

**No Wife No Kids
No Plan**

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A Novel

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iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

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ISBN: 978-0-595-43253-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-595-87594-8 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

1

There is no substitute for living on a busy street in an urban lower-class neighborhood. I know this because I recently made my way to a seemingly-forgotten stretch of cracked pavement in order to leave my old life behind. Here my neighbors are predominately of Italian descent, with the exception of a few scattered mutts and one Nazi named Getman who is the nightmare on Oak Street.

If you go two streets north, you'll wander into a Vietnamese neighborhood. Three blocks south and you'll find yourself standing amongst nothing but Poles. Two to the east and it's African Americans. While the area isn't an absolute melting pot because of the way the neighborhoods are self-segregated, you're guaranteed to see all walks of life if you choose to go less than a quarter of a mile in any direction.

Although I've only been here a few weeks, I've already learned that you don't need to turn on the T.V. to find action. In this neighborhood, all you have to do is step out the front door and you're bound to be entertained. Take yesterday, for instance. Mrs. Abarno, a mose of a woman with a mustache as thick as a Major League Baseball manager's, was chasing her son down the street with a Michael Myers-sized butcher knife. Apparently the athletic high school sophomore was in hot water for misfiring a hockey puck through the bedroom window of "Grandmother" after the frail old woman returned home from the hospital where she was receiving treatment for a heart attack. As much as I sympathize with "Grandmother" and her failing heart, when Mrs. Abarno came to my porch and asked which way the boy went, I led her down the wrong street.

I liked the kid, and he certainly didn't deserve to get all cut up over one lousy slapshot, especially by a woman with more facial hair than he could muster on even his most testosterone-filled day.

All in all, I liked living on Oak Street despite what outsiders thought of the lack of safety of the neighborhood. While the curbs were lined with decrepit cars of every make and model, long stripped of any value, and the sewage drains clogged with everything from hypodermic drug needles to used condoms, I found myself at peace here. Sure, most people would choose pin-drop silence over blaring sirens, but then again I've never considered myself to be like most people. I recently even went so far as to make it a personal goal to avoid the majority like an especially-itchy sexually transmitted disease.

To give you an idea of my background, I previously lived in a posh condo community for what turned into an eight-year span of yuppie madness. Built like Fort Knox to keep the lower and middle classes from infiltrating, the only time you got to meet your neighbors was during fire alarms, which thanks to my tinfoil broiling pan, usually happened every time I cooked a steak. In fact, whenever an attractive woman moved into the building, I would purchase a nice cut of rib eye and cook it at two o'clock in the morning, preferably in the middle of the week. Before ever turning on the stove, I'd ensure I was well-prepared, having showered and put on designer jeans and a stylish t-shirt. This was my way of outshining all of the other single males in the complex, who would stagger half-conscious out of the building in their pajamas, sporting various styles of bed head and rubbing the sleep crusties from their heavy eyes.

I decided it was finally time to leave the discomfort of my home when I received a two-page letter from the trustees of the condo association accusing me of trying to convert the high-end building into a college dormitory. They listed multiple transgressions that included leaving a canoe in the laundry room, hosting a soccer game

in the parking lot, and scaling the three-story building in the wee hours of the morning. Not that I feel the need to defend myself, but the canoe looked ridiculous in my living room and the soccer game was a precursor to a twenty-four hour poker game that culminated in me locking myself out of the building, hence the need to forge my way upward. Would they have preferred that I slept in the lobby? I think not.

I sold my two-bedroom unit to a Guatemalan factory worker who was an honest, hard-working family man. I came to this conclusion because he spoke freely about bringing ten of his relatives to live with him in the modest condominium I once called home. Even though I had received significantly higher offers from other, equally-qualified buyers, I gave it to Pedro because I felt it was time to give something back to society—and to those pretentious fucks in the condo association who thought it was better for me to sell than stay. I'm happy to say that when I went back to pick up my canoe from the laundry room, Pedro rushed over to greet me with a warm "Amigo" and a powerful bear hug that I was surprised he was capable of due to his tiny, almost muscle-free frame. After our embrace, he invited me over to the picnic tables where he and a few dozen of his friends were having a pig roast. I spent a few hours with the group, munching on perfectly-cooked pieces of pork, drinking beer from an endless keg, and playing a serious game of condo-people-watching, which consisted of having to associate each person that passed by us with a particular celebrity. Unfortunately, I was unfamiliar with the majority of the overseas pop culture icons that Pedro and his friends chose, so I just agreed and smiled for the most part. The building's occupants that fell victim to our taunting all had the same look of horror and disgust on their snooty faces when they saw our fiesta taking place. When the building supervisor came over and accused me of having turned the place into the projects, I joined

two of Pedro's friends who were urinating in the bushes and marked my territory one last time.

The place where I now hung my hat was a large, dilapidated brown Victorian that sat at an angle on the corner of Oak and Cherry Streets. If you tilted your head slightly to the left, the once prestigious house righted itself in an almost magical fashion. I can only assume it was built on a sinkhole or that an army of termites with appetites that rivaled their size had been treating the triple-decker as an all-you-can-eat buffet. But regardless of its posture, this was now my abode. I rented the first floor while the other two floors remained unoccupied. Apparently the run-down condition of the house was making it difficult to rent.

As it turns out, my new home was owned by an imprisoned drug dealer. The realtor told me before I signed the lease that the landlord was serving a lengthy sentence and had no intention of fixing up the place now or in the near future. I was informed that I could get a rent reduction if I did some regular work on and around the house, but I told her I liked everything just the way it was. In fact, the only change I made was to hang a set of chimes from the porch roof next to a long-dead plant that was unidentifiable due to its wilted appearance. When the breeze blew, naturally or unnaturally, which it frequently did in this neck of the woods, my hanging orchestra chimed away, performing a never-ending symphony as if it were the only music being made in the entire world.

If you didn't know I was living there, you'd assume the house was long-abandoned. My dining room table consisted of a piece of particle board propped up on four overturned ten-gallon buckets. The matching chairs were four milk crates I walked off with from the nearby mini-mart. On particularly hot days, the wafting odor of sour dairy products emanated from the plastic seats. My living room set was homeless chic, from the lobster pot coffee table I bought off of some grizzled fisherman for a twenty-dollar gift certificate to

Denny's, to an Oldsmobile sofa that I built out of two front seats from something that once resembled a car. I tore them out of the rusted carcass that sat on my front lawn like a dead dinosaur caught in a tar pit, and while they had a certain musty quality to them, I found them to be quite comfortable.

In fact, the only furniture I brought with me after my release from yuppieville was a big screen, high-definition T.V. that I couldn't find myself parting with for fear of never again seeing the animal kingdom as it should be seen—I'm a big Animal Planet fan—and my box spring and mattress, which I'd have happily left behind if it wasn't for all of the compliments I received on it from the many conquests I bedded since buying it a few years ago. And let's be clear, the compliments weren't for the activities performed on said mattress, but for the comfort level itself.

The outside of the house wasn't any better than the inside. The grass had not been cut in countless years and the yard had grown into its own ecosystem, complete with what I assumed were unclassified plant and animal life. I kept to the cracked, concrete walkway because I feared what was inside the jungle-like brush, whether it was killer poison ivy or gigantic fleas. I even went so far as to post "Keep Off The Grass" and "No Hunting" signs in the yard for everybody's protection, and in all honesty, for my own personal amusement.

While there wasn't technically anybody else living in the house, I wasn't there alone. A group of gypsy roaches pitched their tents under that roof long before I arrived and they had been breeding nonstop ever since. At first I thought we could coexist, but when the lights went out, the *Periplaneta Americana*, as they're called in the scientific community, would go apeshit for life and ransack the place like a swarm of kindergarten kids hopped up on Pixie Stix. I could deal with the sounds of them marching around the hollow house, each tiny foot echoing step after step, but it's when they

decided to use my sleeping body as a jungle gym that I put my foot down, both figuratively and literally, as I now chose to stomp on the scurrying pests.

About a week in I decided to make my new home an insect bed and breakfast, scattering roach motels throughout the square footage. They were effective for a little while, but for every hundred I gave shelter to, a hundred more would show up in my cupboards, shoes, and in one instance, the very pants I was wearing at the time. There was no denying that I was losing the battle between man and insect, which is when I decided to call in reinforcements.

My friend Mikey knew a guy who had a cousin that was interested in selling what he described as a “big snake.” Apparently the reptile had a hefty appetite for anything with two or more legs and while I’ve always sort of sympathized with Indiana Jones and his dislike for serpentine creatures, I felt having him manage the cockroach population was better than the alternative—having someone fumigate the place with chemicals sure to make my balls shrink. It also felt appropriate having a wandering snake in my new apartment of Eden.

I gave Mikey eighty bucks and a six-pack of Molson. That was the price of the snake. After the drop was made, a box rivaling the size of the car carcass on the front lawn appeared on my doorstep within three hours. I stared at it for a good ten minutes before mustering up the courage to look inside. Peeling back the duct tape on the cardboard cover, I quickly understood what a “big snake” looked like as a monstrous, almost prehistoric python was curled up at the bottom of the box doing its best impression of “inconspicuous.”

I released the legless dragon into the belly of my house and felt confident that my cockroach problem would no longer be a problem, though for a moment I wondered if having the air squeezed out

of me in the middle of the night by this natural-born constrictor was worth the price of a cockless domain.

After watching the snake, who I decided to call Charlie, slither his way into the kitchen, I took a step outside and sat on my stoop, the one place you'd find me if I wasn't working or sleeping. Even though the chaos that surrounded it would suggest otherwise, this was my zen den. I'd go there to think, drink, learn, people watch, and occasionally, have a heart-to-heart with a puffy-tailed rodent. As the days rolled by, each moment on the porch grew more surreal, making my move to the 'hood well worth the near bargain-basement price of admission.

I sat on the top stair and heard the rotten wood shift beneath me. As always, I ignored the house's call for help and continued my routine. I looked over at my F355 Ferrari Spider, which was innocently parked in my driveway. The sleek, black Batmobile stood out like a sore thumb in the low-income neighborhood, but it had always been something I could push the limits with, so why should here be any different? I cracked open a cold beer and stared out at the Boston 'hood that nestled me into her saggy bosom. There was urban life all around me—a typical day on Oak Street.

2

Next door old Mrs. Fazzino had just stepped out of her house. She was not aging gracefully by any means and her bones seemed to be turning against the rest of her body as arthritis attacked her at every visible joint. Even if you peeled away the layers of life, I imagine she'd still be a homely woman no matter what her age. Her nose was big, her lips were small, and her eyes had a slight cross to them that made you wonder if any man had ever thrown her a bone and shook her out of her virginity. I'd have a hard time biting that bullet, and I'm not exactly known for my standards.

Mrs. Fazzino crept slowly down the steps of her porch and began a daily activity that, while crazy, I always found endearing. Just like yesterday and each day before, the soup-can shaped woman took time out of her less-than-mundane schedule to vacuum her lawn. Despite the arthritis turning her fingers into jagged lightning bolts, she handled the Hoover like it was a toothpick, making quick strides through the thick grass. If not for the limitations of the extension cord she could have covered more ground, but the frown-turned-upside-down on her face was proof that she was quite content on the fringes of the walkway.

When she turned the crackling machine off, I picked myself up and marched towards her, leaning over the fence that separated our yards.

"Good evening Mrs. Fazzino," I said sincerely. "How is the dirt tonight?"

"It's all in the bag," she said as she squinted toward my unbuttoned shirt sleeve, which I was oblivious to until then.

The thing that I found most interesting about Mrs. Fazzino was that she always had a way of making me see the negative details in myself and the world around me. She never looked me in the eye unless there was something wrong with it. She always focused her attention on a bruise, a wart, or some other almost unnoticeable imperfection. Once, I tested this theory and put ketchup on the tip of my sneaker and lo and behold her tomato-seeking eyes locked on to my right foot for the entire conversation.

With her eyes still focused on my shirtsleeve, Mrs. Fazzino made her way to the fence and positioned her small oval face inches from my hand. She cleared her throat and then whispered toward the empty button hole, “The other night I heard growling coming from next door.”

She raised her arm slowly and pointed to Jimmy’s house with one of her twisted fingers.

“He was growling like a lion,” she said.

“A lion? I’m not calling you a liar, Mrs. Fazzino, but that seems a bit out of character for Jimmy. Now if you said a tiger, I might agree with you, but a lion just seems sort of out in left field. You sure it was him?”

“I saw him in the window,” she said, squinting. “He was growling.”

“Maybe so, but he couldn’t have been growling like a lion, Mrs. Fazzino. I’m a big nature buff and I’m pretty confident that lions don’t growl. You know, it’s one of those urban legends or something like that.”

Mrs. Fazzino paid no attention to the words that flowed from my mouth and instead turned her faded, flowery apron toward the furthest side of her house and fixed her gaze on Jimmy’s place.

“The Virgin will teach him a lesson,” she said confidently.

Once again I could thank Mrs. Fazzino for showing me the little details in life that I often overlooked. Positioned only a foot away

from where the old woman was standing was her precious ceramic statue of the Virgin Mary, which normally faced the street, but was now facing Jimmy's bedroom window. She'd even propped it up from underneath using what appeared to be an attachment from her vacuum. She may have been insane, but she was as crafty as MacGyver.

"Mrs. Fazzino, do you really want to subject the Holy Mother to the goings-on in Jimmy's bedroom?"

"She knows who he is. We know all about him and his growling."

"Jimmy's harmless—growling or not. I really don't think there's anything to worry about."

Her crossed eyes darted back to my shirtsleeve, though her attention was still elsewhere.

"Look, do you see the wrapper over there?" she asked.

"What wrapper?"

"The one that blew over from Jimmy's house."

"But, there's a fence there Mrs. Fazzino. How can things blow over from Jimmy's yard when you have a fence to keep them out?"

"The wrapper came in through the holes. He sends everything through the holes."

While a part of me felt bad for the old woman, I couldn't help but find humor in our conversations—good or bad. And even though she made me laugh on the inside without ever trying, I was sincere with her when we spoke and treated her respectfully. I can't speak for what happened inside her home when I wasn't around, but from what I could tell, I was the only person she had any direct contact with and so, I tried to humor her.

Mrs. Fazzino's shriveled face rippled in the breeze like an old sail and her nose blocked the setting sun from sprinkling its UV rays into my eyes. "They always try to hide but I find them," she nod-

ded. “He growls and his wrappers purr, but they’re not quiet enough to hide from me. I may be old, but I’m not crazy.”

“Nobody said you were crazy, Mrs. Fazzino.”

She continued to nod as she collected the vacuum cleaner and slowly crept back up the steps and into her house. I knew Mrs. Fazzino would return again at dusk the following day for there would be renewed dirt, and even if it were immaculate, the dirt would still be there, just like the dragon will return to the child tonight, no matter how many swords and weapons he brings to bed.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed up Jimmy. I had only known him for a few days, but we connected like guys do, sharing a few beers and burping them up as quickly and as easily as they went down. We exchanged numbers, agreeing that it was easier to call than walk the twenty or thirty feet down the street to knock on each other’s doors. Jimmy was a machinist by trade and he had lost all of his incisors in a work-related accident that Mikey described as something you’d see in a big-budget Hollywood horror movie. He had falsies to fill his mouth, but he only wore them when he ate or when he needed to bite the top off of a beer bottle, which meant the majority of the time he was left looking like the oldest young guy I had ever seen. On top of his toothless smile, he had the quintessential retarded laugh, a combination of yelps and snorts, which along with his fully-visible gums, made him come off like the dumbest hillbilly in all of Arkansas. Luckily for Jimmy, he didn’t live in Arkansas and he was actually pretty bright, a fact you discovered once you got past his appearance.

He answered in three rings.

“Jimmy! Yeah, it’s your friendly neighborhood neighbor man. I know it’s not my place, but what’s up with the statue staring up at your window? The whole neighborhood is talking about it!”

He huffed and informed me that he hadn’t slept in two days because of it.

“Why don’t you just pull your shade down?” I asked.

Raised by a single and extremely religious mother, Jimmy had Catholic guilt instilled in him from a very early age, and although he was now an adult in his late twenties, the prying eyes of the Virgin Mary had been affecting his day-to-day activities. Apparently he felt it was like having God in his bedroom twenty-four hours a day.

“Have you tried asking Mrs. Fazzino to reposition the Virgin?” I suggested.

Reasoning with her was not an option in his opinion, mostly because he was convinced that her level of nuttiness was the kind that did things just to drive sane people as crazy as her. He felt that if she knew the statue was upsetting him, it would be firmly planted in its current position until Mrs. Fazzino dropped dead, and although I didn’t say it out loud, I agreed.

“Why don’t you just try to get on her good side?” I continued.

Jimmy claimed to have tried years ago, even going the extra mile and getting his yard professionally landscaped in hopes of connecting with the woman, but it didn’t seem to get any reaction at the time. He even pointed out that my yard was an absolute shithole, yet she didn’t seem to care. He had a point, but I wasn’t going to retire the speech I had already begun crafting in my head because he called me a slob.

“Listen, I think I’ve got the answer to your problem, but it’s going to require a leap of faith on your part. Mrs. Fazzino respects madness. I think if you do something crazy, I could go to her and reason with her, and in the long run, buy you some mental calm.”

He was suspicious, but the more I talked, the more it made sense.

“Maybe if you do something like—I don’t know—clean your dishes with the garden hose.”

At first he refused to stoop that low, but I assured him that if he wanted peace from the Virgin, he’d have to offer her a sacrifice, and

that sacrifice might just be a tiny piece of his sanity and a tad of his dignity, which is a small price to pay in the grand scheme of things.

I hung up the phone and returned it to my pocket. I stretched my arms towards the now-darkening sky and released a ferocious yawn that I was convinced Mrs. Fazzino would mistake for a growling Jimmy. After settling myself back onto my front porch, I found myself mesmerized by a melodic whistling that appeared to be getting closer and closer as it performed in unison with the chimes that hung above me.

To my surprise the lips responsible for such beautiful mouth music belonged to the stereotypical girl-next-door Jennifer, a cute brunette in her mid-twenties who constantly wore her hair in a ponytail using the same blue elastic. She was about five feet four and weighed around one hundred and ten pounds. She wore no jewelry or makeup. Her small features gave her an almost schoolgirlish look. She had a small chin and cheeks, a button nose, and light brown freckles peppered her smooth, fair skin. She lived with her aunt a few houses down from me and from what I knew at the time based on word of mouth, she could bore the stripes off a zebra. I had yet to talk with her since I moved to the neighborhood, and while I normally would have let her walk by without second-guessing myself, I found the need to compliment her whistling.

“Good job with that ditty,” I told her. “You’ve got rhythm.”

“Thanks,” she said, continuing past me to her house.

I watched as she sat on her aunt’s porch, burying her head inside a journal of some kind. I decided to continue our conversation and walked down the street to where she was sitting and scribbling away inside her spiral-bound book. When I stepped in front of the house, she looked up at me for a nanosecond and then went back to her writing. She had a complexion of dazzling freshness and her face was serene and relaxed. I could tell immediately that she was the spiri-

tual, dreamy type and I was intrigued by her concentration on whatever it was she was jotting down with her number two pencil.

“Hi,” I called out from the fence in front of her house.

After going over a few scenarios in my mind on the best way to initiate a formal meet and greet, I settled on the straightforward approach.

“I’m Drago. I’m a new neighbor that lives just down the street. I’ve seen you around a few times, but haven’t had a chance to formally introduce myself, so here I am looking to make amends on that.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said to me in a welcoming voice. “I’m Jennifer.”

“You live here long?” I asked.

“Most of my life actually.”

“Nice neighborhood from what I’ve seen.”

She looked at me, but didn’t say a word. It seemed to me that there was another conversation going on in her head and I wasn’t invited to participate.

“I mean, there are a lot of nice people that live around here anyway,” I said, hoping to save face.

“Very nice,” she agreed politely.

I couldn’t stop noticing her luminous green eyes, which seemed to swirl in the limited light like a capful of oil poured into a rain puddle. She had an old-soul look to her, the kind of aura that had been around the cosmic block a few times.

“You writing the next great American novel?” I asked.

“No,” she smiled.

“If you are writing about this neighborhood, it’s going to be an encyclopedia.”

“That’s true, but I’m not writing about that.”

“How about a hint?” I asked, leaning on the fence.

“I’m writing about the sky.”

I looked up into the evening sky, hoping to find a clue to her motivation. As I searched above, I was shot back down to earth by the sharp metal coils of the fence that were digging into my hands. I raised my stigmata hands toward Jennifer.

“Next time I go see a palm reader, I’m going to be told I have multiple personalities.”

Jennifer smiled and invited me to sit along side of her on the porch. When I got closer, I could see that her eyes were not only green, but a radiant green, and her look, deep and intense. I wanted to collect them like undiscovered gems.

“I forgot what it was like to sit on real steps,” I said. “These are nice and smooth.”

“I’ve seen your porch. It does need some work.”

Suddenly for the first time I felt embarrassed about my current living conditions. I told her I was planning a renovation and when she looked at me incredulously I said that I was going to have the house nuked and rebuilt once the radiation settled.

Every time Jennifer smiled I was taken in by her dreamy disposition. She seemed so content in her skin and I envied her that rarity. In my experience, people tend to pretend they’re someone else while they continuously search to be that person. With Jennifer it was different. She liked being Jennifer and it showed.

“Where does one go to have some fun around here?” I asked her.

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, lowering her head. “I’m not much of a party girl.”

“You don’t have to be a party girl to have fun.”

“No, but my idea of fun is different than most people’s idea of fun. I can assure you that.”

Jennifer suddenly looked at me with a penetrating stare and in a serious tone asked why I would want to move to the neighborhood. Her question caught me totally off guard and the only answer I could think of was the honest one.

“Truthfully, I was unhappy where I was,” I told her. “I needed a change in my life.”

“So you came here of all places?”

“It was a spontaneous decision. I guess I figured if I went to a place I’ve never been, I could look at my life from afar and figure things out. I know it sounds crazy, but somehow it made sense at the time.”

For a moment Jennifer was silent and thoughtful. I could tell she wanted to say something but was holding back.

“Do you like living here?” I asked.

“It’s my world,” she said quietly. “It’s all I know.”

It was hard to decipher Jennifer’s answer as a solid yes or no, but I decided it was best to lighten the mood because things were not necessarily going along with the planned scenario I had mapped out in my mind.

“Okay,” I said. “So your idea of fun is different than other peeps. I get that, but what I don’t get is what your idea of fun is. When you leave your porch, what kinds of things do you like to do?”

“I like parks and quiet places. Sometimes I’ll take a bus to the ocean. You know, the kinds of things that most people think I’m crazy for enjoying.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy at all. Those sound like nice things. I’ve got a log home on a mountain in western Pennsylvania. To me, it’s the most peaceful place in the world.”

“How often do you go?”

“Actually, I haven’t gone there in many years. I’ve been meaning to get back.”

“Why don’t you?” Jennifer asked with genuine eyes.

Once again, I was caught off guard by Jennifer’s questioning and the only answer I could think of was the honest one.

“I get an overwhelming feeling of emptiness when I’m there by myself and there is no one beside me to share the beauty with.”

Although I was being entirely sincere, I could tell Jennifer wasn't sure whether she was being thrown a line. What I had said clearly made her uncomfortable and she ended our discussion.

"Well, I'd love to chat more, but I really have to get going. My aunt is expecting me for dinner. It's my night to cook."

"Okay. Well it was nice talking with you."

"You too," she told me as she stood to enter the house. "Thanks for stopping by."

"See you around."

I'm not sure what it was, but something fascinated and intrigued me about Jennifer and I decided at that moment that I would make it a personal goal to discover more about her world.

As I walked the same path home that I took to Jennifer's house, I couldn't help but contemplate dinner. Both my stomach and I agreed on corn as a main course and I slipped inside to heat up a can, only to return a few minutes later with a fork and a bowl of buttered kernels. I ate quickly, leaving myself no time to actually taste the golden nuggets swimming around in a tiny pool of churned, cholesterol-ridden liquid. There was more shoveling than actual chewing, and before I knew it, the bowl was empty and my stomach was full. I took a swig of beer to facilitate the digestive process only to be interrupted by the neighborhood pit bull, or pit bully as we in the neighborhood called the bloodthirsty creature. The dog belonged to Getman and when the mood struck, it would bark until it was blue in its furry face. This was one of those moments that the dog's vocal chords looked forward to all day long and without warning, it exploded into a vicious bark-fest, though from where I was sitting, there was no specific target in the dog's mind as it just spun in circles hollering at anything that looked at it funny—alive or not. Frustrated, I barked back, but it only seemed to agitate the animal even more, which in turn, frustrated me even more. Before I knew it, I was in a full-fledged barking contest with the dog, each of us

upping the ante every round in an attempt at sounding more threatening as time went on. The pit bull's nerves were wearing thin and the canine monster started trying to break free from the chain that bound him, no doubt hoping to sink his teeth into my jugular.

Apparently the dog had never been challenged in the past because my loud, deep, threatening barks were driving him mad. Sensing a change in his pet, Getman stepped out of his house to investigate. He was a Nazi douchebag who favored camouflage pants and shit-kicking boots, all part of the racist uniform that he and the rest of his bald-headed friends wore proudly. He used his bloodthirsty dinosaur of a dog to instill fear in everything and everyone that came within fifty feet of his house and needless to say, he was not happy that I was agitating his dog. He glared at me, cursing profanities at me with his eyes. I glared as well, not wanting to back down, especially after standing up to his mutt. In comparison, he was a thumb-sucking child. However, he was also the only true ugliness I had experienced since moving to the 'hood.

Aside from Getman, I felt very comfortable in my new neighborhood. Most people were extremely warm and friendly once I got acquainted and spent time with them. And although the inner city didn't exactly feel like home, there was no place in my life that had since childhood. Each apartment, condo, and town was just another pit stop on the way to an unknown destination.

I watched a silent ambulance pass by. I listened to the happy voices of the neighborhood children playing, and I remembered a time when I too was a child, wondering about the world beyond my street, beyond the playground and beyond the schoolyard. It seemed at the time that there was a world full of adventure just beyond my grasp and I was forever dreaming about glorious deeds. In those days I wanted to be some kind of hero and had you asked me then, I would have told you that I had zero intention of becoming a normal adult, at least by what I thought the definition of one was. In fact,

adults scared the hell out of me, and in a way, they still do. Their eyes always seemed so distant and they were difficult to read. The stuff that was going on inside of them was unimaginable to me, and now when I look into a mirror, I see in myself that which I once feared.

Strange, I had become that person that I was so horrified of when things in my life were simpler and more innocent. I now belonged to that unimaginable world that I once thought was so alien, only to yearn for that animated one I left behind. Yet all is not lost, for the paint of adulthood has not dried by any means. The old memories are still warm and continue to maintain their temperature despite the cold storage of middle-age life. And although I had just turned forty years old, age to me was only a number, and if accounting had taught me anything, it's that numbers can be fudged.

I found myself getting antsy as the sun dipped further into the western horizon. I decided to chase the orange ball of light and warmth for a few miles, choosing to walk a few blocks in an attempt at familiarizing myself with my new surroundings. Dusk had created the perfect weather for a city hike, and with little else to do as the day crept into the evening, I made my way down the rickety porch steps and off into the heart of my new home.

I started at a slow pace, but decided to pick up my speed upon hearing the memory-inducing jingle, "Pop Goes the Weasel," which seemed to be traveling towards me at a stop and go click. I hadn't heard the chimes of the song since childhood and found myself suddenly craving a sweet, creamy treat. The generic instrumental was the calling card of a chain of long-running urban ice cream trucks called Mr. Pops, and they had successfully branded themselves with the "Weasel," making it a fan favorite among neighborhood kids throughout the city.

I stood in line behind a pack of hungry toddlers all eager to get their hands on a sugary, frozen snack shaped like their favorite car-

toon character. I had simpler tastes and when it was my turn to order, I went with a creamsicle, an old staple of ice cream men everywhere. The eighteen-year-old driving the truck was a stoner whose tie-dyed t-shirt matched the trippy colors of the treats he sold. We talked for a bit about the jingle that poured from the square truck's bullhorn and I convinced him to sell me the spare copy of the song he had burned to a CD in case of an emergency. I had always been an impulse buyer and the recent reminiscing about my childhood had prompted me to purchase a small piece of it for my own personal nostalgia.

I ate the orange ice cream bar as quickly as possible as my olfactory canal was under attack from the sulfurous air. Trash day loomed in this section of the neighborhood and unlike those parts of society that I used to call home, here trash bins were foreign and garbage was left to rot on sidewalks and stoops. Litter seemed more common than grass here and it was a familiar occurrence to see any number of fast food and drink containers defiantly hurled from cars as they sped by at speeds far greater than what the spray-painted speed limit signs called for.

The interesting thing about litter in the inner city is that it often gets recycled. Rats and pigeons scurry and swoop as they feast on spoiled remains of what was once called food and even the homeless have a hand in keeping the street clean. I watched as one man in particular scooped up a sidewalk-flavored burger and without hesitation, proceeded to engulf the sure-to-be-foul beef patty as if it were filet mignon. Choosing to not go without carbs, he then fought with a pack of wild dogs for what could only have been a half-dozen french fries that were once part of the super-sized creation he was now calling supper. I couldn't help but smile at his tenacity and even more so at his ingenuity when he finished his meal with an after dinner smoke that he made by mixing and matching the tobacco from a handful of discarded and previously

puffed-on cigarettes. He then poured the Frankenstein creation into the burger's wrapper, lit it, and enjoyed a cigarette fit for a king.

I left the homeless man to his smoke and continued my walk, which proved to be more difficult the further I went. Apparently defecating dogs were a common occurrence in the 'hood and without anybody regulating the squatting madness, owners had no motivation to scoop the poop, leaving me to hopscotch my way through fertilized pathway after fertilized pathway. That being said, I preferred dealing with their feces over the dogs themselves, because in this neck of the woods, canine ownership was a status symbol and the more ferocious the dog, the more respected you were on the block. Some of the dogs wandering around these parts were dragons, and although I'm no expert on the subject of man-eating man's best friends, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that the Getman had the nastiest of all domesticated hounds. Hercules himself didn't stand a chance against that beast.

Colors were muted everywhere I went. Grays and blacks and shades of dirt brown filled every inch of the neighborhood and the only green to be found anywhere was in the hanging plants behind store windows. Red was another common color here, but not in the landscapes. I walked past endless people with bloodshot, boarded-up eyes, all of whom made it their daily mission to rest against a wall or stoop, finding little motivation in acting, but instead, choosing to live in reaction to what came their way. For those people in motion, there was an odd heightened state of alert with them all, as if they were expecting trouble at any moment. Each individual had tapped into an internal IV of adrenalin and it poured into their bloodstreams like city sewage into the harbor. The excrement of rage smeared their hardened faces, fortifying their penetrating stares and filling their clenched fists with a bottomless cup of disgust and bitterness. Anger was in everybody and everything. Even my ears

caught a bit of contempt in a set of baritone chimes that hung from and banged against the doorway of a convenient store.

The teenagers were all masquerading as gangsters, and I'm sure a few of them actually were gangsters. Black clothing was the latest trend in urban fashion, whether it was in their bandanas, t-shirts, or the jeans they wore snugly just below their ass lines. On the sidewalks, it looked like a pedestrian funeral procession in constant motion. And while the summer air was just humid enough to cause me to sweat, I found the only warmth at ground zero to be the hot steam that rose from the sewer grates.

I stopped next to a utility pole in the heart of the urban jungle and I found myself at the starting point of a revelation. People—the homo sapiens of the world—truly are exactly like our distant cousins. We are walking primates. To me, everybody looked like they were chimping.

Suddenly I no longer saw each person that passed me as a human being, but instead as part of the monkey family that we for so long thought ourselves better than because evolution graced us with its presence. What a crock of collective denial. Everywhere I looked there was a variety of apes and chimps going about their daily routines, only those knuckle-draggers wore clothes and spoke a unified language. Whether white, black or tan-skinned, it made no difference. There were fierce apes with their hands swaying from side to side as they bolted down the street, and there were scared monkeys with their heads darting about in an attempt to locate danger before it arrived. On a street corner I watched a woman picking invisible lint off a man, seemingly reducing his agitation. On a stoop I witnessed two younger spider monkeys climbing up and down and all around a porch as if they were hopped up on primate sugar. Everything appeared as a vivid expression of the basic instincts we are all born with. It was a living course in anthropology and it was playing

out before my eyes. This was a human zoo and all of the animals were uncaged.

3

My walk had opened up my eyes to more than just the neighborhood itself and I returned to my place on my porch, heavy with thoughts and even heavier in spirits. I glanced over at the bowl that once held my corn dinner to find that it was now filled with something else entirely—ants. The mini army of black carpenter ants must have caught a whiff of the sugary butter now congealing at the bottom of the bowl and stopped their usual routine of whatever ants do to forage what remained of my indigestible dinner. As I watched them dive headfirst into the bowl, I could not help but be reminded of a woman I had been seeing by the name of Martha.

Martha was more than just an occasional lay looking to bring it to the next level. She was a coddler and a nag, and from what I could tell, the kind of woman who could choke the life out of a fully-capable and healthy male within an estimated one year's time. I had been seeing her for about three months, and when she was around I already felt tightness in my chest and a desperate need for oxygen. I was feeling claustrophobic in her world and in her presence, and staring down at that bowl made me imagine what she'd say had she known I had eaten corn, and nothing more, for dinner.

"Why don't you eat real food?" she'd squeal like a pig. "Look at the nutritional values on the label. They're all zeros except for salt."

Her voice was now filling up my head, rupturing my ears and choking the very life out of me. This was all imaginary, so you can imagine the effect she has on me in person.

"All you're doing is raising your blood pressure," I heard the imaginary voice announce. Sadly, my high blood pressure wasn't

due to the food I ate, the job I kept, or the genetics that made me who I was. No, the unhealthy spike in that number was due to the women I kept finding myself involved with. For whatever reason, Martha and those that came before her in the relationship scheme of things have either knowingly or unknowingly been like tiny nails in the big-picture coffin. Yet, like the crack addict up the street who can't stay straight long enough to kick the habit, I couldn't keep my whacker in my pants long enough to actually break it off with these women. Some would say I'm a glutton for punishment. Most would say my pain is self-inflicted and that these women are keepers, only I'm too blind to see.

In all honesty though, thinking of Martha did put me slightly on edge.

We had met in a laundromat. On that first run in, she was doing her regular weekly wash, and I was attempting to get blood stains out of my sheets after a drunken tryst with a girl who warned me she had her period. I have selected hearing as it is, never mind when I'm six beers in and horny as hell.

Anyway, so we met over a long line of industrial-sized washing machines and dryers. She was extremely quiet, sitting there reading her "Family Circle" magazine as her laundry loads soaked, spun and heated themselves to the ultimate goal—cleanliness. Upon reaching said goal, I watched her fold her wardrobe, taking particular notice of something that should have tipped me off right away. I could tell that she was a conservative girl based on the fact that there was not a single thong anywhere to be found and against my better judgment, I struck up a conversation with her regardless. Now that I think about it, it was no doubt my curiosity towards her repressive nature that originally attracted me to her. She was a conquest, and like all quiet women are said to be, I convinced myself that she was a screamer. Boy was I wrong.

Missionary was the mission every time out with Martha. There was no funny business to be found anywhere in the bedroom and all lights had to be kept off, the shades pulled down to the floor and the curtains drawn when performing all acts of fornication. It was always an in-and-out job, and because Martha had never had an orgasm prior to us being together, there were no expectations for me to deliver on something, big or small. Instead, I did my thing while she lay there with the deer in the headlights look, never once making a peep. Although her clitoris was the size of a jolly green giant pea and one would think she could climax like a champ, whenever I tried to touch the pink chickpea, she would nudge my diddling digit to the side.

It was the moments after sex that I dreaded even more. After rolling off of her, she'd immediately suck me into the confines of her delusions. Without hesitation and without warning, the woman would ask me what I was thinking, hoping to find something matrimonial going on just beneath the layer of bone that is my skull. Sparing no feelings, I'd tell her what I was thinking, and never once was it her. A terribly confused, somewhat morbid look would fill her face and she would say, "That's incredibly psychotic," before turning her back to me and going to sleep. Soon all that was left was to tell her what she wanted to hear, and she quickly became devoted to my lies.

Like a super-sleuthing bloodhound sniffing out a clue, Martha must have sensed I was thinking about her, because my cell phone rang and it was her. I answered reluctantly.

"Hello, honey," were the first words out of her mouth and I began to sweat. The night before I had told her that I was thinking about our future together and apparently it had triggered the honey button in her brain. I could have hung up and smashed my tiny cell phone to bits, but like a zombie without any real direction, I remained on the line.

“Hi, Martha,” I replied.

“How was your day?”

“Not bad. And yours?”

“Very nice, thank you. Have you eaten dinner yet?”

“Just finished up not too long ago actually.”

“What did you have?”

“Corn. I had a can of corn.”

“Why didn’t you eat real food?”

“I like corn.”

“When I see you tomorrow night, I’m going to make you corn on the cob. At least that has a purpose.”

“Purpose? It’s the same thing. The only difference is my kernels were conveniently removed from the cob, making it easier to eat.”

I internally asked myself why I needed to justify my eating habits to this woman and I was admittedly unable to come up with anything that made me feel better about the situation. She was slowly killing me and for a second, I imagined her high-pitched voice capable of melting my eyes.

“Nevertheless, I’m making you a full meal tomorrow and the vegetable of the day will be corn on the cob,” she responded.

“Make sure it’s white and crispy.”

There was silence on her end. It was my favorite part of the conversation.

“Have you given any thought to seeing a therapist?”

There it was. The continual therapy bomb. Martha wanted nothing more than to see me on a leather couch.

“Not really, Martha. I’ve been kind of busy.”

“You made a point to mention it in bed the other night that you’d give it serious consideration. You weren’t lying, were you?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said just prior to releasing a lion-sized yawn.

“It’s rude to yawn on the phone!” she snapped.

I went silent and lost my zen. I was close to losing my patience as well and telling her just how little she meant to me, but I bit my tongue. It was clear that this relationship was nearing its end and I'd rather stick a fork in it amicably to avoid any immediate emotional outbursts.

"Honey? Honey? Are you there?"

I bit my tongue even harder, piercing the pink flesh with my canines just enough to cause a little bit of blood to escape. I was self-mutilating now, a sure-fire sign that things were not going well. What started out as a casual sexual fantasy had now turned into an all-too-common nightmare. She had become a conscience, a nag, and she called me "honey" to boot.

"Absolutely I'm here, Martha."

"Sometimes I think you're not listening to me when I talk."

For once she was right.

"I'm just a little tired," I responded.

"It's okay. What's important is that we're together and we get to see each other again tomorrow. I'll be at your place at seven and make sure you have an appetite. I'm going to make you a wonderful chicken dish. I found the recipe in the back of a magazine and it looks absolutely yummy."

The tongue biting was reaching a feverish pitch.

"Sounds good," I somehow mustered through gritted teeth. "See you then. Bye."

I snapped my cell phone shut before she could say good-bye, hoping to avoid any more nauseating "Honeys." She fed me so many "Honeys" I almost barfed. If I had a jar of honey in the house I would have brought it outside and smashed it on the pavement into a thousand pieces, all as an act of defiance against the bee-made substance. If I had my way, I would have made all of the honey in all of the world disappear. Needless to say, I had reached my fill of honey.

The human capacity for self-delusion utterly amazed me. I mean, how this woman, whom I regularly avoided emotionally, could possibly think I loved her was beyond me. I'm her worst nightmare whether she cared to admit it to herself or not and she was mine, and yet she expected me to behave like we were a normal couple. It was definitely time to end this charade. Even though it had only been three months of courting as my grandmother would call it, I knew it was inevitable that I would still get hit with the final complaint of, "I can't believe I wasted so much time with you."

Although I had all but given up my search for my true golden mermaid and accepted the fact that she probably didn't exist, the problem I was facing most of all these days was in dealing with all the consolation prizes. The women I was meeting were an unbelievably distant second, as far away from what I wanted as the truth is from a lie. The older I got, the problem seemed to worsen and I couldn't help but wonder whether it was really worth the pursuit of these separated gazelles that hobbled across the open concrete wasteland looking for a mate.

The thought of Jennifer entered my consciousness. She seemed so different and I couldn't stereotype her into any one category. It was almost like she was connected to another world, yet at the same time she came off as so down to earth. I thought about our first conversation and how I felt a kinship with her almost immediately. I couldn't point out our similarities yet, but I knew on some subconscious level that she and I were alike. I wanted to see her again.

Before I could finish another thought, I was greeted on my porch by Rocky, a squirrel that had lived in the vicinity of my house long before I moved into the neighborhood and who had recently become somewhat of a pet. Upon seeing me, Rocky reared up on his hind legs, waiting for me to serve him dinner. I smiled as I always did at my little friend and made my way past him, into the house,

and returned quickly with a tin of salt-free nuts that I kept by the door for his visits.

When I first met Rocky, I knew immediately that he was a mutant squirrel. There was no other way to explain his blasé take on the world around him, and more specifically, his completely carefree behavior towards me and the other bipeds that walked the streets. He approached me on the first day I moved into the house, going out of his way to make eye contact with me, yet still hesitant to get too close. By the end of the week he was eating out of my hand, and after a few encounters with each other, I had named him.

I reached down and handed a peanut to Rocky and he quickly took it in his mouth and positioned it snugly in his cheek. He took another and another, until his mouth was bursting at the seams. He would always take as many peanuts as he could fit in his mouth, and then he'd disappear for a few minutes and return for some more. I could never tell if he was eating them or storing them away for a rainy day, but sometimes it would go on until the entire tin was gone. For all I knew, he was stockpiling peanuts for a squirrel war.

Today was different though. Rocky was actually eating the peanuts, nibbling on them furiously and swallowing them down. After a few handfuls, he'd take a water break, gulping a long drink of fresh H₂O from a bowl I kept on the porch for him. It was a meal fit for the king of squirrels himself, but it came to a crashing end when we were interrupted by the stumbling solicitations of an overweight prostitute named Clea.

"You lookin' for a good time, mister?" she said as she stepped towards me, her ass hanging out of the bottom of her leopard print skirt. Rocky had already seen all he could handle and hightailed it for a nearby tree, perching himself high above the action.

"I think my idea of a good time and your idea of a good time may be two different things," I replied playfully.

As Clea got closer I was able to get a better look of what she was selling. She was an African American in what I estimated to be her early forties, though I've learned never to judge a book by its cover because this part of town tends to age a person more quickly. She had bright red lipstick smeared over her voluptuous lips, as well as a good portion of her right cheek, which gave her that crazy pill lady quality. Her eyes were heavily caked with purple eye shadow and her skirt was just high enough to reveal a pair of black panties that had seen better days, and her shirt was cut deep down the center of her chest, making it possible for her breasts to spill out. She wore thigh-high boots with six-inch heels that clopped like horse hooves as she stepped up my concrete walkway, and she topped off her ensemble with what appeared to be a pus-filled cold sore that grew on the corner of her mouth.

She pointed back to my Ferrari and asked, "That ya car?"

"Yeah," I replied, not knowing where the conversation was going.

"Ya live here?"

"Sure do."

"This is one sorry ass looking place for a white boy like yourself to be shacked up in," she said as she eyeballed the house from top to bottom. "You buy this house and lookin' to fix it up?"

"No," I replied. "I like it just the way it is."

Clea's face filled with disgust and she had no qualms about hiding it. Her head darted back as if dodging an incoming missile and her brow sank deep between her eyes.

"You crazy or somethin'? You been smokin' crack?"

"I'm proud to say that I'm a subscriber to the Say No To Drugs mentality."

"Well, you must be doin' somethin' cause ain't no one want to be livin' here. One and one don't add up to two, if you get my drift."

She paused briefly to scan me up and down.

“You on the run?” she asked.

“No,” I said, laughing under my breath.

“Sugar, all you do is say no,” she returned in a now-seductive voice as she ran her hands over her mostly exposed breasts. “You are too negative. How ’bout you and me have a date and make ourselves some positive. And I’m talkin’ in that car of yours—not in that haunted house.”

While the idea of contracting a communicable disease in any of my many orifices was a scrumptious thought, I fought off the urge to get really dirty and turned down the forward hooker.

“No thanks,” I replied in a sincere voice. “I’m thinking about becoming asexual.”

“A what?”

“It means I don’t have sex.”

“You got somethin’ wrong with your dick or somethin’?”

Just for the record, there is nothing wrong with my dick, unless a slight upward curve is abnormal, but from what I’m told, it tickles the g-spot region and makes for an added intercourse bonus.

“No, I don’t have anything wrong with my dick per se. I just don’t want to have sex anymore.”

“Shit, if more people think like you, I’m gonna be outta business and that shit ain’t gonna fly with me. You crazy white boys are usually my best customers, although you always want the freakiest shit done to you. What’s up with that?”

“My guess is that our mommies didn’t love us as much as they should have.”

Clea gave me a disgusted glare. Her face always had an expression of some sort exploding from it and it made her come off as very cartoon-like.

“They must have let you out of the crazy pen, huh?” she asked me.

“No. I wasn’t that lucky. I lived in the suburbs with an army of yuppies, but I smartened up, sold my condo and moved here.”

“Here!” she shivered. “Everybody’s lookin’ to move out of here! Nobody moves here unless they have to.”

“I had a severe case of affluenza,” I told her.

“Say what?”

“It’s a social disease. You get it from the relentless pursuit of money and material possessions.”

“Survival ain’t no disease,” she insisted.

“Affluenza isn’t at all about survival. It makes you go after more than you need. Whatever you have is never enough and you always want more, be it a better car, bigger condo, kinkier sex or whatever. It’s the crack of the rich and the wannabe rich. Affluenza turns everybody into a materialistic junkie.”

“So you rather be a poor sucker?” she asked me, raising her eyebrow as she posed the question.

The herpes carrying hooker just wasn’t getting it and I couldn’t help but think of the absurdity of the moment. Here was this destitute woman who had absolutely nothing and was forced to whore herself out for money, and I was trying to explain to her the pangs and sorrows of someone whose cup runneth over. She was just trying to survive in life and I was going into a philosophical rant about how eating too much of the apple was hazardous to your health. It was then that I realized it was best to keep my impoverished soul to myself.

I smiled at the confused hooker and pointed back towards the house.

“I’m thirsty,” I said. “You want a beer?”

She was hesitant at first, looking at me as if I was concealing a large butcher knife in my waistband.

“Do I have to go in there with you?” she asked, never once taking her eyes off of me.

“Nope. It’s probably better that you not because there’s some kind of serious snake on the loose in there. I was thinking I could grab you one and then just bring it back out here.”

“Well in that case, grab me two so you don’t have to get up again.”

I headed into the house and returned steadfast with three beers, one for me and two for my new scantily-dressed friend. I handed her the bottles and she wasted no time ingesting their contents.

“I was kind of hoping we could have a toast,” I said to her jokingly.

“You can toast my ass,” she blurted as she drank the remaining bottle in a single gulp. “Look at that shirt of yours. Those threads are dying for some starch.”

“I know. I need to go to the dry cleaners. Any of them do pick up around here?”

“Sugar, the only establishment that picks up around here is the funeral parlor.”

I chuckled even though the reality of her comment was quite depressing.

“So how much did that car cost you?”

“One hundred fifty thousand, give or take a thousand.”

“Your last name Rockafella or somethin’? How about givin’ me a loan?”

The conversation was getting sticky, and I avoided her question like I would the herpes on her lip.

“Come on, man. All I need is five hundred to pay off my electricity bill and to put some food in the house so my baby girl can eat.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, and I’ll tell you why. If I give you money, you’ll keep coming back for more.”

“So?” she asked as if I was being ridiculous.

“Well, when I stop giving you money, that’s when our friendship would be ruined.”

“Last I checked, friends don’t let friends starve to death neither.”

“You’re an attractive woman with a lot to offer. Why not reel in a nice big sugar daddy to call your own?”

“Around here there are no such things as big fish—only minnows and sharks.”

Surely there must have been something I could do to help Clea boost sales. I thought long and hard and tapped into my MBA training and business expertise. And then it came to me as clear as day. I told Clea about how she had to work on her branding and marketing, which in business, translated to dollars. The problem was that she just hadn’t plugged in to her true potential in terms of reaching her customer base.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“When you are out walking and working the streets, most of your customers are inside, which means they don’t even know you are out there and available.”

Clea thought to herself for a moment and I could tell by the expression on her face that she agreed with my free business advice.

“So how do I get them to know I’m here?”

“Why not go with an already proven method? Music.”

“Music? You mean like hip hop or somethin’?”

“Not exactly. Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to loan you a boom box, a CD and a knapsack and you’re going to conduct an experiment. You load it all up, you blast the speakers, and you walk around doing exactly what you normally do, only this time you’re advertising. Trust me. You’ll be swimming in customers.”

I ran inside and dug out a high-tech portable sound system that I had yet to unpack since moving to the neighborhood. The speakers were capable of projecting sound up to two blocks away, making it possible for Clea to broaden her sales horizons without having to clock extra hours. I grabbed the recently purchased “Pop Goes the Weasel” CD from the kitchen counter and loaded it into the boom

box, making sure it was set on repeat before I piled everything into an oversized backpack. I quickly cut out a series of holes for the high powered speakers using a pair of left-handed scissors and returned to the porch where I handed it over to the entrepreneurial hooker.

Clea strapped the backpack over her shoulders and smiled in delight, no doubt wondering to herself why she hadn't come up with the idea before. She left after saying something to me, but the weasel jingle was too loud for her comment to be heard and I had never been good at reading lips. I watched as she walked down the street, laughing to myself as various coin-carrying kids ran from their houses only to be disappointed to find the human ice cream truck and the fleshy treats she had up for grabs. Once word spread, I could actually see Clea's client list tripling.

As I made my way back towards the porch I noticed Mikey sitting in the shadows. At first he startled me, but his stocky frame and barrel chest were a dead giveaway for who the mysterious silhouette belonged to.

Mikey was my new best friend. I met him the first day I moved into the neighborhood and we bonded instantly. He was a Neanderthal of man and spent most of his free time lifting weights, though he was adamant about skipping legs because, as he tried explaining to me once, they were the least-seen part of his body anyway. He was always wearing muscle shirts and I had yet to see him without a gold chain around his thick neck.

Since day one Mikey went out of his way to make me feel comfortable. When I told him where I had lived prior to moving to the neighborhood, he told me that he would keep an eye on me and that I was under his protection. He told me the 'hood could be a dangerous place and, like prison, it's important to have friends to watch your back. My favorite piece of advice that he shared with me was to steer clear of guys with expensive sneakers and starched t-shirts because they were most likely gang bangers and that I didn't

want any part of them. He talked the talk quite a bit and while he had the veneer of a tough guy, he was extremely likable and humorous once you broke through the top layer. Even though I had only known him for a short time, he was always there for me and was always willing to do me a “solid” as he called it.

I could tell work was bothering Mikey. I had seen that look on his face a few times before. He had been working as a salesman since he graduated from high school, first starting out as an appliance guy at department stores like Sears and eventually getting a break with a Ford dealership downtown.

“How are sales?”

“Eh,” he said. “Today was MIT day so I got all of the cyber-freaks rolling in. They’re in what they call their ‘pre-research’ phase, which basically means that they walk around rubbing their beards and making me offers two hundred dollars below cost. It’s a giant waste of my time. The boss is pulling down seventy to eighty grand and me, throw the dog a bone.”

Mikey lit a cigarette and began belching forth smoke and gas from every possible orifice. A woman who was innocently walking her dog by the house was repulsed by the sound and smell wafting in her direction. They both tilted their noses away from Mikey and picked up the pace.

“Hey, I stink, therefore I am,” Mikey declared to the victim fleeing from his flatulence.

“I didn’t know you were a philosopher,” I said to him.

“I take my One-A-Day and don’t ask any questions.”

Mikey fiddled with the gold chain around his neck. He sucked on his cigarette and I watched the ash fall to the porch and for a moment I feared that the dried wood planks would ignite.

“Fuck, cigarettes taste damn good, man. I can’t believe these politician douchebags are trying to make it so difficult for me to smoke

now. I tell you, if they ever try to take my smokes and Twinkies away from me, I swear I'll storm the White House myself."

"Martha says Twinkies are no good for you. She says there's nothing but chemicals in them."

"You can tell Martha that she can stick to eating celery sticks and carrots because that just means more Twinkies for me. I'm twenty-five man, and these are supposed to be the best years of my life. I plan on enjoying them." Mikey paused and reflected for a moment and then blurted out, "I need a new job. I'm just not making what I should be. I know I'm not a rocket scientist, but I have talents and I work hard. I should be making more than the peanuts I'm making, I'll tell you that much."

"Have you thought about becoming an independent sales rep?" I asked Mikey.

"What the hell would I sell?"

"I read in the newspaper yesterday about how some local laboratory invented a silicone substitute for breast enlargement surgeries. It said they were going to be looking for salesmen to bring the product to market. Basically your clientele would be boob doctors. How hard could that be?"

"How can anybody get excited feeling up some Jell-O that some nerd made with his Bunsen burner? I'll take some itty-bitty titties over some hard fakies any day of the week."

"You don't need to date the shit, you just need to sell it. I bet you can make good money in that field these days. Everyone's trying to improve themselves in our self-obsessed society, so why not cash in on it?"

"And what do I tell people when they ask me what I do for a living?" he said, flicking his cigarette onto the walkway. "Am I supposed to tell my friends that I'm a breast salesman?"

"Nah. You just tell them you're in pharmaceuticals."

“Thanks but no thanks, man. I need to believe in what I’m selling.”

“Can I ask you something, Mikey?”

“Sure thing.”

“I remember when I first moved here, you warned me about the girl Jennifer that lives a few houses down me. What was that all about again?”

“You thinking about hitting that?” he asked me.

“No. I was just talking with her recently and I guess I’m just curious about her.”

“You don’t want that,” he warned. “She’s the Lone Ranger of girls—a total shut-in. If I’m being completely honest, I think there’s something wrong with her. As long as I’ve been here, she’s never had any friends and I’ve never seen her with any guy. My brother went to school with her and they called her Space Girl all through high school. She’s out there, man.”

“Do you have any idea how long she’s been living with her aunt?”

“As far as I know, forever. Something bad happened to her parents when she was a kid and her aunt became her legal guardian or some shit like that.”

Mikey stared at me, investigating my thoughts like a psychic.

“You’re thinking of going after that, aren’t you?” he asked.

“No,” I reassured him, fearing that his knowledge of my interest in Jennifer would become an unwanted interference down the road.

“Like I said, I’m just asking.”

Mikey stood up, stretched and shook out his crotch.

“Let’s go to Da Bomb tonight,” he told me. “I bet there will be plenty of action up in that joint tonight and I don’t know about you, but I could use some action.”

I found Mikey’s dating habits interesting, especially for a street-wise kid from the ‘hood. Most of the women he was seeing were

either professionals or in college with ambitious aspirations. He steered clear of what he called “gutter girls” from the neighborhood and chose to chase successful women because it inspired him to advance himself.

“Let me tell you about women,” he said. “Today, they’re a bunch of floozies with Master’s Degrees. I mean, here I am sitting on a public bench with this Simmons College girl. Her idea of romance is staring into the shrubs. She’s talking philosophy and all I can think about is sticking my dick in between her legs. Next thing I know she’s telling me I can’t express my feelings.”

“What feelings?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should try to have more of a meeting of the minds with them.”

“Today, all they got is meetings on their minds.”

“Maybe you should try some of those community college girls.”

“I do. They are all out for a good orgasm. The problem is that they’ve all had a number of Mike Tysons in them. So I stick my dick in as far as it can go and if I don’t get much of a reaction, I move on to the next.”

“They certainly can’t accuse you of not being a good listener.”

“Hey, if she’s a good screamer, I’m a good listener.”

“What ever happened to that environmental lawyer you met at Whole Foods?” I asked him.

“She’s still in the picture, though it’s fading fast. We met for coffee the other day and she tells me that she’s an animal rights activist and that she hasn’t eaten meat since she was like eighteen or some bullshit like that. Being the sensitive guy that I am, I told her that I thought it was cowardly to shoot an animal with a gun, which is why I use a bow and arrow when I go hunting.”

“I bet that went over well with her,” I said, chuckling.

“Eh, she was sucking my dick by midnight and no, she wasn’t any better than the last neither. Word to the wise, don’t let a vegetarian suck your sausage ’cause she won’t treat it like meat. Bitch might have well has had a celery stalk in her mouth for all she cared.”

I laughed at Mikey as he played out the blow job in question like a game of porno charades. He spoke just as much with his hands as he did with his mouth and every story he told appeared to be choreographed beforehand. It was all part of the Mikey show.

“Maybe you need to lower your sights,” I told him.

“The problem I’m having lately is that I keep meeting the broads who are looking to get married.”

“It’s their biological clock.”

“Oh please,” he said, cupping his hands over his crotch. “What about my biological cock?”

“Listen Mikey, these women that you’re going after know that their time is running out, so when a guy like you comes along, they get completely disgusted. They’ve come to know the difference between a dog in the park and a potential husband.”

“You really got everything figured out professor. Maybe you should teach a course,” he said with a slight tone of irritation in his voice. “Hey, how about you and me do some trolling in Boston tonight?”

“You driving?” I asked.

“If that’s what it’s going to take.”

“Count me in.”

“Sweet,” he said, patting me on the back with a forceful slap that almost knocked me over. “I’m going to go shower up and I’ll be back in an hour to pick you up. You’ll see. There’s nothing like a new piece of pussy to get a man’s mojo going again.”

Mikey crossed the street to his house and I went inside to change. I put on a pair of jeans that were fairly new but had a tiny

tear in the thigh from the metal money clip I kept in the nearest pocket, which continuously rubbed in the same spot every time I went out on the prowl. Luckily for me it was now a stylish maneuver to wear jeans with holes, a fact that Mikey brought to my attention.

I put on a black silk shirt and left it unbuttoned just above the chest. As for accessories I debated between my Hermès belt with a large H on the buckle or a Versace one that was a little less in your face. I opted for the Versace belt after recalling a conversation I had with Rooster, my business partner about the Hermès where he joked, “What does the H stand for, Herpes?” “I have a communicable disease” was not the look I wanted to go for that night.

After dressing myself, I sprayed on some cologne and grabbed a beer out of the refrigerator. I stepped out onto the porch and breathed in the summer air, popping the top on my can and reveling in the decay of the urban jungle I now called home. Although I have been battling with myself recently over the complexity of my life, I thought about how there were a number of lights at the end of the tunnel, including the possibility of leaving my job in the near future and a girl named Jennifer. I smiled at the thought of a positive future, but was jolted from my daze when Mikey drove his jacked-up pickup truck on the sidewalk, laying on the horn to get my attention.

“How is that for door-to-door service?” he screamed from the window of his truck.

I laughed at how much Mikey tried to show the world that he was a guy and I hoisted myself up the metal stairs of his truck to begin the ascent to the passenger seat. When I reached my destination, I could almost read the wattage on the light bulbs screwed into the street lights that lined Oak. I was wheezing when I finally sat down, all of my muscles strained from the pulling and pushing it took me to reach the seat.

“Damn, Mikey,” I said. “You’re going to kill me with this thing. I’ll drive next time.”

“I like to be high up,” Mikey proclaimed as a cigarette hung from his mouth. “It gives me that sense of power. You know, like a set of extra balls or something.”

We sped off down the road and Mikey immediately began tailgating anything on four tires. He was quick-tempered, cursing and waving his fist in the air every time he saw brake lights on a car in front of him, especially a cherry red Camaro that reduced its speed by at least ten miles per hour to purposely irritate Mikey even further.

“I got no respect for guys who drive red Camaros,” he said as he almost rear-ended the Chevy. “You’re labeling yourself a pussy if you drive a car like that!”

We reached a red traffic light signaling us to stop and Mikey pulled his truck up alongside the Camaro. The driver was a greasy rat of a man in his early thirties with a handlebar mustache and a pair of fuzzy dice hanging from his rearview mirror. Mikey revved his engine, tapping his foot on the gas and getting the man’s attention. He eyeballed Mikey for a half a moment, turning his attention to the road quickly after discovering the size of my truck-driving friend. Mikey was intimidating and unfortunately for the Camaro owner, a handle-bar mustache couldn’t hold a candle to the fourteen-inch pythons Mikey called arms.

“I’ll tell you what, if anybody thinks I’m just a guy who blows smoke, they’ve got another thing coming,” he told me. “When I was in my teens, yeah, it was mostly hollow threats—a few fist fights here and there. But I’m in my twenties now and I’m not the same guy I was ten years ago. If somebody crosses me, it’s the real thing and I’ll strangle them with my bare hands if they give me a reason to.”

“People got guns nowadays, Mikey,” I responded.

“If somebody pulls a gun on me, they better use it ’cause one of us is going down for good.”

The traffic light turned green and Mikey gunned his truck off of the line, leaving a fishtail of burnt rubber where his back tires once were. The mustached man in the Camaro didn’t even attempt to be a contender in the sprinted race and instead chose to put as much distance as possible between himself and Mikey. I didn’t blame him.

We reached another set of traffic lights and Mikey pulled up alongside a Jeep Cherokee occupied by a pair of metrosexual males with gelled hair and waxed chests.

“Watch me tip this Jeep over,” he said.

Mikey covered his right nostril with his right index finger and smiled at me devilishly like a kid who knew he was up to no good, but couldn’t stop himself. He leaned out of the window and fired an unsanctioned snot rocket at the Jeep, scoring a three-point shot in the process by hitting the dashboard. The two men in alligator shirts scowled, but kept quiet, thinking it was better to not say anything to Mikey, who looked like a rabid German shepherd at the steering wheel. Once again, I didn’t blame them.

“I bet you thought I was going to ram them,” he said laughing.

I didn’t respond, but instead stared forward as the light turn green and we once again exploded off of the line.

“I know. I’m an asshole,” Mikey admitted. “But, I’m stressed out and I’ve never had therapy so I ain’t rage free, so all these mother fuckers better get out of my way.”

We reached the expressway and it turned into a carnival ride. Mikey was weaving in and out of lanes, darting in front of cars and doing his absolute best to cut off and piss off every driver in the city that night. I clutched my door handle and while I feared for my life, I was comforted by the thought that Mikey’s truck was so high, that if we did get into an accident we would just drive over all of the wreckage like a monster truck at a white trash rally.

When we finally arrived at the club, I leaped out of the truck as quickly as possible and thanked big baby Jesus like a rap star at an awards show for getting me there in one piece. My knees were a bit wobbly from the twenty minutes of knocking they had endured, but I couldn't have been happier to stumble out onto Boylston Street with all of my limbs and internal organs in tact. I felt like I had just been dropped from Pluto with a bungee cord tied to my ankle.

We entered the club and I picked up the cover charge at the door. We headed up the stairs to the dance floor and I looked out at a sea of heads crammed together. The bipeds were browsing nose-to-nose, brushing up against each other with their crotches as they nudged, pushed and got their freak on in an attempt at making a personal connection that would end in a night of orgasmic release. I moved through the crowd like a crustacean at the bottom of the Boston barrel.

"Let's head for the deep waters!" Mikey screamed to me over the thumping music that poured from the speakers.

Mikey cleared a path, using his impressive mass to toss people aside like a human bulldozer. I followed him to the bar.

"What'll you have?" Mikey asked me.

"Beer," I responded. "Something light."

Mikey ordered two from a hot waitress with an impressive rack and tipped her heavy so that we'd be taken care of for the rest of the night. He drank half of his beer in one long swig, swooshing and gurgling it like an alcoholic mouthwash.

"If I didn't get enough poontang they'd have to hop me up on Prozac or something," he told me. "I gotta find me a stray sheep."

"I don't know. You are more likely to find a wounded animal."

"Sounds good to me. Pussy is pussy, right?"

Two women walked passed us. The blond wore a low-cut shirt with skin tight jeans. Her ass was the perfect grabbing size and we both agreed that she was an eight. The brunette wore a short denim

skirt which boosted her market value, but her face was slightly ragged and she had a little spare tire surrounding her waist. I gave her the benefit of the doubt and rated her a seven. Mikey disagreed and wouldn't give her anything over a five.

"Herpes are like freckles," the blond said as she walked by. "Nobody even pays attention to them anymore."

"There's one for you, Mikey," I joked as I nudged him in the blond's direction. "She's well-educated in contemporary diseases."

"Nah, I'll leave the intellectual types to you tonight," he said as he positioned himself into his farting stance, only to release an hour's worth of methane.

I did all I could to keep from fainting from the smell. "Man, that is disgusting, Mikey! You're desecrating the mating grounds!"

"No way. I'm just giving off my scent!"

"What are you trying to attract—a Great Dane?"

"Why not? I have no problem with the big girls. They usually fuck the best."

A tall woman executive dressed in a blue pin-striped suit, who had heard the entire conversation and caught a bonus whiff of Mikey's ripe scent, angrily said to her grossed out female companion, "I'm done with this club forever. I've never seen such barbarians in all my life."

Mikey fixed his gaze on a face in the crowd and licked his fingers, using his saliva to straighten his eyebrows.

"I'll be right back," he told me. "I think I've got a live one."

He approached a short Portuguese woman dressed in a black miniskirt and a hot pink blouse. She had straight hair to her shoulders and long eyelashes that seemed to poke me from across the room. At first she seemed to be responding favorably to the advances of Mikey, but suddenly the conversation ended abruptly and he returned to my side.

"What happened?" I asked him.

“Every time I tell them I sell cars for a living, they look at me like I’m a leper.”

“You sure it’s the work?”

“What else would it be?” he asked me, releasing another hearty round of flatulence as he finished the sentence.

“Listen Mikey, I think I can help you out here. I saw this program on Animal Planet called *The Right to Mate* and they said in a situation like this, you need to have some kind of social status to get the female. You see, in the caveman days all you needed was a club, but that approach in modern times could get land you some serious jail time. Today, you got to be a somebody to get the cheese. It’s the same way in the animal kingdom. You’re either leading the pack and getting laid, or a follower lurking around and picking up the scraps. Which one do you want to be?”

“So what should I do?” Mikey inquired.

“Tell them you’re from the West Coast for starters. This way they can’t do any immediate investigating with their friends. In terms of a career, I’d go with that you’re a businessman and you own a string of bikini waxing parlors called Enuff Muff in and around the city of Los Angeles. Say you’re planning an expansion out East, which is why you’re out here in the first place. Tell them you are out in the clubs conducting a series of informal surveys on the waxing habits of Bostonian woman to see if it’s worth bringing your business to town.”

Mikey scratched his head. “You really think that would work?”

“Absolutely,” I reassured him.

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

“You see that woman over there?” I asked him, pointing to a husky, dirty blond with a drooping chrome belt.

“Yeah. The one with the belt buckle that looks like it could cut my cock in half?”

“She’s been trying to make eye contact with you for the last five minutes.”

She glanced up and caught Mikey’s gaze. After looking away, she whispered to her friends and they all dispersed in different directions.

“See that,” I said. “Her friends are leaving. Now’s your chance!”

Confident in his fabricated life story, Mikey walked over to the lone female with the shiny belt and sparked up a conversation. She was interested at first, even elevating her large breasts so that her suitor could have a better look at what she was selling, but eventually her back slumped and her face went into an involuntary state of scrunching. She caught Mikey by surprise when she splashed her drink in his face and stormed away.

“What happened?” I asked when he returned.

“She called me a sick human being,” he said, licking the booze off of his face. “And then she threw her Jack and Coke in my cake hole. That’s a seven dollar insult.”

I patted Mikey on the back in an attempt to comfort him.

“Don’t worry, Mikey. There are plenty of other fish in the sea of discontent tonight. Unless of course the fish start talking to each other, in which case we’re in trouble.”

I glanced up to where the shiny belt wearing woman once stood and she had returned. Only this time her friends were by her side and she was whispering and pointing in our direction. She did not look pleased.

“Look,” I told Mikey. “Her friends are back and she’s pointing you out. Not a good sign.”

“They’re eyeballing me like I’m the Boston Strangler or something,” Mikey noticed.

“I’m not a military strategist, but I think they’re planning an attack. It looks like you’ve really done it this time, Mikey.”

“Yeah. It’s time to retreat with a little dignity. Let’s head upstairs.”

We made our way up to the second floor of the club, which was essentially a lounge atmosphere with a second, smaller bar. We ordered another round of beers and positioned ourselves by the railing so that we could have a clear view of the dance floor below.

“Check this out, Mikey,” I told him, pointing to something below.

Mikey leaned his head over the railing and looked down at the woman he had just offended. The aerial view of her cleavage was better than any blimp shot I had seen at a football game, but unlike the gridiron display you see on TV, the woman was not pleased to have Mikey in the audience. She and her friends barraged him with a series of FU birds and he turned to me with a serious look.

“If I didn’t know you, I’d say you were sadistic.”

“You’re going to thank me for that moment someday,” I chuckled. “When you’re dying and your life is passing you by, you’ll remember that scene and you’ll break out in a big, boisterous laugh. I’ll be responsible for you leaving this world with a smile.”

“I can see it now,” Mikey said, sipping from his bottle of light beer. “Right before I sail off into the sunset, I’ll look back on a bunch of angry Amazonians giving me the fuck you sign and it will be a magical exit.”

“You know, these beers aren’t working for me. I say we upgrade to the hard stuff. What can I get you?”

Mikey finished his beer like it was a shot and let out a belch that smelled like week-old bologna.

“I’ll have a white Russian without any more tricks.”

I moseyed up to the bar and ordered Mikey’s milky concoction and a Captain and ginger for myself. Next to me stood a woman of medium height with a husky build and a pockmarked face. She was dressed in black leather pants and shined and shimmered in the

reflected light of a nearby disco ball. Her short hair was punked out with tiny spikes and a purple rose tattoo was displayed like a billboard on her right upper back.

Mikey ventured in our direction and positioned himself on the opposite side of the standoffish woman whose edges seemed rougher than those of the other singles circulating around us.

“How come you’re not drinking, little lady?” Mikey asked her.

“Does everybody have to have a drink in their hand?” she snapped.

“They do when they’re in a bar, sweetheart.”

“Fuck off, ‘roid boy. Go wave your dick in someone else’s face ‘cause I’m not interested.”

Mikey and I made our way back to the railing. We were batting way below average that night and if we continued the way were headed, I feared my muscular friend’s self-esteem would slip into a dark place that he had not seen since his awkward puberty days.

“She was quite the gentle flower, huh?” I asked.

“There ain’t no rookies in this place tonight,” Mikey responded. “Just a bunch of used bicycles that ain’t worth riding.”

“I thought you came here to meet women, not fight with them?”

“Who can meet anybody in a place like this? They all got the mad cow disease.”

“Well, I give you credit,” I told him as I chugged down my beverage. “You tried, and you know what they say, you’ve got to make yourself visible. And from what I’ve seen tonight, nobody makes himself more visible than you.”

“Visible? I feel like I’m walking around with a big bull’s eye on my ass.”

I placed my empty glass down on the railing.

“Do you want another?” I asked.

“No,” Mikey responded, finishing his white Russian. “Let’s get out of here. I’ve lost my appetite for pussy.”

We worked our way downstairs, past the angry horde of women and through the meatless market. When we finally reached the outside world, Mikey lit up a cigarette and shook his head.

“Fifteen bucks to get in the joint and twenty clams for some lousy beers,” he said. “Every time I leave that place I feel like I’ve been robbed.”

“It’s a sick world, Mikey.”

After leaving Boylston, we decided to go to IHOP for some early breakfast. The ride there was equally as tumultuous as the ride to the club and I was surprised that I hadn’t lost my appetite. When we arrived, the hostess tried to seat us at a booth in the corner, but Mikey insisted on an empty table next to a group of four tipsy women.

We sat down and pried open our menus. Each page was sticky with syrup and covered with coffee cup rings and I couldn’t help but wonder why they didn’t wipe down the menus at the end of every shift.

“Last time I was here, I found a clump of hair in my pancakes,” I told Mikey. “You could have run a comb through it.”

Mikey’s head rose from his menu. “Thanks, you’ve just killed half the menu and half my appetite. Anything else you find?”

“Try the hash browns. They’re relatively safe, and even though they smell kind of funky, they’re actually quite tasty.”

A haggard, middle-aged waitress arrived with a pad and pen in hand. Mikey ordered eggs over easy with sausage and a side of French fries. I opted for the hash browns and a grilled English muffin, light on the butter. I sipped from a plastic cup of tap water as Mikey guzzled down a cup of strong, black coffee.

“I really have to find a new job,” he confided in me. “I’m twenty-five and I’m not getting any younger. Life is passing me by every day. I want to make my mark on the world, but right now I’m just another cum stain.”

“You’ve got to look ahead, Mikey. The way the world’s going, we’re going to need leaders like you in the future.”

“For what?” he asked, genuinely surprised that I tapped his leadership potential.

“To maintain order when everybody is raping and pillaging.”

Mikey finished his coffee and signaled to the waitress for a refill.

“That doesn’t seem very fair,” he said. “How come I don’t get to do any pillaging? And why do I have to wait for the future anyway? Why can’t I be a leader now, damn it?”

“The truth is, there’s going to be a world depression soon. When the system breaks down, and it will eventually, there’s going to be a huge demand for big, burly bodyguard types with short fuses like yourself. Protection, that’s the business of the future. You’re going to be a star in someone’s sky.”

“And what do I do in the meantime as I’m waiting for the world to fall apart?”

“Nothing!” I told him.

The waitress appeared at Mikey’s side and filled his mug up with steaming java. He blew on the top layer, sipping it slowly because it was too hot to chug.

“To tell you the truth,” he said. “Even if I was making a ton of dough and had the best job in the world, if I wasn’t getting good pussy, I wouldn’t be happy no matter what.”

Mikey’s attention turned from me to the nearby table of mediocre women.

“How you ladies doing tonight?” he asked the group.

The ugliest of the group responded with a “We’re doing, dude.” She had a blinking red stone in her nose that hypnotized me briefly. Mikey ignored her completely and tried to initiate conversation with a pigtailed brunette with orange yolk scattered all over her plate.

“When that happens to me, I get a piece of toast and mop it up,” he told her.

“Then what do you do with it?” she asked sarcastically.

“He cleans his ears out with it,” I said, jumping in to save my friend from anymore embarrassment.

“Gross!” the table squealed.

Mikey turned to me and leaned in, whispering loud enough for the other table to hear.

“What’d you have to kill my shit just there for?” he grumbled.

“Don’t worry, Mikey,” I assured him quietly. “I just did you a favor. Those girls aren’t your type, but you’re just not in the right frame of mind to see that tonight.”

Our food arrived and we dove in, finishing the meal in record time and leaving after paying our bill. We once again climbed into Mikey’s truck, only this time he drove at a reasonable clip having just soothed his hungry belly.

4

I woke in the morning to find Gato's two, saucer-shaped eyes staring down at me from about an inch away. Gato was a cat in the traditional sense, but you wouldn't know that upon first inspection. She belonged to my ex-girlfriend Leslie and I had been pet-sitting the temperamental feline for a few days while her owner was out of town. The cat was a calico, a fact that was not easily identifiable due to the military-style haircut the hapless thing sported. Leslie loved Gato up and down, but she was highly allergic to the dander that seemed to manifest itself in the cat's heavy coat, so she opted to scalp the meowing marvel into a hairless feline freak instead of getting rid of her.

Leslie was kind, and attractive, though she did score a check in the negative column with her perpetual bad breath. She always blamed it on her love for garlicky foods, but I'm certain there was something else going on beneath the surface that she would have had diagnosed if she just saw a doctor about it. Needless to say, doggy style was my favorite and only position with Leslie. She was the first woman to ever confess her love to me from over her shoulder. Once I tried to spice up our relationship by introducing a firm slap on her ass during doggy sex but afterward she cried the entire night. The next day I decided to end our arms-length union and told her things were not working out but it was a clean break and we remained good friends.

The pussy had only been staying with me for a few days and she was already traumatized. This is a cat that knew nothing other than a life of being spoiled and pampered, and here she was tossed into

the belly of hell itself with demon-like cockroaches crawling out of every crack and crevice, and a serpent as unforgiving as Lucifer himself slithering to and fro and fro some more. Since Gato arrived she had taken nothing but the high ground, spending the majority of her time atop the fireplace mantle, only coming down to wake me for her breakfast or to squeeze said breakfast out of her system. Even when she came to see me in the mornings, she leaped from furniture piece to furniture piece, doing whatever she could to avoid giving the bugs and hungry reptile the upper hand.

I greeted Gato with a pat on the head and she let out a pathetic meow that sounded like a newborn's weep for hunger. I righted myself and stretched, allowing time for the blood to flow to my legs before I traveled on them. I wiped the sleepies from my eyes, flicking them on the floor below as one of my daily good deeds. I figured the cockroaches were stealing all of the most delectable foods, so I'd give a little something to the dust mites to choke on.

I picked up Gato and was about to make my way into the next room to feed the hungry cat when I felt something that made me squirm. My fingers had brushed up against an inflammation on the belly of the domesticated feline and the unnatural nature of said clam neck-like bump startled me. Had the cat been attacked by a horde of angry cockroaches in the middle of the night? I pictured the hairless creature pinned down to the floor as various mandibles poked and prodded its body like an alien abduction in a sci-fi movie and I slowly began to panic. What would Leslie think?

Quickly I flipped the cat over for a closer look, only to find what I could unscientifically hypothesize was a mass infection attacking Gato's body. Not just one, but multiple growths of questionable origin were bulging from the underside of the cat and sweat began to bead on my brow. I promised Leslie I would take care of her precious Gato and now here I was holding it in my arms, watching as its health deteriorated due to my mistreatment. Without thinking, I

placed the cat on my bed and reached for my cell phone, cycling through my address book and dialing Leslie. The phone rang three times before she picked it up.

“Hello,” she said in an almost incoherent voice.

“Leslie? It’s me. I’m sorry to bother you, but I had to call.”

“It’s...” she said before a thunderous shuffling drowned out the rest of her sentence. She must have been reaching for her watch because she returned with a somewhat bitchy time-related statement. “It’s four in the morning here.”

“I know. And I’m sorry to wake you, but...”

“What is it? Is it Gato?”

“She’s fine, it’s just—she has some kind of rash and I’m not sure what it is.”

“What kind of rash?” a concerned Leslie responded.

“It’s, well, there are bumps and, they’re kind of big. I really don’t know what to make of them and I’m not sure what I should do. Does she get rashes regularly?”

“No. Of course not. Gato has never had a rash in her life. You have to take her to the vet.”

“A vet?” I asked, as if the idea was the most foreign I’d ever heard.

“Yes, a vet! If anything happens to that cat, I don’t know what I’ll do. I’ve been with her for eleven years. That’s nine more than I’ve been with any man.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll bring the cat to a vet. I didn’t mean to panic you. I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t something she got all the time.”

“Promise me you’ll call me when you get the results!”

“Of course. I’ll call you right away. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of her.”

I spent a few more minutes on the phone reassuring Leslie that I would make sure Gato was in peak physical health before I said

good-bye and hung up the phone. Knowing that I'd be running late to work now that I had to take the cat to the pet doctor, I dialed up Rooster about the situation, making it clear in my voice message that I'd be at work before noon. I quickly showered and threw on a pair of jeans and an old pocket t-shirt, the kind that gets more comfortable the more times you wash it. I retrieved the pet carrier that Gato first arrived in and spent a good twenty minutes trying to coax her inside. After a number of bloody scratches and one hell of a bite, my frustration got the best of me and I forcefully shoved her inside, slamming the cage-like door shut before she could leap out. I grabbed my keys and headed for the door, stepping over Charlie en route to the outside world.

As I made my way to a veterinarian's office a few blocks north, I came to a stop at a red light positioned on a corner renowned for its reputation. If you needed to get high, wanted a fix, or had a vein that craved a feeding, this was the place you came and the man you spoke to was known, according to Mikey, only as Jamal. Last names were unimportant around these parts and it served you best not to dig too deep into anybody's past. Day or night, Jamal stood on the corner waiting for customers to buy his special brand of happiness. I had yet to meet the man face to face, but had witnessed him in the act of making a sale on many occasions as I waited for my light to turn green. We made eye contact once, but that's the closest I've come to a formal introduction.

Gato was screaming as if she had a sixth sense as I pulled into the parking lot of the veterinarian's office. The building was small and painted to resemble a Dalmatian dog with a white base and black spots scattered all over. Like most businesses around these parts, bars covered all of the windows. I did my best to avoid potholes as I parked the car behind the building next to a dumpster filled with various bags of toxic trash, each covered with numerous biohazard stickers. I exited the car, coming close to stepping on a half-eaten

doughnut, unloaded Gato and headed for the front door in hopes of finding out what was infecting the underside of the otherwise healthy cat.

I entered the office of Dr. Miles Felton and stepped into a waiting room filled with pet owners sitting with various sick animals in their arms. I checked in and described Gato's problem to the receptionist. She made no attempts at diagnosing the cat and handed me a form, a cracked clipboard and a ballpoint pen. "I need you to fill this out," she said, never once taking her attention off of the computer screen in front of her.

I collected my homework and took a seat between a very dark-skinned, big-boned African American woman with a small black poodle and a tall, thin Haitian man with a pit bull. I smiled and nodded at each and placed Gato between my legs. Both dogs inspected the pet carrier at a safe distance as the feline inside wailed at the dramatic turn of events in its life. As I filled out my required form, the pit bull lashed out at the little pooch to my left and within seconds the waiting room had transformed from a quiet stop on my way to see the doctor, to a battle royal with barking dogs and barking humans all going at it for alpha greatness.

The large, scary-looking black woman with hair extensions piled up on her head, who looked like the star of a "Women in Prison" television special, screamed at the Haitian, "IF THAT DOG GOES AFTER MY DOG AGAIN, I'M GOING TO BITE THE BALLS OFF BOTH OF YOU!"

"That ain't no dog!" the tall man barked back. "Dogs ain't supposed to look like no stuffed play things. That mutt belongs on a shelf. My dog just got confused and thought it was a chew toy."

"That's 'cause your dog is a retard," the large woman retorted.

The pit bull must have sensed the insult because it got up on all fours and started barking at the woman. Not one to back down from an interspecies fight, the prison lady stood up on her equally-

as-muscular legs and asked if I could hold the poodle's leash, which I did for fear of telling the behemoth no.

"You know, I'm actually curious to see how many human bites it would take to remove a dog's balls," I told her.

I turned to the Haitian man, instigating things even further.

"I supposed if you're going to be castrated, it might as well be in a doctor's office," I told him.

As the big woman headed for the big dog, the Haitian yanked the pit bull back, spinning it half around in a 180. Seeing daylight, the poodle protector raised her right, leather-booted foot, aimed for the goal post that was the canine's hind legs, and kicked her stiletto tip hard into the pit bull's hanging scrotum. The dog let out a high-pitched yelp and the once baritone bark had now turned into a permanent soprano squeal.

Pointing her finger at the sexually-maimed animal, the prison lady said, "Don't you EVER fuck with me or my dog again, ya hear?"

The Haitian opted not to retaliate, and I couldn't blame him. It was clear that the fiercely protective woman meant business, and with one male down already, he became solely interested in guarding the family jewels he had direct contact with on a daily basis—no doubt a smart move on his part. I gave the leash back to the prison lady and she uncharacteristically politely thanked me as she sat down. Meanwhile, I found it highly unusual that a quiet street thug sitting across from me, with what appeared to be an alligator in a Tupperware container, never so much as glanced up during the entire incident. He had probably seen so many similar skirmishes in his life that he had become immune to public displays of hostility, only flinching when bullets or blades were added into the equation.

The tension in the waiting room seemed to have subsided and most eyes were now on a stumbling, middle-aged white guy that practically fell through the door. Looking like a Vietnam vet, he was

dressed in fatigues and had a beard that stretched down to his chest. Balding on top, but long and scraggily in the back, his hair was clearly unwashed and it was graying all over.

“My dog has a broken leg and he needs some tranquilizers,” he declared to the receptionist behind the glass wall.

This was a common occurrence at doctors’ offices on this side of town. Addicts looking to score but unable to pay Jamal or Jamal-like dealers would often try to finagle their fixes using smoke and mirrors. Unlike magicians who work the crowds in Vegas however, these sleight of hand artists were extremely transparent and often off their rockers when they decided to try and pull the wool over their victims’ eyes.

“You’ll have to bring the dog in and let the doctor decide what he needs,” the receptionist chimed in what appeared to be a template response.

“He can’t come in. He’s got a broken leg and can’t walk.”

“Sorry, sir. You’ll have to find a way to get him in here because there’s no way you’re getting any drugs out of this office otherwise.”

Sensing defeat, the desperate junkie tugged on his own beard and pounded on the glass wall protecting the receptionist. “Please,” he begged. “Just a little something to get me—I mean him—by. What do you say?”

Still never taking her eyes off of the computer screen in front of her, the receptionist fought back using a common threat.

“Don’t make me call the police, sir.”

As the vet was leaving, grumbling to himself, the prison lady handed him five large packets of pills. His eyes widened in disbelief and he thanked her as he opened them, exiting through the front door and tripping over his own feet.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” I said as politely as possible to the volatile ball-kicker. “I know what those were and it’s not what he’s expecting. You gave him birth control pills.”

“That’s right. I found them in my thirteen-year-old girl’s underwear drawer. Can you imagine that shit? Thirteen-years-old!”

“There were about one hundred and fifty pills there. You know that they contain estrogen, right?”

“So?” she asked, starting to get defensive.

“They contain estrogen, which is a female hormone,” I told her, covering my nether region with my hands in case of a sneak attack. “That guy could grow breasts from swallowing all those.”

“Then he’ll be able to sell his ass easier,” she assured me.

“Jackson?” the receptionist yelled. “The doctor will see you now.”

The prison lady stood, sneering at the Haitian and the subdued pit bull as she made her way into the examination room. I quickly finished my standard form, using mostly bullshit information to fill in the blanks, and returned it to the receptionist. When I came back to my seat, the Haitian was staring into Gato’s pet carrier.

“What is that thing in there?” he asked me.

“It’s a cat,” I responded.

“That’s a cat? What did you do to it?”

“Nothing,” I said with anger in my voice. “That’s a special hairless breed is all. It’s a purebred.”

“Well, whatever it is, I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

I made no more conversation with him or anybody else as I waited for my turn to see the doctor, and upon getting the call to head into the examination room, I high-stepped my way through the swinging door.

The first person to greet me inside was a veterinarian’s assistant with little to no personality at all. She was a cute Hispanic girl with a petite frame and a nice set of breasts, which pushed themselves out from her pink scrubs. Her job was the menial stuff. She pulled Gato out of the carrier and weighed the cat on an oversized scale where she clocked in at eight pounds. With a pen in hand, the would-be

doctor then asked me a few questions about what was bothering Gato. I explained my concern regarding the bumps on her belly and she made a few notes in a file and informed me that the doctor would be in to see me in a few moments.

As I waited for said doctor to show up, I read through various pamphlets explaining the benefits of vaccinating your pet for rabies, and one particularly entertaining one about heart worms. Five minutes passed and then ten more before I was joined in the room by the pet physician. Dr. Miles Felton introduced himself with a firm handshake and promised he'd get to the bottom of what was bothering Gato. After some standard eyes, ears and teeth examinations, he flipped the cat over and searched for the sinister growths that were plaguing its belly.

"I don't see anything abnormal down here at all," he told me, placing the horrified cat back down on the cold, steel examination table.

"Are you blind?" I responded, picking the cat up by the front paws and displaying the bumps in question to the esteemed doctor. "Look at those things. They're monstrous."

The doctor pointed to the nubs. "These?" he asked.

"Yes, those. They're freakish!"

Doctor Felton's eyes glazed over and he stared at me as if I had three heads. "Actually, they're nipples."

I stood dumbfounded for what seemed like an eternity. I've studied plenty of boobs on plenty of women. How could I mistake the cat's tits for a rash?

With the cat still on its hind legs and its belly exposed, the doctor pointed to each of the nubs, one by one. "That's a nipple. And that's a nipple. And yes, that one there is a nipple too."

The doctor looked at me as if I was wearing a helmet and eating apple sauce from an oversized spoon. I wasn't slow, but I sure felt like it at that moment and to save face as quickly as possible, I

packed Gato back into the carrier and hightailed it out of the examination room. I can't be certain, but I thought I heard hysterical laughter coming from deep within the belly of the veterinarian's office as I waited to pay my bill. In the end they charged me thirty-five dollars for the cat anatomy lesson and I sprinted out the door for fear that the doctor would call a state agency of some sort and declare me an unfit pet owner.

I decided to drop the cat off at home prior to heading to work. There was already one animal in that office and Rooster would blow a gasket if it became anymore of a zoo than it already was. As I pulled down my street I noticed Jennifer watering the flowers in front of her aunt's house. She was wearing a pair of tiny shorts and tank top that displayed her slim, small body.

I honked my car horn to get Jennifer's attention and smiled widely when she looked up. She waved to me slightly, almost flirtatiously, and I watched her in my rearview mirror as I parked the car in the driveway. I noticed the girl next door pause before going back to her urban gardening and if I wasn't mistaken, that pause was a moment we shared together without either of us even knowing it.

5

I parked my car in a lot about a block east of where the office was located and made my way to work. We tried to find parking closer to the building when we originally leased the office space on the second floor, but in the town, parking in general is hard to come by so we took what we could find. The building itself was a two-story brick behemoth with a foundation as thick as the building was tall. Large, sun-catching windows covered the surface on the front and back sides. This was a major selling point for both Rooster and I since we both wanted to keep the workplace well-lit after reading an article about how natural light helped to maintain happy employees.

I stopped in for a coffee at Addie's Corner Store, a mom and pop convenience market that sat next door to our building. I made an appearance there every morning even though the coffee was burnt and lousy, mostly to show my loyalty to the store's owner Addie, a skeleton of a woman who while looking like death, somehow managed to always be full of piss and vinegar.

"Good morning, Addie," I announced as I entered with the chime of the bell that above the door.

Addie leaned over the counter, her fingertips dyed red from cutting strawberries all morning.

"Listen to this," she dove in. "A young man this morning tells me I shouldn't be handling money and strawberries at the same time and that I should be wearing plastic gloves. What the hell is the world coming to? I've been doing this for fifty years and nobody's ever complained until today. And then on top of everything, the

guy has the nerve to ask me if my apples are grown in organic soil. Can you believe that nonsense?”

“It’s a sick world Addie,” I told her, flipping through one of my competitor’s papers.

“Do you know I sell more lottery tickets than food?”

“Yeah, I’d imagine so. Everyone is looking to take a step up the ladder, and most are looking for the easy way up.”

“Uh-huh, and if it wasn’t for that damn machine, I don’t think I could survive.”

“Yeah, they’re turning this country into one big casino, aren’t they?”

“Sodom and Gomorrah! That’s what it’s become,” she preached.

Addie poured my muddy, thick coffee and missed the cup, spilling a puddle of the black ooze on the counter.

“When things get old they get shaky,” she said nervously.

“Is everything okay Addie?” I asked sincerely.

“Fine. Everything’s fine. I’m just an old broad, you know?”

Addie poured me a second coffee, this time keeping all of the liquid within the confines of the heavy, paper cup.

“Are you sure everything’s alright?” I asked again.

“Absolutely,” she assured me, though it was clear she was shaken. “Now get to work. You’ve got a business to run.”

Addie had never spilled my coffee in the four years I had been coming to her, never complained so vigorously, nor did she ever use religious imagery in her dialogue. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was clearly not right with the frail woman.

I entered the building still in my jeans and t-shirt. We didn’t reserve causal dress for Fridays alone and instead allowed our employees to be comfortable in hopes of not only inspiring creativity, but productivity as well. Inside the lobby of our office I found two men dressed in suits waiting to speak with one of our editors.

Elroy, the officer manager's dog, poked his head into the lobby when he heard my keys jangle. He greeted me every morning, not with a bark of joy, but with a snarl so sinister you swore the thing was possessed. He was an ugly mutt of a dog, disproportioned and lacking what most dogs have since birth—a fully formed snout.

"I like your secretary," one of the suited men stated with a grin.

"You should have seen the last one," I returned with a wink as I made my way into the heart of our corporate happenings.

The interiors of the office were set up in a simple, non-flashy way with a major hallway artery running down the middle of the space, with offices extending off on each side. An immense circular room sat at the end of the hallway and that partitioned space was shared by both the editorial and sales departments. The two mixed like oil and water, but Rooster had looked closely at the budget, and in the end we decided it was best to combine the two mismatched departments in one room in order to keep from having to move to a new location.

Office manager Bob had the first office on the left, which he inhabited with the tiny growling machine that stirred every time he caught sight of me. We allowed him to bring Elroy to work because we found he always performed better when the dog was in attendance. The pooch was the closest living animate object Bob had in his life and he talked about it like it was a Scandinavian model he bedded. The only drawback to having Elroy at the office was that the staff often complained about his persistent smoker's bark. The dog, not Bob. See, Bob had been a chain smoker since his teenaged years and the fact that the dog had a serious case of black lung was a living testimonial to the truth that second hand smoke is dangerous. When he got fired up enough, the mutt would let out a half-bark, choke for a moment and then cough himself into submission. I might have felt bad for him if he wasn't so miserable towards me.

I walked past office after office, greeting Jane, Rooster, and various worker bees in the art department. I reached my home away

from home and threw my stuff onto the desk, wasting no time before crashing into my large leather chair, which squeaked beneath me like a supersonic queef. Before I could even let out a sigh of relief over Gato's brush with imaginary death, Rooster had burst into my office as he did every morning just about this time. He didn't sit down, in fact, he never sat down. "Sitting down puts the weight on your ass," he'd say. "When you're on the phone you have to lean into the phone, step into it and always follow through."

Rooster was my business partner and one hell of a salesman. If we were going by titles, he was the Director of Sales and I was the Publisher of the newspapers we built. I originally met him in an Irish pub about four years earlier. I was sipping on a Guinness and minding my own business when I overheard him talking to the bartender about a small community newspaper that he knew was for sale. At the time I was an investment banker and had built myself a substantial financial cushion by placing money in mostly high-technology ventures. I had wanted to try something new and publishing had been an outside interest of mine since my college days when I did a small amount of editorial dabbling for the school newspaper. After debating with myself over a few more beers, I made my way over to him and introduced myself, expressing in a somewhat buzzed context that I'd be interested in buying the paper. Before I knew it I had bankrolled the company and we built it up to a successful chain of four community newspapers.

As usual, Rooster had a wide smile exposing most of his long, horse-like teeth. He was as tall as a park statue and he put that height to use, playing pick-up basketball games during lunchtime at a nearby court on cool spring days. He had a huge, pumpkin-sized head and a large nose that seemed to prod you when he leaned in and out in conversation. His complexion was always that of a sun-burned man's, but it wasn't his frequency in the sun that gave him the reddish hue, but his alcoholic moonlighting. He dressed conser-

vatively and was rarely seen without a gold Rolex and a thick gold bracelet dangling from his wrist like a pair of handcuffs.

“Hey, Babes,” Rooster said as he leaned into my desk, nearly brushing up against me with his nose. “It’s going to be a great day. I feel it in my bones. We’re going to shake that tree today and all of those ripe, red apples are gonna fall to the ground.”

Rooster called everybody “Babes,” including the cleaners, his mechanic, the delivery guy and his wife. He believed that calling people Babes made them each feel special and put them off guard, which is usually when Rooster would go to work on them.

“Last month we spent more than we took in,” I reminded him.

“Give me a valley and I’ll show you a peak. What we need is another one of your big ideas, Babes.”

Since we started the business, Rooster always thought of me as an idea man. In all fairness however, I had zero publishing experience coming into the venture and just approached it with a fresh outlook. Thinking outside of the box was my specialty, and more often than not, my ideas were those that traditional publishers wouldn’t touch. However, innovation was the key to our success.

“Think, Babes,” Rooster continued. “Give us something national this time. No. Something global! I’ll get us an army of warm bodies and we’ll cold call the entire western world if we have to.”

“I think it’s time we Googlize. It’s the wave of the future. We should build a custom search engine that can organize and deliver information on our web site and then we can sell on-line advertisements. Newspapers are going to be obsolete soon if things keep going the way they’re going with the internet, so why not be on the front line?”

“Great idea,” Rooster said with a newfound excitement in his voice. “When can I start selling it?”

“Whoa—easy there. First I need to talk to some programmers because it’s going to take a little bit of time to get it all organized.”

“Sounds perfect, Babes. Give me a rough estimate if you can. How long before it’s up and running?”

Once again, Rooster was an amazing salesman with a knack for smooth talk, but he lacked patience. He was always looking for the next idea to run with, which usually meant we moved onto something new before finishing the previous something old. We always seemed to have our fingers pressed firmly on the pulse of what the public was looking for because of this spastic approach, but at the same time we probably could have benefited from a little more planning, especially with the big concepts.

“At least eight weeks I’m guessing,” I told him, knowing that he’d be disappointed with the answer. “There’s a lot of work that has to be done and this is still uncharted waters for us and most of the publishing world.”

Rooster gave me a half-hearted thumbs up and made his way for the door. “Okay, I can work with that. In the meantime, I’m going to get my sales team motivated. It’s time those boys and girls light up the phones.”

He was just about fully out of my office when he stopped, turned, and poked his head inside, using his oversized nose like a laser pointer.

“Babes, I forgot to mention,” he said with a serious, un-Rooster like expression. “The Moakley billboard company is offering free advertising to all of our big fishes. They are trying to get them to switch over, squawking about visibility and all that jazz. If they pull even a quarter of them over, we’re going to be hammered.”

My stomach sank like I was riding a roller coaster. Without our biggest accounts in our pockets, there was no way we could keep things operating at their current level.

“Those are mafia tactics they’re using,” I said.

“I know, Babes, but unfortunately for us, there is nothing illegal about it. Didn’t want to panic you, but just know it’s happening.”

If Moakley wanted to play rough, they were going to get roughed up in return. I never took lightly to the bully mentality. Getting out of this possibly disastrous predicament required some street justice, and that meant things were going to get ugly. Rooster had family and I didn't want to get him involved in any activity of questionable origin, so I decided it was best to operate alone. I pulled out a note pad and a pen and began jotting down some important intel.

"How many billboards does Moakley have?" I asked.

"I think they have about fifty," Rooster responded. "Something like twenty-five community-based and twenty-five city-based."

"Is he using the same kind of tactics with the City Papers?"

"Yeah. I spoke with the advertising director over there this morning and his accounts are the same as ours. It's basically the national advertisers Moakley is going after."

"What's the owner's name over there?"

"Bill something," he said, thinking hard. "Franconi. Bill Franconi."

"Italian. That's good. What type of guy is he? Do you know him?"

"Not personally, but rumor has it he's a mean bastard. All of his employees hate him to the core and I've had a couple of people tell me he isn't the most trustworthy guy. It's local legend that he stole the paper from his brother-in-law."

I kept writing notes as Rooster spoke, filling up my tiny piece of white paper with information I could use later down the road. This Franconi guy was going to force me to revise my still-percolating plan slightly, but the details were falling into place.

"Okay, I'm going to need a list of all billboard locations where the City Papers circulate," I told him. "Can you have someone get that for me?"

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"Just some analysis."

Rooster eyeballed me up and down. He could sense something was itching at me underneath the surface of my skin. When you work with someone as closely as we have, day in and day out, you tend to get to know when something is on the other's mind.

"What's with you, Babes?" he asked me. "What's chewing on your bone?"

I hesitated for a minute, moving my attention from my note pad to Rooster's eyes. "You know me pretty good by this point, huh?"

"More than you think, so give it to me straight. What's bothering you?"

"We've talked before about me leaving the paper, right?"

"Sure, but it was always crazy talk, Babes. You're in this for the long haul."

"I wish that were the case, Rooster, but it's not. I'm serious this time. I want out."

"Babes, you can't," he said, yanking on his hair in frustration. "We started this together and without you, I'll run it into the ground. I can't keep this place moving forward without my idea man."

"You'll do fine if you just keep moving forward," I reassured him. "I'll make sure everything is in place before I go, and if things start to get rocky, just do what I said and put your money in the stocks I highlighted and invest in gold assets. That will keep your personal finances healthy."

"Babes, I got a family to feed," he pleaded. It was a cool seventy degrees in my office, but Rooster was now sweating pretty heavily. "I didn't make millions and millions like you did on your investments. The money I could have put into stocks had to go to a mortgage, three hungry kids, and a wife that spends like a drunken sailor."

"You'll be fine, and I'll make sure of that before I make any final decisions about my exit. Now let me get back to this Moakley situation and we'll talk more about all of this stuff later."

With glazed-over eyes and sunken, defeated shoulders, Rooster turned to the door, his now-hunched spine staring back at me. “I need you, Babes,” he said as he exited. I understood his concern and sympathized with his fears, but I couldn’t spend my entire life behind a desk, running a newspaper that was sure to become obsolete because the future called for it. Besides, Rooster didn’t give himself enough credit when it came to running the business, because at the end of the day, there was only one of us that was replaceable and that was me. There were plenty of qualified publishers that could run the paper, but it was his relationship with the advertisers that was imperative to continued success.

I watched as Rooster walked away from my office, dejected and fearful for his future. Walking past him and towards me was Harry, editor of the paper and one hell of a moody journalist. I could tell by the sneer he made when brushing up against Rooster in the hallway that he was seconds away from complaining to me about the latest offenses my partner had committed against the editorial department.

“Take a seat, Harry,” I told him before he could even get out a single word.

Prior to hiring Harry, he was a good friend of mine since my early days as a business professional, though in the current state of things I wasn’t exactly sure what our status was. Overweight, bald and sporting an impressively robust mustache, Harry had a hard time holding down a full-time job before becoming editor of the paper. He spent the majority of his career freelancing for various regional newspapers and magazines in his pre-editing days, but at the core he was an intellectual free spirit who would get bored with what he was doing and quit before making his way up the ladder. The reason he stayed on with us so long was out of loyalty, but that too seemed to be on the wane.

Harry circled a chair like a dog trying to get comfortable with its space on the floor and then flopped with a thud, testing the strength

of the chair's legs in the process. He crossed his legs and then leaned forward, clutching his right knee with both hands. I could hear his teeth grinding against each other and I couldn't help but cringe at the almost fingernail down a chalkboard sound. Harry had such bad teeth that as a company we couldn't institute a dental plan because Rooster was afraid our premiums would skyrocket when he went to see a battery of dentists.

"Let me guess, Harry," I said. "You're upset with Rooster?"

"I just can't stand him," he grunted and groaned. "How do you think my editors feel when they hear him shouting, 'People are a flock of sheep waiting to be sheared'? That type of talk wastes our morale. And then he says, 'Don't hang up until they hang up on you. I've never seen a fist come through a phone.' I can't have that kind of stuff spewed around my people."

"C'mon, Harry. He's just motivating the salespeople. You can't take anything he says to heart. Rooster just does things differently is all."

Harry's face turned blood red. I'm sure if I listened closely I could make out the boiling in his veins. As I stared at him from across the desk, I couldn't help but think of him as an angry drunk upset that someone played a country song on his favorite jukebox in the corner of his favorite bar. I halfway expected him to slur his words when he opened his mouth.

"Can't take things to heart, huh?" he erupted with no noticeable slur. "When he asked me to do a front page feature on an advertiser, I told him it would destroy the pride of my department. Do you know what he said to me? He told me that we couldn't afford the luxury of integrity!"

"Okay, I'll talk to him and have him limit his speeches. Is that all?"

"No, that's not all," Harry continued. "There are plenty of obnoxious things he does and there's one in particular that really

goes up my craw. You know those instant soups in the kitchen?" I nodded my head, hoping this conversation would be done sooner rather than later. "He likes to take the dried chicken out and then puts the packets back in the box. That's incredibly inconsiderate to everyone else that has to work in this building, and I'm not the only one who thinks that."

"That's an easy one, Harry," I assured him while trying hard not to roll my eyes. "I'll take care of that one right away."

"I just want you to know—I don't know how much longer I can last," Harry threatened. I wasn't sure if he was looking for an out or a raise, but if our friendship was going to last, it was going to mean his departure, whether it was by choice or by force. "And it's not just Rooster. It's everything."

"Listen, Harry. Maybe you just need some time off. A little change is good, you know?"

My goal was to convince him to quit so I didn't have to be the bad guy and lower the gavel on a fired verdict. I have used this same trick many times before with women, prodding them into breaking up with me as opposed to doing the dirty deed myself. It helped with post break-up relations and often led to a higher rate of angry break-up sex, which I always found to be the best kind.

"I need a life change," he said, staring down at his feet. I could have sworn I saw tears welling up in his eyes.

"Well, from one friend to another, I won't take it personally if you need to step away from your position. I keep my business out of my friendships and vice-versa, so you have my support no matter what you decide."

I was hoping I could sway him quickly and get this off my plate before jumping head first into the Moakley situation. One bad attitude could bring down an entire office and I didn't need to be dealing with a revolt while also considering an early leave myself. The

fewer headaches on my way out the better because it meant I'd be less likely to have to talk Rooster off of the ledge.

"Yeah. Maybe you're right," Harry said and I celebrated a minor victory inside my head. He paused for a few minutes, thinking out his next move. "I'll get back to you by the end of the week on all of this, but in the meantime, do you think we can turn the air conditioner on? We may be a boiler-shop operation, but does it have to be boiling hot in here?"

"I'll have Bob take care of it. In fact, send him in and I'll make it happen right now."

It was less than thirty seconds before Bob replaced Harry in the seat across from me. As usual, Bob's pants were too short for his legs and the cuffs hung just below his shinbone. He hadn't had a girlfriend in the four years I'd known him and his clothing reflected that. Aside from his love for cigarettes, the fifty-four year old was also a closet alcoholic whose hands trembled every morning as he suffered through a daily detox from the binging he experienced the night before. He was an extremely loyal man. Prior to working at the paper he was a telemarketer for a research company, but sitting on the phone all day wasn't his calling. His frequent hacking due to his excessive smoking didn't exactly gel with the duties of the job and he would always smile and tell us how he had been hung up more than anybody since Alexander Graham Bell first invented the phone. That summed up Bob in a nutshell and you couldn't help but feel sorry for him, though you were grateful not to be in his shoes.

We had originally hired Bob to be a salesman, but he failed miserably and I convinced Rooster to keep him on as the office manager. As part of the negotiation, I agreed to Rooster's demand to have Bob be responsible for opening all incoming postal packages. At the time there was a second Unabomber on the loose and

Rooster didn't want to take any chances, so he made Bob the first line of defense.

"Harry says you want me to turn up the AC."

"Put it on sixty-eight," I told him.

"Rooster will have a fit," Bob said with fear in his voice.

"Don't worry about it. He was sweating up a storm when he was in here, so he'll understand."

"Okay, I'll lower it, but if Rooster comes barking at me, I'm pointing him in your general direction."

"Fair enough."

Thinking our conversation was done, I started to review my notes on the Moakley situation, but Bob didn't move from his seat and cleared his throat.

"Something on your mind, Bob?"

"Has it been brought to your attention that a neighbor called the Environment Protection Agency on us?" he asked, nervously twitching knowing that the news would drop like an A-bomb.

"No," I said, choking on my own spit. "I don't know anything about it."

"They claimed we put radioactive waste from the photo processor in the garbage."

"Well, did we?"

"No way. The containers are neatly stacked in the men's bathroom. Nobody in the office knows what's in them."

Suddenly we heard rumblings just outside my office door. It was Avram Rabinowitz, entertainment editor at the paper and a full-blown Hassidic Jew. He had overheard the entire conversation Bob and I were having and the news clearly worried him. He was probably thinking that his wife was going to start having green babies. He had both hands pressed against his black top hat and was moaning out loud. "OH MY GOD!!!!!!!" he repeated over and over again, before scurrying off to spread the news among the other employees.

“Well, I guess it’s not a secret anymore,” I declared. My head was beginning to throb with stress. “Tell me Bob, why would you put something radioactive in the men’s room?”

“There was nowhere else to put it and Rooster didn’t want to pay for the disposal. Should I throw them out?”

“Hell no,” I said firmly. “Call a hazardous waste removal company.”

“It costs thousands. Rooster said...”

“I don’t care what Rooster says. Call them now and get that shit out of the men’s room.”

“Where should I put it in the meantime?”

“Throw it in a closet and lock it. Just get it out of sight. And do me a favor and send Jane in here.”

I rubbed my temples in an attempt to coax my oncoming migraine away. There were certain days when everything seemed to go wrong, and it was one of those days. If I were a turtle, I’d have been in my shell. If I was a bird, I’d have flown away. But no, I was neither of those and instead the publisher of some Mickey Mouse community newspapers.

Jane entered with a sneeze. I blessed her as she sat down, and although I expected a thank you for my *gesundheit*, I received nothing in return. She was in her late forties and of Armenian descent, which meant she was quite hairy, but did little to keep the growth at bay. She was homely, lacking a libido, and based on my experiences with her in the office, always miserable. She had no friends in the office and if I wasn’t mistaken, hated every single human being alive. Rooster and I both agreed that she was a difficult employee, but we never fired her because she was quite good at her job.

Jane was an upstanding member of PETA. There was a particular incident that occurred at the office when the director of a community organization that we were doing a directory for came in for a meeting wearing a full-length mink coat. Jane refused to do the

research and only conceded when I promised to make a donation to an animal fund. Rooster was furious about the payment and told me that the inmates were running the asylum.

“Jane, good to see you,” I lied. “I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I need to investigate directory databases and newspapers on the Internet, especially local publishers.”

“Excuse me?” she whined. Her voice was almost more nauseating than the sound of Harry’s grinding teeth. “That’s not what I was hired to do here.”

“Well, Jane, I thought it possible that you might transcend your job description for a moment and take a step into the future with me.”

“I was hired as research director for the directories themselves,” she continued. It took a lot of intestinal fortitude to keep myself from leaping over the desk and snapping the woman’s neck like a twig. “Why am I always being asked to do something else?”

“Because you’re good at what you do,” I said, biting my tongue on what I really wanted to tell her. “I wouldn’t trust this research to anybody else.”

“And what about that assistant you promised me?”

“I’ll see if I can get you one, but as you know, our world here is ruled by cash flow. And just for the record, I never promised you an assistant, I just said I’d look into it. There’s a big difference.”

She pouted briefly, sighing loud enough for me to sense her deep-rooted frustrations. Unknown to Jane however, I could have cared less about what she wanted and her sighs were lost on me.

“So you’re planning a Google-like web site?” she asked.

“Yes, Jane, and I’d like your input and recommendations.”

“Well, in that case I’m going to have to insist that if the directory is on-line, that the information may only be accessed through its own private search engine.”

“I can’t agree to that at this point because I haven’t thought this whole Internet strategy through.”

“With all due respect, I think I know a little bit more about this than you do,” she said snidely. “I have already given a lot of thought to the subject matter and I know a great deal about the best direction to take.”

“Perfect,” I said equally snide. “I’m sure you’ll find the research I’ve just given you very interesting, yet easy at the same time.”

Jane stormed out of my office and I stood from my chair in order to return some blood flow to my legs. I stepped out into the hallway and saw a group from the art department crowded around one of the oversized windows. I pushed through the onlookers as if I were the paparazzi out for the million dollar money shot and glanced down into the street where I saw an ambulance parked in front of Addie’s store. Within seconds the paramedics wheeled out a body that was covered from head to toe in a large white sheet and I felt my stomach sink deep into my pelvis region.

“It’s Addie,” Rooster said as he rushed back into the office, flush from the news and the sprint up the one flight of stairs to share it with the rest of us. “She’s had a heart attack. She’s gone.”

I continued looking down from the window as the rest of those around me were silent, thinking about the woman we all knew and liked. Outside the store, the small crowd that gathered was now dispersing except for a lone man wearing red suspenders. He was slowly scratching a lottery ticket, using the palm of his non-scratching hand as a miniature table. Number by number he scratched until there was no more silver film to remove. He smiled at the ticket, and then carefully placed it in his wallet. He had a winner, but Addie wouldn’t be there to cash it.

The Mom and Pop store was dead.

6

After lunch I made my way downstairs and had a seat on the front steps of the office. Seconds ran into minutes and minutes ran into blocks of ten and twenty as I continued to sit almost zombified, reflecting on life and the duration of time we're given. I knew Addie's death meant there would be a change in my routine, and even though it was somewhat insignificant, I couldn't help but think that I'd now be forced to make the choice between Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks each morning. I felt horrible for thinking such things when someone I considered to be an acquaintance, if not a friend, just passed away, but the brain has a tendency to overcompensate when you're unable to give it any proper direction.

Just as I was about to head back upstairs, Rooster appeared from the doors of the office and joined me by my side.

"Too bad about the ol' girl," he said, unwrapping a piece of gum and popping it into his mouth. "You never know when your number is up I suppose."

Without warning, Rooster spit the wad of gum out of his mouth and it landed in a gooey mound on the street below. "Ugh," he groaned. "That crap was stale."

"Where do you think Addie's soul went?" I asked, catching my still gagging business partner off guard.

"How the hell should I know?"

"Don't you wonder at all about death?"

"Who's got the time, Babes? I got a wife and three kids and when I'm not dealing with them, I like to get in nine holes or take a relax-

ing shit. Those are the joys I'm allowed in the life I've chosen for myself."

I didn't respond to him, but instead stared at the mound of partially chewed gum that was just recently in Rooster's mouth.

"Are you all choked up about Addie's death or something?" he asked me.

"She was all right, you know. She had an appreciation for the truth."

Rooster shook his head side to side. "You and your truth," he complained. "It's easy for you single guys to ask the big questions. Freedom this and freedom that. Well you know what? If I can free the fork caught in the disposal, I feel like I'm in Heaven. Life is what you make of it and the more time you sit around contemplating what it's not, you don't get to enjoy what it is. Get my drift?"

Like the ultimate salesman he was, Rooster just sold me on life.

"So how are your kids doing anyway?" I asked him, quickly changing the subject to avoid falling back into my depressive funk.

"Great actually," he chimed. "Listen to this one. The five-year-old goes to one of these right-to-know doctors and the doc tells her he's about to give her a shot and goes into this long explanation about what the measles are all about and why she needs the medicine. So out of nowhere the kid interrupts him and says, 'Alright already! I've heard enough. Just give me the shot.' I had to do all I could to keep myself from busting out laughing in the poor doctor's face."

"That's funny. Now kids, kids have an appreciation for the truth."

"No," Rooster replied. "They just don't know how to lie yet. Now, let's sit down later this week and do a plan for a major expansion into other cities."

"I don't think so, Rooster. Like I said, I don't think I have it in me anymore."

“Says you, but I say we should finish what we started. Remember what you said to me in that pub the first night we met after you told me you’d invest in the paper?”

“Yeah,” I responded, not sure where he was going with the conversation.

Rooster sprang to his feet and bolted across the sidewalk toward the steady flow of midday traffic.

“WE ARE GOING TO WIN!” he screamed. “That’s what you said, right?”

“Right,” I said quietly.

“RIGHT!” he cheered at the top of his lungs, only to be interrupted by Roberto Pirelli, one of the brothers that ran Pirelli’s Funeral Parlor next door.

“STOP THAT YELLING!” the Pirelli brother shouted.

“HEY, FUCK YOU, PIRELLI!” Rooster returned. My partner loved to yell at people and his voice could carry like no other. I had never known him to turn down a good pissing match and I had never seen him lose one either. With his quiet, mousy voice, Pirelli was grossly out of his league. “What are you afraid of? That we’re going to wake up all of your customers?” Rooster said as he continued to provoke Pirelli.

“What’s wrong with you people? Don’t you have any respect for the dead at all?” Pirelli said with a look on his face like he smelled something rotten.

“I got your respect right here,” Rooster pointed out as he grabbed his crotch with his right hand. Disgusted and already sensing defeat, Pirelli returned to the safety of his funeral parlor and slammed the nearest window shut.

Since the first day we moved into the building there had been nothing but tension between the two business neighbors. The story goes that Pirelli caught Rooster tossing a banana peel on his perfectly manicured lawn. Rooster denies said claim, even once suggest-

ing that he couldn't stand the taste of bananas, nor could he stomach the mineral potassium. Things continued to escalate as the years went on and Pirelli even once called the cops and got all of our cars, which we then parked on the street, ticketed. This prompted us to lease out the lot up the street and also forced Rooster to call in the big guns. The very next day he went to his brother-in-law's clothes shop downtown and got a naked mannequin, which he named Bonita for some strange reason that I never once asked him about. He placed Bonita's plastic body in Pirelli's bushes so that the legs were sticking out onto the sidewalk and then called 911, claiming that the funeral parlor was leaving dead bodies all over their property. Half of the police force showed up just as everybody was piling out of the home. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your outlook, the police don't take either of us seriously anymore.

A middle-aged foreign man delivering Rooster's lunchtime pizza came over to the office steps, carrying a full-sized box and bringing with him a bit of an attitude.

"How much is it going to set me back?" Rooster asked.

The pizza man looked at the slip sticking out of the box and came up with the total.

"Seventeen-fifty," he said miserably, obviously hating his job.

Rooster pulled out his wallet and counted out eighteen dollars, handing it to the pizza man and telling him to keep the change. The pizza man looked down at the money dumbfounded, unhappy with the amount remaining after having to pay off his employer.

"We usually get at least a ten percent tip," the man declared, his foreign accent making it difficult to make out every word.

"Is that so?" Rooster said, hesitantly pulling another dollar out of his pocket and thrusting it into the hand of the pizza man. "Well, who am I to argue with the majority? Can you believe that shit?" Rooster asked me as he sat on the steps, placing the greasy pizza box on his lap.

“You should pay him a few extra bucks so he won’t spit in your pizza or even do something worse the next time you order,” I told my partner.

“Just what I wanted to hear. I got to worry about the bastard shooting a load in my pie ’cause I didn’t pay him off. I just don’t believe in tipping everybody, you know. First of all, I think we tip the wrong people. Me, I tip the guy that pumps my gas when it’s cold. Nobody else does that. I mean, here’s a guy in the middle of the winter, his hands frozen and his nose runny, and he’s putting gas into my car while I’m sitting inside it warm as tit. Now I’ll tip him, but not some schlep that drives one block to bring me a pizza.”

Rooster was fired up, but if you knew him like I did, you’d know it didn’t take much to get him going. His eyes twitched in frustration as he opened the pizza box, eager to taste what he just tipped nearly two dollars for. Suddenly an angry expression filled his face and his skin went flush.

“THIS FUCKING PIZZA IS BURNT!” he screamed.

“Too bad for you that your delivery guy just drove off.”

Rooster took out his cell phone and dialed the number on the pizza box.

“Yes you can help me,” he told the voice on the other end in a stern voice. “My name is Rooster and I’m the exact opposite of a satisfied customer. I just had a pizza delivered to Grant Street and, newsflash for ya, it’s burnt! No, I didn’t ask for it light-crust. Trust me pal, the back of this pizza looks like the bottom of my shoe. What do you mean you want to see it first before you send over another one? Listen you COCKSUCKER, if I bring this pizza back, there’s going to be a baseball bat to go with it!”

Rage winning over, Rooster hung up the phone and slammed it down into the concrete steps we were sitting on. I heard the tiny cellular device crack underneath the pressure of his palm, but he was too upset to care.

“Nothing’s easy,” he bitched in my general direction. “You can’t even get a lousy pizza these days without it getting complicated.”

“Maybe it wasn’t meant to be.”

“Yeah, it was in my horoscope today that some dumb shit was going to take a blowtorch to my pizza.”

I lifted up a slice from the box on Rooster’s lap and inspected the crusty bottom.

“It doesn’t look too bad,” I told him.

“Help yourself to it all.”

I took a bite of the cheesy slice in my hand, but couldn’t eat anymore because of the burnt, stomach-turning taste. Grabbing the crust like a shot-putter, I launched the pizza pie into the street, hurling it inches from an oncoming car, which honked at us after it dodged the unidentified flying meal.

“Don’t worry,” I reassured Rooster. “It’s biodegradable.”

A swarm of seagulls swooped in and started pecking at the stray pizza slice.

“Great, I spent nineteen bucks so the scavengers and gravel could eat my lunch. This fucking day sucks.”

I headed back into the building slowly, this time creeping up each stair as opposed to making my way up them at a steady tick. I found that I was now lacking any and all motivation to work, which meant the afternoon was going to crawl by. Like my short-fused partner still moping on the steps, I had a feeling that the slightest negativity thrown in my direction was going to set me off.

I entered my office and checked my messages. Martha had called to remind me that we had a date for that evening and for once I was thankful for her nagging ways because had she not brought it to my attention, I would have forgotten completely. I was just about to return her call when Helen knocked on my door.

“Got a second?” the copy editor asked me.

“Of course,” I responded, though truthfully I would have liked to send her away. “Come on in and have a seat.”

“I spoke to Harry and he said it was okay that I come and see you.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I know it’s probably not a big deal, but I’m concerned that our cartoons are getting too scatological. They’re almost approaching bathroom humor.”

My fists clenched beneath my desk, out of sight from Helen’s beady little eyes. She might as well have been holding a knife to my neck because to me this was the same kind of vicious attack on a day that I thought would never end.

“What’s the subject matter of the most recent issue’s cartoon?” I asked her.

“To show the absurdity of the historical commission’s decision to stop development over an old shack.”

“And does an idle bulldozer sitting in front of a nineteenth-century outhouse get the point across?”

“Of course it does, but this is the third time this year that we’ve put drawings of toilets on the editorial page,” she whined.

“Okay,” I said, counting to ten inside my head. “Have any of our readers complained?”

“No, but my parents mentioned it to me while I was at their house on Easter, which sort of prompted me to bring it up when I saw yet another bathroom-driven cartoon in the paper.”

“And so you’re coming to me about this because you want your parents to dictate the editorial content of the newspaper?”

“No, of course not, but there’s got to be some kind of aesthetically pleasing images we could use to get our message across, don’t you think?”

“What would you suggest that we have used in place of the outhouse?”

“Well... I... umm... I guess I can't think of anything else right now.”

I stood from my desk and began to collect my things. Helen was the straw that broke my camel back that afternoon and I was for damn sure not sticking around another minute more.

“Helen, humans have an ongoing obsession with excrement and if we get some on our editorial shoe it's not a tragedy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to leave you to ponder all things poop as I myself exit the office for an overdo number two break. And no, I will not be returning today, so enjoy your evening, but know that I am on top of this cartoon debacle that you've brought to my attention and if you think of something else to put in front of the bulldozer, we can certainly talk about it another time.”

Helen sat in awe as I left her staring at a blank chair with nobody around to listen to her frivolous complaints. The clock on the wall in the lobby suggested that work go on for another three hours, but I was pulling the plug before I was seriously injured by the continuous onslaught of bullshit being flung around the office. I walked the block east to the garage where my car was parked and threw my things in the backseat. I positioned myself behind the steering wheel and started the car, allowing the air conditioner to cool down the interior before I pulled off down the road. While I waited, I pulled out my cell phone and called Mikey. He answered in a half of ring.

“Yo,” he greeted.

“I need to call in a favor, Mikey,” I responded without even saying hello first.

“Anything. Name it.”

“Just so we're clear though, it's the kind of favor that I never really asked you about, if you get my drift.”

“I don't even remember having this conversation.”

“Good. Now I need you to find someone for me that can spray paint upwards of twenty-five billboards. You know anyone who can do that?”

“I’ll ask around and get back to you shortly,” Mikey said in a professional manner. “Call you in a bit.”

I hung up the phone, threw the cellular into the passenger seat and pulled out of the parking lot. I yawned uncontrollably for a moment and in doing so completely blew through a red light at what was frequently described as a “dangerous” intersection. Luckily for me there were no head-on collisions and I continued home the same way I did everyday, thinking that the job I was keeping was an absolute waste of time and utterly meaningless. Sure, at first it was fun, but it had gotten stale, mundane, and turned into a daily chore as opposed to a lifelong career. I was publishing news about local towns that I never stepped foot in and I was growing bored with business in general. The idea of a person spending his or her entire life doing the same task over and over again both amazed me and terrified me to my core. It all seemed so absurd, like the joke was on us or something, but then again I knew that for most people it wasn’t by choice. Life brings responsibilities and that means having to sack up and take one for the team, much like Rooster has done for his family his entire professional career. I guess that’s why they call it being stuck in a rut and why there are always long lines waiting to buy lottery tickets from every convenience store and mini mart across the country. Everyone was looking for an out I suppose and here I was looking for my own. However, I had the means of escaping if I wanted to, but I was loyal to the people in my life and it was hard to turn my back on them.

As I neared my neighborhood I made an impromptu stop at what was called a “flower studio,” though clearly it was a run-down building where various wilted roses and daisies sat in oversized buckets waiting for husbands who had been sent to the dog house to

stop and purchase them. The elderly owner tried to talk me into buying a dozen mums, even though he had no insight as to why I was standing in his store in the first place. Apparently he was stocked heavily on that particular blooming item, but I was in the market for more of a plant than a flower and I handed the owner a twenty-dollar bill to take with me a potted germanium of some kind.

Oak Street was relatively quiet that early afternoon and I couldn't help but wonder where all of the people had gone. It was hard to imagine them all with jobs because so many of them wandered the streets until the early morning hours. Perhaps they were all sleeping off the previous night's buzz, but either way it was the most serene I had ever seen my new neighborhood.

The sun was shining bright that day and it hung heavy in the sky. I had to lower the visor to keep the fiery star from blinding me and its rays almost forced me to pass by Jennifer. She was sitting on her aunt's porch writing in her usual spiral-bound notebook and looked up just as I drove passed her. She greeted me with a smile and I decided to stop by for a visit after parking my car in the driveway. I needed to smile today, and knowing I was going out with Martha later that evening, I figured Jennifer was my only hope at achieving that simple goal.

I grabbed the recently-purchased plant and walked towards the house where Jennifer still sat. I couldn't wait to hear her voice. I imagined her to be especially perky today and that alone excited me enough to pick up the pace. As I made my way on the sidewalk towards the porch she inhabited, the beautiful dreamer that existed in a plane I was unfamiliar with welcomed me with an inviting hello. I returned her greeting with a smile and hesitantly sat down next to her. Suddenly I was like a school boy nervous over a new-found crush. She smelled fantastic and I took her scent in before ever saying a word.

“Hey,” she said, breaking the silence as well as my fragrance-induced trance. “Not working today?”

“I made it a half-day,” I replied. “It’s too beautiful out to be locked up in an airless office. I felt a little caged and needed to free myself.”

I realized I was still holding the plant and presented it to her by placing it on her lap. My finger grazed up against the smooth flesh of her thigh and I felt goose bumps pucker along my arms. I sensed the same reaction in her, but quickly retreated, returning my hand to my own personal space and making the potted gift the center of attention.

“I see you always working in the yard, watering and pruning and doing green thumb types of things,” I said. “I figured maybe you could add another to your already lush collection.”

Jennifer investigated the plant, rubbing the waxy leaves between her fingertips. “It’s very nice of you to do that. This plant is perfect for city growth because it requires minimal sunlight and flourishes in both an outdoor and indoor environment.”

“And that’s a good thing?” I asked.

“Sure it is. Boston isn’t exactly known for its mild winters, so they—the plants that is—appreciate it when you bring them inside before the first frost.”

“Ah, right. So I made a good choice then?”

“An excellent choice,” she said flirtatiously.

There was a distinct moment of silence as we both just took each other in.

“Can I ask you a really strange question?” I asked.

“Sure. Why not?”

“Did you ever watch or read Charlie Brown?”

“The cartoon?”

“Exactly. The bald kid that was the resident nice guy, but always finished last.”

“Yeah. It’s a classic. Of course I know who Charlie Brown is,” Jennifer smiled.

For a minute I felt stupid. Of course she knew who Charlie Brown was. He’s a pop culture staple and an American icon. I was definitely nervous talking to Jennifer because I was certainly rambling and not playing it as cool as I would have normally under different circumstances.

“Duh,” I said, slapping myself in the forehead. “Of course you know who he is. You had to grow up in a cave if you didn’t. Anyway, do you remember the bitchy girl Lucy and how she used to set up a little psychologist stand and charge the ho-hum Charlie Brown a nickel for some ‘professional’ advice?”

“Sure,” she replied. “That was one of the ongoing gags, right?”

“Right,” I said as I reached into my pocket, pulled out a nickel and handed it to Jennifer. “Do you mind playing Lucy for a minute?”

Jennifer took the nickel out of my hand and flipped it through the air, grabbing it and biting down on it as if it were a piece of gold. “Well, this seems to be a legit nickel, so I guess I owe you some legit advice. What’s on your mind?”

I decided to open up to her about my predicament at work and how I was trying to break away from the business. I filled her in on all of the details that were giving me stress and the things that were pulling me in opposite directions, including the difficulty I was having because of my loyalties to Rooster and the staff. She seemed genuinely interested in helping me with my growing work problem and at the same time, was curious about what went on behind the curtain of a publishing company. She referred me as the Wizard, a reference she made numerous times in regard to my pulling of the company’s strings, and I told her about the two sides of human nature at work in the office—one being the editors who were motivated by pride and the other being the sales team who were moti-

vated by money. I explained to her how most of my days were spent maintaining a level of peace between the two departments and how that juggling act was beginning to affect me in a way that tied knots my stomach. I told her I was planning on quitting my job any day now.”

“What will you do for work after you leave?” she asked me.

I pondered my response for a moment and told her that I had built up a moderate-sized kitty, so that I didn’t have to work for a while. I chose not to tell her that I had made enough money over the course of my professional career to last me a somewhat frugal lifetime for fear of coming off as cocky or as a braggart.

“The value of money is to secure your future and have the freedom to find out what you really want or don’t want in life,” I explained.

“So after you leave your job, Drago, you plan on trying to find out what you want in the long run? Discover who you are, if you will?”

That was the first time I had heard Jennifer call me by name and I was suddenly hit with a warm feeling that gushed through my veins. These were the moments I had heard about from others that claimed to be in love, though having never experienced them myself, I always thought of them to be folklore like plesiosaurs in Loch Ness or Bigfoot monsters in the forest. They eluded me my whole adult life until now.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied. “I thought I knew what I wanted, but I gave up on the idea long ago.”

For a moment I felt like she was baiting me, nudging me into sharing a piece of me that I had chosen not to share with anybody. I hesitated to tell Jennifer anything more, but her voice and her eyes were like trumpets of truth, and as they worked me over, I sang like a bird.

“What did you give up on?” she asked.

“Meeting Ms. Right. Meeting ‘the one,’” I divulged. “When I realized I couldn’t find her in the places that I was looking, I figured it was better if I just stopped trying altogether.”

Jennifer was thoughtful, respectful of the personal bubble I just popped in her face, and she chose to stay quiet instead of responding.

“Are you looking for your prince?” I asked.

“Like you, I gave up on that idea a long time ago, when I was much younger.”

“Much younger?” I blurted out sarcastically. “What are you, like one hundred-ten or something?”

I expected a smile, but got a cold shoulder instead. For the first time I witnessed Jennifer pull away from me and I hated myself for trying to be witty. I hit a nerve inside the dreamer and I apologized to her for being a clown and ruining the moment.

“I feel light years away from my youth,” I told her. “For me, those were the happiest times in my life.”

“Sometimes our world can change overnight and yesterday can seem like a thousand years ago,” she responded in a quiet, somber tone.

I immediately thought of what Mikey once told me regarding Jennifer’s parents and how she was left an orphan. The details were not important. What was important was that she was obviously still mourning a childhood lost and here I was pointing out how fulfilling mine was. I was at a loss for words and didn’t know how to restart the conversation in the same pleasant space where it once began. There was now a heavy feeling in the air, and it wasn’t the summer humidity that was weighing it down. “Good grief,” I thought to myself, taking a page out of Charlie Brown’s book of self-deprecation. I had managed to bring up a major trauma in Jennifer’s life, while also establishing the fact that neither of us was looking for a prince or princess, and I did it all in the span of a few

minutes. I didn't have a plan when I sat down on the porch with Jennifer that day, but I was blowing whatever had happened naturally and I needed to pull a rabbit out of my hat and it needed to be real.

"Jennifer, you are one of the most unique people I have ever met and I mean that from here," I told her, pointing to my chest. "I think you are wonderful."

Jennifer turned her frown upside down and gave me a half-smile, just big enough to let me know that I didn't ruin my chances with her.

"Besides," I said, lifting up my arms. "Who else do I know that spends more time on a doorstep than me?"

Her half-smile turned into a full on grin and we seemed to be back at square one.

"So what are you going to do about work?" she asked me. "I'm not doing a very good job at being your Lucy."

"Forget about work. I'm sorry I even brought it up. That was just an excuse for me to get your ear and let me sit down. Besides I don't want you being anybody else with me. I like the real you. Screw Lucy!"

"It's easier being yourself anyway. Once you start taking on traits that don't belong to you, things start to get complicated. I never was good at playing roles. I didn't do very well in my high school drama class."

"I took an acting class because I thought it was going to be an easy A, but it turned out to be a disaster. I was in a play my senior year and I kept changing the original lines to new ones that I thought were better suited for the character. The teacher canned me from the role and insisted I play the part of a mute clown. When I refused to wear the makeup, she expelled me from the class."

Jennifer started to laugh and I savored every childlike note I heard.

“I think I like it when you are a clown,” she said.

“Oh yeah, sure,” I said. “The next thing I know, you are going to have me walk down Oak Street in a clown outfit with makeup on.”

Jennifer laughed some more. She asked me if I realized that there were no oak trees on Oak Street. For the first time, I actually looked at the street on a broader scale, past the litter and trash that lined the curbs. She was right, there were no oak trees anywhere to be found, and I convinced myself that it was probably Getman that cut them all down in an attempt at breaking the system of street names. I pictured him cutting down the maples on Maple Road, the dogwoods on Dogwood Ave, and even going mad with a saw on the pines over on Pine Circle. He was a bastard from head to toe, so it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

“They should probably call it Oakless Street,” I said after returning from my Getman trance. “Or, I don't know, maybe No Oak Here Street.”

Jennifer tried to talk, but she was laughing too hard for me to make any sense of the gibberish that was coming out of her mouth. It took awhile for her to compose herself, which meant my Oak Street jokes were a slam dunk.

“Do you realize how funny your house looks?” she asked me. “I mean, not to offend, but it's pretty silly looking.”

“I know. You don't have to apologize. I'd think it was haunted if I wasn't sure that ghosts are too afraid to live in the place. I mean, if you were a ghost, would you scare there?”

Jennifer chuckled, shaking her head no.

“Last night I sneezed and my bed moved all the way across the bedroom. For a second I suspected a poltergeist, but then I remembered I had wheels on my bed frame and that my floors were slanted.”

Jennifer was laughing so hard that she was holding her stomach. It was like both of us were hopped up on laughing gas, two patients

sharing nitrous oxide while the dentist wasn't looking. We were like kids and I embraced the moment like one—wide-eyed and eager.

“Why... Why... do you have wheels... wheels on your bed frame?” she asked, struggling to finish her question in between her snorts of laughter.

“I get confused in stores,” I admitted to her. “When I bought it, I didn't see the sign informing me and other customers like me that the beds I was looking at were for the disabled and elderly. I'm sure the salesperson thought I was buying the frame for my sick mother or something, which makes sense now that I think about it because he was asking me some really strange questions about ailments and what not. I just thought he was a weirdo, but you know, that's me in a nutshell. I'm the guy in the grocery line with the cabbage who thinks he's buying a head of lettuce.”

“Please stop,” she howled in laughter, waving her arms in front of her like an air traffic controller. “I can't take it anymore. I have tears in my eyes.”

We laughed back and forth at each other for a few more minutes, each exchanging our equal share of puns and jokes. Humor was a common ground we discovered that day and because there needed to be a target, I inadvertently volunteered to be the punch line, taking one for the Drago team in hopes that it would pay off with Jennifer later on down the road. Besides, they say laughing at yourself is a powerful tool, and I guess they, whoever they are, were right because the bond was securely forming between Jennifer and I and it was evident in each chuckle, giggle and snicker that we coaxed out of each other.

Finally the laughter subsided and we tried to get back to a more sober state of mind.

“So do you work, or are you just a porch poet?” I asked.

“No, I work,” she said, hitting me on the leg in a playful way. “I work part time at a medical supply company on Beethoven Street.

It's a really small place, just me and my boss. I do mostly order processing and accounting."

Our conversation was broken up by the pounding fist of a homeless man on the door to my house. He was peering through the windows and trying to pry them open, glancing over his shoulder to see if anybody was watching. I excused myself with Jennifer and asked if I could stop by the following day for another chat. She said yes without any hesitation and walked me down the stairs of her porch to the end of her lawn where we shared a half hug against the ugliness of a neighborhood that had seen better days.

"It was great talking with you," I said to her as I looked into her mesmerizing green eyes. "I look forward to seeing you again."

"Same here," she responded with a warm and deep smile.

We said our good-byes and turned away from one another. The walk home, though only a stone's throw away, was slow and meticulous. I wanted to savor every second of the time I spent with Jennifer and I knew that getting into a conversation with a drunken wino would wipe my whimsical slate clean, so I took my time and let it all simmer.

7

I approached the homeless man cautiously, unsure of his motives. Some people will knife their own mother for a quarter when they're hopped up, so I assumed the worst and assured him I came in peace.

"Hey there, buddy," I said as his back was facing me. "Something I can help you with?"

He turned quickly, forcing a gust of stale air in my direction. The summer heat was definitely making him ripe for the picking and I had to cover my face briefly to help my nose adjust to what it had been forced to inhale. It took a moment for me to realize it, but the man that was now trying to invade my house was the same cigarette-smoking man I had seen the previous night. His clothes were ragged and soiled. He wore a sneaker on his right foot and a leather loafer on his left, but the mismatched shoes were not the most identifiable characteristic the man had going for him. He had a red face as bright as Rose's house and his eyes were cracking with veins, more bloodshot than any peepers I had ever seen. He was thin and frail, a walking corpse in the process of human decay.

"I was just looking around," he wheezed.

"Well, this is my house and I'd appreciate it if you didn't take the tour without me."

"You live here?" the homeless man said in a surprising tone.

"I sure do."

"This place looks like something you'd see in a Tarzan movie."

"Hey, now that's not nice. I don't come to where you live and poke fun of it."

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m sorry. Just seems weird that someone would live here is all.”

“I get that a lot.”

My new visitor seemed relatively harmless and because he had not yet tried to shiv me in the chest, I figured I’d show him a little hospitality.

“Can I get you a beer or something?” I asked.

“Sure!” he said excitedly.

My home was now becoming Grand Central Station for every bum, hooker, con man and assorted dreg that the neighborhood had to offer. The strange thing was that I found them far more interesting than most of the people in my life. My new friends, no matter how stinky they were, spoke candidly and expressed their true feelings without second-guessing themselves, although I must admit that there were some things I could have gone without hearing. But for the most part I enjoyed their company and the flourishing circus atmosphere around my home.

I headed inside and grabbed a couple of cans from my private stock of chilled brews, which sat innocently inside my humming refrigerator, waiting patiently to be digested into the bloodstream. I returned and handed a can to my new homeless friend and he popped the top and chugged it down in a flash.

“You must need a machete to find the morning paper,” he said with a burp.

I knew my place wasn’t a picturesque dream home from a Norman Rockwell painting, but being chided by a wino on the condition of my lawn was almost too much to handle.

“I don’t read the newspaper,” I chirped back, popping the top on my own beer and taking a swig.

“I used to know people that were in the paper,” he said. “People that ran the world.”

“Like what? Politicians?”

“No. They were contractors. The kind of guys that did all of the contracting. They contracted everything.”

“You talking buildings?”

“I don’t know the exact details. I just know they contracted stuff.”

He finished the remaining liquid clinging to the inside of the can and shook it in my direction. “You don’t got any more of these, do you?”

I headed back inside at the request of my uninvited guest and searched long and hard for a bottle of Dom Perigon that Rooster had given me that Christmas. I hadn’t opened it and had no plans to in the near future, so I figured I’d put it to good use and pour it down the hatch of a man that could appreciate a good glass of alcohol. I found the bottle of Dom sitting in a box I had yet to unpack and noticed a number of monogrammed dress shirts sitting nearby. I had planned to get rid of them anyway because of the pretentiousness that they alluded to, so I grabbed one in my hand. Knowing that the shirt would not particularly match his hobo chic pants, I dug out a pair of yellow slacks embroidered with green alligators all over the legs. Rooster had given me the eyesore lower-halves in hopes of converting me to the land of Prepsville but I had promised myself on the day of their arrival that I wouldn’t wear them for anything but a Halloween costume. I brought everything that I had collected outside to my new friend. If he was going to drink my fancy ripple, he might as well be wearing the appropriate clothes at the time. Besides, he looked like he could use them more than me.

I handed him the shirt and pants and he wasted no time removing the outfit he was already wearing, making room for the new one on his body, which turned out to be a near-perfect fit. Crumpling his old clothes up into a ball, he made his way towards the street and discarded the lump of soiled cloth into the sewer, which while I don’t condone littering, was where it belonged. There was no doubt

that a microbiology class could have had a field day with those rags, but it didn't matter anymore because he was looking quite suave in a light pink Armani shirt with my initials monogrammed into the fabric and his fine, preppy yellow pants.

"Is this a girl's shirt?" he asked me as he looked at himself in the reflection of one of my windows.

"No. What makes you think that?"

"Cause it's pink and pink is a chick's color."

"I'll have you know that pink is a power color in business and I bet your contractor friends used to wear shirts just like this."

"I don't know about that," he mumbled under his breath. "And what are these things all over my pants?" he asked as he squinted down at his legs.

"I think they are alligators, but I'm not sure the difference between those and crocodiles. Either way, they're not real, so you have nothing to worry about."

I popped the cork on the Dom and handed him the bottle. He took a few long swigs as the bubbly spilled out all over his face and onto the ground below. Rooster would be cringing had he known a vagabond was drinking his prized liquid straight out of the bottle, and I couldn't help but laugh picturing the expression on his face had he been standing next to me.

"This stuff takes like alligator piss," he complained, wiping the fizz off of his mouth.

"Beggars can't be choosers," I said.

"Says you! I've been a beggar a long time, but that don't mean I've lost my taste for the finer things in life and this, this tastes like the piss from an alligator's bladder."

"Touché."

"You got anything to eat?" he asked me.

I told the homeless man to go inside and to help himself to whatever he could find in the kitchen. I wasn't worried about him steal-

ing any valuables because there were none and I hadn't gone shopping since the first day I moved in, so if he ate anything at all he would actually be doing me a favor because I wouldn't have to throw it away later down the road.

I sat on my porch and thought about my recent encounter with Jennifer, all while a stranger cooked himself a mystery meal inside my house. I leaned back against the wobbly railing and let my face soak up the sun, filling me with ultraviolet rays so sweet I could almost taste them. I can't be sure, but I think I dozed off for a few minutes, though I may have just been in a sort of catatonic puppy-love state due to my new crush a few houses down.

Having not heard from the homeless man for almost twenty minutes, I went inside to make sure Charlie hadn't mistaken him for a big cockroach. Luckily he was not inside the belly of the python, but instead, sitting at my makeshift coffee table eating a steak that he must have found buried in my refrigerator. He was on his last bite when I walked in on him.

"That's the tastiest steak I've ever had," he proclaimed, licking the juices from the plate.

I couldn't believe it. The steak he had just devoured was an E. coli case waiting to happen. It had been sitting in the unplugged refrigerator when I moved into the house and I had just never gotten around to throwing it away. It was as inedible as any piece of beef could possibly be and I had sprinkled baking soda over the top of the package on a daily basis just to keep the smell from attacking me when I opened the door to get a beer. Scared that he would drop dead on my floor, I immediately told him that I had to be somewhere so he would put a safe distance between his death and my house. I did not need to go to jail for some hungry homeless man that couldn't tell the difference between broiled and spoiled.

I followed him out onto the porch. “Thanks for stopping by. Watch out for those contractors. They’ll steal your front lawn. You know, if you had one.”

He chuckled and walked off, rubbing his stomach as if he had just eaten a Thanksgiving feast. I watched him make his way down the street until I couldn’t see him anymore. The good news was that it seemed like I was at least going to get away without being pegged as the meat’s accomplice.

My cell phone rang and I coaxed it out of my pocket. The display screen informed me that it was Mikey on the other end, so I answered immediately in hopes that he had already acquired the information I called him about earlier.

“Who’s the man?” I asked him.

“It’s Mikey for sure,” he responded. “I’ve been telling you that every day since I met you.”

“What did you come up with?”

“There’s a street thug named Jamal that runs with a bunch of taggers that can do the job for you. My cousin and he go way back so you got nothing to worry about.”

“Taggers?” I asked.

“That’s what they call guys who work in spray paint.”

“So where do I find this Jamal?”

“He’s pretty much a permanent fixture down at the corner of Victory and Grant.”

“Wait. You mean Jamal the drug dealer?”

“Yeah. I told you he was a street thug, didn’t I? These guys can do the job and nobody is going to get in their way. If you want to get involved in this kind of shit, you have to be able to get your hands dirty.”

I paused for a moment as bugs scurried across my floor. I watched them like traffic from a hot air balloon high above the city.

“Are you sure about this guy?” I asked.

“Sure I’m sure. If you need the job done, he’s your man. My cousin already spoke to him so he’s expecting you.”

I glanced down at my watch and saw that I still had plenty of time before Martha was due to arrive, so I hung up with Mikey and made my way down to the corner where Jamal operated his business. I approached Jamal as he leaned against a telephone pole covered in flyers for weight loss scams and lost dogs. He was an intimidating black man in his mid-twenties with broad shoulders and a dangerous quality to his persona, and the four men that surrounded him on all sides looked like members of the urban Secret Service, complete with their own brand of firearms visibly positioned in the waistbands of their saggy pants. Jamal was obviously the alpha male of the group and they hung on every word that came out of his mouth. He wore a Boston Celtics cap positioned slightly to the side and an oversized tank top, which displayed his ripped arms and the tattoos that covered them. He fixed his gaze on me as I walked towards him, and a gold tooth from his scowling mouth glistened.

“I’m Drago,” I said.

“Murder comes with a hefty price tag,” he told me.

“What?” I asked, genuinely surprised by his response.

“I heard you needed a job done,” he said, making a gun with his fingers and pointing it into my face.

“No. Not that kind of job. I need a couple of billboards vandalized and taken out of action. I’ve got the locations and just need the manpower to pull it off. Basically I need someone to climb up a couple of poles and play Picasso.”

“Picaswho?” Jamal asked, looking at me as if I were crazy.

“Never mind about Picasso. It’s not important. Do you think you could handle the job?”

“How many billboards we talking?”

“There are a total of twenty-five spread out around the city. I know the guy who owns the billboards and he fucked me over, so naturally I want to return the favor. I was told you have some taggers in your group and I’m offering fifty bucks for each billboard you take out of commission.”

Jamal looked back at his crew and then pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, lighting it and taking a long drag. He exhaled the smoke in my face, purposely filling my space with secondhand carbon monoxide.

“My niggas ain’t gymnasts and they don’t jump through hoops for white guys offering fifty presidents a piece,” he told me. “Especially white guys I ain’t ever met before.”

“Fair enough,” I responded. “I’ll make it seventy-five.”

“And is your ass gonna pay their medical bills when they fall and splat on the concrete below?”

“Make it a hundred bucks a billboard, an extra hundred for expenses, and if you get all twenty-five, another two hundred. How’s that sound?”

Jamal took another drag on his cigarette and exhaled it once again in my face. His tough guy act wasn’t that convincing, and I couldn’t help but think that he was trying too hard.

“I want half the money up front and the rest tomorrow when we finish the job.”

I pulled a wad of cash out of my pocket and watched as each of the men eyed me while I counted off half of the money owed to Jamal.

“Sounds like we’ve got a deal then,” I said. “Come by my place tomorrow at around two and I’ll square up on what’s owed. And again, you nail all twenty-five, and I’ll throw in the bonus.”

“Don’t worry about that, homey—we’ll deliver. I’m a man of my word.”

“Good. Me too.”

I pulled a piece of paper out of my pocket and handed it to Jamal along with the cash.

“Here’s a list of the billboards and their locations,” I said. “And I’m sure I don’t have to ask that this not come back to me, right?”

“As far as I’m concerned you’re Casper the Ghost.”

“Good. Then it’s time that I disappear.”

I turned to walk away when Jamal stopped me.

“Where’s your house, homey?”

“Oak Street,” I said, without turning to face him. “Just look for the house that should have been condemned ten years ago. That one is mine.”

8

The portly Louie parked his ugly piece of steel in front of my house, scraping his wheels alongside the curb and adding one more dent to the last remaining hubcap the car possessed. His door squeaked open and the sounds of grunts took over as he attempted to pull himself from the vehicle, using the roof for added leverage. I sat and watched as it took a good minute to a minute and a half just for Louie to escape from the confines of his loaded lemon.

Louie had a large, egg-shaped head that sat on his neck like Humpty Dumpty on that infamous wall. His ears were flags that flapped on the side of his oversized melon, and if you painted them in the patriotic red, white, and blue, I would not think twice about saluting them. Today he was wearing baggy green carpenter pants that poured over his shoes and a beige golf shirt that featured a smorgasbord of stains from a day of eating various selections from not only the four basic food groups, but a few others as well.

Louie was one of the first people I met when I moved into the new neighborhood. He lived on “the other side of town” as he liked to call it, though in all honesty, I had no idea exactly where that was. On a daily basis he would stuff himself behind the wheel of his beat-up green station wagon and comb the streets looking for buyers of his products. Buyers by definition could be anybody with expendable cash and a hankering for counterfeit goods. The goods themselves were anything from watches to purses and everything in between, and more often than not they were piss-poor knockoffs of designer brands. If you took a look inside his trunk you’d find jewelry, sunglasses, golf clubs, electronics and an assortment of other

fakes and phonies. Louie was the ghetto Santa Claus and his car was his sleigh.

The first time I met Louie I was sitting in the very same spot on my porch. Being new in town, I was an uncharted buyer, and while he lacked any real solid sales skills, I couldn't help but warm up to him when he arrived that day and announced, "The welcome wagon is here!" The more I bought from Louie the more he would appear until finally he was coming by on a daily basis.

"I got your t-shirt," he announced as he dragged his way towards me like a zombie that just escaped from its grave. "It wasn't easy but I did it. I made a special trip to Fall River."

Louie held up the shirt. Its base color was white, that much was for sure, but it was clear that it had seen newer days. A yellow tint had taken control of the fabric as if the shirt itself had been urinated on or left in a window to be sun-soaked for at least a decade. To Louie it was a find, but to most people the shirt was a hand-me-down better suited as a rag than a piece of clothing.

"How do you like it?" he asked.

"It's great," I responded. "Just what I wanted!"

"Look, it says, 'I hate seagulls.' And the seagull poop is right on the lettering."

Sure enough, the shirt came with its very own fake turd, a detail that really classed up the garment.

"Feel it!" he continued. "I'll bet some people are going to think its real!"

His enthusiasm was peaking and I had a feeling selling the shirt was going to be difficult for Louie because he seemed to be growing attached to it. Who could blame him though?

"It's great," I said. "How much do I owe you?"

"Well, I paid fourteen, but you can have it for fifteen. You're a nice guy and I like you."

I handed Louie fifteen bucks and he tossed me the t-shirt. Like most people, Louie had dreams of striking it rich. He was semi-old and street wise enough to know that the chances of hitting the lottery were slim to none, so he had to take control of his own destiny.

Louie pointed to the back of his wagon.

“You see all this stuff I have to sell?” he asked. “The exhaust pipe is almost touching the ground. It’s voluminous. I’m sick of this stuff. It’s time I cash in and retire. You want to know where the money is? I’ll tell you, friend. The money is in day-old bread. As soon as the stores close, they pack it up and bring it to pig farms.”

“Pig farms, huh?” I returned in hopes of making it sound like I was interested in where the conversation was going.

“Sure thing, friend. They might as well call them gold farms because that’s basically what they’re feeding to those pigs. That bread is perfectly good. Just because they put a date on it, nobody thinks it’s good anymore. Screw that! That’s why I say buy all day-old bread and freeze it!”

“Who’s going to buy old bread, Louie?”

“Somebody will buy it—I’ll tell you that much. You know I could be making fifty thousand bananas working for someone else.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I responded.

“I like my freedom though. I like being my own boss. Some days I pull in a hundred and a half, others only thirty-five. I’m not going to get rich doing this, but I get by.”

He moved to the rear of his car, removed a woman’s purse from the trunk and returned to my side.

“Look at this bag. Feel it. It’s Gucci. Does it look real to you?”

I moved my head in a series of different directions to cover myself depending whether the answer he was looking for was a “yes” or a “no.”

“Some people couldn’t tell that it’s an imitation,” he continued. “There are guys on the street that will tell you it’s worth two hun-

dred and they'll give it to you for seventy-five, but the thing is, it's not worth even that. I pay thirty-five bucks a piece for these and I sell them for forty-five. A lousy ten bucks is what I make. I'm not looking to get rich. I'm just having fun."

Our eyes met when he finished the sentence and I could see that he could see that I saw through him. He quickly composed himself and got back to business.

"Now don't you think that girl you've been seeing would like one of these bags?"

I smiled at Louie and shook my head in a very distinct "no" this time.

"I don't think she'd take it if she knew I got it from you."

"What do you mean?"

"Martha—the girl I've been seeing—I told her about you and she thinks you're a low-life."

"Low-life?" Louie yelled angrily. "You tell her I'm the highest low-life she'll ever meet!"

I patted the traveling salesman from the inner city on the shoulder and assured him that I was just having fun at his expense. "I'm only kidding with you, Louie. Martha has never said a bad word about anyone. I don't think she has it in her. You want a beer?"

Louie stood dumbfounded for a moment, still trying to wrap his head around what I was all about, because while we've had plenty of conversations together in front of my dilapidated house, I've yet to give any real indication as to who I am or where I was coming from.

"You sure have a strange sense of humor," he told me. "In fact, you're a strange guy all around. I don't quite have you figured out."

"That's how I like it, Louie."

I went inside and grabbed two beers with the long necks. I enjoyed Louie's company, though I think I may have been in the minority. He was at times abrasive, and if you had an overactive smell organ, you'd probably have a hard time being in his company.

He wasn't particularly fond of bathing, or deodorant for that matter, and last I checked, those baggy green pants he was wearing were the only pair I'd ever seen him wear. He was a transparent con man with a distaste for personal hygiene, but for me, that's what made him somewhat endearing.

My favorite thing about Louie was that no matter how hard he tried or pried, he couldn't figure me out. I know he thought I was probably just some con man too, but he was having a hard time deciphering what my game actually was and the only thing that would comfort his curiosity was the idea that I may just be a crazy man that wandered into the neighborhood. This is why he referred to me as a nut as often as he could.

I came back out onto the porch only to find Louie sprawled horizontally across the steps like a lion on the Serengeti. I popped the top on his beer and handed it over. Louie took a big swig of the ale, released a roar of a burp and then rubbed the cold bottle over his sweaty forehead.

"It's getting too tough out there, you know," he said. "When the kids are more street-smart than you, that's when you know it's time to call it quits. Maybe I should get a real job, but I don't know if that's even possible at this point. You know what they say—you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"That's a good thing. You already know too many tricks."

"SON OF A BITCH!" Louie yelled. For a minute I thought he was referring to something I said, but he quickly lifted his huge body off of the stairs and began pawing at his own ass, searching for something he couldn't easily find. "I think I got a damn splinter from the stairs!"

Without hesitation, Louie shoved his hand down his own pants and began rummaging around his backside in an attempt to locate the frisky piece of wood that had lodged itself in his plump bottom.

“Every time I come to this place I leave with my ass looking like a porcupine,” he complained.

“Sorry, Louie. I’ve been meaning to sand it down, but it keeps falling to the bottom of my To Do list.”

He grumbled and then bit his bottom lip as he pulled the timber from his behind. Like a champion displaying a trophy, Louie held the piece of porch in the air, staring at it with amazement. “Look at the size of it,” he said before tossing it to the side. That’s when a light bulb went on in Louie’s head and he chirped up.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something. Why does a guy like you—you know, good job and all—live in a dump like this? You got rats, rodents and all kinds of animals running around here.”

Without skipping a beat I quickly delivered a “Because I like the neighborhood” only to have it met with a roll of the eyes.

“You know, I think you’re a little nuts,” Louie said as he giggled uncontrollably. His laughter, which was peculiar with lots of “oo oo” sounds laced throughout it, was quickly overpowered by the squeaking wheel of a nearby grocery cart that was being pushed past my house by the hands of a middle-aged Hispanic woman.

Upon seeing the woman, Louie sprang up like a jack-in-the-box. “Excuse me, ma’am, I hate to bother you, but could I interest you in a fabulous Gucci bag?”

Louie’s sales pitch fell on deaf ears as the woman, schooled in the art of minding her own business in the ‘hood, kept her eyes forward and ignored everything that went on around her. It was if she had a force field up to keep creeps like Louie from getting close.

“I tell you, man, I don’t know what this world is coming to, but it’s getting to the point where it’s hard for a guy to make a living anymore,” Louie complained.

“If you want a real job, I heard the local biotech companies are looking for people to test new drugs on. It’s not a glamorous gig by any means, but the pay is supposed to be pretty good.”

Louie looked up at me with an angry glare. “Do I get my own cage when I sign up too?” he asked sarcastically.

“I bet they’d throw one in if you asked nicely.”

“Hardy har har. I don’t care how much money they’d throw at me. I’m not going to be anybody’s gopher.”

“You mean guinea pig,” I corrected Louie.

“Gopher. Guinea pig. It’s all the same to me pal. Either way, no bearded foreigner is going to be sticking any long needles into my ass.”

Another light bulb went on in Louie’s head and he perked up and puffed out his chest like a comic book super hero, grinning ear to ear as if he had just discovered the meaning to life itself.

“Hey,” he said in a boisterous voice. “Why don’t you give me a job?”

I was just about to tell him no when I had my own light bulb moment.

“Actually, we do have some mildly radioactive chemicals that need to be transported out of the office.”

“Mildly radioactive?” he asked.

“Completely harmless from what I’m told, though there was one guy in the office that said it gave him a tingly feeling in his loins.”

“Yeah, like having your pecker licked by a rattlesnake. No thanks. I like my dick and balls the way they are.”

I pulled two hundred dollars out of my pocket and displayed it to Louie like a Chinese fan.

“It pays two hundred dollars.”

Louie sniffed at the bills as if they were freshly cut roses and he salivated at the idea of it being his.

“Where’s it going?” he asked me.

“Revere.”

“Throw in ten extra bucks for gas and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Okay, but I want your word that the stuff isn’t going to end up on somebody’s front lawn,” I told him.

“Of course not! What do you take me for? I’ll get it to where it’s gotta go.”

“Good. Come by the office tomorrow morning at nine. Here’s my card with the address.”

“I got to be at my mother’s in fifteen minutes,” he said as he made his way to his car with my business card in hand. Once again I watched in amusement as he grunted and groaned his way into the station wagon, only this time there was a new obstacle for him to overcome as he refused to put down his beer prior to climbing in. For a moment he looked like an oversized infant sucking on a baby bottle as he finished off the beer while behind the wheel. I started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Louie asked from the open window of his car.

“Nothing,” I said, laughing even harder. “Something that happened earlier today.”

“And you waited until now to laugh?” he asked with a laugh of his own.

My only response was more laughter. I laughed hysterically at Louie and he laughed hysterically at me. I waved goodbye to the beer-toting toddler as he drove off.

I was just about to head inside when Rose gestured me over. She lived directly across the street in a bright red duplex that was converted into a two-family back when this part of town wasn’t as avoidable. She was in her late seventies, opinionated, and from what I could tell by her choice in decorative lawn ornaments, color blind. Regardless of the time of day, Rose always wore an apron over her clothing. She liked to bake and she did it often, a benefit I learned that came in the form of cookies, brownies, and when I was particularly lucky, homemade breads.

The house was owned by Rose, which meant she was the hen that ruled the roost. She rented the remaining portion to Mikey and aside from an occasional complaint when his late-night conquests moaned particularly loudly, she stayed out of his way and let him live his life. She was a nice lady who enjoyed her soap operas, and in a day and age when being neighborly was an afterthought, she made it fashionable again.

I crossed the street and greeted her with a sincere smile.

“Be careful of that Louie,” she said, waving her finger at me like a mother scolding her child. “He’s no good.”

“I don’t know, Rose. He seems like a nice enough person once you peel away the top layers.”

“The devil seems nice too, but you wouldn’t want to keep his company too long, would you?”

“No, certainly not,” I assured her.

“Do you know what that piece of shit did?” she asked me. This was the first time I had ever heard Rose curse, so I knew she was serious. Since I was a little kid I was always uncomfortable when old ladies like the innocent Rose dropped nickels into the swear jar. To me, it was about as unnatural as a cat and a dog fucking each other’s brains out, so I couldn’t help but get the slightest tinge of heebie jeebies running up my spine.

“He sold me a clothes dryer that he took from somebody’s garage! That’s what that son of a bitch did!”

“He really did that?”

“I swear to you he did that,” she said, raising her hands in the air and waving them all around as if swatting tiny Louies out of her personal space. “I’ll never forget that day. He says to me in his devil voice, ‘Rose dear, I found a dryer and it has your name on it.’ He says, ‘A family is moving to New Jersey and they have to sell it. The dryer is almost new.’ ‘How much is it?’ I said back to him. He said, ‘They want three hundred, but I think I can get it for two hundred.’”

I said, 'What's their number?' He said, 'Rose, don't worry about numbers. I'll take care of everything for you.' And like a fool I bought the dryer. That machine couldn't even dry the air inside its own belly. When I went to Mikey to have it fixed, he told me he saw the same machine sitting in the garbage on Bell Street."

It was obvious that the thought of that dryer made Rose angry because she had to brace herself on the railing of her porch just to keep from toppling over. Her face grew as red as the fiery house and a tiny vein bulged out of her forehead.

"That's terrible," I said in a comforting voice.

"So you see? He's a bad man. A very bad man!"

"He should give you your money back. Did you talk to him?"

"Talk to him? I even called his mother. She lives in a nursing home in East Cambridge. She was so hurt."

"Next time I see Louie, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind for you, Rose."

"It won't do any good. If this was Italy, a man would never do that to an old woman 'cause somebody would crack his head wide open. I was born in Italy, you know. I came over when I was ten. The boat was a boat only by definition—not like the luxury liners they have today. The Captain said we were having "bird of the sea" that trip. You know what that is? It's seagull. It tasted awful! But when you're hungry, boy you eat it. Twenty-one days it took. The boat stopped in Boston at Commonwealth Pier and that's where I became an American."

Rose took a deep breath. Her anger seemed to turn to sadness as she relived the events of her youth in her mind.

"When I came to this country, my childhood ended," she continued. "My father put me to work at thirteen. I worked five and one-half days a week and never saw a penny of it. Back then, a family works to support their family. Nowadays it's different."

Rose had a lifetime of regrets to complain about and I always listened to her although it would have been more interesting had she told me some wild stories from her past.

“Did you go to school, Rose?”

“A total of two and one-half years. And my father didn’t like it neither. Each kid was an income and if we went to school, it was like taking food off of the table. He lied about my age, and the age of my brothers and sisters, so we could work,”

“Where did you work, Rose?”

“In the mills in Lawrence. I sewed. I walked two miles to work and only had twenty minutes to get there because I had chores I had to get done before I could go. I worked with a needle and thread from the time I was thirteen years old until I was twenty-two. When I got married, I handed my last paycheck over to my father and he complained that I cheated him of a half-day. I made three dollars and eighty cents a week.”

Rose stood motionless for a moment. Her eyes glazed over and she seemed to go somewhere else. It wasn’t until a muffler-less car roared down the street that she snapped back to reality.

“My father brought me to America to work,” she continued. “My childhood ended when I left Palermo.”

Normally I’d sit and listen to Rose until she grew tired of hearing herself speak, but our talk was borderline depressing and I was quickly eyeing my escape routes for an out. Thankfully, she could tell that I was teetering on uncomfortable and changed the subject.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked me.

“Nobody steady.”

“Well, I believe that there is somebody for everybody, you just have to work hard on finding her.”

“I think you’re right, Rose. You know what they say? Nothing good comes easy.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” she said, giggling like old ladies do to their grandchildren. “It’s nice of you to talk to an old lady. I don’t understand people today. Everybody’s in a hurry. Everybody has so many things on their mind. In Italy it was never like this. I wish I never came to this country.”

I felt bad for Rose. I wished there was something I could have done to make her feel better in that moment, but butterflies and hugs were never really my cup of tea. She was hurting, that much was obvious, and I wondered if a simple gesture of mine would help to lessen the load she was carrying, whether it was helping her to take the clothes down from off of the line or being her date to the ever-competitive sport of Sunday afternoon Bingo tournaments down at the YMCA.

“You know, Rose, if you ever need me to take you anywhere—to the market or whatever—you just give me a holler, okay?”

Thank you,” she replied with a growing smile. “I appreciate that very much. You’re a nice man.”

Rose walked slowly towards the large door that lead into her house, stopping briefly to remind me of what brought me across the street in the first place. “Remember,” she said. “Stay away from that Louie. He’s no good.”

By the time I had made it back to my house, my cell rang. It was Jimmy.

“I think I’d like to try your idea,” he told me with desperation in his voice. “I can’t take it anymore. That woman is driving me bonkers. I’m losing my fucking mind!”

“Okay Jimmy, everything is going to be fine. Mrs. Fazzino should be coming outside in about fifteen minutes,” I said, looking down at my watch. “She’s very punctual with her daily outdoor activities, so we don’t have much time. I’ve got some two-week-old dirty pans and a rack of dishes that could use some major cleaning. Meet me outside at your place in five minutes. Bring out some

drinking glasses and a bottle of dishwashing liquid. Oh, and make sure you have the garden hose ready with the spray nozzle.”

“Why the hose?” he asked.

“Jimmy, tonight you’re going to do the dishes on the front lawn. Mrs. Fazzino will look over at you and you’ll smile at her and keep smiling. You’re going to tap into her insanity and she is going to look at you as a crazy comrade from this night on.”

“You sure this is going to work?”

“Absolutely,” I said confidently, though I knew deep down that it was a long shot.

I went inside my apartment, grabbed an empty moving box and packed the dirty pans inside. The Crock-Pot wasn’t as filthy as I had anticipated, but the frying pan made up for the other’s shortcomings thanks to a firm, crusty layer of congealed fat that had wedged itself into the bottom of the skillet. I then removed a stack of dishes covered with corn and baked beans from the counter and loaded them into the box, turning my head slightly to the left to avoid direct nose-to-scent contact with the odor the plates were giving off.

I passed Mrs. Fazzino’s place and met Jimmy in the front yard of his house where he was standing haplessly with the garden hose in his hand. I spread the pans and dishes, as well as Jimmy’s glasses, out on a tarp that my toothless neighbor had put down over the lawn.

“I’m a little nervous,” Jimmy said.

“Don’t worry, you’ll do just fine,” I assured him. “When Mrs. Fazzino sets the vacuum cleaner down on the walkway, that’s when you fire away.”

I went back to the comfort of my porch and sat on the highest step to get a good view of the action as it unfolded. Mrs. Fazzino’s door opened, right on time as always. Visibly nervous, Jimmy had the hose in one hand, ready to spray on the given command. Mrs. Fazzino suspiciously glanced over at Jimmy, unsure of his motives.

It was like a Western duel of craziness set at high noon and there was no telling what the end result would be.

Mrs. Fazzino placed the battle-hardened Hoover down on her lawn and powered it up. Sensing his moment of truth, Jimmy squeezed on the nozzle's silver handle and started spraying like a madman on a mission from God. His arm swayed from side to side, watering the porcelain, glass and nonstick aluminum. Unfortunately, Jimmy was too close to the dirty dishes and the hose was giving off too much pressure. I watched in awe as the pans and glasses exploded halfway across the lawn, erupting from the tarp like a simulated war scenario where the plan of attack was a carpet bomb initiated from the sky. By the time Jimmy lowered the pressure on the nozzle, the human fire hydrant was soaking wet and covered in week-old baked beans from head to toe. He wiped his face partially clean and looked over at Mr. Fazzino.

Upon seeing everything play out, Mrs. Fazzino sprinted into her house and quickly returned with what appeared to be two large brown handles taped together in the shape of a cross. She scurried over to the metal fence, leaned over the top of it and held up the giant crucifix, waving it in Jimmy's direction. As previously directed, he smiled at Mrs. Fazzino like a schoolboy sitting down for his class photo, but it was not well received.

Cars were now slowing down to get a long glimpse of the man with the hose and the woman with the makeshift cross. A cyclist out for a trek stopped at the curb so as not to cross between the two. A Puerto Rican couple, holding hands and smooching, came upon the scene in mid-kiss and stopped in a frozen state of shock and dismay. They looked to me as if to say, "What's their problem?" but I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of sanity, and instead looked back at them with no expression whatsoever, only to turn to the seagulls flying above, barking at them like a territorial hound. They

said something in Spanish but the only words I could make out were “todo” and “loco.”

I watched as Martha parked her Honda Civic on the street, leaving the ideal distance between her car and the curb.

“What’s going on here?” she questioned me with her car window all the way down. “Why is that crazy man spraying water on plates and glasses? And what is that old woman holding?”

“I think it’s a cross.”

“What is there a lunatic convention going on here?”

“It’s a sick world Martha.”

She exited the car with grocery bags in hand and a purse over her shoulder. She was dressed conservatively as usual, this time wearing a pair of perfectly pressed slacks and a baby-blue colored blouse that covered every inch of her upper body, even though it was smack dab in the middle of summer. She glanced all around as she headed up the walkway towards my house, taking in her surroundings and the chaos the neighborhood released on the world. She was visibly shaken, though I didn’t blame her. This was the first time she visited me since I moved to this part of town, and I could already tell that she was second-guessing her decision to make me dinner that evening.

I greeted Martha at the door, kissed her on the right cheek and welcomed her inside. She looked like a newborn baby taking in the world for the first time; only it wasn’t amazement in her eyes, but fear.

“This... this is your place?” she asked with a certain amount of a tremble in her voice.

“Home sweet home.”

I took the grocery bags from Martha and tried to take her purse as well, but she clutched it tightly as if she was going to be robbed at any moment. I headed into the kitchen and placed the brown paper bags full of food on top of the counter, clearing a space for them by

tossing a half-dozen boxes of partially eaten Coco Puffs into a nearby trash can. I glanced over my shoulder at Martha and smiled. Everything about the moment was horrifying her and she did very little to hide it.

“So how was your day?” I asked her as I unpacked various items from the bags, including a package of chicken, a head of lettuce, two tomatoes and a dented box of Rice-A-Roni. At the bottom of the second bag was the promised corn on the cob.

Before Martha could answer my question, a bug, most likely one of the many cockroaches that inhabited the house, crawled over her shoe and she let out a mind-numbing scream. Unable to control her fear of a creature one inch in length, she stumbled backwards and bumped into the fireplace mantle, which terrified the sleeping Gato enough to jolt the cat awake and put it on the defensive. Still half asleep, Gato hissed and lashed out at Martha, scratching her across the back and slicing three small slits into the baby-blue blouse she wore.

When the dust settled, Martha was hysterical. She was hyperventilating and ranting about my living conditions, so I gave her a brown paper bag and told her to breathe into it slowly. I had just about calmed her down when Charlie decided to make an appearance, slithering from underneath the couch and scaring the lunches out of both of us.

After coaxing Charlie into the bedroom and corralling him inside, I somehow convinced Martha to stay, even though it was clear that she would have rather been anywhere than the house of horrors I was calling a home. I could have just let her walk out the door, and it probably would have ended right there, but I’m a glutton for punishment and in a way, I was kind of enjoying myself in her company for the very first time since we met.

I sat quietly in the living room with a beer in hand as Martha went into the kitchen to prepare the food. She was skittish and on

edge, but she was a trooper for still going on with the dinner and for that I commend her. I didn't say a word as I sipped from my aluminum can. Long silences had become our routine. Any conversing between the two of us threatened what little bond we had.

Martha had discovered a series of Polaroid pictures taken of my squirrel companion. They were stuck to the refrigerator door with magnets.

"I see you've been taking pictures of that rat you always talk about," she said with extreme irritation in her voice.

"Those are actual photos of Rocky drinking out of his water bowl," I retorted.

"You've named him?"

"How else am I going to talk to him if I don't have anything to call him?"

"You know, you must have at least a dozen pictures of that damned rat up here, but we've been going out for three months and you haven't taken a single picture of me."

"C'mon, Martha," I said in my best shoot me now voice. "We've got pictures of the two of us together, isn't that enough?"

"Well I don't see them displayed on this refrigerator, do you? I mean, who wallpaper their kitchen with pictures of rats, but doesn't put any up of their girlfriend?"

"First of all Rocky is a squirrel and not a rat, and secondly, I have a picture of us I've been meaning to frame. I just haven't had a chance to go to the store yet."

That was a bold-faced lie and Martha knew it because I heard her grumble something under her breath, though loud enough for me to hear, not loud enough for me to decipher. Everything then grew silent in the kitchen for a few minutes and I relished in the quiet world that I was granted—even though I knew it would be short-lived.

"Where is your trash?" Martha shouted from the other room.

“It’s by the stove,” I responded.

I heard rustling coming from the kitchen and sighs of frustration soon followed. Martha stormed out of the kitchen and stood by my side tapping her foot, staring down at me like a disapproving mother.

“You know you don’t have any trash bags in your trash bin, right?” she asked with a stiffening lip.

“Yup.”

“Well why not?”

“Haven’t gotten around to buying any,” I told her as I sipped from my can of beer.

“You realize you have seven half-eaten boxes of Coco Puffs in there right now, right?”

I could sense that Martha was getting more aggravated by the minute.

“Sure do.”

“And pray tell, why would a grown man need seven half-eaten boxes of the same sugary cereal?”

“They get stale halfway through. I like them crispy, so I buy them in mass quantity.”

“Well why not just seal the bags?”

“Don’t think I haven’t tried. Coco Puffs are a tricky cereal because they get stale no matter what you do.”

Martha’s face was turning red. I had no idea why my eating habits annoyed her so much and it infuriated me that I felt I had to defend myself to her over such things.

“I don’t understand why you wouldn’t just throw away the stale boxes when you bought a new box,” she said, her foot tapping louder on the floor below.

“Cause when there’s nothing left in the house to eat, I’ll suck it up and eat the stale ones. Besides, last I checked, this was my house and I could do what I wanted.”

I glared up at Martha and my evil eye sent her scurrying back into the kitchen. She had gone from getting on my nerves to totally pissing me off and I was close to throwing her out of my place. I fought hard with myself to just tell her it was over, but I couldn't. I knew that I bore most of the blame for the loveless, miserable shell of a relationship we had together and at the end of the day I'm the one that first threw gasoline on the fire. I'm the one who wanted to see what it would be like to have sex with a stuffy Republican. Clearly I should have known better, but I was blinded by the nude-colored pantyhose and horn-rimmed glasses that first attracted me to her librarian-like qualities.

The thing is, I learned long ago that it takes two weeks to get into a relationship fiasco like the one I was in with Martha and upwards of two years to get out. I was a square peg stuck in a round-hole relationship and it was killing me almost as much as my job was. I needed an out and I needed one fast or else I'd be breathing into the same brown paper bag Martha was.

"Your stove is not working!" she moaned. "How am I supposed to make you dinner if I can't cook it?"

I placed my beer can down on the coffee table and made my way into the kitchen, stopping to pat Gato on the head, giving the cat a little thank you for getting a scratch in on Martha. I entered the kitchen and played around with the stove's knobs as Martha stood over me, arms folded and questioning every move I made with the household appliance.

"Do you even know what you're doing?" she nagged.

"Actually I don't. It was just working a little while ago. Maybe the homeless guy broke it."

"Homeless guy?"

"Long story," I said.

“Now what?” Martha asked, slamming the pots and pans back into the cupboard. “I went to all of this work to make you dinner and now it’s not even going to happen.”

“Well, let’s just cut our losses on the home cooked meal and go out to eat. I’ve been meaning to take you to this café I heard about, so why not make it tonight?”

I knew deep down that she liked the idea of not staying in my house and the neighborhood one minute more, but she still needed to complain. It was a permanent part of her personality and I think she’d be lost without the ability to make others want to hang themselves.

“And what about the chicken I bought? It wasn’t cheap, you know!”

“I’ll reimburse you for the cost of all meat, dairy and other perishable items.”

Martha opened the door to the refrigerator to store the chicken and gasped, “This is unbelievable! All you have in here are condiments and beer.”

I handed Martha her purse and started ushering her towards the door. As I opened it to escape my continuously suffocating life, we came centimeters away from crashing into Leslie, who was standing on the porch about to knock on my door. She had shown up that evening to pick up Gato, and upon seeing her owner’s shining face, the cat made an instant beeline from the mantle to where we stood, leaping into Leslie’s arms and purring as loud as the engines on the street-racing cars the teenagers in the neighborhood spent so much time pimping.

Leslie embraced the cat, squeezing and kissing it as if it were her long-lost husband.

“Leslie,” I said, surprised to see her, even though she was due to pick up the cat that day. “Welcome back.”

“What was the prognosis?” she asked sternly.

“Prognosis?”

“The rash you found on my baby Gato! What did the doctor say? You said you’d call, but you never did, and then I tried to call you back, but you didn’t answer.”

“Oh, sorry about that. Things have been a little hectic around here.”

I suddenly realized Leslie and Martha had never met.

“Before I forget—Leslie, this is Martha. Martha, this is Leslie.”

“I’m his girlfriend,” Martha said, shaking Leslie’s hand.

“I’m his ex,” Leslie responded.

Martha turned and glared at me. I neglected to inform her that Leslie and I had ever dated.

“Now what did the doctor say was wrong with Gato?” Leslie continued.

“Nothing,” I reassured her. “Turns out I overreacted and it was just from the heat. It’s already cleared up.”

“Thank God,” she said, sighing in relief. “You had no idea how scared I was.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to get you all worked up.”

“I’m just happy she’s okay.”

Okay was a relative term. I knew that if that cat could talk it would have been a long ride home for Leslie. Gato would have no doubt complained about being both mentally and physically abused, and I’m sure she would have hired a lawyer to sue me over the anguish I caused her had she been able to dial a phone to get an attorney on the line. All I knew was that my pet-sitting days were over and I couldn’t have been happier to say good-bye to the nipple-covered feline. Leslie wasted no time collecting Gato’s things and she was out the door as quickly as she arrived.

Martha and I arrived in Cambridge just before eight and I knew we would have no problem getting a table. It was a balmy Wednesday in the middle of the summer and most people had better things

to do than make meaningless chitchat at a pretentious eatery at that time of night. Rooster had told me the food at the café was some of the best he had sampled in the city, so I made it a point to remember the place, even though I very seldom made it to this part of town. There the streets seemed to be occupied by mainly yuppies, professors and grad students, all too artsy for their own good, and being in their company made me want to open a vein.

The hostess greeted us immediately and sat us at a bistro-sized table in the middle of the restaurant where we found ourselves surrounded by the stereotypical Birkenstock crowd. There have been times in life when I would meet a person and almost instantly find myself scratching at a deep-rooted dislike for them, even though he or she hadn't so much as uttered a single syllable to me. I felt that way about the entire human population of the café, from the patrons to the waiters, to the people in the paintings that hung from the wall. They were all knee-deep in thought, overanalyzing each word and phrase in their individual conversations, which ran the gamut from the micro super germs infecting the bathroom door knob to the micro world of a big toenail versus a small toenail. "Is this the promised land of milk and honey that my aspiring friends in the 'hood really want to make it to?" I asked myself. This collection of baboons in bowties and corduroy blazers were insignificant specs in the grand scheme of things, yet because they all had titles with fancy initials at the end, each and everyone of them felt as though they were an authority on some subject, no matter how obscure. The air however was filled with more half-truths than a week's worth of methane gas from Mikey's rectum.

As I leaned back and took a look at the establishment and all that went with it as a whole, I froze a snapshot of it in my mind and realized how truly revolted I was to be there in the company of so many charlatans. But it was a different realization that made the most sense to me in the moment. Martha was comfortable here, and for

all of our many differences, it was our social and political incompatibility that made me see how little we had in common.

After looking over the menu and deciding on our main course of action, a waitress came over to our table, introduced herself as Rachel and took our order. I noticed that her name was spelled “Raychelle” on her tag and upon seeing her misguided attempt to stand out and be different, I wanted to slap the individuality out of her. Here everyone seeks to be their own person, yet they all look and act the same.

To my left was a tall, lanky man in his late thirties that resembled a balding scarecrow. The stuffed yuppie looked like the Planters Peanut guy minus the monocle and top hat. He spent the majority of his dinner brushing aside the few strands of hair that remained on his vacant forehead and flirting with the young blond woman sitting across from him. She was no older than twenty and fell on every word that he pissed out of his mouth.

“You feel less condensed inside,” I overheard him tell her. “Almost like you don’t have a body.”

“And all I have to do is change my diet?” she asked in amazement.

“Yes,” he whispered, laying his hand on top of hers. “But remember, macrobiotics begins in the mind. The body is merely a tool for you to use in your battle. The wild rice is only a means.”

I vomited in my mouth as Mr. Peanut worked the young girl over, preying on her like a hungry carnivore. He had more lines than Louie and she was buying it all hook, line and sinker. When Martha excused herself to use the bathroom as she did before every meal, I opted to do something about his home-grown consciousness.

The waitress returned and placed a hamburger in front of me and a tuna salad sandwich in front of Martha’s empty seat. I removed the bun from the burger and slathered the broiled beef

with ketchup, mustard and relish, using my fork to mix the condiments together into one multi-colored concoction. This caught Mr. Peanut's attention and I decided to up the ante. I ripped open a handful of tiny white packages of sugar and poured their contents into my pre-sweetened Coca Cola, stirring it with the same fork I had just used to smear all of the fixings on my blood-rare burger. Mr. Peanut silenced his talking teenaged companion long enough to watch me guzzle the soda, pieces of meat and clumps of sugar swirling in the syrupy liquid as I poured it down the hatch.

I had him on the run, but was running out of time. Martha would return momentarily and I would lose any chance of accomplishing my goal. Though I admittedly didn't know what that was exactly, I was thrilled to be getting under Mr. Peanut's skin and I opted for a climactic finale. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a questionable meat product known to those in the know as a Slim Jim. I unraveled the plastic wrapper and dipped the brown stick in Martha's tuna salad sandwich. I chewed on it like a piece of bubble gum and tried to swallow the hybrid lump of tuna and beef by-product, but I couldn't force it down because it tasted so terrible. I involuntarily hurled the lethal chunk of chewed chum from my mouth and it landed on the back of Mr. Peanut's hand.

"YOU PIG!" Mr. Peanut shouted. "YOU DISGUSTING PIG!"

Without warning I lunged over the table and grabbed the oversized legume by the collar of his shirt. I pressed my fork into his Adam's apple and put on my best crazy face.

"You read the paper?" I asked him.

"Yes," he gasped, fearful for his microbiological life.

"You've read about people like me, right?" I asked, turning to the girl.

"Yes," the blond beauty burped in terror.

"Well there are worse out there than me and they are guys like this weasel."

“I just met him,” she said as tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t even know him.”

“Good. Now do yourself a favor and get out of here and never look back. He doesn’t care about you or the microbiological bullshit he’s feeding you. He just wants to get into your panties. Believe me, I know. I’ve done the same sleight of hand bullshit before.”

The young blond burst into tears while shooting up from her chair. She bolted for the door and escaped into the warm summer night hopefully never to see Mr. Peanut again.

“Now that’s a cockblock,” I said to Mr. Peanut, staring down at him devilishly.

“You bastard!” he said under his breath.

A tidal wave of rage overcame me. I don’t know whether it was the frustration of work and Martha, or the macrobiotic rodent in my arms, but I snapped and lost control of myself. I dug the fork deeper into his throat, took out the remaining part of the Slim Jim and demanded that he eat it.

“No, I won’t do it!”

“I swear I’ll kill you if you don’t. Eat it or else!”

Mr. Peanut bit off a piece of the beef stick, chewed it like a cow munching on grass and then swallowed it against his better judgment.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO THAT MAN?” Martha screamed.

Martha frantically pulled me off of the weasel. I took Martha by the hand, throwing a fifty dollar bill on our table and making a fast exit from the café. I knew the police were probably already on their way and I was easily looking at assault charges, never mind having a biological weapon of mass intestinal destruction in my possession, namely the Slim Jim, so I moved quickly and stealthily until we were back at the car.

“This is it,” Martha said as tears trickled down her face. “I can’t see you anymore. You need help.”

“That man in there was a sicko, Martha. I was doing that girl a favor.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing does anymore. There’s something obviously wrong with you and I don’t want any part of it anymore.”

As I stood on the side of the road leaning up against my car, I made a half-hearted attempt to look sad, but not enough that it would help to change Martha’s mind. I was greatly relieved at being spared the usual break-up routine and felt a spark of life in myself that I hadn’t felt in a long time. I had finally been given an out with Martha.

With watery eyes and a saddened gaze, Martha took notice of the full moon positioned high above us and said, “After you get medical attention, maybe we can be friends.”

She wiped her tears with her palm and straightened her blouse. I hated to see women cry and I hated making them cry even more, but I resisted comforting her for fear of falling back into the boy-friend zone.

“I’m sorry,” I told her.

“Me too,” she said.

I stared down into the glass of a parking meter.

TIME EXPIRED.

9

I returned home and walked Martha to her car. I gave her a twenty for the chicken and said good-bye for what I hoped was forever. She moved in for a hug, but I denied her the full embrace by leaning in with my shoulder as opposed to my full body. I know that hurt her, but I thought it was better than letting her cling to the thought that things could be made better between us in the future. She drove off without uttering another word.

I wondered whether Jennifer was still out on the porch, lost in thought and poetry. It was just past nine-thirty and I had my doubts that she would still be lingering, but I took a chance anyway and walked the short distance in hopes of hitting pay dirt. Before I could even make out her silhouette in the shadows of the porch's overhang, Jennifer greeted me with a hearty "hi" and her porcelain smile lit up the darkness of the night like a mouth-shaped flashlight. This time I didn't ask if I could sit down and instead I went directly to the steps and positioned myself next to her, even being so bold as to make sure we were slightly closer than during our previous chats. There was a moment of silence as we took in each other's auras and I suddenly began to connect with her on a level I didn't even know existed until that evening. Hoping to continue our connection building, I asked her if she ever considered publishing her writing, but she told me that it would be an impossible feat because she always threw away her poems after finishing them.

"Why put in the work if you're just going to toss them away?" I asked her.

“A poem has a place in time and once it is finished there is no use for it anymore. When a bird loses a feather, it grows a new one. It doesn’t try to salvage its loss, but instead, moves forward and continues to fly.”

I told Jennifer I didn’t understand where she was coming from, but she was glad that I was interested and proceeded with great enthusiasm to explain what she meant. Had this been any other girl, I would have agreed with her for the sake of agreeing, because in reality, I wouldn’t have cared. With Jennifer, I genuinely did care to know the answer and discover the girl.

“You see, a poem—well my poems at least—they’re like a combination to a safe. Each has many turns and different directions, but I’ve found through experience that you can only use that combination once. If I write a poem this evening and then turn around and read it tomorrow morning, it will already be outdated, misplaced, and for me, ill-conceived.”

I was shocked by what I had just heard. Jennifer could easily have been the second coming of Emily Dickinson and yet all of her writings were winding up in the trash. Artists by nature are often fueled by ego and more often than not, they crave validation for their works, whether it be a novel, a painting, or in this case, a poem. But here was someone, a beautiful flower of a woman, who seemed devoid of ego and interested only in the healing power of her words, which is what tempted me to ask her about what she had locked in her safe.

“The safe is empty,” she told me. “Inside is a hidden world.”

“What is that world like?” I asked, now more curious than ever to find out what made Jennifer tick.

“That, well, that’s something I can never describe in words. I only write about that which brings me there because words, at least by definition, could never truly describe the beauty, Drago.”

I didn't understand and didn't pretend to. She was a complex girl, and she knew it. What she didn't know was that her complexity was winning me over and that I longed to be complex myself.

"Will you read me a poem one day?" I asked with a slight pinch of begging thrown in for good measure.

"I would be happy to, though it will have to be the right piece, and you mustn't stand in my way when I choose to discard it afterwards."

I agreed to her terms, eagerly anticipating the day that I could hear her recite her own words of poetry. I was genuinely interested in her work and how could I not be? What she said had such a ring of truth to it and at the same time she managed to turn an explanation of poetry into poetry itself. Her selection of words and dreamy delivery knocked me off my center. I had prepared a few funny lines to make her laugh, but my mood had turned meditative and lethargic. I wanted to find out more.

"Why can't a combination be used twice?" I asked her.

"The magic is all in the present. On paper, they are just words. It's their timing that means everything."

"Why write down anything at all?"

"By putting into words what I'm seeing or feeling, everything becomes magnified and my understanding awakens. Next my imagination adds a brush stroke or two to the mix. For example, the simple green color on the leaf mixed with sunlight suddenly becomes green electricity, and the wavering blade of grass in the wind is nature's hand inviting me to follow. All the elements come together to form a story or the combination. They are the entrance to the hidden world. For me, the next day they are just memories, used up moments of time. Unfortunately, that doesn't do anything for me, Drago, and while I understand and appreciate that some people look to the written word for answers, I look to the moment the

words were written as opposed to the words themselves. So you see, that's why I throw my poems away."

While she seemed sincere in her explanation, I didn't totally buy Jennifer's take on her craft and I knew there was something deeper at play, something she didn't want to let out of its cage. She had been open with me about a lot of things since I had met her, but her defensive walls still stood tall around one particular piece of her life. In talking of her poetry however, I had noticed a sense of relief in her, like she had wanted to share this part of herself with someone for a long time, but had yet to find a person willing to listen. I was more than willing to step up and be that person.

Needless to say, I was completely blown away, both by Jennifer and her inner spiritual side that seemed to drive her. I had no similar experience or inner beauty on which to connect with Jennifer, yet for some reason I sensed her pulling towards me like a magnet to metal. Her poetry was like a religion to her and she practiced every day, a committed follower to her own beliefs. I could tell that she was reaching some higher plane, some heightened state of consciousness and it was all natural and self-taught, something very foreign to me.

"Can you teach me?" I asked her.

Jennifer took the potted plant I had given her in her hands and studied it for a few moments. She pointed out that the leaf was in the shape of a circle and then brought to my attention a vertical line that split the leaf into two halves. I tried to follow her, a studious pupil in awe of his teacher, but I was lost in the indirectness of it all.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"In a circle, you can come back to the same point, but in a line, that cannot happen," she told me in an almost clairvoyant tone. "Lines are in motion and circles are complete. They are all signatures of nature."

I started to wonder if she first retreated inward because of the harsh realities of her world. Perhaps there was something that happened to her in her youth that shaped her into the sage-like person she had become, but when I saw the depth and understanding in her explanation, I realized that she was more than just a hurt little girl scared to see the world for what it is. No, it was the rest of us that allowed the negativity and skepticism of our daily lives to consume us, only to blind ourselves from the beauty that was everywhere. Jennifer was plugged into this beauty, inhabiting a world that most people, including myself, would never see and could never fathom. She was no simple daydreamer, but instead somebody with a mathematical and innate understanding of the unseen world that few of us will ever even acknowledge.

“Can you tell me what other circles there are in nature, Drago?” she asked me.

I thought long and hard for a moment.

“Bird nests are circles,” I responded. “And actually, they can have eggs in them from time to time, which are almost circles. I should get a gold star or something for getting a circle within a circle.”

Jennifer laughed for the first time since I sat down.

“So what does all of this circle stuff mean?” I asked her.

“The circles are a part of a big jigsaw puzzle and the fun comes in figuring out their placement for yourself. I don’t think I’ll ever put it all together, but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

She smiled at me and an eerie feeling rolled over me. Although I knew Jennifer wasn’t talking down to me, it was obvious that she had superior knowledge of herself and beyond. I always felt that this department was my expertise, but now I see that I was misguided in thinking I knew the answers. I fully understood that people were under a spell of self-deception and that they believed their own lies. I always knew or didn’t know who I was and it’s what I always believed helped separate me from the rest of the herd. In fact, I

always believed that it gave me an edge over people, but now I was exposed as a false prophet of knowledge and I found myself in uncharted waters with Jennifer.

Jennifer sensed that a conversation was going on in my head and she asked me what I was thinking.

“Oh, just that oranges, pupils, the sun, and manhole covers are all circles,” I responded. “I’m probably going to get into a traffic accident now because I’ll be seeing circles in everything.”

“I wouldn’t want that to happen,” she said, smiling in her own mildly flirtatious way.

I loved to see Jennifer smile and laugh and wished she did it more. It gave me a sense of security knowing that she was here on earth with me. I almost felt her poetry was competition, yet I knew also that this was the engine behind her dreaminess, an undeniable charge that was drawing me closer to her.

I decided everything was getting a touch too cerebral and took a chance and asked Jennifer if she wanted to take a walk and get an ice cream cone with me. She agreed, informing me that she would have to go inside to get her wallet because she didn’t like to keep money on her seeing the neighborhood could be a dangerous place if you didn’t play your cards right.

“You don’t have to worry about money,” I told her. “I think I can afford to buy you an ice cream cone.”

“Okay, but I’m buying next time.”

“Do you have to tell your aunt that you leaving?”

“I’m a grown woman, Drago,” she said with a smile. “I’m not required to tell my aunt my comings and goings.”

We started off down the street in search of a frozen treat.

“You never talk about your aunt,” I said as we made our way down Oak.

“I only see her at meals,” Jennifer responded. “She works during the day and watches television all night long, so outside of an occasional discussion over dinner, we hardly ever speak to each other.”

I could tell Jennifer was uncomfortable talking about her family, so I switched gears in hopes of not coming off as pushy. It was a crisp summer night, the moon was full, resting silently in the sky, and more than anything I wanted the moment to be perfect.

When we arrived at the corner of Main Street, I spotted a pair of yellow pants embroidered with alligators stumbling towards me. It was the same wino who helped himself to the putrefied meat sitting in my refrigerator and I couldn’t believe my eyes that he was not only alive, but seemingly as fit as a drunken fiddle. In fact, from a distance he looked like a distinguished preppie just set free from Harvard, but upon closer inspection he came off more like a middle-aged Blue Blood, half-cocked and with a trigger temper.

“HEY!” the drunkard screamed at me. “You’re that guy with the bubbly wine! After I left your place, I puked my guts out for hours. That booze you gave me had laundry detergent in it.”

I tried to ignore him, hoping Jennifer would think he was an incoherent lush with a knack for ruining romantic moments. Unfortunately, the monogrammed shirt gave me away and there was no dodging the incoming vagabond.

“Hey, buddy,” he continued beckoning as he walked closer. “I want my clothes back, too. Nobody gives me any money when I’m wearing this stupid outfit you gave me.”

In all honesty, there was a part of me that felt really bad for the wino. Not only did I nearly poison him, but I had obviously severely diminished his earning capacity by giving him an outfit that made it appear like he had just walked off of the golf course while making his weekly rounds at a prestigious country club. Both the pants and the shirt were of the highest quality, so I’m sure it was going to take at least a year for the embroidered alligators and

monogrammed initials to decompose, no matter how many dirty underpasses the guy slept under. I had clearly pecked away at his income by making him a well-dressed bum, so in a moment of weakness that found me feeling sympathetic to his begging cause, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a hundred dollar bill, thrusting it into his dirty, stained hand.

“Gee, thanks, Mister,” the wino said, looking down at the hundred dollar bill in awe. “I’d say God bless you, but I don’t believe in any of that religious jazz.”

When the tipsy hundredaire left, headed for a nearby liquor store, I told Jennifer that he was the first true bohemian wino I had ever encountered. I walked through the story of how he had stopped by unannounced earlier today and how I had given him the pants and shirt. I even gave her the history of the pants themselves and how they were given to me by Rooster. She didn’t seem interested in any of my story, but instead wanted to know what my definition of a bohemian was.

“To me, a bohemian is somebody that is unconventional, usually with morals and a lifestyle different from the rest of society.”

“Are you a bohemian, Drago?” Jennifer asked me.

“No,” I said, kicking a rock along the sidewalk. “I like to think that I don’t belong to any particular group of people. I’m my own clique.”

“I can understand that. You are always so confident, but at the same time, not cocky.”

“It’s just a role that I learned long ago to play on the world stage. You see, most people actually believe they are the person in the role they are playing, but for me, I at least know it’s an act. I may be fooling other people, but I’m not fooling myself.”

“Do you ever play any roles with me?” she asked, using the most serious tone I had ever heard the dreamy girl take with me.

I stopped walking and looked at Jennifer intently and said, “Of course not! I would never do that. You’re the only one I find myself being myself around.”

“Good. I would never want you to be someone else. Let’s make a vow to be honest with ourselves and with each other.”

“That sounds like an agreement I can stand behind,” I told her as I once again started up our walk. “A lot of times, roles are just survival tools for me and I use them to get through a scenario or situation that presents itself. It’s a world based on Darwinism, Jennifer. Survival of the fittest and all of that good stuff. I just always thought it was necessary to do what you had to in order to make it to the finish line.”

Even though I tried to reassure Jennifer, it was clear that my playful indiscretions bothered her.

“Don’t ever play games with me, Drago,” she warned sternly.

I raised my right hand towards the sky and made a scout’s honor pledge to Jennifer that I would never play games with her unless the game in question involved a board, tiny playing pieces and a set of dice.

“Drago, can I be up front with you about something?” Jennifer asked me, looking me square in the eye.

“Of course,” I replied, though concerned about what she was going to tell me.

“I don’t like how you use people for your entertainment. I don’t think it’s right.”

“I don’t do it to be mean,” I said, hoping I could reassure her that my motives were not dastardly. “Sometimes it’s just hard for me to make sense of this absurd world of ours and for me, humor helps to keep things balanced. I mock myself, the rich, a drunkard—whoever and whatever. Everybody and everything is open game.”

“People are not game,” she said sternly. “And you just can’t go around all the time making a mockery of life.”

Jennifer seemed agitated since the incident with the wino and couldn’t let go of whatever it was that was pecking at her from the inside. I imagined that she thought of me as an outsider who had come to the neighborhood only to belittle the locals and their problems, but really, that was not me. If she thought of me as a snob then it was my own fault because I must have given her the wrong impression somewhere along the way. Perhaps she thought I was some kind of bohemian, and if so it was apparent that she didn’t like that cut of cloth.

“Okay, I’ll admit it,” I told her. “I probably was a little too tough on the wino with the alligator pants, but I genuinely do like the guy.”

“Drago, you have a good heart and I love the clown in you, but there are some things that I don’t like about you.”

Her words cut like tiny knives and I found myself slightly hurt and so I lobbed one back in Jennifer’s direction.

“Well there are some things that I don’t like about you as well.”

Jennifer stared at me long and hard and in that moment I saw two faces to her, a dreamer teased by her peers and a tough ‘hood girl.

“What don’t you like about me, Drago?”

“Well for one, you are this dreamy dreamer and you don’t seem to have any real dreams. You don’t want to leave this place, you don’t want to find a prince. You don’t seem to want anything in this world.”

Jennifer continued to stare at me and I could tell by looking into her eyes that she was not upset. If anything, I believe she welcomed me challenging her and she responded in a calm demeanor.

“I don’t need to have a future to make me happy,” she declared proudly. “The present is enough for me. The moment is fine by me. It is what it is and I make the best of it.”

“But I don’t understand! Aren’t you searching for anything in this world? Is being too content a good thing? I mean, do you just want to go through life in your own series of present moments?”

“I have my reasons for living the way I do,” she told me, her voice cracking slightly. “I prefer not to be under the spell of dreams that will never happen. That way there are no disappointments or frustrations and I can be at peace.”

“Dreams can come true, but you have to make them happen. You have to have a say in your destiny.”

“Like you did by moving here, Drago? You came here because you thought the grass was greener on the other side. Well, was it, or did you find out that you were mistaken once you got up close?”

I abruptly stopped on the sidewalk and turned to Jennifer.

“No, no. Up close is where I found you, Jennifer. You are the find of a lifetime.”

Jennifer was stunned and admittedly, so was I. I have never been big on sharing my feelings, but with Jennifer it was almost impossible to hide them.

“Why would you like a girl that has no dreams?” she asked, her words drenched in insecurity.

“You have dreams—everyone does. I just don’t think you’re sharing them with me.”

“Drago, we just met. You are looking for something in your life right now and if you ask me, I think I’m the girl that just happened to be in your path, which is making you think that it’s me that you were looking for. I’m probably not that person you imagine me to be.”

“That’s not true,” I said passionately. “All I have to do is just look at you or hear your voice—or even think about you—and I

just know. This has never happened to me before. I know that you are very special. But what does it matter anyway, right? You said yourself that you didn't want to get involved with anybody."

Jennifer thought for a moment and I could tell she was sizing up my sincerity. Perhaps she was thinking that there may be more than just mockery on my mind. She looked at me with truthful eyes and squeezed my hand.

"I never said I wasn't open to meeting my prince. I just need to know that I can trust him."

I smiled at Jennifer, acknowledging this new understanding we had with each other and we resumed our walk.

"And by the way, in terms of the grass being greener here—there is no grass," I said jokingly to lighten the mood.

"No, but there's a clown," she responded with a smile.

"Can I ask you a serious question?"

"Sure."

"Do you ever think you could just take off? You know, uproot and leave and go live in a new place? I mean, I know you are content here, but could you do it if the situation was right?"

"I have nothing holding me here, Drago," she said. "If it felt right, I would do it."

"Okay, that's all I wanted to know."

Further down Main Street Jennifer pointed out a concrete building with cracks that wound up the foundation like an overgrown series of vines. She told me that the building once housed her dentist, but that the tooth doctor in question made the smart move and packed up shop for greener pastures in the suburbs. A few buildings down was a second hand clothing shop that she also made a point to single out. She said it used to be a musical instruction school called "The Music Center" and that her aunt, the one she lived with, would take her there at least twice a week for piano lessons. She claimed to have liked tickling the ivories, but stopped after junior

high school, never to play again. We walked by a group of young African American men hanging out on the street corner and I said hello as we passed by them. A block later Jennifer turned around to make sure they were not following us and then she turned to me.

“It’s best to keep a low profile and leave who you are to the imaginations of the people around these parts, Drago,” she told me. “For instance, I would suggest not throwing around hundred dollar bills to homeless people. Flashing money like that will get you into trouble. This isn’t Wall Street Drago.”

It was obvious that growing up in the neighborhood had forced Jennifer to take on her fair share of hardened street smarts and it was equally as obvious that I was a rookie.

“How does a dreamy poet from the ‘hood know about Wall Street?” I asked.

“Never judge a book by its cover,” she said. “I do accounting for my boss and he has an extensive portfolio of stocks and mutual funds. Like you, I’ve been known to take on a few roles myself.”

We reached our ice cream shop destination and went inside, where the tiny parlor restaurant was filled with mostly high-school-aged hoodlums with nowhere else to go. I eyeballed the offerings on the large wooden board and decided on a two-scoop sugar cone with chocolate chip ice cream.

“What do you want?” I asked her.

“Oh, I’m not a big ice cream person, but I’d love a scoop of orange sherbet in a cup.”

“One orange sherbet coming up!”

I placed our order with a twenty-something woman dressed in a white smock covered in splotches of multi-colored ice cream left over from a day’s worth of scooping. We waited five minutes for the two treats to return and I paid for them with a ten, telling the overworked and underpaid ice cream shop girl to keep the change.

We exited the shop and took in the night air as we licked and spooned the frozen sweets into our mouths.

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “I ask you to get some ice cream and you agree, only you don’t even like ice cream?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“We need to start communicating better,” I smiled.

“And what would you like to communicate with me about, Drago?”

I looked at Jennifer softly as she stood there with a tiny dab of orange sherbet smudged on the corner of her mouth and said, “I want to communicate that I really like you. I wish I had a better way of conveying it, but I have an ice cream headache right now and that’s the best I can come up with.”

Jennifer laughed and melted at the same time. I had broken down her defenses even more with my impromptu comment and we hugged on the sidewalk, two blossoming lovers set against a backdrop of ugliness and poverty. We were now the unseen beauty on Main Street and I felt all sorts of emotions well up inside of me. As we embraced, I saw a flash of my future and for the first time since I lost my childlike lust for life, I saw more than a black wall waiting for me down the road. For the first time I saw possibility.

I held Jennifer’s hand and it fit so naturally next to mine, two connecting pieces in a puzzle built on potential. I welcomed the warmth of her gentle touch and she squeezed me, a moment that sent my heart skipping like a stone across a motionless lake.

The walk home was slow. I wanted to savor every second of it and I sensed she felt the same way. When we finally did reach her porch steps, I asked her if I could take her to lunch the following day and she agreed, responding with her work address and the time she could take an hour break. I hugged her once more, wanting to hold her in my arms until sunrise, and when I saw that she was safely inside, I went home a different person.

10

In the morning I woke and climbed into the shower, letting the water run over me until it went cold. Even after I turned it off, I found myself standing there, still not fully awake to the world around me. The night had delivered romantic dreams as I lay unconscious and even though I couldn't recall the details, I felt their remnants lingering like the path of white exhaust a jet airplane leaves on the sky's canvass long after it's gone.

That day I was scheduled to have my lunch date with Jennifer and I wanted to look sharp and leave her with a good impression. I removed a pair of black dress slacks from my closet and ironed a perfect set of pleats into them. I matched the pants with a light blue polo shirt because women had often complimented me on the color's ability to bring out my eyes, which were a similar shade of blue. I readied my black cowboy boots and opted for a pair of gold toe socks because matching socks had long been an important accessory in my life. In fact, I remember trying to match socks all sleepy-eyed in my pre-gold toe days and the disastrous end results. I'd end up with one brown sock and one black sock secured over my feet and sure enough, I would have a bad morning and it would prompt me to return home on my lunch break in order to make a hose change.

Mrs. Fazzino was standing on her walkway in oversized black sneakers pressing a T.V. remote to her head and looking up at the crystal clear, blue sky.

"Good morning, Mrs. Fazzino."

She looked down at the tip of my cowboy boot which had some scratches on it.

“He’s a vampire,” she said. “We know what he is.”

“Who is a vampire Mrs. Fazzino?”

Mrs. Fazzino looked over at Jimmy’s yard.

“He was washing all the blood off.”

“Oh, you mean when Jimmy was doing his dishes with the garden hose?”

This sent Mrs. Fazzino into what I can only describe as a spazz attack. She was practically going airborne jumping up and down and shouting in a granny voice, “HE’S A VAMPIRE! HE’S A VAMPIRE!” She ran over to the fence and I noticed that there was garlic all over it. She was putting the pieces that had fallen on the ground back on the fence. “Goodbye Mrs. Fazzino. Have a nice day,” I told her.

I got into my car with a fresh outlook on life. I stopped and ordered a small Jamaican nut blend of some kind from a Starbucks drive-thru window. I decided that I was going to be proactive and make my day a positive one by approaching it with a bit of enthusiasm. After all, I was due to have lunch with Jennifer later that day, so what reason did I have to be down in the dumps?

I was sitting behind my desk waiting for my desktop to load on my computer when Rooster poked his head, lead by his nose, into my office.

“Some guy’s at the front desk asking for you, Babes,” he informed. “He looks like a temp from the Salvation Army.”

“That must be Louie.”

“Whoie?”

“He’s a friend of mine.”

“Please, Babes, tell me you’re not going to hire this guy,” Rooster pleaded.

“Nothing long term. Only for an hour. He’s going to take care of the radioactive waste that we had stored in our bathroom.”

Always looking at the price tag on everything, Rooster asked without skipping a beat, “How much we paying him?”

“Two hundred dollars, plus a little gas money.”

“Is this guy bonded?” Rooster inquired.

“Not very well,” I admitted.

“Have him sign a release,” Rooster said as he walked away. “I’ll send him down to see you so we can get him out of our waiting room. He’s scaring people.”

Louie hesitantly stepped into my office. He looked as nervous as a kindergartener on his first day of school and continually wiped sweat from his forehead.

“Nice office,” Louie said. “You should just live here instead of in that house of yours.”

“Louie pulled a stiff handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose loudly. It was a wet, mucousy blow and I now understood why the handkerchief was stiff in the first place.

“Okay,” he said, wiping excess snot from his upper lip. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

I told Louie to sit and then slid him a standard release that we gave to all temporary employees.

“What’s this?” Louie asked.

“It’s a release form that basically states, if anything bad should happen to you while you’re working for us, it’s not our fault, and instead, it’s yours. It’s a standard form we use with everyone as a way of protecting the company from trigger-happy people looking to sue. Not that you’re that guy, it’s just a formality we have to go through.”

“Are you sure this stuff is safe that I’m moving out of here?”

Rooster popped his head in the office, obviously eavesdropping from outside the door.

“Don’t worry, old man,” he said to Louie. “If some of it gets on you, it will keep your pecker nice and hard.”

Louie signed the release and Rooster escorted him to a storage closet where the canisters were now being stored. Bob helped Louie carry the green biohazard bins to the infamous station wagon as Rooster supervised. After the radioactive material was loaded and ready to go, Louie returned to my office to collect his money.

“We’ll send you a check,” Rooster told him.

“Check!” Louie cried. “I don’t have a checking account. Nobody said anything about no check.”

“Don’t worry, Louie,” I assured him. “We’ll take care of you.”

I turned to Bob who was wheezing in the doorway and said, “Get two hundred dollars out of petty cash.”

“And don’t forget the ten for gas,” chimed in Louie.

“That’s right. Make it two hundred and ten, Bob.”

Bob scurried off and returned with the money. We paid Louie and he left on his mission to dispose of the radioactive waste that had been infiltrating our men’s room.

“This just cost us some money, Bob,” Rooster angrily said. “Next time you bring shit into the men’s room, flush it down the stinking toilet! It’s not rocket science! A fucking moron could figure it out!”

Bob left with watery eyes as Rooster took a seat in my office, stretching his legs far out in front of him.

“Where did you find that Louie, Babes? He’s something right out of an episode of *Law & Order*.”

“He’s in my neighborhood all of the time.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that, Babes,” he said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on my desk. “I’m a bit worried about you lately. Everybody’s talking about your move to that dump. Is everything okay?”

I got up and closed my office door so that we could have a little privacy. Being proactive in my day, I decided that it was time to be

firm with Rooster and tell him that I was leaving the company for good. Seeing as he wouldn't listen to the real reason that I wanted to quit and leave it all behind, I made up some ridiculous bullshit about wanting to move away and be closer to nature.

"Nature?" he squealed. "Why don't you buy yourself a tree house in Natick? I'll send a limousine to pick you up every morning."

"I don't think so, Rooster. It's time for me to move on."

"Why don't you plan a trip to the French Riviera and take some time to clear your head? You can walk around with no clothes on for awhile and reconnect with your pre-upright self."

"Not what I had in mind."

"What about that girl you've been seeing?" he asked, desperation filling his face. "You're just going to leave what's-her-name behind in the dust?"

"Martha and I broke up yesterday."

Rooster stood up and paced around my office. He rubbed his chin furiously. I was causing him a boatload of stress, but I had to do what was right for me for once.

"She was no good for you anyway," he said. "What you need is one of those Cambridge, earthy crunchies to lick your balls, and I'll tell you what, Babes, you're not going to find one of those out in nature."

"You're probably right, Rooster, but I've been searching for something here for a long time and I've been unable to find it. It's time to look elsewhere."

"What are you going to find out in nature that you can't find here? It's the same everywhere you go. There's nowhere to run, Babes!"

"I don't know. It might just be one of those things that I have to discover for myself."

Rooster froze and pointed at me like he was the host of a game show and I just won a new car.

"I've got it!" he screamed. "I'm going to call up my wife and have her hook you up with her friend Jill. Trust me when I say this. She's the thing you've been looking for. That girl will give you some serious memory loss and she'll make you feel like you've found what you've lost. I'm calling over there right now."

Rooster rushed out of my office before I could say no and stop the sale from happening. I had just begun to check my messages when my cell phone rang. It was Mikey.

"What's up, Mikey?"

"I got a free trial membership at this new high-end health club and I can bring a guest. You want to check out the hip hop aerobics class with me tonight?"

"Hip hop aerobics?"

"Yeah, man. Trust me. It's nothing but women. It's like fishing for carp in a barrel."

"Actually, I'm trying to be somewhat proactive today and I could use a little exercise. Count me in. When were you thinking of going?"

"There's a class at six and another at eight and either work for me. I'm off today."

"Let's play it by ear because I have a few appointments in the early afternoon that may run late, but whichever one we hit up, I'm driving," I told him, fearful of ever stepping foot in a car where Mikey was behind the wheel again. "Oh, and before I forget. I know you've been having some money problems and that got me thinking. I have a phone call I need made and I'll pay you one hundred bucks if you do it for me."

"You'll pay me one hundred bucks to make a phone call?"

"Yeah, I need to do a follow-up on that billboard deal you helped me out with. You have a rough voice and the goal is to get the guy who owns them to shit a few bricks in his pants so he won't go stepping on our territory again. The guy's name is Mr. Bratton and he's

over at Moakley Advertising. It's in the book. I need you to call him up and say that you're Mr. Franconi from the City Papers. Tell him that he has twenty-four hours to take back all the free ad offers he made or next time it's going to be more than just his billboards that get a facial. Make sure you say that with your best Mafioso voice. Make it sound really scary like you've got mob ties or something. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, I can make that call," he said. "And you're going to give me one hundred bucks just for doing that?"

"It's an important part of my plan, and I'm convinced you'll scare the excrement out of him just enough to make him back down."

"Okay. I'll drive to the pay phone down on Eddy Street and make the call right now."

"Sounds good, Mikey," I told him. "I'll pay you later when I pick you up to hit the gym."

I hung up my cell phone and placed it down on my desk. I was already feeling a million times better than the day before and I knew the prospect of seeing Jennifer meant it was only going to get better. I was halfway through my messages when Rooster burst back into my office.

"You're all hooked up for tomorrow night with Jill," he informed me. "I'll get you directions to her house so you can swing by and pick her up in that fly ride of yours. And believe me, you'll thank me later for this."

"I'm not sure I'm all that interested in going out on this forced date, Rooster."

"Just do me this one favor before you ride off into the sunset. Please! That's all I ask. Give true love one shot at blossoming in hopes that you'll stick around and keep me from going insane here without you."

I agreed to go out on the date with his wife's friend Jill because I felt bad for leaving Rooster to fend for himself at the paper. I knew that I was gone no matter what, so anything I could do to soften the blow would help to keep our friendship intact.

"Listen to this," Rooster said, flipping through a magazine that sat on my desk. "I just interviewed a recent grad who thought he wanted to get into sales. I asked him why he thought he'd be good at sales and he said because he 'loves' people. So, to counter his romantic approach to the world of selling, I told him that he would have to hate a few people to do this job because it comes with the territory. And you'll never believe what he said to me."

"Enlighten me."

"He said that he could never do that and that hate is a terrible thing to have in your heart."

"Uh-oh. What did you do?"

"Nothing. I just booted his ass out of my office."

"Didn't you ever have a first interview? It wouldn't have hurt you to show the kid a little sympathy. He was probably sweating bullets in that room with you."

"My first interview was tits," he said. "I went in for this door-to-door sales position selling security alarms. This guy who's interviewing me tossed a gold Cross pen into my chest and said, 'Sell me this pen.' I put the pen in my shirt pocket and told him that the pen wasn't for sale. He said, 'That's funny, but I want my pen back.' I said no and left the building."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"He followed me all the way out into the parking lot and I drove off. I kept the pen, Babes. It was a nice pen. In sales, either he sells you or you sell him. There's no in between. I wasn't sold on the job or him as a boss, so I left and I took his gold writing penis with me."

Rooster then gave me one of his rare serious looks and said, “Everybody in this world is conning everybody else. It’s just a question of who’s better.”

As he was leaving my office I asked him to send in Harry. Fifteen minutes passed before I ever saw his face, but when he arrived he seemed in good spirits as opposed to the last time we spoke. I decided that it was important to tell Harry that I was leaving the paper. The tough part of the conversation was going to be convincing him to stay, especially after convincing him to leave yesterday. I figured if the paper stood a chance of surviving in its current form, there needed to be a general in place that rose up through the ranks. For all of his faults and complaints, Harry was good at what he did when he put his mind to it and I felt as though I had the right amount of ammunition going into battle to convince him to stay on board with Rooster.

One of the reasons that the paper has grown to the level it had was because of the quality of stories that showed up in its pages. That was Harry’s doing and I made sure to thank him for all of his hard work before moving any further into my plans. If Rooster got a hold of the editorial department it would have meant a quick and painful death for the paper, so keeping Harry in the driver’s seat was important.

I confided in my old friend, spilling my guts about everything I planned to do, but was always too afraid to reach out and grab. He seemed relieved when I told him that I was going to be resigning because it meant that he could now quit without any unwanted guilt, but when I offered him half of my equity in the company to stay, I could see his mind churning as new possibilities presented themselves for his future. He knew he would probably never get a chance to make a substantial amount of money like this again.

“I’ll have to think about it,” he told me.

“Of course,” I said. “Take your time, but I just wanted you to know where I stood and where you could stand if you stick around. Oh, and Harry, keep this between us for now, okay? Nobody really knows that I’m going to be leaving besides Rooster.”

“Sure. My lips are sealed.”

Harry was definitely tempted by the offer even though he knew that Rooster would still rule over him. The only way Harry could be on even playing field with Rooster would be if he was an equal partner, which was what I planned. I just didn’t want to tell Harry that. At least not yet.

11

I left my office just before the lunch rush in order to meet Jennifer at her place of employment. It was located just off of a main artery on a street that was home to mostly multi-family homes and an old cemetery that dated back to the Revolutionary War. It was quieter in this part of town than what I had grown accustomed to from being a resident of Oak Street, and it was a nice, tranquil start to what I hoped to be an incredible bite to eat with Jennifer.

I parked the car and heard “Pop Goes the Weasel” blaring behind me. I turned to find, not an ice cream truck, but Clea working her moneymaker on the sidewalk as a group of horny men pawed at her. I walked by the noisy hooker and made eye contact. She waved me over, pushing the men to the side.

“This idea of yours is working great,” she told me enthusiastically. “Had I known this shit was the way to makin’ money, I’d have gotten myself a theme song long ago.”

“Good,” I said to her, noticing that her lip pustule had taken on an almost frighteningly large metamorphous. “I’m glad it’s working out for you.”

“It’s workin’ so ballsin’ good that Mr. Pops himself was threatenin’ to sue my ass. I told that cocksucker that that he didn’t own no rights to Pop Goes the fuckin’ Weasel. Give me a fuckin’ break, right?”

“You’re safe, I’m sure,” I told her. “That song doesn’t belong to anybody, so just keep doing your thing.”

“You’re damn right I will and ain’t nobody gonna tell me what to do.”

I left Mrs. Pops to business and soon found the building that Jennifer's store was located in and noticed a sign that read, "Gold's Artificial Limbs." I could see why Jennifer called them medical supplies instead of specifying the exact variety.

I walked into the store and was greeted by an old man that resembled Geppetto, the father of the wooden boy who learned that lying wasn't a good route to take. Dressed in overalls and twirling a white mustache with his fingers, the man that seemed to be torn from the pages of a children's fairy tale asked if he could help me.

"I'm just browsing," I responded.

"And browsing for what, can I ask? I see you have all of your working parts, so you can't be in here looking for a replacement."

"No," I admitted, smiling at old man that looked better suited in the role of a cobbler than as a medical supply salesman. "I'm actually here to see Jennifer. I'm taking her to lunch this fine sunny day."

"I know. Sit down. She's just finishing up a few things. I'm Mr. Gold by the way."

"As in Gold's Artificial Limbs?"

"One and the same."

"I'm Drago."

Mr. Gold snickered underneath the protection of his snowy white mustache. "So why do you live in that meshuga house?" he asked.

Mr. Gold looked at me suspiciously as I did my best to look inconspicuous in the wake of his forward question. He asked if I was "meshuga" and when I told him that I didn't know what that was, he explained to me that it was a Yiddish word meaning crazy. I assured him that I wasn't and that the house had a certain amount of romantic appeal to me.

"That sounds meshuga to me," he said, before going into a number of stories about how he had lived in the neighborhood for sixty-

five years and how his business was the only one never to be robbed. “What would they do with an artificial limb, slap each other on the backs for a job well done?”

I laughed at the old man, who admitted his sense of humor was just as vibrant now as it was when he was twenty years old. He told me how beautiful the neighborhood once was all those years ago when he was a boy and how you could have eaten off of the sidewalks at one point because it was so clean. I was going to inform him that people were still eating off the sidewalks regardless of how dirty they were, but I thought it better to sit back and let him spew his stories.

After a few more minutes of walking down memory lane, Mr. Gold started in with the interrogation, asking me questions about my life. He asked me if I went to college and I told him yes. He asked me about my business and he seemed genuinely impressed when I went into my work history, but at the same time he questioned my motives for being a successful businessman living in a part of town that most sought to avoid.

“So what is a man such as yourself doing living there?” he blurted out.

“I needed a change,” I said. “I needed something that I couldn’t find in the suburbs.”

“Sounds meshuga to me, but you seem nice. I just hope you are a good man underneath all of the niceness you give off. Jennifer is a special girl and I wouldn’t want to see anything bad happen to her.”

I assured Mr. Gold that my intentions were honorable and that he had nothing to worry about. That was the first time I had ever said something along those lines and actually meant it and that alone was a giant leap forward for me in terms of my personal dealings in relationships. Though I had only known her a few days, Jennifer was someone I wanted to explore a true romance with to the maximum. What did it mean to give yourself to someone com-

pletely? That was an answer I had yet to discover in life, but I had a feeling that I was closer to finding it out for myself than I had ever been before.

Jennifer appeared from the back of the artificial limb store wearing a gigantic smile, a white lace top with pink trim, and a pair of slim black jeans that hugged her body like a second skin. The outfit complimented her feminine side without being overly sexy, and that alone made her more appealing. She had the ability to ignite a fire inside me and she did it without the help of the usual trappings that I've come to expect from women—cleavage, skin, sluttiness and more cleavage. Jennifer was herself and I loved her for that.

“Hey,” I said to her, genuinely happy to see her again.

“Hey to you too,” she responded.

We exited the shop and stepped out onto the sidewalk where we were warmly welcomed by the ultimate summer day. The temperature sat at a comfortable location on the thermometer and the sun hung pressed against a cloudless canvas of blue. I thought about saying something clever about the weather, but all I could come up with were worn out clichés that would have just dulled the moment.

Jennifer froze when we made it outside, plugging herself into the world and choosing to take in every piece of her surroundings, from those of Mother Nature, to those built by man. She connected to everything in a way that I thought impossible. She was grounded, but floating through the atmosphere at the same time, and I stood and watched her, amazed at every wonderful part of her. She made me want to be a better person and she did it without motivation or without even trying.

We started walking and instead of taking control of the situation like I would have in the past with other girls, I instead concentrated on following her lead. We passed by a Burger King filled to the brim with hungry lunch-goers looking to ingest their daily caloric intake

in one sitting. I shivered comically, telling her about a recent traumatic experience I had at a similar fast food establishment.

"It was last week," I told her. "Before I tell you the story, I just wanted to say that in my defense, I didn't get much sleep the night before."

"Oh just tell me," she said, laughing in anticipation.

"I went through the drive-thru and thought that one of those new fangled garbage cans with the long snout was an ordering window and I drove up, put down the window and said, 'I'll take a number four with a Diet Coke.'"

"No you didn't," she said gasping in embarrassment, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Wait," I stopped her. "It gets better. So I sat there for a minute and then another minute until finally the guy behind me starts honking his horn. I turn back to see what all of the commotion is and he yells out to me, 'Yo, moron, you're talking to the garbage can!'"

Jennifer laughed and said, "I see the clown is out today." I felt my face go flush, but I've been told there's something special about a person that can make fun of and laugh at himself. I must have been the most special person in the world because I did a lot of making fun of myself around Jennifer.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I drove out of line as fast as I could and hid under my bed for the rest of the afternoon!"

"Drago, do these things really happen to you?"

"Well, for the sake of the story I added the whole hiding-under-the-bed part, but the rest is true. I'm a magnet for the absurd."

Jennifer lightly poked me in the side with her finger and asked, "Should I be scared about hanging around you then?"

"Nah. It keeps life interesting."

We entered a sandwich shop that Jennifer couldn't stop raving about and sauntered up to the counter, eyeballing the list of sandwiches on the wall in hopes of deciding what we wanted by the time we were called on to order. With pressure mounting as the line thinned in front of us, I opted to go with something simple that came highly recommended by Jennifer—a turkey wrap with Swiss, banana peppers and honey mustard. She chose the same.

After having our meal and a pair of Diet Cokes brown bagged, we left the shop and headed for a nearby park that was known for being dangerous in the evening, but in the day it was filled with mostly workers taking a break from the daily grind. As we walked I reached out and grabbed Jennifer's hand, even though I questioned what her reaction would be when I made the junior high level move. To my surprise she actually squeezed my hand firmly in response and we stayed connected the entire trip to our final lunchtime destination.

The small park was filled with litter and did not have the abundance of greenery that you'd expect out of an area of land preserved for public recreation. It wasn't the park's fault that its best assets were a few scattered bushes and a stretch of burned, yellow grass. The city obviously had other places to put their money than an urban woodland setting in a seemingly-forgotten block of Boston.

There were a few mothers enjoying the outdoors with their children, but mostly the park was filled with people sitting by themselves, blank stares cemented to their faces. I knew that particular look well because I had it myself every day for ages. It's the look of discontent, work weariness and detachment. I sympathized with each and every sad face in attendance that day.

Jennifer and I found an empty bench spray painted with familiar tags. I had seen that same work on the billboards I had hired Jamal to vandalize, so I knew it was his crew that had left their mark

behind. We sat and unraveled our sandwiches from their white paper wrappings and flip-flopped between bites and conversation.

“Mr. Gold asked me a lot of questions when I was in there waiting for you,” I told her. “He really cares about you. It’s unique for a boss to care at all for an employee these days, so you’re lucky.”

“He’s great,” she said. “I’ve been working there for a long time now and he’s always been good to me. He calls me the daughter that he’s never had and that means a lot.”

“I can’t imagine you get a lot of foot traffic in there.”

“Yeah, I feel bad. He really doesn’t get much business anymore. Doctors are buying directly from the manufacturers on the Internet.”

“Why doesn’t he just retire?” I asked after swallowing a bite.

“He always says he’s going to when one of us has a place to go. So far neither of us has been able to turn that into a reality.”

I was really falling hard for Jennifer. She poured sincerity into every word she spoke and her eyes sparkled with an energy that even the black hole of the ‘hood around us couldn’t extinguish.

“So, I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve decided to read you one of my poems,” she told me.

“Mind? Are you kidding me? I’d love to hear some of your writing.”

“It’s called, ‘The Universe Is Bare and Bountiful.’”

Jennifer smiled as if for the first time she felt validated to be a writer. She pulled a folded piece of paper out of the pocket of her black jeans and opened it like a road map. She cleared her throat and began reading at a slow, hypnotic pace. She pronounced each word perfectly, giving individual life to each syllable.

*A lone green leaf
Wavered back and forth
In the summer breeze
And when the sunlight*

*Buttered the round leaf
Green electricity emerged
And I shut my eyes
Bringing this jade aura
To the pitch black canvas
Whereupon the darkness became outer space
And white sparkles became stars
The universe was bare and bountiful”*

She finished her poem and returned the piece of paper to her pocket.

“That was beautiful,” I told her. “I wouldn’t even try to interpret it because I wouldn’t do it justice.”

“It’s hard to explain,” she said.

“That’s a good thing. In fact, in your case, that’s a great thing.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“For what?”

“For initiating conversation with me the other day. I’m happy you came into my life.”

“I’m happy you’ve accepted me.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes staring into each other’s eyes, letting the romantic silence of two would-be lovers rule the moment. Jennifer then looked like she was about to say something important to me.

“The first day we met, you mentioned your land in Pennsylvania. You said you had no one to share the beauty with. I wanted to tell you that having no one to share my poetry with also made me sad and feel empty,” she said as a tear rolled down her cheek.

I took Jennifer’s hand and told her that she was beautiful. She smiled and the meditative look on her face quickly changed to that of a happy child.

“So does your car go real fast?” she asked enthusiastically.

“As fast as you want her to go.”

“You’re one of those guys that refers to his car as a woman, huh?”

“She’s got curves and she knows how to use them, Jennifer. I’d be insulting her if I referred to her as anything else.”

“Could you take me for a ride in HER someday? I’d love to see what it feels like to go fast.”

“Absolutely. I’ll even promise to get at least one speeding ticket on said ride.”

“Can we go to the ocean?” she asked like an excited child.

“I think I can arrange that. If you’re free this Saturday, we can give it a try. I hear it’s supposed to be just as beautiful as today.”

“I have no plans.”

“Then we have ourselves a plan,” I said as I stared at the wonderful enigma who sat beside me.

Jennifer seemed happy being in my company and I adored every moment of my time with her. Her ever-present inner light was awe-inspiring. It was as if she was in a constant dream state and she was totally down to earth at the same time. I was convinced that she could see things normal people couldn’t see and I wanted her to help open my eyes to those things. She was as playful as a child and as wise as a sage.

I looked up at the sunlight as it filtered down from the heavens, lighting up Jennifer’s angelic face as if she was the holy grail of girls. She shone like a diamond and I felt the moment overtake me. I moved toward her slowly and gently pressed my lips against hers. Jennifer closed her eyes and I could feel the pressure of her lips on my own. It was innocent, yet exhilarating.

Time was growing short and Jennifer needed to get back to work. Also, I was due at my house at two to finish paying Jamal for the job he did on the Moakley billboards. I walked her back to Mr. Gold’s shop and kissed her a second time, once again taking a page out of a preteen’s book and opting to go the sweet route minus the tongue. I could tell that something wonderful was blossoming right

before my eyes and I sensed she felt the same thing. I had already begun to count the minutes until our drive to the beach on Saturday.

12

I was back on the porch daydreaming about Jennifer and waiting for Jamal to arrive when my cell phone rang. It was Rooster and it sounded like he had two barrels of caffeine pumping through his veins. He was talking two miles a minute, one mile faster than how I was used to hearing him speak and he seemed to be teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I assumed it was due to my planned departure.

“Hey, Babes,” he told me as the phone was pressed against my ear. “I just left work early to pick up my kids from school and you wouldn’t believe what I’m seeing. Every Moakley billboard I’m seeing is covered in graffiti, gang tags, and six-foot tall curse words. You can’t read any of the advertisements.”

“I know,” I said, welcoming Rocky as he appeared on the porch to sip from his water bowl. “I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Tell me what exactly? Babes, you didn’t have something to do with this, did you?”

“It was an investment in the paper’s future.”

“Have you been abducted by aliens? I mean, I really don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“You’ve turned into a complete nut job.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I told him as Rocky eagerly sniffed my empty hand, hoping to find it filled with peanuts.

“Well, don’t think we’re not going to talk about this Moakley thing later. I want the details of your fiendish plan because if I

remember correctly, I'm still your partner. And you know how much I hate secrecy."

"It wasn't a secret, Rooster. I just didn't want it to come back to you. I'll tell you all about it later though. Right now I have to get going because I'm actually meeting the man responsible for the artwork you've seen. I need to pay him for a job well done."

"Okay, but don't forget about Jill. That's still on like a carnival, so put on your best shoes."

"Good-bye," I said, hanging up the phone without letting Rooster get in another word. I was in no frame of mind to think about another woman because Jennifer was occupying all of my gray matter. I would have done anything to get out of my date with Jill, but I felt obligated to Rooster and preferred to keep him happy until I announced my official leave from the paper.

I slipped my cell phone into my pocket and ran into the house to grab a handful of peanuts. I returned to my seated position on the porch and proceeded to stuff Rocky's cheeks with a late afternoon snack. He chose to save them for future feasting and ran off to bury them in his peanut graveyard.

Jamal arrived with two of his associates a few moments later. He was wearing a baggy Red Sox shirt, oversized shorts that hung to his ankles, and a black doo rag tied over his head. He scanned the house from top to bottom and waved to his yes men to stay put by the sidewalk. He approached me cautiously, still unsure if he could trust me.

"This your house?" he asked.

"I don't own it," I said, standing and stretching. "I'm just renting."

"What the fuck for?"

"Why the fuck not?"

"I'm not even sure you can classify this as a house, homey."

“Eh, it is what it is,” I said. “Wanna head inside and take care of business?”

“Do it up.”

Jamal followed me inside as his urban soldiers waited for his return. He snickered at the furnishings of my living room and refused to sit, saying he wouldn’t put his ass on anything in the joint.

“So how did it go?” I asked.

“My boys delivered as promised,” he said with pride. “Now where’s my money?”

I walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door, pulling a rolled wad of cash from the produce drawer. I threw it to Jamal and he caught it with his right hand. He removed the rubber band from the cash, licked his fingertips, and began counting it to make sure it matched our previously agreed-upon amount.

“It’s all there,” I assured him. “Bonus and all.”

“Maybe so, but if it’s all the same to you, homey, I’d like to check for myself.”

“By all means.”

As Jamal continued to count, a cockroach sprinted out from a cracked floorboard and began climbing the wall. I reached for the Taser gun that Mikey had given me for protection and attempted to shock the insect into submission, but I missed by at least a foot on my first shot. Without hesitation, Jamal dug into his pants and pulled out a Glock 9mm. He took aim at the scurrying creature and fired, hitting the bug square in the back with a bullet. The cockroach exploded like a water balloon and the bullet lodged into the wall.

“Wow!” I said, shocked and genuinely surprised by his marksmanship. “That was one hell of a shot.”

“You want to kill a cockroach, you got to think like a cockroach.”

"I'll have to remember that. So, are we good?"

"Yeah. We're square. You ever got anymore business like this, you know where to find me."

Jamal turned to leave and I inspected the bullet hole in the wall. He had initiative and was a leader, whether he knew it or not.

"I'm going to need you when the revolution comes Jamal."

"What revolution?" he blurted out.

"Things keep going the way they are, the economy is going to crash and chaos is going to take over. The cities, the towns and the government are going to go bankrupt. All of the power is going to shift and it's going to shift to the people in the trenches. People like you, Jamal. We're going to need you."

Something, if not all of what I said had bored underneath Jamal's skin and he lit up like a furious Christmas tree.

"Get your white mother-fucker revolution out of my face! You fucking cracker-ass pasties are always using the black man to do your dirty work."

Jamal stormed out of the house and I stood thinking about his words. He was obviously extremely intelligent and passionate. I knew it was only a matter of time before we became good friends.

After a few beers and a cold shower, I stepped back outside and noticed a small crowd had gathered in front of Jimmy's house. At first I thought his latest dishwashing antics may have become a spectator sport, but then I saw two policemen and a stuffy man in a white lab coat step out into the open and I knew things were more serious than that.

"What's going on?" I asked a man in a tattered brown bathrobe that I had never met before.

"There's something green glowing in the guy's grass over there," he told me, pointing to a spot on Jimmy's lawn that had been quarantined with police tape. "I think it's a crop circle. We're foolish to think we're alone in this universe."

"I'll take your word for it," I said as I stood on my tiptoes, doing my best to get a better view of the crap circle. "Any idea who the guy in the white coat is?"

"I heard the redheaded cop say he was with the Board of Health."

"That's not a good sign."

"Nope, and he brought some kind of portable chemistry set with him too. I had one just like it when I was a kid."

I parted the crowd and walked towards Jimmy's driveway where Getman was in mid-discussion with an attractive female police officer. She took notes on a tiny pad as the Nazi-loving Getman spewed out his opinions on Jimmy.

"The other day I saw him hosing a glass in just about the same spot as that stuff that was found over there," Getman squealed as if he was being interrogated himself. "He always struck me as an odd-ball."

"Do you have any idea when your neighbor gets home?" the police woman asked Getman.

"Usually about this time actually," Getman proclaimed as he checked his watch.

I stepped over to the officer and asked if I could have a word with her in private. Getman glared at me, suspicious of my motives, but I brushed him off and lead the on-duty beauty to an area in front of Mrs. Fazzino's house where we could talk without any immediate interruption.

"Are you trying to find the person that caused this mess?" I asked her.

"That's my job," she said in a snippety tone. "Do you have any information on who did it?"

"I'm not one to ruffle feathers, but I think you may have just been speaking to the person responsible."

"You got any proof?"

“I live a few houses down so I tend to see a lot of what goes on in front of my house. Getman, the guy you were just talking to, I’m not sure what he does for a living but from what I’ve seen, he has a workshop in the basement. There are constantly UPS shipments being made to his house and all of the boxes that get delivered there always have those biohazard stickers all over them. It’s had all of us neighbors a little worried.”

“And you’ve seen this?” she asked me, looking for absolute validation before she acted on anything.

“With my own two eyes. I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised if the guy’s building something seriously dangerous down there. He’s not exactly the world’s most personable man and if you hadn’t noticed, there are Nazi flags hanging all over the house.”

The officer took a few steps back and whispered something to the man in the white coat that seemed to peak his interest.

“It’s definitely possible,” the Board of Health inspector stated. “I don’t know exactly what it is just yet because I still have a few tests to run, but it’s definitely a volatile substance.”

The officer waved her partner over as two more police cruisers arrived on the scene. More bystanders had gathered and the crowd was blocking the street to the point where oncoming cars couldn’t pass through. The female officer whispered to her partner and they immediately approached Getman. They started aggressively questioning him and the voices grew louder and louder. Getman became defensive and started to back away, but the two officers approached cautiously, the woman cop hovering her hand over her still-sheathed baton. Getman began shouting at his accusers and within seconds a scuffle broke out. The crowd of onlookers roared like the audience at a professional wrestling event.

The male cop tackled Getman to the ground, trying to subdue him long enough to shackle his wrists with a pair of shiny handcuffs. Getman fought hard however, flopping around like a fish and

flailing his arms and legs like a spoiled child who didn't get what he wanted at the toy store. He was about as spastic as his savage dog, who at this point was going ballistic chained to a tree as he watched his owner sit on the receiving end of a little justified police brutality. It wasn't long before the woman officer got into the fray, beating Getman with her now-freed baton. He defended himself well, but a third officer ran in to make an assist, stomping Getman in the head and knocking him senseless so that they could restrain him properly.

After the dust settled, Getman was loaded into the back of one of the police cars. He wasn't responsible for the green ooze on Jimmy's lawn, but he sure did a good job at making himself look guilty and he screamed bloody murder as they tried to make sense of the situation. The neighborhood kids and a few adults cheered. I was guilty of clapping myself.

Louie pulled into my driveway and motioned me over. He remained in the car, but rolled down his window so that we could talk.

"What's all of the excitement?" he asked me.

"Oh, nothing really Louie. The police just caned and arrested Getman because they think he was responsible for dumping some sort of familiar green liquid on Jimmy's lawn. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"No," he said, sweating and twitching nervously.

"Interesting. So, how was Revere today?"

"Still smells the same, you know. Some things never change I guess."

Louie was visibly shaken and he giggled like a timid school boy at the end of each sentence he finished.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. It's kind of like the leopard that can't change its spots, even though you give the leopard a chance to prove himself and make a change."

Louie didn't say anything. He just stared forward, unable to make direct eye contact with me.

"So did the ten dollars cover you for gas?" I asked him.

"It might have fell a little short, but I'll cover it."

"I wouldn't want to short change you, Louie. I'm a man of honor and I like to deliver on what I promised. You know—like you."

Louie stuck his head out of the window and smiled. "It will be our secret. Don't worry about anything. The next t-shirt is on me."

I looked down at Louie and couldn't help but grin. He was a slime ball and he'd never change, but he was a likeable slime ball, which is not an easy feat to pull off, yet somehow he managed it.

"Well," he said checking his watch. "I've got to meet my mother in ten minutes so I'll catch you later."

And with that Louie drove off like lightning, the fastest I have ever seen that green station wagon move. Mikey emerged out of the crowd of onlookers dressed in workout clothes, almost knocking the man in the bathrobe to the ground.

"Hey, watch where you're going," the man demanded.

Mikey turned and snarled at the man, showing his teeth like a dog ready to strike. There were no words said, just silent intimidation and with that the man slinked away.

"You missed all of the fireworks, Mikey," I told him as he approached.

"I heard all about it from Rose. Can you believe that shit?"

"No. It's crazy. It was like a scene right out of Cops."

"Just so you know I know, I heard somebody talking about how it was you that told the cops Getman was involved."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Well, not that I have to tell you, but I've got your back if Getman finds out and decides to come after you."

"Thanks, Mikey. There's nobody I'd rather have in my corner."

“What I don’t understand is, why does all of this weird shit always seem to happen around you?”

“I couldn’t tell you, but what I do know is that Getman deserved a good beating, so why question fate?”

“Good point, let’s just hope that they cart away that dog of his too. I’m not scared of many things in life, but that canine gargoye is an exception.”

“I hear that. That thing is straight out of a horror movie.”

I looked down at Mikey’s outfit, and chuckled under my breath. He was wearing spandex shorts and his cock bulge was put on display for all those interested to see. I didn’t want to look, but the mangled mound of penis and balls was like a car wreck that you couldn’t look away from.

“So you able to hit the early aerobics class or what?” he asked me. “I’m all amped and ready to pound the workout pavement.”

“Yeah, I’ve got nothing on tap right now. Let me just put on some different clothes and then we can get out of here.”

I headed to my house for a wardrobe change as Mikey stretched in the street, farting and burping as he put pressure on his stomach by bending over to touch his toes. I returned quickly and we slid into the Ferrari. Mikey had a hard time squeezing his big frame into the tight fit of the car, but his face lit up with excitement like a kid going to his first baseball game. He ran his hand over the black leather dashboard like he was feeling up one of his many college-aged conquests and when I turned the key, the engine rumbled like a tank.

“This car is the balls!” he said.

We drove down Oak Street while Mikey hung his head out of the window like a basset hound out for a ride. He searched all over for people that he knew, hoping they would see him and be impressed by his choice of transportation. The Ferrari was a movie star and Mikey wanted to be a part of its entourage. To the Mikeys

of the world, the car was a miniature slice of Heaven, but I knew better. It was merely a pretty collection of nuts and bolts that accelerated like a scalded cat. From bumper to fender, it was all about showing off and unwarranted mystique. Shakespeare would have said it was, “full of sound and fury but signifying nothing,” and while I agreed, I still couldn’t part with her. However, at the same time, I didn’t want to spoil Mikey’s illusion about the car, but I found myself unable to bite my tongue when he dropped “the life would be perfect” bomb.

“If I had this car and money, man my life would be the balls,” he said, utterly convinced by his own voice. “I’d be the king of the world, I’ll tell you that much.”

“It’s just a car, Mikey,” I told him. “What you’re buying into is not what the car actually is, but instead, the perception of what people think the car is. And that’s not necessarily a good thing. Trust me, I know. People look at you like a Martian when you have a car like this. They envy you, but at the same time they think of you as someone who is much different than them, which means you end up alienating yourself.”

“Why did you buy it then, smarty pants?”

He had me there. I’m lecturing him, but at the same time, I own the car. I tried to explain to him that for me, the car first represented freedom and escape from a world I didn’t enjoy. I liked the idea of being a filled suitcase away from going nowhere fast, but I quickly learned that it was nothing but a misguided fantasy.

“All the car did was get me a bunch of speeding tickets,” I continued. “I’d go for long drives in the country with her, and then I’d come back owing the state hundreds of dollars. I ended up having to go to driver’s retraining school because of all of the violations that the car brought me. Trust me, money and fancy cars do not bring happiness and at the end of the day, it doesn’t make you feel any better about yourself. I know it sounds like a cliché thing for some-

one with money and a Ferrari to say, but that's because you realize it first hand when you have these things. For me, it's not really about what I can buy and how I can spend it. Having money represents independence from the system. Money doesn't magically make things perfect like the movies imply, but it has given me the means to fight the good fight."

"With all due respect, Drago, the good fight can mean anything because everyone thinks they're fighting their own version of it," he said, sounding far more intelligent than I had yet to give him credit for. "For me, getting by in life is the good fight. For Mrs. Fazzino, the good fight is having enough bags in that vacuum of hers to carry on the madness. We all have our own good fight to go toe-to-toe with, and whether it brings happiness or not, money will help push all of us closer to that goal."

I was floored. It was the first time Mikey had gotten deep with me, and to my surprise, there was another layer to him that I hadn't ever looked for. Although he only made one point, that point silenced me because it made me realize how pompous I sounded.

Also, I couldn't help but think how ridiculous it was that I was giving Mikey a lecture about materialism in a Ferrari, especially when I was sticking a needle with a hot dose of affluenza in his arm. He had the leather smell of the car in his nostrils and the vibrating muscular metal was affecting every nerve ending in his body. I had planted the bug of a vehicular promised land in his brain. Mikey liked what he saw and was feeding off of the feeling the car gave him. I knew that to him, the Ferrari would be one additional diversion to take his attention away from what really mattered in life.

"You never finished answering my question," Mikey said. "Why did you buy the car in the first place?"

"The reason I have the car now is to destroy the illusion of it so that I can pursue other wants that may have some real meaning," I said carefully, hoping not to step on my words.

“Like what?” he asked me.

“Jennifer,” I said confidently.

The mere mention of her made me feel good. She was a constant flame burning inside of me.

“You know, you two may be right for each other after all,” Mikey told me. “You and Jennifer are really kind of similar, what with all of the stuff going on in both of your heads. I’ll bet the two of you are having a real—what do you call it—meeting of the minds.”

“That we are, Mikey,” I said with a chuckle. “That was a nice way of putting it. A wise man you are.”

We entered the posh health club about twenty minutes later. Mikey was carrying a change of clothes and a water bottle in a bowling bag that Rose had lent to him. I had a funny feeling from the start that my gym time with Mikey was going to be a strange outing even by my standards and although I expressed my concern to him, Mikey convinced me that it was going to be as “smooth as a Brazilian chick’s cooch” and that it was going to be his night to shine.

Wasting no time, Mikey immediately approached a sweaty woman who was ordering a protein smoothie at the juice bar.

“Can I buy you a cran something or other?” he asked her.

She turned and glared at Mikey with disgust, and I grabbed him by the ear and marched him away before she had a chance to call the manager. We made our way to the front desk, presented our introductory coupons and received locker numbers with combinations for the electronic locks, as well as a pair of towels. Once inside the locker room, I located my locker and found that it was adjacent to a naked old man who refused to adhere to the normal standards of personal space. I loaded my wallet and keys into the locker and shut the door. I was already dressed for working out in a pair of faded blue sweatpants and an old t-shirt. To my surprise, Mikey’s spandex shorts were not part of his gym garb, and he quickly removed them and slipped on a pair of far too short nylon shorts with the word

“EVERLAST” just above his crotch. He then changed into a skin-tight muscle shirt with the words “UNDER CONSTRUCTION” stretched across his gorilla-sized chest and put on a pair of bright red wrestling shoes that seemed brand new and just out of the box. We had to wait an extra five minutes as he wrapped electrical tape around his wrists and fingers and sprayed his entire body down with pungent cologne.

After putting the finishing touches on his bizarre outfit, Mikey stepped in front of a larger-than-life mirror and slapped himself in the face to get himself psyched up. Curious, perhaps even bi-curious, the naked old man looked on and Mikey noticed the pervert’s heat-seeking glare as it sharp shot his alimentary canal. Never one to back down from a stare, Mikey opted to express his displeasure on the matter.

“If you keep eyeballing me, I’m not gonna think twice to cram my foot right up your Depends-wearing ass.”

The naked old man scurried into the showers in hopes of escaping an inner city beat down.

“You realize we’re going to hip hop aerobics and not a boxing ring, right?” I asked Mikey.

“Life is a fight, my man. You have to be prepared at all times.”

And then like a prize fighter headed into a twelve round bout, Mikey covered his neck with the towel and marched down the hallway of the locker room. I followed, shaking my head in amusement and bracing myself for a tidal wave of double takes. We followed the signs directing us to the aerobics room and soon realized that we were the only two men taking the class. Mikey grinned sensing an early victory and made eye contact with each of the unsuspecting women in the first two rows.

“I look okay, don’t I?” Mikey whispered.

“You look like a kajillion dollars,” I whispered back.

“Then why am I getting such strange looks? Do I have a boogie on my face or something?”

“No,” I said. “I just don’t think they’re used to having all that many penises in here.”

“Oh yeah, we’re as good as golden in this vagina mart! Head to the back. We can watch all of the asses dance and stretch!”

We established a base camp for ourselves in the corner of the room far from any direct contact with the other Jane Fondas in attendance. The instructor arrived shortly after we got settled and she unknowingly forced both of us to do a double take. She was a six-foot tall blond with long, toned legs and a stomach you would sell your own mother to lick. Even the women that surrounded us ogled her, appreciating every nook and cranny of her body, which seemed to be sculpted from the hands of Michelangelo himself. Mikey had to literally wipe the drool from the corners of his mouth when he realized he hadn’t swallowed any saliva since she entered the room.

“What I wouldn’t give to stick my dumbbell into that,” he whispered to me, just loud enough so that the woman in front of us overheard, turned, and called Mikey a pig with her eyes.

The class began slowly, but the pace quickly established itself as something I was unprepared for. We both tried to follow the various kicking and punching and jumping that the instructor threw at us, but we didn’t come close to mimicking her movements, and instead appeared to come off as a couple of slow Stanleys headed for the short bus. At one point I looked over at Mikey and caught him frozen in a crouched position, his foot lodged close to his head. He looked like a dog attempting to scratch away a pesky flea from its ear and I laughed, breaking my own concentration and falling to the padded floor. My tumble to the mat knocked me out of contention completely and I could no longer follow the pattern of moves that

the rest of the class was performing flawlessly, so instead I opted to doing nothing but jumping jacks for the remaining of the class.

Meanwhile, I couldn't help looking at all the women in their spandex suits jacking their buttocks up to unprecedented heights. There was a great sense of urgency about their bones. Their arms were spinning like the blades of a fan and I had to dodge what I hoped to be unmotivated punches from the exercisers that surrounded me. I watched in wonder, these women animated by the passions and impulses that have driven men since the dawn of mankind, these women with their swollen liquid faces like they were just baptized in testosterone.

Suddenly Mikey fell to the ground and his thighs and buttocks shook violently. At first I thought he was pulling a practical joke or in the middle of crafting a high-concept attempt at gaining the sympathy vote from the uninterested women, but when his face turned blue and his eyes rolled back into his skull, I knew it wasn't just Mikey being Mikey. The instructor stopped the class immediately and everybody gathered around him, each questioning the problem at hand and who should be sent to get help. One attractive woman with child-bearing hips informed the group that she was a dental technician and that Mikey was most likely having an epileptic attack.

"So, where do you work as a dental technician?" I asked her as Mikey continued to convulse at my feet.

"Brighton," she replied as another woman in the crowd suggested somebody put two fingers in Mikey's mouth to keep him from swallowing his tongue.

"Really," I said. "I've been looking for a new dentist. Mine just retired."

"Dr. Lewiston is excellent. You should totally try him out."

"I think I might. How do you spell his last name?"

"L-E-W-I-S-T-O-N."

An irate chubby woman broke up my conversation with the dental technician, cockblocking me when I wasn't even thinking with my cock.

"Just listen to that horrible pig," the fat man-hater shouted. "His friend could be dying on the floor and he's trying to get that woman's number."

"That's not true!" I shouted back. "Mind your own business, you cow."

The crowd gasped and I returned my attention to Mikey, whose body had stopped vibrating. He was coming around and his eyes had repositioned themselves in their rightful place.

"Drag me into the hallway," he begged.

"Mikey, I don't think that's a good idea. You should rest a minute. You're sick."

Against doctor's orders, Mikey tried to stand, but fell back to the padded floor, his right ball exploding out of his boxer shorts like a firecracker on the Chinese New Year. I half considered flicking it back in to do my friend a "solid," but I quickly reconsidered when I saw the entire class of women staring down at his testicular misfortune. The best I could do for him was to prevent somebody from accidentally stepping on it.

"Why's everybody staring at my crotch?" he asked me quietly.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it, Mikey. Your nut is flapping in the breeze like a screen door in a hurricane. It's not a pretty sight."

Forcing himself to recover from his lightheadedness so that he could save what little of his dignity remained, Mikey rose to his feet with my help and we exited slowly. He was still dazed and groggy when he nonchalantly tucked his testicle back into his shorts and we collected our things from the locker room and left the health club, never to return. Mikey entered a heavyweight champ, but left after a knockout in the fourth round.

I loaded Mikey into my car and he leaned back to rest. Before driving out of the parking lot I listened to a message left by Rooster on my cell phone.

“Hey, Babes, it’s me,” the message said. “You’re all set for your date with Jill tomorrow night and I just wanted to let you know where you can pick her up because I’m not going to be in work tomorrow. It’s my kids’ last day at summer camp and they’re doing some kind of rehearsal or some bullshit. Anyway, her address is seventy-nine Peacock Street in Chelsea, about a block up from a CVS. She’s expecting you at seven-thirty so don’t be late. I made dinner reservations for the two of you at Lebone at eight. And, Babes, this girl isn’t shy, if you know what I mean. You don’t need to talk about the secret nature of a pineapple to get into her pants.”

I walked Mikey up the steps to his apartment and made sure that he got inside without having another epileptic attack. When I made my way home, I noticed I had a visitor sitting on my porch steps. It didn’t take long to realize that my uninvited guest was one of Jamal’s “associates,” whom I saw earlier that day, but had not been formally introduced to.

“Jamal got arrested, yo,” he told me.

“For what?”

“Slinging crack like he does every day.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” I asked him, trying to come off as uninterested.

“People been talkin’ about you,” he told me. “People been sayin’ you have connections. You know, like the mob, business and shit.”

Feeling an odd sense of pride in being thought of as a connected man, I stood tall and assured the urban soldier that he had come to the right place.

“Jamal is lookin’ at a mandatory ten in the pen,” he continued. “He don’t know I’m talkin’ to you, but is there anythin’ you can do?”

“How much crack was involved?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I guess it was ’bout twenty-five grams or somethin’ like that.”

“That’s all! And he’s looking at ten years for that?”

“That’s what I’m fuckin’ sayin’, yo. Kid don’t deserve that shit. Ten years is a long time. That much time can change a man. But we used to it ’round here. It’s how they keep us niggas off the street.”

Jamal’s predicament filled me with rage and disgust. While I didn’t condone his activities, there were far greater threats in the world than a low-level drug dealer from the streets of Boston. As far as I was concerned, this was a racial shakedown. Money may not bring happiness like I told Mikey, but it can often buy justice or even injustice. I would use my money to secure Jamal’s freedom regardless of his crime.

I collected any information that I thought would be helpful in getting Jamal released, including his last name, which his associate was not eager to give up. I may not have been a card-carrying member of the powerful families of the world, but it was situations like the one presented to me that I was good at resolving. I knew it was going to cost me a pretty penny in the long run, but I was willing to make the investment in Jamal. I called my personal attorney Hank on his cell to arrange an emergency meeting for the morning. I needed a legal hit man.

13

I went to a lawyer's office in downtown Boston, which while easy to find, was not easy to park at because it was smack dab in the middle of the high-rent district and every lot had restrictions. After finding a spot a few blocks away, I walked towards the high-rise building with a blank check in my hand, though it may as well have been a suitcase full of unmarked cash. Hank had referred the legal eagle of questionable business practices to me because as he put it, he was a guy who knew a lot of people and could make things happen, which of course meant he excelled in bribery or to put it gently, he was a power broker.

I entered the plush office and was greeted by a beautiful, young, blond receptionist that looked like a high-end Hollywood hooker. She quickly ushered me into the lawyer's personal office where the attorney in question introduced himself as Joe Masterson. He was a short, thin man and had a face that resembled my pet squirrel Rocky. Skipping any sort of small talk and getting right to business, Mr. Masterson immediately informed me that Jamal was looking at a mandatory ten-year sentence for the possession and distribution of twenty-five grams of crack cocaine, which he sold to an undercover detective, making it a pretty clear-cut case for the prosecution.

"I was told ten years was a possibility, but I didn't believe it," I told him. "He's looking at serving a decade for possession of a candy bar worth of crack? I mean, there're people out there touching kids and getting off with a slap on the wrist."

"They'll put you away for much less than that," Mr. Masterson said as he typed away on his computer, obviously multi-tasking.

“It’s the law. I just have to work within the parameters they give me.”

I had dealt with enough lawyers in my life to know that they always give you the worst-case scenario, and in doing so, try to generate as much fear as possible so that they can extract the maximum fee from your cold, dead hands. It was a tactic shared by the entire industry and I knew it was mostly just smoke that they blew up clients’ asses, but in this particular case, with Jamal selling directly to an undercover detective, I knew it was a serious offense that a judge wouldn’t just make disappear, at least, not unless the price was right.

“Thanks for the gloom and doom spiel, Mr. Masterson, but give it to me straight. Is there anything I can do or am I just wasting my money by trying?”

The cocky lawyer opened a manila folder on his desk and proceeded to read off Jamal’s rap sheet, which included numerous assault and battery charges, one of which resulted in an eight-month jail sentence of which Jamal served four. There was also a previous drug charge listed, which was continued without a finding.

“Jamal’s small fish in the grand scheme of things, and as long as he hasn’t made any direct enemies within the police force or local judicial system, there’s a good chance a call to the top could get him off,” he told me. “I’m politically connected in more ways than one, but for me to make that call, it’s going to require a considerable retainer for my services.”

“How much?” I asked, surprised that he didn’t call it a campaign contribution.

“It will take twenty thousand for me to try and nip this in the bud. Fortunately for us, he hasn’t been formally charged, which means I can deal with the matter outside of the courts.”

I grabbed a pen off of the lawyer’s desk and filled out the required amount on the blank check I had brought along. I was

fairly confident that he had already made some calls to see if Jamal's release was even possible, and for a guy like Joe Masterson, this was a baby tooth for him to pull and would probably not require anything more than a conversation or two to make the charge disappear.

I handed the check to the shark in the suit. He looked it over briefly, and then extended his hand to me. We shook vigorously.

"Great," he said. "I'll start on this right away."

I left the lawyer's office, hoofed it to my car and then drove to work, where there were little to no interruptions or complaints for the majority of the day—that is until I got a phone call from Bill Franconi from City Papers.

"How can I help you Mr. Franconi?" I asked him.

"I take it you've been following what's going on with Moakley?"

"Indeed. We are on high alert over here."

"Well I just got wind that he withdrew all of his free offers to the advertisers."

"That's great news. Looks like there is some justice in this world after all."

"Maybe so, but there are a few things about it all that I don't understand. Do you know why someone would go out of there way to vandalize all of Moakley's billboards in the city?"

"I don't know the answer to that, but I did happen to see the artist's handy work," I said innocently. "I guess you'd have to ask Moakley. I can only guess that the man's made quite a few enemies with his cutthroat tactics. I hear he stole the business from a relative on top of everything else, so you know, when you do those types of things, they can come back to haunt you in the future."

Franconi, confused into a pin-drop silence, obviously suspected me of some involvement, but thankfully the last missile I fired landed, causing the bloodhound to lose his scent. In reality, he had no idea as to the extent of what really happened to make Moakley

renege on his advertising offer, and if I played my cards right, it would stay that way.

“It was nice talking to you, Mr. Franconi, but I got the Mayor in my office and I can’t keep him waiting. I promise I’ll call you if I hear anything on this Moakley matter.”

“I would appreciate that and I’d be happy to do the same if I catch wind of anything,” he told me.

“Great. Talk to you soon.”

To my surprise, it remained relatively quiet in the office for the remainder of the day and I was able to tie up enough loose ends so that when I officially retired, there wouldn’t be a lot of holes that needed to be filled. I was due to have dinner with Rooster’s wife’s friend Jill that evening and dreaded the thought of Jennifer finding out I was going on a date with another woman. I headed home after clocking out from work and dressed in my best hobo attire, wrinkly pants and an equally-as-wrinkled shirt. I also decided that it was the perfect occasion to don my Herpes belt.

I gave myself plenty of time to make it to Jill’s apartment for seven-thirty, knowing that traffic to Chelsea was going to be a bitch. I arrived in her neck of the woods right on schedule and located my CVS landmark without any problems. I had to drive past her building three times before I found a parking spot within reasonable walking distance to her door and I moaned and groaned to myself about not wanting to be on the date prior to ever stepping foot out of my car. I was going into the night with a sour taste in my mouth, convincing myself that I wasn’t allowed to have fun no matter what the circumstances turned out to be.

I made my way up the tiny steps to her door and knocked three times, half hoping that someone would ask me for a password that I was unaware of, only to be sent away into the darkness of the night. Unfortunately, Jill answered in record time and I was immediately struck by her bright orange shirt that resembled the color of a high-

lighter Harry used to correct editorials. The shirt was unbuttoned deep into Jill's chest, revealing round, jiggy cleavage. She was about five feet seven, a slender red head in her early thirties with unusually large calves that flexed below the hemline of her short, sequined skirt. We said our hellos and she invited me inside.

The first room you walked into upon entering her apartment was a sparsely decorated parlor that resembled an office reception area. The only place to sit was a single-cushioned loveseat and a plain wooden chair. There was a miniature coffee table filled with various gossip rags and a Poland Spring water fountain complete with a paper cup dispenser in the corner. She ushered me over to a fish tank filled with neon rocks and plastic plants and pointed to a ceramic skull resting on the floor of the aquarium that had bubbles pouring from its eyes, nose and mouth.

"Sometimes I sit for hours and stare at it," she told me.

I searched the tank like a skilled detective, looking for any signs of life.

"Where are the fish?" I asked her.

"Oh, there aren't any. I had a few but they all died. They're REALLY hard to care for and honestly, they dirty up the prettiness of the tank, so now I just leave it fish-free."

A fish tank without fish set off a warning bell immediately in my brain. It was apparent to me that while Jill could obviously think outside of the box, she was also an idiot. In my experience, this was a dangerous combination and could only spell trouble.

"Do you like animals?" she asked me.

"Sure, especially the ones that aren't overly domesticated. I'm a big Animal Planet watcher."

"Oh really? I'm not big on cable television unless it's the E channel."

"You should check it out some time. It's pretty good. I saw this one show where they had a dog on that was trilingual. He could

answer to commands in Russian, Lithuanian, and Latvian, but didn't know a single command in English."

"Oh real-ee," she said again, only this time in a few octaves higher.

"Do you speak any foreign languages?" I asked her, hoping to jump ship on the "oh really" train.

"I took some French in high school, so I can understand it, but can't carry on a full conversation or anything like that. What about you?"

"Not really, but I have a lot of international friends. They bring a lot to the table."

"Oh REAL-EE," she said once again, a few more octaves higher than our previous go-round.

Shoot me now I pleaded to the gods above, but instead of a sympathetic escape from the heavens, I received a tour of Jill's picture shelf, where I saw framed photographs of her father, mother, and an older sister who wasn't nearly as attractive as her younger sibling. Her father appeared to be serious and extremely conservative while her mother came off playful and young at heart. I wondered if her parents knew that when they posed for the photos that they'd at one time be displayed for countless males to view just prior to hosing their daughter. My guess was that conservative daddy might not like the thought of that very much.

After a brief tour of the apartment, we exited the same way I entered and Jill locked the door behind us, the sound of a heavy steel deadbolt echoing in my ears. We walked the short distance to my car and it was apparent right away that Jill and the Spider were an instant match. I opened the door for her like a gentleman and watched as her muscular legs lifted themselves inside. I made my way around the car and hopped into the driver's seat, inserting the key into the ignition and revving the car's engine.

"I love being this close to the ground," she purred as she tossed her red locks back and glanced up through the car's clear roof. "Isn't it amazing how so many people go through life without ever looking up? We're told to look both ways before crossing, but nobody ever tells us to look up. Why do you think that is?"

"I'm pretty sure it's because a car isn't going to hit you from above when you cross a street."

"Maybe," she said. "There are so many stars out tonight, huh? I just love the way they wink at me like I'm a movie star or something."

I couldn't help but think of Jennifer as I drove to the restaurant, wanting more than ever to turn around and go home. Whereas Jennifer had a deep and intuitive understanding of the celestial bodies, Jill was a simpleton that saw the twinkling stars as another hungry hornball looking to get into her panties.

"What do you do for work?" I asked her.

"I'm in the cosmetics business."

"What exactly do you do in the industry?"

"Well, I'm proud to say that I was just promoted to senior spritzer. It took me two long years, but I finally did it!"

"Spritzer?"

"Oh, I'm the girl that sprays the perfume on women when they enter the department store, and now with the promotion, I'm the first one the customers see and pass by. It's a lot of responsibility with the heavy traffic we get, but I'm a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of girl as my daddy always says, so I'm managing."

"Do you like it?"

"I enjoy making women feel good about themselves, but it's not like my dream job or anything like that. I actually hope to one day open up my own store. I already have a name for it. Want to hear it?"

"Sure," I said, trying hard to sound like I actually gave a damn.

“Purrfume.”

I was silent.

“Get it?” she asked me. “You know—like a cat. Purrfume.”

“Oh, right. Like a cat. That’s very clever.”

“Yeah, my daddy loves the name and says it’s a sure-fire hit.”

“I bet.”

“I really admire you and Rooster for building your own company. It must be amazing to create something like that and then watch it grow.”

“Well, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” I told her as I turned the car left and headed down a busy street. “It’s a lot of responsibility and it can be pretty exhausting at times.”

“But, it must be worth it, right? I mean, look at how successful you and Rooster are.”

“You’ve got to ask yourself what’s more important though. Success or happiness?”

“Aren’t you happy?”

I pulled into Lebone’s parking lot and dodged Jill’s question with a silent shrug.

“I just don’t see how anybody can be happy without money,” she continued, her voice creeping higher and higher to the point where I feared my windows were going to shatter. “It’s expensive to live.”

“There are plenty of poor people where I live and they all seem to get by on happiness.”

“Well, I want to be rich. It’s like, I like money and I should have what I like, right? I hope you don’t mind me talking about this. My daddy always tells me that I’m going to scare guys away with the way I talk about money.”

“No, you’re okay,” I assured her as I pulled into the widest parking spot I could find for fear of being dinged by morons who open their doors without looking first.

“I just love the way this car drives,” she confessed, rubbing the inside of her thighs as if the vibrating engine was turning her on.

“Have you ever been to this restaurant?”

“No. It’s way too expensive for a senior spritzer’s salary. I’m so excited that you decided to take me here though. I’ve been thinking about it all day long.”

We entered the small, but ostentatious restaurant and waited for the *maitre d’* to finish seating a senior couple that held hands like a pair of teenaged love birds. Lebone was famous for its London broil and infamous for its price tags. Jill didn’t hide her excitement about being in the high-end establishment and immediately signed the guest book, using two lines to write her name in large, cursive letters. I glanced into the dining room and watched two waiters dressed in tuxedos working a dozen spacious tables, all but one filled with gooly-eyed lovers. I wished it was Jennifer I was having dinner with, but I had to settle for a table in the back with Jill. At least I had the London broil to look forward to.

Jill studied the one-page menu that featured a section on appetizers and entrées and gasped loud enough for the entire restaurant to hear when she saw the cost of each dinner selection.

“Thirty-five dollars for chicken parm!” she declared “No wonder why I’ve never been here before. I bet the food is absolutely scrumptious though, huh? Do you always eat this gourmet?”

“Not at all really,” I confessed. “I eat mostly canned foods—a lot of corn, baked beans and Progresso soups. I’ve always told my friends that if they find me dead in my apartment one day, the first thing they should do is have the coroner check me for botulism.

Jill looked at me incredulously for a moment before breaking out in a high-pitched laugh that gave all of the dogs within a twenty-block radius a splitting headache.

“Rooster told me that you had a real dry sense of humor. It’s very British. I like it.”

I placed my menu face down in front of me, signaling to the waiter that I was ready to order. Jill continued to study hers, undecided and seemingly confused by the many big words printed on the laminated sheet.

“So what looks good?” I asked her.

“Well, maybe you can help me. I can’t decide between the salmon and the swordfish. What are you going to get?”

“I was leaning towards the London broil. It’s sort of the dish they’re the most famous for.”

“I love meat but I don’t like having it on my plate unless it’s in a bun. To me, just looking down at the piece of hunking flesh, it’s—well—it’s barbaric.

“Well, then why don’t I skip the London broil and get the swordfish, and then you can order the salmon, and then we’ll just share? I don’t want to gross you out by eating a hunking piece of flesh anyway, and this way you’ll get to try both.”

“That’s a great idea,” she smiled. “And so romantic.”

I thought about Jennifer again. What was I doing here, partaking in this first date charade with a woman I obviously had no interest in? Everything felt dirty about what I was doing and I knew that if Jennifer was aware of my actions, it would cost me any chance of being with her now or in the future. She was an honest girl and I was being dishonest, both to her and myself. I should have walked away, but didn’t. Instead I convinced myself that it was best to stick it out and just have fun in the moment. Nobody needed to get hurt because in the end I didn’t plan on doing anything wrong. It was what it was—dinner with a friend.

Jill placed her menu on the table and a waiter appeared in record time.

“Can I interest either of you in a drink?” he asked.

I ordered a bottle of white wine and then proceeded to inform the waiter what we’d be eating that evening. He told us they were

both excellent choices and that the chef was quite fond of cooking them. He disappeared into the kitchen and quickly returned with the bottle of wine and a basket of freshly baked focaccia bread. He popped the cork on the bottle and let the wine breathe, pouring a tiny amount of the liquid into my glass and allowing me to sample it. I took a sip.

"It's good," I told him.

"Excellent, sir," he said, pouring both Jill and myself a hearty glass of the wine. "Your meal is being prepared as we speak. Please do let me know if there is anything else I can help you with in the meantime."

The waiter left our table and I took a long swig from my glass. Jill investigated her surroundings, taking in the décor and overall feel of the restaurant.

"This place reminds me of a place I went to in New York once," she said.

"It does have that downtown feel to it I suppose."

"I was on a date with a multi, MULTI-millionaire," she shared with an orgasmic tone in her voice.

Jill reached for a piece of bread at the same time as I did and our hands collided like a human traffic accident. She giggled, grabbing a slice of the focaccia and dug in without much hesitation.

"You can always tell how good a restaurant is by the bread they serve, and this is some amazing bread," she said.

"Oh real-ee," I returned, mimicking her trademark tag line.

"Yup. If it's tasty and hot, that's usually a good sign."

"Oh real-ee," I repeated, now having caught a serious case of the "oh really" flu.

Jill raised her glass of wine and I prematurely toasted it before she could say a single word. She took a large gulp of the glass's contents and hiccupped loudly after swallowing it down. She tried to play it off, hoping that nobody heard, but even the senior couple three

tables over caught a bit of it. They must have had their hearing aids turned up to eleven.

“I just love life,” Jill declared, a smile painted on her face from ear to ear. “I had an experience recently which made me appreciate being alive and I’m never going to take any of this for granted ever again.”

“What happened to you?” I asked curiously.

“Well, it’s kind of personal. Not that I’m embarrassed to share it with you, I just don’t want to scare you off. My daddy always said that there are certain subjects that don’t make good table talk, and I’m afraid this falls into one of those categories.”

“You’re not going to scare me off,” I told her. “I mean, if you’re uncomfortable talking about it, that’s fine, but if you need to get it off of your chest, I’m a fine listener!”

Jill giggled and then took another bite of her bread, chewing and swallowing it down in record time.

“I had a bump on my cervix,” she confessed looking down at her plate, unable to make eye contact. “The doctor said it could have been cancerous and they did a biopsy. It was like, literally, the longest two days of my life as I waited for the test results to come back.”

I couldn’t believe it. I was getting a recent history of Jill’s crotch by candlelight.

“I bet,” I said. “That must have been a heavy forty-eight hours.”

“You have no idea. If it wasn’t for my daddy, I would have lost it entirely, but he helped to keep me grounded and take my mind off of it.”

I sipped from my wine. The daddy talk was really teetering on creepy by that point.

“Anyway, the results eventually did come back and thank my lucky stars they were negative.”

“Wow. I can see why you have a new outlook on life.”

“It’s short, you know. We really just have to enjoy ourselves while we’re here ’cause there’s no telling when we won’t be.”

Underneath the table, hidden from the rest of the restaurant by a burgundy tablecloth, I felt Jill’s leg rub up against mine. I leaned into it, trying to decipher if I had mistaken the table’s post for one of her muscular gams, but I was right the first time and my leaning action only invited more rubbing on her part.

The waiter returned with our food, forcing the foot action underneath the table to take recess. Jill and I exchanged an equal portion of fish and my first bite came from a mound of steamed zucchini piled neatly to the side of my plate. I was never a huge fan of seafood and was upset with myself for not ordering the London broil. I would have been more inclined to let it go and enjoy my meal had the women sitting next to us not been eating the savory flank steak.

Jill took a bite of the swordfish and sunk into her chair, wriggling in enjoyment. She moved with an animalistic sexuality in everything she did. If food made her lower region quiver, I wondered what my tongue would do.

“Oh, this is just absolutely unbelievable,” she groaned.

“It’s a nice presentation too,” I said in a template, reflex response.

“I feel like I know you,” she told me, moving her fiery hair out of her eyes, once again turning a simple movement into a seductive act.

“What do you mean?” I asked as I placed a bit of each underwater creature on my fork and took a dual bite.

“I don’t know. It’s just like... there’s a connection here that I can’t explain.”

“Maybe it’s because we’re eating each other’s food,” I said jokingly, taking another bite of my zucchini. “Tit for tat can cause all that.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t even shared any of my tit with you... yet,” she joked, cupping both of her voluptuous breasts.

The booby grab caused me to choke on my zucchini. I coughed and Jill giggled, knowing that she was to blame for my inability to eat like a normal human being. She upped the ante even further, slipping off her high heel and pressing the sole of her foot into my thigh, slowly moving it north towards Penis Town.

Thankfully the waiter once again saved me, positioning himself at the halfway point between both Jill and I.

“And how is your meal this evening?” he asked.

“It’s wonderful,” Jill responded. “I like to think of my salmon having been caught by an Eskimo beneath the Alaskan sky. That’s how good it is.”

“A lovely sentiment, miss. I’ll be sure to inform the chef of your kind words.”

The waiter turned to me.

“And you, sir?” he asked.

“I like to think of mine as a three-legged duck who returned to the sea and transformed himself into a retarded swordfish, only to be caught in a giant net, gutted and sent to Lebone to have his fatty flesh appear as part of the daily specials.”

The waiter stared at me wide-eyed, confused by my response. “Very good, sir. If you need anything else, please let me know.”

“We’ll have another bottle of wine, please.”

“Right away sir.”

The waiter retreated and Jill reached over, placing her hand on top of mine.

“That was so beautiful,” she told me. “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“I like to think so,” I said. “I studied a bit of Hinduism in my college days and that’s a big portion of the belief system. The problem is, if things keep going the way they’re going in our world, everything’s going to wind up extinct and there won’t be anything left for us to be born into.”

“I hope that’s not true. It’s a sad future for us all if that’s the case.”

“I’m sure we’ll all be fine. If I get a chance to come back as anything I want, I’m just going to come up with my own animal to return as. It’ll be a hipporhinocerphant.”

“A what?”

“A hipporhinocerphant. It’ll be a cross between a hippopotamus, a rhinoceros and an elephant. I just hope that the hipporhinocerphant isn’t a delicacy in the future, because I don’t want to wind up on someone’s plate like this swordfish and salmon.”

After we finished the meal and wine I paid the bill using my credit card and we stumbled out of the restaurant, both slightly tipsy from finishing off both bottles of wine. Against my better sober judgment, I got behind the wheel and revved the engine, eager to get Jill home as quickly as possible. She was looking more and more appealing as the night wore on, and the alcohol had given me temporary memory loss because I no longer thought of Jennifer.

Upon arriving back in Chelsea I found a parking spot directly in front of Jill’s building and left the car running, half expecting not to get the invite inside. With her pupils dilated from the alcohol intake, she leaned over towards me, exposing the bulk of her breasts, which popped from her orange shirt like two corks from a pair of champagne bottles. My eyes dislodged from their sockets like a cartoon character as I stared down at her pressed together cleavage and she asked me if I wanted to come into her apartment for a nightcap. I agreed, hoping that the nightcap would turn into me seeing her breasts in their fully naked and natural state.

We no sooner closed the door after entering her apartment when we began a long, sloppy kiss, Jill’s doggy bag still hanging from her hand, crinkling as we went at each other with our tongues. I grabbed the plastic bag and tossed it to the floor, pressing Jill up against the wall and infiltrating her skirt with my wandering hands,

continuing to creep them further and further upwards until I discovered she wasn't wearing any panties. With her ass now exposed and resting up against the white wall, I pawed at her flesh as I worked my mouth downward to her neck, skidding over her collarbone and leaving a trail of saliva like a traveling snail. Like a madman possessed, I ripped at her shirt, tearing the buttons from the fabric and removing her purple bra with my teeth. With her large, welcoming breasts now exposed, I sucked on her tits for what seemed like an eternity, and worked them over in my mouth until they reminded me of chewing gum that had lost its flavor.

Jill pushed me backwards and then threw me down on the loveseat, tearing the shirt from my body and clawing at my chest with her manicured nails. She bit at my nipples as she unbuttoned my pants and we sank deep into the cushion of the miniature couch.

"Do you want me?" she asked.

"Of course I do," I replied. "Can't you feel how much I want you?"

Jill moaned as she dry humped against my hard shaft, which was still hiding in the confines of my pants. She reached underneath the loveseat and pulled out a Payless shoebox as I removed the remainder of my clothing. Inside the box was a pleasure arsenal of condoms, creams, jellies, spray cans and even a mini toxic waste container. I reached into the box and pulled out a glow-in-the-dark rubber. I slipped it on and then threw myself on top Jill, spreading her legs and sliding myself inside of her.

I was thrusting firmly from the start, but Jill hardly moved at all, forcing me to reach beneath her and push her ass upwards in an attempt at getting her more involved. She sat there, staring up at me with disappointed eyes and I imagined her thinking "this isn't how daddy does it" over and over again. I was pissed when it turned out not to be the kind of wild, crazy sex I expected, and instead, ended up becoming a slow motion, half-hearted hump session. We were

like two sticks rubbing together but barely giving off any heat and I decided to end the torture, ripping off the condom and glazing her stomach with my love icing, not even bothering to put in the effort to get her off.

When it was over, Jill rushed to the bathroom and returned with a fresh coat of make-up. I was already collecting my things when she flopped down on the loveseat, lying on her back with her eyes closed and her unusually long toes pointed to the ceiling. Her face was shiny and blank like a factory-fresh gravestone.

After piling my clothes in my arms, I went to the bathroom, passing by the various pictures of her family and finding it hard not to stare her sure-to-be-touchy-feely father in his emotionless eyes. I closed the door behind me and began a search for any meaningful sores. After a thorough investigation of my extremities turned up no immediate abnormalities, I grabbed a container of anti-bacterial soap from the sink and covered my entire penis with a transparent gism that smelled like jasmine. I let it soak into the fragile flesh for a few minutes, hoping it would help to kill any of the germs that had decided to stowaway. After I felt it had been fully cleansed, I stepped into the bathtub and turned on the faucet, crouching beneath the running water and rinsing the soap down the drain. Before I could rise to my feet, Jill had entered the bathroom unannounced.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her eyebrows sinking between her eyes.

“I’m washing myself.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” she snapped. “Do you think I’ve got an STD or something?”

“Of course not.”

“You think I’m some kind of slut, don’t you?”

“Not all,” I said, drying off my penis with a pile of toilet paper, the bits and pieces sticking to it. “Just relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax. I hate when people tell me to relax. My daddy warned me about guys like you.”

“Listen,” I said, trying to calm her down. “Let me just finish up in here and get dressed, and then I can come out and we can talk about it. I really don’t think you’re a slut. I swear.”

“Fuck off!” she huffed, slamming the door behind her.

I finished drying and dressing myself quickly and exited the bathroom in hopes of diffusing the apparently volatile situation. Jill was already standing at the entrance of her apartment with the door wide open when I stepped into her living room and she insisted that I leave. Confused by what was happening, I left without question. As I walked towards my car, she screamed at me from the window of her apartment.

“You haven’t heard the last of me, cocksucker!”

I sat in my car, shocked into sobriety and feeling horrible for what happened that evening. Sleeping with Jill meant I had violated Jennifer and the feelings that I had for her. Had I been a crier, I may have shed a tear that night, but instead I just drove home and finished off a twelve pack that had been waiting for me in the refrigerator, deciding to wallow in my own misery as I watched a documentary about the capybara on Animal Planet.

14

I woke up in the morning to a splitting headache and the sound of relentless pounding on my front door. I rose out of bed slowly, dodging a number of scattering insects and the clothes I wore the previous night, all of which had been tossed around the room like a salad. The pounding continued as I slipped a pair of pants over my naked bottom half and marched through the house to the living room where I opened the front door and was greeted by a pair of police officers, one husky guy with a dark beard and a tall cop in his early twenties that seemed fresh out of the academy.

“Morning, officers,” I said, squinting my eyes as the sun filtered into them, magnified by my heavy hangover.

The rookie asked me what my name was and I happily obliged with the information, figuring they were there to follow up on the green ooze that had been dumped on Jimmy’s lawn. Without warning, the husky cop ordered me out of the house and once outside on the porch floor, he spun me around against the wall, cuffed me and read my rights.

“Wait!” I pleaded. “What’s this all about?”

“You’re under arrest for the rape and aggravated assault of Jillian Burnell,” the rookie told me.

As they marched me down the walkway towards the parked cruiser, I saw Jennifer watching the scene unfold from her aunt’s yard where she hovered over the plant I had given her two days before. She had a watering can in her hand and a concerned, yet disappointed look on her face. My heart sunk to my knees. I knew

what she was thinking because it was written all over her face. Everything I said was a lie and I had been playing games with her.

The husky cop opened the back door of the cruiser and pushed me inside. The car itself must have belonged to one of the K-9 units because the backseat was covered in multicolored dog hair and smelled like a wet Golden Retriever after a long day of fetch in the ocean. My mind started to spin, fearful of being interrogated for rape with long yellow hairs now all over my clothes due to the canine cop that usually sat back there. Could I go to jail even though I was innocent? Did I really do anything wrong? Did Jill plan this all along? Could Rooster be involved?

After a short drive downtown, the rookie driver pulled into the police station and I was escorted into the building, more specifically a tiny room with two wooden chairs and a circular table that looked suitable for a card game. After a few panicked minutes of sitting by myself, the metal door opened and a middle-aged man dressed in a suit entered.

"My name is Detective Atwater," the serious lawman informed me. "Needless to say, I have a few questions to ask you and I expect you to answer them."

"This is ridiculous!" I howled. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Yeah, 'cause I've never heard that one before."

"Are you mocking me? I am an innocent man, damn it!"

"Were you or were you not in the presence of Jill Burnell last night?"

"I think I should have a lawyer present," I said, sinking down into my uncomfortable wooden chair.

"Why would an innocent man need a lawyer?" he asked me smugly.

"Because I've seen guys like me get railroaded by guys like you plenty of times before. I don't know what Jill told you, but the truth is that I was fixed up with her through my business partner's wife. I

picked her up at her apartment last night, we went to dinner, we had a few glasses of wine, and then we ended up back at her place where we had consensual sex. That's how the night played out and that's the God's honest truth."

"So you went back to her place and shagged after a night out on the town? What I'm not getting is, if that was the case, how come she's accusing you of rape now? If you ask me, it seems kind of silly for two consenting adults to go through. Did you do anything to upset her during the evening?"

"It's ridiculous, but yes."

"I've heard plenty of ridiculous things on the job, so try me."

"After we had sex, I went to the bathroom," I said hesitantly. "She got upset when she walked in on me washing my dick."

"Washing your dick?" he asked, both surprised and confused by my response.

"I've been seeing this new girl and, after I had sex with Jill I felt really guilty about it and went into the bathroom to—I don't know—wash away my sins, I guess. She opened the door when I was rinsing antibacterial soap off of my penis and she went ballistic."

"And at what point in the night did you call her a slut?" he asked, checking over his notes.

I was sweating heavily as I shifted in the chair, trying whatever I could to find a comfortable position as the world around me caved in. Detective Atwater was writing down bits and pieces of what I was saying, but I could tell he didn't believe me. He had no reason to. An accused rapist is labeled a rapist forever, whether he's guilty or not. My life was over.

"I never called her a slut!" I told him as I slammed my hand down on the table. "She just thought I did."

"What did you call her then?"

“I didn’t call her anything. When she came into the bathroom, she started ranting about how I was washing my dick off because I thought she was a slut, but I never said anything like that. She just assumed I thought she was a slut.”

“So do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you think she’s a slut?” he asked me, jotting something down in his notes.

“No! I think she’s a bitch for screwing me over like this, but I never thought she was a slut. All I wanted to do was wash my penis off and she took offense to that.”

“Okay, calm down. I still have a few more questions to ask you. First off, when exactly did you throw the woman down on the sofa?”

I sighed and leaned my head back, staring up at the bright light that hung from the ceiling.

“I never threw her on the sofa, she threw me. And secondly, that thing can’t even be classified as a sofa because it’s too damn small and uncomfortable. I know because I had my back pressed up against it as she pounced on top of me!”

“Did you take her clothes off before the two of you made it to the sofa?”

“I don’t understand,” I told him.

“Was she NAKED before you got down on the sofa?” he demanded, raising his voice and half making me shit myself.

“I’m not going to answer any more of your questions until I’ve talked to a lawyer.”

“Fine, it’s your funeral,” he threatened, rising from his chair and closing his notepad.

A heavysset African American cop saved me from the suffocating room and booked me two doors down, collecting my fingerprints, snapping my photograph, and even confiscating my belt in case I

was a suicide risk. As I stood there cuffed and in awe of what was happening, Rose walked by the room and spotted me, doing a double take to make sure she was not seeing things. I have no idea why she was there that day, but her appearance meant doom for my life and I tried to salvage my future by smiling and saying hello to her. She ignored me, staring at me with my black ink covered fingertips and turned to the person she was with whispering, "And I thought he was such a nice boy." My guess was that there were be no more homemade breads given to me from that old snatch.

After all of the arresting procedures were performed on me, I was led to a telephone where I was allowed to call my personal lawyer. Hank assured me that I had nothing to worry about and that he would take care of everything. For some reason his hollow assurances didn't make me feel any better.

I was relieved to learn that I was the only criminal occupying the jail cell where I was being held, especially after watching several seasons of the HBO prison drama "Oz." At first I had a great curiosity about my unfamiliar surroundings, even wishing I had a camera hidden in my asshole so that I could dig it out and snap photos so I could share them with the grandkids someday. I knocked my fist lightly on the thick, clear plastic door and wondered if it was bullet proof. Next, I removed the sheets on the rickety cot and searched for the infamous mattress tag, which I had seen appear as a comedic punch line in so many movies in the past. Somebody must have torn it off during his stay there, because it was nowhere to be found. I gave up my search by flopping down on the bed, practically breaking my spine on the uncomfortable, paper-thin mattress.

I laid there motionless, staring at graffiti that had been etched into the wall using a sharp tool or fingernail. Anger swelled inside me and I felt my face and ears grow hot as the blood rushed upwards. At first I felt intense hatred towards not only Jill, but the police and the system as well. I consoled my anger by thinking that I

would get revenge on each of the perpetrators once the revolution started, only to stop myself with the realization that perhaps a revolution was never going to happen in the first place. At best maybe a few rebel college students would burn their American Express cards, or a handful of Microsoft employees who had been replaced by efficient robots would toss stones at one of Bill Gates' mansions, but how much worse than that could it possibly get? Who was I to put a righteous stake in the ground, especially after I had been abusing and milking the same system for years?

It only took a few hours for me to be released from jail. Hank arrived at the station and paid the bail bondsman and I soon found myself in his cushy, secure Lincoln Town Car. Hank was a short, stocky man who was always hunched over and who spent the majority of his free time rubbing the edges of his coarse beard. He had all of the mannerisms of an agitated gorilla. He was unfriendly, unhappy and unpleasant. He was excruciatingly unlikable, but when it came down to it, he was the perfect lawyer for all of those same reasons.

"I didn't do it," I told him.

Hank's dark brown eyes were large, unsympathetic loopholes.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We're going to have to make a deal."

"What deal? With who?"

"The girl who accused you and the lawyer she called in to represent her."

"Are you kidding me?" I shrieked. "I'm innocent!"

"Right now it's her word against yours and at the end of the day, people tend to side with the victim."

"Victim? She isn't the victim! I am!"

"Listen, a trial is going to be costly," Hank told me, doing his best to come off like he actually cared. "If the State charges you, and

I think they will, you're looking at—at the very least—fifty grand to defend your word against hers.”

I collapsed against the window of the Lincoln Town Car, smashing my forehead into the glass, hoping that my head would split open and the ridiculousness would pour out.

“What do you suggest?” I asked. I prayed for mercy in his response.

“If it's money that she's after, and I think it is, I say we just make a deal with her lawyer and get this off of your plate as quickly as possible.”

“How much is it going to cost me?”

“I'm ballparking it at twenty-five thousand dollars.”

“TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND!” I screamed. “All I did was have dinner with the bitch and then had the worst sex of my life—consensual I might add! And you're telling me that's worth twenty-five thousand dollars?”

“Sorry,” Hank shrugged, tugging at his beard.

“This is just a payoff. Isn't that illegal?”

“Technically, no. You would be agreeing to pay her therapy bills.”

“For what?”

“So she won't testify against you.”

“How is she going to recant what she already told the police?”

“These things happen all of the time and nobody thinks anything of it. It will disappear as quickly as it manifested itself.”

“This is wrong, Hank,” I told him as I rested my tired head in my hands. “I didn't rape the woman! Are we even sure that they'll go through with pressing charges?”

“Her lawyer isn't in the business of bluffing. He's got the nuts against you and you need to decide if you want to go all in with him, or fold and return to play another hand another day.”

I thought about the risks in going to trial and the possibility of it winding up in the papers. It would ruin me, the business and everyone else that counted on me in that office, including the families of those in my employ.

“I’m screwed, aren’t I?”

“As your legal council you know I can’t just come right out and tell you that, but as your friend, I wouldn’t disagree with your statement.”

“Okay, but what about offering them like ten thousand to start? How did you get to twenty-five thousand?”

“Because her lawyer knows that it costs fifty thousand to seventy-five thousand to take a case like this to trial,” he informed me. “Twenty-five is half of fifty and ten is just chicken shit.”

“Fine,” I told him in defeat. “I guess just go ahead with it then. You know what you’re doing.”

I turned and stared out the window, watching life pass me by at a speed of forty miles per hour. Hank was taking me home and I thought about going to see Jennifer when I arrived, spilling the beans on everything that happened between Jill and the events that transpired following our drunken tryst. I figured honesty was the best approach, but I also knew that things would never be the same between us. I had destroyed the mutual sanctuary that we built. I had let the world inside.

Hank dropped me off in front of my house and assured me that he would make it all disappear. I pinched myself as I took the walk of shame up to my porch, but I wasn’t dreaming and I didn’t wake up. Instead, I was greeted by Louie and Mikey, both sitting amongst a pile of smoked cigarettes and eager for me to return home.

“Did she squeal like a pig?” Louie blurted out.

“Shut the fuck up, you fat fuck!” Mikey said, looking at me with inquiring eyes. “What the hell is going on, man? Rose said she saw

you at the police station and the rumor around the neighborhood is that you raped some woman!”

“It’s about money,” I told him. “Nothing more than that.”

“The broad is just trying to shake you down for dough?”

“Something like that.”

“How much is she asking for?” Louie asked.

“What the fuck is the difference?” Mikey protested. “It’s none of your fucking business. He didn’t rape the broad anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Hey, I know plenty of guys who didn’t do the deed, but ended up having to pay or do time.”

“I’m sure he’s got a good lawyer anyway. You do got a good lawyer, right?”

I nodded my head yes, trying to block out their voices.

“Is he Jewish?” Louie asked.

“Does that really matter?” Mikey shouted. “You’re out of control, Louie. I should have kicked your ass when you sold that bum dryer to Rose.”

“I’m just saying, everybody knows that Jews make the best lawyers.”

“What’s wrong with you? What were you breast fed by the cleaning lady?”

“We didn’t have no cleaning lady Pepé Le Pew.”

“I thought I told you not to call me that,” Mikey said angrily.

“Why Pepé Le Pew?” I asked.

“Because he farts more than anyone else on the planet. He’s a human skunk!”

“At least I don’t go around kissing hookers.”

According to Mikey, he saw Clea get in Louie’s wagon the other day and the evidence of a close encounter was creeping up on his lower lip in the form of a newborn cold sore.

“I mean who goes around making out with hookers in this part of town anyway?” Mikey continued. “I’d rather have oral sex with a toilet bowl than that ice cream jingling broad.”

“I told you a car door hit me in the lip,” Louie insisted.

“You might want ice that thing, Louie,” I said.

“You’re going to need the gigantic Costco package of chapstick as well,” Mikey told him. “That’s where I get my condoms. It’s the only place I know where you can get a box of condoms with a handle on it. It’s fucking great. If ever I go to Thailand, that box of rubbers is going to be my carry-on luggage.”

Getman walked by us with his usual murderous glare. He was nursing a serious black eye and a fat jaw from the beating he took from the cops. I barked at him when he passed by and he turned to all three of us, snarling at us with his swollen face and giving us the bird.

“Why don’t you shove that finger up your ass and smoke it, Getman?” Mikey yelled.

Louie and I stared and Mikey, confused by his choice of insults.

“What the hell was that supposed to mean?” I asked him.

“Who the fuck cares?” Mikey said. “It sounded tough, and that’s all that matters. Nobody cares what an insult means, just that it sounds scary when you say it.”

“I’ll take your word for it, Mikey.”

Louie pointed across my yard toward Mrs. Fazzino’s house.

“Heads up,” he said. “Mrs. Fazzino is heading this way.”

I turned and watched as Mrs. Fazzino tiptoed over to the fence that separated our yards and leaned against it. Like a hawk soaring in the sky for an afternoon snack, her eyes settled on a ketchup stain on Louie’s shirt.

“I heard them again last night,” she hooted, looking especially like a bag lady that day.

“Who, Mrs. Fazzino?” Mikey questioned.

“The birds are pulling the nails out of my house. One by one, they will be removed and it will fall to the ground on top of me!”

“They’d need steel beaks to do that,” Mikey explained, sympathetic to the craziness attacking the old woman’s brain.

“They are trying to bring down my house!” she howled. “I’ll be crushed!”

“Mrs. Fazzino, if you want, I’ll get the ladder from Rose’s garage and hammer the nails back in. Will that help?”

Without warning, Mrs. Fazzino ran into her house, slamming the screen door on her way inside. A few minutes passed as we all sat in silence, staring in the direction of her house as if waiting to see a crow or sparrow fly off with a carpenter’s nail. It never happened, but Mrs. Fazzino did eventually return, this time carrying a paper bag. She handed it to Mikey without saying a word and then disappeared back into the house. Mikey reached his hand inside the bag and pulled out a mystery item wrapped in tin foil. Louie and I looked on with great curiosity as he unwrapped the gift.

Mikey gasped for air when he caught his first glimpse and whiff of what was inside.

“It’s chicken,” he moaned. “It’s at least a month old, but it’s chicken.”

“Let me smell it,” Louie demanded as he hovered his nose over the rotten piece of meat.

Louie turned his head after a brief smell of the chicken and dry heaved as he attempted to up his breakfast.

“It’s rotten,” he announced between gags.

“No kidding,” Mikey said sarcastically. “You’re as smart as a whip, Louie!”

“What are you going to do with it?” I asked Mikey.

He made a motion to throw Mrs. Fazzino’s present into my yard and I stopped his hand before he could release the putrefied poultry.

“Whoa!” I shouted. “Not in my yard. It will kill all of the good bacteria that occupy this space. With those big arms of yours, I bet you can reach Getman’s driveway if you put a little heart and muscle into it.”

With a mischievous grin pasted to his face, Mikey lunged back, cocking his arm like a slingshot. Resembling a professional baseball pitcher, he hurled the spoiled breast in the air, throwing it down onto the blacktop of Getman’s driveway, just inches from the savage pit bull that emotionally terrorized the neighborhood.

“How’s that for a shot?” he boasted.

Driven by hunger and curiosity, the dog wandered over to the piece of chicken, sniffing it briefly before engulfing the entire package, tin foil and all.

“Look, it’s eating it!” Louie blurted out.

“The way Getman trains that thing to hate the world, it probably hasn’t been fed in a month,” I said.

We watched as the dog started to hack on its impromptu meal.

“I think it’s choking,” I told them.

“IT IS!” Louie panicked.

“Does anyone know the Heimlich maneuver?” I asked.

“I ain’t doing no Heimlich on a pit bull,” Mikey proclaimed. “Besides, the fucking beast deserves a slow, painful death.”

The dog walked in circles as it furiously tried to expel the lodged piece of Mrs. Fazzino’s killer chicken. Even though it was covered in fur, I could have sworn I saw the pit bull’s face turn blue and before we knew it, its legs gave out and he collapsed to the ground. We watched as its stomach pulsated a few times, the last signs of life before the dog went still.

“I always knew that dog was going to die young,” I said.

“How can we be sure it’s dead?” Mikey asked. “Maybe we should send Louie over to check its pulse.”

“To hell with you,” Louie barked. “I’m no animal doctor, but that thing is as dead as a dead dog can get.”

“Look,” I said, interrupting all of the dog talk. “Here comes Jimmy.”

Jimmy parked his car in front of his house and made his way over to us carrying a big bag with Colonel Sanders’ image on it. He reached in, pulled out a crispy leg and tore a piece of flesh from the bone using his choppers.

“There a party going on over here or something?” Jimmy asked. “If so, I got some KFC to contribute. They had a special on a twelve piece today. So who wants some?”

We were all silent.

“What, my chicken not good enough for you slackers?”

“I just ate,” Louie told him.

“Yeah, me too, but thanks anyway,” Mikey said.

“I’m allergic,” I announced.

Jimmy looked at the three of us suspiciously.

“Um, okay. I’ll be on my porch if anybody changes their mind then.”

Jimmy walked down the street, past Mrs. Fazzino’s house, to his porch, not noticing the dead dog sprawled out in Getman’s driveway.

“Do you think we should tell him?” Louie asked.

“Nah,” Mikey said. “Jimmy knows how to defend himself if shit goes down.”

“But Getman’s psycho.”

“So is Jimmy. The guy doesn’t have any teeth!”

We watched as Jimmy relaxed on his front steps eating his finger lickin’ good chicken. You could sense the tension in the air that afternoon and you knew there was a good chance the pot could boil over.

“This is going to get ugly,” Louie said.

“Yeah, it’s been a real pleasure, but I should get going,” Mikey announced as he stretched. “I’ve got some stuff that needs to get done.”

“Me too,” Louie chimed in. “I gotta get to my mother’s.”

Louie ran to his wagon and sped away, leaving a skid mark on the pavement in front of my house.

“By the way, I’ve got something to tell you,” Mikey said before leaving. “I heard Rose on the phone this morning talking to Jennifer’s aunt. They were talking about you and how she saw you at the police station. Jennifer knows, man.”

My shoulders slumped and I looked down at my feet. My fantasy life was over before it ever began.

“I’m sorry, man, but you’re never going to see that girl again.”

“Nope, I’m really not, but it’s my own fault. I did this to myself.”

Mikey started to walk towards Rose’s place.

“Let me know how everything works out, okay?” Mikey told me as he left me to my thoughts.

I stepped inside the house, collapsing onto the couch and sitting in complete silence. The reality that I would never be with Jennifer again hit me like a ton of bricks. The entire neighborhood, including Jennifer, knew that I had slept with Jill. She no doubt thought of me as a liar and a con man and I knew rebuilding her trust in me would be impossible. Even if she felt no anger towards me whatsoever and only sadness, I couldn’t mend what was already broken. It was officially over.

Suddenly my silence was interrupted by horrific screaming and I poked my head onto the porch to see what was going on.

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY DOG?” Getman screamed as he walked towards Jimmy. “YOU KILLED MY FUCKING DOG!”

Jimmy looked over at the expired pit bull, wiped the chicken off of his face and yelled back, "I DIDN'T KILL NO DOG, YA PRICK!"

"WHAT'S ALL OF YOUR CHICKEN DOING ALL OVER MY DRIVEWAY THEN, JIMMY BOY? ANSWER ME THAT?"

"IT AIN'T MY CHICKEN, NUMB NUTS!"

Furious, Getman stopped his march towards Jimmy and retreated back to his house, stepping into his garage and reappearing with a shovel in his hands.

"MAYBE A GOOD WHACK ON YOUR HEAD WILL REFRESH YOUR MEMORY!" Getman yelled.

"ARE YOU THREATENING ME, GETMAN?"

Jimmy put down his chicken and headed for his own garage, reappearing a few minutes later with a rumbling weed whacker. The two heated men pushed their way towards each other and a small crowd had already started to gather.

"YOU WANT A PIECE OF ME! WELL YOU'VE GOT IT!" Jimmy screamed.

I rushed down the stairs of my porch and ran into the street, getting between Jimmy and Getman. They would have killed each other had I not stepped in, and I couldn't have that on my conscience when it was my suggestion that Mikey throw the chicken into Getman's yard in the first place.

"What's going on here?" I asked loudly so that I could be heard over the purring motor of the weed whacker.

"This mother fucker says I killed his mother fucking dog."

"That's nonsense, Getman," I told him. "Your dog was dead before Jimmy even got here."

"You know who killed my dog?" he asked me with rage in his eyes.

"Actually I do. It was a drive by chicken-chucker. Some car pulled up in front of your house and the driver tossed the rest of his

dinner out of the window. Your dog sucked it down and then died. If it means anything, he went pretty quickly.”

“You fucking liar,” Getman proclaimed, foaming at the mouth and spitting in my face as he enunciated his words. “I don’t believe you.”

“So what,” I said firmly. “Believe what you want, but that’s how it happened.”

Getman pointed his shovel in my face and warned, “I’m going to get you. You won’t know when, but I’ll get you and you’ll be sorry. I can promise you that!”

Getman walked to his driveway, picked his dead dog up in his arms and headed into his garage where he closed the door and disappeared out of sight.

“How come you didn’t tell me about his dog?” Jimmy asked immediately.

“I made the story up to get you out of that jam. You didn’t need to be throwing down with Getman in the middle of the street.”

“So what the hell really happened to his dog?”

“Who knows?” I shrugged.

“This place is really starting to get to me,” Jimmy said. “Between Mrs. Fazzino and that crazy fuck Getman, I’m dealing with a bunch of nuts. You are the only sane one around here.”

“Thanks, Jimmy. That means a lot coming from you.”

We both walked back to our porches and went about our day. Jimmy continued eating his KFC as I received a call on my cell phone from my lawyer Hank. He told me that Jill bit on the monetary bait we dangled in front of her and that I was off the hook. He also informed me that my accomplice in billboard vandalism Jamal would be released from prison later that day and that he too would not be prosecuted. I told him to arrange it so that I could be there to pick him up when they let him off and he agreed to make that call.

Not long after I hung up with Hank, my cell phone rang again, only this time it was Rooster.

"I just spoke with Hank, Babes," he said without saying hello first. "I had no idea Jill was that type of girl, man. The wife just met her a month ago."

"You know how much that date cost me? Twenty-five thousand dollars and most likely someone that means something to me. That's it Rooster. I'm not coming back. I'm done."

"Babes, let's talk this out. The company will pay the attorney's fees!"

"It doesn't matter. I'm out."

Rooster was silent.

"I've got to go," I continued. "I've got stuff to do."

I hung up the phone and breathed a sigh of relief. I had done it. I had finally cut myself off from the company, and even though it felt invigorating in the moment, it was no consolation for how I was feeling over ruining things with Jennifer.

Mrs. Fazzino stepped out into her front yard for some early afternoon vacuuming. I decided to go and have a talk with her about Jimmy. He had endured enough torture at my hands and I felt as though it was my civic duty to bring peace between him and his slightly off-kilter neighbor.

I walked around the fence and stepped into Mrs. Fazzino's yard.

"I hope you don't mind me coming over like this Mrs. Fazzino, but there is something I've been meaning to speak with you about," I told her. "I've read quite a few vampire books and in all of them, they say that vampires can only come out in the dark. If he comes out in the light, his skin would burn. You see, Jimmy couldn't be a vampire because he's out all day."

Mrs. Fazzino focused her eyes on a leftover dog hair still on my shirt from my trip in the police cruiser this morning.

"Everything is upside down," she informed me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

For the first time her prying eyes managed to find their way into my pupils.

“You must find the light before it’s too late,” she told me.

I didn’t know how to respond and instead remained silent as she turned her back to me and walked up the stairs to her porch. With the current happenings in my life, Mrs. Fazzino was almost making sense. Perhaps she wasn’t crazy at all, but just needed to be interpreted. Or, perhaps she was a wise old sage pretending to be a mad hag. Maybe Jimmy really was a vampire using a strong sunscreen. I supposed anything was possible and if anything was possible, then perhaps I still had a chance to redeem myself in Jennifer’s eyes.

I went inside to shower off all of the day’s activities. I looked in the mirror to do the standard check of odd features or abnormalities and although everything seemed to be in perfect order, I was not. I felt sick to my stomach over what I had done with Jill and I slumped away from the mirror disgusted with myself. I had never felt so much hate towards one person—that person being myself.

15

I walked over to Jennifer's house even though I knew the stairs would be empty. I saw the plant I had given her. It was sitting innocently on the porch ledge. On top of a stem, I noticed a lone leaf wavering in the summer breeze. I felt nauseous and I rushed home, fearful that I was about to be sick.

On my way to pick up Jamal from the police station, I made a pit stop at Gold's Artificial Limbs. I felt compelled to talk with Mr. Gold, even though I knew it wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation. Upon entering his empty store, Mr. Gold immediately gave me a disapproving and strained look.

"I screwed up," I told him. "I'm man enough to admit that."

Mr. Gold wagged his finger at me and with an authoritative tone said, "You took caca and you threw it on something good. You've made your bed and now you have to lie in it, caca and all."

"I know what I did was wrong. I acted like an ape."

"What separates us from the apes is our ability to embrace free will and restrain ourselves when temptation calls, but you son were unable to restrain yourself. So yes, you are an ape."

"Mr. Gold, I really am crazy about Jennifer."

"If you ask me, you are not ready for love. True love means that you are willing to give up all your wants and let go of the meshuga. You don't want to change. You embrace the meshuga."

"But that's just it, Mr. Gold," I said. "I do want to change. That's why I'm here, living where I am. I've been trying to make a change in my life for some time now."

“Maybe in more time then will you achieve your goal, but you’ve got some work to do and some personal growth that must take place first. You are still an infant in many ways. You are just a boy. Now, you must go. I have much work to attend to.”

I exited the store and stood on the sidewalk, staring at the early-American burial ground across the street. Although I never directly asked Mr. Gold if there was anything I could do to salvage my one-time blossoming relationship with Jennifer, I had my answer and that was a resounding no.

I was overwhelmed with depression as I drove to pick up Jamal. Mr. Gold’s words about not being ready for love echoed in my ears and I looked up into the rearview mirror, hoping that a profound answer would present itself on my face or in my eyes. Life doesn’t work like the movies however and I was not granted a Get Out Of Jail Free card that I could use to climb out of the hole I had dug for myself.

I arrived at the same police station Hank had picked me up at a few hours before and headed inside. I stopped at the front desk and informed the police officer that I was there to pick up Jamal Wilson. He made a call and then asked me to wait in one of a half-dozen steel chairs positioned against a white wall.

“You don’t by any chance have any magazines to read, do you?” I asked the officer.

He lifted his glasses and gave me a long look. “No, but if you wait another thirty minutes, the dancing girls will be here.”

I chuckled to myself and sat down. No more than thirty seconds passed before the same detective who interrogated me about Jill appeared, spinning his large set of janitor-style keys around his finger.

“You know a lot of lawyers, don’t you?” he asked me, catching me off guard.

“They are good people to know when you’re charged with a crime that you didn’t commit.”

The detective bent down in my face, positioning himself within licking distance. He breathed heavily and I could tell what he had for lunch.

“I’ve seen plenty of characters like you in my time as a cop and do you know where they all are now?” he asked me.

“Let me guess. In jail?”

“Better yet... dead!”

“I think you have the wrong impression of me, Detective. I’m not who you think I am.”

“Yeah, and I hate to break it to you buddy, but you’re not who you think you are either,” he told me as he walked away.

Those words struck a nerve inside me. Had I been fooling myself all along by moving to the ‘hood? What did I hope to accomplish in starting my own personal revolution?

A pair of officers brought Jamal into the waiting area where he was shocked to see my smiling face.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked me.

“Bribing your ass out of jail and giving you a ride home. Now let’s get out of here.”

We exited the station and slid into my car. Jamal was visibly confused, but grateful for the assist I had given him.

“I owe you,” Jamal told me in his usual deep and serious voice. “I’ll square up with you on the money you spent as soon as I get it.”

“And how you going to get the money?” I asked him, mimicking his own tone and mannerisms.

“When I get back in the game, you’ll get it. I’m a man of my word.”

“Are you fucking stupid or just a stubborn prick?” I asked.

I knew I was taking a chance talking to Jamal that way, but he was the kind of guy that respected testosterone-fueled behavior.

Violence and rage were all he knew in life, so if verbally berating him was the only way I could get through to him, then I was willing to give it a try, even if it meant him retaliating with his fists. After all, I was still angry with myself over what I had done to Jennifer and I didn't really care about the consequences. I deserved a beating and maybe I was even looking for one.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" Jamal said with a threatening look.

"You just dodged a mandatory ten years in prison. You could be on a bus right now with silver shackles locked to your legs headed to a maximum security nightmare."

"So, I've done time before."

"Not ten years you haven't. Do you really want to spend ten fucking years in jail?"

"I gotta eat and hustling is all I know."

"There are other ways to eat, Jamal," I told him, hoping that I'd say something that would make sense to him. "These detectives are going to be watching you like a hawk. You so much as sell Viagra or an over-the-counter aspirin and they're going to lock your ass up."

Jamal pulled down the visor and checked his teeth in the tiny mirror attached to it.

"I made a mistake last time they pinched me. That shit won't happen again 'cause I plan on being more careful next time."

"Jesus, Jamal, how can you be that fucking narrow-minded when it comes to your future?"

"'Cause it's my fucking life and you ain't living it for me!" he screamed. "Now I know you got me out of there and for that I'm grateful, but you best stop fucking disrespecting me the way you're doing right now or you're going to set me the fuck off!"

That's when I decided to take a different approach with Jamal, both for strategy and self-preservation's sake.

"Jamal, I'm sorry, but I don't want to see you end up in prison."

“What the fuck do you care for?”

“I don’t know,” I told him. “I just do. And to prove it, I can set you up with a job. Even help you start your own business. You could do real estate here. Fix up run-down houses and then rent them out or turn them over. It’s the wave of the future in this part of the country and there’s a lot of money to be had.”

“And who’s got the money to move into renovated crack houses in the ‘hood?”

“It doesn’t have to be in the heart of the ‘hood. We’ll snag places closer to the city. It’s a gold mine waiting to be tapped, Jamal. I’m telling you, it’s a better way to live than fighting for your next dollar from some junkie piece of shit looking to get high. I’ll front the money and let you take the helm.”

Jamal was silent.

“At least tell me you’ll think about it,” I pleaded.

“I don’t know nothing about real estate.”

“You can learn. You didn’t know shit about the drug business until you jumped right in, right?”

“It’s different.”

“No it isn’t. It’s a game just like the one you’re playing and believe me, you’ll figure it out fast. The majority of the wealthy people that inhabit this world of ours did it in real estate. You think they’re any smarter than you? Hell, some of them saw an ad on T.V., took a course and now they’re millionaires.”

“And what about my boys? I can’t just abandon them.”

I admired Jamal’s loyalty to his friends because it was the same loyalty I felt towards the employees at the newspaper. While we both came from different worlds, Jamal and I weren’t that different. We believed in the same principles and shared similar beliefs, but it was how we acted on them that made us opposites.

“They’ll work for you,” I assured him. “You are going to need people to help in every aspect of the rebuilding process, so you’ll pay

them as your employees and they'll benefit from a regular paycheck every week."

Jamal was flustered and he shifted in his seat, uncomfortable at the thought of taking a handout.

"Man, I don't want to hear anymore of this shit," he said. "Just get me back to my corner."

"Jamal, I want to help you."

"I told you. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Fine. Have it your way."

We drove a few miles without either of us saying a word. I purposely left the radio off, hoping the silence would break Jamal, but he was a stubborn bull, refusing to give or take.

"Do you ever laugh, Jamal?" I asked him. "I mean seriously, I've never seen you even smile. How can someone go their entire life without laughing or smiling?"

Jamal continued playing the silent game.

"Well, I'm going to make you fucking laugh today if I have to die trying."

The sidewalks were filled with all types of pedestrians walking to and from places of no interest to me or Jamal. I swerved the car towards the side of curb and the fearless thug clutched at the dash.

"What the fuck are you doing? You're going to kill someone."

"Nope, just get them a little wet."

My tires hit a monster-sized puddle created by a broken fire hydrant and the murky water exploded from underneath my car, drenching at least a dozen unsuspecting victims. Sandy, brown fluid dripped from their clothing and hair as Jamal and I looked back at the now-wet day walkers as they yelled profanities in our fleeing direction. And then it happened. Jamal let out a roaring cackle that the U.S. government could have bottled and sold to the highest bidder as a weapon of mass destruction. Having repressed the energy for so long, the laugh continued and I had to block my ears.

I stopped the car a block away so we could watch the chaotic sidewalk try to make sense of what had happened. We were spotted almost instantly by a soggy butch dike with a decayed leaf stuck to her face. She ran towards us, waving a heavy chain in her hand, her circular nose ring flopping up and down with each Tyrannosaurus Rex-like stomp and I couldn't help but notice her forearms, which bulged like a juiced-up Popeye after pleasuring himself in the shower.

"Look at that crazy bitch coming at us!" Jamal said with concern in his voice. "We best blow this popsicle stand before she gets any closer. She looks like she's ready to kill someone."

I shifted the car into reverse and started to back up in the direction of the charging dick-hating, ball-breaking bull dike.

"Are you going to consider my offer?" I asked Jamal.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Jamal asked me with a confused look on his face.

We were getting close to within striking distance of the beefy clam digger, who upon closer inspection looked a lot like Hulk Hogan minus the mustache.

"I'm waiting for an answer."

"You crazy-ass white boy!"

"Yes or no?"

"I'LL THINK ABOUT IT!" Jamal blurted out, just in the nick of time.

I shifted the car into first gear and sped off, just as the behemoth swung at us with her chain. The metal links, unable to connect with anything, spun around and hit their owner in the back of the head. We watched as she dropped to the ground, grabbing nothing but a face full of asphalt.

"Man, I've been in knife fights and gun battles, but this is the first time I've ever known fear," Jamal said with a reflective look. "That dike bitch was huge!"

“She would have chained your balls off.”

“Man, you are one crazy-ass white boy.”

After deciding that we wanted a bite to eat, I pulled into a Denny’s parking lot and we headed inside. We were seated immediately and both opted to order our food without even looking at the menu. Jamal sipped from a glass of water as I excused myself to go to the bathroom, my bladder still bursting from the hilarity of a man-like woman sprinting towards my car in anger. I chose a urinal because the toilets were all filled with leftover logs from the person before me. As I was washing my hands, my cell phone rang. It was Rooster.

“What’s up, Rooster?” I said. “I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“Babes, it’s an emergency,” he said in a panic. “I’m at the office on a Saturday trying to make a dent in some paperwork I need to file away and Harry just came in and quit.”

“Is he still in the building?”

“He’s packing up his belongings as we speak.”

“Rooster, I want you to listen to me very carefully.”

A guy walked into the bathroom as I was talking on the phone, entered a nearby stall and began grunting up a storm as if he was giving birth to the largest turd to ever hit a toilet bowl.

“Babes, what’s that noise?” Rooster asked me.

“I’m in the bathroom. Some asshole is literally shitting his brains out. Now listen to me, Rooster. Tell Harry you spoke to me and that we have an offer for him. Tell him that if he stays, he can have my equity in the company. It will start making him think like a businessman instead of a hired-on editor. Make it vest over a four-year period.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, Babes?”

“It’s the right decision and it’s the only thing that’s going to keep him onboard.”

After a flush, the guy taking the elephant-sized crap sprang out of the stall with an open switchblade in his hand. He was Hispanic and he had daggers in his eyes that matched the one he grasped.

“Rooster, I gotta go. Just do what I said, okay?”

“Okay. I’m on it.”

I hung up the phone and ran for the bathroom door, high-stepping it all the way to my table where Jamal was already eating his grilled cheese and french fries. I sat down, my nerves obviously rattled, and looked back over my shoulder at the knife-wielding Hispanic madman who was now headed towards me. Jamal’s eyes locked onto him like an F16 on a Mig and he stood out of his chair, slapping his chest like a gorilla protecting his jungle territory.

“You got a problem, CHUMP?”

Upon seeing that Jamal was with me, the massive pooper pooped himself once again and slowly backed his way out of the restaurant. Jamal returned to his seat and popped a pickle in his mouth.

“I need your advice on something,” I told him, smearing ketchup on my burger.

“Stop fucking with gang bangers in public bathrooms. That’s the advice you’re getting from me.”

“No,” I said. “That’s not it. I fucked up recently. I really like this girl in my life and she found out I was with another woman. I blew it.”

“What happened to your revolution, white boy?”

“It’s a bullshit theory.”

“You can say that again.”

Jamal polished off his grilled cheese and poured a mound of ketchup in its place so he could freely dip his fries into it.

“So is your bitch from around here?” he asked me.

“Yeah, right down the street from me, and if I’m being honest, she’s the best woman I ever met.”

“You sure your mind’s not playing tricks on you?”

“No, she’s the real deal.”

“Man, you got more dreams than a junkie.”

“I don’t know what to do to make it right.”

“Why did you mess with the other bitch in the first place if you like this other one so much?”

“It was there and she was offering, so I took it.”

“We’ve all been there before. A guy’s not expected to keep his dick in his pants. We’re all animals when you take away the clothing and the goods, homey.”

Jamal finished his fries and slid his empty plate to the end of the table where a busboy quickly scooped it up. He sipped on his water.

“You talk to her?” he asked me.

“She won’t talk to me. She doesn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“I should introduce you to my cousin Julia. She’ll straighten your white ass right out.”

“She as big as you?” I asked, unable to eat because the continuous thought of breaking Jennifer’s trust in me cost me my appetite.

“Bigger.”

I pushed my full plate to the end of the table and before the busboy could scoop it up, Jamal pulled it over in front of him and started to finish my burger.

“The whole mess is my fault. I guess I don’t deserve her.”

Jamal was quiet. I could tell he was thinking something. He probably knew that my cause with Jennifer was lost but he didn’t want to tell me.

The waitress slapped our bill down on the table and I threw enough on the table to cover it. I reached into my opposite pocket and pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills and handed it to Jamal.

“This is for living expenses,” I told him. “Consider it a down payment on our deal.”

Jamal stared down at the money wide-eyed. He sighed and shook his head.

“I told you I’d think about,” he said in a soft, un-Jamal like voice.

“It’s okay, take your time. I’ll wait.”

We left the restaurant and I dropped Jamal off at the corner he was famous for occupying. Somehow I reached through to him though because he walked past the pole he so often leaned against and headed to wherever it was he called home.

16

Instead of going home, I turned my car around and drove directly into the city, parking my car by the Charles River and stepping out in the unusually quiet day. I was desperately in need of some soul-searching because the anger I was feeling towards myself was choking the will to live right out of me. Part of me considered jumping into the river for what I did to Jennifer, and ultimately, for what I did to my own happiness, but instead I turned away from the bridge and walked into the heart of the city, wondering what Jennifer was doing and thinking at that moment. I convinced myself she was dug deep within a solitary bunker, her poetry and thoughts keeping her company while I wandered the landscape alone.

I glanced up at the summer sun and let its warmth settle on my undeserving eyes. I had come so close to what I had been searching for my entire life for and here I was wallowing in the realization that I had thrown it all away. My old ways were determined to leave with a fight and I took that last sip from the bottle only to discover it to be a deadly and poisonous concoction. I may have been freed from the rape charges that were wrongly brought against me, but I was still in prison. Having to live without Jennifer was my sentence.

I continued walking as conversations I had once held with Jennifer replayed in my mind. I remembered how she explained her poetry to me and more specifically, the part about watching the details of nature. That afternoon Mother Nature's cup overflowed and my eyes didn't have to be specifically tuned to its frequency to see her presence. Due to a rainy spring a few months before, the vegetation was a lush green. The grass, the plants and the trees that

grew tall above me all gave off a collective aura and it seemed plausible that one could pass through this life giving off green electricity and travel into another time and space. Sadly, I knew that if Jennifer was with me in the moment she would feel the same thing. After all it was the same dreamer of a woman that first introduced me to this hidden world below the surface.

She gave me so much in such a short period of time and opened my eyes to places I had visited, but never truly seen, but what did I do for her? Did I enlighten Jennifer to anything? Maybe my encounter with Jill was a saving grace for Jennifer. Could it have been her protective angel that intervened and stopped everything from progressing so that she wouldn't end up another casualty of my mad world?

It was at that moment that I decided I was going to leave the 'hood. I didn't want to make Jennifer uncomfortable having to live beside me day in and day out and I didn't need to reside on Oak Street in order to make sure Jamal stayed on track. In fact, once I was sure he'd be headed in the right direction, I'd relocate to my log home and miniature mountain in Pennsylvania where I'd try to find peace in the woods and in the silence of my mind. I'd choose never again to return to the world stage and decided I was better fit to play the role of the hermit, locked away from the rest of society.

I continued across Storrow Drive and along the Charles where I watched ducks glide with the water's current. A large black bird with a long crowbar-shaped neck dove continuously, breaking and entering into fish flesh. At the river's edge, a robin repeatedly stabbed a worm in broad daylight, and the wind, using tall blades of grass, scribbled its bent signature in the air.

The river led me to the heart of Boston. I passed by Faneuil Hall Marketplace, which was a melting pot of designer labels, including the safari stock, the classic khaki persuasion and the Brooks Brothers and Sisters who strolled along with their hands in their pockets anx-

ious to liberate funds. And of course there were the next generation of Nikes and Pumas in their basketball blazers, the young cattle already name-branded and milked by parent companies.

I passed by a homeless man on the sidewalk with a sign next to him that read, "Why lie? I need a drink." I handed him a five dollar bill and he said with a penetrating stare, "God bless you."

I headed away from the crowd and reached the edge of Market Street. Above me there was a row of birds standing on a live wire whose high voltage could not affect them. The tiny birds were pre-occupied, indifferent to human sounds, solitary but connected. Their music seemed so out of place amidst the concrete plains. I closed my eyes and consumed a substantial portion of their symphony, each note coming off as perfection. It was like drinking from a watering hole of beauty. The sounds of horns and sirens faded into a living silence, the same silence emanating from a desert dune or a majestic mountain. It was here, all around, in the seemingly dead space of the city.

I opened my eyes. All of the birds had disappeared. Several people were looking at me with curious expressions, and I told myself that they're in between places, but it was me who was between worlds.

I walked over to an empty bench and sat down. At my feet, a small blade of grass had found its way through the cobblestone. It wavered back and forth in the summer breeze. Nature was flying at half mast.

17

When I got home I witnessed the first miracle of my life. Jennifer, stripped of any surface anger, was sitting on my porch steps with her legs crossed. I sat down next to her and tried to say the first word, but she beat me to the punch.

“Jamal told me what you did for him and how you gave him a second chance,” she told me, unable to yet look me in the eye. “He also told me that I should give you a second chance because you are the most messed-up person he’s ever met.”

“What did you say?” I quietly asked.

“I told him how my father was a drug dealer and that when I was five both of my parents were murdered when one of his deals went bad. I told him that I could tell he was a good man and to stop pretending to be somebody he wasn’t.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I had no idea about your parents.”

A single tear rolled down Jennifer’s cherubic cheek and I embraced her, holding her tight. This was her dark secret and as much as I felt terrible for her loss and apparent lifelong pain, I couldn’t help but feel an incredible sense of relief and joy that she was back in my life. The tender flame I was trying to forget only a short time ago now burned like a fiery furnace. She placed her soft hands on each of my shoulders and looked deep into my eyes, penetrating my soul with her gentle gaze. I met them with a look of love, which beamed from my core like a homing beacon. I was so happy and so in the moment that I couldn’t stop a tear of my own from escaping.

“I’m sorry for what I did. It will never...”

Jennifer put her hand over my mouth before I could finish and said, "Jamal told me what you said to him and I'm choosing to believe in you. And now I would like to take that ride that you promised me."

I pulled the magical key to the Ferrari out of my pocket and we waltzed over to the car and took the top down. It was a bright and warm day, the perfect weather for a sun-soaked drive to the ocean.

"I feel kind of embarrassed about crying earlier," I told her, already on the road. "I haven't shed a single tear since I was ten."

"What happened when you were ten?" she asked me.

"My father beat the crap out of me for throwing a kid's tricycle in the pond behind our house. Man, did I take a beating that day."

Jennifer laughed out loud and I joined in. I drove slowly through the crowded streets of the city's suburbs. Jennifer observed how everybody was staring at the car as it drove by them and I told her that she was mistaken and that the many envious eyes were looking at her. She smiled and in that smile I learned what Mr. Gold meant by giving up all of your wants in the face of love. The only want I had was to see Jennifer happy and to be witness to that mesmerizing smile for the rest of my life.

Soon we were on the highway and Jennifer could tell I was holding back from driving the car fast.

"C'mon, c'mon. You promised."

I pressed the pedal to the floor and the white lines on the road now burned like a fuse, blaring by in a hypnotic state. I shifted the car into its highest gear, sending all the needles to the far right of the dials. The Ferrari cut through the lower atmosphere like a black meteor launched from the bowels of the city.

Jennifer was exhilarated and she kept looking over at me intermittently and smiling and laughing. The smashing wind was blowing her hair wildly about, snapping in her face like miniature bullwhips. Jennifer would often stick her arm outside of the car and

enjoy the effect of it being hurled backwards as we raced forward. Everything I was experiencing was now through Jennifer's eyes. Everything she was seeing for the first time I, too, was seeing for the first time.

Our journey seemed to fly by as we swam in each other's excitement and before I knew it we were in Maine, spotting signs for the various beaches that stretched along the coastline. We took an early exit from the highway, eager to see the water. Upon leaving the high speed world of the interstate, we reached a quiet interlude and enjoyed a rush of silence, idling in the ripe country air that nipped at our noses like a hyperactive puppy. I leaned over to Jennifer and lightly kissed her lips and she returned a warm smile.

Within minutes we were slowly passing through green space, surrounded on all sides by fields and pastures. We breezed by boys who peered at the car and cows who were immune. By mothers who took clothes off of the line and fathers who lowered the stars and stripes. By an old man on a rocking chair, unmoved and by an old refrigerator in the yard, nobly rusting away. I drove for several long stretches and pulled to the side of the road when the camel-colored sands of the beaches appeared. It was dusk and all of the freckled sunbathers had left and moved on to their evening activities. We stepped out of the car and stumbled across the sand. Jennifer was staring at the ocean with large eyes and anticipation. I took her hand and we walked to the edge of the water. There we both immediately fell into the undertow of an amiable breeze. The ocean air filled our nostrils as the endless waves were lapping the shore. Jennifer's eyes sizzled with a sparkling green light.

"Close your eyes," she said.

I shut my eyes with my thoughts still on the green electricity I saw radiating from Jennifer's eyes. On the backside of my eyelids the darkness became celestial space and the white sparkles became glistening stars. I looked on with amazement at the heavenly lights

and felt a cosmic presence all around me. I found myself amongst an invisible orchestra and the song playing was the music of the spheres. Jennifer's poem became a reality for me and for the first time I understood everything about her hidden world that she couldn't describe to me. Jennifer was right. The universe was bare and bountiful.

We opened our eyes at the very same time. Jennifer's face was wet from the ocean mist and I kissed her and she kissed me back, sending my heart into love-fueled palpitations. The woman of my dreams, soft and sensitive, circled the top of my tongue with hers and instantly ignited the pilot light to my sexual soul. Our mouths erupted into each other's and the voltage we released made my spirit soar. We continued to explore with our tongues, penetrating deeper and deeper. Drawn closer together, Jennifer and I see-sawed back and forth between her life force and mine, and I felt an incredible discharge of energy explode from the inner-most portion of my being. I lost track of everything—time, space and myself. I embraced all the beauty that swirled around me and I couldn't resist telling her how I felt.

"I love you," I said, whispering softly so not to disturb the moment.

Jennifer stood on her tiptoes and moved her lips up to my ear.

"I love you too," she whispered back.

Life finally had meaning for me.

We moved to a stone wall built to stop beach erosion and sat in silence. We looked out into the vastness of the ocean and felt small in its presence. It seemed like time had stopped. I felt a return to a long-forgotten world, an awakened dream state and best of all, Jennifer was there beside me experiencing the same. She was my bridge to this wonderful state of being. Jennifer was my safe-cracker and combination provider, whether it was her angelic body giving me

warmth beneath a disappearing sun or the enchanting smell of her long brown hair and the salty ocean mixing together.

I watched in slow motion as Jennifer's starry eyes peered out into the never-ending rolling of the sea. I kissed her gently on the lips and inhaled the life-giving breath from her mouth. She looked at me with a soft, heart-melting warmth and it was at that moment I realized how deeply in love with each other we were and how we had become something beyond ourselves.

"Will you go away with me and start fresh?" I asked her. "We can make our home at my cabin in Pennsylvania and travel to beautiful places."

"I will go," she softly spoke, and we embraced and locked together in a kiss.

The drive home was slow and quiet, a peaceful exchange between two people caught up in romantic thoughts. Every so often she would hold my hand or I would reach for hers. Periodically I opened my window halfway and took in the fresh night air. On one quick turn of my head, I managed to get a glimpse of the summer-time canopy of stars and I thanked the Heavens for Jennifer and life itself.

I dropped her off in front of her aunt's house and walked her to the door. We kissed some more and decided that we would leave tomorrow for Pennsylvania instead of waiting. We had both done enough waiting in our lives.

"I should get going," she said. "I have a lot of packing to do before tomorrow."

"Me too," I told her.

We kissed one last time and I had to force myself to walk away or we'd have stood on that porch until the sun came up. I waved good-bye as she entered her house and I headed to my apartment, parking the car in the driveway and running up the stairs eager to get my things thrown into a suitcase for my morning evacuation.

As I entered the front door I quickly found myself thrown down from the clouds and onto the hard wood floor, where frightened cockroaches scurried. Getman and three of his Nazi friends were waiting for me. I tried to defend myself at the start of their initial blows, but my roundhouses were no match for their stomping boots and lead pipes. They were hitting me everywhere at once and I genuinely feared for my life.

Sensing my anguish, Getman bent down to me and said, "Look at the last face you are going to see on this earth, you piece of shit nigger-lover. That's right, I saw you hanging out with that black gang banger and now I'm going to send you to the same hell that he belongs in."

I closed my eyes as the strikes continued against my body. If I was going to die, I wanted to picture Jennifer's face instead of staring into Getman's ugly mug. I was preparing for the worst when the pounding suddenly stopped. I heard the thunder of footsteps and guns being cocked. I opened my eyes and saw Jamal and three of his cohorts standing in the room like a firing squad, their weapons pointed at Getman and his baldheaded, racist friends. My four attackers were frozen in fear as the tables turned on them and they were now begging for their own lives.

"DON'T KILL THEM!" I shouted.

The Getman gang sighed in relief.

"That doesn't mean I'm not going to have them crack your heads open, you dumb fuck," I told Getman.

Jamal nodded to his friends, each bigger and meaner looking than the next and they wasted no time laying into Getman and his friends. Teeth, blood and tears were spilled all over my living room that night as four angry black men beat the snot out of four narrow-minded white guys. For the most part it went down like any other bar room brawl, but there were a few times that I had to look away because the tenderized flesh of Getman made my stomach turn.

Jamal dragged a near-unconscious Getman over to where Charlie was curled up beneath the couch, pulled the snake out and squeezed its jaws so that its mouth opened wide. Jamal placed the snake's fangs up against Getman's neck and slapped Getman awake so that he knew what was happening. Getman pleaded for his life, but lucky for him, Charlie had no appetite for the Nazi and he returned to his spot underneath the couch after Jamal released him.

Jamal threw Getman towards the door as his three racist friends crawled out on their bellies, bloodied and beaten.

"Next time we'll kill ya, ya Nazi fucks," I heard one of Jamal's friends say as they left my house.

Jamal came over and lifted me off of the ground.

"Been keeping an eye on you."

"Well what took so long?" I said as I realized every part of my body was either aching or bleeding.

"I was thinking up my plan of attack," he said, laughing at my weary state.

"I guess you do laugh more than I gave you credit for, huh?"

"I laugh at what's funny, and you like this, it's pretty damn funny, white boy."

Jamal went into the bathroom and grabbed a towel, handing it to me so I could wipe the blood off of my face.

"Thanks," I said. "And thanks for talking to Jennifer. You saved my life twice."

"Crazy-ass white boy," Jamal muttered.

Things were spinning out of control in the neighborhood and Getman's gang was sure to retaliate eventually. I asked Jamal if he wanted to come to Pennsylvania with Jennifer and me, but he declined, saying he'd rather stay in Boston.

"How the hell are we going to do real estate if your ass isn't around?" he asked me.

I smiled knowing that Jamal had taken me up on my offer.

“I’m going to set up an account for you at my bank,” I told him. We’ll start with one hundred-thousand. That should be enough for you to live on and to establish a line of credit in order to purchase your first property.”

“Damn!” he said, floored by my accounting. “That’s a lot of money!”

“It’s what you need to get this operation running, but don’t worry, I’ll be there every step of the way as your partner. In this day an age, with cell phones and what not, doing business with miles in between isn’t a hard thing to do.”

Jamal and I programmed each of our cell numbers into our phones and I informed him that I would set a meeting between him and my banker for that Monday afternoon. I knew I was taking a risk with Jamal, but it would hopefully keep him off of the street and out of trouble, while also giving him a foundation to build on. It was a hefty goal to achieve, but using my credit line to buy a starter property that he could refurbish in hopes of flipping for a pretty profit was one that I felt he could deliver on.

Jamal insisted on stationing two of his boys on the porch for the night in case Getman returned even though I felt it wasn’t necessary. We shook hands and he smiled at me for the first time.

“You be careful, you crazy-ass white boy. And take care of that beautiful lady.”

“I will. And you come to Pennsylvania and visit us soon.”

“I will.” Jamal nodded affirmatively.

After Jamal left, Mikey came running over with a hammer in his hand.

“What’s going on?”

“Getman and his friends had a pipe fest on my body, but it’s all copasetic now, Mikey. You can put the hammer down.”

Mikey offered to take me to the hospital, but I was feeling as fit as a fiddle knowing that I was leaving with Jennifer in the morning.

I did secretly hope that they didn't cause any permanent damage to any of my bones or organs, and decided to just heat those parts that hurt the most. Hopefully I wouldn't look too mangled the next day and Jennifer would still want to run away with me.

I told Mikey I was leaving and that I'd be a phone call away if needed me. He complained about having to hit the clubs solo and I offered him one last piece of advice before we parted.

"Wear some longer shorts next time you go to the gym," I said with a laugh. "The world has seen enough of your balls."

We hugged and Mikey left, not even realizing that he just did me a solid by proving that friendship is more than just what you can do for me.

I woke in the morning with butterflies in my stomach and ran to the bathroom. I looked in the mirror and was surprised to find only a few small bruises on my face and a single black eye that was far worse in my mind. None of my bones appeared to be broken, a small victory in my opinion after the beating I took the night before. After I finished packing, I opened the back door and set Charlie free; lecturing him on those things he could and could not eat in the wild, namely Rocky. With my suitcases in hand, I grabbed a few peanuts from the mantle and stepped outside, leaving them by the squirrel's water bowl. As I made my way down the stairs of my porch, I noticed Jennifer already standing by my car, suitcase in hand.

"Oh my God!" she said after noticing my face. "What happened to you?"

"It's a long story," I told her as I loaded our things into the car. "Let's just say that Getman said goodbye to my face. But, we have a long drive ahead of us, so let's save it for the road."

After everything was packed into the car, including Jennifer, I looked at the house one last time.

"Good-bye, old friend," I said to the house.

I smiled and jumped into the driver's seat, leaning over to Jennifer and kissing her on the lips. I started the car and let the engine rumble, only to pull out of the driveway and then out of the city en route to our new home.

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