truck.

"Berg?" Gib asked. "Is Carson related to you or something?"

Agent Berg turned around, looking confused. "No, I first met Agent Carson when

I was assigned to the New York office. I only know about him through his Bureau record.”

“Then why are you helping a drunk burnout like him, anyway?”

Berg looked surprised. “He needs my help. What else could I do?”

Gib looked at Berg’s face, realized that the Agent was entirely earnest in his answer. He had a natural Sally Field face. “Well, that’s...” Gib said. Then he reached out to shake Berg’s hand.

Agent Berg shook hands, then climbed down from the truck, still looking a bit confused. Gib pulled out into the street, then a thought struck him. He put the truck into reverse and pulled next to Berg.

“Hey, Berg, can you get an affidavit made up? So it looks real official, but it’s still private?”

Berg considered it, then nodded uncertainly. “I should be able to that, yes.”

Gib smiled thinly. “Then I have an idea. It won’t help me much, but it will give me some leverage. Maybe I can use it to keep Carson out of this.”

“Explain it to me,” Berg said.

After Gib did, Agent Berg nodded. “I’ll get it done as soon as possible. No later than the end of this week.”

“Thanks,” Gib said, and gave Berg the address of his apartment in San Francisco.

Berg said, “But I have to say that it still appears to me that it would be better to just abandon this whole project.”

Gib said, “I appreciate your concern.” Then he drove away toward the Lincoln Tunnel and parts west.

This second homage to Horace Greeley was a much different affair. Gib struggled and cursed his way through the usual awful New York area traffic. He had driven a lot of places and in a lot of cities, but he had never found drivers who quite equaled the unmitigated incompetence of New York drivers. Even Boston drivers were driving instructors by comparison. But once he hit the Delaware Water Gap and the Pennsylvania border, his attitude settled into a disturbing grey groove.

He set the cruise control just below 80 and watched the road with an unblinking stare. His only movement was to change lanes and to hit the scan button on the truck’s radio. He would find a station with a few good songs, then lose it. Sometimes, there would be a preacher warning against sin and various temptations. Gib would pause on some of these, morbidly curious, before continuing to scan.

He stopped for gas and a large cup of coffee in Pennsylvania around 3 a.m.. Again at the last rest stop in Ohio, around 7 a.m. After filling up the tank, he realized he needed sleep, so he parked the car and slept. When he woke up a few hours later, it was because light was flashing his face.

His first panicked thought was that Bob Maynard had found him, had even tracked him to a rest stop on the Ohio Turnpike, and was waving at him to get out of the truck. Then, more awake, he thought it might be a cop who had decided to investigate the unmoving rental truck. Finally, he looked around and realized the sky had darkened with a furious storm, and that the flashes of light were bursts of lightning as bright as spotlights. He looked around the skyline and thought he saw a funnel cloud far away to the south.

Gib shook his head and went back to sleep. When he woke up again, it was to a

light drizzle. He got some food and some more coffee and kept driving.

And driving. And stopping for coffee. And driving.

About a day and a half later, he stopped at a truck stop east of Cheyenne, Wyoming. He had staggered into the place, intending only to get yet another coffee charge-up, but a few steps into the place, he had become captivated by a rack of 99-cent tapes. The groups all seemed to play country or heavy metal music, and had names like "Big Daddy and the Stockboys" and "The Smilin' Americans". Gib finally pulled himself away from the display when he felt nervous laughter bubbling up inside his throat.

Gib walked over to the coffee pot and filled up two large styrofoam cups. Then he wound his way through the shelves of candy bars and beef stew until he noticed his hands were hurting quite a bit. He stopped and set down the coffee on a shelf. The palm of each hand was bright red, and Gib realized the coffee had been scalding hot.

"I'll sue," Gib muttered to himself, his mind wandering.

And that set him to thinking of a conversation he had had with Ruth.

They had been sitting in one of the South Park coffee shops and Gib had burned the roof of his mouth with a gulp of over-heated coffee. He had made the same "I'll sue" joke, and it had set Ruth off on a rant.

"Is that a fast food coffee joke? About that old woman who burned herself in New Mexico?"

"Uh, it was trying to be a joke, yeah."

"Do you know why that old lady sued? Do you have any idea?"

"She was trying to get something for nothing. Why else?"

Ruth said, "Really? The coffee was so hot the woman got third degree burns all over her lap, including her labia. How does that sound? Fun? And then she had to get plastic surgery, which involved skin grafts from her thighs to her genitals. How does *that* sound? The woman was in her eighties, by the way."

"That's horrible."

"That's what the woman's family thought, but they didn't want to sue. They just asked the company to some of the medical costs. I might have some of the exact details wrong, but in any case, the suits at the burger company told the family to fuck off. Their final offer before the lawsuit started was about a hundred dollars in gift certificates.

"When it went to court, the family was more than a bit pissed off, and so was the jury when the jury heard how the hamburger suits had acted. Not to mention the fact that burger place had settled over half a million dollars in coffee burn claims over the last ten years but hadn't done a damn thing to change how they served coffee. So the burger suits got slapped with about 3 million dollars in punishment, not just for burning the woman, but for being assholes. But the burger suits' instant reaction was to start a public relations campaign about how awful our legal system is, that people can get millions of dollars for spilling coffee. It pisses me off."

"All right, all right. You win. I won't sue because the top of my mouth got burned.

Ruth looked surprised. "I didn't say you shouldn't sue!"

"What?"

"I mean, if you're that big a pussy, go ahead. But it's important to know the whole story."

Gib stared at her until Ruth couldn't keep a straight face and broke out laughing.

A tap on his shoulder brought Gib back to reality. He turned and looked up at a hat with the logo, "S&M Trucking. We Take It Like Men" on it. Then his eyes tracked down to note curly black hair and a scraggly beard. The trucker was burly, Gib noticed, but looked strangely furtive for all of that. When Gib finally focused on the trucker's eyes, he saw they resembled antique pool balls, yellowed and brittle with abuse.

"You look pretty rough, man. How far you got left to drive?" the trucker asked.

"Miles and miles," Gib said. "Miles to go before I sleep. Miles to go before I sleep."

"If you got forty bucks, I got something that'll help you clear out the cobwebs," the trucker said.

Gib reached into his pocket and handed over a wad of bills. The trucker looked down and his yellow eyes widened in surprise. "I don't know if got enough stuff to cover that, man," he said nervously.

"Give me what you have," Gib said, not having much idea what the trucker was talking about.

The trucker slipped a bottle of pills into Gib's unresisting hand. "A few of these and you'll feel like you never need to sleep again." Then he walked away, leaving only a faint smell of sweat and Old Spice in his wake.

Gib looked at the pill bottle, put them in a pocket, then walked up to the front counter to pay. As he set the two cups down near the register, some of the hot coffee spilled onto his hands. The cashier looked alarmed and wiped his hands off with a cold, wet rag.

"Boy, that coffee is hot," she said. "Are you OK?"

"Fine. I'm fine," Gib said.

The cashier laughed. "Good. I guess that means you won't sue."

It's important to know the whole story.

The coffee got him another hundred miles. The skies had darkened near the Wyoming state line, so Gib had added the AM dial to the radio scanning game. In between burst of static from lightning in the atmosphere, he heard an emergency weather report break into the droning voice of Paul Harvey.

"There's an unseasonable storm sweeping into the region. We have reports of high winds and snow drifts in the following counties..." Gib saw snow flakes start to hit his windshield. In less than a half-hour, the snow had turned into a blinding sheet and Gib was barely able to see thirty yards in front of him. Wind gusts shook the truck and Gib held tightly to the wheel.

It's not even Halloween, Gib thought. *How the hell can it be snowing this hard?*

The driving snow was hypnotizing, and Gib felt himself drifting off. So he opened up his new bottle of pills and took a couple, wondering what they were.

Gib thought about his first trip west, at the beginning of the summer. This time, there was no question the universe did not want to see him back in California. When he thought about the cargo sitting in the truck behind him, Gib had to agree with the infinite reaches.

The two pills didn't seem to be doing much. Gib just felt a tiny tingle at the base of his spine, but the sensation was much too weak to travel up his spine and reach his

eyelids.

So he washed down a few with the last of the cold coffee. In ten minutes, all of his muscles spasmed, seemingly at once. It was as if a prison tried to turn its electric chair into a carnival ride, with the voltage just below a terminal level. Gib could feel each of his individual hairs vibrating in the wind from the open, and every pore on his body itched with the awareness. Before his brain turned off, the absolute last image that caught him was looking down at where he was obsessively scratching his left forearm. Trails of blood followed his fingernails across the skin of the arm.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was in a restaurant parking lot.

Time for some food, Gib thought. Time for a huge stack of food.

There was a newspaper vending machine in front of the restaurant, and the largest local paper seemed to cover Reno. Apparently, he had blacked out in the whiteout and driven through a snowstorm all the way across the rest of Wyoming, all of Utah, and most of Nevada, before stopping in Reno. Idly, he wondered if he had hallucinated the snowstorm, because the sky above him showed no signs of foul weather.

When Gib walked into the restaurant, he saw an old woman feeding quarters into a slot machine. He had seen the woman before, he realized. He had stopped at this very same shitty restaurant -- Jenny's Grub Steak -- months before.

Before everything had happened.

Gib couldn't get more specific to himself about the meaning of "everything".

The old woman still had a thin line of drool sneaking out of the side of her mouth. With the twitchiness of a longtime gambler, the old woman looked over her shoulder and saw Gib staring at her.

"The fuck you staring at, shitheel?" the old woman said in a deep, bourbon-burned voice. "Direct those eyes someplace else or I'll rip them out of your skull and piss in the empty sockets."

Gib nodded his head. "All right, ma'am," he said. He looked around the restaurant, looked back at the old woman's hostile glare.

"And get a shave, you goddamn hippie," she said. "You look like a bucket of sloppy shit."

Gib nodded his head again and walked back to the rental truck.

As he crossed into California, Gib noticed an odd thing. He started to accidentally turn off the cruise control. He would be cruising along, and then a car would speed past him on the left, its horn blaring. He would look down at the speedometer and realize his speed was falling. But it seemed that every time he reset it, it would be at lower and lower speeds.

By the time he passed the west edge of Sacramento, the truck was motoring along at just under 50 and cars were racing around him on both sides, their horns blaring angrily. When he neared Richmond, he was driving no faster than 45. So he pulled off the highway onto San Pablo Avenue.

Doing about 20, he wound his way toward the Berkeley safe house. When he crossed the Berkeley city limits, he had to pull over and open both windows in the cab of the truck to get some fresh air.

When he started back up, he turned off onto every side street that caught his eye.

And he stopped for fresh air every other block. Anything to delay his arrival.

When Gib was only a few blocks away from the safe house, he parked the truck and walked around it six times, widdershins, dizzily praying for another snowstorm to come crashing out of the sky. He looked up at the blue sky and the few white clouds and silently demanded they turn grey, then violent. If the universe was going to send him an omen, why couldn't it send one he could really use? A hail storm would be okay. A hurricane. Flash flood. A Biblical torrent of frogs, leeches and locusts. Anything.

Finally, he got back into the truck and drove to the safe house. SO much for the infinite reaches.

He pulled up into the driveway and put the transmission into "park". Looking up at the house where he and Jan Reuben had spent interesting times, he leaned forward onto the steering wheel and fell asleep.

A time later, someone poking him on the arm through the open window woke him up. Without lifting his head, he turned to see who was poking him, and of course it was Masturbatin' Bob Maynard, who said:

"Christ, kid, what took you so fucking long?"

"Shoot the Moon"

When in doubt, win the trick.

Edmond Hoyle

By the time Gib had divested himself of Maynard, the two of them had hashed over a couple of plans as to how Gib was suddenly going to introduce the *fact* of the explosives instead of the *abstract concept*. Gib nodded his head wearily as Maynard spent two hours revising and backtracking and editing. Finally, Maynard had pronounced himself satisfied with the approach. Gib got a ride from Masturbatin' Bob to the airport to pick up his car out of long term parking.

From the airport, he drove to The Space and found a three-player game of hearts going on between Garrity, Campy and Frank Marion. After Campy broke a hundred points, Gib joined in as a fourth. After a very few hands, he quickly found himself down by many, many points. No matter how he tried, he found himself unable to concentrate on his hands. It didn't help that his attempts to make small talk crashed and burned into a silent chasm of card-playing intensity. The only reason he hadn't lost very quickly was that the Green Ragers were, for a change, taking every opportunity to dump points on each other and would sometimes overlook Gib in their zeal.

Still, inevitably, Frank Marion added up points after a particularly unsuccessful hand and announced that Gib had 99 points.

"If this was Euchre, you'd be in the wheelhouse," Marion said.

"There's four of us," Garrity said. "Why don't we play Euchre instead of Hearts?"

"Let's finish the damn game," Campy growled. Campy was the nearest in points to Gib with 82. Garrity and Marion were both hovering in the high seventies. But Campy had gone from the lowest point total to the second highest in only three horrific hands. So the big man was irritated.

"Is that fucking all right with everyone? That we finish the game?"

Garrity and Marion exchanged a smirk about Campy's poor temper.

"I'm happy to forfeit," Gib said.

"Fuck that," Campy answered.

Gib shrugged. It was Frank's deal.

Gib found himself with some high Clubs in his hand, the Queen of Hearts, one or two Diamonds. And the Queen of Spades. Not a very good hand, he thought. That's the end of that. He took the first trick with the Queen of Clubs, then started to throw down cards, just to get the game finished.

And then, leading off with the eight of clubs, Gib watched as Campy dropped the Ace of Hearts on him.

"Boom!" Campy yelled. "Game over. Let's play Euchre."

"You were the one who wanted to play this hand out. So shut up, and let's finish," Garrity said. Then he dropped the King of Hearts. And Frank Marion followed by dumping the Ace of Spades.

Gib looked at the three of them and said, "You're *all* out of clubs? Christ. Let me just end this, then." And he started to dump out the rest of his cards, starting with the clubs, then moving on to the diamonds. He couldn't seem to get rid of the lead. And he

came down to his last card and realized he only had the Queen of Spades left. He knew Marion had dumped the Ace of Spades, so he idly wondered who was going to get stuck with the Queen.

Gib dropped the Queen.

"God damn it," Campy cursed.

Gib waited to see Campy drop the King and take the thirteen points. But Campy simply took a long look at Gib, then dropped the Ace of Diamonds.

"He *didn't*," Garrity said suddenly. "I can read him like a damn book! He wasn't trying to do that!" Garrity dropped the Eight of Hearts.

Then Frank Marion dropped the Two of Hearts, and Gib realized he'd shot the moon.

"Someone already dropped the King of Spades?" Gib asked.

"I dumped it a few hands ago," Campy muttered. "Shit, he shot the moon. By accident!"

"Someone took a heart, though, didn't they?" Gib asked, starting to realize his luck.

"Nope," Garrity said with a grin. "You kicked all our asses, man."

"Nice hand," Frank Marion congratulated him. "I don't think you could have done that if you'd been trying."

"No," Gib said, excitement finally waking him up more than he had been in days. He could feel something had changed. These guys had been kicking his ass for months.

But maybe something had changed out in New York, with Sidney.

Maybe, in spite of the loaded hand of Bob Maynard, in spite of Jan Reuben, and in spite of all the other tangled complications Gib had created for himself, in spite of every player dumping on him, he still had a chance to come up the winner in this game.

"I really did shoot the moon," Gib said. "Wow!"

"Ah, enough," Campy said. "let's play Euchre." The big man gathered up the cards.

"By the way," Gib said, "I got a hold of some plastic explosives. They're in a rental truck in Berkeley."

The Green Rages stared at him. Campy forgot about the cards in his hand, and they slowly spilled out, helicoptering to the floor.

"Do you guys think we can do something about Devil's Arroyo now?"

"Tumbling Dice"

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the roar of the ocean without the roar of its many waters.

Frederick Douglass

Everything went very, very, very fast after that. Extremely fast, even.

That night, after the Euchre game had been abandoned before it ever started, Gib met up with Ruth as she was driving up with the groceries for the soup kitchen being held in The Space later that evening. He helped her prepare food until the adrenaline he had picked up from winning the card game wore off. Ruth finally noticed him fighting off sleep and told him to go home.

"If you fall asleep cutting cucumbers, I'll never forgive myself," she said, laughing. "Hell, you might fall asleep while stirring the soup, and that would be a disaster! Go home, get some sleep."

He nodded groggily. Then he thought about it and shook his head. "I missed you," he said, simply. "I'd rather hang around here." Ruth got a queer look on her face, but before she could answer, Gib staggered out and found himself one of the cots for the homeless guys who would be coming later. He was asleep as soon as he hit the raggedy canvas.

A few hours later, Ruth took him home. She crawled into bed with him, but he barely noticed before he dozed off again.

In about a week the Green Ragers had decided they needed to test the explosives. Frank Marion said he would be in charge of all the electronics involved in making the bomb.

"In fact," he said as the four of them met at The Space late in the morning, "The only thing I want you thumb-fingered Neanderthals to do is carry my bags." Marion sniffed proudly. "An artist has to protect his hands." He held up his hands like a surgeon.

They all turned when they heard the front door opening.

"Look natural," Gib said to all of them. Marion froze, but Garrity walked over to the bar and poured himself a Coke.

Ruth appeared at the top of the stairs carrying molding over her left shoulder. "Hey, you all remembered."

"Remembered what?" Gib asked.

Ruth set the molding down in the middle of the floor. "We're replacing all the molding today, and we're fixing that wall that got busted during the Elbow Bender's show two nights ago. Campy, why don't you go down and get the paneling from the van?"

Then Ruth noticed the deliberate nonchalance of the four men. "All right," she said, "what are you idiots plotting?"

"Plotting?" Marion called out in a too-loud voice. "What are you talking about?"

Ruth's face tightened and she folded her arms. "Since you clearly all forgot about the work you had promised to do, then there's some other reason you're up before noon. So not one of you is going anywhere until I figure out what the hell is going on here." She looked at each one of them in turn, saving Marion for last.

"Ruth, it's a secret!" Marion said.

"Frank..." Ruth said in a doom-threatening voice.

"Ruth," Campy interrupted, "Green Rage is moving up to direct action. No more media pranks. Direct action."

Ruth looked at Campy and unfolded her arms in what Gib hoped would be a gesture of acceptance, until he saw she had unfolded them only so she could clench her fists. She started walking toward Campy.

"What stupid idea of yours have you forced on Frank and Ethan, Campy?" Ruth asked.

"Idea of mine?" Campy said, a rare grin coming to his face. "Why don't you ask your boyfriend what we're doing?"

Ruth stopped and looked at Gib for a second, then back at Campy. "*Devil's Arroyo?* You got back onto that *stupid* plan for Devil's Arroyo?"

Ruth started stomping around the room, kicking the pieces of molding she had dropped on the floor. "I can't *believe* this. If you took all the unbelievable amount of testosterone it takes to think it's a good idea you have to *blow something up* and then you fed all that testosterone to a family of lab rats, they'd chew each other faces off, before the last survivor starved to death admiring his biceps!"

Ruth stopped her angry pacing in front of Campy. "What do you think you're going to use for explosives? Wait, let me guess. You're going to shake up beer bottles and then let all the foam explode! No, wait! You're going to go down to Chinatown and buy a bunch of bottle rockets and M-80s! Then you can blow your fingers off before you appear on the news and declare the state of California environmentally friendly!"

The rare and disturbing grin had stayed on Campy's face. He looked exceedingly satisfied, in fact. Gib didn't know what to make of it.

"It turns out," Campy said quietly three times before he cut through Ruth's shouting, then continued, "it turns out that Gib is more dedicated to the cause than I thought. He had some contacts back east. And those contacts knew how to get what we needed."

Ruth opened her mouth, looked at Gib, but no words came out. Then she closed her eyes and pointed at the door. "Get out of here," she said.

"But," Gib said.

"OUT!" Ruth shouted. "All of you! Get out!"

She picked up a piece of molding and began herding the four of them toward the front door by smacking them on the back and shoulders, whenever they showed signs of slowing down. Garrity and Marion tried to argue, but Ruth wasn't interested.

As the door slammed behind them, Garrity said, plaintively, "But it's *my* place." He looked at the door for a second, then said, "Ah, hell. Let's go get some lunch and talk this thing out." They all piled into Gib's car and went to a burrito place.

During lunch, they all decided they had to test the explosives.

Frank Marion said, "It's different reading about something and seeing it in action."

Campy clearly wanted to see evidence that Gib had what he claimed.

Gib said he'd pink some up. Then he convinced the Ragers to leave Ruth out of everything from then on in. It didn't take much convincing after her reaction at The Space.

After they were done, Gib dropped the Ragers off at The Space. The van wasn't parked out front, so they assumed that Ruth had taken the vehicle and her temper elsewhere.

"It should be safe," Garrity said to Gib, "but if you don't hear from us in three days, send out the hounds."

Gib laughed morosely, then went to the Berkeley safe house to pick up some explosives for Frank Marion to test. Masturbatin' Bob was there, waiting to be briefed. Jan Reuben had pointedly been excluded from the planning session since Gib had gotten back from New York.

The two men sat in the kitchen of the safe house at the table. Maynard had made a pot of coffee and was sipping a cup. Gib had tried to drink some, but found that his stomach was in too much of an uproar.

"Boy," Maynard said, "that bint has really got some cojones, pretending like she isn't right on board with these punks."

Reuben nodded her head.

Gib looked at Maynard. He had known Bob would want to arrest everyone, Ruth included, no matter what he had said before New York. After all, Ruth was the one who ran The Space. It could probably survive the loss of all of Green Rage, but without Ruth, the whole thing would fall apart.

"Look, you stupid fuck," Gib said, "keep your mouth shut until I'm finished. Is that all right with you, Masturbatin' Bob?"

"What did you call me?" Maynard asked, surprised, "Kid, you'd better watch your mouth."

"Don't be an idiot," Gib sighed, then pulled photocopies out of the back pocket of his jeans. And Agent Berg had been as good as his word, FedExing copies of the affidavit he had prepared in New York, describing how Agent Robert Maynard had convinced Agent Steve Carson to supply explosives for an undercover operation. "Read these," Gib told Maynard. "I've blacked out the name of the lawyer who took this statement for me, but he has all the originals."

Gib had also called Wallis and gotten the name of a lawyer in San Francisco. He had dictated the entire chain of events that he had described to Wallis, shading this version of events to implicate Bob Maynard more specifically. The lawyer has promised to hold the statement for Gib as long as required.

While Maynard skimmed the papers, Gib told him, "Picture this, Bob. I give these documents to Joseph Arlen, senior director of the FBI. He uses it to bring a – what's the term you used? – 'rogue FBI agent' to justice. I go down, too, but how far down do you think I can go with my Joseph Arlen on my side? And if you get involved in a scandal, what happens to your pension? How long can you live on ramen noodles and dog food, Bob?"

Maynard got to the end of the copies before he shook them at Gib. "Shit."

"Exactly, Bob. First of all, Ruth is out. I don't care how you have to square it on your end, but Ruth is out of this, no matter what happens to the Green Ragers."

Maynard ground his teeth. "Fine. If she doesn't show up at Devil's Arroyo, we won't arrest her."

"Good enough. And Sidney Pinkwater is out, too."

"Forget it, kid," Maynard said, instantly.

Gib stared at Maynard. "Bob, you don't get it; this is the deal breaker. Either you say yes, or I start the flames burning under our asses."

Maynard grunted and leaned back from the table. "Kid," he said, and for a wonder Masturbatin' Bob Maynard sounded almost contemplative, "I understand what you're doing here. Hell, I suppose I almost kind of admire it, you thinking you're being loyal and all. But we're at the end now."

Maynard got up to refill his coffee cup. "I already said you can have the quim."

"Ruth."

"Whatever. I've been thinking about it, and maybe you're right." Maynard was obviously lying, but Gib didn't care. "She ain't worth nothing, anyway. She's just some goddamn social worker who got sucked up into all this terrorist shit."

Pacing back and forth with the empty coffee cup in his hands, Bob said, "I've been working in the Bay Area since I got out of Quantico. And when I got out, I met people just like these dirt liberators we got here. Just like them. And just like these shit-eaters, those yip-yappers liked to blow shit up, too."

"I've seen your scars."

"Yes, you have."

Maynard sat back down. "You know what's hard about chasing punks like these Green Rage fucks? I don't mean banks robbers, or foreigners, but chasing homegrown punks? Everyone feels sorry for them. Thinks all the Bureau is doing is harassing them."

Maynard looked down at his coffee cup. Then he violently threw it against the wall. The hard ceramic didn't burst into tiny pieces, but three large chunks, and the handle went flying across the kitchen.

"But they're still punks!" Maynard screamed. Then he sat back down next to Gib.

Maynard tore the toupee off his skull and threw it away. Old scars formed painful patterns and ridges across Maynard's head. They ranged in size from the thickness of a piece of laundry line to fishing monofilament, and they combined to make Maynard's skull look like a battle had been fought and lost there.

"*That's* what happened because of punks with bombs. Not just my back, but this! I shouldn't have survived, the docs told me. Took me three years to be able to come back to work. And I haven't missed a damn day of work since. Because I knew they were still out there, whoever they were. So these Green Rage fucks, that fat fuck bomb maker you got the fake job with, all of them, they're getting what they deserve. All of them. *All* of them."

Maynard looked dully at Gib, until the older man's eyes slowly lost the glaze that had come over them. "You get me? Your fat friend is *my* deal breaker because he *used* to make bombs, and those mud lovers are deal breakers because they *want* to make bombs. So you can have the quim, like I said, because she isn't blowing anything up. But anything else is out. You don't like it, go fuck yourself."

Gib sat and thought for a long while. For now, he'd have to take what he could get. He would figure something else out later to get Sidney off the hook. "Well, you have to leave Sidney's company alone. He's got a lot of people counting on him."

Maynard shrugged. "Sure. I don't give a shit about the company." Maynard put his toupee back on.

When Gib pulled the Ryder rental truck out of the driveway to take it to The Space, Maynard said to him, "I knew they'd want to test the boom-boom, by the way. I *knew* it."

Gib delivered the semtex to The Space, where the Ragers helped him unload.

Three days later, Gib was supposed to drive up to the Santa Rosa area and meet the Ragers. Since the morning Ruth had kicked him and the Ragers out of The Space, he hadn't seen her. He'd left about twenty messages on her machine, he'd rung her buzzer, and left notes on her door, but she answered none of them. As he drove up 101, Gib thought depressing thoughts, ran through hypothetical conversations with her. The problem was, he couldn't think of a way to lead into what he really wanted to talk about.

Ruth, the thing is, I want to keep you out of jail. Why would you be going to jail? Oh, well, because I set you up. Yeah, you and all the Green Ragers. Why do you look so mad?

When he met the Green Ragers in a parking lot on the outskirts of Petaluma, he silently handed the bag that held the brick of semtex over to Frank Marion, who carried it carefully over to the Ragers' van. Campy pulled out of the parking lot and drove for about 45 minutes. They finally ended up in a field that looked to be next door to nowhere. Gib had been stuck in the back of the van, so he had no idea where they were. But he hadn't been much interested anyway, spending the trip trying new conversational gambits with an imaginary Ruth. As he followed Frank Marion out the side door of the van, he saw what looked like a radio tower in the distance, but it was so tiny, it could have been the ambitious project of a kid with an erector set. The field was dry and dusty, with brown grass poking out of hard clay.

Marion took the brick of semtex in one hand, a mass of wires and clips in another, and walked out a few hundred yards. He fiddled for about a half an hour while Garrity and Campy sat back at the van and tried to write songs. Gib found a deck of cards and played solitaire.

Suddenly, he saw Frank Marion running back toward the van.

"Get behind the van! Behind the van!" Marion didn't wait to see if the other three followed him, but charged to the other side of the vehicle and rocked it on its wheels as he slammed himself into the side panel. Garrity, Campy, and Gib didn't waste any time following.

Marion looked at each of them with a serious look and said, "Cover your ears. And open your mouths to equalize the pressure on your eardrums."

The other three did. Then Marion pulled a transmitter out of his pocket, and smiled at them for being so easily fooled by his fake panic. Grinning, he pushed one of the buttons.

Suddenly, an explosion.

Uncle Joseph had always thrown a huge Fourth of July party every year. Usually, there was a large group of Agents who brought boxes and boxes of illegal fireworks that had been confiscated in raids throughout the previous month. As the food and beer was served in massive quantities, the size and force of the fireworks being set off increased quickly until the grand finale, which would usually come around 10 at night. A series of firework mortars would be set off by explosives experts from the Bureau, and each one would explode with a huge concussive force. Gib liked to see if he could keep his eyes

open for every launch, but each time, the sound and the sound caused his eyes to flicker closed – if only for a second. But no matter how brief, that moment always came when his eyes couldn't help but close.

When Marion's bomb went off, Gib felt his entire brain close.

The side of the van surged against them, and Gib felt air rush by him in a giant surge. The ground shuddered so much that they all had to steady themselves against the side of the van, and Campy lost his balance and fell to the ground.

The following silence dominated their attention for a full minute, until the sound of Frank Marion laughing filtered through their abused ears.

“What the *fuck* was that all about?” Campy shouted from the ground. To Gib, it sounded like a phantom voice heard on a phone line when two wires overlapped. Gib barely heard Garrity say, “Frank...” as he sadly shook his head.

Marion ignored Campy and quickly got into the van. “Come on, come on,” he shouted. “Even the idiot cops will hear that one. They'll be out here soon.”

The other three got into the van and Marion drove away. When they were a few miles away from the bomb test site, Campy started yelling at Marion again.

“You used the whole brick, didn't you? You crazy son of a bitch! Why didn't you just use a little bit!”

Marion looked honestly puzzled. “What would be the fun in that? How often do you get the chance to make an explosion that big?”

No one had answer except for Ethan Garrity.

“At least twice, Frank,” Garrity said. “You'll get at least one more chance.”

There was silence in the van.

"Screen Test"

I've had a perfectly wonderful evening. But this wasn't it.

Groucho Marx

"We need to get this whole thing on film," Garrity stated. Campy agreed.

Frank Marion thought it was a stupid idea. "If it's going to be an interesting tape, I need more than one angle. You know how the scuba tape turned out. I did the best I could, but it's still just one long boring linear shot."

"So what do you want to do, Frank?" Garrity asked.

This was two days after the test bombing up north in Marin County. The four of them had been playing cards and revising the plan over and over, based on Gib's original idea, the information he had gotten about security and the photos that PacPow had provided him.

"I think we should do a practice run this weekend," Marion said. "That way I have some time to edit the tape before we do the actual thing, and the tapes ready for the media right away. Maybe the next day."

Gib wasn't so sure about the idea. But having a tape would certainly please Masturbatin' Bob. It probably wouldn't be enough to get Pinkwater off the hook, but it was worth a try. It would make the trial of Green Rage even more of a slam dunk.

"I think we should do what Frank says," Gib finally said.

"But won't people notice us?" Campy argued. "I don't want the video to jeopardize the mission."

"It'll be fine," Garrity said. "No one is going to notice us. And we need the video to argue our case in the media."

Campy finally agreed. That very night, Garrity and Frank sat down to film the Green Rage manifesto that would be part of the video. Actually, they filmed two versions of the same statement, written by Campy, that explained the reasons for the bombing. The only difference between the two filmed statements was that one had Garrity filmed in good lighting, a serious expression on his face, while the second one obscured his face and processed his voice through a phase shifter that Marion set up.

"Just in case," Garrity said.

"In case of what?" Gib asked.

"Well, we have to explain what went on, but if the public reaction is really bad, we'll use the second statement."

Gib listened to Garrity's explanation in admiration. The man certainly knew about the need to be able to weasel out of any situation.

That Saturday night, they made the two hour drive down the coast and parked in a secluded area about three miles away from the entrance to the Devil's Arroyo facility. Campy had discovered the place while studying the photo book and thought it would be a perfect place to hide the van. They parked and started to unload the camera equipment and makeup.

"Makeup?" Campy asked. "This isn't Hollywood, Frank."

"It's just camouflage paint, Campy," Marion said, and he wouldn't brook any argument. Marion appeared to have been bitten by the director's bug and he was going to

make the movie *his* way, goddamnit. The other men stopped arguing when they saw how obsessed Marion was. They changed into the black t-shirts and army pants and Marion painted designs in varying shades of green and black on their faces.

Then they hefted the backpacks filled with dirty laundry (to simulate the explosives they would be carrying in a week). The first power line they wanted to check was only two miles away, but the hike took over two hours because Marion kept stopping them to get a better shot or a new camera angle.

After an hour, Campy yelled, "Frank, we're just *hiking!*" and Marion eased back a little bit while they trudged through the woods. But he started directing again once they reached their destination. A thick utility post rose out of the tree-covered area, and the power lines themselves were barely visible through the leaves. Campy climbed nearby trees from five different angles, even though they planned to set the charges at the base of the post. Marion thought the overhead shots would be more cinematic.

Hours passed, and Marion had to work harder and harder to quell the dissent among his unwilling actors. But in the end they finally checked out every power line that was targeted, and had time left over before dawn.

At quarter to five, Campy was still out reconnoitering part of Devil's Arroyo, but the other three were sitting back at the first power line. Marion was half-doing in exhaustion, so he had finally stopped filming. Plus, he had run out of video tape.

Garrity chattered nervously to pass the time.

"This is really going to work, isn't it? We're really going to make a statement."

Yeah, Gib thought. *The statement is: We're idiots.* He tried to change the subject.

"Ethan, what would you be doing if you weren't doing this?" Gib interjected into Garrity's nervous flow of words.

"Sleeping?"

"I meant that philosophically."

"Oh. Can you give me an example?"

Gib thought about it. He'd been in a lot of strip bars over the last few months.

"Okay. I have this stupidly great idea for a business, if I weren't working for Sidney. It's a strip club, right?"

"I think that's been done," Marion said sarcastically, waking up.

"Not like this. Each dancer will dress like a famous actress, and we'll keep it current so it's mainly modern day actresses."

"You gotta have the classics like Monroe," Garrity added. "Marilyn's a requirement."

"Okay, sure, Monroe," Gib said. "But mainly current actresses. But the name of the place is the key. I'll call the place: The Golden Globes." Gib leaned back and looked for the reaction from the other men. Garrity and Marion laughed.

Gib said, "It's a great idea. It'll make *hundreds* of dollars. Hundreds!"

Marion sat up and said, "I can beat that dream easy. Did you guys know my grandpa has a construction company?"

"He also sells concrete. Huge concrete slabs, and bricks and all the other things people use concrete for. Anyway, I used to do sales for him one summer, and I think I could have sold a ton more stuff with this TV ad. I hire a Chinese guy to dress up in a

karate robe, right? Black belt, white pajamas, real Bruce Lee stuff. So I go on a sales call, do the whole pitch and all, then I bring the clients outside for a demonstration. Fake Bruce Lee sets up some of my concrete between two boards, and he does all the screaming and shit, then he tries to break the bricks.

“We see a close up of Fake Bruce Lee’s fist not even making a crack in the blocks. And after the brick doesn’t break, he jumps around screaming how he broke his hand. People will love it. Then I just stand back and let the orders fly in.”

There was dead silence for a few minutes, until Garrity broke it, saying, “Frank, you’re really weird sometimes.”

“Well, what’s your fantasy, Ethan?”

“I like singing in the band.”

“Come on!” the two other men shouted at once.

“Okay. But no one better laugh.” Garrity looked around at each of them threateningly in turn before he said, “I like little kids. I think they’re neat. So I guess I’d like to teach grade school.”

The other three considered it until Garrity finally demanded, “Don’t keep me in suspense.”

Marion said, “I never knew you liked kids, Ethan. That’s nice.”

Gib agreed.

That was when Campy came back into the clearing. The big man asked what they were all talking about. When he found out, he said, “This is it for me. No matter what, I’d be doing something for the environment. Maybe I’d be a forest ranger or something.”

“You’re no fun at all,” Marion said.

Campy shrugged.

The group hiked back to the van and drove back to San Francisco. The next day, Marion edited together all his footage and put together two different three minute statements for the media. The first one used the statement with Garrity’s exposed face, and the background music was Green Rage. “Free advertising,” Marion said. The other tape had Rage Against the Machine as the background music and used the Garrity who had his voice changed and face hidden. When Marion showed it to the other Ragers and Gib on Sunday, they all applauded.

Monday night, they had a small dinner at a restaurant in North Beach, strangely enough the same restaurant where Gib had first met Gerald Rutsey, the insane *Rolling Stone* editor.

The four of them toasted to the success of the upcoming Saturday with red wine and pasta. Campy made an early night of it, because Norman Haddal’s arraignment on his arrest on drug charges was the next morning. Campy wanted to be there and show support. Garrity didn’t think it was a good idea.

“There’s going to be all sorts of cops there, you big dummy. You think they won’t notice you? What happens if one of them decides to follow you around and check you out just because you say hi to Norman?”

“I don’t care. Norman’s my friend, and I’m going to be there.”

Garrity lost that argument, but decided to tell everyone else at the table that they shouldn’t act suspicious before Saturday.

“Everyone should just act normal. That’s why I’ve cancelled everything at The

Space. No performances of any kind until next week.”

“That’s acting normal?” Gib asked.

“We don’t want people stumbling across semtex in our closets, do we?” Garrity responded. Gib didn’t bother to argue.

Garrity put his hand out over the table ostentatiously and stared at the other guys until they put their hand on top of his. Then Garrity seemed at a loss for words.

“Green Rage,” Campy said.

“Green Rage,” the other three answered. Then they drew their hands back in relief.

“We couldn’t have done this without you,” Garrity said happily to Gib. “We’re going to change the world.”

“Northern California, anyway,” Marion added.

"Un(der)covered"

A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.

Oscar Wilde

With all events at The Space canceled, Gib had nothing much to do until Saturday when they were going back to Devil's Arroyo. Bob Maynard told Gib that Jan Reuben and had worked out an airtight plan to capture the Ragers without difficulty or danger.

"But you don't need to know anything about it, kid. That way, you act less suspicious. Suffice to say, personnel are already in place."

So Gib hung out at Black Helicopter, writing some J. Spiderman columns, especially since Ruth was spending a lot of time there with Pinkwater working on updates to The Space's website. Sidney was teaching Ruth how the system was set up, from the live webcams to the streaming audio. Even little things, like changing the HTML pages to show upcoming shows was something Ruth wanted to do herself. Also, even though the Ragers had kept their promise about keeping Ruth out of things, she had clearly figured out by Garrity's version of acting normal that the Devil's Arroyo plan was going into effect on the weekend.

Ruth was not subtle about expressing her displeasure to Gib.

He tried to talk to her, but since there was really only one thing to talk about, and he didn't want to raise the topic, the small talk was extremely strained. Seeing her at Black Helicopter was fine, because there were other people around to carry the conversation.

Wednesday, though, Gib invited Ruth out to dinner, and she turned him down. "I don't think I want to see you until this whole thing is over and done with," she said. Gib assented, then went to a liquor store and spent a hundred bucks on randomly selected bottles.

Gib woke up Friday morning with the sun storming in through his windows and scraping layers off his eyeballs, even through his closed lids. His left eye opened with only a little effort and a little moan of pain, but to get the right one open, he had to untangle his arms, spend five minutes screaming as the numb left arm came back to life with pins and needles, scrape away the congealed crap that had held the eye closed, then carefully pry the eyelid open.

After that was done, he closed his eyes again and held his aching, fragile head. He looked around, trying to spot a clock, but it appeared someone had trashed his place during the night while he was passed out on the couch. As he tried to remember what had happened, he had a vague memory of bashing the TV with a baseball bat. Maybe he had trashed his place himself.

Abruptly, he ran to the bathroom. He had just gotten to his knees when his guts exploded out of his mouth like Nagasaki, '45. As he gripped the sides of the bowl, he remembered that Hiroshima had been last night, but apparently his kamikaze guts hadn't been willing to surrender after the first bombing run.

After the last spasm, he lay his head gently on the porcelain until his stomach was a bit calmer. Then he stood up slowly and turned on the shower. Without bothering to take off his clothes, he stepped into the cold gush of water and screamed as his head tried to

split open like a pop top. He fell to his knees in the bathtub, held on to the water spout for balance, and leaned over far enough to send a stream a puke arcing into the toilet bowl. In some distant part of his mind, he was pleased to have aim that good, even while violently ill. The water from the shower cascaded over his shoulders and head, sluicing the residue and drool away from his mouth, over his sodden shirt, and onto the floor. Gib sat back down in the tub and let the water stream onto him for at least a half an hour. When he finally stepped out of the shower, the nausea had decreased just a bit, enough that he felt able to bend over and slide out of his t-shirt. Then he wormed his way out of his jeans and underwear and flung them against the wall, splattering water and goo everywhere.

Pawing through the wreckage of his apartment, he found some clean clothes (shorts, boots, black t-shirt), his answering machine and a clock. The clothes told him he was still passable as human, the clock told him it was about two in the afternoon, and the answering machine told him he had one message. The message was from Campy.

"Hello, Evno, it's Campy. We need to talk about you and your uncle. Stop by The Space when you wake up. I'll be here. It's Friday. Thanks, Evno."

Evno? What kind of weird nickname has Campy decided to give me? Gib wondered. Then he processed the rest of the message.

"About you and your uncle..."

Campy couldn't know about Uncle Joseph, so what could he mean? It had to be Masturbatin' Bob showing up at the party.

Damnit.

Even though he felt pressed for time as he dressed, Gib made sure to find a pair of sunglasses in the wreckage before he left for The Space. Even so, his eyes burned with ultraviolet ray acid the whole drive. When he got to The Space, the van was parked right out in front, and Gib could see stacks of equipment through the rear window.

There was no one in the main performance area of The Space, but Gib could hear someone puttering around up in the living area. He walked over to the stairs to see Campy carrying one of the containers of explosives down the stairs.

"Christ, Campy, what are you doing fucking around with that?"

Campy looked at Gib expressionlessly. "Getting ready to blow up some things." He reached the bottom step and set down his load. "Tonight."

Gib blanched. "*Tonight?! What the hell is going on? Why did you change the plan?*"

"Why? Let me show you, Envno." Campy headed back up the stairs and waved for Gib to follow.

Up in the storage closet that had been holding the explosives, Campy moved the last box out into the hallway. Then he reached back into the closet and when his hand came back out into Gib's sight, it was holding a gun.

Which Campy pointed at Gib.

Gib nervously held his hands out to show he meant no danger.

"Campy, what's with the gun? I thought you didn't believe in violence."

Campy cocked his head, like a dog hearing something out of the range of human senses. "When did I ever say that? You must have seen a file on me, Envno. Did I sound non-violent to you? I don't have any problem with violence."

"What do you mean, 'File'?" Gib asked, his voice cracking.

Campy smiled thinly. He reached up and pulled the chain on the overhead bulb in the closet. Gib saw a tall-backed chair and a couple rolls of duct tape on the floor.

"Get in the chair and tape your ankles to the chair," Campy said.

"I don't --" Gib began, and Campy fired.

The bullet didn't come close, but before the echoes of the shot had faded, Gib was in the chair and trying to find the edge of the tape on the roll of tape.

As he fastened himself, Gib asked, "Campy, what's going on?"

Campy laughed quietly. "The master planner wants to know what the plan is." Campy crouched down in a catcher's stance, tapping the barrel of the pistol against one thigh, and watched as Gib began to tape himself to the chair. "Go all the way up your leg. You're going to lose some leg hair. Tell yourself it's for God and Country, Envo."

Gib lost his temper. Partially out of embarrassment, but also because he was tired of Campy's tendency toward the pointlessly cryptic and ambiguous. "Look, asshole, why don't you tell me what's going on! *And what the fuck does Envo mean?*"

Campy considered it. "All right. Tape your right hand down, and I'll play the Bond villain."

When Gib's hand was taped, Campy leaned in and plucked away the duct tape. He quickly taped Gib's left hand to the chair as well. Then he stepped behind the chair, grabbed Gib by the scalp and taped him by the neck to the tall back of the chair.

"I had to find this chair at a flea market," Campy said. "Just for you. These tall backs are rare."

Campy started to tape every loose place that would more closely connect Gib to the chair. And as he did, he talked.

"Envo Azev was the head of a group called the Battle Organization." Campy smiled. "But already I'm getting ahead of myself. He started as an unpopular college student during the reign of the last Czar of Russia, before the Revolution. By all accounts, he was a ugly motherfucker. Thick forehead and lips, big ears, a flat nose, and shifty, bulging eyes. He doesn't sound too pleasant, does he? Anyway, one day Envo Azev decided he'd had enough taunting by the students around him. So he wrote to the Russian Secret Police, ratting out every revolutionary group he knew about. And so for fifty rubles a month, he was hired to be a rat. An undercover agent.

"Now, here's where it gets funny. Envo joined the terrorist wing of the Social Revolutionary Party in 1901, which was called, roughly translated, the Battle Organization.

"By 1903, he was in charge of the Battle Organization. *In charge!* Isn't that great? The guy running the secret police, and most of the country, was a guy named Von Plehve, and he sure thought it was great how well Envo had done. Von Plehve was probably *the* most hated guy in Russia at the time, and that's really saying something, but he figured he'd know about any assassination attempts way ahead of time. Since he had his boy Envo in place.

"Von Plehve must have been really pissed when Envo had him blown to bits in his carriage. Supposedly, all that was left was a hole in the ground, chunks of carriage and dead horse, and a pool of blood."

Finished mummifying Gib to the chair, Campy stood back and looked to see if

there was any spot he had missed.

“There’s a couple of morals to that story, Gib. One is that when a government starts putting double agents in place, you just never know what might happen. Hell, I’ve heard people say that in the 60s, one out of every three people at a protest meeting was working for the cops or the FBI. And it was the undercover agents who always pushed for radical action, because they knew that they couldn’t bust the heads of people who were just talking. But I figure you already knew that, Gib, because that’s just what you did, right? If a trick works, the FBI might as well stick with it.

“The other moral is that tools have no scruples. They can turn on the owner with the greatest of ease. Easy as falling off a flying trapeze.

“In other words, thanks for the bombs. Without you, Green Rage would just be playing another show tonight, trying to slip in some environmental rhetoric in between songs.

“I won’t tape your mouth, because you might choke. And I would hate to kill a federal agent, especially one who was nice enough to provide us with explosives we would have *never* been able to get any other way.”

Gib figured he’d give it one quick try, just to see if Campy was running some weird kind of bluff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not working for the FBI.”

Campy laughed. “Sure, all right, I’ve got time. You were the last loose end. Just let me sit down and stretch out. I’ve been moving boxes for hours.” Campy settled his huge mass onto the floor and stretched his legs and arms while he talked.

“After you turned Norman in, I got really, really pissed off. Of course, at the time, I didn’t know it was you who had turned him in. So I tried to think of who it could have been. I mean, Norman makes drugs. That’s no secret. But only a few people knew where his lab was.”

Gib was strangely calm. The balloon of tension that had been lurking in his stomach for so long that he hardly noticed it had suddenly vanished. Whatever Campy told him now, it was all over. The assignment, this stupid plan to blow up a nuclear power plant, hanging out at The Space, Masturbatin’ Bob and Jan Reuben, working for Black Helicopter, all of it. Taped to a chair, with an armed and unpredictable man sitting in front of him, a man who outweighed Gib by probably seventy pounds of muscle, Gib still felt the relief of a man in the electric chair who had just heard the hotline from the Governor’s mansion ring. “I don’t think any jury in the world would convict you,” Gib said.

Campy looked at Gib oddly. Then, shaking his head, he said, “So here’s the weird piece of coincidence. I’m at Norman’s arraignment, and who should I see walking through the courthouse but your Uncle Bob? I remember him because he and Norman got into it pretty good at that party you threw.”

“They sure did.”

“You seem to be enjoying this,” Campy said suddenly.

Gib saw no reason to lie. “I am. You know everything. I can hear it in your voice. And believe me, I’m not surprised it was Bob who screwed everything up. But mostly, I’m relieved. This whole job is a lot of work. Very stressful.” Gib smiled.

“I suppose it would be.” Campy now seemed absurdly calm himself. “Anyway, I saw your Uncle Bob –“

“Don’t call him that. He’s not my Uncle, he’s the moron who got me chin deep in this shit. The other people in the office call him Masturbatin’ Bob.”

“Oh.”

“Please, go on.”

“Okay. I saw ... Bob at the courthouse, and I knew he wasn’t there as a character witness for Norman. And Norman got a two year sentence.”

“It would have been probably fifty years if the DEA had any idea what the fuck Norman was actually making,” Gib said. “Bob told me half the samples were about as illegal as a can of Coke, because there’s no laws on the books about most of the stuff Norman made.”

Campy laughed. “Anyway, Norman’s lawyer, guy named Jimmy Sansler, got him sentenced to a minimum security prison somewhere out in Colorado. And I’m talking to Sansler after the hearing, and I ask him if he recognizes Masturbatin’ Bob. And he says, Sure, that guy’s some burnout FBI guy who’s on the slow train to Pension City. And that’s how I knew it had to be you who had turned Norman in.”

“You knew I was a fed on Monday? That’s five days ago! Why did you wait until now to do something?”

For the first time since he had finished taping Gib to the chair, Campy looked less than sanguine. He made a couple of false starts, then finally said, “What would I have told Ruth? Hey, Ruth, the guy who you’ve been fucking? He’s an FBI agent and he’s going to put you and all your friends in jail.”

The big man looked so discomfited that Gib laughed. “You’re some big bad revolutionary, man.”

Campy looked pissed. “And of course, that’s the real reason I’m not going to kill you. I want Ruth to see you who for you really are. Have you figured out what you’re going to say, Envo?”

Gib had no answer for that.

Campy said, “Well, that’s everything. I’m not going to tell you anything about the new plan, of course.”

“You changed the plan?”

“Sure. It’s still Devil’s Arroyo, obviously. But we’re not going to blow up any power lines. Blowing up the power lines is completely insane. Those lines go *into* the plant. They’re what power the safety systems. Did you know that?”

Gib couldn’t win the staring game with Campy.

“You knew, right? That blowing up those lines would give the plant a decent chance of China Syndrome?”

Gib shrugged. “You weren’t supposed to blow anything up. But planning to blow up the power lines would have made you look both dangerous *and* stupid, which every jury loves.”

Campy shook his head in grudging admiration. “You would have made Green Rage a curse word as bad as Exxon Valdez or Three Mile Island. Shit, something that bad might have tainted the whole environmental movement. Really impressive work you do, Envo.”

“Stop it, you’re making me blush.”

“Good thing we changed the plan.” Campy stood up. “Either I’ll be back here in

about a day to let you go, or your federal friends will find you if things go wrong. You won't starve in a day."

"What about water?" Gib yelled.

Campy snapped. "Right! Almost forgot."

The big man picked up a plastic construction from the floor, the kind of hat designed to hold two beer cans at a ball game. It had plastic straws dangling down on either side. Campy had altered the hat to hold two huge bottle of water.

He strapped it onto Gib's head.

"Thanks." Gib decided to make one last effort he knew would be useless. "Hey, are you sure you have to do this? Are you sure there isn't some other way?"

Campy appeared to give the question real thought. "I don't know if I *have* to do this. But if you don't mind me resorting to cliché, there are two kinds of people you can be in the world. Ed Wood or Orson Welles. Ed Wood was a wonderfully nice guy, but a dreadful incompetent. And by all accounts, Orson Welles was, in spite of his genius, a total asshole. I don't want Green Rage to be the environmental version of *Plan 9 From Outer Space*."

Gib stared at him. "I don't remember any semtex in *Citizen Kane*."

"First colorization," Campy said, smiling, "now this. Will the madness never end?"

Campy grabbed the light chain, then remembered something. "One last question. Are you really that bad a card player? Or have you just been eating shit for all these months? Before now, I would have said you just sucked, but since it turns out you've been running a huge bluff the whole time, I'm curious."

Gib thought about it. "No, I just suck at cards."

"Okay." Campy pulled the chain and turned out the light. "See you, Envo, or whatever your name is." Campy turned to go.

"Hey, wait."

The big man paused and his shadow loomed in the doorway.

"What happened to this Envo guy?"

"Azev. Envo Azev. Around 1907, he lost his nerve, and escaped from Russia, settled in Berlin under the name Alexander Neumayer."

"So at least he had a happy ending," Gib said. Then he saw the gleam of Campy's teeth in what appeared to be a pitying smile.

"If you say so. When World War I started, the Germans tossed his ass in jail as a suspected revolutionary and he died soon after he got out of jail. What lesson can you draw from that?"

Gib sighed. "And they all lived happily ever after?"

Campy shrugged. "We'll see. We will certainly see."

"Romeo and Juliet"

I wouldn't ever set out to hurt anybody deliberately unless it was, you know, important - like a league game or something.

Dick Butkus

As soon as the door closed behind Campy, Gib started working at the tape as best he could. After an hour of fiddling at the edges of the tape with his fingernails, he was suddenly overcome with the desire to smack himself in the head.

The chair. The chair was a piece of shit. He should be able to bust it to pieces.

He tried lunging up out of the chair. Doing that, he was at least able to start moving the chair around the closet. That led to the idea of working up a head of steam and banging the chair into the nearest wall. The chair would of course split apart. The problem with the idea was that heads of steam are hard to work up when you're duct taped tightly to a chair. At best, Gib was able to produce a burp of steam. After all his banging and scraping and screaming, the most he had been able to achieve was loosening the left arm of the chair a little bit, just enough that he could nudge it back and forth. He tried slipping the chair arm loose from the chair itself for a half an hour or so, but got all of nowhere.

Between the work and his lingering hangover, Gib got pretty tired. So he fell asleep.

He woke up nicely refreshed, though no closer to free, and convinced himself that he should just relax. There was no way he was going to work loose from the chair, and that meant everything was beyond his control. Nothing he could do, not now. He relaxed in the chair, sipped some water from the hat, and wondered what to do to pass the time.

Then he heard a voice.

Dimly, sure, but he was sure he heard it. Not words, but even without words, he could tell the speaker was irritated.

He started screaming like a banshee, like an opera tenor who had just dropped an anvil on his foot, like a TV preacher begging in tongues. The sound of the mysterious voice from hostile to curious. With that for encouragement, Gib kept screaming to change the voice from curious to closer.

Then, from just outside the closet door, a voice.

"Someone in there?" the voice asked.

"Open the door!"

After a second, the voice said, "It's locked!"

"*Kick it down!*"

"Really? Cool!" The voice vanished into the sound of a heavy boot kicking the door as hard as possible. Gib saw a pinpoint of light as the door started to splinter around the handle. Then he noticed how close he was sitting to the door, and he tried to bounce backwards, but not in time. One final kick sent the door flinging back on its hinges where it smashed into Gib's knees and bounced back toward the frame. The voice kicked the door again and it smacked back into Gib.

"Stop kicking the door!" Gib yelled.

A shadowy head wearing a baseball cap with a beer logo on it peered around the side of the door and looked closely at Gib.

“Dude, what the hell is this?” the voice asked. Now that Gib could hear the voice up close, it sounded young. And stoned. “I don’t want to get into any kind of bondage scene, dude. I’m just here with the beer.”

“Cut me loose, damnit!”

The head cocked to the side. “If I cut you loose, will you sign for the kegs?”

“Yes! Absolutely! Cut me loose!”

A minute later, the beer guy had dragged Gib out into the hallways to see him better. The beer guy, who when Gib saw him in the light of the hallway looked fully as retarded as he sounded, had tried to rip the duct tape off Gib’s legs first, but Gib yelled at him to tear his arms loose first. Once the beer guy did that, Gib ripped the duct tape away from his chest, then stood up with his legs still attached to the chair and proceeded to smash the chair to pieces, screaming at the top of his lungs. When he was done, the chair legs were still taped to the back of his legs. He looked at the beer guy who was watching curiously.

“Have you got a knife?”

“Sure.” The beer guy handed him a utility knife and Gib carefully cut his legs loose. Before he handed the knife back, Gib gave one try at removing the duct tape from his bare legs and arms, but it was like trying to remove the nastiest bandaid in the history of the world, so he ended up just cutting off the loose ends of tape and letting the rest stay. He ended up looking like the understudy for the Tin Man in the *Wizard of Oz*.

“Thanks, man,” he said to the beer guy. He tried to run out, but the beer guy demanded his full pound of flesh, and Gib had to wait while the guy got his papers out of the cab of his truck and had Gib sign off on the keg delivery. Luckily, the beer guy had unloaded the kegs first, so once Gib scribbled a signature, he took off running for the bar phone.

Grabbing up the handset, he started to dial before he even knew who he was calling. He realized he had dialed the first three numbers of Ruth’s phone number. Not Maynard to tell him Campy had changed the plan, not Reuben to tell her the same, but Ruth.

All right.

He finished dialing the number, but got Ruth’s machine and hung up. Black Helicopter. She’d been there all week. Thinking about it, he realized he probably should talk to Ruth in person instead of over the phone. Gib ran out to his car and floored it. After the tires finished squealing, he pulled a U-Turn across two lanes of traffic and started racing toward South Park and Black Helicopter Productions.

When he got there, he saw Ruth’s motorcycle parked out in front of the building. *She must be riding the Honda because Campy’s got the van*, Gib thought. After a short minute of looking for a parking spot, he pulled up onto the sidewalk and left the GTO there. Not waiting for the elevator, he raced up the stairs and burst into the work area. OddGreg was getting a cup of coffee from the pot in front and waved hello. Gib grabbed him, spilling the hot coffee.

“Greg! Have you seen Ruth?”

“Sure,” OddGreg said worriedly. “She’s right behind you.”

Gib spun and saw Ruth sitting across the conference table from Sidney, who was setting up a small video camera. He barged into the conference room without knocking.

"Gibson!" Pinkwater said. "Wonderful to see you. Do you know how to set up this infernal contraption?"

Gib put his hands on the arms of Ruth's chair and bent down to look her in the eyes.

"Did Campy tell you anything?" Gib asked as calmly as he was able.

Ruth looked at the duct tape on his arms. "About what?"

"He changed the plan."

"He didn't tell me anything about that. None of you have said anything to me about your plan, and I'm glad. Blowing up roads. What stupidity."

Gib straightened up, then collapsed into a chair which rolled away from the table weakly. "That's it, then."

Pinkwater asked quietly, "What plan?"

Then Gib realized what Ruth had said. *Roads?*

"These idiots think they're going to shut down Devils Arroyo by shutting down the roads to it," Ruth said, "but I guess Campy's changed the plan."

Gib jumped back up so quickly, he flipped the chair over. "You never read that printout I gave Campy? At the barbecue?"

"No. He told me what was in it after you came back from New York."

"The roads!" Gib shouted. "He just changed it to the roads!" He felt a wave of relief course through his limbs. He could still jump in the GTO and get to Devil's Arroyo in time to stop the Ragers. He looked at Ruth and said, "I can still stop them."

"Stop them? I thought –"

At that moment, the front door of Black Helicopter blew off its hinges.

An assault team smashed through the doorway and ordered everyone in the place onto their stomachs. Taylor Jackson tried to argue, and one of the black-suited agents smacked him in the face with a gun butt and knocked him to the floor. The workers were herded away from their keyboards into the front of the building.

Then Bob Maynard, his face colored in excitement, walked into the office. He was wearing a flak jacket over his normal cheap suit, but he had removed his toupee, and his scars were in high relief against the blood racing through his scalp. Instead of his normal beaten-down look, the agent looked like an action figure brought to life, confident in his purpose and completely in control of the situation. Looking around, he spotted Ruth, Gib and Pinkwater through the glass walls of the conference room, and pointed to them with the black 9mm automatic that was in his right hand. A squad of agents lowered their M-16s and Maynard signaled for the three of them to walk out of the conference room.

"Keep your hands on your heads!" Maynard shouted.

"Oh shit," Gib said as he put his hands up and led the way out of the conference room. In the main office, he could hear OddGreg Igoe screaming insults at the agents who were watching the employees of Black Helicopter Productions. Taylor Jackson was still curled up in a ball and coughing. Other than that, silence.

Maynard separated Pinkwater from Gib and Ruth and signaled one of the other agents to cuff the big man. While Pinkwater's hands were roughly pulled behind his back, Maynard announced, "Saul Hampton, you're under arrest for murder. You have the right to remain silent –"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Ruth shouted.

Maynard ignored her and finished reading Sidney his rights. "Saul Hampton! Do you understand your rights as I have read them to you?"

Sidney turned to look gravely at Gib. Gib couldn't hold his stare.

Pinkwater said, "I understand."

The assault team herded Pinkwater out of the office. Maynard watched them go with his hands on his hips, like a cowboy at the end of a long cattle drive, until the group vanished down the stairs. Then the agent called to the rest of the assault team and they left as well, Maynard watching them go.

OddGreg went to see if Taylor Jackson was all right, while yelling "Attorneys! More attorneys than you can believe!"

Maynard ignored them and turned to Gib. "What the hell are you doing here?" Maynard asked.

Ruth stared at Gib. "You *know* this guy?" Then comprehension started to flare behind her eyes.

When Campy had taped him to a chair, Gib had thought it was all over — beyond his control. But seeing the reality of what was going to happen, what *was* happening, all the crap he had set in motion and was now unable to stop, was more awful than anything he could have imagined. He felt like a chunk of hot magma had placed itself in his stomach and was burning away his insides.

Gib said to Maynard, "It wasn't supposed to happen like this!"

"Oh, really?" Maynard asked. "I thought you might say that. When surveillance called and told me the terrorists had gotten into their van and taken off south, a day ahead of when you told me they would, you can understand how I got a little worried. So I got a team together and bumped up *our* schedule. Reuben should be arriving at Devil's Arroyo with the other team as we speak."

Ruth looked horrified.

"I figured you decided to bust up our deal," Maynard said, then looked at the duct tape still on Gib's arms and legs, "but I can see by your wardrobe you might not have had a choice. So I'll hold up my end." He turned and looked at Ruth. She was still staring at Gib in disbelief, so Maynard had to snap his fingers in front of her face until she noticed him. "Hey! Girlie! You're free to go. Just make sure you don't skip town."

Ruth slowly looked back and forth between Gib and Maynard, then turned and bolted out the destroyed front door.

Maynard snorted. "Women. No gratitude. None of them." Masturbatin' Bob Maynard was resplendent in his triumph.

Gib punched Bob Maynard in the face, as hard as he possibly could. Masturbatin' Bob collapsed like a cow in a slaughterhouse.

Then Gib hared away after Ruth. Leaping down four steps at a time, he shouted at Ruth to stop, but she made it to the street without saying a word. Gib banged his way through the door to the street just in time to see her race away on her Honda motorcycle, her hair waving out from beneath the bottom of her black helmet.

He jumped into the GTO and chased her for five blocks down Brannan before he realized where she must be going. He hung a left and headed toward the nearest onramp to 280. He got on headed south and slammed into fourth gear, headed south. The drive would take him about two hours doing a hundred all the way. He hoped no cop tried to

stop him on the way, because he knew he had to get to Devil's Arroyo as fast as he possibly could.

Before Jan Reuben did anything stupid.

Before Stanley Campanella, Ethan Garrity, or Frank Marion did anything stupid.

Before Ruth did the wrong right thing.

"Fight and Flight"

Avoid running at all times.

Satchel Paige

From the front door of Black Helicopter Productions to the secluded spot where Campy had parked the Green Rage van, it was exactly 213 highway miles. The Goat spun to a stop three inches away from the back bumper of the van exactly two hours and twenty six minutes after Gib chased Ruth out onto the street. Night had fallen and Gib had barely spotted the turnoff in his headlights.

The most frightening part of the drive hadn't been weaving in and out of traffic on 101 South, screeching into the car pool lane at 95 miles an hour or the breakdown lane at 98, hammering the horn like a drum while approaching any car. It had been the ten minute detour just south of Salinas to get gas. He had spotted the gas gauge approaching empty ten miles before he stopped but hadn't seen an easy off-easy on exit until he saw a Shell station sign. He left rubber braking up to the pump, stuffed the gas spout into the tank, ran to the counter and threw a twenty at the kid behind the counter, and then when he got back to the GTO, he almost forgot to take the gas pump back out of the tank. He was about to turn the key in the ignition when he looked in his rear view mirror and saw people running for cover.

On shaking legs, he had walked back to the pump, topped off the tank with an extra squeeze, and put the gas cap back on and the gas hose away. Then he sped back onto the highway, leaving a trail of rubber behind to match the one he put down when he pulled in. Two miles down the road he almost started hyperventilating, so he slowed down to 85 and gripped the wheel with until his breathing normalized.

Even though the Goat had done all the work in the last two hundred plus miles, Gib sat in the car for about five minutes and caught his breath. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror and his eyes were wild. He must have scared the crap out of the kid at the gas station. It was a damn good thing no cop had stopped him; a state trooper would have given him a lead handshake if he had seen a guy looking like Gib reaching for his identification.

Knowing it was stupid, that the Ragers had arrived at the spot hours before, Gib walked up to the van and checked it out anyway. Nothing. There had been a tiny chance he could have caught the Ragers, because they would have gone the speed limit the entire way, and besides, as far as they knew, the only person who could stop them was duct taped to a chair in The Space. So why hurry? They would have all night.

Having no better plan, Gib tried to retrace the path that they had followed while Frank Marion was filming them six days before. He ran the two miles at top speed, shocked to find himself grateful for Jan Reuben's 5 AM Saturday calls. Without them he would have been puffing after the first steep hill.

When he got to the power line, there was nothing. Gib tried to picture what he knew about the landscape. There were three main roads that fed into Devil's Arroyo, and four or five smaller paths. He could ignore all the paths, because they were mainly for hikers and naturalists who still came to the area to see the coastal scenery. The three main roads were the only ones that would be of interest to Campy. The southern road was all

the way on the other side of both Devil's Arroyo One and Two from where Gib was currently standing.

There were two choices. Campy and the Ragers might plant bombs on the Southern road first and then swing in a wide circle back to the van, mining the road that led down to the Pacific coast, and then hit the northern road last, which was closest to the van. Or he would be paranoid, and mine the Northern road first, just in case the Ragers got discovered before they could get every bomb planted.

If Gib had to guess, he would bet on paranoid. Anyway, if Gib went to the southern road first and guessed wrong, there was no chance he would get to the Ragers before they had started planting bombs. Worse, Ruth might get to them first. He was sure he had beaten her here, but on the drive down, Gib had been convinced every motorcycle he saw was Ruth. He hadn't seen one she lost him on Brannan Street, back in San Francisco.

The northern road, then. If he didn't find the Ragers there, Gib wouldn't be able to stop anything by that time anyway. He didn't know where Jan Reuben's group of agents were, but he suspected they weren't waiting around for Gib to make a decision.

Gib headed southwest through the trees, toward the narrowest point of the northern road he could remember.

As he walked, he set a rhythm, almost a cadence, in his head. *Needle, haystack, needle, haystack, needle, haystack.*

After twenty minutes, he was climbing a hill and heard an engine. Racing to the top of the hill, he saw the road only about a hundred yards away from the hill he was standing on.

There was a motorcycle coming slowly down the road. Even from where he was, Gib knew it was Ruth. He charged through the trees and the underbrush trying to get to the road in time to cut her off. He didn't know what he was going to say to stop her, get her to turn around, but he knew he would think of something. *Oh yeah*, he told himself, *because you've thought of so many good things to say already.*

Just as he was about to step out onto the road, only a few steps before the motorcycle reached him, Gib was tackled from behind. As he fell, his face smacked into a tree branch.

Tears in his eyes, he rolled over and saw a monster holding him. Then he wiped his eyes clear and saw Jan Reuben, dressed all in black and her face darkened so that only the whites of her eyes shone, with her arms wrapped around his legs.

"What are you doing?" she snarled at him.

"Trying to stop her!" Gib yelled.

"Keep your voice down!"

"Ruth! Ruuuuuth!" Gib kicked at Reuben's hands where they held onto him

"Ow! Shit!"

Gib's kicks dislodged Reuben from his legs. He scrambled to his feet and chased after the motorcycle.

Dozens of armed men emerged from the treeline up and down the road. Ruth, startled, lost control of the motorcycle and it toppled over, pinning one of her ankles. She yanked off her helmet, her short blonde hair scattering in the starlight. Gib raced to lift the bike off of her.

"Give me a hand here," he shouted at one of the armed men. The man ignored him and looked over to where Jan Reuben was walking out of the trees.

"It's all right, Gib," Reuben said. "We've got everything under control." She turned to the man next to her. "Michaels! That man's a federal agent. Help him get the motorcycle off the woman."

When the two men had lifted the motorcycle, Ruth skittered out from underneath it and scrambled to her feet, about to run off into the woods. Michaels immediately dropped the bike and grabbed Ruth, drawing his pistol and holding it to the side of her head.

"You're not going anywhere, Miss Radley," Jan Reuben said. "But don't worry, we'll give you a ride back to San Francisco with all the rest of your friends."

"No!" Gib shouted. "I made a deal! Ruth is *not* part of this."

Reuben's confident look faltered. "What are you talking about?"

"Maynard and I made a deal. Ruth goes free, no matter what!"

From the Reuben's body language and the expression on her face, it was clear to anyone within two hundred yards exactly what was going on. Gib saw a few of the agents standing behind her turn around and avert their faces, either out of embarrassment or politeness. Then Reuben straightened and walked over to Gib.

In a cold voice, she said, "Fuck Bob Maynard. Fuck you. And fuck your deal."

Then without turning her head, she said, "Agent Michaels."

"Yes, ma'am," Agent Michaels said.

"Cuff the bitch."

The instant Agent Michaels went for his cuffs, Gib went for the man's gun. Michaels shouted and grabbed at Gib's hands. The other black-clad agents ran to help Michaels. In the confusion, Gib saw Ruth run into the trees.

The Reuben kicked him in the spine with her combat boot.

Gib collapsed like a sack of sand onto the road. As he did, he heard Ruth screaming warnings to the Ragers.

"Frank! Ethan! Campy! Run! Get out of here! It's a setup! A trap!"

Confused shouts came from deep in the woods.

"Stop her!" Reuben screamed. The gathered agents took off in pursuit.

Then Jan Reuben leaned down to whisper in Gib's ear. "That sounds like an accomplice yelling to me, you bastard. Your deal is *done*. I hope you *rot*." Then she ran off after her men.

For a few minutes, Gib lay on the road and waited for feeling to come back to his legs. The kick in his spine had numbed him like a shot of novocaine and it took a while before he could stand up. Looking at the woods, he heard the shouts of the agents as they rampaged through the trees, hunting the Ragers. He also heard Ruth shouting warnings for a good long while until her voice drifted away. Gib, still rubbing his back, picked up the motorcycle and kicked it to life. Then he pointed it where he thought he had last heard Ruth's voice and accelerated into the woods.

Gib only had a tiny idea how to drive a motorcycle, and the Honda wasn't built for going offroad, so things were unpleasant. Bounced and rattled like dice on a craps table, blindly flying over the crest of hills, Gib stalled the motorcycle three times before he got the rhythm of it. Once he caught up to the main pack of people, he hoped he could dump

the stupid machine.

Suddenly, Gib saw a black figure jump out in front of him. Gib dumped the cycle to try and miss the FBI agent, but the man picked the wrong direction to dive, and the cycle clipped him, spinning him into a tree where he dropped onto the ground and stayed still. Gib checked to make sure the man was breathing, then took his gun. The Honda cycle had continued running after Gib tried to dump it, and smashed into a tree as well, so Gib left the cycle and the man behind.

Now that he was at a more normal speed, Gib could hear and see figures running through the wood and shouting in confusion. Picking a direction at random, Gib ran off to search for Ruth.

That was the exact moment it started to rain. In seconds, the whole forest was engulfed in a blinding downpour, with appropriate thunder and lightning.

After a few minutes, the heavy rain let up, as if the first burst was only a warning shot across the bows of anyone foolish enough to be out in this gathering storm.

Gib decided to head for a small hill that was more or less in the direction of where the van and the GTO were parked. After ten minutes of walking in the rain, Gib came to a clearing. Looking up at the hill, he saw three figures wearing backpacks climbing the now mud-covered hill. He watched the three figures desperately slip and scramble for a minute, making certain it was the Ragers and not three FBI agents. Then he charged to the bottom of the hill and fired his borrowed gun into the air.

“Campy! Ethan! Frank! Stop right there!”

Garrity and Marion plopped to the muddy ground and turned around to look down at Gib from about thirty yards above him on the gradual slope of the hill.

Frank Marion called down, “Hi, Gib. Is it Gib? I knew the hill was a bad idea.” It was hard to tell at this distance in the steady rain, but Marion sounded almost relieved by Gib’s presence.

“Yeah, Frank, you can call me Gib.”

“You shithead,” Garrity yelled, but even in this crazy circumstance, he sounded cheerful. Ethan Garrity was a hard man to depress. “I guess you had us all fooled, didn’t you?”

“Fooled myself, Ethan. Sorry this got all fucked up. I didn’t think it would ever get this far.”

Garrity and Marion sat down, exhausted, and started sliding back down the muddy hill.

Campy was still climbing, ignoring the conversation, so Gib fired a couple of bullets into the mud ten yards to the left of the big man. Campy froze, his hands planted deep into the mud in his half-crouch, but he didn’t turn around.

“Come on down, Campy. It’s all over. All you guys, come on down. This is over.”

Ethan Garrity pointed over Gib’s head into the clearing. “I think you had better do what he says, Campy,” Garrity called up to the big man. “His friends are here.”

Gib turned around to look and saw the squad of agents coming in to the clearing, guns pointed. A drenched Jan Reuben came out of the trees about ten yards away from Gib and pointed her gun at him.

“Drop it!” she shouted.

“What?” Gib asked, confused.

“Drop the gun!” Now other agents were running toward Gib, their guns centering on him.

“But I stopped them! Don’t you understand? This is all over! They’re surrendering.” Gib waved the gun at the Ragers behind him on the hill.

“I said drop the fucking gun!” Reuben shrieked, losing all semblance of control.

Ruth came charging out of the trees behind Gib.

Just as Ruth tackled Gib from behind, Reuben fired.

Both Gib and Ruth fell to the ground, his gun spinning away in the wet grass.

The agents surrounded them both, a forest of black legs. Dazed, Gib heard one of them say, “Shit, call for medevac. This one’s been shot.” Gib wondered which one they meant.

Then Gib found himself laying on his back, the rain falling directly into his face, ignored by the agents performing first aid on Ruth. Pushing himself up on an elbow, he tried to see what was going on, but an agent pushed him away angrily. So Gib looked up at the hill to see what was happening there. He crawled to his hands and knees, then slowly pushed himself to his feet. Stumbling on the slippery grass, he made his way over to the hill. The level of the rain was starting to increase again, and the wind was blowing harder.

At the bottom of the hill, both Marion and Garrity were on their stomachs, faces shoved in the mud, while agents took their backpacks and cuffed both men. The agents removed blocks of semtex from the backpacks and put it into special containers.

Gib helped the two men roll onto their sides, so they weren’t breathing mud.

Marion asked, in an agonized voice, “Gib, where’s Campy?”

Promising to find out, Gib walked further up the hill

Led by Reuben, three agents had climbed up the hill towards Campy, who had not moved from his hunched position, but he had his backpack in his hands and was doing something Gib couldn’t make out. Then the big man slung the backpack over his shoulders again, still without turning.

Signaling for her agents to stay back, Jan Reuben held her gun in both hands as she approached within ten yards of Campy.

Gib heard Reuben yell, “Get up and put your hands on your head.”

Campy stood up in a graceful motion, using only his legs because he kept his hands behind his back. There was a beatific smile on the big man’s face. He spotted Gib at the bottom of the hill, and shouted, “Gib! Think I can shoot the moon?” Then Campy laughed joyfully and pulled his gun out from behind his back and fired over Reuben’s head. Amazingly, Reuben held her fire.

Gib realized that neither Frank or Ethan had been carrying the semtex armed. That would be crazy. But Campy, as always, was carrying the heaviest backpack. And Gib hadn’t seen any of Marion’s homemade detonators removed from either Ethan or Frank’s backpacks.

What had Campy been doing with his backpack?

Campy fired another shot into the air and the three agents who had followed Reuben dived for cover. Reuben didn’t. Instead, from no more than ten feet away, she carefully aimed her pistol at the middle of Campy’s chest and pulled the trigger.

In the instant before he was punched over backwards and blown down the hill, Gib saw Campy and Reuben vanish. *Just vanish.* That was the last thing he ever saw in Devil's Arroyo.

EPILOGUE

NOVEMBER, 1996

*In which we see whether or not Gib learned anything
during his summer and fall vacation...*

"Boy Meets Girl"

Once you accept your own death, all of a sudden you are free to live.

Saul Alinsky

The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.

Chinese Proverb

The ability to quote is a serviceable substitute for wit.

W. Somerset Maugham

Gib woke up in a hospital three days later, feeling much better than he expected. Of course, he had expected not to wake up at all.

Miracle or punishment? He knew he'd find out soon enough.

The first person who came into the room was Joseph Arlen, Senior, Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Uncle Joseph.

Who said, "Nice work, son. I'm damn proud of you."

Punishment, then, Gib thought.

Uncle Joseph raised his eyebrows when Gib didn't answer.

"Must still be a little stunned, right?"

Gib still just waited.

Now confused, Uncle Joseph explained, "Did a hell of a job here, Gib. Especially because you had a bad egg like Maynard in charge. Happens even with the best hens. But you smoked him out, smoked out the bad guys as well. Might even get a commendation. A medal."

That was the punchline Gib had been waiting for.

"Where's Ruth?"

"Ruth Radley? She's in this same hospital. Under guard, of course."

Gib closed his eyes. That was what he had needed to know. Definitely punishment, not miracle.

Uncle Joseph continued, "Damn media vultures. Brave little girl says she's got nothing to say, but they still keep after her."

"Brave girl?" Gib asked, opening his eyes.

"The two surviving bad guys, those Green Rage guys, they told the whole story. While you and that little girl were getting treatment. How she helped you stop them. Brave, like I said."

Gib finally said, "Uncle Joseph, that's not –"

Uncle Joseph held up a hand. "Don't want to hear it. All I know is, everything worked out perfect for me. And for you, Gib. You just lay back and let me put some medals on your chest. That's it."

After some more small talk from Uncle Joseph, Gib pretended to feel tired again, yawning until Uncle Joseph took the hint. As the older man was walking out the door, he

said to Gib, "Know what FBI stands for? Really? Fidelity, Bravery, and Integrity. You got it, Gib. You got it all. I knew you had it in you." Uncle Joseph even looked a bit teary-eyed.

Gib shot a question back at him. "Uncle Joseph, have you talked to Owen lately?"

"Owen? The Faggot? No. Why?"

"Just curious."

An hour after Uncle Joseph left, Gib asked the nurse for a pad of paper and a pen.

Dear Sidney,

he started,

I have some things to tell you...

No, Gib thought. He already knows that.

Dear Sidney:

I don't really know where to start...

No, Gib thought. Get to the goddamn point.

Dear Sidney:

This is what happened. I'll make sure to tell everyone...

A few hours later, Gib searched around until he found his clothes and got dressed. The he found a fire alarm and pulled it, leaving the hospital in the confusion.

San Francisco Chronicle headline, November 3, 1996:

Hero FBI Agent Recants Story!

Offers Sworn Affidavits, Clears Green Rage

New York Post, November 3, 1996:

FBI Rat!

Hero Turns Bum in Shocking

Live Press Conference

New York Times headline, November 5, 1996:

"Liars and Assassins": Affidavits from "Rogue Agent"

Show Widespread Contempt for Civil Liberties in FBI

Chicago Tribune headline, November 5, 1996:

Congress Considers Investigation of "Rogue Agent" Case
"We can't confuse some bad apples with the whole bunch,"
Argue Senate Republicans, Justice Department

There were many more headlines in a similar vein after Gib held his press conference. Uncle Joseph presented no medals.

Wallis called Gib, though neither she nor Gib were sure if she was offering sympathies or congratulations.

Days later, Gib walked back into the hospital, wearing his best suit and carrying a briefcase. He looked like a respectable young lawyer, and so the young nurse he singled out thought he looked trustworthy. When he explained what he needed, slipping her two hundred dollar bills, she was happy to help.

The nurse told the guard in front of Ruth's door that he had a phone call. When he got there, it was a dead line, and she told him the party must have hung up. Suspicious, the guard checked Ruth's room to make sure she was alone.

Once the guard went back outside to his chair, Gib slipped into Ruth's room from the connected room next door, using the key the nurse had loaned him.

Ruth looked over at Gib with bruised, angry eyes. Her hair was slicked back on her head, and she had her hands clasped on top of her chest.

Ruth said, "I somehow knew you'd show up. And of course you had to sneak in." Gib sat in a chair by the window. "I didn't think I was on your approved guest list."

"Correct."

"Look, I just came here to do two things."

"I hope suicide is on that list."

Gib said, "First of all, I'm sorry." Then he waited.

Eventually, Ruth said, "Fine."

"What?" Gib said, surprised.

"You said I'm sorry, and I said fine. Apology accepted. Get out."

"That's it?"

"What more do you want? Redemption? Forget it." Ruth's lips tightened in distaste. "Don't look for redemption from me. You don't get forgiveness just because you say you're sorry."

Gib didn't have anything to say to that, so he just sat and stared at Ruth. She held his gaze as long as she could, until she finally had to turn away with tears in her eyes. But her voice was steady. "Please tell me the second thing is for you to commit suicide."

"No, I –"

There was a knock at Ruth's door, and the guard's chair scraped. Gib jumped up and hid in the bathroom.

"Ms. Radley," the guard said, coming into the room.

Gib sucked in a tense breath.

"Yes?" Ruth said.

"I hope I'm not bothering you."

"You're not," Ruth answered.

"I thought I heard voices."

Gib held his breath. He thought he could get past the guard, but wasn't sure he could get out of the hospital. Still, he'd have to make a try. He gathered his legs under him.

"Well," Ruth said, and Gib got ready to run.

"It must have been the TV. I'll turn it down."

"No, no, that's OK. Just wanted to check on you."

Gib almost fell down in surprise, but caught himself just in time.

"Just call if you need anything. See anything."

"I will," Ruth promised.

After he heard the door to Ruth's room close, Gib stepped back out of the bathroom.

"Thanks."

"I don't know why I did that," Ruth said. "Maybe it's because you're a TV star the last couple of days. Of course, the only reason you had to have a press conference is because you caused all this trouble in the first place."

"That's true," Gib said. "Any halfway competent defense attorney will get both Ethan and Frank acquitted in this kind of situation. Especially with Campy ... with Campy not around."

Gib opened his briefcase.

"This is the second thing I came here to do, to give this back to you. The FBI grabbed it up when they swept through your apartment, but I got it back."

Gib blinked his eyes a few times as he put the single sheet of paper down next to Ruth's legs on the bed.

It was done now. Whatever happened from here on in, he was as clean as he get himself. Gib walked to the door to the connecting room., then stopped when Ruth spoke.

"Running away?" Ruth asked.

"Of course. This is all going to get messy," Gib said with a rueful smile. "But if Ethan and Frank need me to testify, I'll be back."

"What's is this?" Ruth asked, not bothering to pick up the paper.

"Our marriage license. I thought you should be the one to decide what to do with it."

This time, Gib didn't stop at the doorway to the adjoining room, but walked through and locked the door behind him. When he got back to the nurse he had borrowed the key from, she said, "Thank god. I was starting to get nervous." She looked around. "I thought looked really cool on TV," she whispered to Gib

"Thanks," Gib said. "But I was wondering if you could do one more thing for me."

"Oh, no, I don't think –"

"This is really no big deal, I swear. I have to leave now, but when you bring in her

pain medication, I'd like you to call me and tell me what she's doing." Gib handed the nurse a scrap of paper with number to his brand new mobile phone written on it, along with another hundred dollar bill. The nurse considered long and hard, then finally stuffed both papers into her pocket and nodded her head.

Leaving the hospital, Gib walked out past the wheelchairs and the gurneys, through the white hallways and across the black tarmac of the parking lot until he reached his first, last, best refuge. He sat down in the driver's seat of the GTO. For a second, he thought about turning on the radio, but decided against it.

An hour later, as he was getting some food in a drive-through in Oakland, his new cell phone rang. Gib pulled into a parking spot and answered. It was the nurse, which vaguely surprised him. He didn't think she would call, in the end.

"What's she doing?" Gib asked.

"Nothing, really."

Gib waited.

"She's just reading this sheet of paper, over and over. She wouldn't put it down." *Well, at least she didn't burn it,* Gib thought. *Maybe there's hope after all.*

Gib laughed, then thanked the nurse and hung up the phone.

He backed out of the parking space.

He pushed down the clutch, slipped the car into first gear.

Then, the clutch still held down, his other foot poised above the accelerator, Gib wondered where to go.

THE END