

ARMADILLO HIGHWAY

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PREFACE

American fiction has been more often than not measured aesthetically by its relationship to reality. Although there are noted exceptions, for one hundred years the questions most literary scholars ask of a fiction have remained constant. Does the fiction fulfill Aristotle's dictum to imitate life? Does it meet the criteria of literary-realism, a theory first articulated fully in this country by William Dean Howells in the late-nineteenth century? Does it, above all else, strive to remove the artifice between text and reader by eliminating extreme authorial didacticism and intrusion?

These aesthetic requirements have provided us with a rich and large canon of literary fiction that relies on particularity and veracity of detail to tell ordinary and "true" stories about our culture. The point of such fiction becomes, not what happens in the story or novel, but rather do readers believe in what happens? Howells wrote in his 1891 landmark work, Criticism and Fiction, for example, that "no author is an authority except on those moments when he held his ear close to Nature's lips and caught her very accent" (14). In exchange for the exploitation of human

tension, problems, and events, much modern literary fiction, in the tradition of Howells and the first American realists, seeks minute verisimilitude, and that seeking, an all-encompassing quest for realism, becomes the sole reason for the fiction's existence. As Henry James succinctly put it a hundred years ago in The Art of Fiction: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (166).

In Armadillo Highway, I attempt to parody and call into question the unrelenting quest for literary realism, not because I stand opposed to verisimilitude in fiction but because I try to reflect my generation's fragmented sense of reality, a reality constructed in part by the fabulist and contrived elements of television. As a Baby Boomer, a member of the first generation of people born with television sets already plugged into the living-room outlets of their homes, my reality was shaped by a coterie of situation comedies, many of them campy, satirical shows that would hardly stand up under even a watered-down version of Howells's realistic standards.

There is a large aesthetic gap between, say, Gilligan's Island and Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady, and I would not pretend to seriously compare them. The point is that certain rhetorics, or particular ways of telling a story, emerged from the nature of popular television in the 1960s and beyond, much like they emerged from the literary brilliance of Twain, Howells, and James a hundred years

earlier. Some television rhetorics, and especially the situation comedy, were and remain essentially ironic and satirical in content, mere burlesques of realism, concerned far less with dramatic verisimilitude than with the fabulous and the humorous. These ironical, satirical rhetorics are decisively non-romantic, yet they reject realism, and embody the implausible, especially the stereotyping of romanticism. But the satire renders the conventions of romanticism inappropriate when applied to the situation comedy.

A situation comedy is more akin to Menippean satire, which focuses more on mental attitudes than character development, or plot, but even this label seems inappropriate. Still, I argue, by way of my novel, which on one level seeks to reflect a television rhetoric, that these methods of telling a story can become, in fact, modes of important social criticism.

This satirical, self-mocking, open acknowledgement of the absurdity inherent in the fabulist elements of television is one voice of my generation. It becomes a linguistic construct, a way of creating reality, now embedded forever in the minds of most television-nurtured Baby Boomers. It is human communication steeped and webbed in irony, always a burlesque yet sometimes quite serious in reinforcing traditional American values. Situation comedies, such as The Beverly Hillbillies, Bewitched, Gilligan's Island, all three based on implausible premises,

provided escapism, ignoring the political and social turmoil brewing, and then exploding, in the late 1960s. These shows projected a stable, secure world. There were no Kent States here. No Vietnam body bags. No Watergate. It was like this: Everyone on the island would love Gilligan, anyway, no matter what stupid thing he did next. We knew that. It was one thing we could depend on, just as a child might depend on a parent.

In a 1987 exchange published in The Boston Review, for example, I argue that many Baby Boomers have subconsciously "accepted TV as another parent, as, especially by those in dysfunctional homes, 'security.'" I still believe that, and I still argue for television's significance as a linguistic prototype and construct for my generation.

Generally, the narrative of a 1960s situation comedy can be described as follows: a set of implausible, characters face a problem, usually a minor family, community, or job-related dilemma, which is resolved to everyone's advantage. The dialogue used by the characters in advancing the narrative is more often than not contrived, wooden, and often overstated. The audience, of course, is expected to watch and understand the show on an ironic level, not a realistic one.

But there is another level of narration as well. The point of this narration is the show's very own implausibility and mediocrity (and I cannot stress this word enough) become ironically and intentionally advanced as the

bridge between it and its more sophisticated viewers. The mediocrity is key here. In this level of narration, for example, the talking pig in Green Acres--woefully and pathetically rendered--can become an absurd symbol of a generation of children wallowing pleasantly in the commercial muck of advertisement-driven television. Arnold's creators surely knew this, or sensed something like this, and if you know much about Arnold, how he liked nothing better than to watch television himself, my argument becomes strengthened. The "character" of Arnold is so intentionally implausible, we gauge the overall artistic success of the show in which he appears based upon that very implausibility. The more contrived, then, the better, and this contrivance, in itself, eventually becomes a way of projecting a mode of reality.

In Armadillo Highway, I attempt to draw upon the narrative and rhetoric of a situation comedy, and using camp, satire, and fabulism, reach an ironic communion with an implied reader on this second layer of narration I described. The novel's main narrative, for example, employs an episodic sequence of unusual events. The life of Frederick Roderick II, the novel's main character, is filled with the unusual, if not the implausible. He talks to a cartoon character; he earns a doctorate at Harvard University by studying and writing about situation comedies on television; he is held hostage in a grocery store in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, by a rock band.

I also attempt to embrace the lively verbosity and anxious, comedic tension inherent in a situation comedy. At the same time, I attempt to mock its glaring artifice, its silliness. Fred's dialogue is ironic, often overstated, and intentionally stilted and contrived. In an interview with a sales manager, for example, Fred, attempting to win him over, tells him, "I am the personification of sales in singular need of one good product with which to prove famous hawking adage."

My work, however, attempts to go beyond just telling a story in the type of television-inspired narrative, using campy, satirical language. The novel attempts to operate on several levels. Throughout Armadillo Highway, for example, I remain fixed on this idea of realism, on what in the end constitutes reality for us as humans. Thus, in the third chapter, I introduce a more conventional narrative that, as it unfolds, has obvious parallels to the narrative describing Fred's angst-ridden life. In this narrative, events are initially more plausible, and the reader is invited to make connections. The questions I attempt to raise in readers are: Is the narrator of this narrative and Fred the same person? Is this Fred's real story? Is the unconventional narrative merely a fabulous rendering of rather ordinary events? These questions, surrounding as they do the anxiety of the novel's main character, are ultimately intended to introduce the novel's psychological emphasis. How does one create one's reality? Can one

change an internalized story, or ingrained belief, about oneself with the fabulous, or the humorous? Is it right? Is it moral? And, finally, what does it mean when the conventional narrative in Armadillo Highway grows increasingly satirical and cynical? Which narrative, then, if any, triumphs in the end?

The relationship between the two narratives, then, attempts to embody the novel's main artistic "problem." Many of the connections are obvious, and thus not problematic. Fred and the older narrator suffer from acute anxiety, for example, and both grew up in California and live in Oklahoma. Complicating the relationship, however, is the fact that the novel never states openly that the two narrators are the same person telling the same story in significantly different ways, each striving, in its own manner, for truth. I attempt to show that the older narrator might be interpreted simply, not as an older Fred, but as a self-acknowledged failed author who has only created him as a character for a commercial novel, and by doing so, denies the roots of his personal and artistic problems. Fred, in this interpretation, becomes a part of the author's failure, or success, depending on the reader's judgment. At one point in the novel, the older narrator tells a friend that his new writing philosophy will include, "Schlock, tits, and things that go bump." I attempt to raise this question in readers: Is the main narrative, then, a reflection or a parody of this commercialism?

Thus, the problematic sense of reality is complicated by the novel's continual reference to itself. In the conventional narrative, the narrator first calls all his writing autobiographical, and debates with two friends how and why fiction should be written, and the methods a writer should employ. Of course, this debate announces the artifice of the novel in which it occurs, and the text, then, becomes self-reflexive. Through the novel's self-acknowledgement, I attempt to raise even more questions about the nature of reality in a fiction. At one point, a friend of the narrator even reminds him that in a fiction it is impossible to "pass off reality as reality." In addition, Fred, too, is a writer, and segments of his doctoral dissertation, The Day McGarrett's Hair Came Knocking, appear in the novel, which is itself a dissertation. Fred's dissertation explores some of the very points I have raised in this dissertation preface about situation comedies on television. Is his dissertation a parody of this dissertation?

So what type of reality, if any, is presented in Armadillo Highway, or in any fiction? This question, of course, remains unreconciled in the novel. As Wayne Booth argues in The Rhetoric of Fiction:

A dialectical history of modern criticism could be written in terms of the warfare between those who think of fiction as something that must above all be real . . . and those who ask that it be

pure--even if the search for artistic purity
should lead to unreality . . . (38)

Armadillo Highway openly confronts this dialectical tension,
and satirizes it.

I am very aware that I am writing within an established literary tradition, and much of my novel, and in particular the Oklahoma chapters, parodies John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. California-born, Fred ends up in the birthplace of his mother, Sallisaw, Oklahoma, the home of Steinbeck's Joads. Route 66, the mother road upon which the Joads make their way to California, is a central metaphor in my novel. And I parody Steinbeck's rather romantic view of Oklahoma's poor people in the late 1930s. Some of the parody is direct and obvious, as when Fred comments on the power of Oklahoma people, echoing Ma Joad's remarks to Tom Joad about the strength of the common people in The Grapes of Wrath. Fred tells readers:

. . . and I felt something durn right about it all, and, at first, I couldn't quite catch hold of her, of what it was that was so durn right about it, but then I seen it was like, well, like we was the people, and it was the people that counted, and what the big banks and the big land companies done way back when didn't matter because the people would always go on no matter what.

Some of the parody, however, is more subtle, as when Fred drives from Sallisaw to Del Mar, California, and stops

in Paden, Oklahoma, for gasoline and a Dr Pepper. The Joads, too, stopped in Paden for gas on their journey to California. In addition, the Oklahoma towns visited by the older narrator and his friend Randy in 1992 are all towns mentioned by Steinbeck in his 1939 novel.

This parody of The Grapes of Wrath is not an attack on Steinbeck's novel. It is on one level an acknowledgement of the continuing influence of Steinbeck in shaping the historical identity of Oklahoma's past. It would be extremely hard to write a satirical novel like Armadillo Highway, set partially in Oklahoma, for example, without recognizing and "revising" The Grapes of Wrath, placing it in a current perspective. In addition, on another level, this revisionism, or reconsideration of historical events, coincides thematically with Fred's academic endeavors. Fred is interested in "retextualizing" historical events and personages. Thus, I am, to use an old idea now embraced by poststructuralist literary critics, rewriting or restating The Grapes of Wrath and the events upon which it was based in my own modified terms.

The Grapes of Wrath and Steinbeck, however, are not the only major novel or author parodied or referred to in Armadillo Highway. I also refer to James Fenimore Cooper, Henry James, and James Joyce, among others. I parody images from Theodore Roethke's, "The Lost Son," which I consider one of the great poems of the twentieth century. Again, my point is not to attack the traditional literary canon, but

merely to reinforce and parody the idea that writers are primarily rescripting what has come before, and rebelling against it, over and over, whether they do so intentionally or not.

I agree with Roland Barthes, who refers to a literary text as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (146). My use of irony and satire in Armadillo Highway, then, is not so much a reaction against established literary tradition as it is a reflection of a normal artistic process, a convention: the breaking down and mocking of older conventions and categories to create a new set of problematic conventions and categories. In the end, of course, my irony and satire seek the truth as much as Melville's Moby-Dick, no matter how much I may mock the quest itself.

And this brings me to the idea of the controlling influence of contrived and artificial categories in our lives, a theme I attempt to satirize throughout Armadillo Highway. My point is to carry certain categories, or ways of thinking, including stereotyping, racism, miscegenation paranoia, and provincialism, to absurdity. Thus, through exaggeration, I hope to reveal an angst-driven, hyped-up version of common prejudices and ideas. Luddy Heinrich, then, is a communist, homosexual professor who has never taught a class in his long academic career; Boy Roberts, an

impoverished Oklahoma woman with a strange, almost-mystical bouffant, lives in a small trailer house with her two sons Toy and Loy, and was a childhood victim of incest; Sarah Williams, Fred's wife, is a sharp-tongued feminist and one-time lesbian, fully capable of physical violence. These characters are not meant to be plausible in the sense of Howells's literary realism, nor are they used to criticize the university system, the large rural population in Oklahoma, or the feminist movement. In fact, it is just the opposite.

These characters, filtered as they are through the anxiety-ridden consciousness of Fred, become distortions, lies, fictions within a fiction, and thus the stereotypes, or categories, are intended to eventually collapse. By revealing an exaggerated, implausible version of these stereotypes, then, I ultimately mean to show them to be virtually unfounded, groundless. I want my implied readers to laugh at and mock their own ingrained stereotypes when they find them reflected through Fred's anxious views, as much as they might laugh at the characters and events in the novel.

Another significant theme I attempt to raise in Armadillo Highway is geography, and how geography, the sense of place, affects a person's concept of reality. The novel is set in southern California, Boston, and Oklahoma, a representative triad of our country, and I attempt to show it in this way. Of all these places, Oklahoma changes the

main character's identity the most, even to the point of substantially altering the narrator's dialect. I attempt to suggest that language becomes the arbitrator of reality for Fred as narrator, who erratically assumes and parodies an Oklahoma twang as he attempts to fit into his new community. During the tornado scene in Oklahoma, for example, the narrator, a Harvard graduate raised in southern California, now uses the following dialect:

I 'membered then how Toy he liked to fish and noodle in this one big ol' hole down to the crick behind the house, so I took off like a housafire, and shar enuff, thar he was, trying to unsnaggle his fishing line, get it out from under this big ol' crick rock the size of a June watermelon.

This takes us to the novel's conclusion. Although the grocery store scene is resolved in the novel, much like a situation comedy, and Guitar and his band become semi-famous, I have intentionally left Fred's predicament unreconciled. How much of Fred or the older narrator can be read into Guitar's success? I invite this question, but I do not attempt to provide a particular answer. And what about the swirling, suffocating pillows, Fred's personal enigma he carries with him throughout the novel? Again, I attempt to leave the novel ambiguous.

Fred walks away from the grocery store feeling a sense of despair, in communion with the dying coyote, aware of his own death. The older narrator, in search of some vague

truth, stares at an approaching tornado after he parodies Tom Joad's well-known farewell speech in The Grapes of Wrath. Obviously, he, too, is aware of his pending death. I cannot resolve their dilemmas because to do so would violate the structure of the novel, which remains evasive, ambiguous, and satirical. The idea of a controlling author of the novel, of the person who wrote the text with an intended meaning, is left deliberately vague. Frankly, I hope to frustrate readers who attempt to assign to this novel what Barthes calls a conventional Author-God, who, once discovered and explicated, would provide a final, determinate meaning and closure to the text (146). I invite multiple interpretations, and yet I know this invitation is unnecessary. My fiction, and all fiction for that matter, as Barthes puts it, can only be "ranged over, not pierced" (147). The arbitrary relationship inherent in the signs of language between the signifier and the signified assures that. In the end, because meaning is never determinate in Armadillo Highway, there are only misreadings constrained by contextual norms.

In the final, short section of the novel, Fred is now in California, looking back over his life's experiences. He tells us he now ponders what he might think about when he dies, and worries he may be thinking about something quite trivial when his time comes. This, of course, is a quintessential manifestation of anxiety. Fred is not only thinking about his own death, but is also focusing on what

he might be thinking about when he dies. Yet Fred offers a sliver of hope when he admits that even this anxiety, and this type of thinking, no matter how irrational, makes us human in the final analysis, places us above animals. Or does it? This, of course, the novel cannot resolve.

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CHAPTER ONE

Pillows. My story begins with pillows, swirling paisley-cased, bed pillows, hovering inches above my face as I lie paralyzed in terror on my bed. One drops, then another, and soon my face becomes covered. No breath. Gasping for air, I try to signal help with hands. Fear frozen. Darkness.

My story ends with pillows, too. The exact ending goes, They swirl out there somewhere. This means I think they really do swirl out there in someone's consciousness. In particular, I imagine an eight-year-old boy with curly brown hair and blue-green eyes, dressed in Yogi Bear pajamas, staring in horror at the ceiling. His unsuspecting mama comes to the room, tucks him tenderly with his ragged Boo Boo bear. Lemony kisses applied forthwith. Mother whispers, "Good night," and shuts bedroom door.

The pillows surround, smother him.

Paralyzed, he cannot reply, cannot ask for his mother's help. Darkness. When the attack ends, he runs to her bedroom, and says, "I want a glass of water," or "I peed the bed again" or "I can't sleep," anything but the truth because he senses that the pillows might retaliate if he squeals.

(All this, I admit, is how I, today, see myself, then, as a boy. Still, I feel strongly that if it happened to me,

one of a generation of 78 million people, it could happen to anyone. And it is probably your child, or a relative's or friend's child who now lives in silent terror with pillows. In the end, it is all of us.)

Sarah, my estranged, beautiful wife, a psychologist, called my reoccurring pillow fantasy a manifestation of acute anxiety. She was right, of course, but she was wrong about the primeval roots of my attacks. Under hypnosis, I repeated, "I love my mother," and Sarah's theory crumbled. My mother married seven times when I was growing up, a fact my wife probably still thinks remains the sole source of my psychological probs. "I can't help someone who won't recognize the trauma of his childhood," she argued. So, a clinical psychiatrist prescribed narcotics to help me. But I stopped taking the drugs. See, I also always felt the pillows might be the source of my inspiration, my sexuality, my soul, my very essence. I shared this with Sarah, of course.

She said, "Bullshit."

Ultimately, our disagreement didn't matter because eventually Sarah swirled away like one large, insane, paisley dervish. But this, I promise, does have a happy ending. Probably. It depends on your attitude. But for years I lived with the pillows. Today, sometimes, I still get a panicky feeling when I'm on elevators, in cars, in planes, in any small, enclosed place, and this feeling makes

me remember. As I said, that's what this story is all about. It is about remembering the times when the pillows came knocking. But it is absolutely not about figuring out why they struck.

As I said, my mother, Margaret, married seven times. My real father, after whom I was named, was Frederick David Roderick, an artist who abandoned my mother and me on April 2, 1951, exactly one week before my first birthday. I have no real memories of my father. All I know of him was shaped by my mother's descriptions, and she never uttered a single disparaging remark about him I can remember.

When I was ten or so, I went through a period in which I constantly asked my mother about him, and, inevitably, I got a version of the story that created my fragile identity. It normally started like this: "Artists are very special people, and I desperately loved him." The facts of the emigration story would then unfold. I heard the epic a hundred times. The outline went like this:

My mother grew up in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, the only child of a wheat farmer and cattle rancher. She was a stunningly beautiful babe. She was also an actress. She even starred in Sallisaw High School's production of Oklahoma her senior year. When she turned eighteen, she left Sallisaw, against her parent's advice, and moved to Hollywood, chasing that tired stereotypical dream that rarely comes true. But

before my mother had an opportunity to become another Hollywood victim, she met my father, who married her and took her a few miles down the highway to Del Mar, just north of San Diego. I have his eyes, blue-green eyes with a speck of gray in them, I am told, and it was his eyes she said that made her incapable of rational thought.

In Del Mar, he built a small house, a two-room shack really, on top a cliff overlooking the ocean, on land left to him by his grandparents. His parents died when he was eight. My mother cooked, cleaned, got pregnant. My father painted, painted, painted. They lived on her monthly allowance from home, although her parents didn't know of the marriage and wouldn't until after her husband was gone.

Usually, at this point in the story, a natural stopping place, I demanded more facts. Why didn't she tell her parents she was married? Where were her parents now? Would I ever meet them? She would say, "Gracious, Fred, I simply couldn't tell them, then, because they wouldn't have understood. Plus, I had this crazy idea in my head he would become famous and then it wouldn't matter, see, because they would have had to accept him. And, yes, your grandparents still live in Sallisaw, and, yes, someday, you will meet them."

The story continued. After I was born, the shack became cramped and noisy, but, for a while, my parents' lives went on in the same idyllic manner. A few months

later, my father began painting nudes, and a series of young, beautiful women began appearing at the shack to pose. My mother simply accepted the models as part of his work, and, although she had taken a job as a receptionist for a local real estate company and was gone all day, she believed her husband remained faithful to her. She still believes he was faithful to her, except, of course, there was Shirley, the last woman, or I should say, girl, he painted in our Del Mar home.

She was fourteen, a runaway from Omaha my father met while visiting friends one weekend in Los Angeles. She came to stay with us, to take care of me while my mother worked, and, of course, to pose for my father. The note my father left my mother about a month later went: Dear Margaret: Shirley and I left. Better this way. Love to you and baby. Fred. My mother was visited by the police about two weeks later. It seems Shirley's parents finally tracked her to California, and, after some inquiries, traced her to our shack. My mother told the officers the truth, of course, and even promised to notify them if her husband reappeared. Skeptical of my mother's veracity, the police were apparently serious enough about the matter that they continued to harass her for three years. Questioned several times, my mother was accused implicitly of being an accomplice to kidnapping, and was threatened with jail more than once. Sometimes, Gestapo-like officers showed up at

our home in the middle of the night hoping to find my father and the girl there.

But my father was gone, truly gone, forever, and we never heard from him again. My mother speculated he took the girl to Europe or Mexico or South America. But we knew nothing for sure. And, amazingly, my mother never criticized him for abandoning us.

"I was honored to have his child, Fred," she would say when I pressed her. "Your father was a spectacular artist, and a great person. What he did was wrong, but artists are very special people."

My mother's attitude about her first marriage prevented any type of ugly, long-term bitterness to fester inside of me, and, try as I might, I could, can, never dwell for long on the fact that my father was a selfish, uncaring jerk who, on a whim, abandoned his wife and child for some defenseless, 14-year-old babe he painted and seduced in our small home.

I should mention the note he left my mother was attached to a painting. The painting was a nude he had done of my mother. My mother sold the painting to a local art gallery shortly afterwards, and it then sold the painting to some anonymous Los Angeles customer. All of this, of course, was quite frightening to me. Throughout my childhood, I lived in fear of stumbling upon my nude mother in someone's living room, in a museum, on a bank wall, in an

office, anywhere people hung paintings. As a child, I scanned huge art books at the Del Mar public library looking for, or so I told myself, a reference to my father, but, really, I searched unsuccessfully for my nude mother. When my teachers showed slides of the world's great works of art, I got queasy as I envisioned the next slide might be my mother flying around in naked rapture next to angels without pubic hair, or spread out in the buff on a blanket near a river in a type of fuzzy, impressionistic-like setting. No, I have never seen the painting. It still swirls out there, like the pillows.

My mother's parents, my Oklahoma grandparents, Lex and Ruth, did not forgive my mother for her failed marriage, her secrecy about it, and the ensuing police involvement (there was some minor newspaper coverage of my father's disappearance with the girl) for more than twenty years. The fact that my mother's next five marriages were disasters didn't help matters, of course, and she talked with and wrote her parents infrequently. There were no visits. I didn't meet them until I was eighteen.

Except for Earl, the seventh and last husband, my mother's next husbands were liars, drunks, and philanderers. All of them were officers in the armed forces. She met them at Commanders, a dancing club near the naval and Marine Corps stations in San Diego. A night of dancing followed by a weekend interlude could result in a

marriage a week later. All these marriages made me feel, as a boy, that I wasn't giving something to my mother she obviously needed. What she needed, of course, was sex, lots of it, but I didn't realize this until much later.

Undoubtedly, my mother, with her blue eyes, thick blonde hair, and beach-tanned legs exuded an intense sexuality, even in her late forties; this, combined with an Oklahoma, country-girl accent and dialect she exaggerated greatly after two or three whiskey sours, brought military officers to their knees. But only one marriage lasted more than six months, and that was because the groom was a Navy officer who had to ship out for the Mediterranean Sea the week after they married. She divorced him in absentia; she divorced all of them quickly, quietly, and efficiently. No regrets, that's what she told me.

Later, my mother defended her numerous marriages to me, and I will now give you her own exact words: "For gracious sakes, Fred, I grew up an Oklahoma Baptist, which means when you sleep with someone you got to marry them or you die and burn in hell for all eternity. I grew up in a more conservative era than you. Marriage was automatic, necessary, for me. Your generation doesn't have this sense of guilt, and that's fine I suppose, but my generation did."

I

had little to do with my stepfathers, except for Earl of course, all of whom lived with us in the suburban, ranch-

style house my mother had built next to the shack when she became a real-estate agent shortly after my father left us. The home and the accompanying land, with its beach view, became worth quite a bit of money. And, soon, rich people began moving into our neighborhood in droves. My mother protected me from my stepfathers, and none of them was allowed to punish or spank me. Only Horace, the Marine Corps major, had the audacity to hit me (and my mother), but, then, he was terribly drunk at the time. I got even by stabbing him in the left buttock with a small steak knife as he slept off a weekend binge on the couch. He woke up angry when I did this, very angry, and he hit me again, but my mother ordered him from the house.

I simply don't remember the other husbands that well. Some were nicer than others, and all of them, even Horace, made some token attempt to befriend me, usually by taking me to some store and buying me a gift. As strange as it may sound, however, and I have told this to my psychologist wife a thousand, no, a million, times, I do not believe my mother's marriages traumatized me like prevailing psychological theory might suggest. Even the stabbing incident with Horace is something I remember fondly, and sometimes I wonder, with perverse pleasure, what type of scar I left on his butt, and if he still remembers the demon child of the beautiful, eccentric woman to whom he was married less than four weeks.

In the end, I must use the word eccentric to describe my mother. Our neighbors in Del Mar, particularly my friend's parents, certainly used this word to describe her, though their connotations and mine are very different. I have heard my mother called an "old, horny divorcee," and an "oversexed Oklahoma bimbo," and a "nympho with no scruples" and a "slut cow," and on and on it went. I have heard her referred to as a "selfish, terrible woman who should have never had a child." Once, I overheard one of my friend's parents use my mother as proof that the government should force certain types of unsavory women to have abortions or undergo sterilization.

Throughout it all, I was the victim of unwanted sympathy from my friend's parents who felt my mother neglected me, or felt my revolving stepfathers had given me a sense of insecurity, or felt decentered, confused, because her life was so different than their own lives.

For our neighbors, the word eccentric was something evil, and my mother personified it for them. She was, to them, the fallen Eve, tasting the forbidden fruit at regular intervals. She was a living example of the decadence they openly hated but secretly wanted to experience. Despite all this, though, I would also use the word eccentric to describe my mother. But I use the word to describe the wide disparity between her life and the stilted, suburban-oatmeal lives of our neighbors, most of whom undoubtedly lived out

more than a few fantasies of their own through my mother. I am willing to bet the issue of my mother's sexuality, for example, sustained its share of middle-aged erections on Cherryvale Road. And my mother's eccentricity, from her numerous husbands to her Baptist guilt, gave me the distorted, twisted views necessary to become someone incapable of fitting into the type of world inhabited by people who qualify their lives by criticizing anyone who deviates from their own moronic, brain-dead, cliché-ridden ideology. For that, my Boo-Boo, I am grateful. But Yogi? Pause. (Mixed metaphor coming.) No buts, Snagglepuss. Exit stage left.

I repeat: I loved my mother. I still love her. And she loved me. And she still loves me. No, I never felt I had to compete for her affection. Yes, she was always compassionate, fair, and open with me, and she always, always, kissed me good night. I still remember the smell of her perfume as she lowered her head, and the waxy, lemony taste of her lipstick. She held me tight against her, and, for a moment, I felt the pillows would never come back. And she married Earl, she had this one good marriage that lasted, and Earl became a father to me, a man who now boasts, "I raised you right, white boy," and I agree with him. The pillows were not, I repeat, were not, the result of my mother's marriages, or her neglect, or her lack of sophistication. You know, I know, we all know, where the

pillows come from. So, I repeat: I love my mother.

I begin with my first serious, post-puberty attack, the first time the pillows struck outside the night-time bedroom of my childhood.

It began with a telephone call in my sixteenth year, the year 1966. The telephone call was placed by Jim "Hog" Jones, the 350-pound head football coach of the Del Mar High School Fighting Kangaroos. The call was placed to my mother, the contents then relayed to me. Essentially, these were the details: Hog spotted me in the school's hallway on the day I enrolled in my classes, determined me to be the exact size and shape necessary to run with the football in the wishbone formation, asked someone my name, and discovered through my personal records I was a new sophomore with an excellent academic record but, as he put it glumly to my mother, "no athletic history at all." (Up to this point in my life, I attended, small private schools.) He then, through my mother, extended me a personal invitation to try out for the football team. I needed to report the next morning for two-a-days. He told my mother the competition would be intense, but said I looked like a strong candidate to make the team.

I should mention that by the time I turned sixteen I was well-built and fairly strong from lifting weights. I apparently inherited my physique--just over six feet, a thick neck, broad shoulders with a torso that tapered down

to a narrow waist--from my father, and I started weightlifting when I was ten, a week after my neighbor Jerry Helms, the son of a naval officer, beat me up for having a "dog-faced mother spreading cooties throughout the Seventh Fleet," and because, as he stated further, he simply didn't like the way I looked. I never had the opportunity to fight Jerry again, unfortunately, but I continued to lift weights, and as my body grew, I nurtured it.

But I had never played organized sports because the private schools I attended didn't have teams, and I really wasn't interested in football, and my mother wouldn't commit one way or another. She told me, "He said you had a responsibility to the Kangaroos to at least try out for the team." When I asked her what she wanted me to do, she said, "That's up to you, pumpkin. Give it a whirl or don't; it makes me no difference, darling. I told this Mr. Hog, football will not, absolutely not, interfere with your Saturday morning piano lessons." The mention of my boring piano lessons sent my mind swirling into immediate fantasies of gridiron fame. I saw myself racing down the field, swerving left, then right, running into the end zone, holding the ball above my head. I made my decision on the spot. (Picture trumpets blaring. A white light surrounds me. All the world is still.) "I'll do it, Mom," I said. I paused. I said, "For the Kangaroos."

The next morning I was issued pads, helmet, jersey, and

herded onto the football field along with two hundred other hopefuls. Most of us looked bewildered or frightened; we certainly didn't live up to the aura projected by the brown, fighting kangaroo mascot we wore on our jerseys. I took time to look around at the sea of players, knowing only forty of us would make the team. But I had no time for internal, philosophical dialect because of Coach Hog. He called us names, shook his head in disgust at us, withheld water, and threatened physical punishment for no apparent reason.

Eventually, it all seemed quite silly to me, really, that I was there allowing myself to be treated like an animal and a slave, and I realized also I could end up taking a place on the team that some other boy truly coveted. After preliminary exercises, I was ordered to an area inhabited by twenty or so running back candidates, but, by then, I had made up my mind to quit the team. It just wasn't for me. I wanted, however, to finish out the morning practice to spare myself the embarrassment of having to articulate publicly to Coach Hog my reasons for quitting less than two hours into my first practice, so I ran over to the running back hopefuls.

I was next ordered to run through some tires spread out on the field, and this, too, seemed like another silly ritual, but apparently my time, as an assistant coach put it, was "aces, baby, nothing but aces," and this enabled me

to compete against the team's first-string tailback in a two-boy race through the tires. I won easily. My time caused great turmoil among the entire coaching staff who, it appeared to me, spent a great deal of time talking it over as they adjusted their crotches and spat.

When we lined up for scrimmage, I was placed on the first-string offensive squad, and quickly given a broad outline of my duty in the wishbone formation: trail the quarterback to the left or right, depending on his instructions in the huddle, and wait for the football if he deemed it necessary to pitch it. The ball was snapped, and I proceeded as instructed to the left. But the quarterback took only three steps before he was met with a swarm of defensive players, so he quickly and efficiently tossed the ball to me. (Freeze time, please. There I was in the backfield, the ball tucked safely under one arm, the other arm extended, and a little bit of daylight, running room, just around the corner. Begin time, please.) I wish I could say I scored a touchdown or that I made a first down, or that I even ran for two or three yards. But, as I determined later, someone on the offensive line missed a key block. This player was to prevent a certain linebacker from charging through the line and tackling me, and, unfortunately, he failed in his duty.

And what I saw and felt as the linebacker streaked through the line and wrapped his burly arms around me was a

pillow come from hell, the mother pillow of all pillows, and it was as if all my childhood nightmares had swirled together in one huge Oklahoma tornado of claustrophobia. But it didn't stop there. One after another, the defensive players piled on. Oh, linebackers, tackles, safeties, cornerbacks, all types and sizes, piled on and on, melting into paisley-cased pillows, and then there was darkness, the blackest of all dark, what there was before existence, before the bang, before God, and I died a terrible death, my bones turned to chalk, and I spoke to worms.

Coach Hog's voice, then, came to me in a dream, and I was so enthralled over my resurrection or reincarnation (I didn't know which) that I almost reached up and kissed one of his fat jowls. Coach Hog said: "You got to learn to play with pain, Roderick. This is not a game for whiners and criers." He helped me to my feet, then swatted me on the buttocks. Soon, the players on the offensive squad gathered around me, and all of them swatted my buttocks. An assistant coach came over then, and he swatted me on the buttocks. The linebacker-turned-pillow swatted me on the buttocks. On and on it went. Way to be. Swat.

In a moment, I determined that all of them expected me to participate further in this carnival of pillow terror, and had I not been a recent victim of my greatest pillow attack yet, I might have been able to remove myself from the field. Instead, I loitered, lingered, floated in a vacant

haze as the offensive squad huddled. In my cloud, I realized, but only vaguely, that we would be moving to the right on the play. The ball was snapped, the quarterback took three steps, and, again, pitched to me.

Oh, the inability of words to describe the horror of a two-hundred and fifty pound linebacker pillow, the paisley swirl, the ensuing black, the feeling of instant paralysis. Oh, the unfairness of life, man's inhumanity to man, all of it, all of it in its worst form, and, again, I couldn't breathe, and Mr. D wanted the next dance, and the worms laughed, said to me come here boy come here.

I needed a miracle, and what happened next was, at the very least, a small, cosmic pulse. Standing alone in the backfield with the pillows pressing down, my mouth open in a poster-quality, silent scream, I escaped the linebacker's wrath momentarily when he tripped over his own legs.

And, all at once, the pillows flew away to the end of next week, and I got happy legs, legs so happy, so free, they carried me away in a streak of kangaroo brown and white, a whoosh, in the opposite direction of the line of scrimmage, toward the wrong end zone. Twenty-one boys, confused, screaming, gave chase. I spotted Coach Hog at the end of the field, and I fully intended to hand the ball over to him, until I saw the angry expression on his face, and, then, Coach Hog began turning into a huge, paisley rectangle before my eyes. With no choice left me, I turned upfield,

and I saw pillows strewn across the field, pillows everywhere, and everyone, everything, all, went paisley, then black, paisley, then black.

And, as you know, Boo Boo, that's when you showed up, the first time you had ever shown up during a pillow attack, and you said to me run like hell Yogi, and, mixing metaphors, I said to myself exit stage left, beep beep, and what's up doc, becoming a swirling television cartoon character, and no longer was I a ten-year-old boy dressed in Yogi Bear pajamas unable to cry out for help when the pillows came calling, and no longer was I mere sixteen-year-old Fred, whose artist father abandoned him, whose mother was the gossip of the neighborhood, whose stepfathers bought him cheap trinkets in order to win his affection. No, I felt I was a powerful, confident television character, a Road Runner, a Snagglepus, a Bugs Bunny all wrapped up in one swirl, and I felt like nothing could stop me, and you Boo Boo, you made this happen.

(Boo Boo, from where, from what, do your strong arms come? Is it only just the security of the flickering womb that stays the pillows or is it more?)

I ran upfield, in the words of my mother, like a houseafire, and along the right sideline I found daylight, the teeniest of openings, but there it was, the space between the pillows I needed, I always needed, and heeding your encouragement, I ran like hell, as if I held the mama

of all picnic baskets and as if there were fifty, no, one hundred rangers behind me. Eleven defensive pillows were left sprawling on their butts as I ran past midfield, the 40, the 30, the 20, the 10, the end zone, over the chain-link fence, past the school, and then into the parking lot where a near miss with a cruising Ford Mustang brought me out of my Boobooian epiphany. Touchdown, TD, six.

But on the way back to the field, I crumbled. I thought: The touchdown run was a fluke, I might have been killed by pillows, and I will immediately quit the team. I thought: I'm no good at this football thing, and I'm a whiner, a crier, a baby, a wimp, who sees suffocating pillows wherever he goes. I thought: I'm a geek, a squirrel, a moron, a puss, a jerk, an ass, a slimebag, and a scuz.

But when I got back to the field, the offensive squad broke out into a spontaneous chant ("Roo roo, Kangaroo!"), and the players swatted my buttocks over and over, and then Coach Hog told me those words that gave me the confidence to keep playing, those sweet words that made me, forever, a Fighting Kangaroo. He said: "Roderick, keep running the ball like that, and you'll have every girl in this school panting after you like there's no tomorrow." Way to be. Swat. Roo roo.

So you will know what it truly meant to be a Fighting

Kangaroo, listen. The swirling flicker of Gilligan's Island plays off the light-blue eyes of sixteen-year-old Susan Dougherty, cheerleader, who apparently ignores me as I remove her halter top and then undo the top three buttons of her bell bottoms, revealing the silky edge of her panties and (is it? oh my God yes!) just a whisper, a suggestion really, of curly, blonde-brown bush. With one hand, I rub a thumb lightly over a nip, which has turned blue-gray in the television light, and with the other, I carefully slide some inexperienced fingers beneath the elastic edge of her panties. All at once, the Skipper screams for everyone to gather around because the Professor's new invention might get them off the island this time. Ginger and Mary Ann show up first. And, as Ginger's and Mary Ann's voices swirl around the living room, I feel Susan, my babe, spread her legs.

Listen. It is that feeling, that feeling of that specific moment when I am on the cusp, suspended between two worlds, the world of knowledge and the world of innocence, when Ginger and Mary Ann swirl their supple bodies in front of me, talk to me in seductive Hollywood-starlet and Kansas-freckle dialects, when Susan Dougherty opens her cheerleader legs, then rolls her light-blue eyes heavenwards, places a hand on my upper thigh, and whispers, "Do you have any, like you know, protection?"

That is the essence of kangaroolity, that was what it

meant, in the end, to be a Del Mar Fighting Kangaroo. Roo
roo.

CHAPTER TWO

So, Boo Boo, when the pillows came calling that first time outside my night-time bedroom, you were there, and you empowered me by reminding me of the flickering womb from which I will always draw my sense of security. And, in my first game for the Del Mar Fighting Kangaroos, I scored three touchdowns, one of which was an eighty-yard run through a sea of pillows. I heard your voice, Boo Boo. Run like hell Yogi. And I left streaks of color behind me, smoke clouds shot out from my feet, and those defensive players that fell to the ground trying to catch me made noises like boing! and plat!.

But, Boo Boo, the pillows also came calling when my mother, about a week after my first game, brought Earl home and announced her seventh (and last) marriage. And you weren't there for me then, Boo Boo, and now I know why.

Earl, I will forever feel ashamed of how I reacted when I first met you, but, no buts, I have only my childhood pillows to blame. Still, I hang a low head when I recall that moment when you stood awkwardly on the front porch as my mother introduced you as her new husband, my new stepfather. You held out a hand, Earl, a huge black hand with a pink palm, and you smiled, a shiny, white-tooth grin that contrasted with your black face, and you stood there in all your blackness, the black of my immature, childhood

horror, the black of my ignorant hell, and this white boy, in all his bigotry and hate, saw paisley invaders swirl.

I managed to say: "Oh my God" before the paisley, and then the dark, and then the paralysis, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the couch looking up at the concerned faces of my mother and (for thinking this I apologize, Earl) her new black husband come to ruin my life. "You all right, honey?" Mom said.

"No," I replied. I pointed to Earl. I went: "He's a, he's a, he's a . . ." My mother finished for me.

"A painter, dear, just like your real father. He does houses on the side, and I just know you two will become the best of friends." I caught your eyes, then, Earl. And it was as if you sang it in a deep baritone, as if the words you said next were the chorus of a religious song, a black spiritual, and it was as if my mother and I were in church pews swaying back and forth with our arms raised in holy rapture.

I heard you say: "Lordy, lordy, I does mean it, the best of friends, Fred."

As I ran from the couch into my bedroom, I screamed a barrage of obscenities, and I threw myself on the bed, and plotted my suicide. Listen. She came into my room, and in her eyes burned beacons, warnings, of hell to pay, of all the hell seen and unseen, but this teenager greeted the source of his human existence with a version of the

following words: "I can't believe you married that shit hunk of jungle-bunny-monkey scuz."

(Mama, I cringe at those words now, and, Earl, I apologize again for my first reaction, which was a manifestation of suburban-white isolation, immaturity, and misdirected hate.)

Initially, my mother pointed out, in so many words, that she would not take responsibility for the hate and ignorance I now displayed. She also expressed her disappointment over my use of profanity. She said, as well, "I know this is sudden, Fred, but Earl and I have known one another for a few years now. He's been painting rental houses for us at the agency, and well, one day about two months ago, we got together." This we got together stuff was my mother's Oklahoma way, of course, of referring to copulation. After thinking about that, the copulation, I saw a paisely streak fall from the ceiling like a shooting star.

I said, in words like these, "Even Horace would be better than this. I would rather be chained, whipped, tortured, burned with cigarette butts, than live in a house with a . . ."

And then my mother pulled out all stops, commenced with that activity which made her the winner of all our arguments. She cried, and, in a swoosh, collapsed into my arms, and what happened next was I went into a guilt coma,

and then I pictured how my life would be from now on. Earl, Mom, me, holding hands, walking through the Quail Ridge Shopping Center, as people stared, and something swirled in my chest then, and I thought: I will never be the same. My life is ruined.

"Gracious, all the changes I've put you through," my mother said then, in a rare moment of regret, and she cried into my chest. "It hasn't been easy for you, I know."

I repeat: I love my mother. I know she always manipulated me, will always manipulate me, and I know she will always use guilt and tears to secure my approval for whatever she needs me to approve. But I love my mother because she gave me life, nurtured me, held me on those nights after the pillows struck when I slipped into her bed, because she did her best with me as she tried to balance her perfectly-normal, healthy sex drive and the constraints placed on her by a past she could never escape, and because she taught me that action, change, is always a possibility, that we are not stuck, that we can and sometimes should be different, that we can, will, adjust, and that it might take seven times but, in the end, it all works out, there is an Earl after all. I repeat: I love my mother.

I said, in words like these, "It's all right. I'm sure Earl's a nice guy." I felt her hot tears on my neck, felt the heaving of her chest against mine, and I said, "I overreacted. I apologize. I just need to get used to the

idea." I held her face in front of mine, and I said, "I'm awful, and I shouldn't have called him that. I'm a fool, an insensitive jerk, and a selfish brat."

My mother shook her head at these last words of mine, and then said, "You will grow to love him, oh, I know you will, Fred."

And that's how Earl Fo Feely came into my life, swirling like a pillow, and I made my amends to him that day, and afterwards I went back into my room to sulk, and the next morning when I went into the kitchen to get my breakfast, he stood there in a pair of briefs dotted with leopards, and my mother was nowhere to be found. He said, "Good morning, Fred," and I mumbled some incoherent response. Confession. I saw underwear leopards leaping, paws extended, searching for prey, and I fully expected Earl to turn Native City on me. I heard drums. I felt orgiastic energy. Dance. Swirl. The leopard hunt. Bonga bonga bonga. We ARE the leopards! A paisley flash to the right, to the left. But all this faded away, and then I saw Earl pour orange juice, and saw him wait patiently for his toast to pop up, and as I walked to the refrigerator, I took a deep breath, and I remembered my promise to my mother. (Earl, I apologize for putting words on this moment.)

My stepfather buttered toast as he said, "Yo mama tells me yo be playing football. Running back. The Roos."

How do I describe my response without lowering my head

in shame? I said, in words like these, "I urge you, Mr. Feely, to stop your efforts of communication because such efforts will only create more of the resentment I, as an immature teenager, now hold towards you. Further, I do not plan to make race an issue in our relationship. However, if you persist in your efforts to speak with me, I shall use every means available to inflict as much hurt and anguish upon you as possible. Mr. Feely, my agreement with my mother allows for a great distance between you and I in the initial stages of our relationship. If you fail to live up to your part of the agreement, I will assume the treaty to be null and void. Thank you."

Earl looked at me with this strange black expression, and he said, "Say what?"

I said, in words like these, "Mr. Feely, I do not think there remains a pressing need for me to repeat myself. Obviously, your question is merely rhetorical, and is designed to elicit some emotional response from me that, as I'm sure you will agree, would not serve us well at this juncture in our relationship."

And Earl stared at me, and he didn't say anything at first, and then the leopards on his underwear grew bigger and bigger. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I heard drums again. As I walked through the door, I heard Earl utter these significant words, "Listen, Fred. Yo Mama and me be coming to see you play Friday night." A pillow fluttered in

my chest.

I said, in words like these, "Mr. Feely, I think you have misjudged my mother, who cares little for the type of organized athletic contests in which I now participate. However, I urge you, by all means, to take her out, show her a good time, but, please, avoid creating a situation in which my mother could become bored. Ennui, I'm afraid, Mr. Feely, is your greatest enemy in terms of sustaining with my mother a marriage that will last more than six weeks. Do not, I repeat, do not come to the game."

Earl said, "She told me yo scored three touchdowns against the Parker Penguins."

I said, in words like these, "The exact statistics of my athletic ability, amazingly incredible or not, should be of no concern to you, Mr. Feely."

Then Earl said this, "I told her, I told her, 'No white boy can run that fast.'" I heard my mother laugh behind me, and I felt her arms around my chest.

She said, "According to Earl, it sounds like you're really good at this ol' football thing. I'm just dying to see how you play, Freddy."

What was the white boy to do? Mom and Earl, an ice cream sandwich from hell coming to ruin my life prime time, Friday night, and, of course, I thought immediately about senior Susan Dougherty, my true love, the taker of precious boy innocence only the week before. I wondered what she

might think, how she might respond to a boyfriend with a black stepfather who wore leopard underwear, and I wondered what effect, if any, all this would have on our growing relationship. Would our love--just now in its infancy--survive? All of them, Earl, Mom, Susan, swirled themselves into a potential paisley pillow, and I gasped for air before I ran screaming silently into my bedroom.

Against the El Camino Cougars Friday night, I saw pillows, many pillows, and thus I scored four touchdowns, which included a ninety-seven yard punt return in the first quarter that broke a school record. And, as I walked back to the bench after my first touchdown, I looked into the crowd, hoping that Earl and Mom had blended in somehow with the other kangaroo fans. No one, however, sat within two rows of Earl and Mom because a black person come to Del Mar Memorial Stadium, circa 1966, was still a very unique situation. It consequently demanded some type of unified, kangaroolian protest. So, there they sat, on the fifty-yard line, the best seats in the stadium, with no one within spitting distance, and, so, there I was, standing on the field in my kangaroo browns and whites, looking up at them. (Me. Face turned heavenwards. Sweaty brow. Greek statue. Them. Waving. Whistles, chants of Fred! Fred! emitting from lips. Indifference to kangaroolian bigotry.)

I turned away, and as I did, I heard Earl scream out in his exuberance, "Margaret, I swear it, I've never seen a

white boy run that fast." I looked up again upon this pronouncement, and saw that all the spectators, now completely silent, stared at Earl, who continued to wave at me, and, then, as if all of them were one huge head, the spectators turned their eyes on me. Then they stared at Earl again, and then back at me, then Earl, me, Earl, me, Earl, me. Oh, do I need to get down on my stomach, crawl with worms, eat grass, in order to describe fully the horror of this moment? And, Earl, I apologize, but I confess my betrayal as I slunk back to the bench.

Oh, yes, I was ashamed, ashamed to acknowledge Earl, ashamed my mother had got together with him, ashamed ultimately to face the painful truth that my stepfather was of the Africanus Americanus persuasian. I acted like this: I do not know the man. But it fooled no one. And at that moment the cock crew.

At the bench, I offered my buttocks as a platform for congratulatory expressions, and my cheeks were duly swatted, and, then, Brent Yoman, the Kangaroo quarterback whose primary duty in the wishbone formation was to pitch the ball to me, approached and insisted upon an immediate pow wow. First, Brent swatted my buttocks. Then he said, "You're grooving for the Roos, man, like you're really grooving it, man." Then, as he pointed to Earl and my mother, he said: "Who's the spearchucker and the slut, man? They seem to know you. Is he an assistant college coach? Don't tell me

USC is already recruiting you, pahleese. You're only a sophomore." I felt a pillow flutter after he said that. Then he said, as he grabbed my shoulders playfully (but I was out of it by then), "Confess, Roderick. USC? UCLA? Confess. Confess."

He called my mother a slut, and this made me see a paisley invader shoot across the sky. I then felt the hardening of my very bones, and every muscle, every nerve in my body, contracted into taut rope. I thought about Jerry Helms, then, and how he described my mother's relationship with the Seventh Fleet before he beat me up. I heard, again, the voices of all our neighbors as they criticized my mother's numerous marriages, and I felt their unwanted sympathy, and saw my childhood pillows swirling in a powerful cyclone. And Boo Boo, you, you came to me again.

You said, Tell him Yogi, and, at first, I didn't know exactly what you meant, but then it became clear, and I grabbed Brent by the shoulder pads, and said, in words like these, "Please refrain from referring to the before-mentioned couple as spearchucker and slut because they are my people, my parents, my father and mother, and I resent your chosen nomenclature, which implies a great deal of disrespect. Further, if you do not desist immediately, I will be forced to comment on the sexual capabilities of your mother."

I walked away from him, and I heard Brent, who knew

nothing about my mother's previous marriages, say something like this, "No wonder he can run so fast. He's got darkie genes in him."

(Listen. It is nearly ten years later. Brent tries to sell Sarah and I a couch at his furniture store. Sarah sits, bounces on a foldout, in all her lily, Anglo-Saxon whiteness, as I listen to Brent drone on about fabric, warranties, and brand names. All at once, Brent stops talking. He nods his head at a nearby four-year-old black child who has become separated apparently from his parents. "Yours?" he asks.)

After the game, I exchanged many buttock swats with my teammates, all of whom by now had been informed by Brent of my mixed lineage. But my teammates, the coaches, and even the fans, sensed a state championship in the making, they knew I was the primary, perhaps the sole, reason for the team's success, and knew deep in their hearts, in their loving, Christian bosoms, that they could easily (had, in fact up until now) pass me off as white; thus, the color barrier was broken finally at Del Mar High School, circa 1966.

Still, a pillow flitted when Earl and Mom met me outside the locker room that night, and I felt everyone's eyes upon us. Smiling, Earl spoke first. He said, "Never. Never. In my life. Never, have I seen a white boy run that fast. Mercy."

Mom then said, "We're both so proud of you."

I said, in words like these, "Thank you for the compliments, which I'm sure are heartfelt and sincere. You make me feel larger than life. You do. Unfortunately, due to a prior commitment, I must leave you now, and so, goodbye and good luck." Exit stage right.

As I walked away, I heard Mom say this, "We're fixing to go get a drink. We'll probably be late getting home, Pumpkin."

This, oh, this was sweet news to me because this, oh, this I could sense: a four-touchdown night against the El Camino Cougars meant ensuing fornication. But as I raced to the parking lot to meet my babe Susan Dougherty, a pillow appeared, and it occurred to me that a person of alleged mixed race, like myself, might be deemed unsuitable for copulationary purposes by a seventeen-year-old Anglo-Saxon blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl from the now fashionable beach village of Del Mar, California.

Oh, I had everything, true. I had the looks, the athletic talent, the convertible Volkswagon Bug, the home with a beach view, but, well, it all meant nothing, didn't it, if my alleged black blood caused my love to turn away? How would she respond to me having now heard the news of my interracial background as described by Brent, the wishbone quarterback? And, all this swirled in my mind, as I approached my car, and saw Susan, still clad in her

cheerleader's outfit, leaning against it.

She greeted me with full lips, full tongue, and full pelvic pressure, and she gave me soft buttock squeezes, and when I tried to speak, she cut me off and said, "Freddy, I think I'm falling in love with you." I immediately, without qualification, pronounced my undying love for her, and, then, I tried to explain about Earl. She seemed perplexed. "Earl who, Freddy? Your father what?" she said, and then I felt her tongue in my ear, and that's when I determined that somehow Susan Dougherty hadn't found out about Earl yet. Yes, I decided then not to tell her until later; in this way, I felt I wouldn't jeopardize out impending physical interlude. It was a selfish decision, but my hormones, but oh hormones nada, I make no excuses. I did it. I'm glad. But fate? Hah! Fate?

Couch again. A rerun of I Love Lucy creates purple shadows in the living room. The buck naked Miss Susan Dougherty, cheerleader, on top, moves her cartwheel-honed hips in a rhythmic up and down movement. Kissing slurps ensue. When she raises her face from mine, I grip those mag orbs I still can feel in my imagination. The television light swirls. A certain pressure mounts in my hot, white loins, and Lucy wants to perform at the club, but Ricky won't let her. And a moan emits from Susan Dougherty's lips then, and she says, "Fred, don't stop." And I can sense

that Lucy, who practiced her nightclub act all day, is now in trouble, possibly stuck inside something (a coffin? a cabinet? a television set?) in her apartment.

My thrusts are so intense now that I lift Susan Dougherty, cheerleader, several inches off the couch, but Ethel is there to help Lucy, and when I hear my name again, I don't know if it's Susan Dougherty's Fred or Ethel's Fred, but one of them has said, "Fred, will you do it, will you just do it." And, I'm doing it, Ethel, Susan, and I'm an erupting volcano, and Susan Dougherty, the babe for me, is repeating the affirmative statement, "Yes," and I feel her body clench, vibrate, churn. All this, and as it is happening, Ricky arrives, and he screams, "Lucy, I'm home," over and over.

But then I seem to hear two voices saying "home." That's when it happens. In mid-climax, Susan Dougherty's eyes go blank, her mouth freezes into a silent scream of horror, and she has a certain part of my anatomy locked in a death grip of hell. We are stuck together, then, like two dogs, and what has happened is that Earl has walked into the room, announced that he is indeed "home" early, and Susan Dougherty has seen him, and this has caused her to think her worse nightmare has come true: A huge black man storms into the rich, white settlement to commence raping and killing white women. Thus, Susan Dougherty becomes paralyzed.

She sees pillows. And Earl quickly walks out, and I

hear him tell my mother in the hallway not to go into the living room right at that particular moment for unspecified reasons. I say, "Susan, listen, I know him. It's all right." No reaction. I say, "Susan, listen, he will not hurt you." No reaction. Then I say, "I'm related to him, he's my" (and here I hesitated) "my father." Her eyes make contact with mine then. I sense a breakthrough. So, I yell out, "Right, Dad, no one's going to hurt anyone? Right?"

A deep baritone answers, "No sir. Uh-huh. No sir in heaven. Oh, I swear by the merciful God, no sir."

Susan Dougherty screams then, and it is a scream I will always remember, Boo Boo, an Old-Testament scream, and as it swirls and swirls, the Red Sea parts and my dying erection is at last set free, and my babe, my soon-to-be-former Kangaroo babe, lunges from the couch to her clothes on the floor. I quickly pull on my clothes. And Susan screams as she throws on her white Kangie sweater, screams as she pulls her brown cheerleader's shirt over her hips, screams as she runs from the living room, through the hall, and out the door, and screams, as Earl, Mom, and I, standing on the porch, watch her run wildly down Cherryvale Road. Earl puts his hand on my shoulder then. Him. Concerned facial expression.

Earl says then, in a soft voice, "Son, never, never in my life have I seen a white girl run that fast."

The morning after *Susanus coitus interruptus*, and before my piano lessons, I visited Earl in our old shack, which he now used as a studio. When I walked in, I saw Earl, in his leopard underwear, painting on a huge canvas that covered all four walls, and the colors swirled for a moment, made me dizzy, until I blinked, and focused on Earl's face. He smiled. "I'm glad you came to be out here, Freddy."

I said, in words like these, "Mr. Feely, my visit here is to express my gratitude to you for withholding from my mother a description of the exact physical configuration in which you discovered Susan and I last evening. Additionally, by retaining her in the hallway as Susan prepared to leave, you prevented my mother from obtaining that specific knowledge that would have, at the very least, been the foundation of a parental lecture of no small consequence. Therefore, I thank you."

And Earl looked at me, and he smiled, and then he handed me the paint brush he held his hand.

He said, "Lighten up, bro. Paint some tits."

That's when I focused on the huge canvas, and I saw the breasts, and I realized the painting was nothing less than a history of the world told in women's boobs. Oh, how do I begin to describe it? How can my words, any words, become the flesh I saw that quiet morning in Earl's studio? It was a gigantic canvas full of beautiful breasts, nothing but

breasts, pairs of life-sized breasts, and there must have been dozens upon dozens of them, and they swirled and swirled. All I remember of that first moment are fleeting images: A coral-colored nipple peaking out the top of a frilly, beige bra, a set of tiny, ivory-white, girlish breasts covered partially by two huge, black hands, a dark crimson nipple glistening with small drops of white milk, and on and on it went. There were realistic breasts, as if they had been photographed not painted, and hazy, impressionistic breasts, and fragmented, cubist breasts. There were the avant-garde breasts, like the pair with nipples shaped into tiny replicas of the Statue of Liberty; these boobs Earl called Nipples of Freedom. Oh, some boobs even had legs, mouths, and hair; and then, of course, there was the painting's dark underside, as illustrated by a pair of monster boobs draped in slimy fish scales, and with fangs drenched in blood.

Earl said, "I call it A Thousand Painted Breasts." He said, "About half my work be in storage. I be about six hundred sets short altogether." After that, he said, "It be my life's work, Freddy."

I could barely breathe. I felt dizzy all at once. I mumbled, in words like these, "Boobs. Many. Boobs boobs." I stumbled around the room, and, now drunk on tits, I lost my sense of equilibrium. I fell, stood, fell, stood, until Earl's strong, black hands steadied me, shook my

shoulders.

Earl told me, "Get a grip, son." No, this wasn't a pillow attack, but I felt a primal energy unleashed in my stomach; it was native, mystical, as if I could actually feel the roots of trees growing, as if I could speak to stones and be understood, as if the snail, the toad, the spider, the coyote, were one, in being, with me. All boobs everywhere, all boobs that have been, are, will be, came to me in that first rush, and then I felt myself swirling through a black tunnel, back to the moment of my creation, back to my mother's very womb, that wet nest of my existence, and I flung myself on the floor and curled into a fetal position.

I heard Earl say, "Lord almighty, if this don't beat the drum." I rocked myself.

I said, in words like these, "I see it." And what I saw was a huge breast, the size of, say, ten people, and its brownish-red nipple beckoned me, said to me come, and as I lunged forward and smothered myself in its eternal, rubbery warmth, a sense of euphoria--the sexual, the maternal, the spiritual all rolled together in a single light--embraced me, and then I heard the words. The words were, Go back Yogi Go Back, and it was you, Boo Boo, you.

(Was it a real Godhead experience, a true light within? And why, I still ask, why was I ordered back from its enveloping heat?)

Earl said, "You gone freaky on me, bro?" Him.
Kneeling. Worried, squinty face. Hand on my shoulder.

I said, in words like these, "Am I alive?" Me. Lying on back with arms extended. Breathing normal. Paint brush in hand.

Earl said then, "Child, you not be doing this LSD?"

I said, in words like these, "God, no. The boobs. The boobs."

Earl helped me to my feet, and he said, "Your mama told me you be a jittery, nervous boy. This be true?"

I said, in words like these, "The painting. I had no control. It swept over me."

Earl said, "You making fun of me?"

I said, in words like these, "How can you postulate such an absurd position, Mr. Feely? Your painting obviously speaks to some primordial instinct in me and thus resulted in my near-death, mystical experience."

Earl said, "Cool."

And Earl, upon my ensuing prod, thus articulated his personal theory of art, and it went something like this: "If it feels right, it's right; if it don't feel right, it ain't. Dig?" I told him I dug. Next, he said, "I paint tits, cus I always gots tits on my brain. All the time, I see tits in my imagination, and I got to be painting them." Earl then added, "The Man think this be obscene, son, but this ain't pornography, this ain't something I do to get

juiced, this ain't nothing but the reason why God put me on this beautiful, groovin' earth. I don't havta, I gotta paint tits, bro. I'm a driven cat, Freddy. A thousand set of tits. No repeats. I be all my life painting tits, and even then I might not finish, bro." I didn't quite know what to say, and then Earl walked me over to an open space on the canvas, and he invited me to add a set of breasts to his painting.

I said, in words like these, "I don't draw."

Earl said, "Don't draw, bro. Feel. Feel the tits. Let them be coming out of you like it be natural."

My first brush strokes were tentative, true, but then I recalled Susan Dougherty's beautiful breasts (and I imagined some others) and soon I found myself thoroughly engaged in a new and fascinating artistic endeavor. After a few paint drips landed on my shirt, I removed it. Eventually, I found my jeans were flecked with paint, so I removed them, too, along with my socks and shoes. When Mom came out to announce the arrival of my piano teacher, she found me stripped to my underwear, coated in paint drippings, recasting history, culture, humanity, in terms of women's breasts. (Oh, the spheres, the cylinders, the orbs, all the world in the geometry of boobs!)

Mom said, in a nervous Oklahoma drawl, "Well, since it's art and all, it makes me no mind, Fred. Obviously, Earl can use all the help he can get with his painting."

And that's how I came to paint boobs, once, twice a week for the next three years, and that's how I came to know Earl, who became like a father to me. We rarely talked. But what I learned on that canvas, what I learned from Earl, empowered me, gave me strength. I learned that imagination is everything, that it is the only thing we really have, the only thing we need in the end, and I learned that no one, no thing, can take it away. I learned that our worlds, our realities, exist as we make them, as we want them to be, and a world of boobs is not a bad world. In fact, it is a very soft, very decent, world. And Earl taught me more. He taught me to lighten up, and he taught me to be true to what I felt. Yes, Earl and I were and remain miles apart in some ways, but this we have in common: The boobs.

By inviting me onto his canvas and thus into his world, Earl gave me the only thing he had to give, but it was the most important part of him, and for that, and for the love he has given my mother and me through the years, I am very grateful.

CHAPTER THREE

It is circa 1992, and I drive a battered pickup truck on Route 66, just east of Quapaw, Oklahoma. Dennis and Randy smoke Marlboro 100s, cradle Budweisers between their legs. Cows graze. Oil pumpers pump. Wheat waves. Songs include, "Oklahoma" and "Wild Thing."

We talk wives. I say, in words like these, "All the women in my life, including my wife, are manifestations of my mother."

The next day in Texas, into the sea of cherubic faces, I read a story of my life because all my fiction is autobiography. It went something like this. My mother married five times. I didn't know my father. My mother was an alcoholic who beat me senseless until she kicked me out of her house. Examples. She once tore off my t-shirt, and ripped bloody gashes in my back with the end of a clothes hanger. She knocked me unconscious once by hitting me over the head with a metal television stand. She placed my hands on a electric stove burner, and on and on. (She kept me home from school on several occasions because my face was cut and bruised--see, she would scrape my face with her long, polished-red fingernails--and she didn't want my teachers asking questions.) My mother liked to tell me she hated me. She always blamed me when some potential husband dropped her. She kicked me out of her home when I was

fourteen.

(Frame this. I stand in the foyer of the apartment. I have no place to go and no money. She repeats, "You can't stay here." The reason I can't stay with her, she says, is that her new boyfriend doesn't know she has a fourteen-year-old son. She doesn't want him to know about me because she has lied about her age, telling him she is about ten years younger than she really is. So I sleep in an abandoned car, and I drift with the street junkies, the derelicts, and the prostitutes.)

The point of my story, see, is that even after all this, all this abuse, and even after all the psychologists, which came later, and then the drugs to mellow the angst, and the withdrawal nightmare that follows, the protagonist son feels guilty each year that he doesn't send his protagonist mother a Christmas card. So he buys her a card one year, tries to write a note in it. But he can't think of anything to write. And, see, that was the last image. The protagonist son stares into space in front of a Hallmark Christmas card as he tries to come up with something to say to the protagonist mother he hasn't talk to in nearly twenty years. Finito.

Later, driving home on Interstate 40, Dennis comments on the ironic distance between the narrator and author in my story and life. He has diagrammed it on a cocktail napkin, and now he hands it to me. His point is the whole story

doesn't work because it just isn't believable enough. The diagram, which I don't understand, illustrates this perfectly. He goes, "You know better than to pass off reality as reality."

Randy smokes his Marlboro 100s, drinks beer, and says, "Yeah mon. Lighten up."

For the record. All of it, all the maudlin prose, the self-pitying, the failed attempts to write it down, all of it lies in a big pile in the backyard. I pour lighter fluid on it. A match is lit. Poof. Gone, history, it's history. I'm a free man.

So when Earl and A Thousand Painted Breasts came into my life, the pillows went into semi-hibernation. Oh, sure, I still saw swirling linebacker pillows, and occasionally a particularly anxious moment in my life would produce a paisley stalker, but the pillows, for now, slept off the excesses of their orgiastic rampage. Maybe they slept because Earl and Mom stayed married and because the ensuing domesticity flowed over me like baptismal waters. I was at peace. Earl, Mom, tits. I guess we were a strange family as families go, but we were a family, a close family, and the only secrets and feelings--except for one--we kept from one another really didn't matter. The one secret, of course, was about my pillows. No one but me and Boo Boo knew about them. But then, as I said, the pillows were in

Sleep City.

I must now get you and me to my college of choice (an important Eastern school to be named later) with one significant diversion.

The diversion ensues forthwith. Heads up. I am 18, circa 1968, on my way to college, travelling Route 66 near the Oklahoma border. The Beatle's Magical Mystery Tour tape fills my Volkswagon Bug. My hair dangles shoulder-length. I wear straight-legged Levis jeans, a blue work shirt, and army boots. I feel the spontaneous overflow of harmonic nature, this specific nature, in the passing landscapes. Cows moo. Oil oozes. Wheat sways. And as I pass into Oklahoma, I sense a homecoming, a return, of no small significance; this is, after all, my mother's homeland. I realize that I am less than four hours away from Sallisaw, Oklahoma, the home of my grandparents, whom I am to meet for the very first time. Oh, I feel the tug of primeval roots!

And the names of towns drip from my lips as I pass the road signs: Elk City, Clinton, Weatherford, Hinton, El Reno. It is near El Reno that I stop to pee, and as I stand pissing (albeit statuesque) in a vast field of prairie grass next to a rest stop, I think: I truly feel peace and serenity. Onward eastward.

At the Oklahoma City Red Dog Cafe, as the waitress Barb, whose hair is a swirling tornado and whose voluptuous

breasts beg release from her tight uniform, flirts with me, asks, "Honey, you fixing to have yourself some pah (trans. pie) or not?," I think: These people are my people, God's people. At the Henryretta Kerr-McGee, as the gas station attendant, sans upper front teeth, openly arranges his testicles, inspects carefully a substance newly picked from his ear, says, "Ya gonna need me to check that earl, mister?; it don't cost nuttin' extry," I think: Somewhat crude, yes, but the very salt of the earth. In Checotah, as I wait patiently for the spotted box turtles to migrate across Interstate 40 at Oklahoma's world famous "Tom Turtle Crossing," I think: This is a state of caring and compassionate people. At the Muldrow Tool N' Takem, where I stop to ask directions, as the gap-toothed junkyard worker, chewing chaw, giggling in snorts, huffs, and phlegm, talks to me about the weather, I think: The people in Oklahoma are truly interested in their fellow man. And in Sallisaw, the birthplace of my mother, as I pulled into the gravel driveway of the Lex and Ruth McNally homestead, as I smell the sweet, intoxicating odor of ammonia fertilizer, I think: When I die, God, I want to be buried in Oklahoma.

Yo. Lex and Ruth, along with sundry dogs, cats, chickens, and pigs, issue forth to greet their never-before-seen grandson. Hugs are exchanged, small talk ensues, loving warmth is felt, and then I am seated at a banquet the likes you ain't never seen. We eat chicken fried steak,

mashed potatoes, okra, and biscuits, and all of it is immersed in a thick, white gravy, and then we eat rhubarb pie and drink coffee on the front porch. Says Lex, a plump, white-haired, wrinkled man, "Well, thank the Lord, pass the butter, if it ain't Fred hisself come a calling."

Says Ruth, a plump, white-haired, wrinkled woman, "We purty near didn't a thunk we'd ever a see your real face in person." In response, I construct and deliver loving commentary.

The bottom line, I soon discover, is this: Still unable to reconcile themselves with their daughter, Lex and Ruth are now committed fully to me, their only grandson. I'm the heir to acre upon acre of beautiful red Oklahoma soil, the life source for wheat, barley, hay, the grazing ground for mucho cows, and the possible holder of unlimited barrels of oil, that is, black gold, Texas tea.

Says Lex, "Shoot, don't take nuttin' to work the farm with all this new `chinery. Air-conditioned cum--binds? Even a city boy could take to it."

Says Ruth, "We'd a like to thunk, Fred, after we's dead that is, that you'd a come back someday and curry on what your ancestors started here with nuttin' but a couple mules named Joe and Sally, a hand-held plow and some seed."

I think I'm going to cry, and I look at their quaint, weathered faces, and a Robert Frost poem or two comes to my mind, and, in my euphoria, I promise them everything.

(Freeze time. I sit on the porch swing. Pa Lex stands behind me with his hand on my shoulder. Ma Ruth, sitting next to me, holds my hand. My stomach, bloated with gravy, coos contentedly. Ma quotes some appropriate Bible scripture, and Pa follows with an amen. Amazing Grace in G, please. Begin time.)

Yep. In this state of familial bliss, awashed in grandparental warmth, and seated in the very bosom, nay, the very nest of my primordial home, I see paisley. Can it be true? Say it ain't so. I blink. And there it is again, some ten miles away, swirling across the flat prairie. It is the Queen of Sheba of all paisley swirls. I try to catch my breath.

Says Lex, "Shoot `n howdy, why if'n it ain't a cyclone. Best we get to the cellar, Ma?"

Says Ruth, "Why she's a beaut, Pa, a real beaut, tightly wound as she is, a real humdinger. Why, looky there, I think she took the Ferguson barn." My mouth is open but nothing is coming out. I see a flying, paisley cow mixed with the remnants of the Ferguson barn. Says Ruth, "Pa, we best get to the cellar or not?"

Says Lex, "Well, it do look sorty bad, Ma."

I'm paralyzed. Everything moves in slow motion. When Lex and Ruth attempt communication with me, I manage only to produce a low bleating sound. Darkness.

I wake up in the cellar. Ruth asks me, "Your first

nader?"

Says Lex, "We was fixing to call the doctor in town." The tornado has passed, I'm told. We are safe. The house and barn stand. But there wafts a stench in the cellar that makes it difficult to breath.

When I cover my nose and gasp for air, Ruth says, "Pa? Did you break wind?"

Says Lex, "Naw Ma, I tole ya, I cleaned rabbits down heres the other day."

Says Ruth, "I swear it smelted like your gas, Pa. Are ya sure?"

Says Lex, "Rabbit."

Says Ruth, "Gas."

Says Lex, "Rabbit."

Says Ruth, "Gas." I throw up, and what spews forth are first impressions and unrealized expectations of Oklahoma.

Says Lex, "Why, looky there, a big ol' chunk of pie not even crumpelt up."

The next morning, I tell Lex and Ruth, in words like these, "My visit here to my ancestral roots has been both enlightening and entertaining. I have been rendered speechless by your hospitality, which has no current world equivalent. I now bid you a fond, loving adieu, and my only prayer is that I can somehow make you proud of me in my future college endeavors." Tears are shed. Promises of future communication extracted. Exit stage right. Yogi?

Sorry Boo Boo. Splitsville from Hicksville.

So Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., founded circa 1636, was among the schools which beckoned with scholarship. USC offered a Mercedes, and UCLA promised a sports car to be bought later (both offers contingent on numbers of touchdowns scored), but I applied to and was accepted by Harvard, which offered me not a football scholarship, no, but a partial academic scholarship with the option of playing football if I wanted. I accepted Harvard's offer of an academic scholarship, but decided against playing ball. (As Earl told me, "Yo be too small and too white to ever play pro, Fred. Think about yo future, boy. Yo wanna be painting tits all yo life like me?") Coach Hog said, "You have ruined your life, son." But Mom and Earl, who pushed me to apply to Harvard, were elated with my decision.

"Gracious," Mom said, "my little Freddy, a Harvard man."

Therefore, I became a Harvard freshman, autumn 1968. I attached myself forthwith to the history department, and it was under its auspices that I met my mentor, the famous Dr. Ludwig "Luddy" Heinrich, a scholar of American history, April 1920 to October 1921, and an avowed communist. At age fifty-two, after twenty-three books, several dozen articles, and hundreds of grants and fellowships, Dr. Heinrich decided

to actually meet and talk with students, and that apparently even included undergraduates like me. For reasons I found out later, Dr. Heinrich selected me as his one undergraduate student to mentor, though we had met only once, and that meeting was just a casual, introductory encounter in a history department restroom. (It went like this. Dr. Heinrich stands sombre at the urinal. I step up to the next pisser, unzip, unload, and then he says, with his exaggerated lisp, "Hello there. My name ith Luddy, and you muth be a new thudent in the department." I tell him my name. I tell him I'm a freshman. That's all. As I leave, he goes, "Tootleth, Freddy.") Under the department's mentor program, I was to meet with Dr. Heinrich once a week.

Our first meeting took place over dinner in his Boston, penthouse apartment. Him. A touch of gray in hair. Thought-lines crease forehead. Unlit pipe in hand. Tweed. His first major question, "Tell me, Freddy. What hitthorical periodth intereth you the moth?" I wasn't quite ready to commit to specifics; in fact, I really hadn't thought about it much at all.

So, I said, in words like these, "Frankly, Luddy, (he had insisted on the use of first names) I want to study all history, all of it." Luddy laughed aloud; we were sitting on his couch, and he moved closer to me.

"No, no, Freddy. You muth thpecialize and you muth thpecialize thoon." I rubbed my chin and tried to project a

professorial aura.

I said, in words like these, "Perhaps it would be advantageous to myself and my colleagues to sample a variety of historical periods. By doing so, I could lay a foundation for a specific area of study."

But Luddy shook his head. "Abtholutely, pothitively not. You will thimply wathte your time." Luddy then placed an arm around my shoulder. "Freddy, thimply thelect a topic, thomething that intereth you, and write an etthay, and leth thee what happenth," he said. I gasped. Me? Write? In high school, we always talked about writing, and we watched a lot of films about it, but we never really got around to actually doing any of it. Forthwith, I pondered my imminent collegiate failure. (The plague of illiteracy wrecks havoc, don't it?)

As I pondered thusly, I felt one of Luddy's hands on my knee, and then I felt his breath on my neck, and I heard him say, "Relath, Freddy." Something paisley swirled on my left. Luddy said, "I'm tho happy we'll be thudying together." His hand moved up to my thigh, Boo Boo, and something paisley swirled on my right. Luddy said, "I will teach you tho much, Freddy." And then I felt his hand on my crotch, on my very memberraneous extraneous, and his professorial lips wet my neck with their mildew.

Oh, a communist homo come knocking, a fag making a hit, a limp wrist, lisp-talking boybutt craver looking for his

lollipop and hole!, and I screamed, but there emitted only pathetic, Flipper-like squeals. I was a mere child. Pedophiliac seducer on the looser! Run run. No escape. Paisley. Swirl swirl. Beige. Gray. Black.

(Luddy, I apologize, but these were my feelings as I remember them. And it was you, wasn't it, who told me, "As a hithtorian, you muth learn to create hithtory, Freddy. The facth don't ever matter." You wanted me, didn't you, Luddy? Case closed.)

I woke up on Luddy's couch, fully clothed and apparently unviolated.

(No Sarah, Luddy didn't rape me. And his attempt at seduction, as awkward as it was, doesn't plague my subconscious as you think it does. True, he was an authority figure; true, he tried to seduce me. Luddy apologized later, and he never did it again. No, he didn't cop a feel after I passed out, and if he did I don't remember it.)

Luddy's Aristotlean face hovered above mine. He said, with eyes lowered, "I am thintherely thorry. Your beautiful buttockth thwept me away. I promith to keep my handth off you. But, firth, pleath Freddy, pleath, let me thuck you off juth one time, and then I won't athk to ever thuck you again. I will be a thatithfied man." I sat up.

I said, in words like these, "Dr. Heinrich, I mean Luddy, please understand that, though I harbor no ill will

toward homosexuals, a group in which you apparently claim lifetime membership, I am an avowed heterosexual. Period. I therefore refuse to allow you to perform fellatio upon me. Period. I suggest further that you jeopardize your career and your reputation by attempting to forge a sexual liaison with a disinterested student more than thirty years your junior. Simply put, Luddy, I am not interested. Period."

Luddy looked at me gravely. He said, "I don't want to loth you, thon. I'm a profethor, and you're my very firth thudent. I thee already that you have potential. Tho, thtick with me, Freddy, and I'll make you an academic thuperthtar. I promith. No athking for thuckjobs. No kitheth on the couch. But I have eyeth, Freddy, and I can't thtop them from theeing, from alwayth dethiring you. I could thimply thwallow you, thon, you look tho delithouth. No, you can't thtop my eyeth from theeing, Freddy."

Pinch me. Let's get this straighto. My mentor's libido bizarro is the issue here. Him. Old communist fag. Needs to get laid. Says he will see me always as triple x poolboy with bronze tan, oiled skin, tight cutoff jeans, hanging bulge. Me. Indignant. Insulted. Shocked.

Oh, what was I to do? Luddy said, with eyes bright, "Pleath work with me, thon. I rethpect your heterothexthuality. You're probably a capitalith, too, but thath all right." And, well, with many misgivings, I

decided to do it. He promised hands off, and, frankly, I was intrigued by his offer to make me an academic superstar. And, in the end, it was the right decision for me.

(Oh the late Luddy, you begged, didn't you? On your knees, praying to the Greek pagan gods, you asked, over and over, "Pleath, Freddy. One louthy thuckjob. How could it pothibly be a threat to your mathculinity? Just cloth your eyeth and relath." But I always refused. Hah. And, oh, how I taunted you with my tight jeans, the late Luddy, wiggling my firm little ass in your sagging face. Hah.)

But listen. I now had to write a paper, a real paper of the Harvard U variety. Ten frightfully long pages. Oh, the words, words, words. From where were the words to come? Answer me? What muse would guide me?

A fellow student, a junior, noticed my state of panic, and, after I explained my problem, he told me, "You need to get your ass over to see Cloverleaf, pronto, and get yourself a category." Dr. William H. Cloverleaf, a long-time Harvard scholar, worked in The Categories of Knowledge Department. Under Harvard's guidelines, a student was entitled to one and one-half categories a year. Professors could receive anywhere from five to ten categories annually, depending on rank.

Cloverleaf's office was in the basement of the maintenance building. After filling out an application

form, I was ushered into his small room. The room smelled like sewage, and I soon discovered the reason: the eighty-year-old Cloverleaf was chronically flatulent. Everyone ignored it, though. He looked at me over the rims of his wireframe glasses.

"Yes, yes, a category"--fart fart--"but for what"--fart fart--"speciality young man?" he said.

I shrugged my shoulders. (Oh, the smell of academia, of Hahvud!) I said, in words like these, "My interest, Dr. Cloverleaf, is history, but admittedly I need to narrow it down to something more useful. I sincerely hope, even in my present immature state, to make an important scholarly contribution to the body of knowledge in my discipline."

"And--fart fart--"what do you"--fart fart--"read?"

This was one tough question. I said, in words like these, "Well, frankly, I get most of my information from television." (We were never really required to read at Del Mar, though we did watch a few films about reading and I think we took a field trip once to go watch some people read at the library.)

Dr. Cloverleaf played with some string, an egg shell, and a stuffed kitten lying on his desk. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. An hour. Finally, he said, "Well, then--fart fart--"let the category be: television"--fart fart--"as a vehicle"--fart fart--"for the reinterpretation and revision"--fart fart--"of historical events and

personages." He wrote this on a form, and then stamped it with a seal, thus designating it an official, Harvard category.

Eureka! I danced out his office. Me. Confident category holder. Collector of scholarly tidbits. A file-building, drawer-stuffing academician. But the night before the paper was due, I panicked. Writer's block. Nada on nada. Then I went into a trance, a paisley trance, and I heard your voice, Boo Boo. You said, Bullshit `em, Yogi. And what happened was the words, those beautiful rhetorical units which build the constructs of our very existence, flowed from me like a river, a huge, gushing river.

A short excerpt of the paper, in words sort of like these following, ensues forthwith.

Rewriting American Ingenuity:

The Professor Considered as Inventor Archetype

(Scene opens with group of men sitting around a large table. The men include the following inventors: Eli Whitney, Thomas Edison, George Washington Carver, and Alexander Graham Bell. In walks The Professor of Gilligan's Island. He stands at the head of the table.)

The Professor: Eli, you gave us peanut butter, and Tom, you gave us the telephone. George, you gave us the light bulb. Alex, the cotton gin, your invention, revolutionized American agriculture. All I need is an invention to get seven people off a damn, deserted island. Got any ideas?

I'll make it worth your while.

Eli: Professor, please, I invented the light bulb.

The Professor: Sorry. My mistake.

Thomas: And I invented peanut butter, not the telephone.

The Professor: That's right. Wow. Sorry.

George: Jeez, he's got it all screwed up.

Alexander: Look, I think the first thing you have to do is get rid of this Gilligan guy. He messes up everything.

The Professor: He means well. The Skipper rides him pretty hard at times.

Thomas: What's in it for us?

The Professor: A four-way split on forty-five percent of any accrued royalties, and, plus, your names will be associated with the product, thus ensuring your historical legacy. I think that's a fair deal.

Alexander: Throw in Ginger and Mary Ann, and you got yourself a deal.

The Professor: Done!

George: Wait! Why do we need to ensure our historical legacies? We're famous. (To the other three.) Let's make him give us at least a fifty-fifty split on the royalties.

The Professor: I hate to tell you guys this, but no one even knows who you guys are anymore, or what you invented, or how significant your inventions have been for civilization. I'm more famous than you'll ever be, and I

haven't come up with anything even half as good as your inventions. See, I serve currently as the symbol of American ingenuity. You guys are nothing but words, stupid words, rotting away in decaying, yellowing books that no one ever reads. I'm the metaphor, now, for what you guys did.

Eli: He's right, you know.

(As the four inventors grumble, V.K. Zworykin, the inventor of the picture tube, walks into the room.)

The Professor: My God! It's Zworykin! All is well now. I'm glad you could make it.

(The four inventors panic, talk in hurried voices among themselves.)

Thomas: All right, all right, here's one. He could use my peanut butter to glue together a boat.

Alexander: Or, no, no, maybe my cotton gin would float . . .

George: Ah, right, telephone lines could be used as ropes to hoist the sails on the cotton gin.

Eli: And crushed light bulbs, mixed with peanut butter, could be spread over the cotton gin so it wouldn't rust in the water.

Thomas: Right, and, see, if they ran out of food, they could eat some of this rust protection, just as long as they avoided the crushed light bulbs.

Alexander: But will the cotton gin float?

George: Christ, Alex! We know peanut butter floats.

The whole damn thing will be covered in peanut butter.

Eli: And crushed light bulbs.

The Professor (looks bemused): Zworykin. What do you think?

Zworykin: Stay on the island or you'll end up like these four nobodies.

The Professor (looks terror-stricken): God, no! I can't stand it there anymore! They hate me. They all hate me.

Zworykin (as he walks to the door): Goodbye.

The Professor: Wait, Zworykin. Look. I'll cut you in. You take the higher side of a 60-40 split. Really. 70-30. 80-20. All of it. You can have all of it. (He watches as Zworykin leaves the room. He looks heavenwards. A quiet ambience wafts.) I'll get off that island someday, and when I do, he'll see, they'll all see. I'll have my own television show then, and it won't be on some stupid island. No. New York. Boston. LA.

Thomas: What about the peanut-butter-cotton-gin idea?

The Professor (scratches his head): Like I said, a 30-70 split, name recognition, the broads, and that's my final offer.

Oh, the mighty power of the pen, the wondrous feeling of creating your very own world, your very own reality, and the words flowed from me intuitively, as if a power beyond

what I could see controlled my hand, my brain, my soul. And the next day, as I handed the paper over to mentor Luddy, I felt a sense of accomplishment like I never felt before.

I told Luddy, in words like these, "This is perhaps the best essay ever written by a Harvard University student."

Later that day, however, as I awaited judgment, I happened to glance through an academic journal lying on the desk of a colleague, and it suddenly occurred to me that my essay was somewhat different than those articles appearing in that particular august publication. Oh! I get it now! Footnotes! Incoherency! I began to sweat. A couple hours later, when a fellow student complained about a low grade he had just received on a twenty-page, thirty-source paper, I panicked. And when Luddy called me, said, "Freddy, pleath come over and talk to me about your ethay," I saw paisley marauders.

So, on the way over to Luddy's apartment, I thought about boobs, and I pictured myself an old man painting breasts with Earl, and I saw myself maybe carrying on his work after he died. I heard Earl's voice swirl. "Yo be painting tits all yo life, bro." Well, all right then, I could do that if I had to. Boobs? Academics? The choices in a young man's life were never as clear and, though I knew I would disappoint my mother, I felt that A Thousand Painted Breasts beckoned, that this was a sign, an omen, for sure. My heart was in academics, but, see, all my talent was in

tits.

When I got to his apartment, Luddy said, "Thith ethay ith brilliant. To use the television metaphor as a thymbol for your age borderth on the genuith."

I hung my head in shame. I said, in words like these, "Please forgive me, for I have embarrassed not only myself but my parents as well. I will pack now, and leave Harvard, knowing that I'm a failure. If you ever need some breasts painted, give me a call."

Luddy held out his arms. "Freddy, Freddy. Thith ethay ith wonderful, fantathtic, thuperlative! I plan to publith it in one of the journalth I edit."

I said, "Forgive me, please."

Luddy said, "Lithen you thilly atthhole, I thaid your ethay is getting publith in one of the moth important hithorical journalth in the world."

And then it hit home. Publication! Gasp. I need air. Swirl swirl. Paisley.

After I regained consciousness, Luddy said, "I told you I'd make you an academic thuperthar, didn't I?"

But something still bothered me. I said, "But I don't even know what my essay means?"

Luddy smiled. "Perfect. Now how about a little thuck thuck to thelebrate?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Circa 1992. Near Chandler, OK. Route 66. Randy, his friend Bert Clark, and me in battered pickup. Open prairie. Buffalo roam. Rabbits run. Clouds drift. Nacho Doritos, Budweisers, and beef jerky between legs.

We talk failure. I say, in words like these: "I have no coping mechanism."

The story I tell next went sort of like this. After my mother kicked me out of the house, I hung in San Diego for four years, working at this place called The Doughnut Shop. Inside the men's restroom was a hole in the wall leading to the kitchen. Above the hole, someone wrote: "Put your dick in here and the cook will put a doughnut on it." I was the cook. The owners liked me because I was so young, and they felt sorry for me because my mother treated me like shit. Other facts. I mostly lived at this boarding house during those days. It cost me fifteen dollars a week. I quit school. I listened to The Doors albums. More facts. I met this strung-out, speed-freak girl named Florence, who was a couple years older than me. She got pregnant, and she put the baby up for adoption. I never even saw the kid.

So, I didn't do much in those years but work at this doughnut place, hang out, and get plastered.

What happened, because something's always got to happen, is some of the people I knew started dying. Arthur,

tripping on blotter acid, tried to get high and see God, so he overdosed and died. Mushroom drove his Harley into a bulldozer parked on the side of the road. Bruce overdosed on heroin, like everyone knew he would do sooner or later. And all this freaked me out, so I started to get my act together.

In the truck on Route 66, as we pass armadillo blobs, Randy says, "You're putting too much pressure on yourself. Relax. It's all right. Forget it. Lighten up, mon."

Bert Clark says, "La-la-look. I hardly even na-na-know ya. But I th-th-think Randy's absolutely right."

Hey dudes. It's like this. I get home, and I think about it, and then the feel-sorry-for-me pose deconstructs. My wicked witch melts. Ding dong. The midgets sing. Screw the past, and the Sigmund thing. No affect. Zilch. I feel truly alive for the first time in my life. Serenity flows. Peace is felt.

Main narrative continues here. I take us back to Harvard, 1970, where I was fast becoming an academic superstar. Everything I wrote Luddy published in one of his journals. My articles included "The Gettysburg Battle and Leave It To Beaver: June Cleaver Never Met a Black Man But She Wanted To," and "Buffalo Bill and Rawhide: Keep Them Frontier Myths Rolling," and "Puritan Immigration and Green Acres: The Errand Into God's Country or, No, the Old Country

is Where I'd Rather Be.'" Several of my articles were reprinted in a book. The point of all my research and writing was this: There was no point. The more outrageous and silly I got, the more recognition I received from fellow scholars. As Luddy later told me, "The age was primed for thith un-idea, thith anti-logic."

Me. Success obtained. Life goals being obtained. Gracious, always, to the little people who made all this possible. Pillows absent. Then the department, in the face of a growing, university-wide demand, asked me to conduct seminars. See, after a couple articles about me had appeared in the student newspaper, I became a cult figure on campus. Half scholar, half comedian, I was a user of pop culture to seriously distort historical events and personages, and I collected a large following. I especially appealed to a large group of potheads who would toke up and then come hear me talk. To them, I made perfect sense. I also appealed to anti-establishment groups on campus--the gay groups, the communists, the war protestors--because I was wrongly perceived as someone tweaking the nose of authority and getting away with it. And that was why I met Sarah, Harvard U psychology major and intense Vietnam War protestor.

(Sarah, oh, I will always remember the first time I saw you, and I will always remember the first time I felt your name on my lips, the sss, the air, the ah, and I will always

remember how you looked at me that first time, and in your blue eyes I saw there were wonderful promises. You came to hear me, your honey bunny Boo Boo bear, didn't you? Hah! I dazzled you. And as I talked about "Petticoat Junction and Matriarchy in Early American History," I drank you with my eyes, and, yes, I made love to you over and over in my mind until I was spent.)

Sarah was, is, very blonde, very sensual, very full, and she will always be this way to me, and the day she came to hear me speak I noticed how her breasts strained against her Nixon Is A Murderer t-shirt, and, when she stood, I saw how her hip-hugging bellbottoms tightly caressed her perky, little bottom, suggesting a hint of panty lines. I told myself, from a purely animalistic perspective, "God, man, I must meet her." And amazingly, after I finished speaking, she just stood there, loitered like some love nymph, as if she were waiting to talk with Mr. Genuis himself.

I, the great one, approached her. A crowd surrounded. I heard someone say, "This will be great." Me. Cocky. Swaggering. The male pose. Sarah. Shy. Smiling. Ready to worship.

But something askew? Sarah said, "You're a pig, Roderick."

I said, in words like these, "Pardon me?"

She said, "Oink, oink." Those standing around us laughed.

I said, in words like these, "Did I offend you in some manner, Miss, ah, Miss, I didn't catch your name."

Sarah snarled, then, and thus I saw her beautiful, white teeth with just a suggestion of an overbite. She said, "Your work is nothing more than an extension of the authoritarian infrastructure which supports the killing of innocent people. You are a capitalist pig, a sexist, and a war monger. You are a germ spreading disease throughout the world. You are festering pus. You are a redneck, macho, cock-slinging, insecure idiot riding on the coattails of a famous scholar. I detest you and everything you stand for."

I began to feel very very uncomfortable. More and more people crowded around us. I said, in words like these, "I hardly think it is fair, given the brevity of our relationship, for you to judge me so harshly. Perhaps we should have coffee and talk in a more reasonable manner. I'm sure we can reach those compromises which, I have no doubt, might lead us into a relationship that you will find to your satisfaction."

Her blue eyes turned green then, and her voice became Satanic, deep, and hissing. She screamed, "American matriarchy and Petticoat Junction! What do you know of the struggle for equality?! What do you know of the women's movement!? How dare you compare a television show--a crass commercial tool of the capitalist pigs--to the accomplishments of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton,

Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, and Abby Foster! How dare you compare characters in a situation comedy--stupid, trite women--to some of the most important, influential women in our history! How dare you rewrite history to feed your own personal greed, to build your own reputation!"

Oh, jimminy Christmas, this was not good. I had been publicly reamed and revealed. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I shuffled. I hemmed and hawed. I heard someone say, "Tell her off, Roderick." And then, when I looked into her eyes again, I saw they had turned from blue to green to paisley. Someone said, "Speak Roderick speak." But the paisley swirled on and on. I panicked. I fell to my knees then and grasped Sarah around the waist. She responded by giving me an undercut on the chin with her knee, and I fell back.

Lying spread out on the floor now, I looked up into her paisley eyes. She said, "You're a joke, Roderick, a pathetic joke." Swirl. Swirl. Dark.

I woke up on the couch in my apartment. A friend who helped carry me home said, "Don't worry about it, Fred. Her name is Sarah Williams. She can't do anything to you. She's a bitch, man. Everyone knows it. She's frigid. She, like, wants it, supposedly, but then she doesn't want it because it might be too political or something? Dig? She's a real case, a kook. All she does is the war thing and dumps on as many men as she can find."

I said, in words like these, "I love her. Oh yes, I want her."

My friend said, "I get it: the ol' fuck her and she'll shut up routine. No way, man. She'll cut your balls off, and she and her friends will eat them for breakfast. I think she's lesbo maybe."

I said, in words like these, "Stop! Listen. No love is greater than mine. Inside of me, something blossoms. Something strong and overpowering grows and grows, and then it takes over all rational thought. I am love personified. I am rose. Oh Sarah, love hath bloomed like never before, the floodgates of passion are open and much poureth forth, and Cupid comes shooting arrows at your sweet door. Oh love! Oh love of all love. Oh sss, oh air, oh ah! Saraaaah!"

But how was I to make her see how much she meant to me? What could I say, oh what could I do? So I stayed in misery the rest of the day bemoaning my unrequited love, and I fantasized about her, and in those fantasies Sarah and I became joined as one over and over. Thus, the next day, suffering the symptoms of passion gone unacknowledged, I decided to take action.

Undoubtedly, I could find Sarah at the Vietnam War protest rally scheduled to take place on the Square at one p.m. that day, and, righto, when I arrived I saw her adjusting microphones on a small, portable stage near the

administration building.

There was a slight problem, however. The problem was this. There were ten thousand people between where I stood and where Sarah stood. Oh, how I hated these protest rallies, these huge, chanting pillows, but for her, for Sarah, I would do anything, and it was a testament to my developing love that I closed my eyes and threw myself into the crowd in an attempt to make my way through to the stage. Oh, nightmare come true! Ten thousand bodies pressed against my own! Oh love is blind, truly blind! Still, I think I might have made it, if the first speaker hadn't started his diatribe at that very moment, thereby activating the crowd. The crowd/pillow went beserk. I felt myself being bounced from person to person. I heard the crowd chant, "Down with Nixon!" I lost my breath, and then got it back.

Finally, a fellow student noticed my consternation. He grabbed my shoulders. He said, "Like, you need to get up front man or what? Like, here, let me help you."

When I felt his hands begin to hurl me forward, I said, in words like these, "No, I don't wanna go."

He said, "Split to Canada, man. Like that's what I'm going to do."

Realizing I had been misunderstood, I said again, "No, I don't wanna go."

He said, increasing the volume of his own voice to

answer mine, "Hell no."

"I don't wanna go!"

In response, those standing nearby said, "Hell no."

Once again. "I don't wanna go!"

This time perhaps a hundred or more people answered.

"Hell no."

Oh faces swirled. I felt people grab me, hug me. I yelled, "I don't wanna go!" This time, I was answered by the entire crowd, including the speaker. "Hell no!"

"I don't wanna go!"

"Hell no."

I screamed. "No, no, really, you don't understand. I do not wanna go!"

"Hell no!"

The noise, the bodies, the paisley. I felt myself falling, and I looked up and saw faces peering down, and these collegiate faces, these academic faces, became my childhood pillows. I thought about Boo Boo, then, and I thought about Earl's tits, and I thought about my mother's arms. Then I thought about the beautiful Sarah, and I realized my forthcoming death--for this was the final pillow attack, was it not?--would be in vain. Yea, she is a tree of life to them that lay hold of her: and happy is everyone that retaineth her, but though ye have scaled the fortress of love, ye shall be thrown into the abyss. Appropriately, these were my last sounds: "Sss, air, ah."

Resurrection City. Breath returned. Body functions resumed. Beautiful face juxtaposed to mine. No, can it be? Saraaah! My face in her lap?! Oh the eyes, the eyes! A nonthreatening swirl ensued. Limbs tingled. Love pit developed in lower stomach.

She said, in soft tones, "Are you all right? I was thinking about calling an ambulance."

I looked around and saw we were alone behind the stage. In the distance, I could hear the anti-war demonstration still in progress. I said, in words like these, "Sarah, it is time for me to profess my true love for you. The cock crows each morning, and inside of me he awakens a seedling that grows. This seedling is my love for you. As each passing moment passes, this seedling matures, until finally it is a tree. The roots of this tree bursteth forth from my body, and in my agony, I weep. Indeed, I weep. I weep because the place I covet to plant my roots drifts from me like the dandelion seed. Without nurturing, the roots wither. Thus, I die. Either return my love or kill me now. Oh oh sweet Saraah!"

Oh she smiled! I felt her lips brush my forehead. She said, "You're a fucking nut, Roderick, but there's definitely something extremely cute about you. You got a good-looking ass, too. Listen, you really added something special to the rally. The human touch of the Vietnam War draftee. I, we, appreciate it. I misjudged you the other

day. I had no idea the pigs were calling your number."

Progress. Extremely cute? Good-looking ass? Oh, these words dripped from her tongue, came forth from her beautiful mouth, and I savored them like a linguist in morpheme heaven. Meanwhile, I ignored the stuff about the draftee. (I admit that I heard it. But I felt myself on the cusp of the greatest moment of my life. I chose to hear what I wanted.)

I said, in words like these, "From your encouraging words, I draw the peace and contentment I need to live for at least the next five minutes."

Her lips met mine. A peck. A momentary second of bliss. She said, "Can you walk? Come on, I'm taking you home with me."

Sex scene ensues here. Listen. I take you now to an oversized bathtub in a small Cambridge apartment, circa 1970. I soak in sudsy suds Sarah prepares. She brews hot tea as I drowse in bubble bliss. Yo. A tap tap upon the door. "Enter." Sarah with tea. "You don't mind?" Herbal tea served. "Can I massage your shoulders." Neck kneaded. Tension evaporates. Meanwhile, extraneous member grows heavenwards but camouflaged by suds.

Plot thickens. Sarah rises, walks to center of bathroom. Oh the lightest of light-blue eyes. They are the eyes of an ecstatic angel in a Renaissance painting. They

are eyes to die for. She tucks a thick strand of blonde behind an ear. Her t-shirt now dangles off shoulder. Water has been splashed haphazardly upon it, and the cloth is transparent over one large, coral-colored protusion. I gasp. She goes, in what seems like throaty tones, "Can I interest you in some company?"

I think, in words like these, This is truly a dream.
No man has ever experienced such a sensual moment. I will never be happier.

I say, in words like these, "Okey dokey."

Sarah lifts the t-shirt over her head. Oh magnificent orbs of womanhood! Words cannot equal objects! Oh Goddess of all female breasts, speak, how do I worship you, how do I give thee thanks?! Oh I shall enshrine thine breasts on a A Thousand Painted Breasts, and still it will pay only partial homage! Sarah wiggles her bellbottoms downwards. Now wearing only white panties, she bends to retrieve a wash cloth. The panties crease cleft separating firm, rounded flesh. Extraneous member engorged, now peaks through suds cover. Sarah tucks thumbs on undie elastic. She shimmies. Panties removed. The blonde curls outline fleshy pinkish flower and blessed, holy orifice.

Pronouncement of extreme hornaciousness made. Sarah, without preliminaries, mounts engorged, extraneous member. The joyride begins. Giddyap! Hi ho Silver! The wet orbs find awaiting tongue and mouth. Sarah's face is spotted

with Mr. Bubble, and when she throws her head back, the suds drip slowly from her chin into her cleavage. I burrow like the mole.

Oh! Sss, air, ah! The pelvic pace quickens. Buckets of water splash on the floor. Tidal wave! Lifeboats! Women and children first! Wonderful lover announces between gasps, "Sometimes, I get"--puff puff--"sort of crazy"--puff puff--when I come"--puff puff--"and I think"--puff puff--"this will be"--puff puff--"one of those times." I acknowledge with emphatic hip thrusts. She responds with wriggly hip grind. Listen. It hurts so good.

Hey. What ensues is but a blur. Water water everywhere. The tub moves. The walls shake. Hygiene products shoot downwards from cabinet. Towel rack falls. Toilet seat clatters. Ceiling tile dust sprinkles. Long fingernails dig into shoulders. Oh I bleed for love! I explore new orifice with sudsy finger. Wild screams swirl.

A pressure builds in my lower stomach. Stop. This is the moment I want forever. Sarah on top, groaning, scratching, screaming. Her angelic eyes are rolled back. My hands cup oval, fleshy cones. And my sweet release is just seconds away. A few more thrusts then? Not yet. Stop.

I think that if we, all of mankind, could be suspended forever in this just-before-orgasm world, suspended on the cusp between the pulsating, rising heat and the shuddering,

intense finale, then world peace would reign forever. One more thrust. Stop. Is this why we exist? A half thrust. Stop.

Sarah screams her intentions, which are similar to mine. It begins to happen. Together. A thrust. Stop. No, it is impossible to stop now. Swirl. Swirl. Oh yes! Paisley! I feel her lips on my neck, and her fingernails are relentless, and she pronounces her forthcoming over and over. Breathing stops. Heaven happens. The Moment occurs.

Post coitus, shrinking erectus, still tub bound, I say, in words like these, "I did not know the true meaning of love until now."

Sarah replies with gentle kiss. She says, in all coyness, "You know, Fred, I bet I can help you get it up again."

Retire to bedroom, pronto! Bet kept. All orifices, crevices explored. All positions assumed. Some gadgets used. Inhibitions adieu. Fantasies traded. Kinky stuff employed. The late, late afternoon. Nonstop bed bouncing. Impotent neighbors complain. Body parts made raw. Lotion applied. Sleep follows. Sex scene ends here.

I woke first that late, sleepy Cambridge afternoon. Sarah's head rested on my shoulder, and I gently ran my fingers through her hair. When she woke, she spake thusly: "Fred, I know this attorney that can help you get out of the

draft."

Oh what a wretched liar I was! Oh what fraud had I perpetuated upon this innocent, unsuspecting lass! And what should I do now? Should I further this fraud by adding yet another lie? How long could I keep up this deceit? Should I fess up? Post-sex guilt swept over me like an Oklahoma dustnado.

Oh then Sarah reached over and kissed the fingernail scrapes on my shoulders. She added, "I was really wrong about you. You're really in tune to what's going down, and you're a wonderful, wonderful lover. Please, Fred. Let me help you. I don't want you to get killed in that ridiculous war."

The gulp I gulped next was all the pride that has ever been or will ever be. I loved her. I wanted our relationship to flourish in honesty and light, not dwell in deceit and darkness. (Oh Sarah, I know this was not one of my better moments.) I said, in words like these, "Sarah, the following confession is made with the feverent wish that some way, somehow, you will find it in your heart to forgive me. For, Sarah, I am not a draftee at all. My protestations at the rally this afternoon were only the result of wanting to escape from the pressing multitudes I encountered as I tried to make my way to the stage where you were. When I said, 'I don't wanna go,' I meant that I didn't want to go further into that human sea of hell

gathered to protest the war. Later, basking in your warmth and sincerity, I lost my wits, and I chose to ignore your inference about my draft status. Further, I must confess, in all honesty, that I am definitely apolitical and I find those who do protest the war somewhat naive, confused and immature."

The blonde head snapped. The angel eyes squinted. The bodacious bod tensed. Oh the pantheress when she smells prey! Oh the tigress protecting her cubs! Oh the hunt of the hungry, desperate she-wolf!

I trembled. Sarah said, "You know, of course, that I will kill you now."

I said, in words like these, "I think additional communication is definitely warranted, and therefore I propose we converse further on this delicate subject. I might begin by reiterating my undying love for you. It is a love that burns, and from the fire's embers I draw enough strength for us--both of us--to see our way through this minor, technical difficulty in our blossoming relationship."

The nude Sarah jumped to her feet in one swift, clean movement. A war dance ensued forthwith. She said, in a deep growl resembling a member of the canine species, "You lied to me! It's like you raped me, cocksucker!"

I said, in words like these, "I must disagree on word usage here. The word rape implies some type of physical or threatening force was used related to the sex act. Force

was never applied by either party before, during, or after copulation. Perhaps, Sarah, we should use extended definitions during this minor, soon-to-be-resolved spat, thereby ensuring a consensus on important terms. Don't you agree, honey?"

In all of history, there was never a scream, nor will there ever be a scream, like that following my cogent, to-the-point commentary. Sarah's howl swirled, and I actually saw a trail of paisley shoot from her mouth. Next, she grabbed a bean bag chair from the floor next to the bed and held it over her head. She said, "Say your prayers, motherfucker."

I did the big-time paisley panic. Paralysis gripped me from the neck down. Oh would Desdemona finally get her revenge?! Dedesmona, no! Dedesmona, no! I said, in words like these, "I pray to God that I live to see another day."

In slow motion, the bean bag chair came closer and closer to my face, and just as the vinyl touched flesh, I thought about the swirl that had been my short life. And, in that short moment before death, I became again the insecure kid with the eccentric mother, and all the anxiety I had ever experienced in my life, I relived, and it shook my weakening body with its nasty hands. Oh paisley angst! Oh hold me Mama! Yes, I thought about my beautiful mother, whom I loved, but I knew I would see her no more. This thought was my brain's last gasp. I faced the void. My

quest ended in blankness. Nada. Dark.

The light relumed. Void became fog became haze became Sarah's face. Surprised by rebirth, the second that day, I managed a low, purring sound. This was met by the following Sarah soliloquy.

"In my hand, which is just inches away from your penis, I hold a very large, very sharp knife. I advise you to be very still. I could cut off your penis, and then allow you to bleed to death, or I could cut off your penis, call an ambulance, and allow you to live, or I could allow you to walk out of here with a very frightened but uninjured penis. This will depend on you, Fred Roderick."

Interrupting, I said, in words like these, "The third option holds out a great deal of promise for me."

Sarah responded by resting stainless steel on protruding flesh. She said, "I did not ask you to speak. I will continue. My actions will depend on whether I believe your promise to never ever ever tell a living soul about what took place in this apartment today and whether I believe your promise to never ever ever attempt communication with me again. If you violate any of your promises"--here the knife, cutting edge away, pressed firmly against extraneous member--"I will literally amputate your disgusting male ego. The dick will be history, compendo?"

Oh blackmail! What could I do? I said, in words like these, "Yes ma'am. I promise to remain mum on this most

sensitive subject. Furthermore, despite obvious hardship, I will remain incommunicado with the woman I was born to love."

She said, "Put on your clothes, and get out of here, Roderick."

Adios.

The human without a reason for existence moped. Extended crying jags became his most frequent activity, prompting a serious consideration of professional counseling for post-Sarah depression. Oh love unrequited, thou art a wretched fiend! Listen. Duddly Do-Right, save me for it is the train of love derailed! Bullwinkle, catch me, I'm falling! Batman, wake up Robin, and get your asses over here! Boo Boo, my Bah? For approximately twenty-four hours of hell, I abided by the terms of our needless separation, but then I decided to go for it.

My first phone call elicited this response: "I will desexualize you, Roderick." Click.

My second phone call resulted in a visit by two burly, off-duty Boston policemen, who twirled nightsticks. One said, "Hey, wise youse wanna bother this young lady, who maybe happens to be my cousin and who says youse a creep, which I truly believe seeing youse ugly mug with my own eyes in person like this."

The other said, "Youse wanna become Bah-sten mashed

potatoes cus I'll turn youse into Bah-sten mashed potatoes all over the adjacent sidewalk."

I said, in words like these, "Officers, please. Obviously, there remains a small misunderstanding between myself and the young lady in question. I will, of course, refrain from further communication with her, but I hardly think this matter warranted the attention of the glorious, proud men of blue, the pride of all Boston."

Oh love letter tried. Returned to sender. Ambush from behind tree on campus. Groin kicked. Love poem delivered and recited eloquently by friend. Friend shoved down stairs.

Finally, the crafty coyote devised Plan Triple A. I had a friend secure for me a private, heretofore unused room, in an obscure corner, on a closed wing of the Harvard U infirmary. Sarah was then informed of her lover's suicide attempt by phony psychologist/friend, who urged her to visit distraught patient. Trapped by moral dilemma, Sarah agreed on short powwow. In anticipation of her visit, I wrapped my wrists with bandages after dotting flesh with ketchup. Lying in bed, as phony friend/doctor checked pulse, I moaned and quivered as beautiful Sarah entered the room. Doctor discreetly departed.

I said, in words like these, "Yea, I welcomed death's dark embrace, but your bodily appearance makes me reconsider. I see the light of hope. But, know ye this,

alive or dead, I will love oh Sarah for all eternity."

Sarah said, "Listen, Fred. We have nothing in common. We don't hold the same political, or social, or ethical values. We don't even know one another that well. I admit the sex was good, even great, okay, but that isn't enough to sustain a relationship. Besides, there are things you don't even know about me, things you wouldn't understand."

I caressed her hands with my own. I said, in words like these, "Nothing in your past or present would prevent us from forming a more perfect union."

Sarah said, "I've been with women, Fred."

I gulped. I said, in words like these, "Been? As in been been or just been."

Sarah said, "I've slept with women, Fred. We did it. See, I went through this experimental period where I thought I was gay, and I slept around with a lot of women. I'm still struggling with this side of me."

Oh sex secrets revealed! Oh true confessions! Oh the past came calling! Yet not an ounce less in weight did my love for Sarah become upon her confession of prior sexual interchangeability.

I said, in words like these, "I reiterate my former expression of indifference to your past, and I suggest I can offer certain assistance in reconciling your inner struggle."

Smiling, she said, now looking beneath a bandage, "I

knew you were faking it the moment I walked in the door. You are a persistent boy, Fred, and a very very strange boy." She sighed, and shook her head.

I said, in words like these, "Please give me an opportunity to prove that our love is a special love, a love that, given time and nurturing, will bloom like the chrysanthemum."

She said, looking heavenwards, "I can't believe I'm going to do this. All right. I guess we could try. But no strings, and absolutely no commitment. When it's over, it's over, understand? And no more theatrics."

I said, in words like these, "Kiss me like there's no tomorrow."

CHAPTER FIVE

Future additional. Circa 1992. Bethany, OK. Route 66. Dennis, his friend Jack Salowski, and me in pickup on 66. Sunset shimmers. Red dirt darkens with shadows. Jack Daniels passed. Male dreams shared. Life often occurs in the slow right-hand lane. Double nickles.

I say, in words like these, "I am the biggest failure because I tried the hardest."

The story I tell next goes sort of like this. I left San Diego, and lived with a friend in Kansas City. I got my GED diploma and I started college. I worked nights as a waiter in this fancy restaurant. After I graduated college, I got a job at the newspaper. I wrote obituaries, and then I wrote murders, and then I wrote city council meetings. After that, I worked at other newspapers. Then I got a master's degree. Then I got a Ph.D. Success story, right? The whole time, I wrote fiction on the side. I sent it to book publishers, magazines, and journals. Publications? Zilcho. Sample rejection one. I'm sorry to say that though your theme is both interesting and important, your handling of it seems somewhat heavy-handed, and particularly given the subject matter, we don't care as much about your protagonists as we should. Sample rejection two. Fred's mother, as a character, is almost totally unbelievable. Her speech is, although explained, completely

unreal. I think your prose also needs some polishing, to even out the roughness and uneven quality. Fourteen years of serious writing netted me only above such exclamations, and low paying teaching and journalism jobs. I wallowed in bitterness because trash got published instead. I seriously considered taking a high-paying job as a public relations flack for an electric company. (Rotund dork in gray: "You'll truly like our company retirement plan.") But, no, no, I had to write, be the great artist, all that, and thus I brought misery and misfortune to myself and new family, including small, innocent children who didn't ask to be born. As failures went, I became the granddaddy.

Dennis downs whiskey in manly mode. He goes, "Let me tell you a story." Story is not saleable, so not reprinted here. The gist. Dennis, too, has struggled with writing, made the artistic sacrifice, all that. The story is one I've heard at least twenty times before.

The point. He goes, "You can't worry about publication. Life goes on. "

His friend Jack, a New Yorker, goes, "Listen to the man for christ's sake already." Pause. Cattle feedlot on right. "Fuck. There's enough fucking cows around here to clog up the world's fucking arteries for the fucking next billion and half fucking years."

I go, in snips like these, "Oh closet full of unread manuscripts! Oh self-addressed stamped envelopes! Oh the

three-month wait for rejection form letters! Oh cost of postage alone would provide lunch money for kids! Oh goodbye to your starving artist routine, Dennis, I have to feed my babies!"

Dennis goes, "Get a grip. Make your wife get a job."

I say, in words like these, "Schlock, tits, and things that bump. Isn't this where you get off?"

Finger snap! I'm beaming myself elsewhere, Scotty, and it's to the set of The Today Show. I'm introduced as the famous writer of best-selling, critically acclaimed novel. Interviewer goes, "You're important, rich, handsome, and fulfilled. How does it feel?" I go, in words like these, "Super duper. But I still have respect for the stupid poor people from whom I was long ago derived." Should I fantasize about this when I die, when the Oklahoma tornado catches up with me, when I become but another roadside clump on the armadillo highway? Would thinking about this, as I die unpublished, make me one of the biggest failures ever, at least locally, and thus make me, in a weird way, successful at something, i.e., successful at failure. Silver lining found as Oklahoma clouds drift in red sunset.

Important stuff continued here. (Oh Sarah those first weeks were bliss. Remember that weekend at the cheap New York hotel when we did it until we were raw? It rained, so we never left the room. Remember the subway? You didn't

think we could do it, did you? Remember the time we pulled over in my bug outside of Boston because we couldn't help ourselves? How did we walk afterwards? I want to relive it. I want to live, as I did once before, with the perpetual semi-erection! I want the old sexual fire! I want us to be twenty-one, again, and so desperately horny nothing matters but doing it!)

Despite obvious incompatibilities between Sarah and me, including sociopolitical items of great import, love flourished in my life, circa 1970-73. Sarah and I, setting aside differences, became inseparable lover-roommates. Me. The contented cockdaddy. The peacock. The crowing, strutting male pose. Her. Aglow with The Look. The dove. The graceful, blue-eyed swan with her proud lover.

After several months of experiencing intense love feelings, I posited thusly, in words like these, "Sarah, I want you to become my bride, for it is now obvious to me that you are truly the most important element of my unfolding destiny."

Sarah, the beautiful, handed down the following ruling, a filibuster, "I told you, Fred. No strings, no commitments. Besides, we have to finish graduate school before we do anything."

Listen. Transition to graduate school two or three so years later. The bottom line. There was nothing to it because the whiz kid whizzed. After completing my master's

in uno year, I began work on a doctorate, exploiting my bestowed category. (Cloverleaf, I thank thee. I give thee thanks.) I cruised, faked it all, studied rarely. Five published papers and a book later, I started my dissertation, less than two years after I earned my bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, Sarah, two years ahead of me in school, continued her doctorate work in psychology. Sarah, the politico-feminist, was The Hard Worker, the Disciplined Student, and the Serious Scholar. She completed her coursework with spotty but respectable GPA, published a minor paper, and began work on her own dissertation, a study of certain, interesting psycho-sexual disorders.

Scholar-lover-roommates lived in harmony, and joy reigned throughout Lovesville, USA. We enjoyed enlightened, postmodern, progressive male-female relationship based on nonsexist, equality principles endorsed by most groups which offer life-enhancing seminars. Digression. Sample conversation and event follows.

Sarah said, "Fred, why didn't you fill up the empty ice trays? You used them last."

I said, in words like these, "Que Sera, Sarah." She threw ice trays across room, striking important Harvard U brain container.

Sarah said, "I will not be your mother-slave woman, Fred! So fill them up, asshole! Now!"

Jumping to my feet, I said, in words like these, "I am

now made aware of my male-derived insensitivity. Be advised. In the future, I will strive to shoulder my fair share of domestic duties, including the refulfillment of ice trays."

After trays are filled, I gathered the wilted sunflower in my arms. Ruby on ruby. She said, out mouth's side, "I hate your fucking guts, Roderick." Kiss turned into caresses, blended into hot body friction, developed into raucous romp. The postmodern relationship! I was truly a complete postmodern man now! How really sweet it was, Gleason! Sample conversation and event ended here.

Now, we must forthwith turn to an important dream, related to mystical powers of pillows and beloved Boo Boo. Listen. Yep. The hotshot drew blanks on the disseration. I became blocked bad. Instead of doctorate-quality words and research, I produced pillow after pillow. For six successive weeks, I suffered through daily pillow attacks. Sarah, the soon-to-be psychologist, termed it a textbook case of acute anxiety, and she taught me deep breathing techniques, which didn't work.

She said, with sincerity, "If I could only find out what makes you feel this way, then I could help you." Despite Sarah's probing, she didn't determine a root source of my worsening condition.

The dream. One day, I fell into a deep sleep on the couch after a gruesome pillow attack. When I woke, Hawaii

Five-O's McGarrett sat next to me in the vinyl-covered recliner. (I had yet to really explore the McGarrett character as a representative or derivative archetype, but I had recently recognized the possibilities.) The quiet, stonefaced McGarrett combed his hair into a pompadour. On top of the wave a fish appeared.

I said, "My God! It's McGarrett. What do you want?"

McGarrett said, "Listen to the fish."

The wavefish said, "We've got Boo Boo, Fred. Unless you do exactly what I say, the fat bear's sidekick becomes cub sandwiches. Get it?"

Oh Boo Boo, Beeber, my Bah! Oh the guiding light, oh the inner strength, oh the vanguard of all peace and tranquillity standing against hellish pillows! Why have they done this to you, Boo Boo, the terminator of crippling angst, the remover of claustrophobic conniptions?

I said, in words like these, "What do you want from me?"

The wavefish said, "The exclusive rights to your mortal life and immortal soul."

I said, in words like these, "But who are you?"

The wavefish said, "I'm the fish on McGarrett's hair. Just touch me, Fred, and Boo Boo will be set free."

Choices nil given Boo Boo's predicament. Trembling appendage reached skywards to McGarrett's wavefish, and as flesh touched scales, a flowing, spiritual warmth spread

throughout my lower abdomen. Boo Boo's voice swirled.

Thanks Yogi. Peaceful zzz.

Sarah woke Fred, whose hand cupped crotch. I said, in words like these, "A nightmare, to be sure, yet so vivid and real I wonder if it wasn't a significant life omen.

Further, to my great adult chagrin, my hand confirms for me that I've wet my Levis, an incident heretofore confined to my early childhood period."

Sarah, in sarcastic sally, said, "Did little Freddy pee pee his pants because of a scary-wary dwreeem?" Great balls of ironic laughter thundered in small apartment.

Male essence humiliated. I said, in words like these, "I talked with McGarrett's hair, Sarah, and I signed a Satanic-like pact with it. See, for the release of the precious Boo Boo bear, the important childhood symbol, I entered into a contractual agreement with the mysterious wavefish concerning my current and after lives. Sarah, the fish rules."

Flesh around Sarah's eyes squinched, forming thin skin crevices. Angelic light-blue rolled. "Don't you think you're beginning to carry this television thing a bit far? You're even dreaming about it."

I said, in words like these, "The opposite of your statement applies. The nightmare serves as a forceful reminder that newly locked in the recesses of our collective subconscious resides numerous unexplored television

archetypes and paradigms that re-textualize society's historical identity."

Sarah said, "Bullshit."

I said, in words like these, "Exactly. Hallelujah! Now I can do the dissertation, understand?"

Inspired, I ran to the room in which desk and typewriter resided. I typed the dissertation title: The Day McGarrett's Hair Came Knocking. Oh words on paper! Oh black on white! Oh ink on pulp! I then felt the beautiful Sarah behind me. After reading title, she asked these rhetorical questions, "What type of person dreams up this weird shit? What type of strange person thinks like this? What is wrong with you?" (Were you jealous, Sarah, because your own dissertation was floundering in advisory committee hell? Admit it. You've always been jealous of my success.) Ignoring above questions, I took the paper from the typewriter, and placed it on the desk. Next, I retrieved my television from the living room--Sarah never watched it--and placed it on the desk as well.

Sarah, lingering, asked, "What's with the tube, Fred?"

I said, in a word like this, "Research."

This is what happened. Television to paper. Nonstop watching and writing. Possessed. Import of work foremost in mind. Grouping occurs. Contrast familial strata in Group 1 (G1), The Beverly Hillbillies, The Brady Brunch,

Family Affair, Petticoat Junction, The Waltons, The Partridge Family, All in the Family. (Special group includes GlA, The Munster's and The Addams Family.) Subcategories of characters appear. Sample subcategories. SC1, Aunt Bea, Granny, Kate, and Alice. SC2, Columbo, Mannix, Cannon, Judd. Academic formulas developed. Gl-Gla+SC1#3=X. X always relative. Stream of consciousness dissertation writing ensues next graph. (The Flow.)

In both Green Acres and The Beverly Hillbillies, what emerges at once is the unreconciled, historical tension between the forces of city and country. The shows, taken together, reflect a significant cultural antithesis. Whereas Jed brings his clan from Bugtussle to Beverly Hills, in an augmentation of the typical rural to urban migration, Oliver reverses the process, thereby breaking a centuries-old convention. Should we view Oliver then as a paradigm for a new system of immigration in the postmodern era, or is this polarity merely an aberration?

Elipsis here. Thus, Gomer, Barney, and Gilligan struggle to express themselves against an historical tradition that refuses to recognize their emotional sensitivity, a sensitivity erroneously and historically associated only with women. As Sargeant Carter, Andy, and The Skipper, all strong-willed men, dominate the people and events around them, Gomer, Barney, and Gilligan live only to please their male mentors. Gomer passes inspection. Barney

arrests a speeder. Gilligan cleans the hut. But nothing they do can completely please their dominators. Enslaved by a tradition that unjustly celebrates only male, physical prowess, Gomer, Barney and Gilligan are reduced forever to the weakling stereotype. This tradition, as it expresses itself in the postmodern era, emotionally cripples all three men, who exhibit signs of manic depression. This, in turn, leads to the moronic behavior they employ to seek out attention in any form, including ridicule.

Elipsis here. The male desire to dominate, conquer, and possess all those around him manifests itself in I Dream of Jeannie. Trapped in her bottle, Jeannie represents an extreme example of the archetypical submissive woman. Even once released from captivity, she bows to the male-God Major Nelson and refers to him over and over as her "master." Thus, Jeannie represents woman held perpetually in bondage by the male fantasy. Other television women, from the extremes of Ginger and Mary Ann, also become reductionist male fantasies. A sexy movie star versus the virginal farmer's daughter. The re-textualization, or the re-historicizing, of women shows that the femme fatale/virgin maiden dichotomy remains entrenched in our culture. Stream of consciousness disseration writing ends here.

New category emerges. War's a hoot. G14, McHale's Navy, Hogan's Heroes, F Troop, M*A*S*H. Soldiers figuratively die. Laugh tracks swirl. Makes war tolerable.

New category emerges. Car chases reflect knight-errant theme. G15, The Mod Squad, Hawaii Five-O, The Streets of San Francisco, Cannon, Mannix, Judd for the Defense. Mucho shots fired from car windows. Tire struck. Car crashes. Knight slays dragon.

New category emerges. Spy metaphor popular. G16, Mission Impossible, The Man from U.N.C.L.E., I Spy, Get Smart. Gadgets revered. Computer revo foretold.

New subcategory emerges. Chubs. SC10, Mr. French, Cannon, Hoss. Plump worn with dignity.

New subcategory emerges. Supernatural women. SC11, Flying Nun, Samantha, Jeannie. Habit-wings, nose, bottle.

Full scholarly synthesis occurs! Oh Star Trek, My Favorite Martian, The Jetsons! Oh Bonanza, Gunsmoke, Rawhide! Oh nuns and dogs who fly! Oh Kung Fu! Sing it: That Girl! Here's Johnny. Oh Leave it to Beaver and Dennis the Menace! Oh Fred Flintstone, my namesake, what's going down in Bedrock?! Deeno! Oh Mister Ed, Lassie, Flipper! Oh I Love Lucy! Lucy! Lucy! Batman! Popeye! Help.

As Gladys Cravitz watches, organic knowledge fuses. Nuke explosion. Run Fugitive run. Swirl swirl. Paisley. Dark.

Four hundred pages, two hundred signatures later, the Harvard U diss was approved. Sample prof comment follows. Without qualification, your dissertation is the most

significant, synthesized piece of research and writing ever presented in the History Department at Harvard University.
Sample prof comment ended.

Luddy, the mentor, said, "I will have my famouth preth immediately publith thith brilliant book, and your academic thardom is enthured. Now, pleath, let me thee you naked, thon."

Sarah, toiling through yet another diss rewrite, said, "I loathe you and your faggot communist professor."

Via telephone, Mom, upon hearing news, said, "My son, the doctor. Well, like I tole my friends, he's not a real doctor, but I'm so proud anyway."

Earl: "Yo be getting yo butt home to see yo mama, dig? We can paint us some tits for ol' time's sake."

Dr. Frederick Roderick II, possesor of Harvard U Ph.D., academic rep, and unlimited future, stood poised at the crossroads of his young academic life. (Soft landscape music wafts. I stand upon a mountain top. Before me stretches the mighty, poetic Hudson River, its fens, and, more, its fertile valleys.) Pillows? Hah. I was a free man! But what was I to do now? Profess? Write? OK. Where? I needed bucks bad. A rep don't pay the piper.

Luddy, of course, had all the answers, and he invited Sarah and me to his apartment for a graduation dinner to discuss my future. Luddy had never met Sarah, or expressed an interest in meeting her, so I was surprised he included

her in the invitation. (He had once, in a jealous fit, called her "that bitch you live with.") Nonetheless, the Lovebirds showed fashionably late, and, over cocktails, Luddy outlined mucho options. I could stay at Harvard, of course, or go to Yale, Princeton, Chicago U, Brown, Duke, or etc., including several European universities of great standing. He had spoken with all the above-mentioned and etcetera universities about me, and, now, it was simply a matter of choosing where I wanted to go.

Luddy, in philosophical mode, said, "You were my firth thudent, and you'll be my lath. I'm juth drained, Freddy. I love you, thon, but making you an academic thuperthar wore me out."

I said, in words like these, "My gratitude can hardly be expressed given the inadequacy of current linguistic constructions."

Meanwhile, the beautiful Sarah, scheduled to defend her diss the following Monday, remained strangely demure and mute. (Ah! Was she role-playing the faithful feminine acolyte? Did the pot boil with its cover tightly shut?) When Luddy complimented her figure, for example, Sarah did diffident squints down, and gave shy thanks. When Luddy praised her beautiful blues, Sarah blushed and gave a quiet, backgroundish response. When Luddy spoke of her overwhelming "physical presence," Sarah smiled full whites, and cocked head in fake dolly pose. Her fem tude went

incognito in deference to older male's crapola.

(Stop. This is a moment to savor. Mentor promises dreams come true. Shy, beautiful lover hangs on every linguistic unit. Pillow-free environment occurs. Begin.)

Festive mood changes. During dinner, Luddy insisted on opening a second bottle of wine, and, forthwith, he proceeded to drink it himself. Sloshed, Luddy made an ungraceful pass at mentee, who, as usual, passed it off as nothing more than mentor's crazed preoccupation with youthful beauty. Thus, mentee removed mentor's straying hand, and then cracked subtle, tension-releasing joke.

But Sarah, I could tell, seethed inward, and The Shy Glow turned into an intense grimace. Sarah said, "Perhaps it's time we leave, Fred."

In response, the drunk Luddy hotly averred, "Tho, Tharah, ith it time to go thuck thuck Freddyth penith night night?"

Sarah said, still rational, "Now, Fred! Let's go!"

I stood, with slumping shoulders and tried to laugh it off. Luddy, drunk part two, stated, "You like to thuck thuck, don't you, you thilly bith?"

More references to Sarah's bedroom demeanor ensued. The angry Sarah kept composure as Luddy threw alcohol-induced jealous fit. The coup de grace. Caboose comment. At the front doorway, as Lovebirds prepared for departure, Luddy made last stupid comment about backdoor entryway

usage. Nothing could stop physical violence now. Sarah's blue turned gray, then paisley.

I stood between girlfriend and mentor. Internal praying occurred inside boyfriend-mentee.

Sticks and stones, no. Sarah leered verbally, as she placed hand suddenly on my buttocks, "That's right, Luddy. Come on, Fred. Let's get home, so I can take you in my mouth and in my"--appropriate tension-building pause ensued--"ass." Full body rub applied. Fem appendage reached for shocked extraneous member.

Luddy's reaction. Squeal squeal. Red face. Choking noises. Hands clasped chest. Legs wobbled. Eyes rolled. Clump! Crumpled body in foyer. Body quivered once, twice, thrice. Breathing stopped as CPR illiterates watched.

I said, in words like these, "I see pillows." Clump!

Later, at the hospital, a grim-faced Welby-type announced this: "I'm terribly sorry. We couldn't save him. His heart must have stopped beating just"--finger snap--"like that. Did he seem anxious about something? Had he experienced an emotional jolt recently?"

Sarah said, as eye water welled, "Oh my God, I killed him."

Distraughtness prevailed over mentor's permanent cessation. Great bouts of unbelievable depression experienced. Lethargy followed. Sarah, the self-assigned

murderer, bravely defended psycho-sexual diss only to succumb later to extended crying moment. Me. Mopy. Mortality felt. Pondered life's philosophical use.

The dark cloud ruled, circa spring 1974. In this state, taking advantage of Sarah's vulnerability, I convinced lover to spend summer in California, allowing wedding bells to toll. Marital bliss sure to alleviate grief and guilt, I posit.

She said, "I will not use your last name, Fred. Ever." Okey dokey response given. What's a nomenclature but an indeterminate linguistic sign?

Behold. Shocked liberal feminist. "You never told me Earl was black." Lo. "I do not want a traditional wedding." More diff. "I will not wear a string bikini and parade around the beach like some male fantasy. God, I hate all this California body crap."

I said, in words like these, "I am the appeaser."

A Thousand Painted Breasts worried future bride. Her. Looking titward ho. "Do you realize you come from a very very strange home?" Me. In words like these, "Your father's a convicted felon, and you call my home strange." True. The Trenton, New Jersey, Sam Williams, just released from the Fed pen after a five-year sentence, was a convicted embezzler and a great embarrassment to fem daughter, who was supported financially throughout life by savings of swindled, now-impooverished widows. Her. "He told me he was

in the insurance business." (Sarah's familial data. Only child. When ten, mother died in terrible car accident. Father and sweet law-abiding aunts--Mae and Lilly--raised fiesty, intelligent blonde, who as Harvard U doctorate became important extended family success story.)

Sarah commented, "I see now why you're so terribly weird and angst out. All your mother's marriages, and, then this"--she pointed to mag orbs--"as a way, a failed way in the end, to compensate for the instability in your life. Some day, you're going to have to come to terms with your childhood, Fred."

I said, in words like these, "I repeat. I love my mother. Please. Refrain from analyzing future hub in presence of future in-laws."

A week from wedding bells. Tension rises. Privately, Mom said, "I think she's the sweetest, purtiest thing. You're lucky to have her. But sometimes I get the feeling she doesn't like me very well."

Earl said, "The chick be cool, Freddy. But she don't dig the tits or me, does she?"

Sarah said, "Your Mom is so, well, so Oklahomanish."

Mom said, "Shootfar. She's not even interested in her wedding dress, or the pretty lingerie everyone gave her at the shower. It's like everything's not good enough for her or something."

Enter into premarital fray, one uninvited embezzler,

the mustached, graying, slender Sam Williams, who obtained California address from sisters. Sarah frazzled at patriarch's unexpected appearance. Sam talked smooth, fast, a lot. The topic. Money. Example. "My little girl here, she's going to make megabuckareenies, passing out all this Harvard schlock about Oedipus screwing his mother and whatnot. When the green starts rolling in, don't forget about your ol' man, kiddo. Just kidding. Just kidding." Example. "So bottom line me. This tit painting--I like it, I like it--is worth what maybe a thousand, two thousand Ks per pair? Just kidding. Just kidding." Me. Fuming at future in-law's crass commercialism.

Cut to the chase. The wedding. Thank God. Nontraditional. Marriage poem, a villanelle, written by yours truly. (Poem not saleable, so not reprinted. Published later in small, no-rep academic journal.) Marriage performed in backyard by liberal Episcopal minister with pony tail. Groovy love wedding happened. Bye Mom, Earl, Sam.

Sarah and beau, tension relieved, escaped afterwards for honeymoon in Rocky Mountains before return to East Coast and careers. The moosehead mounted upon wall above bed in western-like hotel wore lacy wedding-gift lingerie and male boxers as Sarah and I made mountain-induced, Colorado love. Peace prevailed. Early marital waters smooth. Were pillows R.I.P. in pillow heaven?

I feel an authorial digression upon me. Stop narrative. This is a moment. After ecstasy happens, Sarah does zzz, and her blonde spreads on my shoulder. I think in serene snips. I have everything I want. I love my wife. I have wonderful parents. My future is secure. I am confident. I run a finger down cream and freckles arm. She responds with neck-crevice snuggle, wet puckers, and wriggly body squirms. I look heavenward to the stuffed Bullwinkle, whose antlers now display sundry lace, satin and straps. Deep breath sigh. Moose, listen. I want the honeymoon-bed again. Please. Digression over.

New twist. A telephone call brought a downer to the two-day old honeymoon. Mom, with tremors, said "Almost all of Earl's painting is gone, stolen." Pause of great significance, space, occurred.

I sat stunned. Sarah mouthed what. Mom continued, "And, I wouldn't bother you kids on your honeymoon, but, well Fred, we're mighty certain that Sarah's father took it. See, he stayed an extra day at the house, and now he's gone, and so is the painting."

I said, in words like these, "Surely you jump erroneously to a false conclusion concerning my father-in-law."

Mom added, "Sam went to the studio yesterday by himself. Earl gave him the key. He never gave the key

back. We found a crowbar on the studio's floor. The crowbar was used to pry loose the canvases. The police have already matched fingerprints on it with Sam's fingerprints."

Earl, on other phone, said, "I'll be wringing this man's neck for taking my tits. Yo know how long it takes to paint that many boobs? I'll string him up like they usta did to my people. I'll poke out his eyeballs with a fireplace poker. I'll tear off his lily white skin piece by piece and feed it to tracking dogs."

Mom said, "Earl. Did you take that sedative the doctor prescribed?" Pause ensued. "It's sort of emotional here. Anyway, Fred, we wondered if Sarah would call the detective here whose handling the case. Maybe she can help the police locate her father."

Oh no, Bobsey Twins, the case of the missing tits! Oh lost boobs! Oh the scrambled nips. Swirl swirl. And, all at once, I thought of those days I spent before the canvas, and I saw myself flecked with paint, and I saw the tits, and something deep and powerful moved inside of me. Gone now? Forever? I felt the void. I experienced the nothingness of all my unbeing. I wept. I wept for the lost breasts of my childhood, of all our childhoods.

Sarah demanded communico. I said, in words like these, "It appears that your father has absconded with half of A Thousand Painted Breasts. The police need your assistance in locating father/felon, asap."

Her reaction. Constipation-like look squinched eye sockets into slits. Hands became fists. Knuckles turned white. Emission of low growly noise occurred.

She said, in words like these, "I'll murderlize the son of a bitch."

CHAPTER SIX

The future mo. Circa 1992. Me. Yukon, OK. 66
(Upside down equals smart sidekick.) Dilapidated buildings
adjacent to taco distributor. Arches, First Baptist Church,
Love's Country Store. Bloated, crawling overalls on cracked
concrete sprouting grass shoots near mill towers. The
tracks. On either side.

I say to myself, in words like these, "I can't
breathe."

The story goes like this. I married the you're-lucky-
to-have-her woman with impressive blues. We purchased a
house in a small Oklahoma community near rising-in-the-
company newspaper job. I taught night classes--from
Mesopotamia days to Chaucer--to extremely disinterested
students at a local juco. The beautiful tots arrived, and
were duly loved and photographed by coach, but the dilemma
happened. The dilemma ensues forthwith. I couldn't
breathe. Literally. Driving up and down Route 66, the
armadillo-stained highway, to and fro work, I lost sizeable
portions of my breath. Panic-stricken, I grabbed chest,
conducted deep-breathing exercises, placed mouth near air
conditioning vent, or stuck head out the window for strong
wind drift inhaling. Somehow I always made it to home or
office, where, in macho-derived mode, I kept my breathing
problems, the daily terror, a secret. The then-one-day

part.

One day, as breath loss occurred, it dawned on me I now experienced a serious heart attack. The idea swelled, produced a tightness in my chest, sweaty palms, and general bodily discomfort, often associated I imagined, with pending heart failure. Thus, I drove to the nearest hospital, walked myself, gripping chest, into the emergency room, and announced an ailing heart condition. The deal was this. I didn't want to die in the car on Okie Route 66. But the medical personnel determined the heart attack to be an illusion. Magic drug administered. Later, in a Valium-induced haze, I listened as the doctor pronounced me fiddle fit. Instead of heart care, the doc discussed hyperventilation, anxiety, and panic attacks. The spiel. Breathe into a paper sack, don't panic you won't die believe me, exercise for stress, diet considerations are important. The big question popped by meds, wife, friends.

Is anything bothering you?

I said, in words like these, No prob. Everything is perfect.

Long pause ensued. I said, in words like these, I take that back. Everything, all of it, you, them, this place, my job, my life.

Now, years later, on Route 66 near Yukon, OK, I say to myself, in words like these, "Here is where I first felt it. The angst. Here is where I began the hunt."

I stop the pickup. I get out and cup red dirt in hand, letting soil sift through fingers. On one knee. To left, amber waves. To right, moos munch. Cattail placed, floss-like, between pearls. The farmer tude copped.

I say to myself, in words like these, "And here, a God willin', is where it must end."

Listen. This is the serious part, readers. My life is a fleeting moment of vague, undescribable anguish. I feel that hard in my lower stomach. I don't want it to be like this. Therefore I hunt. Under this road sign? This cow pattie? Does the worm know? The soul of the squashed armadillo who only lives to die? The carcass-eating, stomach-swollen vulture on the roadside? The western sun? And I know that this, all this, is about something beyond my ability to comprehend, much less express. It might be complete silence, or the one brilliant metaphor, or a good, strong noun, or a silly verb. A Will Rogers one-liner? Who knows? It remains a struggle for me. But this I know. If it exists, I'll find it on Okie 66.

Cock and bull continued. Luddy and boobs=goners. Father/felon history, Nowheresville, USA. Sarah embara. Pillows stormed. Meanwhile, Havard U diss pub to rave reviews. Pillows mo n mo. Marriage tribs. Improper disposal of toenail shavings prompted weekend-long fight. (Nuptial jury? I am disgusting? She is overreacting?)

The pillows, as never before, stormed in erratic daily stampede like Okie buffalo. Instead of conducting research for forthcoming, important Harvard U job, (I planned to imitate mentor's one-exception no-student policy) I lie on bed in new, expensive Boston apartment. Perfectly still, with wet towel on forehead, I remained safe. Sarah demanded I seek treatment. I acquiesced. Body meds shrugged. Head meds, in conspiracy with psych-friend Sarah, pointed to childhood trauma, including plentiful marriages of mother. I repeated. I love my mother. Anxiety drugs suggested. Miserable slow-motion, cloud-like life happened. I faked drug taking. Pillows went into remission thank God. But Boo Boo, where the hell were you?

Then I was informed that my book had won a prestigious national award. Bucks galore. New York ceremony scheduled. Reporters called for quotes. Me. In words like these, "It is totally expected. I owe effusive thanks to the many ugly, stupid people on whose backs I traversed the difficult pathway to academic stardom. And, of course, this, this prestigious award, as I look heavenwards, I share in my heart with the late Luddy, scholar par excellence and lifetime non-winner of this particular coveted award." Reporters fed at quote-trough like hungry Okie pigs. Oinks wrote `em up in pyramids, AP style leads.

Sarah said, "Although the drugs have helped you control your anxiety attacks, I don't think we should go to New York

for the ceremony. Too many people. Too much pressure. You need to take it easy."

I crossed legs, rubbed chin, nodded head. I said, in words like these, "Your professional opinion has been duly considered, Dr. Williams. At first, your informed medical suggestion seemed appropriately cautious and wise. Upon further review, however, I conclude that you err by not pondering a significant element in my case. The element, my dear, is this: the pillowroonies are gone."

Sarah said, "It's the drugs, Fred. Let's see how they work in two or three months from now. All I'm saying is that this particular trip, at this particular time, doesn't seem right to me. I have a bad feeling about it."

Inside cackles crew over non-drugtaking secret. Yukity yuk. I said, in a word like this, "Overruled." NYC bound.

Oh, the large red pome fruit! Times Square. A penthouse view. Park Avenue. A thousand extended rhetorical passages. The urban nudity. I do want to be a part of nonsleeping metropolis. And in the airport, a young man recognized me from the picture on the dust jacket of my book, and asked for my autograph. I took pity, and with cursive flourish, scribbled this ditty, in words like these, Good luck, stupid person, with your mediocre life.
Frederick Roderick.

Sarah said, "Don't let this go to your head."

Hotel fab beyond. But more autograph seekers accosted

me in elevator. Small paisley swirl occurred as I acknowledged peasantry homage. Sarah noticed my pale color in the hotel room. Concern expressed. I dismissed whiteness, clams, as a travelling-induced aberration.

Mood change needed. Hotel room prompted inner tingles. I took beautiful flaxen in arms. Rose cushions pecked. I said, in words like these, "I am the super hero of your choice. You are the criminal cat woman. Upon your breasts lies the one poisonous component in the universe that can render me a helpless, mortal human. You have lured me to this hotel room to take away my supernatural powers. Remember. One lick of poison, and I am your human toy for all eternity."

Sarah, sighing, said, "No games, Fred. Not today. Be Fred, Fred." (Lovemaking session okey dokey but unsaleable so not reprinted here.)

At the award ceremony the next morning, I gave the following speech to overflowing crowd, in words like these, "I am the brilliant award recipient. You are the stupid people I only figuratively adore."

After the speech, stupid personages with nametags circled in effort to capture genius vibes. One-by-one, I pronounced worshippers stupid. Prob occurred. No one split. Stupid commentary prevailed. Example. "Your book really changed my life." I saw a paisley flash. Mo. "How did you become so creative?" I can't breathe. Sarah

recognized a potential pillow prob brewed, so she dragged me away as stupid herd drooled, their cow-like mouths lined already with the cud of my brief appearance.

Sarah said, "See. I told you. Too much, too soon."

I said, in a word like this, "Air."

Outside on NYC sidewalk, I found frags of lost breath. Sarah wrapped arms tight around hub, and asked about prescribed drug taking for anxiety. The lie ensued. A deep breath. With effort, face-squinch removed, and pearls shown. The cool tude. I pronounced myself now cured, and called near-attack a special circumstance because of multitudinous stupids. Sarah very skeptical but eventually duped.

The walkaround happened. Step step. Breathe breathe. The aerobic rhythm practiced to retain breath. Diverse NYC population seen. The poses numerically large. Ethnic cafes. Antique shops. Bookstores. The VIPs, the BFDs. Then, in one area, the suits in droves, marching to money whistle. Then, in new area, alas, some sig art galleries. One small gallery, devoted to postmodern experience, appealed to artistic senses. Inside traversed the Bostonians.

This is your life! Flashback begins here. The sixteenth year. A last touch on Sue's painted spheres. Stepback in da Vinci affectation. Earl. Fatherly tones. "These be a fine pair, son." Me. Love for all mag orbs

expressed by circular boob-look as head nods appreciatively. Flashback ends here.

Whoa! Sign said "New Exhibit: 437 Painted Tits by Sam Williams. Sold separately or as whole. Make offer. " Alleged artist, father/felon, capped in artsy beret, loitered near canvases. Sarah My Godded, opened mouth in silent scream, and caught hub's shocked eyes. Without mo adieu, she-panther pounced, dropping Sam to his knees with boffo Ninja groin kick. Crowd gathered.

Sarah said, "Scum of scum."

Sam, genitals cupped, said, "Honey, honey. I was going to cut you in, really. Fifty-fifty. Honey, honey."

(Oh, my plumps, my soft!) When a security guard grabbed Sarah, I, seeing swirls, placed my hands on the guard's arms in an attempt to disengage his appendages from my wife's waist. As I did so, I tried to articulate the perfectly-sound reason for my wife's sudden, violent action, and give assurances that she would not repeat testes punt.

The guard, ignoring aforesaid articulation, said, "Get him, too!"

Additional guards, helped by sundry onlookers, swarmed. Swirl. I fought with the strength of ten men! I said, in words like these, "You simply do not understand the circumstances under which these strange events unfold." Swirl swirl. Some stupid said, "Like I think they're religious kooks protesting the `nudidity' thing, man." Arm

bone snapped. Swirl swirl. I heard Sarah. "Leave my husband alone!" Leg bone popped. I fell. I squirmed like drugged Doors' dude. Some other stupid said, "Sit on him!" A huge set of buttocks, the buttocks of hell, descended. Slow motion. (Freeze time. Paisley buttocks inches from face. Death moments away. Mucho life regrets felt. At reaper's door, No. 1 regret=I didn't do enough for stupid poor people. Begin time.) Help, Boo Boo! And, after all this time, you came to me, didn't you, Bah? You said, There's not a goddamn thing I can do for you, Yogi. Go to sleep. I'll talk to you later. Chest crackled. Breathing stopped? Dark.

Injury inventory. Broken arm, left. Broken leg, right. Cracked ribs. Contusions, bruises, cuts. Three hundred stitches. Consolation. Partial painting unharmed and returned to CA. Earl ecstatic, even though Sam Williams escaped. Stepfather, see, unable to get revenge racial-like.

Me? Pillow paralyzed. Sickness swirled. Losing weight. Weak. In my hospital room, as I recovered, I held long, meaningful negotiations with the beautiful Sarah. The bottom line. Pillows sapped energy. Therefore, I didn't want the Harvard U job. Yet. Maybe never. I didn't want to explore the retextualization of historical paradigms. Not now. Maybe never. I wanted to go back to California,

recuperate further, and help Earl finish his breasts. I would decide later what I wanted to do for life's remainder. Okey dokey? When can you be ready to leave, honey?

Sarah, tight-faced, said, "Fine. You go. Not me. I'm keeping my job and the apartment. When you feel better, come back to Boston. I'm sure Harvard will take you whenever you're ready. Maybe a separation will be good for us."

I said, in words like these, "Separation? But pumpkins darling coo-coo bird?"

Sarah said, "My career is important to me. I'm sorry. And frankly, Fred, I'm burntout dealing with your anxiety problems. You won't stay on your medication. You make fun of the people who try to help you. You don't believe anything they tell you. You simply won't help yourself. Fred. You need to get your life together."

I said, in words like these, "I love my mother."

The Sarah sigh. She said, shrugging, "See?"

I said, in words like these, "Please accompany me to CA for one or two months. I desperately need you in this, this, the most trying portion of my life."

Sarah folded arms, held sepo posture firmly. She was a CA no-go. Me. CA-bound. Sans wife. Searching. Gut feeling occurred. Sarah disembarking ship of love? (Oh, Sarah, you were so cruel to me that day. I do not forgive

you.) Tears condensate. The glassy-eyed lamb. The sorries internally felt, and milked to no avail. Tragic mood wafts in large pome fruit.

Come listen to a sto about a man named Fred. I take you back to California, into Earl's studio. I stand, on crutches, before the canvas, and, forthwith, intuitive paint strokes form mo orbs. Big ones with hot pink petals, the protruding embers. As breasts come, pillows subside. From the canvas, I draw new strength. When pillows do come, I fight `em gallantly with boob-derived energy. One month passes. Two months. Casts removed. Three months. Long thought-provoking Del Mar beach walks ensue. As Pacific sunset shimmers, I ponder existence on planet.

Via long-distance telephone, Sarah explains pointedly about new roommate, Erin. "She's gay, Fred." Swallow-like swirl. I decline to broach further. I place possible Sarah and Erin lesbian tryst in inactive mind-file as I mull multitudinous creation theories.

Mama then says, "Hell'sbells. What about you and Sarah? Three months is a long time. Maybe you all should get ya a nice, clean divorce. Start fresh. You need to quit moping, Freddy. Get back to work, do ya good. So, what ya going to do with your life, son? You can't paint breasts forever. Hell'sbells."

Earl adds, "Yo Mama be telling the truth, Fred. What

yo wanna be wasting yo life painting tits fo? Yo need to get yo life together."

(Listen. A moment I want back. I take you inside, again, the hot studio. I'm alone. Underwear removed. Sweat beads form on forehead, back glistens, thigh dew trickles. I mix a shade of soft pink, and, with intense concentration, I draw carefully the nipple's thick outer rim. I then fill the circle's inside with more soft pink, extending the paint outward until it barely meets the edge. I rapidly dot on a ring of small, pinky-brown nubs. I outline the rubbery spout, and fill it in with a darker pink shade. I etch one minuscule line that curlicues on sprouting flowerbud's face. No. Nothing matters but this. I rub my nude body on the canvas, smearing the still-wet breasts, pressing against it with my chest and hips. Painty sweat covers me head to toe. I feel lower-stomach heat waft, rise. I squirm rhythmically against hot smeary breast colors. The thick paint globs make lapping sounds as I hippound the canvas.)

Alas. Adrift. Pillows rock steady. Sans wife. Parental nags continue. And then, in God-act deal, came news of Lex's and Ruth's demise, the Okie bumpkins deader n doornails. Cessation cause. Death One. Lex falls into churning combine blades. Death Two. During an effort to stop machine, Ruth falls into churning combine blades. Lex's and Ruth's bloody fragments now belong to the land,

the red Okie dirt. Baptist funeral scheduled. Sallisaw lawyer contacts yours truly. The deal. If you want it--farmland spreading out far and wide--come and get it.

Mama a no-show at her own parents' funeral. "I don't have the strength to relive it, all the hurt. You go for me, honey. Oklahoma brings back too many bad memories for me."

The funeral. Sallisaw FBC on 62, feeder for 66, the mother. Pipe organ. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. Languid afternoon sunshine streaks multicolored through stained glass. Intense Okie heat forces senior-citizen attendees into surreal slow-motion shuffle. Lost now found. Overalls stuffed with needed crying tissues. All boots de-manured for occasion. Hats removed respectfully. Blind but now can see. Crocodiles well as minister pronounces former good lives lived to extreme fullest. Me. Front pew dignitary. The honored grandbaby of diced Okies. The Harvard U whiz, in person, meets small-town USA.

No naders spotted. Huge funeral dinner with brimming white-gravy bowls. Local farmers, in discreet shootfar way, make offer on newly-acquired land. I adopt mourning pose, and promise to mull. Later, alone at family homestead, I ponder the acres upon acres, shimmering in Oklahoma sunset, and I contemplate seriously the rural tude. I remember my promise to Lex and Ruth. More than that. I think about pillows, my life, Sarah. Gone but lurking. Must continue.

Over? I feel gutfully that Okie life is life for me, the answer to all tribbs, personal and otherwise. As sun lowers in the west, I feel exact antithesis because a new day, a new beginning, occurs internally. Naders not a one. Sound the all clear, captain.

Telephone used to announce decision. Sallisaw to Boston. Sarah asked, "Where the hell is Oklahoma? And why in God's name would you ever think I would live there?"

Sallisaw to Del Mar, CA. Mama said, "It seems durn strange to me, Freddy, but if it's what you want and all, well, then I guess I'm happy for you."

Earl said, "Yo be drifting. Maybe yo find yo place to stop, but maybe not. Oklahoma don't seem like the coolest place to be, son."

(Fie on the coastal cynics! Oklahoma? Oklahoma, you gave me my sense of place? Oklahoma, you are my center. Oklahoma, I take solace, draw peace, from you. So I repeat. Fie on the coastal cynics! Oklahoma, I find more beauty in the realism of your overgrown, rustheapy Route 66 junkyards than in the post-card California beaches of my youth. Oklahoma, I can feel the unhomogenized sense of a true historical past, of a people's real life journey, of the epic quest for survival and truth, on your potholy, dilapidated highways, but not in a thousand restored Boston condos can I get even a glimmer of this feeling. Oklahoma,

the task is not easy, and I not worthy, but I will write your story. I will sing it, too, and if it must be a cappella, so be it. I will sing of your bread-producing soil, of the armadillo, raccoon, and dinosaur fossils turned to oil, your plentiful natural gas. I will sing of your expansive western prairies, your eastern woodlands, your lakes, rivers, your cornucopia of villages, towns, cities. Most of all, I will sing the glory of your diverse, honest, hard working people. Fie on the coastal cynics! Oklahoma, I drop to my knees and kiss your red.)

Farmer Fred begins life anew. The Rebirth here. Hands hired. Wheat harvested. Calves fattened. Riding horses purchased. Boots bought. Hat worn. Chaw chewed; vomit spewed. The Pickup. One-finger howdy driving waggles. Neighborly acts committed. Howdies mo. Hot Okie sun weathered handsome face into farm vet lookalike. Hands in back pockets. Shuffle on footballs. Well. Naw. Shoot. Yep. Sharnuff.

Myth one. Farmer's daughter. Underaged horse-training filly, Kelleen, in tight Ls, tight t, offered fulls for stable smooches, options. Declined on legal grounds. Said redheaded Irish-derived fil, in pleading Okie drawl, "Doctor Roderick. My boyfriend, Alfalfa, he say"--blues down pause-- "I buck like a goat, and he ain't kidding." Me. Pondered the stuffed red and frecks with lech, teary regrets. The Okie pen, just say no. Nada bait. (Brainfiled for rehash,

non DA purview.)

Myth mo. Friendly neighbors. Sunday invites galore. Gravy smeared pot roasts floated in flower-spotted crockery. Ice-tea serving gray-haired grandmas smelled like dying violets. Smiling, red-faced, rocking-chair grampies patted gassy belly bulges. Flatulence considered polite. How it used to be in human-terms rhet back in Dust Bowl, circa 1930s. Porches creaked. Breezes caught. Following repeated. Ya need somepin, any ol' thing, ya come and get it. Doors unlocked twenty-four-a-day. No knocks needed for just like fambly.

The good life, USA, and the pillows were gone, not a nader one, and the life of Frederick Roderick II, Okie farmer, became a peaceful life filled with the simple, rural pleasures of the union's greatest state.

(At night in goose-down bed, the lonely toss. Saaarah! I want you back. I need you here. I love you. Help! Swirl swirl.)

Yogi? Hibernation or what?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fu. Circa 1992. Ran + Me. El Reno, OK. 66. Onion-fried burger wraps, coney cupolas, grasp the infamous frontier ender. Gnats swarm dead arma next to overgrown, sidehi cattails. Pock-marked metal palm tree towers over boogy dive Oasis, pitted crete, glass shards. For sale. All. A highway joint visit for thirst quench purpo. Red shag surrounds. Bud poured freely. Tattooed Marlboro-smoky cock waitresses, mag orbs, fab tocks, table grind with G five dollars, w/o in backroom mo. Okie sexy sisters Sensational Shannon and Terrific Trisha on stage six a week.

I say, in words like these, "The wife she is a bailing."

The story I told next, as Sooner babes gyrate, went like this. So I started to pull my life together again. Head meds decided the angst was caused by childhood trauma, and recommended indefinite \$125-an-hour therapy sensations. The focus. Mom. The deal was this. I needed to accept the fact that my mother rejected me. Once Mom-gone accepted, healing occurs. Thus, I told myself, everyone. I now accept the fact that my mother withheld her love, abused me, abandoned me, hated me, never wants to see me again, is a putrid bitch, a withered whore, the hated she-cunt of all eternity, etcetera. Heads meds beardscratched, nodded, lulled.

I scoffed like this. Hah! Words, nothing but words, and I can revise them anytime I want, make them my prisoners, move them around in unexpected ways, and you can't do a goddamn thing about it. Besides, I don't even think about my mother, ever. Snap. She doesn't exist. Snap. Now she does. She's 4-H mama of the year, a homemade-bread cooking, full-hipped, big-breasted suckle-ready, apron-wearing June. Snap. Now she's my wife, your wife, all women, and we're rocking the headboards like there's no tomorrow. Words goddamnit. Stop. Head meds looked very worried. At home, as angst increased, the wife grilled. The sito made clear. I needed to pull it together for small, innocent children who didn't ask to be born. Wife wanted a normal life. Maybe I should accept matriarchal theory, take angst-relieving drugs, quit thinking, writing, doing, being. I got frustrated. I thought maybe I wasn't nuts. They were. But then I thought maybe I was just thinking that because I really was wacky. The wife went like this. I'm struggling with the fact that, yes, I'm thinking about bailing out on you.

Randy, with one hand sliding up and down dancer's leg, goes, "Relax. It's nothing but a phase, mon. She'll get over it. So will you."

I go, in words like these, "The answer to all my problems is somewhere on 66, man. I know it."

Randy goes, "See, I don't believe it for a minute. I

mean that. I don't even believe you're nuts. You're my friend, and I'll go with you on this trip, and I'll help you look for what isn't there, but Christ, come on now! It's a funny thing, really, how you are, this. But it'll be a good party, anyway. We'll get drunk, go fishing. I got three, four days max."

I think. Fishing? A fish a fish a fishing? What does he mean by this reference to fishing? (Is it inside his tackle box? A jig? A lure? A sinker? Is the fisherman, this ball-capped lake person of all people, trying to give me a clue?)

New heroic tude copped in El Reno, OK. All at once, in epiphany-like deal, I feel prophetic. Upon the swirling tocks, jiggling orbs, I inscribe figuratively the following prophecy in terms understandable to uno and alle. Listen. Insurance salesmen suck because, for one thing, they steal from stupid poor people. I get up and doodle this on a bathroom wall with felt-tip. I tell Randy who shrugs, goes, "What the hell does this got to do with anything?" I laugh cockdaddy superior in the face of handsoff proachin' nips. I do fab fake face suck. Incoming buds, Buds. The Brownian chant resumes. Yes, I do feels good.

(Listen. And then one day a strong wind come, and my pappy, on his deathbed, held my hand, and he told me he was a depending on me. Begin.) Yo. Lemme give you a Sallisaw

straighto. Wheat brought \$2.95 a bush, but cost \$4.76 to grow. Corn ditto. Cattle market seesawed; one bad buy, sell, lead to televised, media-event auction. Oil? Boomo to busto babes. Rural neighbors only rich in those things not measured by greenareeny. (Translation: They were all stupid poor people.)

Bank executive knocked on my barn door, and listed Lex and Ruth's debts. If I wanted a loan for seed, pay the pipe. If I wanted a loan for cows, pay the pipe. What cash was left by the estate already used for neighborly loans, and for new farm toys, including majestic thoroughbreds and cool tractor for local pull contests. Mortgaged hilt. Farm crisis max. Cash poor. Ain't the farm even safe, paw? Swirl swirl. Black.

When I woke from lo'-tack, I found this advertisement in local rag.

Wanted. A reliable person. The Shawnee Potato Chip Company has an opening in your area for a route salesman. Set your own hours. Work with one of the state's largest growing companies. Salary + Commission. Good hours. Must be clean, have a high school diploma, and have a good driving record. Call 405-262-5180.

Bingola. Me. Reliable, clean, high schooled, a good driver. Intense need for cash. Eager to learn chips in and out.

At interview, potbellied manager asked, "Do you know

anything at all about marketing chips, or any product. Do you have any retail experience, any sales experience? Do you work well with the public."

I said, in words like these, "I am the personification of sales in singular need of one good product with which to prove famous hawking adage."

My chip truck she was a pink and white beaut, a dandy, a real dinger, a ride, a drive, a five-gear mama with a bellyfull of salty fried. What I did on my job was this. I drove from store to store in the Sallisaw area and tried to get managers to allow me to stock chips on the shelves. Major prob? Cheap chips tasted and look like Okie cow patties. Solu? Played on local connection, the state's first, only chip, bs, bs, and support your state businesses, bs, bs, and, shar times is tight, Bill, but we're a all in this together, bs, bs, and, shar, ya know, in Oklahoma we know how to make us good chips. Okie gab gets product on shelf. What then? Neato placard, which reads, Made In Oklahoma, along with mini state flag, placed strategically above greasy fried frags. Okie loyalists, members of the forty-sixth, placed hand figuratively over hearts, and bought bags galore. First week I netted three-hundred dollars in commission above my two-hundred and fifty dollar weekly salary. Commissions rose steadily. After three months, the average take salary and commission combined: Eight, count-`em, eight biggies a week. Salesman of the

month, year=me. Mo. Market, all at once, turned good for browns and whites. Money flowed. Mo. Thoroughbreds bought for aesthetic value now stood studly for big fees. The farm was saved, truly saved, Paw. Chips, moos, studs. Ah farm living is the life for me, you bimbo kraut! Neighbors gave congrats, ask for mo n mo loans. Accepted, granted. What the hay? Pillows where?

And in my first year on the Okie farm, I worked so hard I forgot about my personal problems, and, see, I became part of the land, the dirt, and, well, I really felt like I belonged to the land, and, sure, I missed Sarah, the tits, Mama, Earl, but this, well, this was good, good and solid and righteous and, well, everybody knew one another, and we worked together, that's right, together as a community, we shared, through the good times and the bad times, and I felt something durn right about it all, and, at first, I couldn't quite catch hold of her, of what it was that was so durn right about it, but then I seen it was like, well, like we was the people, and it was the people that counted, and what the big banks and the big land companies done way back when or today really didn't matter because the people would always go on no matter what.

New prob. Libido ruled in face of Sarah's continued absence. Sex-think dominated brain waves. (Meanwhile, ears went red as neighbors gossiped about East Coast nonmarriage marriage of new Okie.) Then, one Saturday

morning, I witnessed horses mate. Owner of soon-to-be impregnated filly, also an onlooker, said, "Criminy, this guy knows how to drive it home, don't he." I think, in a word like this, Indeed. That night I lacquered up good and headed up Hwy 62 to Buster's, the honky tonk sans fern, sans hanging crockgrass, but Bud on tap, all you want fifty cents a pour.

And, I bar belly, and it's hiya Ray, hiya Sean, how's the corn, how's bizness?, and do me a nice cool Bud, Lisa. Bar pose. One foot on bottom railing, shoulders slightly hunched, fingers tapped rhythm to Willie, Waylon, etc. Pool tables in full use. Small talk with bartender about possible chip display with Okie flag maybe adjacent to red hots.

Late in the evening in walked a babe, a shell, a bleach-frosted-blonde, a high-haired beaut in jean skirt mini, breasts a plenty, the three-time divorcee Boy Roberts (her first name derived from pappy disappointment over sex of first child). Me. By now quite drunk. Silly, giggly. Caustic to max. Yet still the stud. Her. Beautiful. The greatest hair on earth. Swinging tah tahs. A bitchin' babe no bout adout.

She sat next to me, showed pearls, and lit cigaboo. Deep smoke suck ensued as painted fulls gripped tobaccy cylinder. One-eye squinch, head-nod tude as smoke clouds developed overhead. Everyone coughed.

She said, with gruff, sexy voice, between `lish ruby, "So you must be Lex's and Ruth's grandson, the big-deal Harvard shit whose making us all look so bad by actually making money. We've never met. I'm Boy Roberts, the one you've heard so much about. Don't lie. I know you've heard about me. Don't ever lie to me. Ever. Understand? I know about you, you and your wife. No kids, right? She's gone, ain't she? She ain't never coming back. She thinks you're a shit, a loser. She's a feminist, a radical-type, ain't she? She doesn't know jackshit. I'm a single parent with two kids, and I live in a rundown trailer in a backwards-thinking Oklahoma town. What has this radical ERA, East-Coast shit, ever done for me? Not a goddamn thing. Anyway, now you're here, Sallisaw, Oklahoma USA. You're hornier than hell, right? Old man Caruthers was at your place early today, wasn't he?, and he mated one of his horses with one of your studs. I know that. Everyone in town knows that. You watched it, didn't you? Goddamn, you really did watch it. See, us locals know better than to watch something like that unless we're going to get some ourselves. You'll learn. You're ready to bust, ain't ya? Your doink's so hard it's about ready to fall off, ain't it? Everyone in town knows you're going around with a boner; it's so big it can be seen from across the Arkansas River. You think I'm beautiful, don't ya? You wanna screw me, don't ya? Here lemme buy you a drink. Lisa!? Two shots. Tequilla."

Tequilla shotted.

She said, "Lisa!? Two more. Keep 'em coming. Let me separate some wheat from the chaff, Dr. Fred. These boobs"-- she arched her back and rubbed her hands over her chest-- "are all mine, no jobs, no nothing, and still firm as hell, understand? What you've heard about my tits are lies, goddamn jealous lies. Also, I got some stretch marks on my thighs from having my babies, not real bad, but if we screw you might notice them, so I want to warn you about them now. Do not, I repeat, do not, say one goddamn word about the stretch marks because I'm very sensitive about them, understand?"

Tequilla mo.

"Lisa!? Two more. Make `em doubles. I think I should tell you up front that I'm after a man, a good man. I need money, and I need help in raising my two boys. Here's what I know about you. Like me, you're high-strung. But that's all right because it means you won't never be lazy. You're the artsy, reading type. Good for the kids. You're nice, gentle. Herman Ferguson told me how you drove to Tulsa to get Hazel's new walker when hers busted. That was nice. You're also not some straight-laced ass or you wouldn't be in this pukehive. I hate a tightass. You own land, lots of it, more'n anyone in the county. You also got a steady job. You're also very handsome. All in all, see, you're the best catch to come to Sallisaw in the last several

decades, if not in its whole entire history."

Tequilla mo.

"Lisa!? Shoot, just bring the whole goddamn bottle. Put `er on my tab. But then there's this marriage thing hanging about you, right? See, the town don't know what to think about it. But it's been a year, hasn't it? No wife, right? Where the hell is she? Something's wrong, sure'n hell, I figured. I gave it a year. Christ, the whole goddamn town gave it a year, waiting for something to happen. Well, clear as a bell you two ain't getting back together, are you? And then, tonight, when Lisa--she's my best friend--gave me a call, tol' me you were rooting around for some female company, leaving your scent as it were, I said, `What the goddamn hell, I'm going for it.'"

Tequilla mo.

"I know you probably think I'm strange the way I talk and all, but I've been through some hard times, and I like to be up front to avoid difficulties. Now I don't want to rush, but here's what I propose. We take this here bottle, worm and all, and we get into your truck, and we drive to this place I know out by the Arkansas River, or we can go to Fort Smith and get us a room in one of those thirty-dollar places that shows dirty movies, or we can go out to your place, which is what I would like the most because I know you got a nice place. But if we do that, I'm warning you, people are gonna talk. Whatever. I like to let the man

decide these things. The trailer's definitely out because the kids are there with mom. She's spending the night, though, so I got the whole night if I want it."

Tequilla mo.

"Am I pushing you? You and she, your wife, ain't, you know, thinking about getting back together? Hell, its been a full 365 days, n more. I figure she's given up all her marital rights. You deserve a little loving, some woman company, no matter what."

Pause. Swirl. I said, in words like these, "The amount of tequilla I just consumed, combined with the twelve Budweisers I drank earlier, has rendered me incapable of any action other than the following."

I felt myself fall from the stool. And on the floor I looked up and I saw a red swirl, and then I realized I was staring up Boy's skirt, and it was the sweet Oklahoma red of her panties I saw. Gasp. The Arkansas-River boner ain't gonna make it. Red went to paisley, paisley went to black.

Morning next. Whereabouts unknown. Head pounded. Eyes squinted. Mini appendages pulled leg hairs. Giggles followed. Lassie dog panted. Cat crept on stomach. Spinsick. Huge bowl spied nearby. The Regurgitation.

Small child said, "Oooh gross, man. He must a been drunker `n shit."

The boom. Semi-recognizable voice, in deafening decibels, said, "Watch your filthy mouth, Toy! You and your

brother go outside and play." Spinsick part two. The Regurgitation. Emission completed.

Boom cont. "Ya don't know where the hell you are, do ya? Do you even remember me at all? It's me. Boy Roberts. We met at Buster's last night. You're at my trailer. Naw, we didn't do it, dammnit. You were slop-gut toilet-hugging drunk. Hell, if I'd a known you weren't a drinking man, I wouldn't a done shots like that with you. I'd taken it slow and easy. I like it, though. I mean. I like it that you ain't a drinking man. You sorty met my two sons, Toy and Loy. Right. It all rhymes. Boy, Toy, Loy. You think rhyming names is tacky, don't you? You think my trailer's tacky, too? Well, hell, I had these boys when I was barely out of high school. What do you expect from a seventeen-year-old Sallisaw hick married to an alcoholic port-a-potty maintenance worker? And this here trailer, I bought with my own money, every damn cent. So don't give me any of this Harvard I'm-better-n-you shit, all right. I'm just another poor person, stupid, I guess, like everyone else around here."

I said, in words like these, "Cease all talking to prevent further gushing."

She said, "Christ, I'm sorry. Me carrying on like this, and you so hungover you're fit to die. Here let me get you a wet warshrag."

I felt her real breasts press against my chest as she

wiped my forehead, and I noticed her hair, again, the huge bleached, frosted, wispy, frozen cone, the twirling, frizzying experience, and it was madness, madness in shades of blonde, silver, brown and black. And this was strange, but I found something very reassuring in Boy's hair, and I didn't know why, but it calmed me.

Her words next from rubies full. "Sleep honey. I'll keep the kids off you."

Several hours later. Soft country music background twang. Boy told me the kids went fishing with their grandfather. I ate a grilled cheese sandwich as she talked on the telephone with her mother. I took a shower, brushed my teeth with her toothbrush. I couldn't find my clothes. I stood in her living room, draped with a Moby-Dick beach towel, calling her name. She walked into the room from back of the trailer.

"They had the most godawfulest puke all over them so I went ahead and warshed them," said the stark-naked Boy with blissful orbs needing enshrinement upon CA canvas. "They're in the dryer now. It'll be another forty minutes at least before everything is ready. So why don't you hand me that there towel around you, mister, so I can get me another load going."

Okie life cont. Boy and Fred became Sallisaw item. Truck rides to Dairy Boy for summer-night sherbs. Moonlight

country road walks w/pause for against-oak smooches. Skinny dipping lake swims with ensuing water bobbing. Late-night tv popcorn times w/Samantha, Clampett reruns. Conversation singular. When Boy rambles, Fred listens, amazed at nonstop verbiage. Talk, sex, kids. No time for discernment, mindthink. The great hair towers, mesmerizes.

The chiles. Wild boys, seven and four, abounding freckles. Orneries rope unsuspecting mama beau, demand ransom. Father fig needed, pronto. (Am I worthy?) Put `em on knees and back for giddyap horsey rides. Read `em whodunnit, cowboy, outter-space books by dozens. Buy `em presents, tousle hair, tickle ribs. Put `em to bed w/cheek kisses. Late-night stomach pits develop as attachment grows and chiles fu pondered. What chance in hell, Boo?

The Boy story, gleaned and condensed from K upon K manuscript pages, ensues.

Opening statement begins. "You need to know everything because that's how I operate. No surprises. No lies." Opening statement ends.

"I never had the confidence you probably had, and I probably never will. I grew up poor, and I was stupid as a goose most of my life. Until now. My parents, bless `em, are good people, but they're stupid, stupider n hell. My father, he's a tenant farmer, been one his whole life, been shit upon by everyone. People laugh behind his back because, for one thing, he's never made a living; for

another thing, he's ignorant and naive and he'll believe anything you tell him. My daddy's the most literal person that ever lived. You tell him with a straight face someone invented a way to turn water into oil, and he'll believe you. My mama's even stupidier than Dad. We was county cases, welfare, all my life. I still get food stamps. I was born in a trailer house, and I've lived in a trailer out in the country my whole life.

"I have three sisters, all younger n me. The twins, they're retarded, and live in a state institution in Enid. I go see `em three, four times a year. I should tell ya. There's a long line of mental retardation in my family tree. My other sister, Beth, she's the youngest, and the prettiest, and she's married to a Houston oilman; she never writes, or calls. She wrote us off, and I don't blame her. If you can get out, get, and don't never look back, I tol' her.

"Ya need to know. I was the town slut for a long time, ever since I was fifteen when Tommy Radford and his brother, Lenny, took turns with me in their barn. For a long time, I'd do it with anyone. It was my way of getting attention, of feeling like I was something, anything, a real person that existed, even if this real person was a whoredog slut who let boys do anything they wanted. Understand? I was a somebody. It sounds crazy I know. I let the boys do anything, let them take turns, let them watch with their

hard-ons as I screwed them one-by-one, let a gang of `em jack-off on me once at the same time, let them pull trains on me at parties. A boy would come in the bedroom, and I'd just say, "Another one?," as if it was no big deal. I just laid there and let him. They were hateful, hateful boys, all of `em. A lot of those boys, they're men now, still live here in Sallisaw. You've met many of them. You do business with some of the sonsofbitches. I'll give you names if you want. I won't hide the fact that all of it happened, ever.

"I quit school in the eleventh grade, and I got married to George Thurman, an Arkansas man who went to work for the Smith's Public Toilet Company in town, fixing and cleaning port-a-potties. He was thirty-four, and been married twice already. I married him because I seen him as a way out of my parents' trailer, which was hell in itself n more. He was a drunk, and he beat me. Worse, I let him do it for more n a year. He's Toy's father. I ain't seen or heard of him in eight years. He's never paid a penny in child support, and neither has Loy's father, my second husband, a Texas oilie by the name of Bean Dove. I haven't heard from him in five years. My third husband was Bob Shirley, who operates the Root N Scoot outside of town. We was married less than six months. He's a religious nut, belongs to the Church of the Firstborn congregation, which don't believe in regular doctorin' medicine. He's a good, honest man, but

he's certifiable on this religious crap. Applying oil to your forehead and laying on hands, and washing each other's feet, just a crazy mess. We couldn't make it work; we tried, but we couldn't mesh."

Closing statement begins. "The one thing you should know above everything else, though. I ain't as stupid as I used to be. I don't let anyone step on me anymore. Not you. Not anyone." Closing statement ends.

Town tude. Big winks from overalled bellies. Getting ya some, hoss? Some tang, some pie? She's a doozy, let me tell ya. Boy Roberts. Jugs. Hell, she'll suck it off if you ain't careful.

The warning given by local insurance agent. "Nothing wrong with a man getting a little somepin. No one's faulting you. But you can't take her public, Fred. The other day when you two showed at the Washington's cookout, Isabel liked to die an early. Boy ain't exactly socially correct, even around here, if you catch my drift. She's been a whore all her life, slept with every man in the county n more. Her daddy's dumber n a dirt clod. Some say he's a retard like those two kids of his. There's a lot who say that Boy's oldest boy is really her father's kid, and that's why Boy quit school and married that Arkansas man, cus she was pregnant by her own goddamn father. Incest, man. It happens around here. I don't know if it's true or not in Boy's case, but it's the way these people live.

Idiots. You can't even help `em because they're so goddamn stupid, and they can't help themselves."

I responded, in words like these, "Please. Further communication is unneeded at this time, thank you."

(Oh, Boo Boo. Him? Not him? That wagglin' fat ass, the deputy sheriff? The father? No! Swirl.)

Oh Okie living made complicated by new love interest! Long solitary walks used to mull sito, and, on those walks, I stopped, knelt on my haunches, spat, and I drew in the dirt with a stick, spat, and I figured, spat, and I figured damn hard.

And then one day, as I walked along a dirt road to my figuring place, black clouds developed in the west, and they was hard-rain clouds, and from one of those clouds dipped a swirling nader, a bonafide twister come to lift me to heaven, but then it turned and headed toward the homestead.

I ran, I ran like the Oklahoma buffalo back to the farm, because Boy and the kids were there, and the winds blew against me, but still I struggled on, and I fought onward, running against a moving wall of fence pieces, roof shingles, and Sears siding fragments, and, lordy, I spied Boy in the yard, her hair a mini-nader in itself, a silver-blueblonde sidewinder leaning due west with the wind, and she was a holding her child Loy, but, lordy, Toy he was nowhere to be found, off fishing somewheres, and the

screaming, deathnader she was a coming on less than a mile away.

Boy screamed, her voice nearly lost in the howl of the nightmare winds, "Toy! Toy! Toy!"

I wrapped her in my arms, and drug her and Loy to the cellar, and I got on my knees to her, and our eyes met, and I made a promise, and this here was that promise. Come hell, high water, or even a nader, I would find her boy, her oldest boy, the boy named Toy, or else die in the trying of it.

I 'membered then how Toy he liked to fish and noodle in this one big ol' hole down to the crick behind the house, so I took off like a housafire, and shar enuff, thar he was, trying to unsnaggle his fishing line, get it out from under this big ol' crick rock the size of a June watermelon.

I hollered, in words like these, "Leave `er be, Toy. Our only chance now. Gotta run, no, gotta fly, gotta fly like a hellbat to the cellar."

He said, "But I got one of your good jigs on `er. The yeller caterpillar with the silver wings. We can't just leave `er."

Then the trees started to fall around us, the earth rumbled, and then I seen it was too late, so I wrapped my arms around Toy, and it was then, at that moment, after I took a good last look at his face, noticed the odd shape of his tow head again, seen the vacant look behind his eyes

once more, that I knew it was all true, what they all said in town was true, that he was his very own granddaddy's son.

We swirled, clamped together, Oklahoma boy and man, and I felt us lifted higher n higher by the wind currents. I heard Toy say, again and again, "What about the jig? What about the yeller caterpillar?"

Yogi, what are you doing in this godforsaken place?
You don't belong here. Leave.

Okie nader survival II. Fred and Toy, as one entity, lifted and dropped in nearby moo pasture. Injuries? Toy. Zilch. Me. Only scratches, bruises. Even caterpillar jig later recovered intact. Property damage. Where once a barn stood, nada. Good news. House needed only new roof shingles, siding. Only a quarter mile of fence shredded. Overall op. Luckier n allgetout to still smell roses.

When we all gathered on the porch, Boy noticed how I kept staring at Toy. She said, "He's all right, Fred. There ain't a thing wrong with `em."

Later that night, when she saw how I couldn't keep my figuring eyes off him, she put the kids to bed, and came back downstairs. She said, "You've been listening to talk in town about me, ain't ya?"

I said, in words like these, "Certain town citizens have mentioned you in passing, yes.

She said, "It's about Toy and my daddy."

I said, in words like these, "Your statement suddenly reminds me that, why yes, those two were linked recently in an extended rhetorical passage of some interest."

Boy lit cigaboo, smokesucked, coughed, and retrieved Jack Daniels from liquor cabinet. Slug taken, one, two, three. She said, "Here it is, then, Fred, all of `er. I've left something out about myself that you should know. I thought I could get away without telling ya. I hoped to hell it wouldn't come up in town, but, goddamn, it did, now didn't it?"

I said, in words like these, "The pin and needles upon which I lie will not sustain me much longer."

She said, "Yeah. My daddy started having sex with me when I was twelve. He didn't actually rape me, see. He just didn't know better. Neither did I. Then. Course, my excuse was I was young and dumb. I could of tol' the welfare people, and I didn't. We was both stupid. Mama didn't even think anything was wrong about it. She knew about it. Understand?"

"So yeah. It's true. Toy could be his son, and maybe he is, maybe he ain't. I don't know. He could be a lot of men's sons, including no doubt the man who tol' you about all this. He ain't George Thurman's son, though. I was pregnant before I ever done it with him."

CHAPTER EIGHT

F. C#1992. R + m. Weatherford, OK. Maw rd.
Sombrero tipping Mexican two steps over boarded rooms, no
longer for rent, OOB. A photo opportunity ensues. Cheesers
click. Weeds grow inside nearby gutted, rusty, junkyard
Impalas, sans hoods, caps. Hunger howls force pit. Okies,
lookin' gaunt, sallow, need beef, spud fix. Mordy's `rant.
Specials. Gravy-smear'd meat loaf or chicken fried steak,
white beans, corn, mashed, cornbread, salad, carrot cake,
iced tea all you want. Three dollars, sir. Locals eyeball
chompin' strangers. Hand-hid belches, pick between
incisors, belly pats, mighty fines.

I say, in words like these, "Everything, all, depends
on this one trip."

The story I told next went like this. Headmeds
consulted over additional test results, dwindling patient
bank account, and discarded Mom theory. There was nothing
seriously wrong with me. New theory. I belonged to a small
group of overly sensitive, intuitive, creative, and artistic
(translation: failed) people in our society. Because few
such people lived in Oklahoma, I felt alienated, isolated,
alone. Options. I should look for, find, and befriend
those few people like me in the Sooner state, the home of
Will Rogers, or pack up and move to someplace like southern
California, or New York, or Boston, where I was sure to find

other people like me with whom I could find support, identity. Also, I could make this an extremely exciting, enlightening period of my life, as I struggled to find out just who I was, and who was like me. Headmed said, "Consider it your personal quest." The wife, though, remained skeptical, clung to Mom theory. Deal arranged. Wife said she would go with me, anywhere, just as long as I pulled it together for innocent offspring, the two boys. She said although I still love you, frankly I'm burnt-out dealing with your problems. You're a grown man.

I then announced forthcoming Okie 66 tour with a new friend of questionable character. Statement given. I need to do this. (I hesitate, build conversational tension.) I'm looking for something, anything, and it could be the breath I lost on that road, or other people just like me, or the right voice, words, for my writing, or a feeling, a way of thinking, that I missed out on as a child. I sense it's out there on that old, damn highway. I consider it a personal quest. And I know it sounds stupid, but I feel drawn, powerfully drawn, to that road.

Wife okayed Okie trip, but gave stipulation that I needed to be sans angst, depression, upon return. Please. For the boys' sake.

I went, in words like these, "I'll take pictures."

Randy, stool swiveling, says, "It's funny, really. You're always trying to make a big deal out of everything,

and you talk too much. I love you anyway. Come on, let's go buy some beer, and then go fishing. I know a spot less than a half hour from here."

I get serious. I say, in words like these, "Fishing? What is it with you and this fishing thing?"

Randy smiles, and now he looks like a catfish, with his bloated gills, the smooth, slimy jewels, and his squinty, felinic eyes. He rolls blood-shot browns, says, "It's something to do, mon, a way to get loaded, that's all. Don't worry. If we catch anything, we'll throw it back in. I got everything we need."

The lake. Tacklebox opened. Lures, jigs, bobbers, swivels, sinkers, hooks, bait, each in its plastic compartment. Little drawers filled with special fishgetters, gadgets. Plastic lizards, baby mice, for the bottom biggies. Minnows, night crawlers, shad. Exotic smells waft, including odor of ten-year-old garlic corn.

Randy puts on The Hat, a red-orange-white ball cap. It says, in huge black letters, Okie Boy.

Squirming crawlers ripped in two, shared, their bodies disemboweled on hooks. (Do they mind? Can they feel the metal claws as they pierce their rubbery hides?) Lines cast. Bobbers float. Come and get `em, fishypoos. Beers drained 78rpm, n faster, in summer heat. Alcohol and nature combine, produce intense harmonic, euphoric feeling, induce dialectical, Socratic tude.

I say, in words like these, "As a metaphor for our lives, this sportperson's activity has no postmodern parallel, now does it? For we are all, are we not, fisherpeople, casting out lines into murky waters, hoping to catch the meaning to make our lives more than just the naturalistic, animal-like constructions of a Godless world? Randy? What we do here is a simple dramatic rendering of man's quest for man. Are we not agreed on this rather important philosophical tid, fellow rhetor?"

Randy says, "Quit talking, mon. Look. You have a bite."

I say, in words like this, "Oh my God! Thar she blows!"

Metaphorical battle ensues. Man against fish. Pole arched, squirming. Reel in, relax. Reel in, relax. And then the fish, a three-inch perch, dangles from my hand, and it is battle weary, shocked, conquered, vanquished. I look into one of its eyes, which squints, maybe winks. Oh kindred spirits! Something moves within me. All at once, I feel the old fire in my bones, and as I remove my new gilledfriend from the hook, I telepath to it this, Speak to me, give me a sign. The fish flops, wiggles. Communication perhaps? Is this it, what I'm looking for? If so, what does it mean? I raise the fish above my head in priest-like, communion-wafer movement. A sacrifice ritual? Randy goes, "It's not a keeper, mon. Throw it back in the water.

Gently." I do so. As the fish swims away, I wonder, I wah, wah, wah, wah wonder.

Night-time pacers over new Boy-background fo. Fem come to beds ignored. Insomnia, figuring ensued. Thought-muddles wallowed relentlessly circular night n day. Should I weep or run? Who was to blame for this incestuous mess? Should stones be cast, and at whom? The toothless, dimwitted dad? The mama? The welfare workers? Paisley spotted overhead. Shwoosh! Wave followed wave. Hit the dirt! Boy rhet no comforter against swirls. One, two days spent in pillow hell. I didn't blame her, but I couldn't touch, talk to her. What is wrong with me, with us, with them? Still? Oh where am I? Who am I? What have I become? (Does the arma know before it is squashed? Does the hooked worm, its black intestines spewing over metal, upon fingers? The upside down highway turtle, forgotten? (I pull over and flip him/her over.) (Does it matter to you?) The dead roadside, masked racoon lying in its own blood puddles?) Dark. Void.

And on the morning of the third day, as dawn crawled across Okie homestead, as Boy and the chiles slept, the doorbell rang.

A vision? The supernatural? A hint of fabulist elements working within the framework of my life? Oh sss, aaar, ah!

It was the estranged, beautiful wife, suitcase in hand; I had not seen her in eighteen months. She smiled love, opened arms for welcome hug. Shocked, outside of myself, I felt our bodies embrace, fall automatically into the old fit, felt her ruby cover mine, and I went through these acts as if I were dreaming. The dawn light enhanced surrealness.

We stepped inside the house with arms wrapped around each other. Sarah, oh beautiful Sarah, said, "I've missed you. I need you."

I said, in words like these, "Pinch me for I am truly dreaming."

She said, "I know it's been a long time, but I've changed. I'll live wherever you want me to live, Fred, even here in Oklahoma. But really, we have to get rid of those awful, smelly cows. I'm a vegetarian now. Fred, listen. I want us to start a family. Now. I want to have a baby, two babies, maybe more. Say `yes,' Fred. Please."

I said, in words like these, "Your request demands time for digestion."

Sarah pressed against me, nibbled neck, and I felt the old fire rise in my bones. She said, "I want to make love. Now." I felt her hands on me.

I said, in words like these, "Perhaps we should exchange updated versions of our lives before pondering physical festivities."

She said, "Later." And then my robe was on the

hardwood floor, and she knelt in front of me. I locked my hands under her armpits and tried to raise her, but she wouldn't budge. Mmmm.

I said, in words like these, "I must insist--ooh--that we refrain from sexual activity--oh yes, God yes--at the present moment, given the close proximity of"--pause of great significance--"two innocent and defenseless children."

Sarah said, "Chull-run? Wa da ya man chull-run?" Noises heard behind us on stairs. Pitters. Patters. Sexual cessation occurred. Boy's morning smoker's cough resounded as phlegm gurgled to top. Sarah cocked head around my legs. Gasps of oh my Gods.

Rising, she said, "Tell me, Fred. Who the hell is that woman and those children, and what the hell does she have on her head?"

Boy's morning hair was mashed into one huge, multi-colored wave on her head's right side. A flash of desperate anguish hit me. She sat on the stairs, with Toy and Loy in front of her.

Boy said, "Kids scoot back to your room and get dressed. Why lookee here if'n it ain't the Boston bitch come home to the man she purtnear left high and dry in Okiesville, USA."

Sarah said, "What does she mean? Why does she talk like that?"

Boy said, "Don't you worry yourself none, hon. I'm

taking my kids and gettin' the hell out of Dodge. I know when I'm beat. They ain't no way this ol' broad can compete with some educated Boston bitch with natural hair and good skin. Shoot, you ain't even wearing make-up, except for a dash of eyeliner and lipstick, and you're beautiful. They ain't no way. I see that."

Sarah said, "Fred? You didn't tell me you had ah ah met someone."

Boy said, "Of course he ain't tol' you about me. He's been hoping you would come back all this time, and then he would sorty pretend like nothing happened between us. Right? Ain't that right, Fred? Like we we ain't even met, right?"

Sarah said, "Fred? Speak."

Boy said, "Ain't that right, Fred?"

Sarah said, "Fred? Say something."

Boy said, "Ain't that right, Fred?"

I said, in words like these, "I'm going upstairs to put on my uniform, and then I'm getting in my truck, and I'm going to work."

As I headed for the stairs, Sarah grabbed my arms. "Work? Truck? You mean you actually drive that silly chip truck out in the driveway. Fred, listen. Something's happened to you out here, and it seems really weird. I blame myself. We need to talk, Fred, seriously talk."

As I passed Boy on the stairs, she said, "Over just

like that, huh? Me and the kids just something you use up and throw away like an old warshrag, right? Well, I guess you're no different than any other man. You're a scumbucket and a slimebag, a user. And I don't need you, or any other person with a goddamn thang sticking out."

After I put on my uniform, I went downstairs. Sarah sat pouty, with her arms folded, eyes staring, on the couch. Boy, her hair still mashed, was in the hallway, helping the boys zip and button.

Sarah said, "We need to talk, Fred. I'm serious about the babies, our babies. Please."

Boy said, "Lordy lady, don't have a hissy. I'm leaving. You two can get started right away. Ain't nothing stopping ya. Hell, the sheets ain't even dirty. We ain't done it for three whole days."

I said, in words like these, "I shall return for lunch. If you're both still here, fine. If you're both gone, fine. If just one of you is here, fine. I don't care. During the lunch hour, however, I will announce a personal decision of great import to anyone interested. Good bye, ladies. I bid you a fond adieu."

My eyes met Toy's eyes then, and a painful pit formed in my stomach.

In the truck, my knuckles whitened as I gripped the steering wheel. Oh my God, what decision? What was I going to do? Boy? Sarah? The two boys? Babies? Paisley. I'm

outside of myself. Deep breath. Focus. Chips. I started the engine, released the brake, stepped on the clutch, and headed to my first delivery. Be patient, still. It will come to you.

Parking lot scene of grocery store. Dancing neon cucumbers in background. Woman's stringy, blonde hair in spangles. Her hand tapped a rhythm on Ford pickup's passenger-side door. Two men with her. One with an earring, brownish hair; the other dark, thick, tall. Foggy shadows in early-morning light. Vibes poor to bad.

The Happy Cucumber Grocery Mart, super saver store, emitted fluorescent sparkles. Dolly loaded. One, two, three cases Okie chips. Roll `em, roll `em, roll `em. One eye on truck occupants. Ford's doors opened, slammed shut. Dark younger man approached.

I said in words like these, "This establishment does not resume its operating hours until 9 a.m."

The man produced a small, black pistol, drew a bead on my forehead. His hand shook.

He said, "No shit, Sherlock. That's why you're taking us into the store. Now, you just go about your business, and get that lady in there to open the doors."

He pointed to Shiela Crawley, the store's young assistant manager, who we could see through the windows but who couldn't see us. I felt the other two at my back.

I heard the woman's voice. "Will he do it or not, Guitar?"

"No names!" the gunman said. "I told you no names!"

"Okay okay. God, why are you always yelling at me lately? Listen, mister, we ain't the mean type, okay? But, well, I mean there's always the chance he might shoot you, or, at least break your leg, or arm, or somepin. Well, maybe fingers, he'll break some of your fingers? Right, honey? Fingers is the deal? Just fingers?"

Gunman's eyes rolled. "Shut up for christ's sake, all right already. This gentleman, here, is about to escort us into the store. Ain't ya?"

I felt my stomach muscles tighten, felt something flutter inside. Oh paisley! Oh give me air, one breath! My feet moved, all alone, as if a spirit within held sway. I pushed the dolly to the automatic doors, backing my way in, pressing my back against the glass. The gunman, woman, and other man hid behind a Coke machine, but I could still see the pistol nuzzle. I tapped on the glass until Shiela, who was behind the store's cash-checking counter, came to unlock the door and let me in. As I rolled the chips in, the gunman and the other two rushed in after me. It was all a swirl. Shiela gasped, and looked confused.

The gunman said, "All right, missus, hold it right there, or you will die."

Shiela shook, held her hands dramatically above her

head and pudgy body.

"Now let's all walk over to the counter nice and slow like, there we go, that's it, whoa, whoa, hold your horses"-- he stopped to pick up a paper sack from a slot in a checkout counter--"all right, keep moving, there you go, nice and steady. Stop. Missus, you get on back there and fill up this sack with all the cash."

All this time, I continued to roll my dolly of chips. I caught Shiela's eyes as she went behind the counter, and I turned away embarrassed. Oh I felt somewhat responsible for all this. Maybe I should have refused to enter the store. Listen. What if I would have done that, just refused, held my ground?

Shiela put stacks of money in the sack. When she handed the sack back to the gunman, he looked into it, and said, "Jimminy criminy. There must be a couple of thousand dollars in here."

The woman, the blonde, said, "Honey? I need me some shampoo, too."

"Hurry!"

She ran down one of the aisles, as I lodged the dolly handles against my stomach. Immediate tension defused. We waited. A few seconds later, the woman skipped back down the aisle. She had light-blue eyes, and a very attractive, slender figure.

The gunman grunted, "All right then." He pointed his

gun at Shiela and me. "What the hell do we do with you two?"

Chills danced down the chip dude. I felt myself backing up intuitively, moving the dolly with me. The gunman said, "Stop it right there, Mr. Chip Man." Frozen Fred.

The blonde said, "Why, tie `em up, honey, like we said, right?"

The gunman snorted. "I know that. Jeesh! Everyone's got to be a bossy cow, don't they? Jeesh? All right, Bobby, you go find some rope or cord. Charlotte, you go look out the windows, and make sure everything's hunky dory outside."

Satisfied smirk adorned blonde as baby blues giggled. "What about the no names policy, Geee taaar? I shouldn't tease you, I know, but, see, it just slips out, don't it?"

Guitar? Bobby? Charlotte? I tried to picture their names in the Sallisaw Times, in a story about The Happy Cucumber store robbery, but the names didn't fit.

The gunman yelled, "Jiminy criminy, all right already, let's frigging forget the whole name thing, Charlotte. Now move it!"

"Not until you say `please.'"

"Pah-leeese all right already give me a break and a half!"

The one named Bobby, who wore his hair in a pony tail,

looked at Shiela and said, "Excuse me, ma'am. Could you tell me where you keep your rope or cord?"

Shiela rubbed her chin, bit a fingernail. "Gee. Rope? I don't know if we have rope. Now, wait a minute. Right. I got it. We got some jump ropes, you know, kids' jumping ropes, down aisle four, right in the middle on the right side."

Bobby said, "Aisle four? Right. Thank you ma'am." He hurried away.

The gunman said, "The tying you up part can't be helped, you know. It's SOP in deals like this."

Shiela stood, glaring, with her arms folded tight. Strangely, she had a self-satisfied, smart-alecky look on her face, perhaps a nervous reaction. I closed my eyes, put brain in CA tit-think mode, asked silently for Boo Boo's help, took a deep breath. A swirl. Breath. A swirl. Breath.

All at once, loud commotion broke out. "Police! Police!" The blonde came running through a checkout aisle yelling. "There must be four or five police cars out there, Guitar. They got their lights on, and they got rifles and barricades."

Guitar held up his hands. "Great! Just dandy. Now how do you suppose they figured it out. Lady, is there a back door to this store." Shiela nodded. "Well, let's get going, and check it out."

"I got the ropes," Bobby said as he walked up. "They was right where you said they'd be, ma'am."

Guitar said, "Shut up already!"

"What? What's going on?"

Charlotte pointed to the windows. "Cops. All over creation."

Bobby threw the ropes down. "You said nothing would go wrong, Guitar. You said, 'like taking candy from a baby,' remember?"

"So sue me all right already. Jeesh Louise! All right. Everyone to the back door."

I continued to roll my chips on the dolly as we all followed Shiela down aisle three, past canned goods, through the door to the butcher's station, and into a cold storage area filled with boxes and crates. Guitar went to the door, barely opened it, and looked out. He shut the door then. He wore a panic-stricken look.

"Everywhere! They even got state troopers. Quick. Put something against this door. Now back to the main counter."

Once back at the counter, Guitar barked orders at the other two. "Move that shelf this way. Now go get that one, and pull it over. There you go. Okay move that shelf there this way, in front of the counter." Canned vegetables, potato-chip packages, and pasta containers dropped to the floor.

Guitar said, "We'll make ourselves a little place here. Bobby, go get us some beer, a couple of cases. Quick. I'll cover you."

Bobby looked at Shiela, who said, "Aisle eight." Bobby ran.

All at once, this noise echoed through the store: "This is the Sallisaw Police Department. Surrender. Put your heads above your hands and come out of the store."

In response, Guitar shot his pistol, and the bullet shattered one of the plate glass windows.

"This is the Sallisaw Police Department. Surrender. Put your hands above your heads and come out of the store."

Grocery shelves surrounded us now on three sides, and the check-cashing counter shielded us from the store's front and parking lot. When Bobby got back with three cases of Budweiser and ice, the telephone behind the counter rang. Guitar made Bobby crawl over the counter to get it, and bring it to him.

Guitar answered it as he continued to point his gun at Shiela and me. "What already?" Pause. "Well listen smarty pants. I got a couple of hostages, see. You come stormin' in here, and I'll kill them. Lights out for the hostages. Deader n dead. Understand?" He hung up.

"Hey," he said then, "who wants a brewski-rooski?"

Pop tops popped. Throat gurgles, gulps. Bobby's belch resounded. Feet smashed Doritoses' bags. Ca-runch! Yellow

dust haze in morning light. Guitar paced, fingered thick black. Charlotte nagsighed, tipped brewski. Shiela refused beer, closed eyes. I sipped 3.2 Bud for nerve sito, leaned against chip cartons. Oh where am I? Bird, bird, sigh me home on you sweet flight.

As he paced, Guitar mumbled something like, "Merry Christmas, good night Irene, a hostage situation. Think breed think. Think breed think."

Meanwhile. "This is the Sallisaw Police Department. Surrender. Put your hands above your head and come out of the store."

The competitors. Pringles, Guys, Frito-Lay, Ripple, strewn on floor. Kaleidoscopic greasers. Swirl. Del Monte green beans, Green Giant peas. American Beauty Pasta, all shapes, sizes. Swirl. Feet crunchers cont. Beer gurgling cont. Charlotte wrapped hair in pony tail, sighed, muttered, "Great great great." Bobby smashed beer can on his forehead, hiccupped.

Guitar raised arms, stopped pacers, pointed to Shiela. "I'm thinking here, and what I'm thinking ain't pretty. Tell me something, lady, and tell it to me straight. Did you or did you not activate an alarm when you were behind the counter putting the money in the sack?"

Shiela eyes, those little beady assistant manager's eyes, opened, blinked, teared, looked heavenward. Sobbing, she placed her hands over her face. She nodded her head.

Guitar resumed frantic pacers. The telephone rang then, and he answered it.

"Yeah yeah yeah. Roger and over and out and code red and all that crap." He slammed the receiver down.

Bobby said, "Are they going to, like, waste us, man?"

"God, Bobby, how the hell am I supposed to know. Give me another beer for christ's sake all right already."

Charlotte handed him a beer.

Charlotte asked, in a soft, nurturing voice, "What are we going to do, Guitar?"

Guitar's hands flew up. He pulled his hair. Chip stomps. Can kicks. More pacers. He faced Shiela again, with an opened Doritos sack on one hand. He poured crushed chips on her head. Shiela wept.

Guitar caught my eyes then. "What are you looking at, Mr. Chip Man?" he said. He picked up another chip bag, and poured it over my head. I stood as the stoic, but inside swirls ensued. Oh, roadside coyote (our eyes met as you crawl injured from the death road) come, help.

Charlotte said, "Guitar, don't, don't get riled."

The telephone rang. Guitar answered it, and then handed the receiver to me.

The voice said, "Hello. Lonny Shultz. Sallisaw P.D. Special Projects. With whom am I speaking, please?"

I gave him my name, and then Shiela's name, and told him we weren't hurt. Guitar stood watching, listening.

Shultz said then, "Can you give me a thumbnail sketch of your captors. We know they have at least one gun. So, are they prone to violence or what?" I caught Guitar's eyes then.

I said, in words like these, "Given my present circumstance, it seems inappropriate for me to comment. However, I suggest, strongly suggest"--here I nodded my head at Guitar--"you meet all their demands and thus secure our release."

"Yeah, well, what exactly are they demanding?"

I handed the telephone to Guitar. I said, in words like these, "The authorities await your instructions."

He grabbed the telephone, and barked, "I'll get back to you on that, okey, dokey?" Receiver slammed.

Bobby said, "Say, how about we have them bring in a chopper and just fly us right out of here?"

Guitar flung his arms over his head. "Shut up all right already."

Charlotte went over to the sobbing Shiela, and put her arm around her. "Look here honey, don't you worry none. We ain't the mean type, see. Why Guitar, he's all bluff and show. Actually, we're musicians and--"

"Can it, Charlotte!," Guitar said, waving her away from Shiela with the gun. "Don't say nothing to nobody."

Charlotte stood, and said, "Guitar, let's just give up. Get it over with. Now. Why play this out to all

eternity."

"Jiminy crimony beer me beer me all right already I'm thinking I'm thinking we need us a plan good night Irene think breed think."

Charlotte came over to me, and I noticed her ruby over pearly white, and her sympathetic blues. "We're not criminals," she said. "See, we needed us some new equipment, and we were going to pay back the money some day, wasn't we, Guitar?"

Guitar shook his head, rolled his eyes, kept quiet.

"And, well," Charlotte continued, "we're poor, just a poor blues band, trying to make it. Guitar there, see, he's half Osage, a breed, and no one ain't give him a break his whole life because of it, even though he's the best guitar player and blues singer I've ever heard."

Guitar sat down on the floor, folded his arms, smiled. The pistol swung from his fingers. He shook his head dejectedly.

Charlotte put a hand on my shoulder. "We ain't never had a chance. We play dives, that's all, weekends, twenty or thirty dollars a night. But last week, Guitar's amp died, and the P.A. head's got some electrical problem that we can't fix, and so we're stuck. We got no money to fix it all."

Her eyes reminded me of Sarah, and a vague yearning struck me. I felt myself swept away, swirling, swirling

before her eyes, her face, breasts. Something moved inside of me. A light? I believed every word she spoke, and I would have dropped to my knees, crawled with worms, licked the moss on the dark underside of stones, had she told me to, and, yes, I wanted her, and who wouldn't?

I said, in words like these, "I'm proficient on the keyboards, though I have some experience with strings, including guitar."

Charlotte said, "Great. So you can relate, huh?"

Bobby said, "Like maybe we can jam someday. We was always thinking about adding keyboards and synthesizer, wasn't we, Guitar?"

"What the hell is happening here all right already!" Guitar stood, kicked chips, cans, squashed pasta, pulled his hair. Shiela cringed, and put her arms in front of her face.

Guitar continued, "God, Charlotte, why don't you tell him my life story, like Mr. Chip Man gives a crapola, good night already, jeesh. Listen, Chip Man, if you or any other white sonofabitch got a problem with breeds, or with full bloods, it don't matter to me because that's your problem, not mine. I'm just another guy trying to make a go at it, that's all."

Charlotte walked over to him, and massaged the back of his neck. "Some rednecks slashed our tires in Wetumka once. We was completely run out of Ardmore. We drove all

the way to Idabel once for a gig, and then the bar owner wouldn't let us play because he realized Guitar was part Indian. Guitar, he was beat up bad--I know, I know, you don't want me to tell, but I feel like he needs to know, like he might even understand--beat up real bad in Oklahoma City outside a bar we was playing in only because he's a breed, and that's the only reason. We feel like this robbery, this ain't nothing compared to what we've been through, especially Guitar, and, like I said, we was going to give the money back, every nickel."

I said, in words like these, "Although your story generates in me a great deal of sympathy, and although I stand opposed to the bigotry you described, I can hardly see a compelling reason for us to exchange extended rhetorical passages related to our lives. The fact remains the police surround us, and there is nothing I, or anyone else, can do to help you. Of course, I will tell the authorities that Shiela and I were treated well. But, really, I can promise no more than that."

Charlotte stared into my eyes, and she held my hand. She said, "I don't know. There's just something about you that made me think you was different. See, I get these feelings, these intuitions about people."

The telephone rang. Guitar answered it. "Yeah yeah yeah. Demands? Well, I got demands. Lots of `em." He moved the receiver away from his ear, looked at Charlotte,

shrugged. He said, "What do we do? Give it up?" He turned to Bobby, who was drumming a rhythm on a pasta box with two fingers. "Cut it out, Bobby."

All at once, Guitar jerked his head back. "I got it. I got it." He took his hand off the receiver. Charlotte ran over to him, and Bobby followed her. A paisley streaker flew across my field of vision. I fought for breath.

Guitar said, "Listen up. Here's what we want. Grab a pencil. I want two Martins--get that, I want M-A-R-T-I-N six-string acoustic guitars. Right, idiot. Guitars. I want a Les Paul electric with new strings; in fact,, all the guitars should have new strings. I need an electric bass, maybe an old Rickenbacker, get it? Two Marshall amps, big ones, the biggest, meanest, loudest you can find. Six microphones and stands. A Sony reel-to real recorder. A Yamaha recording board and head with at least sixteen channels, and two concert-sized speakers. Full drums, Shultz, with two basses. We'll need picks, extra strings and drumsticks, a tuning fork, E and G harmonicas.

"Also,"--he looked at me--"I need keyboards, make it a Yamaha electric piano, with a synthesizer, separate amp, too.

"Look, I got it, go to House of Rock in Fort Smith, give them the list, and tell `em, Guitar Running Deer needs a full set-up. Right. Running Deer, as in Running Deer, the white man's version of my name, asshole. Do it, or the

hostages die."

He hung up, and then rubbed his hands together.

Charlotte stood with her arms folded. "Are you sure about this?"

"Look, we always thought we'd sound really great if only we had the right equipment, right, and now we're going to record it all, make a tape, a good tape like we always wanted to. Here's our chance, Charlotte."

Bobby jumped up and down. "Cool! Cool!"

The telephone rang. Guitar answered it, and handed it to me.

"Shultz here. "What's going on? What does he want with all this stuff?"

I said, in words like these, "It appears they're going to jam."

Guitar held his thumbs up. Charlotte hugged him from behind. Bobby jumped. Shiela cried into her hands.

Shultz said, "Jam? What do you mean, jam? Jam what? Jam who? What is this jam thing, anyway?"

I said, in words like these, "Music. You know, they're going to make music."

CHAPTER NINE

Fc#1992r+mElkCityOK66. Donde esta Espanol mass? Holy Cross Catholic Church on The Vast Treeless Western Plains. Padre shuffles to altar, speaks strong, beautiful uno voice, for alienated Okie poor people. Poor people, all, in blissful bliss, Sunday best, listen, pacified their world inheritance coming. Trailers of farm workers abound with palmleaf-strewn crucifixes, the nailed Jesuses next to velvet manger-scene renditions. Sweaty-brassiered mamas pin clothes on swaying metal strings next to rusty Sears swingsets. Town boomoes to bustoes epitomes, featured in numerous regional AP graphs describing downs and ups, the Okie rodeo of life. Okie oil, always an equalizer. Great downtown metal-encrusted elk desecrated w/Take State, Rhonda loves Gary, Suck Me, four Fuck Yous, Flying Dog Dick (a winged penis with beagle head). Truman windbreaks, planted circa 1946, needed for shelter, erosion. Okie dust swirls. EOLOK66. Here, Padre, here? Is it her, the Virgin, or him, the Son, the blue-eyed Hebrew? Communion cup sips, or is it the host? Or maybe the body dipped in its own blood, the moist, sticky wafer glued to Okie boy's mouthroof? Wal-Mart then? Or Sonic's limeade? The Whopper? Extra Crispy or Original?

I said, in words like these, "Listen, my readers. I now reveal the meaning of all this. I'm really serious

this time. I feel like nothing, even this, is real. I feel like everything is absurd, funny, stupid, ironic, silly, an act, a pose, a tude, a persona, surreal theater, based in New York, Boston, LA, a game, politics, greed, money, power, selfishness, hate, animal-instinct, machine-like, computerized, predictable. We live and we die, and we have nothing and no one but ourselves, and it doesn't matter because in the end we drag our crushed, bloody haunches off Route 66 like the truck-struck Okie coyote and die, alone, panting, dripping tongueslime, glassy-eyed, reliving the senseless, trite memories of a hollow life."

The story I told next went like this. The night before I left on the 66 tour, my wife held me tight. She said, what's wrong, really, tell me? What's happening to you, us? I went like this. As I try to sleep, I remember everything universally sordid, and every slight, imagined or not, that I have received in my life, and I mull all possible, future tragedies. I think of death--mine and others--virtually every single day, and every single night. And that's why I drink, so I can pass out and not think about it, but it never works like that, does it. You know. So I lie here in my drunkstink, and the mind moves fast, then faster, not alone. I feel everything, as I get older, turn against me. I feel it as it actually happens, the actual process. The moon, sun, stars, the possum, the turtle, the statistician, and now, of course, all people

stand against me. I feel an enormous pressure against me, us, people like me. I feel shallow, trite hate and indifference press against me, always, because I'm different, and I know--and this knowledge is painful, not illuminating--the mediocre, cliched ideologies that fuel this hate are nothing more than corrupted rehash found in elitist books written twenty-five hundred years ago literally on the backs of poor people, slaves. I remain silent, on the outside, only to survive in today's world. But I say to you, here, alone. I am excluded, invisible. The greed and hate of your typical stomach-paunched, fat-assed, leering insurance agent is a reality, a religion, of which I am not even a partial creator, nor fellow augmentor, in which I am no participant. In fact, I'm an agitator, a helpless, depressed agitator, a drunken, staggering willy-nilly unable to take risks, a spy in the enemy's camp, the defeated side of a dichotomy. I'm dead, really, kerplunk.

The wife went, But you talk as if all people are bad. And they're not, and they're not against you at all. You're too extreme. What do you want, really really want?

I went, I want to be accepted just like this, me. I want the people I like and respect to like me and respect me back. I don't want to lie anymore to our friends, family. I want to believe that something exists beyond money, hate. Also, I wish we had enough cash so I could get some dental work done, and so we could get the kids some new shoes. Is

that so bad?

The wife went, No. But, really, what does this 66 thing got to do with anything.

I went, Not a thing, really. I see that now in this startling moment of clarity and vision. Still?

In the truck, after poor-people's mass, Randy goes, "So what? The muck of naturalism, the 1920s, 30s, we're all cogs, pistons, in some terrible depressing machine, all that, whatever, mon. It's been done before. It's a cliché, see. So your response to all this, this, this problem with rich people and greed is a clichéd ideology itself. This crap, class struggle, goes in cycles. You know that. Now, your depression, that's just a part of what you do, and it will never go away. You write and no one ever reads what you write, no one ever cares, and no one ever will, probably, except for me, sometimes, and a few others. What you need to do, then, is just accept the fact that you will always be depressed, and, also, continue to drink heavily. In fact, I don't think you drink near enough. When's the last time you truly blacked out, huh? One or two times a week isn't enough, mon."

I go, in words like these, "Is not The Bottle yet another clichéd response to a world in which most humans are rendered helpless to change their social and psychological conditions?"

Randy laughs, passes the Jack Daniels. "Sedative for

the masses, and all that, mon. Right. So what? It's fun. Unlike fiction, poetry, depression, self-pity, politics, ideology, and the baseball fan, liquor makes something happen because it changes your immediate perspective."

Whiskey shots, one, two, three. Repeats. A fine haze moves over my mind. I feel a return, a softening, a mellowness. Inside, something happens. I feel renewed. Words come, words I would use later in my writing, and they are good, solid words, nouns. And I put my arm around Randy, and we drink the bottle, and we sing, we sing my depression away. Rowboats, beerwalls, Brownian chant. Music? Within the lyrics? The rhythm? The focus, the intuitiveness? Something primal, native speaks, gushes loose inside me, unleashes its fury. Do I hear it, really hear it, and do I feel it? Will I remember this feeling tomorrow? Hath the rain a father? Any last words, coyote? Inside the pit, I feel our slime and blood mingle, and our chests contract in unison. No? Not yet lowly ant?

Two hours later. Sunlit-strewn chip haze knee level and rising. Mo barley-based fluids consumed. Guitar to and fro, hair pulls, silent arm exclamations. Shiela sobbed nonstop, eyeliner smeared. Charlotte arm-folded skepticism resumed. Bobby on pasta drums, the bossa nova, samba beat. Me. Deep breaths.

Think wanders occurred. Packaging, display, the

difference in chip biz. New logo needed for Okie fried grease, a catchy pull, a take `em in, a salessuck. Look. Fritos next to Coke on sale combo hard to beat. Look. Guys next to powdered French onion dip mix, sellin' like cakes. Look. Doritos, free sample bean dip special.

Bobby moved over to Shiela, tried to put his arm around her. She cringed. He said, "We ain't going to hurt you, maam." Upon pronouncement, Shiela sobbed dramatically.

Guitar walked over to her. "Shut your trap all right already. Crybaby, crybaby, nah nah nah nah nah nah! Jeesh, my nerves can't take it much longer."

Charlotte said, "Now honey, she's doing better, I think. Ain't ya, sugar, you're just about all cried out, ain't ya?"

When Bobby moved away from Shiela, I took his place. She leaned into me without reservation, and I patted her back, and felt her hot tears drip down my neck. I caught Charlotte's eyes then, and something desparate and tragic in them made me turn away.

When the telephone rang, Guitar leaped into the air, kicking out both legs, rising high and higher above the chip-covered Linoleum.

"Yo. You got the stuff? Good. Listen. One person, just one, brings the stuff in, all right. I'll meet you at the door. I'm bringing Mr. Chip Man with me. Any John-Wayne stuff, and blam, blam, the dude's dead, history. Get

it?" He hung up, and turned to me. "Come on, Mr. Chip Man, let's go. Bobby, you look after princess ballbaby brat, and make sure she don't go anywhere."

I felt the pistol's barrel nudge me in the back, and I found myself walking from our room through an opening between Pringles and Del Monte asparagus tips. As we went through a checkout aisle, I looked through the store's windows, and I saw what seemed to be hundreds of people, and even more cars, flashing lights, and yellow-striped barricades. Everyone outside milled, paced, and seemed important. Beyond the parking lot, another crowd formed across the street in front of the orange facade of a Whataburger.

Guitar said, "Good night Irene, it's a hootenanny, a real doozy!"

Someone dressed in a blue uniform and pulling a long, rectangular cart appeared in the doorway. A tarpaulin covered the cart, but I made out the outline of a small, electric piano, a microphone stand, two large speakers.

"Take off the cover," Guitar said. "You're not pulling some Trojan Horse deal on me."

The man removed the covering, revealing a mountain of musical instruments and equipment.

Guitar said, "Well, I'll be a frigging youknowwhat." He motioned for the man to bring the cart into the store. "Over here. This way. No tricks. Right this way." He

continued to press the pistol into my back.

When we got to the opening, Charlotte and Bobby, seeing the equipment, cheered. The cart wouldn't fit through the opening, so Guitar made the man unload it, piece by piece. Guitar directed the set-up, rearranging constantly. At one point, Charlotte gave the man a beer because he look tired, and told him how much she appreciated what he was doing. After Bobby helped him unload the speakers, the job was finished.

The man wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and said, in a recognizable voice, "Well, there she all is, all right. Now, I wonder if we could talk seriously here, about all this, this equipment, this `event,' and about what's going to happen next. We've met you halfway, see. What's your next move? What do you really really want?"

Guitar said, "Shultz? You're Shultz? I tol' you: No funny stuff."

"Look. I don't have my gun, see. I just want to talk."

Shultz didn't fit my image of a "Special Projects Detective." I'd imagined him as bigger, older, smoking cigars, unapologetic, McGarrett. I'd seen him in a pressed, three-piece expensive suit, running around catching criminals here and there, and never once getting wrinkled, never a drop of sweat falling from his forehead, nor a strand of wavy, sprayed hair falling out of place. I

pictured him dashing, with a shoulder holster slung around his body in a natural way, and I saw him looking at charts, acting on his instinct, and, what's more, ready to die if duty called.

But the Shultz before me was a potbellied, pale man, with sideburns, yellow crooked teeth, and a huge birthmark, which was a port wine stain, covering the left and back sides of his neck.

Shultz said, "Is this some Indian deal, a political statement, or what?"

Guitar laughed, shook his head. "Right. A TID. This here is Indian land, and I'm claiming it. Now get the hell out of here. Vamoose, moose."

Shultz turned to me. "Is he serious?" I shrugged. He continued, "Because, I need to know. I'm leading the negotiations, and I want to know where we stand. Now, I got you the music equipment, and I'm willing to work with you, but, I got to tell you, there's FBI, Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation agents, Troopers, sheriff's people, and everyone else and their brother out there, and they're itching to make a move, a full assault, on the store. For now, we're safe. But I don't know how long I can hold them off."

Guitar grunted. "What is this we crap? Wee wee on your face, asshole. I'll kill these people. I'll kill you."

Shiela groaned, and buried her face in her hands. Charlotte put her arms around her, and this time Shiela didn't resist. Bobby sat down behind the drums.

As he pointed at Shiela, Shultz said, "Let me take her out of her, and leave you this one." He pointed at me. "Call it a trade for the equipment. Let's work together on this."

Bobby tapped a soft roll on his snare as Guitar thought about it. Charlotte said, "Maybe, since she's so upset and all, it'd be the right thing, Guitar."

Guitar paced, shook his head, talked to himself. The drum roll continued. Shultz folded his arms in front of him, said, "It would show your good faith, and buy you some time. Don't do it for her, no, do it for yourself."

Guitar walked over to the huddling Shiela and Charlotte. He knelt, and then whispered something in Shiela's ear. Shiela's tortuous sobs echoed. Her chest heaved. Charlotte gripped her tight.

Shultz said, "So what did you decide?"

Guitar's smirk spread. "Forget it, Shultz. The white princess bitch stays. Without her, we got nothing, nothing but a strange-talking chip man who won't fetch jackshit in the current hostage market, right? I see your ploy. Once she's out of here, you guys come in shooting. Her, she's the symbol, the young woman in distress, the fair maiden, and all that.

"So you mess with us, and I'll kill her, shoot her right between the eyeballs, her pretty baby blue eyeballs, and I mean it."

Charlotte looked incredulous. Bobby slapped a cymbal, and the noise shuddered around the room. I thought, A strange-talking chip man fetching jackshit? Was he right? Me. Nada on the hostage market.

Shultz said, "What is it you want? You're not being real clear here. Do you want safe transportation from the county, the state, even the country? Do you want immunity from prosecution? Are you really making a political statement? If so, what is it? Do you belong to an activist group? What? You're not, well, your regular textbook hostage-takers. I can't get a handle on it. I don't know what to tell my superiors. Tell me. What is it? What do you want? Money?"

Charlotte said, "Mister Shultz, see, we're a rock band down on its luck, and the deal is--"

Guitar interrupted. "Whoa, whoa there Charlotte. Zip it, zip it, and zip it good. Shultzzy smultzzy?" Guitar waved his gun from Shultz to the doorway. "Adios amigo, ciao, bye bye, get lost, don't call us, we'll call you, see ya later alligator."

Shultz turned to me. "Let me take him then. You said yourself he's got no value on the hostage market. Let us walk out of here together, right now, and I promise you no

Swat-team assaults on the store for the whole day."

Guitar shook his head no. Shultz said, "Why?"

"Keyboards."

Shultz said, "Keyboards?"

Guitar looked at me. "Yeah, and he better be good."

Into the microphone, a tape rolling on the reel-to-reel, Guitar said, "We'd like to begin this hostage crisis by playing a song I wrote about two years ago. It's called 'City Girls,' and here she is."

He nodded at Charlotte, who stood next to him fingering the bass guitar, and then at Bobby behind the drums. He stuffed the pistol in his pocket.

I stood in front of Guitar behind the piano. He said to me, "It's in E, Chip Man. Follow along. Don't try any funny stuff. I can get this gun out of my pants in half a second."

Shiela stood next to me, her back as well to the rest of the band, and she looked glassy-eyed, defeated. She held a Budwieser on one hand that Guitar insisted she drink; in the other hand, she grasped a tambourine Guitar insisted she play.

"One two three."

Because Guitar stood behind me, I couldn't see his chording, so I closed my eyes and focused. He fingered an E7, then E6, CM7, E, which he repeated three times, and

jazzed up by hammering the B strong continually with his pinkie. Next, Bobby came in with a soft roll on the snare, and Charlotte introduced the bass-line loudly, before she found the blend. I played a middle E, scaling through the chord, and then followed the progression, softly, shyly, trying to hide my presence.

Guitar sang:

She's got long red fingernails
She doesn't know how to cry
Sometimes at night
She's got sunglasses on her eyes
She drives a Cadillac; she loves neon lights
She's even been to college and she's
always right
City nights, city lights,
City girls make me feel all right

Guitar's raspy voice strained to a breaking point, left you with questions, placed you on an edge. Was this a great voice? Maybe. Mediocre? Possibly. Did it have staying power? Would it hit the A, or screech and grate its way up the scale? The voice overreached, and then it turned into a howl, long sustained natural howl, and it was a rebellion, the guts made vocal, the pit, fear of death, misery. The floor seemed to move, the lights flicker, and, intuitively, I played louder, stressing E, never straying far, keeping the song placed, anchored.

She eats organic food; she even rides a bike

She wants me to come over

And meet her puppy dog named Mike

I thought I'd been around

But boy did I play the fool

The things that girl taught me

I thought I was back in school

City nights nights, city lights,

City girls make me feel all right

Tons of makeup, tons of gin

Fake eyelashes, lots of men

I don't think I'll ever be the same

After it was over

She didn't even know my name

City nights, city lights,

City girls make me feel all right

What a night

It was quite a thrill

The memories are great, but even still

I wonder what she's doing today

What she's doing to them

While I play my guitar

And she plays her men

City nights, city lights,

City girls make me feel all right

Guitar repeated the refrain several times, building the song to a crescendo. Meanwhile, his left hand flew up the guitar's neck as he interspersed a funky variation of the song's melody when we all came crashing, falling dramatically, in unison back to E. I found myself trying automatically to match his guitar work, coming in when I felt confident of where he was going, slowing up, going soft, when I felt unsure of his next move. Guitar ended the song with a standard blues riff, and then he fanned E for several seconds. He stopped. One last E bump, a jazzy thump. Over. A damn good song. Pumped left. I could hear a smattering of applause from the parking lot.

Guitar turned off the tape. He said, "Jesus Christ, Charlotte, you came in late on the refrain two times. Shit. We've only played this song about a zillion and a half times. Da dum, da dum, da da da dum, and then you go to A. Got it? We're taping this for christsake's already."

I turned and looked at Charlotte, whose face looked ashen, pale all at once. I hadn't noticed the mistakes. She said, "I'm sick of you yelling at me, Mr. Great One." She turned to Shiela, and we all did. I didn't notice until then, but Shiela continued to tap the tambourine softly against her hip in a vacant, automatic way. Her eyes were closed, and she hummed. Charlotte said, "Hon, the song's over. You can stop now, hon." Shiela looked at everyone,

and her face turned red. Quickly, she turned her head away, gulped her beer, looked bleaty.

Charlotte whispered in Guitar's ear, "I think she liked it."

Guitar smiled. "Well, Chip Man, you got feelings, you do know the blues, which, frankly, surprises the hell out of me seeing as how I view you as a tight-ass redneck. How did you like the song?"

I said, in words like these, "Your haunting song, with its bluesy riffs and funky offcentered melody, plumbed the depths of my American psyche. Your subject matter--the common prostitute--retextualizes the Whitmanian gush of the nineteenth century. But your augmentation, as it further mythologizes and romanticizes those people in our culture who sell their bodies for money, takes the poet one step further by presenting an extended first-person, narrative account, a celebration, of one man's one-night relationship with a lady of the night."

Guitar said, "Frigging good night already. What?"

Charlotte smiled, rubbed the back of Guitar's neck. "He liked it, honey, he really really liked it." She looked into my eyes as her mouth formed a half smile, a knowy look. She said, "I think Mr. Chip Man is coming around, and he shar played real nice for us."

Guitar said, "Whitman, shitman. Jeesh, what a goddamn thing to say. Are you sure you liked it, Mr. Chip Man, or

are you making fun of me?"

Before I could answer, the telephone rang. Guitar answered it. "Yah-low. Speaking. What do you mean the song is `pornographic?'" Guitar rolled his eyes, shook his head. "Jiminy criminy. Listen. I got a tape and message I want you to deliver. That's right, Shultz. Tulsa. KDOG. Send someone to the door. Now. Or someone's gonna die."

After he hung up, Charlotte asked, "What you up to now, hon? I thought we were just making tapes, and having fun for a while?"

Bobby handed Shiela another beer. She even smiled as she accepted it from him. Under different circumstances, I would say she flirted.

Watching this scene unfold, Guitar sneered, and then said, "Right, Charlotte. Making tapes. Having fun. Listen, kids. Ray--dee--oh, here we come."

"Rock with The Doag, Tulsa, Oklahoma!" The voice thundered through the store's ceiling speakers; even so, Guitar reached behind the check-cashing counter and turned up the radio's volume.

"KDOG has been given and has reviewed a tape supplied by the Sallisaw Police Department. The tape contains a song--that's right Doagies, a song--recorded by those who commandeered The Happy Cucumber Grocery Store in Sallisaw earlier today, and who hold two people hostage, and have

shot at least once at police. Those who now control the store demanded KDOG play this tape. After listening to the tape, and discussing it with authorities, The Doag's management, as a community service, has decided to air it. By doing so, and I want to stress this, KDOG is not condoning the actions of those who made the tape. Doagies, I think you'll be surprised. Hey. The world gets stranger and stranger every day, but who I am to argue with the cosmos, bros. The bark continues, Doagies. Listen up. This is K-D-O-G, Tulsa, Oklahoma."

As "City Girls" blasted through the speakers, Guitar paced. Filtered through the radio, the song lost funkiness, and the natural throaty growl in Guitar's voice. On the other hand, the song seemed commercial this way, piped through the small speakers, like any other hit song on the radio, with everything neatly in place. I tapped my feet. Shiela, still sipping beer, shook her hips, nodded her head back and forth.

"We made it on KDOG," Bobby said, as the song ended. Charlotte and Guitar hugged. I saw tears in the blonde's eyes. All at once, I felt myself caught up in their moment, felt something swirl inside my stomach. Here was a triumph of raw art, here in America's heartland, her core, the breadbasket, the nation's food center, here in a small town in Oklahoma was something genuine maybe, something real you could feel, touch, see.

I said, in words like these, "Your talent secures you fame and fortune. Contrarily, you jeopardize that same fame and fortune by your actions here today, and that I simply cannot understand."

Guitar kicked a Doritos bag across the floor. "Fame and fortune? Right. Lemme tell you something, Mr. Chip Man. When you're a breed like me, you're invisible, non-existent, a nothing, a nobody, a no one, a blank slate nobody cares about. No record company is going to take a chance on me, on someone they can't even see, won't even recognize as a real human being. I know. I've tried selling my music. I've sent tapes to the record companies, knocked on doors in LA and Nashville. Fame and fortune jeesh good night already, listen to the guy speak. We're a nightclub band in rural Oklahoma for christsake's. Hell, we can't even get work here sometimes. The PukeDive Inn won't even hire us, and this guy has us signed with MCA, eating cavier and drinking champagne."

Charlotte nodded. "Now hon, don't get riled. He means well. I can tell." She turned to me. "See, we've tried, really tried. Guitar even did this thing with his hair once, didn't you? Remember, the braids and the color--"

"Can it, Charlotte!"

She continued, "And, well, anyway, our own equipment is old, and it's breaking down, and we didn't know what to do. Music is all we got; it's our whole lives. God, I know

we're in a mess, but, see, it all just happened. We're nice people. We're just poor. It shouldn't be this way."

I wanted to throw my arms around her, and tell her it was all right. I almost did. But, suddenly, I saw a paisley streak, felt an old flash of despair, an old wound reopen, in my stomach. I thought about Boy and Sarah, felt the floor move, and I sat down to keep from falling. This, this, all seemed unreal to me now, this strange happenstance, this weird series of events. I pinched myself. Real? A dream? Stupidity? Ironic?

I rubbed my eyes, maybe expecting to wake up, and when I looked up, I saw Bobby and Shiela with their arms intertwined, whispering, laughing. The plot thickened. I held up my hands. Inside, I felt an urgency.

Somehow, I managed to find linguistic constructions. I said, in words like these, "Gimmick. Something trendy. A cause. It's your only chance." I stared into Charlotte's eyes, sought something in them?

Guitar snorted, paced. Bobby said, "Like he's dyed his hair several times." Shiela laughed. Charlotte said, "Why hon, I'm just pleased as punch you're feeling so much better."

I reached for another beer. I said, in words like these, "Make it political and social. Food. All this food donated to some cause, some group."

Guitar stopped pacing. He snapped his fingers. "The

Indian Children's Missions in Tulsa and Oklahoma City." He looked around at the shelves of food, at me, Charlotte. "You know, it ain't a bad ideer. We say we came in here to do something good for the poor people, for my people. And, you know, maybe we could do something for them, for the people I mean."

I said, in a word like this, "Exactly."

Guitar stopped pacing. "Yeah. But what about you? What about Miss Assistant Manager of the Year here? What will you guys say about this later?"

I said, in words like these, "Sealed are my mummied lips, and, as far as Shiela goes, well?" I directed Guitar's attention to her. Shiela now rested her head on Bobby's shoulders, rubbed his back with one hand, let a finger linger on his neck; Bobby ran his fingers through her hair, pressed close. They continued to whisper, giggle, oblivious to unfolding events. Four beer cans stood empty and mangled next to Shiela.

Guitar smiled. "Good night Irene all right already! I does think we got ourselves a doable plan."

Charlotte said, "Fine. But listen. Both of you. Those kids really do need our help. You can't just make a big game out of this. You just don't make a game out of the misery of other people. It ain't right."

Before I could respond, the telephone rang. When Guitar answered, the ceiling speakers emitted a high-

pitched squeal. "Jesus, feedback," Guitar said as he turned the volume down on the speakers.

A familiar voice spat through the speakers. "You're on the air with Diamond Doug, K-D-O-G, The Doag, Tulsa Oklahoma. With whom am I speaking?"

Guitar said, "Guitar Running Deer."

"And are you the leader of the group who has commandeered the grocery store there in Sallisaw?"

"That's right. We're a rock group. I'm on vocals and guitar. Charlotte McHenry's on bass. Bobby Albright on drums. We're here, we're here in the store--"Guitar paused, scratched his chin, shrugged his shoulders--"we're here to help out the Indian Children's Missions in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. This is what we demand: All the food in this store goes to the two missions. Today. That's what we want. That's all we want."

I caught Charlotte's eyes then. She whispered, "We shar are in a doozy of a mess now, ain't we?"

Guitar continued. "Through our music, and through our actions here today, we hope to send out a message to God's children of all colors. The message is that people are starving, hurting in their guts bad, right here in Oklahoma, and throughout the country. It's time we do something about it."

Charlotte whispered, "He always rises to the occasion,

no matter what the situation."

Guitar's words came out strong, steady, and rational through the speakers, a combination of Native American dialect and Okie-talk.

Softly, I said, in words like this, "Perfect. Let's get this thing over with."

CHAPTER TEN

Fc92rm66e. The Return on rainy, surf-torn day. In truck, I check trip log for meaningful clues. Contents. Two bloated, stiff racoons, smelly stuffed toys, gifts for fat black birds. Twenty squashed armadillos, spewed guts on shiny shells, Okie roadside escargot. The dying, alone, coyote. Kiwanis. Contents ended. The real toad? "that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea"? or "yes I said yes I will yes"? or "She sang beyond the genius of the sea"? The chimney sweeper? Plums? Clinton. Weatherford. Hinton. The rubber tomahawk? Geary. El Reno. A wet, black bough? Oedipus? Hrothgar? Madame Sosostrius? "dissociation of sensibility"? A hardened, ketchup-soaked Wendy's french fry stuck in crevice of truck's seat? Madonna? The lowly fly? The lowly ant? Barking European dogs? Barney Rubble's eyes? Are we only our modified memories? Purge? No? The microwavable burrito sans sauce, w/Diet Dr Pepper? Super unleaded? Exercise? Inside the mysterious beekeeper's mind? Henry James's major contributions as a short story writer? Reconstruction? The lowly turtle? The lowly roach? Regular bowel movements? "Are we a race of titmen who soar no higher than the columns of the daily paper"? Jim Gatz? A superplex off the second turnbuckle? Good teeth? A handful of dust? Clean underwear? Children?

I say, in words like these, "Inside of me, a sudden synthesis occurs, and it is the organic of all organic knowledge, and it is a natural, intuitive metamorphosis without parallel, of that you can be assured. A euphoric feeling moves within me, fast, then faster. Onward! Onward to Oklahoma City, where the answer awaits! As you are my witness, it awaits, it awaits my glorious, long overdue arrival!"

Randy goes, "Where in Oklahoma City?"

I say, in words like these, "In the downtown area of Oklahoma City stands a shelter for homeless people entitled Okies Helping Okies. It is there, inside that haven for the disenfranchised, the nonpoliticals, the invisibles, the havenots, the stupid poor, the educated poor, the people, that I will find that for which I have searched. For it is there--in a dilapidated old house on Route 66, among living souls--that I will see myself reflected a thousand, nay, a million times. For I am my poor brother, and he is me. For I am my poor sister, and she is me. We are branches of the same sturdy oak."

Randy goes, "We're only about ten minutes away from downtown Oklahoma City, so tell me where to turn."

I say, in words like these, "For it all becomes clear in this momentary catharsis, Randy. I belong with the people, with them, with us. Don't you see? I was homeless, broke, lost. I found work, a home, went to college,

forgot. Forgot? I forget no more, you, you wretched socialite bitch contemplating your next breast augmentation, your next face lift, you, you pathetic, moronic banker ripping off friends and family alike, reliving your putrid high school years, boring your friends with your mediocre memories, you, you, you. (In disguise, I look just like you, Mr. Prudential. You won't know me, but, oh, I am there. I mingle at your cocktail party, drink your booze, listen, smear pate on your furniture when you aren't looking, laugh outwardly at your corny, racist jokes, and I gather evidence, take names, and, before I leave, I screw your liposucked, tummy-tucked, bleached-haired wife in a bedroom closet as you mesmerize the boys about the birdie on the eighteenth and the time you almost went to state as a 135-pound wrestler.) Forget? Never again.

I remember how you held me back, made me wait, work, serve you in a collection of menial, low-paying jobs, demanded I pay homage to your collective mediocrity, just so I could get a chance to do and obtain those very things you were given gratis, that you took for granted, such as food, shelter, education. I went hungry when you wasted food. I worked when you played. I studied when you slept. And then, after years of struggle, I tried to join you, tried to become you, said I do, I do, mouthed green wafers, wedded corrupted host. This was a mistake on my part. I am not you. You are not me. I am the people. They are me. So,

proletariat, arise! The age is, again, ripe."

Randy goes, "But, tell me, when will I see you again?"

I say, in words like these, "You'll see me in the pathetic, vacant eyes of the abused, hungry five-year-old whose father is gone, whose mother sells her needle-scarred body to feed a drug habit. You'll see me in the displaced family, whose father lost his factory job, who now live in a dilapidated station wagon under a Route 66 overpass, who eat one small meal a day, if that. You'll see me in the mangy, drunken forgotten street person scrounging in a dumpster for food. You'll see me reflected in the struggle of the proud hard-working lower classes of our society. You'll see me wherever people gather to fight injustice, gather to make rich people give something back to poor people. I'll be there.

Randy stares, shakes head, and goes, "You know, you can't get away with acting like this much longer. We all know you're depressed, and we want to help you, but this, this is--"

Sudden distraction south. I say, in words like these, "Look, look! The sky turns black. It's falling. It's falling. Tornadoooo!"

Randy smiles, laughs, looks like a catfish again, goes, "Not your first nader, is it?"

Swirl of swirls, oh art thou the chariot comin' for to carry me home?

A new tape rolled, and we played in G, blue-grass style.

Come listen to the story about a boy
named Ned
His stomach's always empty when he puts
himself to bed
His cries are lost in our hypocrisy
We've seem to have lost all sense of
humanity
Charity, that is
Giving food
To those in need

Well, the first thing you know the little
boy is gone
Malnutrition it don't take long
Watching children starve is what you
oughta see
The next time you think you need some
sympathy
When you're feeling sorry for yourself,
that is
Think you got it real bad
When you don't

So listen everyone to what we need to do
We need to give away all this hostaged food
We're going to feed hundreds at the missions
We'll give ourselves up after we get this
thing done

The Indian Children's Missions, that is
Feeding kids, keeping `em alive
Because it's right

"Frigging weird, Mr. Chip Man," Guitar said, "like I mean, ain't it making fun of all this?"

"Why, I think it works," Charlotte said. "It's like it's funny at first, but then you start thinking about it and it sorty gets to you, right here in the ol' heart of hearts." She patted her left breast, nodded, squinched her eyebrows, looked serious.

Get those damn chips away from me, Bobby," Shiela said, "and hand me another beer."

I said, in words like these, "You needed a song. You asked me. I provided one."

Guitar whooped all at once, slapped his sides. "By cracky. Then let's give it a whirl, Milton Berle. This hostage thing has taken on a life of its own, and who the hell am I to interfere with destiny." He grabbed the telephone, and barked. "Shultzzy wultzzy, we got us a little tape we need delivered, pronto schmonto."

"This is KDOG, The Doag, Tulsa, Oklahoma broadcasting live from the Mobile Getalong Doaggie in Sallisaw. I'm Joe Haller. Let me bring you up to date.

"We're in the parking lot of The Happy Cucumber Grocery Store, the scene of an ongoing hostage situation. Those who commandeered the store earlier today--calling themselves members of a rock band-- still hold two people hostage. Recently, the group relayed its demands to authorities through The Doag. The group's members, led by Guitar Running Deer, demand the store's owners donate the store's food to the Indian Children's Missions in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

"Authorities say the group's members are apparently hunger activists connected with several Indian tribes in this state, Arizona, New Mexico, and others.

"Meanwhile, Doaggies, at least ten thousand people have gathered in the grocery store's parking lot, and the parking lots of nearby stores and restaurants. Many onlookers are sympathetic to the group's demands. Police suspect the event, or "stunt" as one officer put it, was planned weeks ago. Here is the group's latest tape, which the group demands we play every ten minutes."

As the song played on KDOG, Guitar retrieved a small black and white television set from behind the counter,

turned it on, and flipped through the channels. Three Tulsa stations carried live reports, and I caught these snippets: "Inspired by radical Indian groups" and "An indication of the terrorist-like methods increasingly adopted by East-Coast hunger activists" and "Authorities appear reluctant to meet their demands because it would set a precedent for future hunger groups in Oklahoma."

Leaving the television tuned to one station, Guitar beamed, paced, kicking Frito bags, crushing empty Buds, throwing his arm out. Charlotte stood with her arms folded, and with a skeptical grimace. Standing up, Shiela and Bobby made out, mouths full open, tongues licklocked, hips hugging, revolving.

"Frigging incredible," Guitar said. "You get something going, and then, poof, it explodes into a full-scale deal." He turned to Bobby and Shiela, and said, "Jiminy crimony, bring the bacon home, man!"

"Now, honey, they got a right just like anyone else," Charlotte said.

The telephone rang. Guitar answered, and as he listened to the voice on the other end, he nodded, raised his eyebrows, did a little dance with his feet. He said, "Let me talk it over with the guys, and I'll get back to you." After he hung up, he hugged Charlotte.

Guitar said, "Here's the deal. Apparently we're getting some national coverage. A rock star who wants to

remain anonymous has offered to donate a sizable portion of money to the missions if we give ourselves up. Shultz said he can't guarantee it, but since no one's been hurt and since we got a cause and all that, he figures we'll get little to no jail time, just probation, and especially for you Charlotte, being as you're a woman who I `forced' to do this, get it? Also, this same rock star has promised to go our bail. What do you think?"

I said, in words like these, "Perfect. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Charlotte said, "It sounds wonderful, Guitar. I mean, here we was, just a few hours ago, thinking we was going to prison, and now we got hope, and we've been on the radio, and we've made us a good tape. And we're going to help some poor people, too."

Guitar paced some more, laughed, jumped, shadow boxed. "Sounds good, right? Well, I tell you what. We're not going to take it. Not yet. We're going to hold out for something bigger, something better. Look. We got them by the youknowwhats, the ol' lamb fries if you catch my drift."

"Guitar. Please," Charlotte said.

"Nope. Grab the bass, darling. Bobby, get your hard-on behind the drums. Mr. Chip Man, we need us some more tinkle fingers. Miss Assistant Manager, pound your hips with this"--he threw her the tambourine--"because we is making us some more moo-sick! And remember, just in case

anybody's forgot, I still got a gun and a very very itchy finger."

(Oh paisley swirl, oh the nightmare, the lack of oxygen, the lack of father, of brother, of Boo Boo, for where art thou, Boob, where? Inside, I feel a second-person move, then it is outside myself, floating in a paisley sea. With each breath, I suck in thousands of specks, and they choke, smother me as I swallow for air; the harder I breath, the more specks I draw in. Boob? Is that you? Coyote? As the maggot awaits its turn, our lungs strain against odds.)

We played ten songs, all written by Guitar, a set of bluesy understatements and jive, all about shadowy and sexy people, events, moments, fringe on fringe. Guitar and I then met Shultz at the doorway to give him the tape.

Shultz said, "Well, things seem to be going your way, Gee-tar Running Deer. The store's owners are meeting this very instant, and I think they're going to give into your demands. Also, the governor,"--Shultz pointed to a helicopter in the sky--"I think that's her now, is on her way from Oklahoma City. She's announced something about establishing a commission to look into the hunger situation in Oklahoma, to see if there really are hungry people. Also, you got your big-deal rock star element involved."

Shultz turned to me. "And, frankly, we suspect that you're in on this whole thing, Dr. Ph.D. from Harvard

University. We've checked you out, yes sir. This thing smelled like an East-Coast liberal deal from the getgo, some type of outside agitation, all that, and the ACLU is going to represent you afterwards, right? Tell me, what organization do you belong to, who's behind all this, Dr. Frederick Roderick?"

I said, in words like these, "You err. I'm a hostage, a victim. The only organization to which I belong is the Sallisaw Kiwanis, and that is solely for business and fellowship purposes."

Shultz rolled his eyes, scoffed. Guitar said to me, "I thought you talked funny, Mr. Chip Man, and now it makes sense."

Shultz continued, "Anyhow, I'm sure they'll play this new tape, and everything will be hunky dory. Still, the DA remains iffy on immunity. It's all political now, out of his hands, my hands. It depends on the governor, what she thinks, how she gauges public reaction. If I was a betting man, I bet you only get misdemeanors, something along the line of public disturbance. But don't take that as a guarantee."

Guitar laughed, and it was a howl, a long, sustained hoot. I felt his arm around my neck, and he started dancing and singing, trying to get me to go along with him.

He said, "Smultz, I does think that we's done did it!" He thrust his hips back and forth. "We's screwed

the whole goddamn system!"

Back in our hovel, I listened to Guitar's tape on KDOG, watched Bobby and Shiela make out, saw Charlotte rub Guitar's back, shoulders, kiss his neck. The beer left me feeling bloaty, tired, achy all over.

Guitar gave me a smirky look, said, "What's a college boy doing driving a chip truck?"

I said, in words like these, "I don't want to talk about it. I want this, this situation, to end, now. I don't feel good."

Charlotte said, "You know, I was thinking. After this thing is over, maybe you'd like to play with us, be in the group, be a part of it. You shar play a pretty piano, and mostly we just play weekends? You can keep your day job, see."

Bobby stopped kissing Shiela. "Yeah. Like we need some synthesizer really bad, and I mean bad bad, right Guitar?"

Guitar nodded at Bobby, turned to Charlotte, said, "Shoot, Charlotte. Weekends? After this thing is over, we can play whenever we want. Don't you think so, Doctor Chip Man? Hey, I like that. Doctor Chip Man. And on keyboards, it's the doctor of chipolas, the surgeon of salt hisself, Doctor Chip Man."

I buried my face in my hands, shook my head, sobbed.

I overheard Charlotte whisper to Guitar, "I think we

should just leave him be for now; it appears all this is getting to him."

And then I think I dozed on and off for an hour or two until the telephone woke me. Bobby and Shiela were gone from the room, but I could hear their strained panting somewhere beyond the shelves, possibly in the frozen foods section, or over in produce. Meanwhile, the hunger song filtered through the speakers on KDOG.

Guitar answered the telephone. "Yo, mon." His eyebrows danced, his feet shuffled. Then he jumped, raised a fist in the air. He said, "Let me get back to you on this one, Shultzzy." Guitar fell to his knees, clasped his hands. He said, "Holey moley. Holey moley joley roley foley doley."

"What? What is it, hon?" Charlotte said as she put her arm on his shoulder.

On his knees, shaking his head, slapping the floor, Guitar said, "The store's owners said yes, the governor herself has promised additional state funding for the missions, this nameless rock star, whoever the hell he or she is, is going to match the store's donation, and we skate, plead guilty to some stupid, little ol' misdemeanor charge about making too much noise. Yeah, that's what he said, see, we're in violation of a noise ordinance, too much noooise. Also, we got national press out there. CBS, ABC, NBC. They want us to do a press conference when we come out of the store, say how all this came about, why we did it,

what we plan to do next. Some big-deal Indian dude from Washington is here, and he wants to meet with us.

"The only problem is storage. The missions can't store this much food. They don't have the room or enough freezers and refrigerators. It's a logistics problem. Logistics. That's what he said. Logistics. But they're going to work it out."

Guitar ran around the room, shouting, "Logistics, logistics, logistics." Next, he squirmed on the linoleum, laughed hysterically, slapped his sides. Bobby and Shiela, flushed faced, sweaty, came running into the room then, heard the news, hugged, cheered.

I said, in words like these, "Good. You have everything you want. Goodbye." My eyes met Charlotte's eyes, and we regretted, regretted what was going to happen next, for we both knew I was leaving, that it was over, that we were never going to see each other again.

Guitar said, "Wait. A recording contract? Right. An album. We'll say we'll donate half the proceeds to hungry people. And that's it, it'll be finished. We'll stop this thing after they agree to give us a contract."

I said, in words like these, "I don't feel good."

Guitar blocked the space between the shelves. "No way, Jose. You don't just walk out like this. Stop. Think about it." He raised his hands, pointing out an imaginary marquee. "It's Doctor Chip Man, the keyboard surgeon, the

prescriber of funk, of rock `n sock `em roll. Why, you'll be famous. We'll all be famous. Think about it."

I tried to move around him, but he stopped me. Guitar said, "Listen. You started all this. It was your idea about having a cause. And then the song you wrote got the ball bouncing. You can't just walk away from it."

I said, in words like these, "Please. Get out of my way."

Charlotte tugged on Guitar's arm, tried to move him away, said, "Leave him be, hon. He's got his own thing to do."

Guitar pulled the pistol from his pants, waved it in the air, his last hurrah. He laughed, put the gun away, said, "I don't figure it, Dr. Chip Man. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

Charlotte, teary-eyed, hugged me. She said, "It's real funny how things happen sometimes, and the people you meet, ain't it? Here we was perfect strangers just a few hours ago, and now, it's like we's a family almost, and that's what's important, right? It's the family, and keeping the family together. I shar hope we see you again."

I turned to Shiela, put out my hand, and she took it. I said, in words like these, "Are you coming with me?"

She smiled, hugged me, shook her head no. She said, "I don't know what I'm going to tell my parents, Fred. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before."

Bobby shook my hand, put his arm around Shiela. He said, "I'll talk to your parents, Shiela."

I stepped around Guitar, who had his arms folded, and then stopped, turned around, stared into his eyes. Guitar said, "When will we see you again? We need your keyboards."

I said, in words like these, "I'm tired of this, you, all of it, everything." Boo Boo? No answer. I felt a stabbing sensation, a stitch, in my chest.

As I walk out the store's door into the parking lot, Shultz ran over, grabbed my arm, searched me quickly for weapons. He said, "Is it over? Are you giving up? What about the rest of them?"

Other paisley fishbowed faces surrounded me, and when I turned away, I faced a pack of journalists, dogs who clicked, screamed, scrambled for position. I heard loud applause from the Whataburger parking lot, noticed a woman dancing next to the KDOG truck, saw Sarah running towards me, her arms outstretched.

I looked to the sun then, and I felt the coyote next to me in our dark pit.

On Oklahoma Highway 62. Vian. Checotah. Henryetta. At Paden, I stopped for gas, and a Dr Pepper. Harrah. At the edge of towns, I hunkered over the steering wheel, pushed hard on the gas pedal, felt the freedom of leaving perpetually renewed. The chip truck strained, ground gears,

coughed, spat fire, smoke puffs, trembled its way along the armadillo-splotted road. I drove through towns and cities of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, all fine, important American places, and then I pulled into Del Mar. Along the way, the sun-baked asphalt, the transparent heat, and the crawling turtles rose, spoke decent, caring words in the sunlight. This? Or do we become late-night mull, the coyote's companion? These are questions I ask.

Boo Boo, what of facts, really? I leased the Sallisaw land to a local farmer, let Boy and her children live in the house rent-free. Sarah went back to Boston. She said she loved me, and she promised to follow me to California as soon as she took care of some things on the East Coast. (Our first loves haunt us, don't they?) But she never showed. She lives an extremely complicated life, or so she tells me. Boo Boo? What about you? In the end, you went away, too.

There is more. Just past Oklahoma City, on my way to California, I saw someone who looked like myself, only older, traveling east, and his eyes were red, drunken, and defeated. But that's all I saw, nothing more. The Route 66 tornado was imagined, see, a metaphor employed in a well-intended cause. It was really only a dustnado, a masquerade, like all this, nothing to get worried about.

Me? It is years later now as I write this. I paint tits, or lie on the beach, and I shape my memories to meet

my current needs.

You know, it's funny, but I figure now I'll die thinking about something stupid, like trying to come up with all the names of The Brady Bunch, or fantasizing about playing quarterback for the Oklahoma Sooners, or arguing with myself about whether to eat a Butterfinger because of all the extra calories. This is the same ol' stuff you've heard before, the decaying fodder of souls, all that, but it is what ultimately makes us human I guess, what places us above the coyote and the lowly armadillo on life's cruel highway. Still, I wish stuff didn't bother me so much.

As for the pillows, they swirl. They swirl out there somewhere.

VITA

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