

Work

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Work

It is not real work unless you would rather be doing something else.

- Sir James Barrie

Work is a collection of short stories linked by themes of career, job, and the all-consuming practice of “work”. “The Shift”, “Your Boy Friday”, “Lady Fortuna” and “23 Ways to Creep Into My Sub Consciousness” are first person accounts that move fast in fine focus. Fun and sometimes bawdy, they are the written equivalent of a four-martini business lunch (expensed to the company, of course.)

Taking a far less frenetic approach, the piece entitled “Clean” uses limited third person narration to, among other things, gain a sliver of space between navel and gaze. It is the somberest story of the bunch, dealing with life, death and the impossible, sometimes irrational lengths we go to in order to find acceptance. “Little Girl Games” employs first person, but achieves distance through nostalgia and reflection, putting years between the narrator and the subject of the story.

Whether dealing with travails at the office, janitorial duties, wedding planning or fortune telling, *Work* attempts to wring a spirited energy out of what can often feel like banal drudgery.

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Table of Contents

The Shift	1
Lady Fortuna.....	12
23 Ways To Creep Into My Consciousness.....	27
Clean.....	35
Little Girl Games.....	51
Your Boy Friday	60

The Shift

The Chinese children take to the fire escape and find more joy out there with the old office chair and a coffee can of cigarette butts than I ever could given my youth back and a pocket full of candy. But these kids, their parents upstairs discussing mysterious things—perhaps evangelical quotes, the state of the New Economy, Confucius in the weave of chrysanthemum prints or the technological malaise of their chosen country—laugh and wheeze and push each other to go and stare at the strange lady sitting behind the desk, bobbing her head to unintelligible sounds squeaking out from the doll-coffin Sony. I am a shooting duck amusement to them, a vaguely interesting curio wonder, and they point their gun fingers at me and widen their eyes to show the white—I see you, little Lily, I see. The youngest child’s mother comes down to check on her precious marvel, and to yell at the rest for going out on the escape—or perhaps she’s not yelling, see, Cantonese is a harsh language, and maybe, really, Mom’s just telling the tots to wind up play time, the meeting’s almost over. Little Lily giggles, puts one tiny hand over her mouth, the other on mother’s hip. Mom has the worst case of Rosaceae/Psoriasis I have ever seen, a sore bloom mapping her forehead, her nose, tapering to leave the cheeks colourless, the chin a thin trail of weeping red. Under my left nostril, a hive is forming, I can feel it, a rash by-proxy, boiling up out of the suggestion of another person’s hot misery.

Grelios comes up to the door, asks for a pen, he always asks for a pen, but not before finding a way to ride my ass. “You no work—man like me, *I work...*” So why are you always here, Grelios? Does your boss send you out to suck the city dry of ink? “You hear me? Pen, pen! Need pen!” No Grelios, today you no get pen. No pen! So he brings out the big guns, a grin that would turn Satan’s stomach, each graying snaggle tooth just begging to be freed from that stink-hole prison caught behind curtain of desiccated lips. I don’t flinch, but there are children to consider. Perhaps he feels this is a form of banter, of flirtation, that *pen-pen* means foreplay, because he makes for the knob on my double-dutch

door. I toss out a Bic, a sardine to a seal, pray that that will appease him, for now, for today. Chasing it down the hallway, he plows through the children, flattening them to the walls. Lily looks at me with child-like dismay and adult disgust: “That is no way to handle a man.”

But Little Lily, I am simply here to keep order of the order established. I am a place holder, a seat warmer, a limp-limbed puppet of the prevailing regime. I am certainly no Admin Lady Supreme—no, she is the one who created this world. I once tried to figure out her system, just for kicks, just for the office goods, but by-colour seemed too simple and by-use, too involved. I stay away from the Mac; I’ve no desire to play God. There is a reverence, a deep respect for Admin Lady, continually faced with a constituent of idiots who need help zipping up their own flys. She’s feared universally, for her omnipotent control, for her gatekeeper indifference, for the finger that keeps the dyke from cracking apart. I know when to bow and I know when to stand, which is probably why I got the job in the first place. A lackey-like enthusiasm combined with a willingness to listen to personal problems just cemented the deal. The Powers That Be have tried their damndest to dom her, but after a few stalemates they’re always begging to be mounted once more. You can’t mess with the bureaucracy. You don’t fuck with the core.

A.L.S. keeps a stash of diet cola and barely legal ciggies in the office mini-fridge. I’m jonesing for a bit of a perk-up, but the road tar taste on offer won’t do. Coffee seems like the healthier option, so I stick a “I’LL BE BACK WHEN I’M GODDAMN READY” note on the door. The downstairs kitchenette doesn’t provide much: dripping faucet sink, frayed-cord kettle, a microwave that’s been on the mend since ‘89. Every cupboard is double locked, except for the one on the end. No discernable security there, because as the claw marks will attest, it’s perpetually jammed. To the uninitiated. Knocked with a loose fist in the right spots and “pWop-tCH!” it opens like Ali Baba’s tomb. Here’s where I keep my chipped alumni mug, my duct-taped filtration system, my cache of jet-fuel dark roast in a Vac-o-Bag of Chicory Decaf Coffee Substitute.

Nobody trusts anybody here.

Lower your head, Lord, lower your head when plodding up the stairs. Eye contact means someone will ask for assistance, and there isn't enough juice in these batteries for even a grunted reply. Two minutes and I will be back to my insolent stare—I just need two minutes. But off my perch and outta my cage, I am ripe for the prodding, a ring-rung target. And look; here comes Dr. Utzbechah, a once prominent surgeon, renowned for some sort of technique in whatever part of the world he came from. But sadly, he can't practice here, not without the qualifying exams and courses he cannot afford, not with only the odd three hour shift at the corner hookah joint, not with only a rudimentary grasp of the finer points of English. And yes, here's the pitch: he asks me to translate text on a simulation multiple choice test. But with my head down, I wave him away—not now, not yet—and proceed to unlock the office door, feet getting caught up at the threshold in the children's paper chain offering. “Veh-ry sexy, litshick on cup,” says Dr. U, but he's only saying that to get my attention, and once more I wave him away. I find myself zoning out for a few seconds, until I see the fine doctor bending down to ask two of the kids what “blocked” means in the context of arterial calcification. He is getting too close for everyone's comfort, and though I am sure he means nothing by it, Lily is obviously too scared to move.

Let's see you work your magic now, Little Lily. You think you know better than me?

A.L.S. would've remained in the office, waiting to see how it all panned out. She's not cruel, but has had enough of making things better and feels entitled to a bit of drama now and then. I am not so ready to live and let be, but the caffeine is refusing to do its duty. I fail to stir two seconds before lil' Miss Sally Saccharine bounds out of her swivel chair, almost knocking over her cubicle divider, poncho tassels a blur of fuchsia spangled motion. Stretching spread eagled between the children and Dr. U, she yells “IT MEANS YOU CAN'T GET PAST IT,” perhaps trying to help translate in the say-it-louder-and-they'll-

understand school of language learning, perhaps trying to scare Dr. U away. Whatever the case, Dr. U backs off, bowing slightly, repeatedly in S.S.'s direction. Encircling the two children in fibrous pink wings, S.S. turns a malevolent grin my way, indicating displeasure with my effort at this juncture.

Kick. The coffee jolts me to. The stare of death is back. S.S. is its first recipient at full strength, her grin crumbles to a mannequin mask of concern for the now suffocating Lily. I want to yank that lambswool monstrosity over the two of them, net them both in the tacky cross-stitching. I'd throw the whole lot over the third floor landing, a treat for the parking lot gulls below. Perhaps on the way down, they could deliberate on my tossing technique, criticize the "drag and hoist", screeching in favour of the fireman's "lift and swing." I'd peek over the railing, nibbling on one of S.S.'s "these-are-for-everyone!-enjoy-and-by-the-way-would-you-contribute-to-Connie's-baby-shower-gift-fund?-I'm-knitting-a-mommy-n'-me-snuggly-for-all-of-us-to-give-her!!!" vanilla cupcakes, and think to myself, "who the fuck is Connie again?"

S.S. sets herself straight and makes for my half door. You better not open it, Missy, you better not...but she does, and positions herself in front of my desk, hands on lemon hips. She likes that I'm still sitting, she can look down on me, wipe the sweat from her brow, pretend as though she's just saved everyone's ass. She should really think about saving her own—that lycra-poly blend isn't fooling anyone.

"Listen, um...can *we* have a few words?"

Uh, no—*we* can't and by the by, you should really have that checked by a dermatologist.

But I just nod and stare dumbly up past the uneven mole on her chin, trying to imagine bats or mud or heavily corroded razor blades flying out from her glossy-slick mouth. That's what A.L.S. would do. Just witness her recede behind the "NO ACCESS" shield of her

gaze. A.L.S looks like she's listening, oh yes, but in fact, she's thinking, plotting your slow and ultimately painful demise. Oh no—your paycheck is late? And you have to make payment on those nasty back taxes? Awww...so sorry about that. Or, that file that you wanted? That contained the pivotal document in your presentation to the project investors? Yeah, oops, think it was shredded. So sorry...

And that's just the simple stuff. A.L.S. can be far more insidious, waiting months to exact her...well, let's not call it revenge. "Evening things up" sounds more accurate. Anyway, you won't see it coming, and you'll never think it's her doing. But she's in there alright. Rearranging the order, stacking the odds, imperceptibly shifting your fate.

"We all have to pitch in, you know. That's part of working here. We are here to help build strong ties to the community. We are here to strengthen those ties once they are built. Those ties are so easily torn asunder, if word gets out that we are not providing a safe, nurturing space to come and...."

TRANSLATION OF S.S.'s DIATRIBE: if people hear that we let the pagan perverts get too close to the heathen children, our funding will be cut, and my job as the office meddler will be cut, and I'll have to start at the bottom of some other organization where it will take me weeks, nay months to wreak havoc. And that will take time out of my crocheting. So fuck that.

Shit. I'm getting a look. She's been finished for a while. OK, what to say, what to say? It has to acknowledge her grievances, placate her fears, it has to be healing and assuring and re-confirm her power over me, but in a non-hierarchical fashion. There is no summit without a base, after all. She's got a poster that says so over her computer.

"Uh, yep, ok."

An odd tick mangles S.S.'s face. I've seen that tick come out a few times; it is a horror to behold. Once, a Somali woman, who had been under S.S.'s tutelage for three months, brought in a goat's head stew to the centre's bi-annual potluck. Along with her six children. And her husband, her husband's mother, two cousins, and several assorted

individuals who may, or may not have been part of the family. When S.S. specifically told her to bring a dessert. Gave her the recipe, even. Three berry trifle. But this woman, to the great dismay of S.S., saw fit to share a *mélange* of her own devise. I was happy—learnt how to say “son of a rabid monkey whore” in a very unique sub-Saharan dialect. But the stew, the extra bodies flew in the face of a highly regimented ‘casual get-together’, planned down to the last plastic fork and “SHCHC-OO: Where Community Spirit Comes ALIVE!” giveaway canvas grocery bag. What started out as a mere left eye twitch through the salads turned into a full foot-caught-in-a-combine facial flex once the limited sweet selection was served.

“Computer break disc in two. You give me ‘nother.”

In Grelios’s outstretched pudgy palms lay two distinct, un-fractured compact discs. “They are two separate, different discs, Grelios. Not broken.” He must have put his atop another already in the drive. “Broke! Broke! You fix!” The hive is back, edging out S.S. and Grelios in the race for most annoying force on earth. “And you know, you didn’t put in for Secret Santa yet,” twitches S.S. It is September. And there are two discs. September, two discs. I take a sip of my coffee, stand up, grab the two discs from Grelios. I show them to S.S. “Two discs, yes, so what?” I ask Grelios for today’s date. “Seep-tember four.” Thank you. Thank you both. Now can somebody hand me the first aid kit? I have an itch that just won’t quit.

A.L.S has been sliding more shifts my way, calling in sick at the last moment, not wanting to get out of bed. I’m more than happy to take them—can always stand to make a bit of extra cash. She keeps on top of things, using me as her eyes and ears, tells me to write down the name of anyone causing trouble. I’m also to keep tabs on A.L.S.’s personal “loan bank.” It’s an old pickle jar full of spare change. The jar rarely fills to more than a quarter before it’s empty again. Nobody but the two of us know about it; the other staff would complain, casting out that old ‘give a man a fish’ crap. They see graphs, they see charts, they see figures, they see black, red, and white. They’ve all been touched, they’ve all

been taken advantage of, they've all been hardened. A.L.S says you got to look past all that. Need is need. Sometimes we dole straight out, sometimes we buy things with it. School supplies, sacks of rice, dictionaries, new socks, baby wipes, a few yards of material...whatever fits the bill. Whatever the jar can afford.

S.S. stalls her exit, twitching squint-winch-squint. She wants something more from me, she wants her ego salved, for that I'd need two dozen daisies raised up from bended knee, so no dice. Some people just have to learn to chill. God knows I've had to. To not great effect, but I've learnt little tricks. Now it's her turn. So go water your bonsai and ply your protocol elsewhere, lady. I got better things to do, like stare at my three and a half walls. Oh yes, that's right S.S., *walls*. It's out and out territoriality here, see? Behind cubicle partition, S.S. feels trapped in a permanent state of transition. She has case files to hang, her diploma to mount. She wants, nay, she feels entitled to A.L.S.'s office—the only one on the floor. This is the root of her particular 'hate-on' for A.L.S. and by association, *moi*. Three and a half walls. We are such primal creatures, *non?*

But A.L.S is the epicentre, she is front line for all the cubicle dwellers, she mans the machines, she prepares the plans, her fingers are in everything, making sure nothing goes awry, nothing blows up. Too dreadfully. And besides all that, she's been here the longest. She has squatters' rights. But no matter, no matter, y'all may be rid of her soon. The Powers That Be keep rumours of cutbacks and layoffs rumbling below the surface. They'd cut off their nose to spite their face, if it'd float them a sliver above the red. Course, you don't want your employees feeling fat and logy, certain that the teat will stay plumped. But the constant meetings behind closed doors, the grim, rumped faces and non-stop employee evaluations do nothing for staff morale. Makes them all kooky as cats on speed. 'Cept A.L.S. Who has a plan should she be unceremoniously relieved of her position. Bus driver. *School* bus driver. Says she knows someone at the DMV who can make it easier for her. She'd be good at it, I think. Have never seen her drive, though.

Oh Jesus bloody Christ, get...out...get...OUT OUT OUT!!!! March on, S.S.!

There is nothing more to be accomplished here. I swear, if you don't mosey, I will take severe, no, I will take drastic measures. There is a small drawer filled with blank-book matches. Sure, it may be better used for elastics, or paper clips, or emergency tampons, but no, A.L.S has seen fit to fill it with matches. A passive threat? A quiescent arsenal? A rebel stance against the no-smoking on the premises policy? Do you really want to stick around and find out? Get out, S.S. In thirty seconds, this whole coop of wood and paper could burst into flame, and then who would have an office, huh? No one.

“Are we clear on everything here?”

Yes, yes, nod, nod, agree, yes. I am starting to hyperventilate. I feel my eyelid begin to flutter. Soon it will spasm dance in time with S.S.'s twitch. She turns around to leave, knocks an open file off the desk, walks out, doesn't stoop to pick up the papers. Mrs. Ping's proof of landed status now has a boot print over the government's green seal. The nation salutes you, Mrs. Ping. May you serve us well.

A nose appears over the shortened door. Little Lily, have you come to check up on me? Are you still around? Has my performance pleased you—pick or pan? I'm tempted to throw a miniature basket of paper clips at her, just to see what she'd do. Laugh? Cry? Throw them right back? You never know with kids. But here comes her big brother to take her away, scolding her in monotone, solely for effect. They walk backwards watching me, watching them. The Sony sings “Misty”, as interpreted by a local ska band.

My stomach is whinging from the coffee. Please one urge, feel the recourse all day. There's an open roll of Tums at the bottom of my bag, but I'm afraid I'll react badly to the thick coating of lint, shmutz and a mysterious sticky substance which may or may not be old hand lotion. So nuts to that. I'll suffer through the cramping, the nausea, the cold sweats, God, it sounds like withdrawal. We had a guy in here the other day, he couldn't have been more than seventeen, searching high and low for his dealer. He said the dude normally comes to check his email. I asked him if there's an online market nowadays—y'know, where people can put in orders and such—to which he responded with high

pitched laughter and repetitive scratching at the side of his face.

The mailman left a bundle of packages, envelopes, industry magazines and assorted flyers bound for the trash on my desk. The intra-mail boxes are clearly evident, they're right beside the door, it would only take him moments to unwind the elastic bands, sort and fling the mail Frisbee-style into the exceptionally wide slots. He was trained to do this. I, on the other hand, have to deliberate for hours over pieces that read, "To Occupant" or "ATTEN: Onirampshushkin Rahasheed" when there is neither an occupant nor Oni in this office. My favourite is the envelope addressed to "STAFF AND EXECUTIVE." It's as if I'm supposed to shred one letter into confetti and sprinkle it amongst the personnel. Hooray!!!

Perhaps I am not cut out for this. In fact, I think it is evident that my talents could be better used elsewhere. Perhaps the word 'talents' is stretching it a little. There are weeks where my hours are filled with nothing but doubt and utter dismay. A.L.S. has it all down, from the filing system to fielding calls to ordering supplies. She leaves it perfectly arranged—I'd be hard pressed to fuck things up completely. I know she's grooming me, affording me the opportunity to live a somewhat comfortable, semi-conscientious, limited salaried life. Which, don't get me wrong, I am thankful for. But there are times...

What are they doing now? Can you hear the hushed laughter seized in twelve little windpipes? Can you sense the quick progress of a faulty plan? Why must the phone ring now? I don't want to change long distance providers, I don't want to transfer you to career services, I don't care if you signed up for a workshop, no, no, you can't get your money back now. Steps, hundreds of footsteps up and down the escape, running stairs like manic new recruits—no, I don't know where you'd call for that, let me consult the wall—up, down, up, down, the background rhythm to my failure.

Then silence. Nothing. Wait for it, wait for it...ok, here we go.

Chubby Striped Shirt heads straight for my door, bounce-skip-step. He's intercepted by a hookah-bound Dr. U, who moves left to Chubby's left, moves right to

Chubby's right, caught in an awkward dance of clashing agendas. Bowl Hair is the next to shoot the hallway, pinball style, bump, bump off the wall, off Chubby, paddled by the pamphlet table, made to skid out when another soldier is sent down the pike too quickly. It's Lily's brother, partaking in a Kamikaze mission, running full tilt to unplug the jam, oh LB, can't you see it's hopeless? Your captain is a shmuck, spatial logic so obviously not his strong suit. But there is cheering now, rejoicing in the madness, as one child after the other adds a personal mangle of small, thin limbs to the blockage. Even Dr. U is enraptured, having given himself over to the gorilla absurdity. But what was the original purpose in all this? There must have been a game plan, some stratagem, a short term goal with questionable return?

And then I see her. One lone soul, at the far end of the hall. An odd smirk besmirching the china doll cuteness. Are you the final hope, darling? Do you have what it takes to rise above the carnage? What makes you so special? Where's your mommy? Would she approve?

She has me locked in the gaze. The rest were too distracted by tactics, by the particulars. Lily is not concerned with the art; the process is mechanical to her. Any past or further gain is insignificant. Produce, achieve, now, the moment is now. Industry, thy name is little girl.

She backs up for a running start. She begins her calculations; has to side step, maybe vault the melee. But she wants over. She wants up, over the half door and into my office. But why, Little Lily, why? I have been chosen for this life, not you. There is no need for you to be inside, where it is sad, where it is dark. I keep the overhead lights off for a reason. They're unflattering to the face. They buzz with blue bottle persistence. They expose the inanity of a system gone south. Run the other way, out the back door, you have no business being here.

Here she comes. This is going to get ugly. I should've popped the antacids when I had the chance.

Explode off strong with a left foot propulsion. Set your eye straight past those who failed before you. Ignore the patch of doubt scratching right behind your ear. Run with the abandon bestowed upon toddlers, dogs, PCP addicts. Fear is learned. Faith is inherent. Draw from within. Forget the rest.

“HEY!”

I’m surprised S.S. didn’t appear sooner, truly, ducking out from behind her impermanent walls, those shaky, unreliable things, much like dominos, in effect. And sigh, this is my cue, to open my door, to dash out into chaos, to clamber over the mess, to save the day, to catch the weight, to bear the burden, on my shoulder, on my side, wedged between floor and fallen divider.

Noise. Yelling. I can’t see a thing.

By the time they lift the wall, I am gone.

I am down the escape, and thinking of tomorrow.

Lady Fortuna

You've had one hell of a lifecycle, my friend. I'm just telling it like it is. No bells and whistles, no Cleopatra hoo-ha, no crazy 'you-were-once-a-great-king-so-that's-why-you're-incapable-of-understanding-why-your-coworkers-never-listen-to-you' crap. That doody's for the fakes. Do you taste onion in this tea? Swear to God Manny never cleans these cups out properly. Sorry, sorry—back to you. Ok, what do I see, what do I....MANNY!!!! ARE YOU OUT THERE? TAKE THE PHONE! Right, sor....I SAID TAKE THE GODDAMN PHONE, IT MIGHT BE MY 3:30!

I'm back, let me get adjusted. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to get centered. One disturbance, and my psychic charge goes out the window. But that will not happen today, oh no. You came here for a reading, and you will get one. It's just so hard to work with temps. The agency said he's been temping for years, he's a pro. A pro alright—a pro at not being able to hold down one position for more than six weeks. That's his problem, you know. They're all like that. No stick-to-it-ness. A whole generation of Mannys out there, doing our taxes, answering our phones, making us burritos, all with an eye to the rock TV and seventy-five cars in the drive. None of them knowing how to do one thing properly. They want all the glory without the struggle. Not like me, my friend. I have struggled, ooooooh yes, yes I have. But this hour is not about me. It is about you. You and the many lives which came before you.

Ok, what do I see, what do I see? Well, as I said, you weren't no queen of denial—ha, ha, that's a little joke—but you started off as a gal, alright. A hun? Yeah, that's it—you were a Mongolian mamma. Lots of little brats. Running around, making

your life miserable. Yeah, you could've been Genghis' bride, for sure, along with umpteen other hunnys—aha ha ha! No, no, but it's true. He poked anything that walked. Always out to prove something. I once did a guy who had Genghis in his cycle. Hand to God. Really. This little pipsqueak, with a voice like a nine year old girl, was once the terror of the Orient. Guess what he does. No, guess. Refills condom dispensers at truck stops. I know. But that's karma for you. Now, let's get back to business. So, you were dressed in yak, eating yak, tending to the yak—kids and livestock, that was your lot in life. At least I think it's yak. Don't really know what the Huns had back then. Maybe it was an ox/yak hybrid. What? Oh yeah, Huns and Mongols are the same, I'm pretty sure. Wouldn't know the difference if I crossed either on the street. Would you?

In another life....did I mention I might be skipping a few here and there? See, some lives are quite fuzzy, and I can't really get any handle on them. Then frankly, there are others which plain bore the crap out of me. Do you really care if I saw a lifetime spent in a sphagnum bog? No, you weren't a farmer, just some swamp tiller's retarded half-brother, sitting on the side, diddling yourself while everyone else shlepped moss around for a living. Right; on to the more important stuff.

Do you need more tea? MANNY! He's always on the computer, checking sport scores. That one plays the ponies too much, if you know what I mean. Would bet on his mother's bowel movements, if there was money in it. He begs me, "Predict the winning team! Predict the winning team," but what do I know about football? Tennis, now there's a game. I always wanted to go to England, y'know, to see a match at Wim...Wim-bull, that place where all the good players go, but it's just so damn expensive. They want to keep the riff raff out, I understand. And hey, speaking of jolly pip pip and cheerio, do I

have a lifetime for you! Oh yes! You were a scullery maid! In a royal castle! Somewhere...somewhere damp. And cold. But I hear all of England is like that. 364 days of the year. The three hundred and sixty fifth is a tease. It's how they get the British to stick around. At least I think it's Britain. Scotland, Ireland, England—they all have castles coming out the yin yang. Anyway, you were a maid somewhere very important in the eighteenth century. How can I pinpoint eighteenth? Oh, the wall hangings. They called them tapestries. I did a little research on the internet about a year ago. Manny's predecessor, Laguina, taught me how to "Google." That thing is invaluable to people of my profession. Sometimes we see the craziest things, and can't quite describe them. I was doing Laguina's cycle—it was a slow day--and saw the weirdest contraption. She kept saying, "tell me what it looks like, give me some dimensions," but it kept going out of focus. So the next day, she hooked me up to the internet, and we went 'surfing.' I'd been using the computer for accounting purposes, to write letters to my cousin in Addleburgh, and from time to time, to play solitaire, but that was it. And then whammo! The web! It was like a whole new dimension opened up. To tell the truth, I was scared of the new technology, with CNN going on and on about viruses and the naked ladies popping on to your screen without going looking for them. Like I needed trouble. But I digress. As I was saying, a new world showed itself to me, completely amazing. And don't you think we found Laguina's thing-a-ma-bob? Put in a few details, pressed search, and ta-dah. An early prototype of your common, everyday vacuum cleaner. They had a blueprint image online from the patent office. It wasn't successful, never made it out of the workshop. See, as the front part sucked up dirt from one place, it's back vent just blew it out somewhere else. You'd end up with one half of

the room spic and span, while the other looked twice as dirty as when you started. She was like Edison's nephew, four times removed. Died while removing earwax. Demonstrating an invention at the state fair. Re-tooled drill bits and bodily orifices do not mix. A tragedy, really.

Crap, look at the time. Doesn't stop for anyone, as we say in the biz. On to your next...oh, the maid dealie? Well, you did the usual poo-poo stuff, cleaning out chamber pots, de-lousing undergarments, fending off the advances of second in command footmen. Your mother didn't think you'd amount to much, looking at you, just before she croaked. What did she die from? Let me see...childbirth. Yep, yours. Your Pops never forgave you for that. Who was going to take care of things when he went to boink the local smitty? So, he sold you off at seven. Yeah, there's a lot of detail here. You're still holding a bit of resentment from this period. Maybe this is a little personal, but do you ever suffer from incontinence? See, yeah, I thought so. You're holding some old resentment in your urethra. Forgive your father for putting you on the market. Forgive the livery guy for not knowing when to stop. And hey, no one *really* knew about syphilis back then.

You seem to have a lot of lifetimes spent around the lower rungs...let's see, hmmm, north country Chinese foot washer, Spanish prisoner of war...oh look! You got to work in the galley of a pirate galleon! Well, that's exciting. Except, oh no, scurvy. But that was pretty common. African slave—we all have our time in the south—and no, before you ask, you did not work for any of the presidents. Though your owner did sell manure to someone who bore a keen resemblance to Ulysses S. Grant. Everybody told him so. Just to bug him.

More? OK. Indentured 17th century Basque servant, but, oh here we go, you *were* supposed to be a servant, but died on your way to the new world. Pushed overboard. I think you should stay away from water. What? No, that's not a prediction, just a personal opinion. Barnacle scraper, child mine shaft diver, Laplandian sea troll patroller—Christ, I get a lot of you in here. Didn't know what the hell you were all on guard against until I looked it up on Google. Dangerous job, that one.

So it appears that you've had many kicks at the proverbial can. Yeah, you don't live too long, most times around. But think of all the things you've experienced! And I bet you have an amazing life now. Let me ask you; what do you do? Wait, I'm getting images of airplanes, and wow! Very large rooms. Throngs of men in suits. And polo shirts. And shrimp? Hhmmm, that's strange. You what? Arrange travel for sanitation conventions. Do you get to go to any of them? Oh, well, that's too bad. But I bet your boss brings you back some of that delicious Atlantic City salt water taffy! Hmmm, no, that's true. I guess it wouldn't be good for anybody's diabetes.

But coming in here, getting your past lives read—see, you're on the right track. Most of my clients, they just wanna know when they're going to meet someone, when they're going to get married, if that rash is going to go away on its own, whatever. They want me to tell them that money and happiness and relief from itchiness is right around the corner. So, admittedly, for some, I do. But it's not a lie. They might feel so pumped up from a session with me, that they throw away their reserve, drive to the damn drugstore and finally buy that anti-fungal cream. Life's funny like that. I get things rolling, doing Fate's dirty work. So you see honey, we're all servants of one type or another. And oh, back to my original point, well, you're trying to see where you've gone

wrong in the past, so you can fix things in the present, am I right? No? Really? I'm sure Manny had you down in the book for a past life reading. Why didn't you say something? My friend, listen; you gotta learn how to assert yourself. This namby-pamby behaviour won't get you anywhere. You gotta stand up to your boss and demand to be taken to one of those conventions. No, I don't care if he is six-six and wears a pinky ring. This means nothing to me. Let me use me as a prime example.

I wasn't always the successful business woman you see sitting here before you. This fourteen karat gold owl pendant with ruby chip eyes did not simply fly onto my neck, no siree. You like these bangles, honey? One word—moulah. And you don't get that from sitting on your hiney, letting the world pass you by. You gotta reach for the stars. Or in my case, when the stars start calling, pick up and say hello. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was born Fortuna Gerwitzin Shmeckle. See, I bet you didn't think Fortuna was my real name, huh? You probably thought I changed it for business purposes. Oh no, my friend, this was the name pronounced to me at birth. My father insisted on naming me after his dearly departed mother. But my mother hated his mother, and thank God, hated the name 'Fanny Shmeckle' even more, so she got my pop to agree to Fortuna. She'd read it in one of those *True Romance* magazines, thought it sounded exotic, and boom-diddy-bam, thank you corner news stand. I was a pretty average kid, making mud pies, skipping jump rope, playing doctor. Except when I played doctor, I'd predict the way in which my little friends would die. Some of them found this very interesting; at lunch hour, I had them lined up to the teeter totters, waiting to hear me say, "stomach cancer," or "killed by falling gondola." It was snotty Timmy Spitznagle who ratted me out. He

got upset when I said, “boredom, Timmy. Seems to me you’ll die of boredom.” He wanted to hear, “race car accident” or “rodeo stampede.” But what could I do? I saw what I saw. Anyway, little Timmy ran home and told his drunk of a mother. After four stiff cooking sherries and a Pabst chaser, she called my house. Boy, did I get it that night! Whoo-hoo! Nobody likes a know-it-all with smart mouth. Between spankings, I shouted at my ma, “In an old age home! At night! A nurse with a funny walk and a pillow!” but she couldn’t hear me over my father’s sobbing. You know, some men base all their worth on their penis. Guess my pop was one of them. Better he knew about the ticking time bomb in his pants, I think.

Ma tried to ignore my God given gifts, signing me up for polka lessons, macramé instruction, home shoe repair courses. Tried to keep me as busy as possible outside of school, so I’d forget this ‘ESP nonsense’—her words, not mine—and get on with real life. And so I did. Grammar school turned into junior high, which then melted into high school. High school passed by uneventfully, except for the time I didn’t get the lead in “My Fair Lady.” Mrs. Trice, the drama coach, didn’t like my rendition of *The Rain In Spain*. Or my chin. And thought Patty Newheart—a girl with a nose so brown, she should’ve rented herself out as a suppository—deserved the part more. Now, I bet you’re waiting for some sort of *Carrie* drama, with pigs’ blood on opening night and what have you. Honey, that stuff’s for Hollywood. In confidence, ok, that would’ve been fantastic, but these powers only go so far. And back then, they weren’t completely reliable, with the puberty and the mood swings and the relentless pressure from my father to fix his favourite Florsheims. Those loafers were beyond repair a year after he bought them. Did he give them up? Oh no. He kept saying, “Fortuna, those courses were not for nothing.

You'll need something to fall back on when you're older. And with a chin like that, there'll be no Prince Charming to keep you in pumps for damn sure. So practice on these babies."

Where was I? Oh yeah, the show, the show. Right, so, I get relegated to stage manager. Had my duties down to a tee; open the curtain, close the curtain, whisper lines to Patty when she'd forget them. Which, might I add, was way too often for anyone with six months of after school practice. On opening night, the lights dimmed, the auditorium hushed, and BLAMMO! I got a blinding headache accompanied by what I can only say was a divine vision of my own future. There were flash bulbs going off in my brain. Yes, all colours of them, swirling, bright, and frankly, in not unlike the pattern found on my Aunt Sylvia's chesterfield. But whatever. And then something emerged out of the light. It was a sign. No, not a burning bush type sign. A wooden one, with silver embossed lettering and three coats of Verathane. "Lady Fortuna's House of Knowing." Yes, yes—the exact sign you see above my door today!

The play? But I just told you the exciting part! OK, all right. Well, this is where things get a bit sticky. Now, I'm a trooper, don't let anybody tell you different. Even with my head pounding, I grabbed hold of those ropes and I opened that front of stage curtain! At least, I thought it was the front of stage curtain. It was actually the back stage curtain. Under who's cover a very flustered Patty Newheart was receiving her first introduction to the joys of the male anatomy. See, I had pulled too soon. Then again, so had Timmy Spitznagle--out of Patty. May I just say, it became glaringly apparent why Timmy was so obsessed with hotrods and horses.

Anyhoo, in that moment, I knew I was meant for greater things. But it didn't happen overnight. Oh no. My path was not so obstacle-free. It was littered with failed attempts at community college, spiritual pilgrimages to Iowa, dead end cobbler jobs, and one or two very unhappy marriages. Not that they started out unhappy. But you can only make so much of a life with a shoe horn salesman. Who has a private penchant for expensive dog toys. But not dogs. C'mon, money only goes so far.

The second marriage? Well, that was somewhat my fault. He was a hell of a guy. Big, strapping, ready to settle down and make a good woman out of me. And a size 16 shoe to boot. Don't listen to what anybody says—there *is* a co-relation. So what if he enjoyed dressing like Phyllis Diller from time to time? She is a very funny woman.

In all honesty, I was ready to throw in the towel on this whole psychic thing. Nobody seemed interested in me probing their souls; they just wanted me to fix the ones close to their feet. But that was before *she* came along. Who is *she*, you may ask? Well, her identity cannot be revealed. No, no, I'm sorry. I abide by a strict code of honour. The first rule? "Thou shall not rat out thy well paying customers."

OK, this much I will give you; she was a very popular movie actress, about to make a huge mistake. She came into the store bawling, waving round a pair of python stilettos with the straps torn all to hell. "Help!" she cried, "Daddy couldn't wait for me to get undressed!" Turns out, 'Daddy' was used to getting a little sumthin' as soon as his mistress stepped in the door. Being, how d'you call, *ignored* as she rushed past to unleash her ample waist from its punishing restraints, Daddy took hold of the designer spikes and let loose. What a mess! I'm telling you! And it wasn't just the straps. The lasts had been broken in half, one heel was mangled to the core, and the soles were

chewed right through. All because he didn't get his treat right at that very exact moment. Did I mention that Daddy was a shit zsu? Right, sorry. This dog had issues, please. Anyway, Miss S—that's what I'll call her so's I don't fub up and give you her real name—Miss S was set to appear on a red carpet in a couple of hours. And these were the heels her dresser had chosen for her to wear. Now, I bet you're saying, "just tell her to put on another pair!" Oh honey, if only life was that easy. Miss S was a size 13 and a half, ladies. Most starlets, never mind regular girls, don't have size 13 and a half stilettos coming out the wahzoo. And python is very delicate leather. Like you care—are those made from PVC? Yeah, thought so. But whatever. I'm trying to illustrate something here.

So guess what happens when I take a hold of the shoes. No, guess. Wrong! I get the blinding headache again! Flashes, lights, colours, Aunt Sylvia—the whole shebang! And what do I foresee? Miss S serving up flapjacks n' chicken gravy off Route 76. No kidding! Through the pain, I squeak out, "You planning on changing careers?" Know what she says to me? "*No, but I was planning to come clean with the public tonight.*" Whoa. "Wha' d'ya mean," I ask, just struggling to keep vertical. Turns out, Miss S has been hiding inside a complete body girdle for five years. She'd been unable to lose the weight gained for...uh, I can't tell you which movie, but here's a hint; robots, the Ugandan ambassador, and a cleft palate. Yeah, well, better to have forgotten. It didn't exactly do boffo at the box office.

But it was sad, truly. Nothing but boning, Lycra and chaffing for five years. The poor girl. Why'd she tell me her secret? You'd be surprised what folks tell their cobblers. Really. More than your average bartender.

Anyway, the situation was like this; she needed repair. She needed direction. She needed help. And could I help her? Yes, yes I could. Y'see, I'm no fan of those Hollywood Tiny McSmallersons. At no point in silver screen history have fat ladies made it into the good bedroom scenes. Disgusting. Why not let the fatties have a go at it? Phyllis kvelled when I ate seconds. The more of me, the more to love. Of course, it ruined our marriage. He began to look better in my tube dresses than I did. Wasn't right. A gal's got her self esteem to think about.

Huh? Yeah, yeah, I'm getting to that.

"Don't do it," I said. What? Oh, no honey. No, not about the red carpet. No, she had to make an appearance—it's part of the job. I meant the whole chub thing. I told her *not* to let it all hang out. I said, "keep it to yourself." This was not being hypocritical; c'mon, what did I just say about fatties and valuable screen time? Ding ding, my friend—they don't get it. Plus, it was around the time of that heroin chic kick. Y'know, with all the models in greasy hair, bones sticking out everywhere, beggar cups as purses, whatever. That's when I knew the designers had run out of ideas. My cousin Benny's been like that for years. Did Mr. Klein ever ask him to shill for perfume? Ooooooh no.

Now of course, at first, Miss High and Mighty was insulted. After all, who was I? A lowly shoe gal, banging her head against the counter for relief? Raggedy heels in tow, she stormed out the door, muttering something foul about James Woods and Pop Tarts. The next day, I come back from lunch to find a blue message note tacked to my smock. "*Think a lady was phoning for you, Fortuna. She mentioned something about a chin. Didn't leave a number.*"

No biggie, whatever, right? Could've been my mother calling. She never trusted the people I worked with. Thought they were all illiterate immigrants. She'd shout at my boss, "CHIN-CHIN! Came in to have talky with BIG CHIN!" I kept telling her, "Ma! Mr. Xiu was born in this country! He has a university degree! He speaks English better than you do!" but it fell on deaf ears. Another generation entirely.

So weeks go by. I forget about the migraine, I forget about Miss S. Let me tell you now, my friend; this is Destiny's way of spacing out the important stuff. Can't have all the exciting crap happen at once. Give you a heart attack. Which I almost had, when Miss S came waltzing back into my life—and into the store--three sizes thinner. She'd a Slim Fast shake in one hand and a huge diamond ring weighing down the other. What was going on? Well, turns out that call was from her. She wanted to thank me. Thank me? Yes! See, she'd felt strange after our little meeting. Lost a little confidence in 'Project Loose Caboose.' Decided to go to the event all packed up and packed in, save the reveal for another time. And you know what? Good thing she did, because her limo pulled up right behind a caravan of consumptive super models. She had to follow their non-existent rears all the way down the red carpet. Could you imagine the 'contrast and compare' photos if she had gone through with her plan? What a media disaster! I had saved her career, and got her thinking about those twin packs of coconut balls she'd been buying in bulk. Ten colonics and twice daily trips to the gym later, boom! She was girdle-free and glowing. And a little delirious. But her new life coach told her that would pass. He also told her that he admired her gumption. They got to talking, one thing led to another, and a month later, she was engaged to the second most popular celebrity life coach on the circuit! Huh? Oh, well, the most popular one was gay.

Miss S wanted to know where I got my information. She thought maybe I had a customer who filled me in on the go-go world of celebrity culture. No, I told her, it was just a gut feeling, combined with a horrendous pain between my eyes. I explained about the flapjacks too. She became convinced that I had a gift. A very wonderful, marketable, headache-inducing gift. She went out to her limo and retrieved a handful of scripts. “They want me to be in all of them,” she said, “but I can only do one, because of scheduling conflicts. Pick one for me, Fortuna. Pick the *right* one.”

Whoa, is right honey. In one foul swoop, she confirmed her delirium and sealed my fate. But what was I supposed to do with five lemon coloured scripts? Read them? Honey, I didn’t have time for that. There were several sets of moccasins crying out for re-fringing. A whole bridal party worth of satin flats to dye. “Touch them,” she insisted, “feel them and tell me which one seems most promising.” Just to be nice, and not antagonize the crazy lady, I ran my fingers over the covers. What harm could it do? Hah! Famous last words.

Like a baseball bat to my forehead, the pain came. And with it, a vision of Miss S in a pork pie hat. And fishnets. And a herd of sheep. “That’s the Fosse number!” she yelled, “I can’t do the Fosse number! I’m too fat for fishnets! What are you trying to do to me!?” What was I trying to do to her? What was she trying to do to me? I was the one lying crumpled on the linoleum floor, praying for an end to my days.

Did she do it? Of course she did it. It was her elevator to A-list heaven. *Jazz Farm* hit number three at the box office. That was the highest ranking she had ever achieved. And by sticking to a strict diet of licorice bark and halibut, she managed to drop those final forty pounds. In the movie, you see her go from doing a little soft shoe,

half obscured by the manure pile, to tripping the light fantastic full out in a field of tobacco. Her popularity soared. Her people couldn't have been more pleased. And who added extra notches to her tap straps? Who told her not to do the full frontal scene with the butter churn? Bingo, honey! Yours truly. The headaches? I managed to get them under control. Sure, the opiate dependency was tough, but again, life's an uphill battle.

Miss S began to bring in more and more of her starlet friends to the store, heels in hand. After a while, I didn't even need shoes to get a good read. My talent grew by leaps and bounds. People had to fight, just to get in the door. Mr. Xiu had to hire on more help behind the counter. I was too busy predicting the fortunes of the somewhat rich and semi-famous to be bothered with padding arches. It became apparent to everyone that I needed my own place. Even Mr. Xiu agreed that it was time for me to leave the cobble game. Especially after I let pair of wingtips stretch out in the expander for too long.

And here I am, honey! Got my own little business, doing what I was intended to do; helping the known and unknown alike not screw up so much. This time around. Speaking of which, I got one more lifetime for you. It just came to me. You were a patient of the famous Dr. Freud! You were analyzed by the founding father of head shrinkology! Too amazing, I know. But there you have it. Hmmm? No, you weren't the guy with the hat for a wife. No, no one of note, really. You were afraid of gifts. Wrapped ones. Terrible phobia. He told you, "Tell people to stop bringing them." Seemed to work. You lived a pretty normal life after that.

Miss S? Oh, she's doing well. *Now*. Got a little too friendly with the speed pills after her life coach ditched her for an ashram in New Mexico. People started to talk. She'd turn sideways and disappear off camera. A bit of time spent in upstate Vermont put

her back on track, though. Thank God for St. Ben and Brother Jerry, if you know what I mean.

Ok, Manny's giving me the signal. Our time's up, honey. It was lovely meeting you. And just a word to the wise; try to avoid incinerators in the coming few weeks. Why? Well, there's no time to go into detail. We can talk about it, at your next appointment.

23 Ways To Creep Into My Consciousness

1. Have a head like a puppet. With two bulging eyes coloured an unbelievable blue. And a nose so tiny, a person would suffer to breathe through it. Speak softly. Have a mouth that opens far too wide for its own good. Make me wonder who has their hand up your ass.

Why have you just broken into song? Is that felt you're wearing?

2. Own a snake. I can't stand snakes. Saw a guy out on the street the other day with a banana python wrapped 'round his arm. Like a phylactery.

Wonder who he prays to.

3. Be my mother. Call me at a quarter to seven in the morning. Tell me how the cat woke you up, then didn't want to eat the food you drove all the way across town to buy. Gossip about the family before I can object. Rattle off what you've ingested for the past three days.

Explain what didn't digest properly.

Ask me about my father. Be quietly disappointed when I have nothing new to tell you.

4. Sprout wings on my ficus plant. Mites I understand. Flying albino bugs who send out the troops every time I go to water I don't get.

How did you all evolve so quickly? When do you plan on taking over the earth?

5. Cardboard. When does it go from being called 'paper' to 'cardboard'? Why are there still packed boxes sitting around my apartment? I moved in two years ago. Do boxes sit? Stand?

Can I use a verb to describe the stationary position of an inanimate object?

Paper goods have a Ptolemaic order of their own. I'm sure of it.

6. Sport a moustache. There aren't many men who do these days. Not many women either.

I saw this young girl on my way to work today. Must have been in her early twenties. She had a goatee. A real piece of facial swag, right there on her chin. Was dark as daytime in the midst of a storm. She seemed proud of it.

That, or indifferent to it.

7. Be the word I am typing right now. No, now. No, now. No.....now.

Now.

8. White Rabbit Candy. Tastes like sweetened condensed milk crossed with a rubber tire.

I want some.

But I'm at work.

And can't get to China Town.

Where I buy it.

Or Singapore.

Where it's made.

9. A man just walked up to my desk. He had horrible acne scars. I asked if I could help him. He said, "No, thanks, you already have." Smiled. Walked away.

Never saw him before in my life. I'll be thinking about that one for days.

10. Issue a commemorative stamp of my face. At age 22. No, better yet, of my left elbow. In its current state. Suppose you'd have to own a small country to do so, since I'm not famous.

Or be the Post Master General, and just like me a lot.

11. Make up travel itineraries for a living. Watch David Letterman for one week straight.

Jot down twelve items on a grocery list.

Let stew.

12. Be Death. It's easy. Just wear a t-shirt emblazoned with the word, "DEATH".

Grimace.

I'll think you're funny. And creepy. But mostly funny.

13. Dazzle me. Recite the entire MacDonald's menu, from McShakes backwards. Bleach every tooth in your mouth neon white except for one. In the front.

Style your hair like Rick James. In memoriam.

I'll think you're something, alright.

14. I took the bus home from work. It was a nice sunny day and all, a clear day to hoof it, but I was tired. The bus stopped because of engine trouble at the corner of...well, I forget now, actually. And there was this bright blue balloon. It drifted up on past my window. It set itself against the sky. It wasn't like the movie at all. I am not a small child and this is not Paris.

Still mesmerizing, though.

15. Taste my sweat. Tell me it's as good as a '72 Rothschild. Appear to be pleased with yourself.

Try not to scream when I drop my ten pound weight very close to your right Nike.

16. Reduce yourself to mildew. It's something that's never far from my mind. Or my bathtub.

There is a commercial conspiracy.

Mr. Clean is a big fat liar.

I'm sure the union put him up to this.

17. Three gray hairs have set up camp on top of my head. My friend told me not to pluck them.

“If you do,” he said “ten more will come back in their place.”

“Like punks to a squat,” he said.

My friend is a 37 year old accountant. I've known him for years. Very straight edge.

Out of his mouth, that analogy sounded all wrong. “Like ants to a picnic,” I could understand. What does he know about anarchy?

Some people always try to go against type.

18. Ah doo-doo-doo. Ah dah-dah-dah.

Christ. Heard that on the radio last Tuesday, and haven't been able to stop singing it since.

19. Be my ex. No, wait; don't. I won't take your calls. If I think it's you on the phone, I'll down a couple of Valium. And then I won't be conscious of anything.

Not for a good five to seven hours, at least.

20. Dinner. Around this time, I usually think of my mother. How she managed to put a proper meal on the table every evening. Enough for five people. And do the dishes after, and clean us up, and help us with our homework, and put us to bed by a decent hour.

Then make lunches for the next day, put in a laundry, and complete a sundry list of other chores before dropping into the sack herself.

I think I'm doing well if don't eat fudge for dinner. If I can wait long enough for the delivery guy to get here. If I remember to rinse my contacts before turning out the lights.

I love my mother. I implore you—be my mother.

21. Who at headquarters decided that coloured toilet paper was a such bad idea? I haven't seen any of that stuff around since the late '80's. Quilted? Yes. Triple-ply? Yes. Embossed with calla lillies? Certainly. But forget about pink or blue.

Did they find out that the dyes cause rectal cancer? I wouldn't want to increase my chances there.

I already think too much about my colon as it is.

22. Be my colon. On my better days, I try to be nice to you. Why can't you forgive me when those five to ten vegetable servings just aren't an option? I don't want to threaten you with laxatives, but if push comes to shove, I will.

23. Twenty-three ways. It's all supposed to end here. But the end got me thinking....

24. 180 count Percale cotton. Supposedly, if you take the time to count the threads in every square inch of these bed linens, you will find one hundred and eighty of the little buggers straining to stay tight together. But who is going to do this? They could put any random number on the package, and I'd be likely to believe them.

25. Shit. I forgot to give the slips into accounting. If you were a yellow slip right now, you'd be foremost in my thoughts.

26. Who had an act throwing fishes? They would always come back to him, boomerang-style.

What was his name?

27. I ate chocolate for dinner. I admit it.

And now I can't sleep. And it's late. And I won't get enough rest. And I'll be exhausted tomorrow.

Accounting will eat me alive. I will lose my job. I will have to move back in with my mother.

If you were chocolate right now, I'd hate the crap out of you.

29. Hah. You think I mixed up the numbers. Well, I'm just having some fun. I've got to do something in lieu of sleep.

28. Hello God, it's me. I....oh, wait. I still have guests.

30. Be not-God. The absence of something will always plague me more than its presence.

31. Supposedly, evil is everywhere. It is in the water we drink. It is in the person we desire. It in the earth, in the trees.....ah hell.

Now I'm thinking about snakes again.

32. I've never adhered to one particular religion. I find them all fascinating. I can't help but fall back on the old Judeo-Christian precepts, though.

I don't like the idea of Purgatory. You might think I'd be amenable to a few years in flux, but nope. I'm just not sold on this whole "after life" thing.

Better you should wipe me out completely. I can deal with non-existence. I'm not vain.

33. If you were a paramedic who had to come and get me right now because I had fallen out of bed because I had had a heart attack because umpteen years of candy bar dinners had finally gotten the better of me and I had managed to call 911 just before things got really ugly...what would you think of my pajamas?

My father sent them in the mail. As a birthday gift. His current wife purchased them. At Sears.

She didn't sign the card.

34. My brother is 34. My brother lives 456 miles away.

My brother has brought back the ‘everything-you-say-I’ll-say’ game into our relationship.

Though fun at first, I now remember why I hated it so much as a kid.

Plus the fact that it has led to some very expensive long distance calls.

35. Be my brother’s tongue. Refuse to repeat what was previously said. Say what needs to be said in twenty minutes or less.

36. We’re out of Xerox toner at the office. It made today’s projection sheets difficult to read. I gave up after seven minutes of staring cross-eyed at the first two rows of figures.

What’s toner made out of? Petroleum by-products? Crushed beetles? Squid ink?

37. Funny how there’s facial toner, which helps clear your skin of black guck, and copier toner, which lays black guck on thick and heavy.

Or maybe it isn’t funny. It’s late, and I can’t sleep. Anything right now is a laugh riot.

38. Ah doo-doo-doo....ah no. The Police are back. And they’ve brought reinforcements. Here comes Rick James with “Super Freak.”

39. It’s too late to take a sleeping pill. If it were possible, I’d wish you to be a sleeping pill that would knock me out for three hours. And three hours only. I’d wake up at 7:30 AM, feeling cheery and well rested. Ready to take on the world.

But wishing you into something you’re not is not what this whole thing is about.

Or maybe it is.

40. I wish you into love. Into money. Into twenty blue balloons.

Into non-carcinogenic turquoise toilet paper.

Come to me as sleep. As comfort. As a parent to tuck me in and reassure me that everything is going to be okay. The people in accounting are just power hungry malcontents with no social skills. Tell me I am going places. Kiss my forehead and lull me to dreamland with a song.

Just make sure it isn't "Super Freak."

41. You might suggest reading. But the novel by my bed isn't particularly riveting. It's been here for two months. The bookmark hasn't budged past page 24. I can't even remember who the characters are.

Wait. I seem to recall a hirsute Mexican.

That's all I got.

42. Now I'm desperate. Really and true. I'm about to pull out an old Zen master trick. Or maybe it's an old Indian trick. I don't know. Doesn't matter. You're going to help me.

43. You are going to be black. Not wispy-shady black like the proud girl's goatee. Not dark and intense like bittersweet chocolate. You are going to be black.

Black like a pore clogged with city grime.

Black like the devil's heart.

Black as the ink in a fresh toner cartridge. squid's ink. There is no thinking about black.

There is only black.

Be black.

44. ██████████

Clean

Most of the time, the walls got it. Depending on the trajectory, the nature of the incident. Plain plaster was the hardest to clean, followed by oil-based matte. If something had a sheen, Harry was a happy man. He'd plug in his shower radio—his third in ten odd years—tune in the classical station, and get to work. He'd be close to ecstatic if the mess was confined to a smallish room, like the bath, or a secondary bedroom.

Harry developed a latex allergy about six years back, so regular gloves were out of the question. Layering three sets of rubber ones made it impossible to get a good grip on the equipment, so he bought a pair of fishmonger gloves with reinforced tips. Bought them in Maine, on his last trip there with Viv. She laughed when he tried them on back at the hotel room, just the big black gloves up to his elbows, sports socks, and nothing else.

Nothing gets blood out like industrial acid cleansers. Other products promise great results, with enzyme-oxygen-lemon-lime-power, but no dice. Acid burns away all memory of the stain. Knocks out HIV-1 too. Gives you a clean surface to paint over, if need be. Clients are frequently embarrassed to inquire about such things. It doesn't seem right in the face of everything else. But life goes on. Walls need to be painted, rooms reclaimed. You can never exorcise the ghost completely, but a new splash of ecru goes a long way in trying.

One time, Harry and his crew were asked to save a beige carpet. Apparently, the make and model had disappeared off the market. It was wall to wall, double plush, ran from living room to TV den to powder room, just stopping short of the kitchen. It was

laid throughout the rest of the house, but it was downstairs that got hit. The worst was at the various points of contact. Blood mingled with urine and feces. Hardened bits of tissue acted like perma-bond for slivers of bone. It took days to pry the solids off with a paint spatula—a knife would've ruined the nap, a blade would've cut the fibres.

Containers have spills, pots have spills, bodies have spills. Spills have to be sopped up. Washed away. Sometimes it's just a matter of packing up the mattress in a hazmat bag, or decontaminating the tiles and re grouting the floor. Harry brings along his caulking gun on each job just in case. If a sink or toilet is involved, you can be certain the caulking gets its fair share. Half the time people don't caulk appropriately to start with. When the sealant lifts away from the surface, nobody thinks to repair it, do a good job. Dirt gets under the curl, stays there forever.

Harry started out on an office team, cleaning after hours, on weekends. It was only when there was an incident in a law firm cloak room that he considered getting into the more macabre end of things. He contacted his boss as soon as the body was found. A call was sent out to a biohazard firm to do a clean up once the police were finished. Harry stuck around through the scene appraisal, got talking to this guy, Ed, who'd been doing this sort of 'site management' for years. Ed told him all about bloodborne pathogen training, the loopholes concerning safety gear, the ins and outs of security clearance and media handling. It sounded much more exciting than scouring coffee rings, and paid a shit load to boot. When Harry asked if a strong stomach was necessary for the job, Ed just grunted and shrugged. Said it lost the Hollywood impact once you adjusted to the smell.

Viv wasn't so keen on the lateral career move, but she appreciated the increase in income. The salary of grade school secretary wasn't spectacular, and Harry could only expect to earn so much if stayed in the same position. Carpal tunnel syndrome, the back strain, the tinnitus from malfunctioning vacuum cleaners; these costs had to be factored in against his longevity. She wasn't so worried about the monotony of his job; no, Harry liked doing things by rote, he thrived under routine. It was the physical strain that would tow a good cleaner under.

Harry's first job was under Ed's direction. It was a murder-suicide, a seventy-nine year old man who couldn't stand the strain of caring for his wife. She had been beaten to death in her wheelchair, while he gave himself a quick gunshot to the brain stem. Harry wondered if the husband intended to do himself in; maybe after the initial euphoria lifted, the inevitable guilt hit hard and fast. Or maybe he was scared of jail time. Or maybe the resentment, when drained, left him empty. A man without a purpose is no man at all. Ed told him not to think about it; they weren't there to analyze. He suggested Harry find someone to talk to, if things got too heavy. But Harry never did. None of the cleaners did. They just kept scouring. Steel wool, Comet powder, pine forest fresh.

After a year with Ed, Harry started his own business. He could do the work, manage a crew, had an ok head for numbers. Viv helped him with the books at night, until he was in the black. Which coincided with an audit. Nothing puts the fear of God into a person like the Internal Revenue Service. Confronted with two of life's certainties, Harry almost preferred the one that didn't require receipts. After that, they got themselves an accountant.

Viv met Harry when she was still with her first husband, Henry. She was a young, dedicated wife of 23 to Henry's indifferent 32. Henry was an insurance salesman who started off his career in actuaries. Fed up with the solitary existence of a number cruncher, Henry asked to be transferred to sales. He craved the interaction, the contact, but became jaded fast by the unfounded complaints. One night, while working late, he got talking to some of the cleaning staff. It was nice not to hear, 'act of God' or 'the other guy's fault' in the course of conversation, and Henry, for the first time in a long time, found himself laughing. He suggested to the crew that they go out for beer, but Rashid didn't drink and Martha had to get home to her kids. Only Harry didn't have anywhere special to go, or anyone special to go home to.

The two of them stumbled home to Henry's townhouse. It was the closest place to fall down drunk at 3 in the morning. Even through the haze, Harry remembered thinking how nice the living room was. He face-planted on a brocade loveseat, and was lost to the world.

Viv was the first one downstairs at 7 AM, unsuccessful in her attempt to raise Henry from the dead. She knew a pot of coffee was in order, probably some dry toast too. He didn't often take to benders, but when he drank, it was full steam ahead. Unaware that her husband had brought home company, she was a little caught off guard to find a snoring mound drooling onto her sofa.

The call came in at 2:48 AM. It was a bathroom suicide, supposedly confined to the tub. Harry didn't believe it; there was often a trail left from moving the body, no matter how much care the paramedics took. He asked the Lieutenant if it could wait until

sunrise, but the policeman just sighed and suggested that he'd better get over there pronto. The son had begun cleaning up the mess himself.

Clean-up crews provide a healthy barrier between incident and truth. The police carry round the cards of a couple reliable cleaners, offer them up to the bereaved with a warning; "Don't do this yourself. Call the professionals." Harry got in with the local precinct thanks to Ed, who sung his praises like a master would his favourite apprentice. Ed was trying to wind down his business at the time, shove off to Florida with the missus. "If anyone knows how to deal with death, it's those cats down south. Tonnes of geriatric suicide, accidents, crime hits. Think I'll freelance for a while, then retire in the Keys. Hear it's gorgeous there."

Viv didn't feel right in waking the stranger. Instead, she made a general ruckus with the dishes, the coffee pot, the cutlery, hoping he'd take the hint. It worked. At first clang, Harry's slack body sprang to life. Wildly, he searched his surroundings before his eyes locked onto the pretty brunette by the stove. They stared at each other for a good two minutes before Viv thought to tell him where he was. In her hands: a knife and a mug. On the counter: Folgers, Wonder Bread, Florida's Best.

The son's wife asked the Lieutenant to place the call. Her hands were full with trying to take away her husband's cleaning supplies. "Honey," she'd whisper, "Baby, no. Let's let someone else take care of this." The husband never said a word. He just kept finding more Spic n' Span, more mops, more sponges in more cupboards around the house.

Harry and Henry became fast friends, taking in the odd movie together, organizing one or two poker games, comparing hockey pools before Henry left the office at night. Only once during these escapades did Henry ever think to check in with Viv. He needed the name of their electrician—Harry was re-wiring his den.

Resp. mask, wader boots, monger's gloves. Goggles, sweat band, Aspirin, wallet. Suit up, kiss wife, grab truck keys. Lock door, start motor, find drive thru. Coffee, orange juice, muffin...no, donut. Right turn, left turn, right again, straight.

It was over a dinner of chicken casserole that Viv learned of Harry's sick mother, of his choice to clean in the evenings and nursemaid during the days, of his sister's degree in physiotherapy. It was in offering to help with the dishes that Harry learned of Viv's loneliness. No words were exchanged, just a quick, light touch when washer hand met dryer. Henry was busy in the family room, setting up the TV for a night of Nascar highlights.

The house was in an older part of town, a small wartime single, well maintained except for some fallen Christmas lights. Harry didn't bother calling his crew; he figured it'd be a small enough job to do on his own, no need to wake the troops this early. He grabbed his equipment out of the truck, laid it on the dolly, and wheeled up quietly to the door.

One knock. Two knocks. One quick buzz on the doorbell, after Harry noticed a small black buzzer in the grey early morning.

A tall blonde woman answered the door. Before his foot was over the threshold, she was whispering in quick staccato.

“Thank you for coming so quickly. Really, thank you. He won’t leave the room. I’ve stopped him from cleaning, but he won’t leave the room. Perhaps you can convince him. He shouldn’t be in there, sitting with...with all of that stuff. My father-in-law wasn’t even sick. We don’t understand what happened. He never mentioned that he was depressed. We had dinner with him, just the other night. Ribs, his favourite.”

Harry nodded, assured her that this was a natural response. He asked to be directed to the bathroom. The paramedics did alright; not a chair out of place, not a shoe scuff anywhere, no evidence of death or trauma at all. Quite a feat, maneuvering in close quarters like this.

The door to the bathroom was shut tight, light blazing out from around the edges. Harry took a deep breath, and turned the knob.

“Oh, uh, hey, Harry.”

“Hello Henry.”

“Long time no see.”

“Long time no see.”

“So, you’re in this end of the business now?”

“Yep, for a while now.”

“I see.”

“Yep.”

Harry stood in the doorway, thinking how small Henry looked, perched on the toilet seat, hugging his knees.

“Bet you didn’t expect to see me here.”

“Yeah, Henry, sorry ‘bout this. If I would’ve known, I’d da sent one of my guys. Really.”

“No, no, it’s ok. So, um, how’s Viv? She doing ok these days?”

“She’s fine Henry, doing real well.”

“Good, good. She deserves...well, I’m glad she’s doing ok.”

“Henry...”

“I know, I know, I’m probably in the way. I just can’t bear to leave, though. Funny, huh? This is probably the worst place for me to be right now, but I can’t leave it. I’m driving Beth nuts. She’s worried sick. You saw her, huh? Just got married in Reno last week. Was a quick courtship, but it felt right. At least, I think it felt right.”

“Henry...”

“She’s a school teacher, did you know that? Oh, well, of course you didn’t. No, guess that didn’t come up in passing. Heard her whispering. She’s got a loud whisper. Like a stage whisper, you know? Yeah, she’s a funny one. Did she tell you it was with a fishing knife? For gutting fish? Did she tell you that? My father loved to fish.”

“No, she didn’t say.”

“Yeah, my old man loved the river. Always planned to go out on the high seas, try his hand at the bigger stuff. Sword fish, dorado, that really tasty tuna you get in sushi restaurants. It’s like butter, if you cut it right.”

At that, Henry began to sob.

“Henry, maybe you should go out and see Beth. Let her give you some coffee.”

“No, no, I’m ok. See? No tears. They won’t come out. Just a bit of dry heaving, kinda like when we used to whoop it up together. You remember that, don’t you?”

Harry took his first long look at the bathtub. It was half filled with bloody water, the surrounding tiles smeared with feces, more blood, splattered with small pieces of viscera.

“Yeah, you probably want to get cleaning. I wanted to do it myself, but Beth wouldn’t let me. Said it was too traumatic. How much more traumatic could it be? Look at my hands? I’m already covered in stuff. Picked up dad outta the water myself. I shouldn’t have, I guess, since it was kinda a crime scene and all. Do you watch those crime shows, Harry? Y’know, the ones with all the blood and guts and de-headed corpses? The ones where they show the autopsies? My dad looked like he autopsied himself.”

Henry brushed a lank thatch of graying blonde out of his eyes. Harry was still standing in the doorway, silently calculating his first move. The two men kept their gazes low, focused on the bath rug.

“Can’t quite figure it out. I mean, my dad seemed fine. He stuck to the same routine, everyday, rain or shine. Newspaper and coffee at the diner ‘round the corner, a walk up to the hardware store to see what’s happening, lunch at twelve, nap at two, dinner at six—like clockwork. The same routine, ever since he retired. He even had a lady friend who’d sometimes bring him over chili, iron his shirts. And healthy as a horse; I took him to get checked out just the other week. I was in the room when the doctor

gave him the verdict; “You’re as healthy as a horse, Jim. Just watch your salt.” They tell every man over forty to watch his salt. Right?”

Harry nodded, and decided to start readying his equipment.

“He didn’t even flinch when Mom died, the fucker. Said to me, “Such is life, son. Now, can you help me cart her shit off to the Sally Ann?”

Steam cleaner, deodorizer, rag, scraper, hazmat bag.

“Thought maybe he’d mourn in private. I’d stop by unannounced to see if he had the tell-tale red eyes, runny nose, whatever. But nothing. Two weeks later, he had this new woman, cleaning out the fridge. She was down on her goddamn knees, on the kitchen floor, surrounded by old Tupperware, mustard bottles, relish jars, spoiled meat. And he looked like the cat that swallowed the fucking canary, sitting at that little banquette in the corner, beer in hand, welcoming me in.”

The walls in the small room were pretty good, nothing that a wipe wouldn’t fix, but the floor would have to be steamed, spritzed, scrubbed, as would the tub and the stall. Harry donned his gloves.

“That guy was some piece of work. Don’t get me wrong, my father did right by his family. We were always fed and clothed, but when it came to me, when it came to my mother....”

Henry trailed off, catching sight of Harry reaching in to drain the tub.

“Hey, hey—not yet, ok. Give me a few minutes more, please?”

Harry wanted out of there. He wanted to do his job, and get out. He wanted to leave before he said something wrong, before he did something stupid to the wan man curled up in a fetal position on the toilet.

“Guess you’re used to seeing all this, huh? Isn’t gross, or even sad anymore, I’m sure. I have to say, for guys like me, it’s shocking, overwhelming, Harry. Especially if it’s your dad in there, covered in blood and crap and, and, things I can’t even name. All that stuff that’s supposed to remain inside the body. Hey—most times, are the bodies still on scene when you get there to mop up?”

Harry bristled. “Sometimes, Henry.”

“This your own business, Harry? You doing well for yourself?”

“Things are good, Henry.”

“That’s good, that’s good. Guess Viv’s taken care of, then.”

Silence.

“Kinda like his life is in that tub. As long as bits of him are still floating around, he’s not...well, he is, I know, I’m not crazy, I know my dad is...”

Henry started sobbing again. He never showed one bit of remorse for ignoring Viv, for putting her on the shelf, for denying her love. He was vicious when she asked for a divorce, riddling her with threats, telling her she’d spend the rest of her life miserable, without a cent of his money, as a janitor’s wife, is that what she wanted, to be handled by a man who handles shit for a living?

“Sorry, Harry, sorry. You can pull the plug now. I’m ready. Go ahead.”

And then he hit her. Henry hauled off and punched Viv out cold. She never laid charges.

Harry reached into the tub, and pulled. They both watched as the red water swirled down the drain, taking clots and bits of pink tissue along for the ride.

Henry didn't come after Harry. He knew the fight would be over before it began, his friend being twice his size. And Viv forbade Harry to do anything. Said she'd never talk to him again if he did.

"I don't think my father ever did one nice thing for my mother, y'know that? My gift to her was taking him out of the house, whenever possible. He was so fucking demanding. Wonder if he loved her, or just needed a servant."

Harry kept his promise to Viv. He never laid a finger on Henry. Henry's car, on the other hand, was a different story. One hell of a write-off, when Harry got finished with it.

"Henry, it's gonna get mighty warm in here, once I turn the steamer on. Go on, go out there and see Beth."

"No, no, I'd rather not. I don't care if it gets hot. What d'you got there, anyway? One of those vaccum/steam cleaner hybrids? We were given one of those as a wedding gift."

"Uh, not exactly. This works like a pressure washer, but de-contaminates as it washes because of the...you sure you want to talk about this stuff?"

"Yeah, why not? Better than talking about my dad. He didn't even leave a note, the bastard. No explanation, no reason for putting me through this shit. An inconsiderate

ass, right until the end. His lady friend found him, called me right away. Obviously didn't give two goddamns for her either."

Viv cut off all contact with Henry soon after. And true to his word, he never gave her one red cent—not that she asked for any alimony. Harry was sure that he'd be getting a call from the police, waited on tenter hooks for months after vandalizing the car, but nothing ever happened.

Steam strengthened the smell of a body spilt. It wrestled with the sulphur of Henry's distress.

"I was so angry, Harry. At Viv, I mean. I know that's what you thought of, the moment you saw me tonight. It's been years, but...I swear to God, I'd never hit her before. I'd never hit anyone, for Christ sakes. Dad always called me a pussy. I could never fight back."

Harry stopped spraying. His back to Henry, he considered his options.

"I hadn't felt so...so much of anything, towards her, before. I knew it wasn't a good marriage, Harry, but no man deserves to be cuckolded. Especially by his best friend. Did you know that? That you were my best friend?"

Harry didn't say anything, he didn't move.

"I wanted to hurt her as much as she hurt me. It wasn't premeditated, it just happened. I have to think that's why she never reported me; she saw something fair about the situation. It felt like a clean break to a rotten relationship. It just did."

The acid was staying on the enamel for too long, Harry knew that, but he didn't stoop to wash it way.

"Can I help, Harry? Please? I'll do anything—hand you stuff, put dad's bits in that bag, whatever. There must be something. Do you have an extra pair of gloves? Harry?"

There was therapy. A chipped bicuspid resulting from the hit. And years of swinging in a moral abyss. Both were noosed by the knowledge of their indiscretions, but no, no, they were right to have proceeded as they did, those days in the room beside his sightless, senseless mother, holding each other for hours, attempting to breathe hope, life, themselves into one another...

"Harry?"

"Take mine, Henry."

"Really?"

"Yeah, shouldn't do this, you know, but four hands are better than a pair. Grab my caulking gun from the dolly, would'ja?"

"Geez Harry, this is...well, thanks. We're good now, huh? All that other shit is in the past, right?"

Harry felt his stomach seize.

"Just hand me my gun, will ya?"

"Sure, sure, no problem, man," and Henry stiffly unfurled himself.

The smell of chemicals reared up, overpowering the scent of anything remotely human. Each deep, regulated breath burned like electrical fire, but Harry tried to remain calm.

“Here ya go, Harry.”

Harry turned to meet Henry’s gaze full on, gun in hand.

“OK then.”

And just like that, Harry shot streams of caulking all over Henry’s shirt.

“What the fuck, Harry?! Jesus! What the hell?”

“Give me your shirt.”

“What?!”

“Give me your shirt. I’ll wash it. Or I’ll buy you a new one. Just hand it over.”

“You’re crazy! I’m a man in mourning, I...”

“Fine,” said Harry, and began roughly unbuttoning the cotton piqué himself.

Henry didn’t struggle. They avoided each other’s eyes, as one stripped the other clean. It was useless for Henry to fight. Harry towered like a monolith, his hands sure in their work.

“Now we can get started. Grab that mop.”

“Whoa, look at your hands...”

Touched by the sealant, Harry’s skin began to redden and bubble.

“I’m allergic to latex. I can manage. Can you?”

“I, uh, yeah, I guess so...”

Harry grunted. “Good. Let’s get going.”

Silently, the two men went about their task, ridding the room of the stains of the father, not finishing until late into the morning.

Little Girl Games

Maria used to cross herself with sticks. It would happen when we were out back in the far reaches of the school playground, walking round and round the running track. Just as one of us would be getting to a good part of a story, she'd call everything to a halt so as to make close inspection of a stray poplar twig. If it was a split twig, formed like a divining rod, Maria would pick it up, close her eyes, and touch four points of her body with the crux of the 'v'.

Maria came from a religious household. Her mother was a lapsed Mennonite and her father was German Baptist. This made her an authority on all things God and holy-like. For the first two years of our friendship, she'd try and convince me to take a greater interest in Jesus Christ. "He died for you, you know," she'd say while we were busy squishing caterpillars just off side of the road, seeing if they'd bleed "catsup, mustard or relish". "You'll burn in hell if you don't believe," she warned, trying not to laugh at her wailing little sister whose panties we'd just tossed high up into a silver maple. "You like God, don't you? Well, he is just God's son," she'd contend, having lain her dolls in an old tool box to do their Barbie and Ken business.

Despite Maria's febrile devotion to the salvation of my soul, and my constant refusal to see the light, we were very good friends. This probably had to do more with our proximity to one another than any other factor. Where as most of our other friends lived on farms and bush properties deep within the township's limits, our homes were situated a mere country mile apart. In the summer time, we'd often meet half way in

front of the Bennett's farm. Leaving our bikes (and sometimes Maria's sniffling little sister) on the gravel shoulder, we'd clumsily forge into the ditch through the tall grass and brambles, whistling and clicking our tongues to coax the Bennett's horses down towards the fence. Maria was crazy about horses. We would plot and plan ways to get over the fence so that we could ride them, bare back, just like they did "in the old days".

It was in the early spring of grade four, during one of our usual recess promenades, that Maria and I agreed to go into the marriage business. We had been noticing with increasing frequency that our classmates were pairing up. Through the aid of well meaning friends, hastily scrawled notes and craftily worded cootie catchers, our girlfriends were beginning to claim boyfriends for themselves. Previous to this, most of us girls confessed to having crushes. It was even rumoured that some of the boys liked us back. But nothing really came of it, save for a bit of drama when on occasion, two girls shared the same crush. A fight would ensue over hypothetical dating rights, but end quickly enough seeing as no boy came forth to pick a favourite.

Things began to change when the grade five class began 'going out' with one another: phone calls in the evening to plan where they were going to meet up at recess the next day; holding hands at lunch hour; kissing behind the landscaping shack our school janitor had erected in the hopes of outsmarting a bunch of tool-hungry raccoons. The fivers were moving ahead fast, and we grade fours were not about to be left behind.

Michelle and Terry were the first to pronounce their couple status. Michelle was the only kid who lived close enough to the school to walk home for lunch. This gave her extraordinary *caché* amongst her fellow classmates. Upon the first day of 'going out',

Michelle brought Terry home without permission, which elicited a swift reprimand from the principal, our teacher, and her mother. The couple took it all in stride, simply revamping their lunch hour plans to include private time by the monkey bars. These trendsetters incited a great wave of coupling. Leeann and Billy were next. Then Leeann and Michael. Then Leeann and Layton, which shocked us all. We became awash in a world of lies, deceit, broken promises and wanton ways. Who knew the nine year old mind could be so devious?

Maria saw through all the melodrama. She saw the need for stability. She saw the need for certainty. She saw the recent wedding of her Aunt Vi, and thought every woman in the world should wear white lace and puffy sleeves. Romance was not a concept to be taken lightly. Amy and Billy were on the cusp of 'going out'. Maria proposed that this be taken to another level.

We had often played "wedding". Digging through the dress-up bins, we'd manage to come up with suitable attire for the event; an old full slip to drape over our shorts and t-shirts, a lacy half slip to wear on our heads. On more than one occasion though, "wedding" turned into "princesses on patrol"—a sort of Camelot meets *Charlie's Angels* hybrid. When we actually went through with the ceremony, we'd make Maria's little sister be the groom. Happy just to be included, she'd stand in front of the coffee table/altar-of-holy-matrimony, drowning in one of her father's sports coats.

The idea for a ceremony with moral undertones was Maria's. I, on the other hand, must take full credit for coming up with the following: the marriage contract, a consultation with the happy couple to go over vows, bridal party details, and possible

ceremony locations, as well as a written assurance from the groom guaranteeing that he would show up at the appointed time instead of wimping out to go play soccer-baseball with his buddies. Maria insisted on designing the invitations and the rings, seeing as she was the artistic type. I was big picture, she was small detail, and after having spit-shaken on our new proposition, we approached the would-be blissful twosome.

Amy, being the girl jock of our class, was a bit skeptical of anything too *frou-frou*. At the point in our pitch where Maria started going on about puffy sleeves and God, Amy's eyes began to glaze over and Billy started shifting nervously from foot to foot. Quickly refining our strategy, I jumped in to assure the couple that everything would be done in the best taste possible. Pandering to Amy's sense of priority, I made mention of the fact that the ceremony could be scheduled in after track-and-field day, as long as the preparations were taken care of in advance. Maria piped up and said that she would work Amy's first place ribbons into the decorations. This cemented the bride's commitment to our cause, but the cold-footed groom was still unsure.

I asked Billy to take a walk around the track with me. I explained to him the importance of commitment in the face of our ever-changing young world. I slipped in the fact that once Amy began 'dating', she might not be satisfied with the attentions of just one boy. I even threw in a bit about post-pledge snacks, seeing that no wedding was complete without a celebratory meal. As Billy was on a constant growth spurt, his weakness was his stomach. I knew I had him when he asked "what kind of snacks?" I ran back to tell everyone the happy news.

We agreed to meet Saturday at Maria's house in order to prepare for our first gig.

Maria had commissioned her little sister to do our drudge work, gophering construction paper, markers, potato chips and fruit punch down to the basement where we had set up shop. Going over the specifics of the marriage contract, I made sure to work in a sort of elementary pre-nup, having borne witness to the fall out from one too many mixed-tape exchanges. Maria thought that two horses running side by side through a meadow would be the perfect picture to have on the front of the wedding invitations. I agreed to this, so long as I didn't have to draw anything. My horses always ended up with hairy pin heads and rumps resembling monster, mutant peaches. Everything was as smooth as silk until we had to decide who was going to officiate the ceremony. Maria thought it should be her, since she was closer to the Lord and all. I thought I should do it, as I was the resident class thespian. Hadn't I just received a standing O for my performance in the last Parent's Day pageant?

We decided to let the couple choose, wanting to give them the illusion of authority over their special day. That following Monday, we showed Amy and Billy several potential playground locales, excitedly talking up the spot we thought best suited our spectacle. We left them with six official invitations to distribute at will, the contract we had written up on pink paper in red ink, and a list of pros and cons concerning our respective ceremony-leading skills. With all the details finally squared away, Maria and I were set to have our first real wedding in four days time.

By the time Wednesday rolled around, we had still not heard back from our pair of lovebirds. Maria began to get testy. She feared there would not be enough time to decorate *and* pick out theme-appropriate psalms, should she be chosen to conduct the

proceedings. I was a bit put out too, having spent all my allowance on a bag of Oreos and two cartons of B-b-q Pringles for the post-wedding celebration. We confronted Amy and Billy separately that lunch hour, hoping a divide and conquer technique would speed up the process. Maria couldn't get a definitive answer from Billy, as he was too busy being third baseman and didn't have time for "girl stuff". Amy, on the other hand, was willing to spill the beans after some very insistent cajoling. She confessed that she and Billy had gone ahead and signed the marriage contract Monday, if only to see what her name and his last name looked like together on an "official" document. Unfortunately, that evening while chatting on the phone, it became evident that they could never go through with the wedding. Billy admitted to harbouring lingering feelings for Leeann, his first real girlfriend. He didn't know if he could ever like Amy in the same way, but as an afterthought, said he would try. Amy, in her mind, ran second place to no one, and decisively called the whole thing off.

A bit chagrined, Amy inquired after some divorce papers that she and Billy could sign, seeing as how they were 'legally' married now in the eyes of our classmates. I switched tactics, and solemnly said I would get right to work. I had gone from yenta, to wedding planner, to lawyer, all in one day. I never had such power before. The only problem was to get this past Maria; a girl who believed so heartily in the sanctity of marriage, in the union of two, in the fruition of our endeavours, in the wedding rings she had labouriously made from neon friendship beads and twist ties.

I had expected Maria to put up the good fight, to try and convince Amy and Billy to give it another go, to go find another couple on the playground who would agree to get

married under a paper banner that read “A.C. + B.L. 4 EVER”. But there were no theatrics, no beseeching of the Lord for the reinstatement of propriety, not even a cuss word which sometimes escaped her otherwise Jesus-worthy mouth. She just sat down on the playground lawn, which had yet to recover from the winter, and began nimbly picking through the brown mat for new greenery.

I didn't press for Maria's help on the divorce. I wrote one sentence on a lined scrap torn from my notebook—"I agree to divorce you in the month of _____, on the day of the _____, 19__"—and drew two lines freehand under it for both signatures. Amy had high jump practice and Billy wanted to get home for his after school snack, so there was no real pomp or circumstance to the whole affair. After they had signed the document, I assured them that I would keep it filed in the safest place I knew—under my mattress at home. Both seemed somewhat nonplused by the gravity of the moment, as they nodded quickly in sync and ran off the moment the final dismissal bell rang.

Last year, I received a wedding invitation from Michelle. It had been years since I had spoken, or for that matter, seen any of my grade school friends. For me, going to the town's public high school meant spreading my wings, trying new things, leaving behind those who thought they knew me, for those who knew they didn't. Some of the old gang stuck together throughout those teenage years, and from what I had heard, decided to stay and make adult lives in the area.

So I wondered; could it be that Michelle found my name on the back of an old picture, and said to herself, “what a lovely chance for a reunion?” Maybe she was

curious to see how those who'd flown the coup had turned out. Or perhaps, the bride to be stumbled upon her pink-flocked address book from 1986 and thought, "Hmmm, I'll just invite everyone I've ever known to the ceremony. It's a crap shoot, but there's a chance I'll get a gift out of it." Unaware of my current whereabouts, she passed on the invitation to my mother.

After a bit of deliberation on the matter and some shuffling of my work schedule, I caught a lift back to my hometown. It was the nostalgia factor that compelled me to RSVP, "yes." Well, nostalgia, and my own nagging curiosity to see first hand how adulthood was treating everyone. The ceremony was scheduled for late afternoon, so I had just enough time to briefly see my parents, change into something appropriate, borrow my father's car and zoom off to find parking in the small church's lot.

Upon opening the car door, I was greeted by the sight of four women struggling out of a mini van, all hindered by miles of tulle. I called out their names in quick succession, smiling at the thought of reconvening with my old school chums. "It won't be so bad," I thought, "you've turned out fine and they all seem to be in high spirits". There was no answer to my call, so I repeated it again. Leeann was the first to stop fidgeting with her bridesmaid dress. She looked over, and offered up the type of grin one normally reserves for well-intentioned, but ultimately bothersome strangers. I kept smiling dumbly as the three others dropped what they were doing to turn my way.

"Come on, girls," Leeann commanded, leading a brigade of fluffy women past my car and into the church. Maria was the last to walk by me. When I managed to catch her eye, she nodded quickly, looked away, and followed the rest in.

I took a seat on the pew beside Amy and her mother. Amy looked tanned and well-turned out. She had become a hair dresser and was planning on getting married herself within the coming year. She nodded in sympathy when I explained what happened outside.

“You know,” she said quietly, “Maria is due in six months.”

“Really,” I replied, a bit shocked, “when did *she* get married?”

“She didn’t,” Amy smirked, and the wedding march began.

Your Boy Friday

5:15AM: "...blocked artery on Hadden due to an overturned milk truck. Make sure you bring your Wheaties on the drive in today! Now here's K.C. and the Sunshine Band to get you going on your Friday morn..." Hit snooze button.

5:25AM: "...and rain later on today..." Turn off alarm clock. Turn head towards window. Forgot to draw the blind last night. Forgot to take off clothes last night. Forgot to brush teeth last night. Wool mouth. Blech. Roll body up into a sitting position. Swing feet over edge of mattress. Balance. Keep upright. Blink. Rub eyes. Resist pull of fine cotton bedding, so warm, so soft...no. Get up.

5:28AM: How many bottles did the table do in? Started out with a nice Pinot Noir, and then...and then...Christ. Still peeing.

5:35AM: Kitchen. Water. Coffee? Are there beans? No. Shit. Instant? Why would there be instant? Tea, start with tea. Tea is for saps. White tips with verbena. Hate the tea. Shit. PDA-in a double macchiato at 6:45.

5:36AM: Text message on PDA from Ms.Y: "CATCH D CL ON WAY INTO WK." Fine. There's a café beside the drycleaners. PDA-in dry cleaning at 6:55.

5:40AM: Is there bread? Bagels? Leftovers from dinner at Cuccinas? Great. Verbena and *linguini alle vongole*. Nausea. Abort breakfast.

5:50AM: "...I'M ON A HIGHWAY TO HELL!" Pedometer says 2K. Feels like 10K. Turn up volume. Keep running. Ms. Y wants shapely employees. Dry heave by the side of the road. "...AND I'M GOING DO-OW-OWN!" Back to apartment.

6:11AM: Take toothbrush into shower. Take shaver into shower. Take

caffeine pills-Ibuprophen-B complex-Gravol combo into shower. Multi-task. Can do attitude. Check, check, check, check.

6:30AM: Out the door, 103 steps to the subway. Convenience is one small key to success. Stimulants another. Pop an extra caf-pill. Smile at the turnstile attendant. Life underground. Couldn't hack it. Would miss the sun.

6:32AM: Text from Ms.Y: "1 BG ORG—NO MIX, NO HYDRO! .5 CKE, 10 SMARTIES." Fuck. Find dealer on platform. Good, by the corner post. And young too. Usually the fastest—inexperience makes them sketchy, eager. What is he, like 14? Will he have organic? Ms. Y can smell the difference.

6:37AM: NOTE TO SELF: do not be hasty in judging today's teens. Little Boy was all business. Had everything, and more. Plans to set up his own grow-op in two years, once some bonds mature. What happened to model planes and hanging out at the mall? Changing world.

6:40AM: Seems like the whole car forgot to apply deodorant. C'mon, c'mon, c'mon—off at the next stop. Got to keep on schedule. Has the train always been this slow?

6:48AM: Behind schedule. Shit. Forget coffee. Jump the line and get the Armani. Don't even have to say anything. The cleaners know every one of Ms. Y's underlings.

6:50AM: Cleaners point out stain on my shirt. Crap. It's big, can't go to the office like this. Ms.Y will have a fit. K, Ricky should be in at his boutique by now. Set him up with that model last month. Owes me, *mucho*. Text: "RICK, OPN UP. NEED BUT. DN. SHRT. BLK. 15.5 NK, 33 SLV. NTHING CHEAP." On way to boutique, call Felix. Tell him to cover. "Say I had some difficulty in procuring the product. She'll know what I mean." That should buy some time.

7:02AM: Knock on the plate glass window, Rick is dressing the mannequins. He has the shirt ready to go, thank God. Change in the middle of the store. Rick tells me to wear it three buttons down at the neck. “No one wears ties anymore. Not in your business. Not unless it’s ironic.” I trust Rick. Fashion is his religion. Too bad the tenets are always changing.

7:15AM: text from Ms. Y: “DID U GET IT YET?”

7: 20AM: Run to make the elevator. Pop another speedy-von c-pill. Up, up, up. Stomach rolls. Ugh.

7:23AM: Touch down. Glide into office, slide behind desk. Phone; “Y PR, Oli here...”

7:32AM: “OLIVER! ARE YOU OUT THERE?” Felix shoots over a “sounds like you’re in trouble” look. Stand up quick from sitting position. See kaleidoscope of stars. Blood flow should be better. What’s the point of taking all those pills?

7:41AM: “...and I didn’t hire you just because you’re pretty! I’m running a proper business here! I need you in, on time, especially on days like this! And what is this crap? I get better drugs at my son’s Montessori! Do you have any gum on you? Peachy, thanks. Now do you think you can give my feet a little rub? This morning’s been a bitch. I’ve been in talks with the people from Stuttgart, and they only want models with *real* deformities for tonight’s launch, like a gimp leg, or a half a face, or...” Phase out. Go to a happy place. Bali. No, never been to Bali. Can’t see it. Lorenzo’s beach house party, Yeah. Last summer, with that girl from Barcelona. Ahhhh. Can’t even feel Y’s corns now.

8:03AM: Back to desk. Check e-mail. Hear Felix snickering in the background. He’s just jealous. I’m Ms. Y’s number one boy, and he knows it. Adam’s number two,

followed by Julien, then Paco, with Felix rounding out the back. In fact, he rounds it out because he *rounded out*. But we're all in it together. Adjust shirt cuff, wipe speck of dirt from pant leg.

8:12AM: Respond to emails:

"Sorry dude. Can't make it to Voisin at seven. Launch of new apparel line. Say hi to the talent, though. That Parma chick is primo. Go for it."

Send.

"Sorry Kitten. Love to hang out, but it's all business this eve. Maybe next Wednesday? Text me."

Send.

"That place is so last month, love. Come to the launch instead. I'll put your name on the list at the door. Don't go to the front—that's where all the plebs will be. Come around to the side exit, knock twice, pause, then knock twice again. Don't let anybody see you.

Ms. Y will kill me. "

Send.

"Ms Y. will only say that her client is out of country, visiting relatives. All allegations and/or suggestions to the contrary are false and flagrantly offensive."

Send.

"Can you get the muzzles over to the Ritz by five? You'd be doing me a real solid, Charles. Tell the desk they're for the launch tonight. Gracias mucho, in advance."

Send.

9:07AM: Instant Message from Kitten: u'r sure you can't come, oli?

Oli: honest. as i said, gotta wk. y don't u go to vos. with the others?

Kitten: hate them. hate them all. only'd go to see u.

Oli: won't be there, darling. we'll do something next week, k?

Kitten: now i hate u 2.

Oli: o, don't be that way. gotta jet, pet. miss u much.

Kitten: fine. nxt week. u'r lucky u'r so pretty.

Oli: i am, aren't i? ☺

IM Status: Offline

9:26AM: Paco comes back from tracking down the city's only source of imported *umberblitzen*. There won't be enough to serve at the after party. He's stalling out front before going in to tell Ms. Y. Gotta feel for the guy. The last time a boy failed to locate something, Ms. Y cut his VIP privileges down by half. He couldn't slip but two of his friends into Lai, and had all comps revoked at Nori. Forced to pay for his own spicy crab rolls. The horror.

9:45AM: Gots tha' munchies. Nothing 'round here but Altoids and blow. This is not proper sustenance for a growing boy. Must sneak out for a pastry. Tell Felix, "got to run an errand." He says, "get me two of whatever you're getting, but in chocolate." Felix, Felix, Felix; will you ever learn?

9:57AM: Cute girl behind the counter. Keep sunglasses on. Mystique, it is all about the mystique. Wait for it, wait for it...K', lean in, flash that stunning grin. "One almond croissant, two *pain au chocolat*, and uh, um, a single espresso. Yeah, love—to go. Cheers."

10:04AM: Pastry chick's number in PDA under "Sweet Sue." Remember that for later.

10:12AM: Stop to admire gorgeous new Italian slides in store window. Catch a glimpse of the hair in reflection. Got to get that neatened up before tonight. PDA-in tentative appointment with Juan Carlo at 5:30PM. Text J.C. If he doesn't get back in seven minutes, text Dean. Dean's fine for a trim, wouldn't dare trust him with a new style. Ditto for highlights.

10:17AM: While in elevator, get text from J.C. He'll do me the solid of 5:30 if I can get him into the launch tonight. Done and done, my friend. Confirm time block in PDA.

10:19AM: *Life is sweet, life is grand...*...what the hell? Ms. Y's been skulking around out front. A faint trace of *Terre D'Hermes* still lingers in the air. Oh God. My beautiful desk! Sticky notes litter the surface like a flock of dead canaries. Turn to face Felix, who's giving me the Cheshire grin.

"Where's my chocolate, boy?"

Fuck you, Felix, fuck you.

TO DO: Find victims of Polio. Conference in their agent to me.

TO DO: Confirm FX Labs for make-up. Tell them to bring selec. of gaping wounds.

TO DO: Tampons, Stoli, 2 prs boys spt. socks, size 6-11, Trojans, protein bar (caramel)

TO DO: Get prilim. timeline to Adam—he's setting up at the Ritz. Fax to front desk.

TO DO: Type up prilim. timeline (see attached.) Make changes if/when they arise.

TO DO: Answer back CEO Tom from "Exec. Match." Thank him for the tea roses, tell him (nicely) that I never want to see him again. Ask him for his contact in Aspen.

NOTE: Tell your pals to take a raincheck tonight. Only A-list for the launch. No 'no-names.' Are we clear?

10:22AM: Can't read anymore without dissolving into tears. "Why didn't you stop her, Felix? You gotta take some of these off my hands."

10:23AM: "No way, Oli. I've got my duties for the day. Manning the phones. Turning away the rest of the alphabet from the door. Patching through the Euro trash to Ms. Y. Serious business here, bro. You need to get on top of your own shit."

10:24AM: "I'm blocking off time for pay back, F-man. Look at this, look over here. You're scheduled in between lunch at ANI and a drugstore run for tampons. You like that? Y'scared? Yeah, well, you should be."

10:25AM: “You finished there, Oli?”

10:25AM: “Yeah, I’m done.”

10:25AM: “Got my pastries?”

10:25AM: “Yeah, here y’ go.”

10:26AM: “Great.”

10:30AM: Have stared at the yellow carnage for long enough. Must accept fate as the ousted darling. For now. Easy climb back up—Ms. Y loves the pretty boys, and who’s the prettiest of the lot? Right son, right. Chin up. Before long she’ll be begging you to escort her to dinner. Who’s the man? You are, Chico, you are.

10:32AM: Get on the horn to The Agency; “Listen man, you got to help me out. We need freaks. That’s right—honest to fuck aberrations. None? What about that model with the peg leg? Will she take it off and hop around for a bit? Circulate among the crowd? No? How about the Swedish guy with a lazy eye? Saw him at Crepa the other night. ... Well he said he worked for you. OK, fine. Where did you get the models featured in last month’s Right Bomb campaign? They were all kinds of fucked up....No, I don’t think it was just the clothing. They seemed really gimpy. Photoshopped? Really? Ah crap. Hmmm...ok man, I am turning thirteen shades of desperate. What do you recommend? No, they don’t want any fake shit. Not for the models, at least. No, they’re pressing hard for the real deal. Think about it, and get back to me. Promise to get you into the launch if you come through. Yeah, yeah—ciao.”

10:41AM: Where the hell is Julien this morning? He should be handling her birth control, at the very least. No one has mentioned his name. This could potentially mean something is grossly amiss, or he’s on secret assignment. Hate doing Mr. Big Shot-publicist-ex-husband espionage myself, so God speed Julien. Hope you dig up some dirt. PR is such a nasty affair. Now, where’s that fucking timeline....

10:59AM: Timeline typed and faxed to Adam, to the tune of Paco getting eaten out by an angry Ms. Y, still hungry for *umberblitzen*. Christ, she’s loud. Text Felix: “JUST GO

DOWN ON HER PACO & GET IT OVER WITH!” Felix turns around from his desk and we have a good morale-boosting giggle.

11:10AM: Search for: “physically challenged models+rate+half face” Go. 10 000 hits. Mostly porn. Fuck.

11:12AM: Search for: “Gimps+work for scale” Go. 7134 hits. Yes! And one that appears promising. Jackpot! Click on site. Wow. Very nice graphics. Wonder who did the front end? Looks like T.O.D.’s handywork. One hell of a web designer. Never has to pay for drinks, like, anywhere.

11:15AM: “Hi, is this M-PAIR? Great, great. I’m looking for some models to stroll around a launch party tonight. It’s for a German clothing label. No, I thought the online form would take too long to process. Sure, sure—put me on hold. OH! And one other thing—they have to be the real deal. No arms taped to the side under a sweater, no fake clubbed feet. You got me? OK, thanks. I’ll wait....”

11:23AM: Text from Adam: “FX LABS HERE 2 START TRYING OUT SHIT ON WAIT STAFF. SCARS&BRUISES CHEAPEST. TELL Y.” Good. Done and done. Tear up sticky note.

11:30AM: Still on hold.

11:34AM: Instant message with Ms. Y:

Oli: potential phone confab w/ gimp agent in about 5 min.

Y: fine—on line 1 w/ julien, 2 w/ heinrich. try me on 3. tampons?

Oli: after lunch. can u wait?

Y: i’ll clench. ☺

Oli: ☺

Y: FX labs?

Oli: at ritz now, beating up the help.

Y: excellent.

IM Status: Busy

11:37AM: Instant message from Kitten: u busy?

Oli: very.

Kitten: roc said u'r getting him in 2nite.

Oli: roc's a liar. can't chat now.

IM Status: Be Right Back

11:40AM: Ms. Y hashes out details with M-PAIR agency. Must stay on phone to keep track of details, i.e.—three Thalidomides (2 male & 1 female), one “half body”(fem.), one Tourettes sufferer(male), one withered arm(male), one double amputee (fem.), \$50/hr (each), talking extra, touching extra, all acts of a carnal nature *verboden*, rider requirements must be filled at beginning of night, two dressing rooms, wheelchair access, strict enforcement of union rules, option to keep clothing at night's end, etc, etc, etc, etc...

11:50AM: Still caught in three way with M-PAIR and Ms. Y. Discussing fine line between 'touching' and 'carnal.'

Instant message from Ms. Y: where's lunch?

Oli: ANI

Y: reservations?

Oli: for 2.

Y: i'm going w/ u.

Oli: felix will be ☹

Y: fuck felix. need to talk.

IM Status: Out To Lunch

12:01PM: Anticipating bittersweet taste of expensed meal with stressed out boss.

12:40PM: Continuing to anticipate. Ms. Y not coming out of office. Reservation was for

12:30PM. Had to call up ANI, explain, beg, then threaten with the wrath of Ms. Y's name.

Got us a window of time, until one. A fast cab should get us over there in five minutes.

C'mon Ms. Y; put down the God damn phone.

1:06PM: Got Ms. Y off the phone and into the cab. She offers up a smartie from the subway stash. Goes down nice with a swing from her flask. Hand on my knee, she begins a verbal onslaught which doesn't abate until we are at the restaurant and wrist deep in appetizers. It then begins again and carries on through to desert. Thanks to the magic pill, I can focus on every word.

1:21PM: "...but then Julien found out that the bastard intends to bring Trampy McSlutskin, which of course flies in the face of all business and social etiquette. Not only is it an insult to me, but to Heinrich, who used to go out with the little wench when she was a c-list fetish model who couldn't get into one of these shin digs to save her life. Heinrich has Mou-Mou now, but what about me? How will it look to the press when I show up with nobody on my arm? You? No darling—they've grown too used to you. You're like a beard at this point. Everybody knows you're my boy, and not my *man*. Hmmm? Sure, I'll take a bit more. But only a drop—too many carbs in wine. I wish I had your metabolism. God, the things you can get away with. Speaking of which, Oli; you have to be at your desk when I need you. How does it look to the other boys when my number one is off gallivanting who knows where with who knows who? What kind of example are you setting? Or conversely, what kind of example am I setting by letting you do whatever you wish? Everybody needs to know that I am in control. I have to run a ship shape, professional operation. I can't lose face in front of anybody. Can you imagine if word got around to the Ex? God, I can't believe he's bringing that whore to the launch tonight! He's doing her PR, apparently. What does she need a handler for? The photographers barely blink when she's around. Oh—you've got to be on guard when the paparazzo ask Heinrich about his last collection. He doesn't want to answer any questions about the eyelashes. He was going through a phase then, it was an artistic statement, he has no idea where those Indonesians got such a load of them, any mention of detention camps and small children have to be nipped in the bud. We are onto something completely new now. His people want everyone on board to stress "new"; *new* direction, *new* design, *new*

perversions, a *new* use of natural—but not human—fibres. Are you going to eat your *lavash*? I'm starving. Something so thin can't possibly be more than 9 countable carbs, right? I never know how to calculate these things. My trainer says to subtract the fibre grams, but Christ, it's not like the bread basket comes with a nutritional chart. Did you already contact Tim from Executive Match? Oh, *Tom*, was it? Right, well, whatever—maybe it's not too late to snag him for tonight. He's horrible in bed, but I don't have to go home with him. I just need to appear with someone who looks approximately my age. What? Really Oli, the reassurance isn't necessary. I know I'm in pretty good shape for a middle age broad. I better be, or Dr. Shapiro isn't doing his job! Have you reconsidered my offer on the Botox refresher? It's never too early to start. Take it from someone who knows. I'm doing Dr. S's "Boffo Breasts For Bupkas" campaign in April. Already have the photo proofs for the paper ads. Thinking of getting a lift myself. We'll see. Remind me to give Mou-Mou his card. Heinrich said she's starting to sag, but he doesn't want to say anything. God, he loves that poor girl so much. What is it with him and gutter trash? Hmm...maybe I can get out of fucking Tom if I switch over to Paco mid-night. Paco certainly owes me for that *umberblitzen* fiasco. He's lucky that the gays adore him; I was set to fire him on the spot today. I think it's that Latin swagger that moves them so...or the bulge in his pants. He's on herding duty this evening, with Julien. We need to move everyone as quickly as possible from the pretty stick figures on the catwalk to the freaks in the main ballroom. Heinrich wants the transition to be jarring. And NO ONE say 'freaks', OK? The guy from M-PAIR said to use the term, "differently-abled." Watch Adam for that—that boy's tongue slips too easily. Fuck, I'm going to be "differently-abled" too if the mains don't arrive soon. Those appys weren't fit for an anorexic gnat. That's it; I'm off to the ladies room—a little powdering of the nose should get things revving again. Text me if Mr. Monkfish arrives in my absence, all right darling? And make sure to skim off the risotto—I refuse to lose the war against my ass because of a little rice and butter. Good, great."

2:28PM: Back at office, behind desk, listening to rambling message on voice mail. Call back The Agency:

“No, listen Roc—we’ve already found our gimps. Sorry man—you snooze, you lose. And thanks ever so very much for telling that mewling mess of a girl that I’d get you in. She’ll hold it over me forever. Kitten is renowned for her grudges. We can kiss her parent’s chalet *auf wiedersehen*. Wasn’t it you who bought those new short blades at the end of last season? Good luck in finding better powder to try them out on. That’s right Rocco—wave bye bye to that fresh mountain air. And say *sayanora* to tonight. No, uh-uh. Ms. Y has put her pump down. You’re not connected to the operation, you’re not A-list, you’re not getting in. What? Well of course I’m going to get Lauren in! I’ve been trying to get into her pants for months! Do you blame me? No, didn’t think so. Right, so please placate Kitten, would you? Feed her some line about the launch being a complete wankfest. She won’t want to come if it’s not the place to be. Fine—wait until later, knock on the side door, but I’m not promising anything. And just YOU—no guests. Ciao.”

2:34PM: Text from Felix: “HOW WAS LUNCH, ASSHOLE?”

2:34PM: “Felix, you can turn around and talk to me. I’m sitting right behind you.”

2:36PM: Text from Felix: “U DON’T DESERVE TO SEE MY PRETTY FACE.”

2:36PM: “Don’t be like that, dude. Here; I brought you back my dessert.”

2:38PM: Text from Felix: “WHAT IS IT?”

2:38PM: “Dark chocolate truffle cake with a blood orange coulis.”

2:39PM: Text from Felix: “U R 4GIVEN.”

2:58PM: Write courtly email to Tom from Exec. Match. Thank him for a lovely time last weekend. Be effusive about tea roses. Hint coyly at his prowess in bed. Ask him to launch tonight. Detail event. Demurely acknowledge his busy schedule and prior commitments. Hint coyly at own prowess in bed. Sign, “With Affection,” Ms. Y.
Send.

3:12PM: Julien comes in with ‘swag bag’ for launch. Every A-lister will receive one upon entering the ballroom. All the goodies in the basket look prime for the picking. I could do with a spa day at ErGo, Felix makes a grab for the cds, and we save the hair product for Paco. Ms. Y shouts, “DON’T BE VULTURES, BOYS,” and she’s right. We can be so uncouth. But she loves us that way. Felix pops in one of the CDs. We all begin thrashing to the hard, pumping ruckus of German Industrial. Felix stops, thinks he pulled something in his neck. Music off. Back to business.

3:33PM: Email from Tom: “I’d be happy to escort you tonight. I had a fantastic time last Saturday. You really know how to use your nails, don’t you ☺? Gathering this event isn’t black tie—perhaps I should come dressed for the occasion. You mentioned something about ‘apocalyptic S&M’—I have a nice collection of bondage wear. Just an option. Tell me what you think. I’ll come to the side door.”

Mark email “urgent”—remember to write a response. But not before attending to Felix’s whining with some “Icy Hot” and several extra-strength pain relievers.

3:45PM: Instant message from Ms. Y: TAMPONS!?

Oli: shit—going right now. already gone.

Y: RUN!

IM Status: Away

4:12PM: Back from pharmacy. Got everything on list except....ah shit. Forgot the condoms. Well, maybe she won’t notice. Stand at desk, take stock of situation. Can feel tension rising in office. Very palpable. Wish someone would massage my neck with an analgesic. Even baby oil would do.

“OLIVER! GET IN HERE!”

Right, right. Tampons. Coming, Ms. Y!

4:15PM: Standing outside door of executive washroom, taking notes: “...and make sure that Adam checks in every fifteen minutes until we get over there. I want to know how the staff is faring—can they get around a crowd in their outfits? In their make-up? What about

the servers who are down to one eye? I don't want any fake scar tissue conveniently "falling off" half way through the night. Are the caterers up to speed? We need to send out the hors d'ouvres one after the other—bam! Bam! Bam! Heinrich wants this event luxe—no stinging on the sesame shrimp. Ditto the booze. Keep it flowing. And get Adam to tell those in food service not to affect any limps, ticks, or curvatures of the spine. They are not to be mistaken for the real freaks. God knows how many would-be Streeps there are manning the trays tonight. Also, keep all whips, muzzles, ball gags, gas masks and chains above reach—we don't want any party goer taking undue liberties with the help. Christ, think of the libel. Text Adam so he has all the info right there on his PDA. Go, go, go!"

5:12PM: Cancel hair appointment with Juan Carlo. No time. Fuck, fuck, fucked-y-fuck. Pocket Paco's swag pomade. Sure he won't miss it.

5:34PM: Starting to drag under weight of responsibility. Out of caffeine pills. Wonder if Adam has got some greenies in his top drawer. Fuck! The damn thing is locked. Hit Felix up for a toot of the white stuff, but get lecture instead:

"You really should get off that crap, Oli. Not good for the system. And such a passé drug. Go meditate for a spell. Takes the edge off, puts you back in the game. I meditate for at least twenty minutes, everyday. Do you ever notice how you and the boys are always fucked by noon, and I'm just hitting my stride? No coincidence there, my friend. I got my Zen on. Totally."

"Felix, didn't I see you doing a rail two weeks ago at Nicole's dinner party? Shortly after the cheese course?"

"That was so fourteen days ago, dude. Get with the program."

5:45PM: Text from Adam: "MUZZLES STILL NOT HERE. DECORATORS PISSED. WAITSTAFF LOOKS DISGUSTING. GOING 4 A SMOKE. OVER&OUT."

5:50PM: Text from Paco: “MODELS HOT, EVEN IN UGLY CLOTHING. GET OVER HERE. KEEPIN EM WARM 4 U.”

5:54PM: Text from Julien: “TELL Y THAT X PLANS 2 ANNOUNCE SURPRIZE 2 PRESS. WILL FIND OUT MORE L8TR.”

6PM: Had enough. Must dash home to change into proper freak show/ “Apocalypse Stuttgart” attire. Maybe Hugo Boss. Definitely black.

6:01PM: Scream from back office: “OLIVER! WHERE ARE MY PATENT SPIKES?”

6:20PM: With boss shod and sedate for the moment, it is time to slip out the door. Felix gives me the silent army salute, mouth otherwise engaged in phone conversation. Ciao, Felix. May the C-listers give up the ghost without too much strife. C’mon—not popular, not admitted. Begging is so beneath us all.

7:10PM: In cab on way to Ritz. Have been busy fielding calls/texts with one hand, feeding, dressing, coifing myself with the other. Ms. Y in a tizzy over Ex. Julien couldn’t come through with more info. Divorce is such nasty business. Worse among publicists. All know how to ruin each another in less time than it takes to say, “yesterday’s news.” NOTE TO SELF: don’t ever walk down that aisle. Yeesh.

7:32PM: Arrive at Ritz. Would have gotten here sooner if cabbie overlooked a few stop signs, as per my suggestion. Catwalk start time is scheduled for nine, which means at least 9:30PM. After party scheduled for 9:40PM, ergo 10:20PM, but Ms.Y won’t stand for the usual post-show lollygagging. Save the bitchy comments for the ballroom, thank you very much.

7:37PM: My trench is barely off before Ms. Y is equipping me with my high-ranking lackey accouterments; walkie talkie radio headset, security tag, pass card, duty list, clipboard, and just to suit tonight’s mood, riding crop. Not exactly Cartier, but it makes one feel important.

8PM: We boys are all tuned into the same station; Y PR. It is a single voice stream of shrill directives and irrational demands. In the history of my service to Ms. Y, no event has ever

run smoothly. “WE NEED ORGANIC STRAWBERRIES, DE-STEMMED AND DE-SEEDED IN THE INTERVIEW SUITE.” “WE NEED SMALLER BUBBLES IN THE MINERAL WATER.” “GO FIND CARPET TAPE, TWO GERBILS AND A MARIANETTE—NOW!” “WHERE THE FUCK IS MY...OH, WAIT, NEVERMIND BOYS—FOUND IT...” By the end of the night, I’m always one “ten-four, copy that” away from chucking my earpiece into the nearest abandoned fruit-tini.

8:21PM: Charles finally arrives with muzzles, etc. Since the decorators have gone home for the night, it is up to Felix, Adam and I to do this ballroom up right. There is too much paraphernalia for just three men to handle, so we rope the hotel’s janitorial staff into helping us hang shit. We’re like the high school prom committee. But instead of hanging streamers, we staple nipple clamps to the wall.

8:49PM: Seven-fingered mop-jockey Burt wants to know where the last ball gag should go. I tell him to keep it, as a souvenir of our time spent together. He gives me a curious look, then tosses it onto his cleaning cart. “Stay for the party Burt,” I say, “you’ll fit right in.”

9:16PM: Walkie Talkie report from Julien: “The Ex has entered the building. I repeat, the Ex has entered the building. And he’s wearing Helmut Lang.”

9:17PM: W.T. reply from Ms. Y: “DO ANY OF YOU BOYS HAVE A PERCOCET? I JUST NEED HALF A PILL.”

9:17PM: W.T. reply from Paco: “You’re beautiful Ms. Y. He’s a bastard and you deserve much better.”

9:18PM: W.T. reply from Ms. Y: “STOP KISSING MY ASS, PACO. GET BACK TO WORK. WHAT’S THE WHORE WEARING?”

9:19PM: W.T. reply from Julien: “Um, not a hell of a lot.”

9:19PM: W.T. reply from Paco: “Figures, huh Ms. Y?”

9:20PM: W.T. reply from Ms. Y: “OH, SHUT UP PACO.”

9:43PM: The M-PAIR models are brought into the main ballroom. At their entrance, the lights dim and DJ Trevor starts spinning a sample of his wares. I am reminded of

jackhammers at dawn, dying loons, and a smattering of women in labour. The differently-abled people seem indifferent to the noise. They seem indifferent to the S&M gear. They don't even look remotely curious about the gruesome waitstaff. Perhaps they've seen this all before. Maybe they've seen far stranger. Tourette's guy comes over my way, and asks if he can smoke in here. When the answer comes back negative, he begins a barrage of expletives that'd make a seasoned trucker blush.

9:45PM: W.T. report from Adam: "Oli—girl at side door. Says she knows you."

9:45PM: W.T reply from Oli: "Copy that. I'm on my way."

9:46PM: W.T. reply from Ms. Y: "THAT BETTER NOT BE ONE OF YOUR FRIENDS, OLI."

9:46PM: W.T. reply from Oli: "Of course not, Ms. Y. Just enjoy the show. We have everything covered. Over and out."

9:47PM: *She's here, she's here she's here. Oh lovely Lauren is here, here-here-here, she's here...*

9:48PM: "Hiya, Oli!"

9:48PM: "Kitten! Wow, I, uh..."

9:49PM: "Roc told me the secret knock! I mean, well, I had to kinda drag it outta him, but, well, whatever, right? I mean, like, here I am!"

9:49PM: "Right! Here you are! Great! OK, well, come on in. The fashion show's in progress, the party hasn't started yet, there are some, well, uh, some people you can hang out with in the main ballroom—that's where the party's going to be—uh, right. So. Go right on through."

9:51PM: "Aren't you going to come with, Oli?"

9:51PM: "No, can't. Uh, sorry Kitten. Too busy. But I'll catch you in a few. Just have some things to take care of out here."

9:52PM: "Oh. OK. Well, come find me soon. I'll probably be by the bar."

9:52PM: "Of course, love. Soon, soon."

9:53PM: Make sure Kitten is out of earshot. Then proceed to bitch out Adam:

“Names, motherfucker, OK?! I need names—you can’t let the riff raff in. That’s why you’re positioned here. To stop the unwanted from entering the building!”

9:53PM: “Thought you knew her, dude. Jesus—sorry.”

9:54PM: “Nah, no—I’m sorry. It’s just, from now on, you’ve got to be more careful.”

9:54PM: Quadruple knock at side door. Adam looks over to it, then back to me. *Sigh.*

“Just open it Adam, for Christ sakes.”

9:55PM: “Hi there, Oliver. I decided to come after all.”

9:55PM: “Uh, hey there, uh...”

9:56PM: “It’s Sue. You came into the café this morning. Y’know—‘one almond croissant, two pain au chocolat...’”

9:57PM: “Oh sure! Sue! Uh, wow—so, I told you about the side door, huh?”

9:58PM: “Yeah, you did. Um, it’s ok that I’m here, yeah? I can leave but, it’s just that, well, I took the night off, and I was supposed to cover the counter shift for my friend...”

10PM: “No, no, no—come on in. Of course you’re welcome, love. The festivities haven’t started yet, but I’m sure you can entertain yourself at the bar. Why don’t you go on ahead, and I’ll join you there in minute, hmmm?”

10:02PM: “Uh, alright. If you’re sure.”

10:02PM: “I couldn’t be more certain. Please. Go in and have a good time.”

10:03PM: W.T. transmission from Ms. Y: “OK BOYS—THE SHOW IS OVER. NOW IT’S OUR CHANCE TO SHINE. JULIEN AND PACO? RUSSE AND ROPE ‘EM. ADAM, YOU KEEP ON THAT SIDE DOOR LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT. FELIX? STAND AT THE MAIN ENTRANCE AND CHECK PRESS PASSES. OLI? SHMOOZE THE GUESTS, WATCH THE SERVERS, MAKE SURE EVERYONE GETS THEIR SWAG, AND KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR THE EX AND HIS WHORE. I DON’T WANT HIM RUINING THIS NIGHT FOR ME. ARE THE FREAKS READY TO ROLL? THE STAFF PREPARED FOR THE ONSLAUGHT?”

10:05PM: W.T. reply from Oli: “All systems a go-go, chief.”

10:05PM: W.T. reply from Ms.Y: “ THEN LET’S HAVE AT IT, BOYS! 1-2-3, HUT!”

10:10PM: The A-listers are herded in. Expressions on faces range from gleeful—once the swag is pushed into their hands—to shocked and appalled, once their eyes adjust to the spectacle before them. The ballroom has been turned into a virtual dungeon-destruction zone, complete with crumbling cinder blocks, torn flags and bent steel girders. Water shoots up from faux broken sewer lines. Enema equipment is used to mix drinks. Shattered tempered glass serves as cocktail tables. A bondage cross stands in the centre of the room, with one guest having already strapped himself into the restraints. The “differently-abled” folks are too busy nibbling on mini-bratwursts to notice any sideways glances. People are reaching high to finger the leashes and muzzles. All things according to plan, so far.

10:21PM: W.T. transmission from Ms. Y: “GET THOSE FREAKS MIXING WITH THE GUESTS! I’M NOT PAYING THEM TO EAT! USE YOUR CROPS IF YOU HAVE TO!”

10:22PM: W.T. reply from Paco: “I’ll get right on that, Ms. Y.”

10:23PM: “PACO, IF YOU WERE ANY FURTHER UP MY ASS, I’D NEED THAT EQUIPMENT BEHIND THE BAR TO FLUSH YOU OUT. JUST DO IT. OVER AND OUT, KIDDIES.”

10:30PM: Heinrich and Mou-Mou make their official entrance into the ballroom. The DJ switches from hard-core Industrial to less intrusive Trance so that the applause can be heard, the adulations received. Ms. Y comes over to the happy couple with a cordless mic in her hand. Everyone sports wrinkleless smiles, thanks to a modicum of insincerity and a lot of Botox.

10:34PM: “...and without the visionaries like Heinrich, our world would be a far duller, far flatter, far less animated place. To design such inspired creations...” I’m distracted briefly by the tableau of a drunken Kitten chatting with ticking Tourette’s Guy. My attention is further removed from Ms. Y’s touching ode when there is a tap on my shoulder.

10:37PM: “Hey man! I made it!”

10:37PM: “Yeah Roc! Good for you, man!”

NOTE TO SELF: Never put Adam on bouncer duty again.

10:38PM: “And look who was waiting at the door to get in when I arrived—Lauren!”

10:39PM: “Hey Oli—how are you? Thanks for inviting me to this thing. Looks fab.”

10:39PM: “No problem, Lauren—glad you could make it. “

NOTE TO SELF: Why is Roc’s arm around Lauren’s waist?

10:40PM: “Yeah, dude—I forgot how amazing Lauren looked. It’s been like, forever since I last saw her. Told her to come into The Agency for some test shots. Think I can set up some work for her.

10:42PM: “Isn’t that amazing, Oli? Me, a model? Wow—and I was having such difficulty finding work in my field. Who knew a degree in Economics was a waste of paper? Roc tells me models can make upwards of \$200 an hour! Isn’t that great?”

10:44PM: “Uh, yeah—fantastic, Lauren. Listen; would you like a tour of the room? Maybe an introduction to a celebrity or two?”

10:45PM: “Um, well, Roc and I were going to get cocktails and talk business right now. Maybe later?”

NOTE TO SELF: Tie Roc to bondage cross. Have at him with riding crop.

10:50PM: “... and it is with the utmost pride, that we at Y PR welcome you all in celebrating Heinrich, his genius, and his fabulous new clothing line, “*Folterungsvorrichtungen!*”

10:51PM: Polite clapping dissipates. DJ begins to kill loons again.

10:52PM: W.T transmission from Ms. Y: “OH OLI DEAR? COME FIND ME BY THE NORTH EAST CORNER, HMMM?”

10:52PM: W.T. reply from Oli: “Copy that, Ms. Y. Over and out.”

10:53PM: Walk fast. Navigate increasingly tipsy crowd. Shit. Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit. What did I do this time?

10:57PM: “Oli darling, do you remember that lovely man I was telling you about? Tom? I met him through Executive Match? Well, I just want to introduce you to him in person.

Tom, this is my trusted, infallible head Boy Friday, Oliver.”

10:58PM: Shake hands with short, hairy man trussed up in a black leather harness. Has a rubber pony bit between his teeth. Oh my dear God...

10:59PM: “Wice t’h weet tu, Owi.”

10:59PM: “No Tom—the pleasure is all mine.”

11PM: Walk away quickly. Shit. Forgot to email back Tom. What else can go wrong tonight...no, don’t say that. That is a jinx. Only idiots say things like that. You are not an idiot. You’re just stressed. Pushed past your limits. Too much to do, not enough time. You need a helper.

11:02PM: W.T. transmission from Oli: “Who’s packing tonight, boys? Just need enough for a short line.”

11:05PM: Still no answer back. Those greedy bastards. Hate them all.

11:11PM: Music stops. Oh no. What now?

“Ladies and Gentlemen? Ladies and Gentlemen? Uh, may I have your attention for just a moment?”

There’s someone up in the DJ booth who is not the DJ. Or else the DJ has a very gruff voice for a 19 year old.

“I’d like to make an announcement.”

Oh God—it’s the Ex. Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh G.....

“I am over the moon because my girl—yes, the beautiful one you all see standing to my left—has agreed to do me the utmost honour of becoming my wife!”

11:13PM: A cheer goes up from the crowd. Ms. Y is cursing into my earpiece.

11:14PM: “And one more thing—thank you everyone, yes, one more thing—we’re expecting our first child in June!”

11:15PM: Another cheer goes up from the crowd. Flashbulbs go off. This is getting a better reaction than the clothing line. Ms. Y has gone super-sonic. Only dogs can hear her now.

11:16PM: Ms. Y charges out into the middle of the floor, Tom right behind her.

“I have an announcement too!”

No Ms. Y ! Don't do it! Oh God, I can't watch, I...hey! What's Sue doing with Kitten and Tourette's Guy?

11:16PM: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to take this opportunity to, uh, to introduce you to, uh...” Ms. Y looks Tom up and down. Think he's grinning from the attention, but it's hard to tell with the bit in his mouth.

11:17PM: “...to the love of my life, the light in my storm, the pea in my soup, my beloved, uh, uh...” She can't do it. She wouldn't do it. For Christ sake, Ms. Y, think of the firm! He's wearing a bridle!

11:19PM: “...Paco! C'mere, *mi guapo!*”

11:20PM: A bewildered Paco makes his way his way through the crowd. He joins Ms. Y and Tom in front of the bondage cross. She grabs his ass. There's polite clapping again.

11:22PM: “PACO! YOU LYING BITCH!”

11:22PM: It's Heinrich. Really? Well, there was always suspicion... “I thought you said there was no one else! ‘*No one else but you Heiny*’ you said! Do you do this often? Do you often say “forever” but actually mean, “for now?” I should have known—you fuck everything that moves, you, you, you no-good hustler!”

11:26PM: “Heinrich! How could you?!” Mou-Mou looks as crestfallen as her chest.

11:26PM: “I want who I want when I want them, Mou-Mou. It is none of your concern. You can now feel free to fuck that janitor over there. I saw how you were looking at him!”

11:29PM: Seven fingered Burt peers down into his drink. Why not go for it, Burt? Beats three minutes alone in the mop closet.

11:30PM: Got to find the DJ. Must put the needle on the record. Get this train wreck back on track. Let's see; if I was a nineteen year old music geek at a fashionable after-party, where would I be? Hmmm...either in the bathroom getting busy with an underage model, or by the bar getting smashed off free booze. 'K. Let's find the horny, drunken bastard. And fast.

11:39PM: Not in any of the W.C.'s. Christ, this is a large hotel. Now over to the bar. Where I don't want to go.

11:44PM: "Hiya, Oli-Wali! Oli-Wali-Dolly-Smally...oops! I didn't mean the last one! Or did I? Hee hee!"

11:45PM: "Hi Kitten. Sue. Uh...dude...."

11:46PM: "My name is FUCKSHITPIDDLEPLOP-TIT Martin."

11:47PM: "Uh, hey Martin. Listen; have any of you seen the DJ around here? He's like, six feet tall, kinda gangly, backwards painter's cap..."

11:48PM: "Y'mean T-Dawg? Yeah, he's coming home with us."

11:49PM: "T-Dawg? What do you mean, 'home', Kitten?"

11:50PM: "He's, um, spinning at a private party I'm having tonight. Back at the loft. Just me, Martin, Sue, and Trev...I mean, T-Dawg. Sorry Oli—there's no secret knock for this one. Just invitation only. And—*tee hee!*—no horribly insensitive pretty boys allowed."

11:52PM: "Oh, don't be like that, Kitten."

11:53PM: "And by the by, Roc and Lauren left, like, twenty minutes ago. Rocco was right—this party *is* wanksville. Good drinks, though. "

NOTE TO SELF: Bring home set of cuffs, muzzle, and cat-o-nine-tails. Schedule meeting with Rocco, Monday.

11:55PM: "Thanks for the info, Kitten. Have...uh...fun, I guess. Catch you all later."

11: 59PM: Find way up into DJ booth. Put on some Sinatra. Couples begin slow dancing among the wreckage. Aw, look—Burt seems so happy, holding Mou-Mou. Bet he doesn't care if her boobs sag. The servers are recreating a scene from "Night of The Living Dead."

Ms. Y is still screaming at the Ex. The expectant whore is standing on the sidelines, downing whatever stray drink she can find. Tom has found a friend in Miss Half Body. Heinrich has lost his indignation, and is making out with Paco. Well, guess my job here is done.

12PM: W.T. transmission from Felix: “Did you manage to score any blow, Oli? Mind sharing?”

12:01PM: *Sigh.*