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**O'Leary's Pub & Other Stories**

**Matthew Brown**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
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## ABSTRACT

### O'Leary's Pub & Other Stories

Matthew Brown

A collection of short stories about 'ordinary' people who endure a re-evaluation of point of view when their lives become complicated by an unexpected experience. As in most fiction, the act of discovery plays an important role. The difference in this collection may be that, for each of the characters, discovery is not some 'bolt' of instant recognition, but rather an abrupt curtain-drop of disorientation. Out of this chaos 'forced' reconciliations and rationalizations are necessary to ensure the survival of the psyche. Each character discovers that life is far more complex than initially suspected, and that his role in the ongoing orderly function of the universe is now dubious and undefinable by any of the old standards of measure.

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## Island Lake

You can drive from Montreal to Sault Ste. Marie in just under eleven hours. That's if you push it; avoid stopping in Petawawa or North Bay. It's difficult not to put in at North Bay. Good bar there, just off the highway but the name eludes me -- someone or something's 'Roadhouse'. No worry; there's a large yellow sign which you can spot early enough to swerve off the road if you don't exactly recall what you're looking for.

Gorgeous girls are brought in from Montreal to work there, circuit strippers doing the milkrun, a couple of weeks, maybe more, then on to the next contract -- Sudbury, the Soo, Wawa, until such time when their sexy sabbatical expires, whereupon I like to think they stand at the gateway to the west and contemplate some form of French invasion or return to McGill to complete their degrees.

I shouldn't stop. I should stay on the road and shoot through town like a three-quarter-ton bullet in the cool, deserted night. There's something enjoyable about driving long distances after nightfall. A pleasing sensation of movement replaces the visual knowledge of distance. An hour out of Ottawa you can roll down your window and get a reasonably accurate whiff of Northern Ontario, a mixture of

pine and poplar forest, manure, and decaying shore-slime from some little lake hidden by the darkness of night.

I call Northern Ontario 'home' but that's a complex label, since I think of it with a combination of pride and a strange sort of incestuous guilt. Somewhere between Renfrew and Matawawa, my thermos of 'Cafe Supreme' coffee is down to its last sugary dregs and I begin to view myself as a unilingual failure, slithering homeward with my not quite legitimate cosmopolitan tail between my legs. Chalk River brings heart; a few 'Quebecois-isms' opportunistically parleyed will suffice to alleviate any hometown suspicions: "Longue voyage! On n'est pas arrete une fois pour la piss, tabernack!". Any Husky truck Stop will provide replenishment for my companion thermos (coffee as good as it gets, I might add).

Maybe a quick pit stop at 'Salley's Roadhouse' -- that's the name -- will help to ease me gently back into the sullen, white-capped ways of northern life. I like to imagine that these dancers, so far from their natural element, have followed me northward for the sole purpose of weaning me off the multicultural influences of the big city. By the time I reach Blind River, my mind and body should be sufficiently immersed in what is the true reality of Canada.

True reality of Canada. My opinion? Forest dry, forest wet, mosquito and blackfly and too much of everything to know what the hell to do with it; to know how to own it.

That's it exactly. No sense of ownership. Protect it. Protect ourselves from it. Parcel it away in parks. Want to feel like you're the only person alive and yet you're still trespassing on someone else's property? Go to a park. But just try to put up a ski hill.

A real Canadian refugee am I, yes indeed. Countless times I've tried with serious intent to pinpoint that exact moment when the North and I became strangers. I was the one that fled; I was the one that staggered out from the bush. Came out from the desolation of an eternally changeless landscape; changeless in a beauty that lacked a healthy lust, in a wealth without hope for profit, and in a cold snapping, crisp purity that could only know appreciable softness by an artist's numbing brush.

Toronto loomed as a possibility, but it was too much of a haven for similar refugees. So it was on to Montreal. The city provided me with much of what my spirit craved at an age when I desired a more complex and chaotic experience. The universities, theatres, cinemas, the proximity of multiple cultures and the diverse swell of ideas did much to convince me that as a budding writer, my place was among the cafes and coffee houses that dotted 'The Main'. Filled as I was, a with a self-confident naivete' not uncommon to young unproven authors, I was determined to follow the well trodden path of my predecessors, whose creative talents had first flourished within the bars and brasseries of that



eclectic east-end mosaic.

But gradually as I struggled to churn out my mediocre, sentimental prose, I became aware through the exhaustion of failure, that my life was taking on the imbecilic proportions of a cheap outline to some auto-biography that was being written not as a retrospective but as a blueprint for success, like my many friends, aspiring actors who studied their craft by reading every trashy tabloid they could get their hands on, or tuning in to the entertainment gossip shows, so as to not, God forbid, pull off a poor posture during those critical moments when proper posturing was an absolute necessity for survival.

I could posture with the best of them, drink with the worst of them, more than hold my own with the polemics of daily discourse, but when it came time to be alone at my desk and to bloody my hands doing the thing that I had chosen as my life's great endeavour, I found that these carefully nurtured talents betrayed me consistently and without mercy.

At first I thought - after securing my degree in English - that Paris might be a way of consummating my talent, believing that success and recognition would find me as a matter of proven historical formula.

But what was left of whatever natural instinct I possessed made me shelve my plans for Europe, and instead of Paris I returned home that summer. A piece of me was still

very much northern and it was screaming out for a meatier part in my auto-biography. I've been coming home periodically ever since. I believe I will put in at Salley's Roadhouse. The highway's smooth twists and turns have become hypnotic and the forest about me feels like future timber for funeral parlours.

The thing about Salley's Roadhouse -- all roadhouses in general -- is that their outer appearance gives little clue to the goings-on inside. For example: the travel-weary 'Stewarts' from New Brunswick can bring in their two lovely children and enjoy a late meal in a congenial atmosphere without necessarily realizing that in the adjacent bar young women are stretching the limits of Ontario provincial law by making ominous gestures towards their G-strings. Miss 'Ferguson', typically well-fed, nocturnally good-natured waitress, helps young Andrew gaze through the kiddy section of the over-sized, laminated menu: "Double Decker Bronco Buster Burger with Fries and Coke for cowpokes with big appetites!" A conspiratorial wink lets Mrs. Stewart know that while the name is big the food is proportionate to little tummies. And, "Oh yes dear, there's a Journey's End Motel in Sudbury," and she doesn't figure it to be full up this early in the season. Meanwhile, intuitive Mr. Stewart has excused himself to the washroom, no doubt wishing to grab a quick peek at the 'Adult Menu'.

And what a menu it is! Decidedly, this establishment in

no way compares with the high calibre institutions to be found in proliferation in Montreal. Then again, this isn't Montreal, this is bloody North Bay. I find myself making comparisons when there is no need for doing so. I have a good time here. I like the girls. They're always laughing and in good spirits. No one's slipped some three-piece suit a sinful token to get a seat with a good view. There's no masturbatory air of silent torment; there's no conspiracy of desperate guilt hanging over this crowd. No explicit sex films on monitors to suggest that what you're really paying for you're not getting. There's laughter and cat-calling, whistles and marriage proposals and cheap draft, and an overwhelming sense of privilege and appreciation. In short, you don't have to come in here feeling like you have a wad of Kleenex hidden away in your jacket.

The girls are beautiful, maybe more so. Maybe it has something to do with the climate. They probably expected a rough ride when they signed on for the tour. Now they see what eighty-odd years of moral conservatism, hard labour, excessive drinking and the constant subtle war between pride in one's stock and geographical inferiority can do the men here. It makes them big, burly babies, makes them harmlessly boisterous, immensely appreciative; makes this space nervously virginal, explosively self-mocking and vainglorious. The present dancer reaches from the stage and grabs the hat off the head -- now flushed crimson -- of some

local. Big man, b'g, self-conscious hands grab quickly for the bottle of beer and a fresh cigarette, forgetting the one already lit. Got to be doing something; it's rude to stare, mummy used to say. Hard pats on the shoulders and laughter. "She likes you, Thomas, B'Jesus! Get up there and get your hat off her!" But he can't bring himself to meet her eyes and she adores him for it. She feels beautiful because of it. She feels like a dancer. Instinct tells him he should clear land and build her a house. "He loves you!" they yell in broken French. "Il aime, il aime!" "Mais non," she replies, "he is a shy one!" and holds his hat out to him which he takes and places firmly atop his head.

I leave Salley's very late. Should have been in Sudbury hours ago. My old Chevy sits conspicuously beneath one of the three lights that brighten the empty parking lot; its rusted, cream body sparkles with the wet of early morning. Early morning in North Bay. What a treat. Crescent Street must be packed now. No parking anywhere. St. Denis, a circus. If anybody had told me that at thirty I'd be standing in the parking lot of a strip joint in North Bay, quietly watching a 1976 Impala disintegrate, I would have been indignant. I would have been horrified. Even more so, if someone's crystal ball could have shown me what I had planned for myself in the coming days.

"Excusez-moi, monsieur?"

"Oui?"

"Tu parle français?"

"Je ne parle pas bien le français. Pouvez-vous parler l'anglais?" She looks about the parking lot, quickly reviewing her options.

"My English...is not good."

"Montreal?"

"Oui." She is obviously one of the dancers but I didn't see her inside.

"Moi aussi, I live there too...well, I lived there."

"Oui?" Silence. She is sitting on the cement ledge to the right of the entrance, partially in the shadows, wearing some sort of gray sweatpants and white tennis shoes which are crossed in front of her in a manner which suggests that she is not at all concerned about being alone in a parking lot at such a late hour. Her hair looks to be dark brown or black and it is very long, falling over and framing a face that is pale, tired and pretty.

"Mon nom est Jimmy...James," I offer stupidly, hating my accent, the sound of my lazy, toneless voice. She stands up and steps from the shadows, advancing just far enough for me to see that she is wearing a dark leather bomber jacket. Over her right shoulder hangs a canvas carry-all bag.

"My name is José."

Obviously both of us know the key phrases. She motions to the structure behind her, then sticks her hands deep into the pockets of her jacket and shrugs her shoulders. "Finis."

Once past Echo Bay you're less than fifteen minutes from Sault Ste. Marie. Another hour from now it will be sunrise. I've driven constantly since North Bay. Blew through Sudbury without stopping; Spanish River, Thessalon, Bruce Mines -- if you blink you miss those little pockets of human industry. Jose has been sleeping throughout. Her head rests almost cruelly against the window but she doesn't seem to mind and I've had the heater on for quite a while. Periodically, we drive past a streetlight or a brightly lit service station and for a second I can see her clearly before the darkness of the desolate road reclaims her. She is more than pretty -- curled up against the passenger door, with the bomber draped over her like a blanket. Pretty is artificial, the hairspray to hold it all in place; a desperate, apologetic adjective to prop up the mediocre. Pretty is the present state of my writing, lightly scented prose sprinkled over the decaying corpse of my work to keep the stink to a minimum. Jose is beautiful. She grew from the earth beautiful. She will return to it that way. My imagination cannot improve upon her.

I've been thinking about what I'm going to do with this French beauty once we reach town. She asked for a lift as far as I could take her. Beyond that I haven't made inquiries. Maybe she'll dance again. I hope not. She might have contacts further west, Winnipeg or Edmonton, possibly Calgary or Vancouver. She can speak English to get by and it

will improve through necessity. She could get a job in a bank or some government office where her French would be at a premium. Maybe with a little effort she could even become a translator, perhaps someday in the United Nations or some foreign embassy. I wonder if she realizes her potential.

"Ca va?" Turning off the engine has woken her. A little after five in the morning and I'm home. Not the fastest run recorded but certainly the most unusual.

She rustles to life and pulls hair from her mouth and face in order to smooth out the wrinkles of sleep. She doesn't appear to be shocked or frightened by her situation, which is good. No hysterics. Just a warm smile.

"Where are we?"

"Smiley's Pancake House, Sault Ste. Marie. Hungry? Tu veux manger? Quelque chose?" I wince at my atrocious pronunciation. Jose giggles. "Ca me fera plaisir de vous acheter un bon petit déjeuner!" Not a clue and she knows it.

"Je ne comprend pas!" More giggles as she opens the door.

"Come, I buy for you."

Pancakes with bacon and genuine maple syrup from St. Joseph's Island, a side order of toast and a pot of coffee. We eat it all in silence, which can be the nicest conversation two people can have at times. The sun is rising and is heavy on my back. Food is heavy in my stomach. I'm suddenly very tired. Eyes hurt, teeth hurt. My mouth is

past. It made sense to come home. But now, just like the other times, I'm not so sure. Even with this time being different, with what I had planned, I'm still not sure. Hesitant. Seems like everything I do becomes riddled with doubt at the point when it becomes clear that I'm not running to something but rather running from something. Then suddenly it seems like the directions have been switched beneath my feet, and then I can't tell anymore which is the way to proceed. It would be nice to fall asleep in someone's car and just be driven, be believed in. But it's all ridiculous. We're strangers. "More coffee. Est-ce que tu..." She stops me. I try too hard. Again, that's just as absurd. After so many years in Quebec, it's obvious that I have not tried hard enough.

"We should go. You are very tired. I am awake and I can drive." I explain to her that I've reached my destination and that from here I shall be headed to a place that would be of no use to her. I explain that this is as far as she can go with me. She registers neither disappointment nor acknowledgment. Her big brown eyes stare back at me, stare out the window. "It is very beautiful," she says, "there are mountains nearby, oui?"

I tell her of the Canadian Shield and of glaciers and great Lakes and a thousand little ones; of factories and forests, of locks and rapids and Group of Seven. I tell her of employment and unemployment, of houses with flat roofs



and houses of Italian influence, of snow and ice and heat and dry and deerfly, of churches and school boards and Father's Day sales, city beautification, tourism and the Blessed Virgin in tree limbs. It is doubtful that she understands a single bloody word of what I'm telling her. Just tired, I say. Rambling. "Je suis fatigué." That's all. Stupid. Ridiculous.

She drives. I give directions. "à la droite...now à la gauche, slow down here, sharp turn...Attention! Look, là bas!" The shimmering blue water seen momentarily through the trees is Island Lake. She has difficulty spotting it; the camp road is treacherous, winding and washboard and demands her concentration. But she is having fun anyway, loves the big car and the Chevy, in turn, respects her.

Island lake water is not really blue. The penetration of sunlight gives it that effect. More of a dark, dirty green, coloured so by nature of its bottom, a basin of rock, and by much of its shoreline, steep, striated cliffs which hold the heat and warm the water to temperatures which would rival their deep, southern counterparts. The tree line comes to the very edge of the cliffs in a display of profound physical adaptation. Spruce and Jackpine drill roots through granite, quartz and sandstone so that they may lean grotesquely distorted over the water, able almost, to dip their bows triumphantly into the shallows.

We turn off the road and park beside the cottage.

Everything looks as it was, except no one comes here anymore. José skips lightly down through the birches to the dock while I forage about in the trunk for the things I'll need. Most of it is packed neatly in a suitcase and duffle bag.

I don't understand why she insisted on seeing this place. I do not understand in light of the fact that we are strangers. The experience of last night was wrapped in the surreal qualities of a sleepy dream. Surely the reality of daylight would demand a more calculating assessment on her part. Perhaps she has time to kill before continuing on with some personal agenda. Perhaps she's the kind of person who allows the currents of life to shift her from experience to experience without much forethought or planning. In any case we haven't talked a lot and I'm as much to blame for this incongruity as she is. I think that, up until now, I've enjoyed the absence of a discernible motive.

Down through the trees to join her on the dock. It is a fresh, intensely sunny morning, already hinting at hot. Little wavelets of water lap beneath the warm planks we are standing on. The water is remarkably clear in the shallows and I can see the soft, sandy bottom; years ago we painstakingly removed every rock and rotting tree limb. I want to test the temperature of the lake with my fingers. I lean over and stretch out my hand, seeing its reflection on the surface. Firm like my father's, I grab onto it and pull

myself out. Shivering and in need of a towel I run pale, reddish, dripping up through the birches, smoke from the Franklin is strong and I'm hungry. Should have peed in the water. Up the steps slamming the screen door, "Don't slam the door!" Sorry. She wraps me in the biggest towel there is and I'm warm like toast but still shivering and I have to pee -- swim around, no one will know. The lake is big and blue and bigger than the world I know of. Back down the steps throwing off my towel, gaining momentum through the trees, "Out of the way, dad!" Full tilt on the dock, warm timbers beneath my feet. "Crazy kid!" Running, leaping, airborne, big boastful splash, submerged. Silence. Warm pee. No school. Joy.

The water is too cool to bathe in so early in the morning, but will heat up quickly as the sun climbs towards noon. As a kid I would have jumped in without hesitation. The lake feels cold because the air is warmer. At night the the reverse is true and the water feels almost hot because the air is that much cooler. It is easier when you are a child to be consumed by something. One goes about it willingly, eagerly, with an instinct of natural communion. Now, I have to be comfortable with it.

"Maintenant? What do we do?" She asks with such enthusiasm. She really loves the adventure, loves the sunshine and the water. "La-bas." I point to the tiny island near about the middle of the lake. Four or five tall pines

partially obscure the little cottage that stands on it, believed to have been built by a family of Germans in the mid-fifties. They might have spent a couple of summers there on holiday. Since then it has stood unoccupied. As a child I remember it empty. I remember it as a forbidden piece of ruin, some ancient, dusty mystery which disturbed the beauty of my lake and fuelled my dreams with visions of exhaustion and desolation. At thirteen I set out in a canoe with a flashlight and a bag lunch. I was half-way across when they figured out my destination. That was my first and last whipping at the hands of my father. It was also the last summer I chose to spend at the lake. "Ah, oui!" She is extremely excited. The island has caught her imagination. She's already spotted the canoe and before I can say anything, she is manoeuvring it into the water. I pick up my suitcase and duffle bag and follow quickly after her. The suitcase is light compared to the duffle bag which is full of tools. I place both in the middle. José sits up front like a captain, impatient to get moving. I push off with a small twinge of guilt and the craft knifes through the shallows silently and smoothly until the bottom disappears and the larger waves of open water begin to offer some resistance.

No matter how dilapidated the exterior of the cottage appeared to be, I had carefully nurtured an image of what might be inside: a warm, cosy sanctuary thick with the rich

smells of burning pine and brewing coffee. I imagined numerous hot days of summer, coming in from the tiny beach, reddish and parched and tracking sand across the floor on my way to the fridge for something cold to drink. No doubt that this conception was fabricated in part by childhood recollections. Sandy floors have always represented for me a kind of swishy, barefooted freedom. The possibility of any sort of electrical appliance is out of the question, since no power had been rigged to the island.

Still, the ideal of my isolated cabin remained. When cool night would come to rest over my sleepy lake, mists would boil up from the water and blend with mists swirling down through the forest, completely blanketing the shoreline and eradicating any visual boundary. Above me, the low ceiling of cloudy sky would retract upward far into the dark firmament, as if on cables tethered to a million points of light. Happily then would I be seated near the window of my island cottage -- isolated and with no visual parameters to define my frame of reference -- maybe with my feet propped up on the desk, maybe with my toes on the floor, squishing sand, definitely with my fireplace warming me, popping and cracking and sending fiery embers to die on the bricks before the hearth. Here, within such a blank and appealing canvas it might be possible over the next few months to write heavily, to write out my problems, frustrations and the silliness which has plagued my art for so long, to

create a world whose characters are fresh and alive and completely untainted by my experience in this one.

This was my grand scheme, simplistic, precise and in my mind, growing more ridiculous the closer the canoe comes to that little piece of dry, raised land. For one thing I hadn't counted on the continued presence of Jose.

"Attention aux roches!" she screams from the bow. There are rocks everywhere, just below the surface of the water. It is impossible to land the canoe on this side of the island, so I begin to circle it, looking for the tiny beach I had pictured to be there.. Of course there is no tiny beach of shimmering white sand. Nor is there a tiny beach of damp, dirty brown sand. The shoreline is surrounded with jagged, impenetrable rocks and all that remains of a small dock built over the rubble are a few rotted timbers which have somehow resisted the pressure of shifting ice season after season. A graceful landing is therefore out of the question. I manoeuvre the canoe as best I can between the larger rocks until we become hung up at a point close to the shore. Cautioning José to remain seated, I carefully step into the water and make my way to the front, holding onto the canoe firmly while she climbs out and threads her way onto dry land. Then I pull the canoe and its contents over the rocks and up the grassy slope which emerges from the barrier and rises towards the cottage. I join José sitting on the grass and together we remove our shoes and roll up

our pant legs. "This is it," I tell her, "this is where I live now...positively the end of the line...J'habite ici." She rubs her feet and stretches out her legs to wiggle her toes in the sunlight.

"You are very lucky to own this," she answers, leaning back on her elbows, "I like it better than Florida."

"J'ai jamais etc." More and more I am impressing myself with my ability to string a few French words together.

"It is very hot in the summer. This is perfect heat." She closes her eyes and tilts back her head allowing the sunlight to warm her face. I look at her, envious of her calm, her tranquillity and her absolute pleasure in the moment, as if future moments are not a concern, are not linked in any ongoing process of deliberation and consequence. Already I am filled with apprehension over the prospect of having to break into the cottage with a crowbar I have brought specifically for that purpose. But she feels nothing of my anxiety. Throughout the whole of our trip she has remained unaffected by my melancholy nature. Her face is so unclouded, not pale but brilliant, as fresh as the water we have just crossed. I wonder if the same sunlight touches us both? The sun that warms her is the sun that warms this lake, filtering down through the water causing it to appear bluer than it truly is. The sun that warms her is the same sun that makes the leaves of the forest sparkle and the face of the cliffs reflect brightly from a distance. The light

which caresses her face is the same light which makes all the colours of the trees intense and unsullied, and all the little painted cottages surrounding the lake, festive and happy in appearance. I look at her and I mourn as though the sun that warms me is the light of a yellowed photograph in which I see her reclining peacefully and contentedly.

"I don't own this island."

"Quoi?" Opening her eyes and squinting, she comes back to me, softly and glowing as though someone has gently made love to her while she lay on the grassy slope.

"Cela n'est pas à moi. Not the land, not the cottage. Nothing. We are trespassing. We are committing a crime, if you want to know the truth."

"Is it a friend?"

"No friend. I don't know, Je ne sais pas, who owns it. No one has lived here for years. No one comes here." I take the crowbar from the duffle bag and wave it about in the air for emphasis. "I'm going to break in, understand? I'm going to fix it up, live in it, and write in it. I can drive you into town and give you some money for a bus..." But she is already on her feet and plodding quickly barefooted towards the cottage. "I saw you in the bar," she tells me over her shoulder, "so many people and you were the only one with a sad face. You like to watch other people being happy but you don't want them to watch you being happy!"

"A lot you know about it!" I respond dumbly, surprised



that she can relate subtle observations in the English language. She is on the front porch, on tiptoes looking in through the window. "Mais voyons! Me, I was not happy like you, so I quit. Now I am very happy and you like to watch me. Still you are all the time very sad. Viens voir, come and look you!" I join her on the landing and put my face to the cracked windowpane. Aside from the cobwebs and the dust and dimness which covers everything, the ground floor seems to be comprised of a small kitchen which defines itself separately from the larger living-room by means of counters which enclose the space in a L-shape. There is a sink and an indoor pump and there are some dishes neatly stacked in a rack like they had just been put there to dry. But what catches my attention is the object that dominates the living room, appearing almost too big for the area it occupies. It is a magnificent fireplace, the kind you were meant to cook from or gather beside and entertain and converse by. It is encased in a wall of stone and mortar which ascends upward creating one of the walls for the tiny loft. I am more than a little delighted that for once the reality of the situation far exceeds my expectations. "Fantastic." José whispers. "Yes it is, " I agree, "it really is," and I go to fetch the crowbar.

As I have suspected, there is a padlock on the door, although it is a useless measure, since anyone at any time can gain entrance unheard and unseen simply by smashing a

window. Still, I find myself hesitating from breaking the lock.

"Why do you wait?" she inquires impatiently as always.

"I feel a little uneasy."

"Well, I give you my permission."

"Is that so."

"If you don't own it and no one lives here for a long time, then I will own it and share it with you. Do you take part of my island, yes or no?" I actually find myself giving consideration to her proposal. Why not? In reality she has as much right to this little place as I, certainly as much or as little as I, depending upon how one views the legality of what we're doing: busting into a tiny cabin, on a tiny island in the middle of a lake, in the middle of Canada. "If it makes you happy." What else can I say? A lot more perhaps, but that will come out in time. For now our attention is focused upon the lock, which gives way with astonishingly little resistance.

## The Volunteer

At precisely eight o'clock in the morning the recorded prayer echoed through the hallways with the monotone voice of the nun. It moved with aseptic piety, dully nudging patients towards something more industrious than was their sleep, and less compassionate than was their oblivion.

It was one of seven recitations - for each of the seven days of the week - prepared by the Convent of St. Anne de Goulais who owned and operated the hospital. The Sisters occupied the entire seventh floor; it was their personal sanctum, but their shrouded forms were never seen to walk on the wards, the grounds, or, for that matter, anywhere else in the vicinity.

For a long time this was considered quite a mystery.

Furthermore, the intrigue of this invisible convent and its spiritual doings was enhanced by the curious fact that none of the elevators travelled higher than the sixth floor. Somewhere, in some seldom used area, there must have been a stairwell, but its whereabouts over the years had become less and less a matter of significance among members of the medical staff. For those who had given it any real sustained

thought, theirs was the responsibility to tend to the ill and dying; the tedious administration of hospital policy was therefore gladly relegated to the realm of faith and eventual disinterest.

The only part of the hospital where the probing theorem of the nun seemed to falter was in the basement where the noise from the exhaust fans, laundry machines, and the incinerator when it was burning, proved too mighty a barrier for the message to penetrate.

This greatly pleased the sub-resident labour who cared little for the taped dogma, or for anything which entreated them to work for a greater motivation than their bi-weekly pay packets. Such 'spiritual workouts' were generally acknowledged to be more appropriate to the hearts and minds of the medical practitioners, whose jobs required a certain amount of daily soul rallying.

They preferred to go about their well established routine with a minimum of interaction with the upper floors.

This morning, as on every alternate morning, Bernard Castleman had arrived punctually upon the hour. He was dressed in his usual freshly pressed dark blue suit. His step, as always, was filled with purpose; his arms, as always, corralled a wealth of flora and fauna against his chest; his face, as always, appeared to glow with a health

that seemed almost unnatural and deliberate.

Bernard Castleman was - as the tag on his breast pocket proclaimed proudly - a hospital volunteer.

The flowers he carried were destined for the patients on the long-term ward. But their scent - that sweet earthy smell of roses, tulips, and lilacs - seemed more a quality of Bernard. It was a permanent characteristic of his own unique aura of well-being.

He had delivered a lot of flowers during many, many years of loyal service to the hospital. No one actually knew for sure just how long he had been an active volunteer, but everyone agreed that he fulfilled his duties with truly uncommon dedication. He never grew tired or disheartened by his work. The constant exposure to the aged, the ill, and the dying did nothing to weaken his stone-cheery resolve.

He liked to call the patients he was entrusted with, 'friends'. And as his 'friends', he refused to allow them the deceptive luxury of dwelling upon their conditions for any great length of time. 'Time' was rather a fulcra word in Bernard's vocabulary. Time was important. He felt that nothing was more tragic than wasted time; time wasted by preoccupation with the inevitable coming to the end of life; time which could be better spent making plans, restoring family bonds, seeking spiritual resolution, and finalizing

those very critical special arrangements.

This Bernard believed absolutely, to the very marrow of his bones.

Accordingly, nothing was wasted in his efforts to achieve 'quality time' for his friends. Even the flowers which had served their original purpose the evening before at 'CASTLEMAN'S FUNERAL COTTAGE AND CREMATORIUM' were spared the dumpster so that they could brighten the pale blue rooms of some of his very special and deserving 'friends'.

Among other volunteers, Bernard was considered a legend, a high water mark in their long and glorious history of charitable works. Not just for his rapport with the ill, but also for his faith.

Above all, Bernard was a Holy man. "I do believe," he would say during numerous hallway chats, "that it is the power of Him on High which envelops my soul. I am his divine stethoscope within these pained and sorrowful walls." This no one doubted for it did appear sometimes that Bernard travelled about the hospital like a man possessed.

Naturally no one objected when, upon the untimely death of the old lady Marie Claude some years ago, Bernard offered himself as interim supervisor of Pastoral Services on the very logical argument that he had all the experience for the position - a position which no one had contested since, and

one to which he has devoted a good deal of his time and energy as the spiritual liaison to the convent.

That fact that he, like everyone else, had never seen or talked with the Sisters didn't seem to matter. Bernard cherished his part within the religious infrastructure and interpreted the Nuns' silence as an indication of their satisfaction.

He peered through the flowers at his watch. There was much to do. His agenda - though always full - was today particularly heavy. There was a host of details to be looked at concerning the Pastoral Department; there was the weekly meeting with the floor reps where he would be made aware of any pressing volunteer matters that might require his personal attention; he mustn't forget to shave Mr. Adams at nine, Buster will be gearing up for the cribbage rematch at nine thirty, and the quadriplegic Indian - poor fellow - Arnold Cold-water-creek will allow no one else to change his catheter bag. Also he had to distribute the flowers around Long-term before any more of the petals dropped off.

But there was just time to pay a quick hello to the basement first. Bernard's evangelical flame always burned a little hotter first thing in the morning.

From the main lobby he took the elevator down to the sub-basement. Stepping out, he left the comparatively clean

work area of the housekeeping department and began to walk down the gently sloping runway. This led him after a time to the lowest and most sombre level of the institution.

There was no amount of rigorous application that could make this place feel sanitary, Bernard decided, as he squeezed against the yellow concrete wall so that a worker could manoeuvre a trolley past him. He smoothed down his jacket with a free hand and sighed to himself, knowing that the back of his suit was now coated in dust. And the flowers! Maybe he could spray them with water later on?

His destination was the incinerator room where a 'new hire' named Joseph was learning the distasteful but necessary job of disposing of certain bio-medical wastes.

Distasteful but necessary. These were Bernard's sentiments exactly. He didn't enjoy coming down here. Not even in the beginning when the workers seemed genuinely polite and open to his ideas. Back then they had listened. Oh yes. They nodded their heads and agreed that it would be good for morale if everyone banded together in a show of spiritual solidarity. Maybe they could organize a community bake sale, or do a bit of theatre in one of the parks, or a bed race, or something like that? But later, when it became apparent that Bernard's once harmless pep talks were taking on the dimensions of a weekly hysterical religious seizure,



they closed ranks on him, politely but irreversibly.

But now there was Joseph. A fresh breeze. Bernard wouldn't make the same mistakes again. He would tone down the rhetoric and the vocal ecstasies, play it slow and subtle. If he could get one person to take an active interest in what went on upstairs, then the rest might follow in time.

The air had become stuffy and the temperature had risen to the point where Bernard began to sweat. He had come upon the incinerator room. Why, he asked himself, had he not left the flowers with Reception?

"Goodmorning Joseph!"

The room was cramped, severe, and by most modern waste disposal standards, highly antiquated. It seemed always to conjure images in Bernard's mind of raggedly clothed vagrants warming their fingers by an open fire in some economically depressed neighbourhood. The entrance presented itself as a narrow, low vault formed by cut stone and mortar, and Bernard found that he had to stoop low to pass inside. The heat struck his face like some powerful religious experience, and he visualized little droplets of sweat sizzling away into nothing on his forehead.

Joseph had just thrown a sealed box into the furnace and was slamming the iron door shut. He slid across the

steel bolt and stepped back into a fantasy of cooler air.

"What'd'ya say, Bernard." He took a rag from his back pocket and began to wipe his face furiously, as if the heat was something that clung to his skin and burned. "I see ya brung me flowers."

Those ridiculous flowers. "They wouldn't last long in here, I'm afraid. Actually, I just thought I'd pop down to see how you were getting along, Joseph."

"Gett'n along okay, Mr. Castleman. Brains are bakin' if y'know what I mean."

"Yes, I do believe I know what you mean." Bernard was already nearing his threshold of tolerance with the heat. His armpits felt as though they were packed with wet leaves.

"Tell me, Joseph, do you know exactly what it is that you are burning?"

"I've an idea. Needles, blood, dirty bandages, bits and pieces of human innards. Y'know, stuff too poison to go to landfill." As he spoke, Joseph was making another batch ready for the furnace. "Pretty creepy when you think about it, so I try my best not to think about it. Hey Bernard, I hear some tumours come as big as footballs. Think that's true? Shii-it!" He swung open the door and fought back the flames by jamming two boxes through the opening. Was he grinning or grimacing? Bernard couldn't tell. Quickly he

slammed the door closed and slid the bar across.

"I'm not s'posed to be doin' that," he said, wiping his brow. "Y'know, opening and closing the door like that. S'posed to let it burn a while. Shii-it, don't take long anyhow."

The soggy leaves that were in Bernard's armpits began to make their way around to his shoulder blades, slipping down to the base of his spine, and pasting themselves about his inner thighs.

"I can see why you would call your job here 'creepy' Joseph. One might very well come to that conclusion if he were forced into performing a duty without the proper sort of orientation first. What you lack is the benefit of the big picture."

"The what?"

"The big picture. The grand schematic, Joseph. It's the reason we all do the jobs we do. It's the reason you stoke the furnace with refuse; or Housekeeping stuffs the laundry machines with linen; or why surgeons operate or Cafeteria prepares enormous quantities of food. It's the reason I volunteer my time as I have done for so many years. You see, Joseph, we are all of us, part of one machine which has one objective. And it is a glorious one. A righteous one! It is to relieve suffering in what ever way we can."

Bernard paused. Joseph seemed attentive. The flowers were fast becoming a write-off. "Think for a moment where your 'football-sized' tumours have come from. Or for what purpose those bandages and needles were used. There are people who are happy to see their tumours removed, who are thankful to have received injections of medication, or a fresh bandage over their wounds. I think it would be a good thing if you were to meet some of these same people, Joseph. It might make your work seem less creepy and more integral. You can follow me around the wards if you like. I can arrange everything with your superior quite easily. You know Joseph, God put us on earth for more than this. And surely you know that in helping others you harvest also for yourself."

Bernard drew in a deep and unhelpful breath of hot air. Had he blown it? He had come very close to preaching, and he waited awkwardly for a response, feeling the irksome weight of his own caricature and wishing to Heaven he could throw the silly flowers into the fire.

"You're askin' me to be a volunteer? Shii-it. I dunno if I'd be any good at hand holdin', Mr. Castleman. Spend enough time around this joint, y'know? What about somebody else? What about Johnny Baldazarro? Down the hall a bit. He'd be good at it."

Bernard felt it wise not to recite an extremely exhaustive list of people he had tried before Joseph. "Well then, I'll say no more on the subject at present, but just in case you have a change of heart you can find me in my office towards the noon hour. I'm on the second floor, Pastoral Services. Just in the event you get a little curious, that's where I'll be."

Joseph mumbled something neutral and Bernard took his leave quickly.

He felt an understandable letdown but he did not feel beaten. He had made the good effort. Now, as he walked, the air was turning mercifully cooler and the smell of hospital disinfectant filled his nostrils and worked wonders to put the cheer back in his soul. The flowers were deposited in the first available garbage bin.

Later that same morning, towards eleven - a time of day on the Long-term when most of the patients had been fed, bathed, certified as living and then put back to bed - Bernard found himself in room 622, chatting with an old man by the name of Horace Finkelstein.

Horace was ripe in years. Over-ripe some said; passed ripeness and well into living rot. His worsening illness had just about taken away the best part of his mobility and

independence, and he required lengthy periods with the oxygen tank in order to ease the strain on his lungs, which had deteriorated into things resembling a couple of swollen, dried prunes.

Horace didn't have many friends. Quite simply - and reasonably obvious to anyone within earshot - he was a sonofabitch. Horace was the kind of bitter, sulking, temperamental sonofabitch that only his mother could love. And when his mother died that burden of love fell upon his sister, Brenda, who felt it quite unfair that she should be saddled with the task of looking after her brother, since she agreed with everyone else that Horace was a sonofabitch.

But mother Finkelstein had money, lots of it. And she was smart. "I cannot give Horsey an opened purse," she had told Brenda years ago when she was nearing death. "He'd use it to blow up Canadian Tire stores."

Brenda protested. "Surely not all of it."

"You'll get everything," she said flatly.

Brenda smiled.

"On one condition..."

Brenda frowned.

"You must agree to look after Horsey until such time as you marry, after which you can stick him into an institution - with proper financial support of course - and then split.

Lord knows one of my children should have a life!"

At the time Brenda was young, not unpleasant looking she figured, and greedy. Marriage shouldn't be such a difficult thing to manage. She consented almost immediately.

"Sign on the dotted line please, Brenda."

Mother Finkelstein was a smart woman. She was also astute. In her heart she knew that her daughter - flesh and blood as she was - was a Queen bitch nonetheless, and would probably never marry.

Now thirty years had passed and Horace was gravely ill. He had spent the last six of those years on the Long-term ward of the hospital. It was not much of a reprieve for Brenda, but she did have all the money to console herself and to curl up with at night.

Bernard had spent the last six years patiently and persistently getting acquainted with Horace, and Horace was not an easy man to get to know. Doctors hated him. Nurses loathed him. Fellow patients despised and detested him; some, they figured, died to escape him. But Bernard was unrelenting. He assaulted Horace with camaraderie and good cheer, and over a space of time he had faithfully worked his magic to a point, finally, where he considered Horace as being one of his very 'special' friends.

It was with inner satisfaction with a job well performed that Bernard now gazed over the shrunken, imploded body that lay propped up against the head board. Horace was wearing his oxygen mask, breathing hacks and swears and looking back at Bernard with furious, rodomontade eyes. The old gremlin had a knack for survival, he mused. A sure testimonial to the force of one man's will over extremely calamitous odds.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Finkelstein?"

Horace removed his mask. "Crappers!" He put his mask back on and resumed the incendiary glare - which was one of his favourite tools of intimidation. The last vestiges of health were hiding away in his rat-like eyes. The illness had undertaken a final search and destroy mission.

"Can't we call each other by our first names, Mr. Finkelstein? After all, we've been friends for a long time." The mask came down again. "Only Mother calls me Horace! And Momma's weeds, so no one calls me Horace! Bernard's a doggy's name, or a NAZI'S name. Do yourself a favour...lose it. While you're at it, lose the last name too. Crappers! Wipe yourself off the books and do us all a favour. Ha!"

"What about Brenda?"

"What's a Brenda?"

"Brenda's your sister of course."



"The bitch! What about her?"

"She calls you Horace, doesn't she?"

"She's a bitch! A cow! An unused slut in cobwebs! Dale her, Castleman! She's old and ugly but she's got all the cash! Ha! Get me a nurse! I want an enema!"

Bernard positioned the wheelchair in front of his bed. "It's good to see you with so much 'kick', Mr. Finkelstein. Do you really want me to get a nurse? I was wondering if perhaps you felt up to a little trip down the hall?" He said this with his trademark wink of conspiracy.

"A trip you say? Damn right I'm up to it, Castleman! Get me out of this crisply lined crapper and lets take a cruise!"

Bernard gently removed the oxygen mask from around the head of Horace and hooked it over the valve of the tank. He then carefully turned off the valve and helped Horace into the wheelchair, which was no easy feat - accompanied by much cursing, coughing, and general dissatisfaction with the whole delicate procedure.

Once Horace had been guided out the door, they made their way slowly down the hall, slowly enough that Horace could hurl a few darkly embellished ruditees in the direction of any stupefied patient that was within his target range.

A few minutes later they were safely hidden within the old utility room, which was presently seldom used, and where they were not likely to be disturbed.

"Castleman!"

"Yes."

"Tell me something."

"Of course."

"Take the excitement out of life, what's left? Take the youth out of a man, what do rules mean to him anymore? Freedom, Castleman! A man my age needs a well earned taste of freedom! Freedom to be a Goddamned sociopath!"

His lungs protested and went into a tear.

"Don't over-do it, Mr. Finkelstein."

"Crappers! I'm alive, ain't I? I YET LIVE, don't I? Doctors say: Go figure! Well, thank you very much, snot-faced whoosies in white! Every heart beat's over-doing it, Castleman! They think I'm in a second Goddamned childhood. Ha! Man doesn't grow backwards, he grows forwards! Even if he's deaf, dumb, blind as a prick and shits in a bag he's still nearer the grave than to momma's nipple! Hurry up, Castleman, for Chrissakes!"

Bernard gave him a cigarette and held out a Bic lighter.

"Don't be too hard on the doctors." said Castleman.  
"They want what's best for you, I'm positive."

"Crappers." Horace rolled the cigarette between his fingers and then took a deep, sullen haul off it. Inside his chest the two withered prunes thought it time to dance the Watusi. Bernard stepped forward but Horace waved him off with a hand which was dripping a little saliva. He took another try at it, and this time his lungs decided to 'sit this one out' and pout quietly for a bit.

"You and me understand each other," he said after a moment. "You don't treat me like a swaddling newborn and I don't get you to stick enemas up my ass. I've been a bad boy most of my life, Castleman; a renegade, a ballbreaker, a real 'guard your chickens' kinda guy. Between you and me, I don't fancy my chances with the Hereafter...expect I'll know soon enough." Bernard was interested to note that there was little trace of bitterness in his words. Horace continued to puff away quietly. Then he looked up with dark, wet eyes.

"Angels do not come for me,  
For such a wicked man I be,  
Who, twice the tavern, twice the fee,  
Can ill afford eternity. Ha!"

Bernard walked over to the one tiny window and pried it open a couple of inches to freshen the air. So Horace had

been pondering the 'higher' questions? This indeed was an unexpected but not unwelcome turn of events. What an absolutely totally satisfactory beginning to the day! And he allowed his pleasure to show with a small secretive smile that only the world through the window had knowledge of. "God forgives those that repent in time," Bernard said, a little too casually. He had lost himself for a minute with the view of the parking lot below him.

"He does?"

There was a logjam of cars near the entrance to the Visitor's Parking area; each driver had to wait his turn to punch out a token from the dispensing machine, before gaining access through a barrier which raised and lowered automatically. An ambulance came screaming up to the emergency baydock and two technicians hopped out and threw open the rear doors. "We've discussed this subject on numerous occasions, Mr. Finkelstein."

Horace rolled what was left of his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. The smoke curled thickly about his face, tended to collect there and then spilled over in the air above his head. He was getting a lot of mileage out of it.

"That's interesting, Castleman. Must be short term memory loss cause I don't recollect us ever talking about

that subject. Supposed to be your area of expertise, ain't it? My loss, I guess. Just one more ailment in a big bag of crappy ailments, eh Castleman? Forgetfulness? Minor worry at this stage anyways. Darned annoying though. I seem to be forgetting about a lot of things these days. A LOT of THINGS, Castleman."

A note of alarm zinged in and struck Bernard between the shoulder blades. The ambulance, the stretcher bearers, the parking lot with the lineup of cars, even the distant river which gathered in the hospital grounds in a wide, sweeping arm, were all collapsing images as Bernard's attention retracted back into the room at something near the speed of light.

"All you have to remember, Mr. Finkelstein, is that I've tried my uttermost to be a friend to you. And I think - if I may be so bold - that I've been a pretty good one for a long time. That's all you have to remember. When everyone else said 'no', I said 'of course'. When everyone else said 'that's impossible, Mr. Finkelstein', I said 'no, it's not impossible' and I found a way to make it happen. You could always count on me. Always."

Horace had an irritating thing he did when he wanted to convey certain sardonic notions. First, his rat-like eyes bulged outwards until one felt sure they would pop out and

roll along the floor. At the same time the left eyebrow - furry white - slid up the forehead to a seemingly impossible altitude. Lastly, he forced his head so far backwards that a legitimate fear existed that the skin around his Adam's Apple might tear apart from the pressure. He was doing this now.

"Don't get me wrong, Castleman. You've been just beautiful. Beautiful! Best Goddamn most selfless Altar boy I've ever had! I know - why don't you kneel down before me right now, Castleman. Get down on those scabby knees of yours and prostate yourself! God, I love it when you prostate yourself!"

"That's unfair of you, Mr. Finkelstein."  
Horace took a tense puff from what was now nearly filter. "I know I'm unfair. Forgive me. Sincerely. I treat you like dirt. I like you, Castleman, you're an enema. I like enemas."

"You have a colourful language, Mr. Finkelstein."

"I like to shit. Lots."

"Indeed."

Horace took another puff. "So He forgives and forgets?"

"Most assuredly, he does."

"Uh-huh. You know this for a fact?"

"This, I believe absolutely."

Horace took another puff. "Uh-huh. Well, you know what I believe Castleman? Crappers! That's what I believe. Repentance ain't an option left to me. Trickery! That's the way to go! I can count on you for that, can't I Castleman? Trickery and deception - the two things we have in common. When the time comes for me to take the big dump, I know you're gonna make me so pretty, the angels will take one look at my smile and haul me off to Hallelujah. I can count on you for that, eh Castleman? Like I count on you for this routine fuckin' coup de grace!" He was smoking the filter now, with a vengeance. "But I've been thinking, Altar boy, trickery is not my ONLY option. Yes, yes, I know it's the one that best suits your... particular needs, but it's not the only option. I can make a gesture." He took one last drag from the filter and threw it onto the floor. "You put a lot of faith in me, Castleman. I like that in my Altar boys. What can I tell ya? Some investments pay off. Some don't. If there's a God, you and me, we both know I can't shaft Him and get away with it. But YOU Castleman! You I can..."

Mr. Finkelstein went into convulsions. His prune-lungs, until now pouty wallflowers, had decided enough was enough and entered into a choral bit of German Expressionist Theatre. Horace had doubled over in spasms of coughing and looked to be hawking out his last moments on earth.

Bernard slowly ground out the filter beneath the heel of his shoe. Mr. Finkelstein's attitude troubled him deeply. Let's be honest. It irritated the hell out of him. Altar boys and investments? What nonsense!

Mr. Finkelstein's face had no blood left in it. From his mouth hung long strands of whitish mucus.

With sadness, Bernard realized that Horace was not really his 'special friend' after all. He had made a deception of friendship.

Mr. Finkelstein - as well as he was able - was waving his hand violently about for attention. A 'gesture'? He thought about it. Had Bernard been deceived in other ways? What other ways? A dull twinge of melancholy crept into his heart. 'I can't shaft Him and get away with it. But YOU I can...'

Suddenly an urgent question entered his mind that was too cruel to leave unanswered.

Acting swiftly, he sprung to the back of the wheelchair and spun it around to face the door. In seconds he was hurtling Horace down the hallway towards the first available nurse's station.

By one o'clock that afternoon the staff had succeeded in draining Mr. Finkelstein's lungs. By one fifteen he was



resting in relative safety with the oxygen mask back in place.

Bernard had kept a vigil outside in the hallway, pacing to and fro and thinking good thoughts that Horace would not expire. The doctors were the first to leave. Shaking their neatly groomed heads, they swept down the hall in a flourish of frustration. The nurses came out shortly after, looking flushed and hassled from the experience. Bernard took nurse Reinbauer aside and inquired about Horace.

"Well," she began, in staggered breaths, as though she had just granted him a post-fight interview, "he's stable...ornery, despicable, loathsome..."

"Just the facts please, Miss Reinbauer."

"He's stable, okay. He's lucid. Of course, he's refused any kind of sedation...wanted an enema. I think he gets some perverse pleasure out of that, Mr. Castleman. Oh yeah, he wants to see you in the worst way."

"Would it be all right?"

"Oh, he's made a point of it. Speaking purely as a professional, Mr. Castleman, I'd lay off the tobacco and try not to excite him. But off the record," she said facetiously, "we appreciate your efforts in this area." Then she giggled. "For a while the doctors were considering a high risk operation. They decided against it though,

figuring he'd beat the odds and live. Gutless turkeys, huh?  
Ha!"

Nurse Reinbauer's mind was too exhausted to register Bernard's expression of distaste, and she hurried down the hall to fill out her report and sneak a little something from her medicine cabinet. Bernard turned the door handle slowly and went inside.

Horace lay flat on his bed, tightly cocooned in fresh linen. The oxygen mask which covered his face made a deep imprint on the skin like a gumbdrop-shaped cookie mould. His eyes were wide open and bulging. When he saw Bernard he motioned him to come closer.

Bernard sat on the edge of the bed and fingered the folds of a sheet. He took a deep, shzugging breath and held it in for a moment.

"Now, see what results when you get overly taxed?" Horace stared up at him. A thick vein inflated down the centre of his forehead.

"My dear Mr. Finkelstein, whatever are we going to do? But you know, I've heard a lot of good things about Stress Management Therapy. Perhaps when you're feeling better, we could sit in on a session or two."

The bulging eyes darted quickly from right to left.

"In any event, I feel strongly that, for the time being, we should cut down on our excursions to the utility room."

The eyes were now doing full rotations. Bernard realized that Horace could not speak with the mask on. So he removed it.

It took a few seconds. Then he spoke. "Thought I bought the farm, eh?"

"Nonsense. How are you feeling?"

"How do I feel? How do I feel! Crappers! That's how I feel. Give me your hand, Altar boy."

Bernard offered his hand, which Horace gripped with surprising strength.

"Listen, I want to thank you, sincerely, for your prompt action back there. What a buddy. What a pal."

"You scared me, Mr. Finkelstein."

"Oh, I'll bet I did."

Bernard placed his other hand over Mr. Finkelstein's. "You know, Mr. Finkelstein, now might be an appropriate time for us to join in prayer. Sometimes it takes an...incident like this to demonstrate the fragility of life. Would you like to pray? I know I would."

"For what?"

"For strength, for resolve. God loves you, Mr. Finkelstein, even if you harbour some scepticism. He wants you to live eternally, with Him, in His Kingdom."

"God wants me?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Finkelstein, He certainly does."

"Hm. He wants me. You want me. I'm in demand, ain't I."

"When was the last time you spoke with your sister Brenda?"

Horace removed his hand and motioned for the mask. Bernard held it over his face while he took rapid, shallow breaths. Then he wanted to speak again.

"I was wondering when you'd bring her up. She's a bitch and a cow but she minds my leash, Castleman. Does what I tell her."

"And is all still in good order?" Bernard asked uncomfortably. "I mean, has anything changed since I last talked to her? Details? Arrangements? That sort of thing?"

"Order. Now there's a word, eh Castleman? Glad you asked me that. You see Altar boy, I'm an expert on 'order'. I know a lot about 'order'. Crappers! Lay in my bed for five years, you get to see all kinds of 'order'. What sort of 'order' are you talkin' about? Don't answer that. First, let me tell you a little something about 'order'.

"You know Carmen the cleaner? Six-fifteen every morning Carmen the cleaner gets into the elevator and presses the 'sixth' floor. Fifteen seconds pass. Then, 'bing', the doors open. Next thing you hear is the sound of the roller pail on the hallway floor. Next comes the 'splash' of the mop as it plops into the water. Then 'splat', as the mop hits the linoleum tiles. What comes after? 'Swish, swish' of course, as he makes his crappy way down the hall, mopping the floor, disinfecting every nook and cranny, making everything nice and spotless. Ain't that fine 'order', Castleman? Every morning, 'Ping, roll, splash, splat, swish-swish.'

"You get to love that smell of disinfectant! That smell's the Goddamned sunrise, ain't it? That's 'order', but that's not the only 'order'.

"I gotta cockroachy that lives in the crack of the doorframe, there, down there. He's got 'order' too. When he hears: 'Ping, roll, splash, splat, swish-swish', he high-tails it into the crack until Carmen's made his pass and everything's nice and clean. Then cockroachy comes out into a sparkling clean world and goes about his crappy business. That's an even grander 'order' don't you think, Castleman?"

"I'll have the place fumigated," Bernard answered flatly.

"The hell you will!" Horace attempted to raise himself on his elbows, "The hell you will!" He went directly into another coughing fit. It wasn't until sometime later that he was able to have the mask removed once more.

"Let me tell you something, Castleman. You're too stupid and unworthy to rub out cockroachy. Maybe sometime I'll decide to ground him to shit beneath my wheelchair. But it will be me that does it, not you! Got it?"

"What point are you trying to make, Mr. Finkelstein?" Bernard asked wearily.

"Think about it, you blockhead! Carmen gets his 'order' from Mr. Boss whoever he is, right? Cockroachy gets his 'order' from Carmen, who don't know shit about cockroachy. So, cockroachy's sitting pretty, yeah? Wrong! Cause I know about cockroachy. He don't know shit about me. I'm the hammer of the Lord! Anytime, Castleman, anytime I want, just on a whim...splat! Cockapoo Heaven.

"Then I say to myself: Crappers! It don't stop there. So I look at you, Castleman. Five year's I've been lookin' at you like I've been lookin' at cockroachy. You've got 'order' too. I know your kind of 'order'. Mr. Sunshine Up My Ass every second day! 'Wanna play cards, Mr. Finkelstein?', 'Need a hand to shave, Mr. Finkelstein?', 'Filter or non-filter, Mr. Finkelstein?', Don't you worry

about a thing, Mr. FINK EL STEIN, everything's well under control. Just you relax, have a smoke and die anytime soon!

"So, there it is you see; I know about Carmen, I know about cockroachy, and I know about you. But you! You're just like cockroachy. You don't really know about me. Ha!"

The muscles in Mr. Castleman's derriere were contracting involuntarily. "I'd rather you'd just come out with it, Mr. Finkelstein."

"Even a sociopath can make a 'gesture'."

"Should I be speaking with Brenda?"

"Won't do any good. My word goes. I'm jarred and jellied. Given myself to science, Castleman. Cut me up. Poke me, prod me, show me off to the wet-backed whoosies, then 'poof', up the incinerator. Ha!

"Castleman, Castleman, don't look so down about it! I'm such a sucker for pathos. All right, Altar boy. Look, it ain't over yet. Listen to me. So, I'm thinkin' a little bit more about 'order' and I come to the conclusion: Crappers. It don't stop there. How can it stop there? If I know about you, the cockroachy and Carmen, then it only makes sense that someone knows about ME, you, the cockroachy and Carmen.

"Get it, Castleman? It's them...up there. Them winged crappers on High! Tell you a little secret. Come close,

Altar boy."

Bernard leaned forward. Horace grabbed him by the tie and drew him to his face.

"For five years I ain't just been watching bugs. I've been investigating things. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink? Poking around. And I found it, Castleman. I, Horace Finkelstein, bloody well found it!" He let go of the tie and relaxed his body. There was a bitter grin on his face.

"Found what?"

"The answer to the big secret. And I'm prepared to make a deal. What do you think about that?"

"If you really care about what I think, I'll tell you in all truth that it saddens me to know that we have to make deals at this stage in our relationship. I thought we were friends."

"Cut the crap, Castleman. I'm not interested. Here's the terms. Tonight, you take me where I want to go...tomorrow I'll call the bitch and put things in 'order'."

"Where is it that you wish to be taken, Mr. Finkelstein?"

"I wanna see the angels, Castleman. Them winged varmints on High. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink."



Bernard did not go home for supper that evening. It was now close to eight o'clock as he sat at his desk in the Pastoral Office and tried to recollect what he had done of any significance during the last seven and one half hours. There was the frantic call to Brenda which accomplished nothing except to confirm what he already knew to be true - that Horace had indeed communicated to her his desire to make other arrangements. The rest of the time was a blur. Horace, that madman, had succeeded in rattling Bernard's brain to the point of utter disfunction.

He fingered the small slip of paper on to which Horace had dictated the few essentials that were needed for his 'trip'. Madness. Just where did he think he was going? Out of the hospital? Surely not!

He drummed his fingers lightly on the surface of his desk. When next he checked the clock, he was amazed to see that he had been drumming away for thirty minutes. It was now eight-thirty. Utter madness. For the first time in his life, Bernard Castleman had to concede that he was an angry man. Mix in a little 'offended' and a quantity of 'indignation' and the result was a seething broth of righteous fury.

He ground up the paper in his hands and threw it with all his might, but the crumpled paper was light and caught

the air. It floated to the carpet a short distance in front of his desk. Let him think what he likes, Bernard decided, I wash my hands of this man completely. But it was a bitter liquid with which he washed himself, and the feel of it unnerved him. Unaccustomed as he was with such a new and corrosive emotion, he slumped back into his chair with the uncertain weight of it, hugged it inquisitorially to his bosom like something newborn, and felt totally inadequate with the whole situation.

When at last Bernard looked up from his moroseful reverie, he saw that Joseph was standing in the doorway. He had no idea how long he had been there, but he made an effort out of instinct to straighten his spine. All the blood had rushed to his face and that he could do nothing about. "Joseph! My goodness. Come in, please. It's rather late, isn't it?"

"Clock'n up some overtime, tonight," he said, as he bent down to pick up the crumpled paper. "I dunno, maybe I shouldn't be here..."

"Nonsense. I welcome the company. Sit yourself." Joseph handed Bernard the papered ball and sat down in the metal chair provided for visitors.

"I came by earlier."

"When?"

"Twelve-thirty, this afternoon."

Bernard put his hands to his eye sockets and massaged them. "That's right, isn't it...we had a meeting, though it was extremely tentative, I believe. To be frank, I didn't think you were going to come. Forgive me."

"Last minute thing y'know? I thought - what the hell."

The two fell into an awkward silence, made more acute for Bernard because he knew that Joseph was looking at him curiously. "Scuze me for askin' but are you okay? Don't look so good. Y'know, maybe I should scram..."

"Stay, Joseph." He gave up trying to hide anything. "It's been a day filled with annoyances. I can't begin to explain the depth of my frustration."

"Don't have to."

"My heart is burdened by a request. Call it a last wish if you like, from one of my chronic patients. It's a wish that I can't possibly grant, even if I understood what it was, which I don't. And I fear that I've lost both his friendship and his confidence because of this. That's the dilemma in a nutshell."

"Uh-huh."

Bernard drummed his fingers loudly on the desk top. The anger was peaking again, quite uncontrollably. "You see, it's a totally unreasonable request...did I say request?"

More along the lines of an order. There's only so much I can do, and I've already done more than is humanly possible for this man. Remember, I'm just a volunteer. I act in no official capacity." A bitter chuckle escaped from his throat. "He thinks I'll do anything for it."

"For what?"

"For HIM! He thinks I'll do anything for him!"

"Sounds like you've been spoilin' him, Bernard. What's he want, this guy?"

Bernard went on dully with his own thoughts as if he didn't hear the question. "He's mad. He's definitely not lucid. Tell me, how could a lucid man on the verge of death request such things?" He uncrumpled the paper and flattened it out upon his desk. "He would like one medium-sized crowbar, one claw hammer of light gauge, and two well-juiced flashlights. What is this nonsense! And listen to this! He says he wants to see the angels. Can you fathom that one? Angels! I tell him, in the nicest possible manner, that he cannot see the angels until...you know...afterwards. I also try to impress upon him the fact that this is a hospital, not a construction site. Think that makes a dent? He tells me that he knows where the angels are hiding and I had just better take him there, tonight, or else. Or else! The man is insane. Well, the hell with him. He can give me 'or else'

because I wash my hands of the whole incomprehensible business!"

Bernard slumped back into his seat and focused his stare, with all its misery, at nothing in particular.

"He's one bent rod, this Mr. ..."

"Finkelstein. Horace Finkelstein."

"Finkelstein, right."

After a reasonable period of silence had again passed between them, Joseph made a suggestion.

"I say we go for it."

Bernard looked at him with his red, miserable, and otherwise vacant eyes.

"I mean, why not? I can get the tools. Everything's in the basement. Go along with it as long as it's practical, y'know?" Joseph had a soothing, persuasive voice. "I wouldn't worry if I was you, Mr. Castleman, if the guy's as nuts as you make him out, he'll get ten feet from his bed and find he don't have a clue. Besides, you don't seem like the type to give up so easy."

Bernard felt his head nodding slowly. Joseph's excited smile was refreshing. It might be nice to hitch his wagon on to someone else's enthusiasm for a change. But even as he agreed, he knew deep down in the knitted fibres of his heart that he was making an error of inestimable proportions.

Joseph hurried down to the basement; twenty minutes later he was back in the doorway of Pastoral Services holding a small canvas satchel. "It's all here," he said, close to a whisper, as if he feared he would break some temporary spell which had fallen over Bernard.

They took the elevator up to the sixth floor. No one spoke.

Horace was sitting up in bed, dressed in blue and white striped pyjamas. His knees were tucked snugly under his chin - cabled tightly together by his arms. Those characteristic bulging eyes, into which all of his various emotional components - displaced by the illness - had rushed for sanctuary, seemed cauterized by their burgeoning fullness into a permanent glare of resentment.

"Crappers, Castleman! Who's this filthpail of a brute?"

It was true that Joseph was still in his soiled greeneries and hadn't bothered to wash himself after the day in the incinerator room.

"Mr. Finkelstein, this is Joseph. He's a friend of mine."

"You a friend of Castleman's?"

"Yessir, Mr. Finkelstein."

"My condolences. Wanna see the angels?"

Joseph shrugged his shoulders. "Sure."

"This ain't no ploy is it, Castleman?"

"No tricks, Mr. Finkelstein," interrupted Joseph, "like to help out any way I can. Got the stuff you wanted." He raised the bag so that Horace could see.

"Good man! Let's get a move on then. I hear the feathery flappin' of wings 'gainst the hallowed rafters of heaven!"

They had entered his room unobserved by the night staff. It was Horace's wish that they should leave that way also. For his part, Bernard felt little of the intrigue that had already bonded Joseph and Horace in a spirit of complicity. He didn't care if one of the staff was to catch them sneaking about. He wished for it. How far were they going to get in any case, even if they knew where it was they were going? The canvas bag containing the tools might prove slightly inexplicable, but it was all in keeping with the anomalous beat of the day anyway.

"Now what?" Joseph asked nervously, for they were out in the incriminating glare of the hallway.

"Sharp left, kid. Torque me down to the utility room. That's where we're after."

The utility room. It was the old storage space where Bernard had often spirited away Horace for a little privacy

and a quick smoke. Bernard was the last to enter and as he closed the door behind them, he switched on the lights. Horace ordered them off. There was sufficient moonlight coming through the window for them to find their way about.

Against one wall stood a large pine bureau which in its day had housed medicines and medical paraphernalia. Now mouldy, stuffed animals - bears, rabbits, turtles - and some stained pillows stared out with compressed lifelessness through the sliding glass windows.

"Move that aside," directed Horace. Bernard and Joseph each took an end and began to push and pull the bureau in a heavy path along the floor. "Five years of patient watching. Simple deduction, Castleman. Everything gets moved after a time. Everything but this."

Horace wheeled himself forward to look at the newly exposed portion of wall. An outline of the bureau could be seen on the surface where the dust had been kept away.

"Mr. Finkelstein?" Joseph urged, for Horace was scrutinizing the wall with prolonged self-absorption.

"Take the hammer and start tapping. Tap all around it."

"Yessir." From his bag, Joseph withdrew the hammer and offered it to Bernard, who quietly refused. Shrugging his shoulders, Joseph stepped to the wall and began doing what Horace had commanded, lightly tapping the surface in a



parabola from left to right. At a point near the middle the tappings changed their tone; they became noticeably duller and serried. Joseph checked himself, repeated the process to be sure, then stepped back and regarded the wall with keen interest.

"That's it," Horace said quickly, "that's our ticket on the Cherub Express."

The intimations of what was to follow finally compelled Bernard to speak. "There's nothing here but a wall, Mr. Finkelstein. I think it's fair to say that we've gone above and beyond what is normally acceptable in our efforts to appease your curiosity. But this is ridiculous, and I must insist that we return you to your room."

"The hell you will!"

"Shhh! Take it easy, Mr. Finkelstein," pleaded Joseph. He looked at Bernard as if to convey to him the same message. "Tell us what you want and we'll do it."

"Rip it away then. All of it! I want to see what's behind. Quickly boy!"

"Alright, Okay."

Using the crowbar, Joseph was able to peel off the plywood sheeting with relative ease. The old pine boards underneath proved more difficult, and extracting the nails made a considerable wrenching noise. But he kept at it,

slowly, intensely, with Mr. Finkelstein's encouragement.

"Wilful destruction of hospital property..." Bernard said, after the sounds of cracking boards had become nearly intolerable to his ears.

Horace shifted in his chair. "Shut up Castleman and let the boy work."

"Yeah," Joseph mumbled, deeply engrossed in his labour, "shut up Castleman."

The last board gave way a few minutes later. Joseph stepped back and drew the rag from his back pocket to wipe his face. There was silence while they looked.

It was with grim satisfaction that Horace finally spoke. "I told you I knew where it was. I was right."

Within the exposed space stood a high, narrow door made of darkened oak. There was no door knob, and a weak ray of light filtered through the hole and fell on the grinning face of Horace.

"Lets not hang around all Goddamned night wait'n for an invitation. Open it up for Chrissakes!"

Joseph soon discovered that there was no way in which to grip the edges of the door since it was flush and swollen tight in its frame. Inserting two fingers into the doorknob hole failed also, for he found that he didn't have enough leverage to force it open.

Horace, strangely tranquil, suggested the crowbar. Joseph positioned the tapered end between the door and the frame and drove it deep in with the hammer. The sound was sharp and criminal. Bernard winced at each strike. Either the staff was universally deaf, or they had helped themselves to a little of what was in their medicine cabinets.

With considerable force Joseph began to pry back the crowbar. The door moaned, creaked, and then suddenly the top portion split away, causing him to stumble backwards.

It was wounded but still closed. Dusty, pale light streamed through the gash. He gripped the splintered wood with both hands and jerked outwards, violently, many times, until his grunts of effort came very close to audible curses.

And then in a motion that was both sudden and unnerving, the door whipped open. For a time no one moved.

There was a staircase which corkscrewed steeply upwards through a narrow shaft. The steps were withered from ages of use. Each was no more than a couple of feet wide. Near the middle of each of the steps were indentations where the paint had been worn away, exposing the green lead primer.

The light was natural and came from two sources. The first a tiny stained glass window which was recessed into

the wall at about waistlevel. Much of the coloured pieces of glass had been replaced with regular glass. It depicted, as nearly as one could tell, a fragmented Christ, face and eyes schizophrenically juxtaposed.

On the base of the recession, which was about a foot and a half wide, sat a miniature porcelain figure of a woman kneeling with head bowed and slightly tilted. In her lap she cradled a lamb which she regarded with endearment, judging by the trace of smile on her glazed, frozen face.

The second source of light, as evidenced by the gridwork projection on the steps, came from a skylight far up on the roof of the hospital which they could not readily see from where they were standing inside the room.

Horace spoke. "I want to go up, Castleman."

"Out of the question."

"Why outta the question!" It was Joseph arguing. "The old guy's found something. Shii-it, why not have a look?"

"Tell you what, Altar boy. You can nick the gal with the lambcrop and stick her in your place of business. I won't tell a soul. Ha!"

What was Bernard objecting to? The truth of the matter was that he didn't, just then, have the means to adequately translate into words what, to him, were very real and opposing instincts of trepidation. So he took the official

line, which in fact, for an official line, made a lot of sense.

"This is private domain. This is a restricted area. And it's probably not even safe."

"Crappers! Safe for who? I'm an eighty-three year old daredevil and I'm gonna crawl up each Goddamned step by myself if I have to!"

"No need for that, Mr. Finkelstein. I'll go with ya." Was that a look of triumph on Joseph's face? Or a look of apology? Again, Bernard could not tell, just as he couldn't distinguish his expressions earlier in the day when they were in the incinerator room.

"But I'll have to take you on my back. It's the only way."

"Good man, Joseph! You're a Goddamned packhorse!"

Like a sack of laundry, Joseph boosted Horace from the chair onto his back. It was fearful to watch, but Horace only squealed with delight.

"Hand me one of the flashlights please, Mr. Castleman."

"Guard the Pearly Gates, Altar boy. Spill the beans and the deal's kaput!"

Joseph shifted the weight abruptly and put one foot on the first step. He looked at Bernard. "You sure?"

"The man's got milk for blood! Giddy up, giddy up there, boy!"

They were gone. Bernard waited. He waited in the stillness of the porcelain figure's gaze until he thought her head would lift and she would speak words that would shatter him in a thousand pieces.

The moon was shifting with its projectory. The light was fading on the madonna, making solemn shadows and grotesque images within the copious folds of her sculptured shroud. There was not a sound to be heard anywhere, not from above, not from the wards; the quiet was unnatural, and filled Bernard with a desolation that he had never experienced before. It was as if the universe had fallen under some conspiracy of anaesthesia to which he was the sole exclusion.

Then at last he heard a sound, a far off rumbling like the kind of low hum indistinguishable between thunder and an airplane. It came floating down the stairwell with all the fanfare of lightly settling dust.

What was it? It intensified quickly; it became a pummeling of heavy feet on the ceiling, swelling louder, nearer, until it was directly above, until Bernard thought he was under a trestle bridge with a locomotive bearing down hard. And just as suddenly it trailed away, dragging behind

it a hollow, lingering aftersense of demented laughter.

There was one flashlight remaining and Bernard turned it on and began to climb the stairs. Though he was not an overly big man, he found the walls and the pitch of steps to be constricting, and he wondered how Joseph and Horace had made it.

Higher and higher the staircase spiralled. The flashlight beam made small, brilliant circles on each wasted board. And then the steps gave way to space and darkness, save for the tiny orifice above, which was now without benefit of an overhead moon. He stepped forward cautiously, but stopped when he heard his heels click loudly on a hard, smooth surface. "Joseph?" His call was not loud. It was the call of a frightened man hoping to find one thing in the midst of many other things he did not wish to find.

"Joseph!" He called again with greater urgency. His voice went out into the black, bounced off distant walls, drifted down unseen hallways, and diffused into many-particled silence. Where were the Sisters? The Sisters! Was that really the most pressing question? He waved the light around him. If they were here there would be hell to pay. This intrusion would never be forgiven. It was therefore a blessing of sorts, that no one seemed to be home.

Slowly he began to get an idea of the area in which he was standing. It was a large, spacious foyer, with corridors spilling darkness into it from various directions, none of which coincided with the architectural layout of the lower floors. There was a notable absence of furnishings. There were no sofas, no chairs, not even a stool. Yet, when his light fell upon a wall, any wall it seemed, it illuminated a gallery of grim faced apparitions, portraits of anonymous saints or clergymembers - he had no clue who they were - all framed in extravagantly carved mahogany, and all fear inspiring.

For this reason he started to move, and when he did he saw that one corridor in particular seemed to offer a source of very dull light near its end. Windows? Of course, there must be windows.

At a place where his hallway became the terminus of another, forming a kind of T pattern, he discovered a set of double doors. They were different from the others. They were grander in dimension and they spoke of some importance beyond. Bernard hesitated but found that his hands were already turning the handles even before he had decided to look.

He was certain that they would be locked. They were not. He pushed open the doors and stood on the threshold



while his light cut long slices across hundreds of single, neatly spaced metal beds. Their blankets and sheets were ruffled and peeled away as though everyone had just awakened, stumbled bleary-eyed to the toilette, and were about to return and scream a collective bloody murder at his unannounced presence -in their bedroom!

This was a despicable invasion of private sanctuary! He closed both doors sharply. Horrid, sinful act. The guilt he felt was overwhelming. It gnawed at him. It throttled him. But it didn't tell him what to do.

He made certain that the doors had safely clicked together, then turned away. But it was not into darkness that he turned. It was into a light so piercing that he thought he had met his maker.

It bore down on him with tremendous velocity, and it lasted only a few, terrifying seconds. Joseph flew by, flashlight in hand; on his back was Horace, clinging for dear life, bug-eyed and delirious, flogging him with his hands, urging him faster. "Ride em cowboys! Yaaaaa hoooo...!"

And just as quickly they were gone, swallowed into the amorphic belly of darkness.

Bernard stood frozen where he was until long after the echoing, insane laughter had trailed off to nothing, and

quiet had returned, heavy and grinning.

The light which Bernard had seen came from the place where the corridor opened up onto a row of offices which were arranged against the side of the institution. Each of the offices contained normal four-paned windows, all in various stages of disrepair. He entered one of the rooms and looked out.

He saw the lights of the city. He drew the fresh night air deep into his lungs and held it there, gratefully. They have a wonderful view, he thought to himself, and watched while a car moved slowly down the road, put on its brake lights and then turned out of sight. There was a man directly below him, strolling along the side-walk. He stopped at a garbage can and began to rummage through it, pulling out a few glass bottles which he placed in a bag he was carrying. Bernard almost called out to him, but held his silence. Just the sight of him made Bernard feel better.

God, it was amazing how much better it made him feel.

He turned his attention to the office he was in with renewed vigour. There was a desk, wooden and very austere, and a chair to accompany it. It was not a very comfortable one but it went well with its counterpart. There was an old, retractable spring lamp with its stem inset into the corner of the desk. It was fully extended and it hung down over the

edge like someone had pushed it aside quickly.

Sitting on top of the desk were a number of curious things. There was some very outdated electronic equipment: a reel to reel tape machine which was hooked into a large metal box with a clock - some sort of timer mechanism Bernard figured - and a standing microphone, all of which constituted the Sisters' P.A. system. There was a cup and saucer made of delicate china and revolting to look at since the cup contained a black liquid thickened by green spores which were crawling over the lip and down the sides. Also revolting to look at was the piece of toast, half chewed. It too was caked in the same prosperous mold which was also seeking out new lands to claim.

On the back of the chair there was draped a very simple, hand-knitted shawl which Bernard placed on his lap as he sat down. He was not impressed with the housekeeping and a trace of a smile crossed his face. Then his eyes caught something of interest tacked on to the corkboard in front of him. He pulled it down. The tack bounced off the desk and landed on the floor. It was a page ripped from a magazine, an advertisement. Its caption read: **FALLING STAR RETIREMENT VILLAGE FLORIDA SUN SURF SAND AND DISNEYLAND!**

A series of clicks and buzzes woke Bernard Castleman from a very deep and mending sleep. The tape was running. It was eight o'clock and the morning's prayer was being delivered to all of the ill and dying patients on the floors below.

The sun was streaming through the windows. Bernard felt the shawl around him. He must have been cold during the night.

He was happy. Then again, he was always a happy sort of fellow. It was in his bones. Today he shouldn't even be at the hospital. Today was not his day to volunteer. But so what? Where there is need, where there is despondency, there are always a few selfless volunteers of Bernard's calibre to be found lurking about. He switched off the tape in mid-prayer, cleared his throat, and addressed the microphone.

## The Noble Quest of Eddie de Rodbender

Once upon a time and thank God only once, there existed a country called Canada, which was bordered on the south by a giant empire called the United States, on the west by a realm called Britalbaskatoba, and on the east by the Republic of New France (formerly the sovereign nation of Quebec).

To the north lay a vast expanse of empty wasteland, left virtually pristine from the time many years ago when it was concluded that a mysterious 'triangle' existed that had a tendency to swallow up expensive nuclear submarines and icebreakers.

To the far east, beyond the Republic of New France, there was rumoured to exist a region known as the Maritimes. Maritimers, it was supposed, were once a hardy, happygolucky bunch of coastal creatures who suffered extinction at the time when Quebec became the Republic of New France and moved to disallow the safe passage of unemployment premiums from Ottawa.

The ruler of Canada was a man named Eddie de Rodbender, whose Great Grandfather generations before had tried unsuccessfully to obtain the seat of power which Eddie himself now held. Realizing that his life's great quest had

been a failure, Great Grandfather Rodbender resigned from the party and moved to Baie Comeau, whereupon he put the letters 'de' in front of his last name and became a subversive for the Government of France.

It was an irksome cross the young Eddie de Rodbender was forced to bear throughout his political career, especially since his French was considered poor at best. But he held to his bosom a sacred oath that one day, by some noble deed, he would make amends for his Great Grandfather's treachery and put an end to the constant humiliation which had dogged at the heels of his lineage.

One day Eddie de Rodbender found himself seated at the table along with the closest and most trusted members of his cabinet. He was not a happy ruler.

"Guys, guys," he began, clearly frustrated, "what has become of this great country! Can't someone tell me?"

The minister responsible for Poor Financing cleared his throat - and his nose. "Well sir, as you're doubtlessly aware, we now have a much smaller tax base with which to work..."

Eddie de Rodbender quickly cut him off with a wave of his Imperial hand, leaving a reddish welt on the side of the minister's face. "Guys, guys! We once had a railroad, didn't we? Why can't we have a damn railroad like everyone else!"

"Britalbaskatoba's got a really swell railroad," muttered the minister responsible for Poor Housing.

"The Republic of New France has got one of those flashy electromagnetic jobs," added the minister responsible for Poor Healthcare.

"I hear it goes from Gaspé to Montreal in under two hours!" exhorted the minister responsible for being Held Accountable.

"So what, it's all your fault anyway!" roared the other ministers in unison.

Eddie de Rodbender slammed his fist down hard on the table - which was quickly replaced by a new one. "I don't give a damn who's responsible for this mess! I want my train back! And while we're at it, I want my country back too, the whole country - from east to west, from north to south, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from St. John's to the Queen Charlotte Islands, from... from..."

"Ellesmere to Point Pelee?" suggested the minister responsible for Filling in the Gaps.

"Right, the whole damn country! That's what I want! Comments, anyone?"

It was the minister responsible for Deportation and Missing Persons who finally spoke. "M'lord, are you at all intimating that we undertake some form of military adventure in an effort to regain territory that has legitimately disenfranchised itself from Canada?"

"Remember too, sir, that we have lost our nuclear capabilities to the mysterious northern triangle," added the

minister responsible for being Held Accountable.

"And who's fault is that!" roared the other ministers around the table.

"Guys, guys, I'm suggesting nothing of the sort," interrupted de Rodbender. He put his elbows on the table and began rubbing the divoted area between his eyes. "Haven't you people been keeping tabs? Look at what's been happening in the Republic of New France. The Quebecois have been reduced to second-class citizens in their own land. They can't work in their own language, they can't get an education in their own language, shopkeepers can't even hang a few blasted signs in their own tongue for God's sake!"

"I hear that by law, all films have to be dubbed first in European French," added the minister responsible for Farm Foreclosures.

"The way I see it," said the minister responsible for No Daycare, "They brought it on themselves, believing all that 'Vive le Quebec libre' crap in the first place."

"The point is," punctuated de Rodbender, "The Quebecois are in a mood to be wooed...catch my drift? As for the west? Well, I'd venture to say that they've had about enough of the crazy monarchy experiment. Besides, I know for a fact that they hate that stupid name of theirs. I believe that they want to be back on Canada AM's weather map. They know now that they'll never get a tan in the winter-time."

"Have you a plan for peaceful reunification?" asked the



minister responsible for being Held Accountable.

"If he does, it had better work!" threatened the other ministers.

"I have, " replied de Rodbender, with stentorian smugness, "The key to reunification is to involve our estranged bookends in a venture which will foster a common nationalistic pride." He paused for dramatic effect and the taking of archival photos. "I propose that we undertake a course of action which will result in the eventual takeover of the United States of America!"

De Rodbender's plan had the brilliance of simplicity. The following week, during a special edition of 'The Journal' which was broadcast to both New France and Britalbasketoba, the ruler of Canada spelled out his plans in an interview with Barbara's mum. Barbara was on vacation.

BARBARA'S MUM: Mr. de Rodbender, what's this all about? A plan to take over the United States? Why them? Why now?

DE RODBENDER; Because I want my railroad back. I want Canada back. To achieve this we need money and resources. But most importantly we need to recapture a sense of cooperation and togetherness among all our diverse races and cultures. We've been kicking each other around pretty good. It's time to stop kicking each other and put one mighty foot forward. We need a new national goal, like the great railroad our forefathers struggled valliantly to build. I see a great destiny for all Canadians, a great ribbon of steel

which binds us together from east to west, from north to south, from Toronto to Sudbury, from Timmins to North Bay, from Labrador to, to..."

"Burnaby!" prompted the minister responsible for Filling in the Gaps, out of camera.

DE RODBENDER: Right, Burnaby, and all points inbetween!

BARBARA'S MUM: America is a major military power. Their arsenal of nuclear weapons can destroy us hundreds of times over. How do you plan on conquering them, Mr. de Rodbender, by unleashing our 'Musical Ride'?

DE RODBENDER: We shall defeat them without violence or boredom. We shall take them by giving them what they want most.

BARBARA'S MUM: You've got me curious, Mr. de Rodbender. What might that be?

DE RODBENDER: We shall give them...us.

De Rodbender went on to explain his plan. By the end of the week he had secured the go-ahead from various sympathetic factions of both New France and Britalbasketoba. The biggest exercise in co-operation in the history of North America was about to unfold.

De Rodbender sat at the table, surrounded by his ministers. Before him was 'the hotline'. He sucked in his breath. "The President's private number," he whispered. "We're like this," He crossed two fingers to illustrate his point and picked up the phone. It rang twice, three times,

and then a woman with a deep southern accent was heard over the intercom. "Thank ya'all for dialling Candy's Erotic Phone Treats. Will ya be a paying by Masta Card or American Express, suga?"

De Rodbender slammed down the receiver. "Such a kidder, that guy."

After a few minutes of diplomatic wrangling, bribery, and a quick entreaty with a Washington Telephone Operator, de Rodbender was finally able to place his call.

"Mr. President?"

"Yeah, wha'd'ya want?"

"Eddie de Rodbender here." He winked at his ministers.

"Who?"

"De Rodbender, the ruler of Canada."

"Yeah, yeah, what's up?"

"Actually sir, we are. Up for sale that is, along with Britalbasketoba and the Republic of New France, and we'll even throw in the fabled Maritimes. What do you think, Mr. President, in the mood to shop?"

"Get outta here!"

"I'm sincere in this, Mr. President, let me assure you. The country is in a shamble. No one wants to be a Canadian anymore. No national pride left. We're nuts about the stars and stripes."

"We could use the clean air..."

"We got all kinds of clean air, and clean water and

wide open spaces and tall, timbered forests and..."

"Yeah, yeah,...how much for the whole shebang?"

"That's a bit tricky, Mr. President. Many things have to be considered. For instance we have to take into account the heavy culture shock, loss of social programs, rise in crime rate, fall of international prestige..."

"What's it gonna cost me, de Rodbender!"

"Three million for every constitutionally recognized person above the 49'th, Mr. President. Mr. President? Are you still there?"

"What's that in Pentagon terms?"

"Three screws, four bolts and about eighteen paperclips."

"Wow."

"Think of all that beaver."

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking. Okay, de Rodbender, I think we can run with this. Let me talk with Congress and I'll get back to you. Leave your number with my secretary."

De Rodbender was delighted. Within a month, cheques worth three million dollars (American) began appearing in mailboxes from coast to coast. But this was only the beginning.

The genius of de Rodbender's plan lay in his gut-felt certainty that each and every average citizen could be called upon to perform his or her role to the fullest. This ensured the young ruler's place in history as the only man

able to defeat the U.S.A. at their own game.

When the money had been mailed out, the newly formed State of Canada immediately became the richest state in America. And these new Americans, adhering to de Rodbender's supreme strategy, began investing every penny of it. They began to invest heavily in the stock market, they bought out companies, broke up monopolies, created new ones, they put their own people into Government, bought off legislators, forced out those who wouldn't play ball, took control of the Army, the Navy and the Air force; in short, they took active control of every single aspect of the great American economic machine.

Victory was swift, bloodless and complete. The Canadian flag waved proudly from the library of Congress.

And Eddie de Rodbender got his railroad.

A moose hunting accident in Little Rock, Tennessee, claimed his life three years later.

## O'Leary's Pub

O'Leary's Pub can be found below the tracks, an inadvertent borderline separating the well-to-do from those of lesser stature. Crossing the tracks is like stepping from light into shadow; one becomes aware of an infinite variety of subtle changes that occur to the body and spirit as well as to the environment.

Twilight on a Thursday or Friday evening is the best time to head out for a drink, just after the street lamps ignite, when the sky presses close over the earth and the air is charged with that special energy created when hundreds of people prepare for a night out.

Of course not all of these people will be going to O'Leary's Pub. Not from my circle of friends anyway. We have different recreational preferences. I am an observer of life. I'm a watcher. I get my pleasure from watching people being brutally honest with each other, from watching the primates, freed by the welfare conques, bloodying themselves to dance the desperate song of the hormonally driven. I cannot enjoy such verisimilitude in downtown bars. It does not normally get past the doorman - the few times it did I was compelled to keep it a bitter secret.

So I am my own company when I undertake these strolls

down the hardened path that winds around the apartment complexes, through the field beyond the railroad station and on to the street that leads to O'Leary's Pub. But I don't mind the solitude at all. I choose to go counter to the general flow of human movement and desideratum. That's the fun of it, the tease of it; the debate is whether I should look back at where I've come from, to see the ugly backsides of things straining to move forward, or keep my eyes pinned ahead for the flashing green sign that bids everyone a hearty welcome to O'Leary's Pub.

Surely, you argue, one tires of looking at the same performance week after week? - the same drunks, the same losers, the same alcoholic evolutionary rhythm that captures and transmogrifies - quite unwittingly - everyone who enters through the doors thinking to themselves 'This will be a night like none other!'

Under different circumstances I would be compelled to spread my patronage to other bars in the area, just for a change of cast. But there is one factor that keeps me here, keeps me coming back, keeps the show fresh and ever exciting to my imagination. That factor is Beth, a creature so appealing that I almost forget, sometimes, who I am in relation to those I am watching. Of course it is out of the question that she and I might ever share a common interest. We are worlds apart in everything that is a natural barrier - education, culture, ambition, awareness; we are headed in

opposite directions at an accelerating rate of speed; her life, her beauty and her desire are written in simple, deepening lines across her face, to be read and read again for the pleasure of those only who frequent O'Leary's Pub. There is no higher purpose for her I'm afraid.

It is sad, for though I have always endeavoured to keep my anonymity, our eyes have met on a few occasions, and in those rare moments I felt that a bond had been struck which transcended the realities of our disparate lives and transported us to a place where only the very best of her and the very best of me counted. But in her realm she is supreme; she is the highest prize, the roughest diamond made and pushed to the surface from the most exhausted, and lacking earth. She is 'me tumble-weary lady of Irish heaven', that debutante of the beggar's ballroom and carnal-minded mistress to the hordes and lords of have-nots. How wonderful it is to watch her perform! How moving it is to see her sweep on to the dance floor amidst choirs of drunken entreaties while all about her, men prostrate themselves in the hope of winning her favour and later still, her sexual ministry. It has a base, animalistic charm which I admit, excites a part of me over which the hot blood and not the brain has sole dominion. I am merely upwardly mobile by comparison. But here we have arrived at the object of our walk. It is a most uninspiring structure to be sure, little more than a dingy green warehouse. But there is a certain



'well-worn' grace, and sweet music beckons within. There are rough customers hanging about, so let us enter with dignity and purpose, like we're meeting someone.

There are three sections to O'Leary's Pub. To the right of the entrance is the room which contains the billiard tables. Already it is crowded with players and watchers hovering over dilapidated tables that are lit by lamps hanging down from the ceiling. The smoke is dense, the talk vulgar, and the play serious. The nature of this room is almost exclusively male, though there is the occasional woman to be found. The female attendance should by no means be construed as an invitation to philander. I have never detected happiness in this room. It is bitter space; space reserved for those who have been pushed from the arena of possibility, for those who cannot find or keep a relationship with the opposite sex. Therefore, frustrations manifest themselves in a myriad of physical and verbal assaults over such trivial things as a contested 'four-ball in the corner pocket' A natural desire arises to curse the fellow who designed the building, placing the washrooms in the back of the pool tables, so that we must pass through this grim theatre to get there.

Having taken a seat in the middle section, I place my jacket around the chair-back, roll up the sleeves of my sweater and wait for a maiden bearing nice things to drink. The bar is here, and several circular tables covered in

green and white checkered vinyl. On each table, a small candle flickers endearingly within its vial. "Hello,"

"Usual?"

"Please." The anonymity of commonplace is the best cover of all. The walls look to be of dark oak, but more likely they are layer upon layer of shellac over a roughly hewn facade of pine or some other cheap material. Pictures, posters, clover and various other Irish memorabilia abound to drive home a shaky but quaint pastoral atmosphere.

The third section is elevated with access through a wooden gate which opens on to the dance floor and a small stage for the band. This area takes a dog-leg, pushing back into the darkness where there are more tables - each candle-lit. It is a snugly part of O'Leary's. Orange vials of flames illuminate intense faces; beneath the table fingers are flicking and fondling, passing sensual messages in their furtive touches. What bargains are made, what contracts drawn, while above the furniture barely a word is exchanged!

Beside the stage is a modern rendering of an old-style jukebox, for use when the band is between sets. Above it, a modest light-scheme awaits the musicians. There is a similar lighting arrangement over the dance floor, with a massive mirrored ball dominating the centre of the ceiling.

"Here you go, sad-eyes,"

"Thanks. Keep it." Sad-eyes? Have I just been christened with a nick-name or does she call everyone

sitting alone at a table - sad-eyes? I have done a masterful infiltration indeed! But wait! Now things get interesting. Here's old Gladice of eight decades if she's a day, impatient to dance, staggering up to the jukebox amid a tumultuous roar of approval. Someone yells "The old gal's gonna dance for us!" She hears, and her face disappears in lines splintered by grinning rotted teeth. Everyone's urging her on and she struggles to concentrate on her music selection amidst all the hollering, demurely brushing off her audience with a crooked, unsteady hand. Finally, she pushes a quarter into the slot and presses the buttons. Silence falls over the crowd while the machine buzzes with the retrieval of her record. She leans languorously across the jukebox; every movement now is calculated, exaggerated - a thirties melodrama. A raised, wrinkled hand smooths away the matted brown hair from her face and places a cigarette between her painted rouge lips. A long, thoughtful drag. A deep, hacking cough. A plume of white facial powder floats across the air. She was almost able to pull it off.

The speakers crackle as needle touches vinyl. Suddenly the lights are aglow and spinning, bathing the floor in a deep scarlet wash, striped by darts of white light from the mirrored ball. Into this exotic space steps Gladice - back in character - with deliberate and over-ripened femininity.

What a beautiful song she has chosen. Never mind that the tune - slow and melodic - clashes so offensively with

the visual fireworks, look how perfectly her movements capture the words and longing sorrow of unrequited love. She is the embodiment of the pain expressed in the deep southern accent of the singer, and her eyes search the faces for a companion flame to her need. Searching, searching, for a friend who will understand her, who will see her as she sees herself - a youthful, desirable wet thing of energy in the green of her years. See there! A young man bounds on to the dance floor, greasy and fractured, all nervous system and great gangly legs. He dances around her quickly, jerkily, in mock accompaniment while she tries to touch him, to draw him into her world of light and rhythm. But you can tell he's just teasing her. Her dream dance has set him off; his synapses fire messages indiscriminately; he hops about like spit on a griddle and the crowd presses for more - whipped into a lustful frenzy by what she believes to be her irresistible beauty. Is that what she truly believes - defined as she is now by hypnotic illumination and trite, insincere lyrics? Look how the crowd pleads with her. Pricked by the overpowering attraction of her joyful pirouettes it seems that they must all have her soon, in one violent release. What can she do in the face of such overwhelming lust? She is trapped, cornered by eyes, a hundred dots of fire, breathing hot licks across the milk of her flesh, whipping her about the floor with shouts and whispers and dark promises.

I wonder about Beth when I watch Gladice; I wonder if she will know when their appetite for her has ended? Or will she, like Gladice, trip unwittingly into a different sort of performance without missing a beat. Gladice is a ghost who is always welcome at O'Leary's Pub. She is a ghost given momentary matter by the flush of overhead light. She is a spirit who does not know that she is otherwise invisible to the powerful masculine hearts she so badly desires.

I am relieved somewhat that her song has ended because the crowd will forget about her quickly and so she will suffer no further humiliation - even if she is not herself cognizant of it, which in itself is a relief. But she remains on the dance floor, teetering on her worn leather pumps, even as the band begins to take the stage and a new anticipation fills the room. The dance floor is still diffused with light but there is no music yet, only the collective noise from the audience. It appears as though Gladice is talking to someone, mouthing words that no one could possibly hear - laughing, winking, sharing a secret. Whose eye has she caught? She smooths her hands down the crookedness of her torso, passing her fingers along the ruined edges of her breasts. It must be a very intimate conversation. There is a coy confidence in her eyes - I can see that clearly. She is in a teasing mood tonight, my Gladice. Who is this lucky fellow...who is this fortunate medium...who...Oh no. No, No, No!

A hasty retreat to the washroom avoids a potentially awkward episode. The danger in such close observation is that the subject under scrutiny may draw the wrong conclusions. I know, I shouldn't feel threatened but that's exactly how I do feel - threatened from my table to the safety of a yellow-stained bathroom and a splash of cold water on my face; threatened by her intriguing character and the possibility of an interesting time with a woman who may have accumulated over her eighty years a degree of pure, unsullied wisdom which would be of paradoxical disaster for me; threatened by the image of her petrified toe searching for my crotch from beneath the table. The horror of it. The shame of it! My skin crawls and I am a coward. "What is this?"

"It's a Long Island Ice Tea."

"But I didn't order it."

"Thank the lady over there, sad-eyes. Enjoy."

"No, no, no! Take it back! I don't drink this stuff! Wait a minute!" Jesus, Jesus! Time to abort through the nearest exit.

"No you don't! Just you sit back down and take off your jacket."

"Look lady, I thank you for the drink but I have to be going now."

"Aaaagh pshaw! Nonsense! Sit back down will ya, that's a good lad. You haven't even had a taste. There's half my

pension in there! Big, shy babies like you always got someplace to go."

"And this place unfortunately requires my immediate attention, so if I can beg your pardon I'll be..."

"Beg my pardon? You don't have to BEG, sweetie. Normally I wait for an invitation but I'd better have a seat or baby's gonna be sick - know what I mean? That's a whole lot better. That's comfy, isn't it? - the two of us - inner bleeders - sharing a drink. Could you light my cigarette please. My name's Gladice."

"Yes, I know who you are."

"You do! Of course you do. I'm famous around here. And your name is Charlie."

"How did you know that!"

"Pssshaw! Everybody knows everybody in this place. Not the first time I caught you stealin' a look either. Them big sad eyes of yours are what won me over. Now, how about that light, sweetie."

"I don't have a light."

"Of course you don't. Hold up that little candle then. Steady now, your hand is shakin'. Thanks. Well, well, what are these? Keys! To your apartment? Your pad? Where you do all your dirty work? Jingle, jingle."

"Give them here!"

"Tell me Charlie, ever get the urge to merge? Ever feel the need to seed? That sort of thing's all an echo for me -

tell ya straight off. Not lookin' for nothin' but a nice fella to talk to, maybe buy me a drink or dance a couple of songs - that's all. Got it?"

"Absolutely. Now may I have my keys!"

"Ahhh. .sly one aren't ya. You want em? There. Come and fetch. You know where they are - close to my heart. Now what's with the sour puss? We must keep you here. At least finish your drink. Have a little fun. I'm not dirt, am I? Well, am I!"

"No of course not. You seem...like a very nice person."

"Someone you'd like to get to know, Charlie?"

"Well...yes, but under different..."

"Good! I'm so glad! I knew it the first time I laid eyes on you. We're soul-mates, you and I, that's what we are. Isn't the band heavenly? I'm such a swooner at heart. What a lovely arm you've got...not very strong but it's young and fleshy...a good thing to cling to. Isn't this nice and cosy? You can sing along if you like...soul-mates, that's what we are...baby's tired now, Charlie...baby's so...damn...tired."

How much time has passed? I don't know, a few songs worth of time perhaps, a few drinks worth of time; time enough for a courtship of knowing grins and ridiculing glances; time enough for the hideous shroud of invisibility to settle upon Gladice and I - and marry us in misunderstanding. Why should I worry about what these people



think, or rather - don't think, or rather - don't seem to find the least bit unusual about a woman...an over-ripened woman who is slowly decomposing next to me, with her head buried deep in the table, and her arm rigidified around mine; with phlegm gurgling in her throat - and worst of all, yes, worst of all, my key...MY KEY, slowly turning to rust between those two ancient tits! I am vulnerable to the most despicable sort of numbing anger. Surely to God there must be one person in this pub who wouldn't mind dirtying his hands to retrieve my property from the frightening depths of her sweaty brassiere? But that is impossible. Any plea for help would be interpreted as an act of arrogance on my part, that I am unwilling to stoop so low myself. Bloody fine piece of work, isn't it? I'm truly amazed at the unpredictable choreography of life. It would be easy enough I suppose, to rip my arm away and to thrust my fingers deep into her wealth of winter compost to get back that which is rightfully mine and wrongfully taken from me. But what if she awakens? What if - in the blending of dream and reality - she awakens disorientated and confused and becomes hysterical at the strange presence of my hand down her blouse? Madness I tell you. No course of action comes to mind! Not..."

"Woo, wow! Gladice! Alright! Okay! I'm outta here..."

"Hold on a minute! Please!"

"Three's a crowd, man."

"You're not interrupting at all. We welcome your company." This may be my salvation. "You're the man that was dancing with Gladice earlier, aren't you?"

"Right, yeah. I like Gladice, she's a good time, a straight-up gal. Makes me laugh. Molecularly sound chick. Got a smoke?"

His brain is without question burnt to the quick. This should be fairly easy. "Have a drink instead, Mr. ..."

"David. You're Charlie, right?"

"Have this Long Island Ice Tea, David."

"Alright! Okay! Mmm...sludge. Gladice, Gladice, Gladiola - that's what we call her. I'll take one of her smokes. Want one?"

"No, thankyou David but help yourself, I'm sure she wouldn't mind. I can tell that there is indeed a strong bond of friendship between the two of you."

"`Strong bond of friendship' Yeooow, you got that formal language of intellectualism, man! I dig it! You give off breezes bro! Just feel that fuckin' breeze!"

"Listen, do you want to make twenty bucks?"

"Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!"

"She has my key...there."

"Myself, I'm into science. I'm into molecules. There's millions of em...clinging together...bouncin' off each other, flinging this way and that way...splitting up and bonding, shaking like the D.T.'s and generally being

schizoid. God made molecules. Molecules makes man. Man is meat. Good meat and bad meat. Twenty bucks? Oh boy, oh boy!"

"Just exhume the key and the money is yours, my friend."

"'Exhume the key!' Tremblin' fingers, man! And the hand made from God reached down from the heavens and made fertile the hallowed earth, snuggle, snuggle. And God embraced his child and saw that it was good, hmm, and God sniffed the bad meat and knew that it wasn't that bad...Gladiola...and God cupped the bad meat and thought that it felt pretty God...damn...good."

How much more time has passed? Time enough to order and consume three Long Island Ice Teas, the special I presume, of the evening. Time enough to come to a point of stuporous inertia; to suffer her ancient nostalgic moans without protest, to feel her arm tightening around mine while this demented brain-dead hippy expends himself on her neck - his hand, buried, feverishly conjuring a firm, youthful breast.

Yes, time enough to know - instinctively - that one final piece of business remains, the imminent arrival of Beth. And I see now that she has come, and I am finished. Shame on you, cruel maker of such a foul design, that I should behold this vision of insurmountable beauty from my present position of undistinguished commonality! My heart wants to burst from my chest and cling to her forever, like a shivering organ ornament. Look how perfectly her satiny

blonde hair frames her lovely face - that beautiful heavy hair that one could bury their face in on days when the mercury dips below zero. Look at her eyes, would you, the blue of a doctored photo of Acapulco Bay sticking out of a snowbank in mid-February. And the rest of her - a body to fling crucifixes from the walls! I never realized the depth of my admiration for her. And I never had the courage to tell her when so many times I had the chance. When so many times I had the freedom to pursue with honesty and genuine lust, I could never bring myself to abandon those principles which have kept me from making a fool out of myself. Who's the fool now! Who's the fool now! "Who's the fool!"

"Wha! You're no fool sweetie! Did I nap? Hey, what the...David! You thief! Get off me you grave robber!"

"Woo! I'm outta here. See ya, Gladiola!"

"Don't come back unless you got drinks for me and Charlie! Hey Charlie, how long have I been out? Now what's with the puss, eh? How come you're always so God damned sad all the time? Here's your key back. Pick yourself up a nice girl and go honeymoonin'!"

"To be honest with you Gladice, I'm of a mind to get extremely drunk right now. How would you like to accompany me on a stroll down inebriation boulevard?"

"It's a road I know well, sweetie. Bear in mind that baby's got a piss-poor bladder - know what I mean? Ya know something, Charlie? You're a hell of a nice guy, I mean

that, lots of fun, a real gentleman. A better soul-mate I could never have than you. Most men fuck off on me after a bit. Hell, I don't mind, I've fucked off on a few in my time. You get old Charlie. Death chews up the family tree until you feel it nippin' at your own heels. But death doesn't bother me at O'leary's Pub. Cause I'm still huntin'. And when you hunt, you live. Remember that, Charlie. You're not much of one yet and that's too bad cause a lot of gals would let themselves get caught by a fella like you. In fact, know what we're gonna do? We're gonna order us some drinks and I'm gonna get my granddaughter to join in the fun. She just came in and let me tell ya, she's a looker. Hold on...see over there..."

"Wait a minute! Don't point her out to me yet. Lets have a couple of rounds..."

"Yeah..."

"We'll talk a little..."

"Yeah..."

"We'll dance a little..."

"You sly dog..."

"Get a little foolish..."

"We're at O'Leary's..."

"Then you can surprise me."

"Haven't I already, Charlie?"

## The Wharfman

Two men pass one another unseen along a steel-gridded catwalk. One is coming, one is leaving. They pass within inches, so close that their dinner pails collide, so close that a recognition passes between them, although no effort is made to pause or communicate, for the steam is hot and thick with dust and neither wears a mask. It is a tight, close-lipped change of shift.

Stephan is heading towards the wharfman's shack at the end of the catwalk. A revolving light, knifing red swatches through the vapours, lets him know that he is near the centre of the gangway, and he stops to lean over the filter gates. In front is a slanted steel floor which rises away from him at a sharp angle to its highest point some one hundred feet beyond. The wharf is two hundred feet wide, though its true boundaries are seldom seen; the billowing white steam is a continuous by-product of the wharf's function, so one lives and works in a near infinite and amorphous landscape.

Beneath his feet, below the gridwork steel, is a conveyor belt which accepts the coke-rock through gates which open hydraulically from one end to the other. Now the wharf is almost bare but for some thin, black lines of rock

which have escaped the hungry jaws and have backed up towards the top. Yet the gates are continuing to open and close in their perpetual, synchronized swallows, in automatic anticipation for the buzzer which now sounds above Stephan's head.

He makes his way quickly to the shack. Inside, he has time to put down his dinner pail and take out his work gloves before the floor begins to shudder violently under the force of the oncoming locomotive. There is the grinding of steel wheels on steel track, a quick exhale of steam and a bashing of iron hitches as the dumper car manoeuvres into position. Now follow a few quiet, pensive seconds during which Stephan puts on his gloves and hard hat. At the door he is prepared and listening. There is another sharp whistle and the first soft patter of pouring rock which is Stephan's signal to position his dust mask over his face. The wharf now echoes with the resounding avalanche as the dumper car empties the whole of its contents in a crescendo of rock on steel. Stephan steps outside, onto the catwalk. He is momentarily repulsed by the wall of heat which strikes him full frontal as he faces the wharf. It has now been transformed into a bed of singing, glowing coke, an inferno of red hot rock, fluid and solid, hissing busily in streams through the first opened gate. The ore is too hot, too fiery to be allowed on to the conveyor belt. He reaches for the first water hose, twenty of which are stationed along the

length of the catwalk. He points the nozzle down and opens the tap. A savage burst of steam erupts upwards, answering the spray with an attack of searing whiteness, into which Stephan disappears completely.

Below the wharf, beneath the great steel and iron structure and the rumbling conveyor mechanism, is a crawl-space shaped by dripping, twisted pipe and damp cement walls. Iron girders support the catwalk along the entire length of the wharf. At each end of their dark bases, piles of coke dust have collected off the belts and Stephan is working hard to shovel it all back on again. It is an awkward task, stooped over as he is, to hurl the heavy, wet material above his shoulders. Each time the blade of his shovel crashes against the conveyor frame with an exhausted 'thunk'. More times than not, the load fails to clear the frame and the dirt sprays back down on his head and into his shirt. But there is a strong determination to finish the job.

A long black tail unfurls from within the rusted knitting of pipe-work and round, dark eyes regard Stephan with a twitchy air of ridicule. "Simple maaan! Does my nervous heart well to watch one so profoundly taken to his taaask..." Stephan brings his shovel to bear against the pipes but the blade misses and it skitters away along a conduit to the far end, where it drops heavily to the ground. In a space lit by a single, soured light bulb, it



rears itself up and sniffs the air. "Waaarn enough below these ovens, to make my bed in the heated sludge and my toilet in your dinner pail!" But Stephan is already concentrating again on the muddy pile. From somewhere far off he hears what he thinks to be a ship's horn as it prepares to leave port with a full cargo of steel product, to travel slowly down river, through the locks into the St. Lawrence, and then out across the ocean to some home port on some other continent.

Often, when the night shift was nearly over and the trains had finished with the wharf, Stephan would take what was left of his thermos of coffee and head out to the B.O.S.P., an enormous, loud building where most of his friends spent the shift pouring molten steel into cement moulds. Out in the yard it would still be dark except for a hint of paleness on the horizon, and the cool air would leave him feeling refreshed and curiously happy, as though some new awareness had broken through the heavy cloak of fatigue and dust.

Inside the building, he would carefully negotiate the main concourse, avoiding intuitively the traffic of cranes and white hot ladles which travel across the ceiling in choruses of shattering buzzers and pulsating crimson lights. An elevator ride to the top floor would bring him out on to a steel balcony where other labourers had gathered in the fresh air to rest and think and greet the coming day.

Sometimes arguments would ensue among the older men about the need for mandatory retirement or better wages, or about the broader political issues like ending world hunger or foreign embargoes. No agreements were ever forged. Always, the philanthropists embraced their ideologies. Always, the realists grunted out resigned curses about the inevitability of what is and cannot be altered, pronouncing, at last, upon the younger men the need to find a sympathetic woman who can cook.

For the most part Stephan would not engage in this kind of talk, content instead with a view of the river which winds dark and lazy around the factory site and then snakes off between two forested fronts of the Canadian Shield.

Shortly before everyone leaves to punch out, the hunters would arrive; three men from janitorial service who spend the long night hours scavenging through the plant, fulfilling a number of different functions. One function, the dance, is of particular interest to the group, and there is always a certain amount of disappointment registered when they have been unsuccessful in organizing one.

Stephan knows the youngest hunter well. Often the two of them would stay behind, long after the shift had ended and the last star had paled to invisibility. It was always within this conjuncture, this time of morning when the moment was his own, and his thoughts had lost that affected night-time tinge -- spaces of intuition where no words would

fit -- that he could watch the processes of life and the activity of the industry with a clear and fixed mind.

Stephan returns to the wharfman's shack and leans the shovel in its spot near the door. He notes two men standing on the catwalk, leaning over the railing. Their forms are blurred but he knows that they are the hunters, come maybe from the ovens or the blast furnaces or even the cool, newspaper-laden benches on the docks, where they might have paused to sleep away the first hours of their shift in the fresh breezes blown in across the river. Their lot, by virtue of their job, is cast in an endless succession of lay-overs. Their workplace is the cans and canteens which catacomb the plant. They are free to wander unrestricted. They answer to no one. They are the welcomed carriers of departmental intelligence. They are the emissaries of cultural and political appeasement. They are the nomadic tale-tellers of calamity and incident, which, by their discursive nature, give them ample occasion to witness.

Stephan has no desire to pass the time with these aged men. Their placidity, the easy way they smoke their cigarettes within the swirling clouds of dust and heat offends him. But by now there is no need for concern. They have spotted something on the conveyor belt which has garnered their interest and they are moving along with it quickly, pointing with excited curses as they disappear into the vapour.

The corrugated steel shack is perched like a sentry on struts at the corner of the wharf. Its walls are shaking from the force of the oncoming train. The gates open and close in an unending wave, even though there is as yet no rock to swallow. The black locomotive slows to a halt at the end of the wharf and expels a blast of white steam. The gates wait in an ever unfurling rhythmic smirk which echoes mechanically across the empty space. Stephan moves to the centre and takes a hose from its fixture. He senses that something is not right. There is too much heat radiating from the vessel, but there is no time left. High above, the dumper car is activated and begins to tilt. A dusting of rock falls like sparks on to the slab and streams down quickly through the gnashing portals. There is a moment of hesitation. Stephan steps back and shields his face. The dumper discharges, and the massive load of rock crashes down in ebullient fury.

Max has been sleeping all this time. He has learned to sleep through anything. His body lies twisted on the wooden bench. His head is propped up on his hard hat and his arms are folded tightly around him in a gesture of warmth. He has a look of determined sleep on his face even as his body is shaken by the departing locomotive.

Stephan enters, covered in black soot and sweat. His heavy green coat is placed on a hook, gloves and hard hat on the table. Max would continue to sleep had Stephan not

pushed his legs aside to sit down and open his dinner pail. Max jerks to life, eyes expressing fear, relief, and then finally indifference.

"It's a good thing you woke me," he says, "I might have slept on through."

"Your buddies have gone."

"Oh?" Stephan keeps an extra cup clean for his friend and pours him some coffee, although he doesn't particularly want his company now. They are on different ground during working hours, opposite poles of thought and sensitivity. But there is always some comfort in having him near, some reassurance of a nature he doesn't fully understand. His presence brings to this shack a nostalgic, mournful quality which Stephan feels as somehow significant. He can go no further with this. These intuitive inclinations are intense but they lack discovery and always, always tend to fade to a feeling of simple joy as the morning draws closer.

Max is standing at the door and looking down upon the wharf as he might look out on green fields and pasture land.

"Looks hot."

"Lots of fire tonight."

"Douser's down again? I'm surprised they keep dumping on you."

"I don't think they know someone actually works down here. They pour into a void."

"Over-automation. One fuckup in the network's gonna

take forever to get attention. Have you called control?"

"They said to keep the fire off the belts."

"Jesus! Keep the fire off the belts! If they fixed it one time, fixed it right, the wharf would take care of itself and you'd be sleeping like a baby at ten an hour! Instead, you gotta watch over every load of rock with a fuckin' water pisser."

Stephan puts on his hard hat and takes up his gloves. There is now a great need to work, to keep busy.

He is out on the catwalk when Max yells from the door of the shack, demanding that Stephan come to the dance later on towards morning. There will be food and something strong to drink. But the noise on the wharf, the belt gears grinding and the gates crashing, is sufficient reason for Max to believe that Stephan never heard him.

Once the conveyor belt leaves the wharf, it enters a chute which inclines steeply into an adjacent building where other belts disperse the coke in various directions. Most of the rock which falls off the belt, falls off here, in this dusty, dim tunnel, sometimes piling up to a depth of a foot or more from the base of the chute to its highest lip. Stephan is climbing up the side. The rock is giving way beneath his boots, sending down small avalanches and raising the dust. Great chunks of rock are bouncing off the bottom. He must turn himself sideways in order to fit between the wall and the dangerous whirling gears of the conveyor

assembly. There is a small hole cut away in the rusted sheet metal and he pauses briefly to stick his face into the night air. He will do half now, from the middle down, and half later if there's time.

He brings the shovel down but the blade does not sink. He must bend over and dig a space for the blade to enter, moving by hand each piece of smouldering rock until he sees the concrete. Then he can slide his shovel underneath and work his way along, dumping the rock back on to the belt as he goes.

Some rock comes bounding down from high above and Stephan stumbles to avoid it. "Man working down here!" he screams, but there is no reply. It stares down on him from beyond the dust and then moves swiftly behind a brace to be certain of its concealment. "Shovel the rock from bottom to top...and shovel and shuffle and shovel the rock..."

It scurries underneath the belt to the other side and creeps down opposite him where it crouches, tense and shivering. "from bottom to top... and shovel and shuffle and shovel the rock, from bottom to top..." Stephan kneels and flings a piece of rock, hitting it on the hind quarters. It squeals in pain and moves down the chute to the bottom, where it stops to inspect itself. "Caution and caaalm, man, lest you catch an appendage in the great whirling machine and then you are loost!"

There is a tremendous roar from the wharf and it

catches Stephan in a moment of uncertainty. A flood of panic consumes him, rushing outward in a need for action and inward in despondency. Where the belt appears at the bottom, a red flushing snake enters the chute and begins to climb upwards. The smell of burning rubber precedes it, black smoke and sweltering haze defines it, and a reflected orange glow enhances it, as it comes ceremoniously up the chute in the cradle of the belt.

Here, the great fiery caravan passes by, forcing Stephan against the wall with a shield of scorching air, each rock jingling with an inner furious laughter.

His hand is on the flag. The bed of coral flame flourishes past, ignorant and jovial, singing happy hisses before the lip of the chute. He turns the flag and the belt stops. The fire stands hesitant at the edge of the lip, stretched out in an ascending curve, challenging something, begging something, finally, asking nothing as the rubber burns through and the snake falls away.

The wharf is down. It will remain so for some length of time, until the millwrights can replace that section of belt which has been destroyed. The gates are silent. The steam is dissipating. There are supervisors everywhere. The hunters are there also, but they keep out of the way. The men in the white hard hats are not happy while they listen to Stephan explain how this mess came about. No system is perfect, they scream. We all live and work in an imperfect system! There



is no argument! But when the douser is down, they shout, you have a priority which over-rides every other task: keep the fire off the belts! Nothing else matters. Nothing!

Stephan waits, almost in anticipation, for the course of this verbal undressing to come to its logical end -- his dismissal. For who could single-handedly destroy thousands of dollars' worth of equipment, disrupt the workings of an industrial leviathan, waste untold man-hours, and still hope to retain his employment? And even in the event that he was not terminated, he could always quit. There would be no shame in that now. Under the circumstances it might even be the honourable thing to do. Besides, is this not the one firm resolution which has driven him since his very first shift, that he would someday quit, move on to something else, something better? No one enjoys shovelling rocks and breathing hot sparks. He could quit now and be done with it or he could be fired and be equally free. Both notions appeal.

The supervisors do not dismiss him. They shake their heads and walk away, headed maybe to some other crisis which demands immediate attention. Rookies and incompetents are part of an imperfect system. He can hear their thoughts. He can feel the tension easing. It's already being quickly forgotten. The millwrights are working and by morning the rock will flow again.

So now the wharf is empty. The gates are shut down and

Stephan stands alone on the catwalk. The hunters are gone also, Max with them. If Max is happy to clean cans and sweep garbage, then who's to argue otherwise? There is almost envy. A man will reach for what he is aware of.

There's nothing more for him to do tonight. The remainder of his shift is free. He could punch out early and go home or he could wander through the plant, maybe find a quiet place by the river. He could try that.

Out in the yard it is pitch. There are no buildings. There is no definition, only shadowy forms which loom and bend against a sulphurous sky. Stephan is walking towards the B.O.S.P.. He is concentrating on the ground in front so that he doesn't fall into a hole or trip on some piece of waste steel. He has decided against the river, preferring the high catwalk and the fresh breezes, where he can look down upon the industry or look away towards the mountains, or neither. He can just close his eyes and rest for a while. Already he is tired. He knows it will not be the same. There will be no exhilaration. There is no daylight to keep the forest and the industry from blending, only an endless blanket of darkness, pin-holed in lights, an inverted cosmos.

There is a piercing light and an ear-shattering horn. Stephan snaps back. A long, dark line of rail cars roll silently past but for the click-click of wheels on tracks. "Wanna be an angel, boy!" someone laughs from one of the

cars. But when the flashlight captures Stephan's face, the laughter trails off.

Inside the B.O.S.P. there are three pouring stands -- long cement platforms which stand ten feet from the ground. Flat cars containing cement moulds are shunted alongside the stands and men are working to guide the ladles over each mould. The sky crane hovers above, gently tipping the ten ton vessel. A stream of molten steel splashes into each receptacle, filling it up in a boiling froth.

There is one pouring stand not in use. Here a ladle has been set aside to be picked up by the sky crane. A crust has formed on top of the fiery liquid. Max throws a rock which bounces off the charred, orange surface. He would like to get closer and further test the crust with a poke of a steel rod, but he is not wearing the proper apparel and the heat denies him.

The pouring stand is self-contained. There is a labour shack, a canteen and a washroom. There is a long, blackened bench which sits against the outer wall of the shack, and beside it there is an old refrigerator which is filled with soft drinks and beer. There are crews of men wandering over from the other pouring stands. Others have come from different departments. Some are old and have been through this many times. Some are new and don't quite know what to expect. They are all gathering near the bench and Max is busying himself handing out drinks and making change.

The other hunters arrive with a wooden barrel which they place at the back of the stand. There are some who are curious and try for a closer look but they are discouraged. The barrel is sealed with a wooden lid but there is a small hole, out of which protrudes a long broom handle.

Stephan is waiting by the elevator. He knows that it is the lack of work that has made him drowsy. How ironic it would have been if he had walked into the train on the very night he had decided to quit. Wouldn't that make for fierce speculation. Wouldn't that make for interesting gossip. Would everyone think it was suicide because he had screwed up on the job? Max might even have believed this. He looks to the pouring stand. A circle of men are forming near the edge. Two others have gone for the barrel and the circle breaks open to allow them to slide it through.

Max would probably think it was because he had taken his job too seriously. That was the impression he must have given everyone, although it was never his intention. He was not by nature a solitary person. But he had learned to be careful; careful to avoid getting mixed up with the camaraderie and brotherhood that is so much a part of this inner world. That kind of protection, the protection of belonging, is seductive; it has a way of smoothing over certain realities that are better faced. It raises tolerances, lowers expectations, and delivers an individual swiftly and ignorantly to the end of his life. He will tell

this to Max. Out of one of the opened doors, he thinks he sees the grayness of coming morning. Suddenly his spirit is alive and refreshed and he is happy beyond measure. He could find work on one of the ships, anything, a dishwasher, cleaner, utility boy, anything that allows for a new experience and a chance for rational, thoughtful reflection upon the future. He will quit! He will tell Max so that he understands.

The barrel sits at the edge of the pouring stand. The broom handle which protrudes through the lid is jerking about roughly. The men are closing around it and there is intense speculation concerning the violence within. For the first time Max has been put in charge and his enthusiasm is amusement for the other hunters.

"Damn near thought there wasn't going to be a dance," says Max, as he grabs the broom handle, "and then at the last moment we struck it big!" In a quick, sweeping movement, the centre of attention is held aloft for all to admire. The wooden lid slides back against his hands like a sabre guard and he moves through the crowd waving the bridled, paranoid thing above their heads.

"Ooovee, that's one big, greasy mother!" yells one in disbelief.

"Biggest one to date," answers Max proudly. The specially made leather bridle fits snugly around the body like a corset. The legs are free and are working feverishly

in a useless attempt at escape. The tail hangs long and limp. Where the bridle attaches to the pole there is a wooden pin engineered into a hollow groove.

Stephan is among the men now. He is working his way to the front. "Stephan! Hey everyone, it's Stephan!" announces one of the older men, and a great feeling of happiness sweeps over the gathering.

"You picked a good one!" Max bellows. "Biggest one to date!" and he waves his catch through the air like a victory flag.

They are patting him on the back. They are laughing and joking and saying that the boy is finally a man and they're pushing him forward so that he might have a good view. He stands alone with Max on the edge of the pouring stand. There are things he'd like to say but his vocabulary is strangely full of gaps.

Max winks an eye. "The best one yet, Stephan," he whispers, and swings the pole out and over the seething ladle. The legs recoil up into the belly. The head moves swiftly from the men to the glowing crust below. The nervous nose sniffs the hot air for meaning. Max tips the pole; the wooden lid slides forward, striking the pin and releasing the bridle. It falls to the surface, recovers, runs a maddened circle and then spits sharply into vapour.

It is seven thirty in the morning. At the front gate there are men coming and men leaving. Stephan is waiting in

the parking lot for his ride. He's been sitting on a bicycle rack. A white pick-up truck approaches. The horn sounds but Stephan does not hear. He has drifted off, head lowered, he is far away. A young man climbs out of the cab and walks over to the bicycle rack. He kneels, and in a gesture expressing both pride and sorrow, he runs his fingers through the old man's hair, smoothing aside the long gray locks while silently making a promise.

## Vodka Moon

The flashlight passed over the brush and Daniel buried his head in the earth, held his breath and imagined himself very small and insignificant. He was lying naked in the forest just in front of the house, naked but for some white tennis socks which he had left on as protection against rocks and twigs. Now he wished that they too were gone. Somehow it seemed more humiliating to be caught with socks than with nothing on at all.

A branch snapped just yards from him. With great effort he suppressed the urge to make a chase of it, knowing that in his vulnerable state the jagged and foreign woods would prove a terrifying menace in the darkness.

"Come out, Mr. Deslauriers," said the man. The tone of his voice was patient and neutral. "I know you're in there...I know it's you. Who else could be so lame-brained."

"Not a chance," he whispered, gritting his teeth, for the blackflies had just discovered his uncovered whiteness and were descending in droves. "you only think it's me, you don't know it's me...could be anyone, or no one."

He listened for further sounds of movement, hoping in his traitorous, pounding heart that Mr. McMullin would move off in some safer direction, allowing him time to crawl up



the gully to the little country road, and freedom.

"I know you mean no harm, Danny. Just a clown who doesn't know when the ~~game~~'s over..."

Of all the stupid holes that Daniel had managed to dig for himself, this had to rank near the deepest. It wasn't the fact that he was trespassing on the property of his girlfriend's father, or disturbing the peace, or hiding out in someone's front forty like a hooligan on a stakeout. It wasn't even the depressing knowledge that once more he had confirmed to himself that he was a washout as teenagers go. It was, rather the horrible reality of his nakedness, his insular uniqueness in the forest and the precariousness of the world he had created for himself, a world which consisted of one man whom he largely respected, and one child who thought of himself as a man, but who would have a tough time convincing anyone else -- circumstances being what they were. With great sincerity he wished that the pudgy brightness of his flesh would turn green with decay and dissolve unnoticed into the mossy ground, to become part of something which belonged where it was, to have an alibi.

"You're an amusing fellow, Mr. Deslauriers, one of the things I like about you. Come out and have a beer. Donna's still awake..."

NO, NOT DONNA! LORD, DON'T DO THIS TO ME!

"In fact, we're all pretty wide-eyed, what with all the ruckus you've created." His voice seemed to come from above,

a matter of a few small feet. Daniel forced his face deep into the forest floor and envisioned fungus, weed and fern growing over and covering his body in a coat of warm, concealing vegetation; from the holes in the coat sprang giant hairs, stands of poplar and pine which climbed upward towards the stars and moved tenaciously across the earth in a thick blanket of nature, engulfing every shivering, naked thing that had lost its way.

In his mind's eye he could see Mr. McMullin waiting in the brush a few feet away, passing his flashlight over the darkness, standing upright against the moon - which was betrayingly full - and grinning with cabbalistic pleasure.

There was never any hatred between them. They liked each other, in the cautious way that relationships exist between fathers and young men who hope to court their daughters. But once ferreted out, marched unceremoniously into the moonlight to stand before the family, stripped naked of all those filamentary qualities which had formed the careful and deliberate lattice-work of his character, Mr. McMullin would know for the first time exactly what this young man's intentions were towards his daughter. That would be the end of everything. How at that moment he wished for clothes! Even so little as a pair of jogging shorts would be enough to deflect attention from the disgusting primordial truth.

Another branch snapped. A work boot came down heavily

inches from where he lay. Was he being toyed with? He waited for the hand that would surely grip his hair and pull him up. But there was no further sound. The flashlight cut a swath through the undergrowth. Something tiny and fast skittered across his outer thigh and he bit his lip in revulsion. Had it been a month earlier there would have been very little spring vegetation and his behind would have stuck out like a polished soapstone. As it was, the thistle bush he had flattened when the police car coasted down the steep driveway more than an hour ago, offered no shield if Mr. McMullin happened to turn his gaze downward.

The heel of the boot turned in the soil and moved away a few yards. He was behind him now, directing his attention deeper into the forest. If only he would go further in, then Daniel could crawl out of the bush and run quietly up the driveway.

"Or what I might do," the man whispered in the intimate space between them, "is let old Gnasher out for a late night run. What do you think about that?"

NO, NOT GNASHER!

"Old Gnasher don't like you too much, I'm afraid. Doesn't like the way you look at Donna. Makes him nervous."

Daniel slowly lifted his face from the earth. His body ached from being motionless but he dared not move a hand to clean his mouth for fear of snapping a twig. Silently, slowly, he pivoted his head to glance over his left

shoulder. He would not look directly at him -- remembering something about rabbits and partridge, how they remain invisible within inches of the hunter, never staring, no matter how close, how dangerous. The hunter will sense that he is being watched, he will feel the eyes and the fear. Daniel looked instead at the light, watched it fall against birches and cedars, watched it penetrate bush and shrubbery, coldly illuminating select fragments of the sleepy forest. There was something unnatural about a man in the woods with a flashlight; every tree, every bush caught by the beam seemed suspicious and distorted, as though they were suddenly discovered in an act unknown to science.

Mr. McMullin was standing near the point where the forest becomes truly a forest and not just trees in the yard of a country home. If he tramped forward a few more yards he would disappear into its thickness. Daniel cautiously turned his head towards the house. It stood nestled at the base of the gully, hidden from the community above. Between him and the driveway were about fifteen feet of bush and thirty more feet of delicately manicured lawn. Near the middle were a child's swing, some scattered toys and a round, plastic wading pool. The grass, tipped with dew, glistened with the strange, pale stillness of the moonlight. How eerie it was to realize that many happy, blistering afternoons had been spent with the younger children on this same lawn, in full view and with total acceptance. Mr. and Mrs. McMullin would

be working in the garden, content and trustful of the boy that Donna had befriended, in the way the two sat very close together on the grass, touching hands and keeping an eye on the little ones, Mary-Lynn and Patty, as they chased after Gnasher and the red, rubber ball he held softly in his fierce jaws. Now his perspective had changed. Now he felt like some loathsome, banished animal, scrutinizing the world from his hidden vantage on the edge of the wilderness. Many times from his bedroom window he had seen curious black bears tracing the edge of his yard. They always resisted coming out from the woods completely. He wondered if all animals crept to the border of the forest at night, to stare quietly as he was doing, under a curtain of stars, their primitive hearts filled with longing and nostalgia.

A glance towards the house brought new horror; Donna was at the living-room window, pressing her face against the glass, peering out over the lawn. On either side of her were the younger girls, each straining to keep sight of their father in the woods. Had she seen him? Did she know that he was lying naked on the edge of her lawn? A terrible shame overcame him and he felt disgust for his body, for its nudity, and for ever wishing his nakedness upon her.

There was no way out. As long as she stayed by the window he couldn't cross the lawn to the driveway. To the left led nowhere but deeper into the woods. If he took to the right he would have some thirty or forty yards to crawl

through crisp and snapping vegetation just to gain the side of the gully. By then he would have made enough noise for Mr. McMullin to catch him easily. And of course, behind and very near, was the ever searching flashlight.

Adulthood was something Daniel had never measured in terms of his actions. Indeed, it seemed that the older he got the more prone he was to this kind of silliness. It had been a beautiful, warm evening, the quality of a fable with its still, fragrant perfection. There was a friend from town named Michael who had come to spend the weekend. When at last his parents had gone to bed, Daniel took a bottle from the liquor cabinet and the two of them crept outside to the back porch.

He was in the mood for a celebration. Winter was behind them now, no more than the rarest clumps of dirty crystal in the shadiest recesses of the forest. As they passed the bottle quietly back and forth, it felt as though everything he had done in his life, every crazy stunt, every family quarrel and every emotional insecurity, seemed to dissipate to triviality beneath a peaceful, spring moon. "After all," Michael had declared, "we've both achieved life's major milestones: we have our driver's licenses, we're legal to drink, we have our graduation diplomas. Hell, you've even managed to lose your virginity. What else is there?"

Together they sat, like a couple of old and worldly men, sharing a pilfered bottle of vodka, in total harmony

with the universe. It didn't seem important to admit that he hadn't so much as kissed Donna, let alone reached that final elusive milestone. She was something more than a diploma or a license. She was not a rite of passage. She was gentle and sweet, alive, real and beautiful and he cherished her because she really did care for him in a way that no one else had before. And in some deeper way, a way that he couldn't understand, he mourned her in certain private moments.

Had they been satisfied with this opiate state of being, Daniel might have been able to mark this evening as a turning point, to say: this was the moment I became a man, this was the moment that I understood the difference between a total, holistic appreciation of what the world has to offer, and instinctive, visceral conquest. To understand and strike a balance. To become an adult. But as the night grew longer they became more restless; headlights on the road became far less frequent; no birds stirred in the branches; no sound of crickets. There were no houselights anywhere to be seen through the bush. All at once the world was asleep. Nature had thrown her silent, sparkling universe around them like a blanket, putting aside all of her complexities, all of her conflicts. She lay open and waiting, and her lure was irresistible.

Minutes later they were naked and running along the wooded path toward the road. Daniel had never felt so free,

so strong, so much a part of everything. Branches whipped across his face and body. He looked down and saw his straining muscles. He felt no pain, only strength and freedom. He knew the path and he knew his body and they were one, flowing, bounding over stump and stream, crashing through bushes and tramping up and down the terrain in pure, organic, naked flight.

They were on the main road, deliriously happy, hopelessly drunk, banging on street signs and creeping with staggered stealth from street-lamp to street-lamp. At the edge of McMullin's driveway they paused, breathless, and Daniel felt the soft, warm breeze against his flesh. He thought of Donna, lying in her bed, complacent and vulnerable. She was his. She belonged to him like the night belonged to him, like the road, the air, the moon and the endless possibilities of life and youth belonged to him, and he felt himself grow hard with happiness and pride.

At that instant the police cruiser came ghosting around the bend in the road, headlights glaring, red and blue flashers silently pulsing. Michael bolted across the road and threw himself over the fence into the field. Daniel stood frozen in the harsh light which was bearing down on him, paralysed by the instinct to surrender, to offer an explanation, to suffer humiliation, to account for actions only attributable to a child.

Instead, he found himself running down the driveway.



There was a chance that he hadn't been seen. There was a chance they weren't even looking for him. He crept through the carport to the side of the house. The living-room lights were still on. Gnasher was barking at the door. He heard the sound of tires on gravel. The trees which bordered the driveway were strafed with reddish-blue light.

He had known this situation before. In different circumstances he had experienced the same hopelessness, the same panic and the same deep sense of betrayal. But as always, there was no one he could point a finger at but himself.

"Well, Mr. Deslauriers, you're quite a woodsman - that's a fact." The nearness of the voice jarred Daniel back from his reverie. The alcohol was wearing off and a chill had gripped his flesh. Spring had not entirely arrived. There was no way to control the shivering. There was no way to control his body's instinct, and he knew for a certainty that the woods could not hide him forever.

"Police say there's a couple of buck-naked boys banging signs and generally tearin' up the neighbourhood. I'm not prepared to say that you have a hand in this, hell, not even that big a deal, really. Good night for it actually. I'm just curious. Curious like old Gnasher's curious. Both of us want to know what kind of heart beats in that gentleman's chest of yours." Daniel heard the footsteps coming nearer. It appeared that Mr. McMullin was going to trip right over

him. Who would be the more frightened, the hunter or the partridge that explodes into the air from the toe of his boot? In that moment of surprise, the bird has a chance to get away, to fly up into the trees in drumming-feathered panic. There was no way for Daniel to present himself to Mr. McMullin so naturally. He had no right to be where he was. He had no right to be naked. He was not prey, nor was he a hunter. He was a criminal, and the woods would not hide a criminal.

"You see my problem, Daniel? You're at that particular age where you want to keep your cards real close to your chest. Speaking as a father, I'm at this particular stage where I got to be able to read them real clearly. We talk a lot, but we don't really talk... I was hoping I'd get to know you a little better tonight. Well, I guess it'll have to wait, huh?"

The man was there, over him, but he had given up looking, and so he did not see what was at his feet, shivering, jerking about like some wounded animal. He walked past Daniel, out of the woods, on to the lawn.

Daniel looked directly at Mr. McMullin for the first time. He was a big man, a hard-working man who knew the boundaries of his land and who strolled it with absolute serenity and confidence. A beer with him would have been nice that evening. And then suddenly, Mr. McMullin turned near the swings and pointed his light nearly straight into

his face. He had forgotten the lesson about the rabbits.

"If you're really not there, then I guess no-one's the worse for me carrying on by myself. But if you are out there...then I'm glad we had this little talk, man to man." Then, as though to put the evening out of his mind, Mr. McMullin turned off his flashlight, picked up a few of the toys and went into the house.

Daniel recognized the station wagon coasting slowly down the road towards him and he made no effort to hide. The car stopped and he opened the passenger side and climbed in.

"Here, put these on," said his mother, "Michael told me what happened." Daniel put on the shorts and shirt and sat quietly while they drove home.

She parked the car in front of the house, turned off the lights and waited while Daniel tried to think of something to say in way of explanation. After a moment, he refused to think anymore. This had not been a night for thinking. If there was an explanation, it existed deep in the forest, within the darkened branches and bushes, where light of reason would only corrupt the mysterious industry of wilderness, and wildness.

"Aliens. They're everywhere. Go figure."

She stared for a long while at the wheel, then slowly a smile crossed her face. "Daniel, you're going to have to snap out of it sometime, and it's probably going to take something more than this to make you do it...but tonight,"

she began to laugh, "tonight I can't hold against you. You looked as innocent as the first time we met."

## Throwing Things At Mr. Wieder

Since we've somehow come around to the subject of life's most humiliating moments and hard learned lessons, why don't you replenish my glass, Dunstan, while I tell you about my own sorry episode, after which, we'll go out and smash tennis balls at one another in a gesture of reciprocal penance.

It was a long time ago, Dunstan, when I was a small lad of six living on Prince Edward Island with my mother and father. Yes Dunny, I had parents. Columbine wasn't born yet, but she was baking well in mother's womb. In the meantime I had devised all sorts of games to preoccupy myself. The game I remember with particular clarity was something called: Throwing Things At Mr. Wieder.

The object of the game, Dunstan, was simple. And it was cruel. It was crueller than any other of the despicable things I had perpetrated as a child, and come to think of it, crueller than anything more I could imagine myself doing as an adult. Yes, that was rather a monumental statement coming from someone you know so well, but I'm nothing if not a man of principle, Dunstan, and if you ever care to hold inquest over the corpses that bridge my golden feet from venture to venture, you will see that each bears a toe tag

that plainly reads: I SAW HIM COMING.

Anyway, lets return to the subject at hand, which was the object of the game. The object of the game was to hit Mr. Wieder with anything that could be picked up and thrown -- and not be caught doing it. Delightful forum for the playing out of pre-adolescent criminal tendencies, don't you agree, Dunstan! You could throw sticks, bricks, stones, bottles, old Tonka toys and garbage can lids; the more creatively one went about it the better. Listen to this. I once even managed with some difficulty to drop a ten-speed bike on this man from an upper-floor stairwell. Now wouldn't you say that it required a herculean amount of planning, not to mention split-second timing? The ability to do that sort of thorough groundwork is bred with the corpuscles, Dunny. I'm sure you can appreciate that a ten-speed bicycle is a very intimidating object for a six year old to transform into something whose sole purpose must be to have destructive capabilities. Imagination, therefore, was an extremely important component of the game.

But it was not the most important element. The most important element, Dunny, was of course, Mr. Wieder. He would have been close to fifty then. This I know now, but at the time I pegged him for a much younger man. I fear that back then I misinterpreted his behaviour for that of a younger person rather than of someone who lacked certain unspecified mental capacities. Mental deficiency. What does

that mean to a young boy who's just beginning to receive intimations of his own superiority over the lesser things in nature? It is a phase of wing-ripping cruelty in anyone's life, Dunni. In this, because of my youth, lays the only mild forgiveness I will allow myself.

Do you suppose another of these scotches will adversely affect our match? I think not.

Let me describe my Mr. Wieder to you. He was of the tall variety, six foot six at the very least. A towering figure in anyone's books. He would have made a formidable impression in the boardroom, if it weren't for the rest of him. You see, Dunni, though he was tall, he was also very fat. To my overcharged eyes it looked like he weighed a ton, and most of the weight, peculiarly, formed the grotesquely exaggerated mass of his derriere. He had a remarkably oversized behind, as though the seat of his pants contained two giant balloons: separate, distinct lobes forever struggling to become airborne, forever wanting to carry him off over the rooftops. When he ran, his knees and toes turned inwards, one over the other, which proved to be of great advantage to me in the countless footraces that ensued after each strike...so to speak.

His face, Dunni, was unique, unforgettable. It was large and square, like someone had taken a block of wood and split it four-sides-even with a hatchet, and then plopped it upon a mountain of flesh. It twitched continuously with the

steady and incomprehensible dialogue he kept with himself. And though he possessed a full complement of teeth, they were all brown and pitted, like the little shrivelled potatoes one finds at the bottom of the basket beneath the kitchen counter.

There was not one single aspect of Mr. Wieder's appearance that I didn't find odd in some way or another. Even his hair was bizarre. It was black and closely cropped with glaring silver striping, and it had the bristly quality of a tomcat's coat; by that I mean that it never seemed to get messed up or blown about in the wind. Oh yes, I seem to remember also, that he always wore the same clothing: green workman's pants, suspenders, white canvas runners, and some sort of smelly woollen sweater, even during the hottest days of summer. Interesting isn't it Danni, the sorts of images we retain with absoluteness from our childhood?

Every game has a playing board, Danni, an arena in which there are clearly designated areas which are 'in bounds' and 'out of bounds'. We could easily spend the next hour wrenching the last drop of blood out of this as a metaphor for the world of business, but I'd rather skip such digressions if you don't mind. We're no longer in high school you and I, and some bridges are built too obviously well to give them much thought. So lets just cross this one quickly and get back to Mr. Wieder.

It was Mr. Wieder who defined the playing board. He



defined those areas which were considered 'safety zones' and those areas which were considered 'danger zones'. Now pay attention. A 'danger zone' was anywhere other than behind our apartment door, where our circular driveway met the street, or in the cluster of wild, uncleared bush at the side of the building. It included the stairwell from the 1st floor on up to the 4th, the entrance lobby, the sprawling front lawn with the magnificent elms, and especially the circular driveway. This was considered a red hot 'danger zone'.

You see, that was where Mr. Wieder spent most of his days. He had one passion, his red and silver Nash Rambler, and he filled his daylight hours with the care and upkeep of that classic vehicle. In the morning he'd be under the hood with his prized assortment of wrenches and screwdrivers close at his side, making adjustments to the adjustments he had made the day before, and probably the day before that, and so on and so forth; the point is, that there never seemed to be an end to the adjustments. Obviously, perfection seemed to elude him always by a day. Would I love to add that car to my collection now, Danni!

Towards noon hour he'd begin to wash it down with a bucket of sudsy water, bumper to bumper, including the tires and the interior. By three o'clock he was hard at work with a can of wax and some rags, meticulously polishing each square inch of metal until that Rambler glistened like it

was a piece of the sun which had fallen on our driveway. It gives new meaning to the word obsession, doesn't it?

Now for the cruncher. After all that devotion, after all that compulsive effort, Mr. Wieder would climb reverently behind the wheel, start up the engine, put it into gear, and drive once around the circular driveway. That's it! Once around the driveway at about the speed of a hearse, park it in the same spot, turn off the engine, collect his tools, and go inside for supper. I watched this ceremony repeat itself, day after day after day, until it finally dawned on me that Mr. Wieder wasn't allowed to drive his own vehicle on public roads. It was always Mrs. Wieder - yes he was married - who did the driving whenever they went to the market or to the movies or to visit relatives in Summerside.

Until that moment of, shall I say, primitive anthropological revelation, Mr. Wieder was hardly a passing thought to me. He was just another adult, albeit strange, who lived in the same old, red brick apartment building as us, and I afforded him the same respect I afforded all the adults who came and went within the busy boundaries of my childhood world -- I ignored him.

I ignored him with all the concentrated vengeance of one who does not wish his fun and games to be prematurely spoiled by someone capable of making moral judgements, and by someone who possesses the power to force you to abide by

those same judgements. Understand Dunni? My fun and games consisted of vaporizing ants that dared to make a pilgrimage across the hot patio blocks beneath my ever-poised magnifying glass, or capturing squirrels with a box and string, after which I would do unspeakable things, or preparing my deep-bush headquarters and seducing other apartment kids into my army, to eventually hurl themselves upon my enemy's encampments which lay on the other side of the field at the back of our building. I had enemies even back then, Dunni. My arch rival was a boy named Kelso. A formidable adversary. We engaged in many 'sour apple' wars whenever his army dared to cross the neutral zone to invade us, or we them. Subsequently, a great deal of my time was given over to plotting combat strategies and stockpiling hundreds of hard, green apples.

Now, to the advent of the game. One morning I was given a boomerang as a birthday gift from my grandfather. This wasn't a cheap fake Dunni, like the kind I had made myself out of cardboard or some thin sheets of wood I had found stacked up in the basement near the laundry machines. This was the real thing, imported from Australia. It was solid, streamlined and shellacked. It felt really good in my hands, and I was convinced that my boomerang was the same type used by the Aborigines to hunt their food in the outback.

To hell with breakfast! I went outside immediately, gripping one end of it tightly and carving out slices of air

in scythe-like fashion. What a bloodpumper it was to imagine what five or six of these things could do for the fortunes of my army! I'd always had a love affair with boomerangs, Dunni, indeed anything that might remotely be used as a weapon, and I especially tingled at the notion of throwing something that you didn't have to, in theory, chase after. The ones I had made myself all flew into the ground, or through a window, or didn't fly at all. But this one I knew was going to come back, and I ran to the middle of the lawn and I let it go with all the strength I could muster.

It went straight and fast, slicing end over end with a whoosh, whoosh, whooshing sort of sound that was delightful to the ears. Just as I thought it was going to hit a tree, it shot upwards and to the left - whoosh, whoosh, whoosh - and I followed it, pivoting on the spot as it circled within the cluster of elms, sheering off big green leaves from the branches - whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.

It was just as I was beginning to question how I was going to catch it with my bare hands when it struck Mr. Wieder on the back of his head, sending his tool box crashing to the pavement and his tools scattering about the driveway. Oh, what a mighty blow was struck! From all the TV programs I had been watching where people got hit with things, I was truly surprised and bewildered that Mr. Wieder didn't collapse in a heap, unconscious or dead. Instead, when my boomerang ricocheted off Wieder's feline-furred

head, his body contorted like a marionette whose strings had been yanked inadvertently by a sneezing puppeteer.

To me, Danni, this was comedy at its best - totally unreal, outrageously slapstick, wholly entertaining. Here was a grown individual performing the Charleston in broad daylight! Here was an adult man, one minute walking with man-like propriety towards the front entrance, the next moment tripping merrily down the yellow brick road. What a holler it was to see!

I was laughing with such abandon that it never occurred to me that he could be hurt. Hurt? Hurt people would be either unconscious, dead or dying. It never occurred to me that he could be mad. Mad people aren't funny. He was funny! It never occurred to me that this was anything other than hilarious to the point of stomach cramps...until I saw that he was bearing down upon me with his big posterior billowing out like an opened parachute. Well, I ran let me tell you; I ran hard because it did suddenly occur to me that NORMAL people would be unconscious, dead, or crying.

Through the elms I raced, leaping over the ditch to the sidewalk. I didn't dare look back until I was across the street, for then I knew that I could run into my friend Bart's house and hide behind his mother, who was almost as big as Mr. Wieder. But when I glanced over my shoulder I saw that he had pulled up at the edge of the lawn, very much like some thwarted dog at the end of his chain. He looked

from side to side, up and down the street, then back at me. It was obvious that something kept him from advancing. Dunny, the man wasn't allowed to go off the property! Not allowed to drive his own car? Not allowed off the front lawn? What sort of adult was this! He yelled at me. He said, "You are a bad boy to throw things! I'll tell your parents, they'll teach you!"

"It was an accident," I snapped back. "They'll know I wasn't being bad on purpose and they'll be angry at you for chasing me." I had never spoken to an adult like that, ever. But you see, Dunny, I was beginning to realize that Wieder was an altogether different kind of grownup, with even fewer freedoms and responsibilities than I had. And in the split second it takes for a child to instinctively know and appreciate the authority of someone older, it took me nearly the same amount of time to realize and appreciate that this seemingly irrevocable law of nature had for this one instance been reversed for my personal pleasure and gratification.

"Accident maybe," he growled at me. "But I'll teach you to throw things that hurt!" After issuing that rather impudent threat, he turned and waddled quickly back to his car, whereupon he took my lovely boomerang and stowed it away in the trunk, slamming down the hood with a self-satisfied smirk. I sat myself comfortably on the edge of the sidewalk and watched as he began to collect his tools from

the ground, polishing each one carefully with a rag before putting it into his toolbox. It appeared that in no time he had forgotten about me, forgotten about the incident, the lump on his head and his angry aberration from normal routine.

But I, Danni, I didn't forget about him! No possibility of that, I'm afraid. I knew that I had hit upon something really, really good. There would be no more ignoring poor Mr. Wieder. The game to end all bloody childhood games had been born. Honestly Dunstan, I feel like some indeterminate spirit in limbo between sobriety and inebriation. For God's sake lets have another so that we're at least defined, hm?

Needless to say, life became much more thrilling after that day. The next morning my boomerang was given back to me. Mother had spoken with Mrs. Wieder, apologizing on my behalf, and Mrs. Wieder, apologizing on behalf of her husband, retrieved my weapon from the trunk of the Rambler. Damage was limited to a proper mother's scolding. I, of course, apologized profusely, nodded my head furiously, and smiled the inward elfin smile of the wicked.

But half-baked apologies are flimsy substitutes for hard lessons yet to be learned. That same afternoon I staked out the garbage shed at the back of our building. I clambered on to the roof with one peanut butter sandwich wrapped neatly in wax paper and a half a thermos of Coca Cola, and I waited. I believe an hour or more passed but I

was patient, as all competent field operatives have to be. There was a splendid view over the tops of the apple trees, of the field which was the neutral zone between our neighbourhood and Kelso's. I suspect now that it's fully developed, but on that sunny day, sitting on the warm metal roof, nibbling away on a corner of peanut butter sandwich, while a Maritime breeze shook and swayed the plentiful bounty of tiny green apples, I felt like I was straddling the shimmering edge of some vast, uncivilized nirvana; keeping watch over the sinister movements of the natives across the great divide, who at any moment might attack in droves and waves. I was manning the watchtower of the world, Dunny; I had food, drink, a view, a noble purpose, and a target. Total self-containment, Dunny. I've never felt that way since.

Towards three o'clock, Mr. Wieder happened along, dragging two plastic bags of garbage on either side of him. I'd expected myself to remain calm and focused at the moment of action, but Dunny, how my blood coursed at the sight of him approaching! I crept to the edge and positioned myself so that I was directly above the door. He stopped in front of it, let go of the bags, and turned the handle. That's when I did it. That's when I dropped a bundle of old tar shingles on his head - with precision and extreme prejudice.

"Arrgh! The sky is falling," he wailed, doing an admirable Jackie Gleason 'Hmmm, good booze!' imitation that



had me doubled over in fits of laughter. What a thunderstroke it must have been to see my cheery mug beaming down at him from over the edge of the roof. "You again, bad boy! This time I teach you good!" I slid down from the roof and hit the ground at a full gallop. It was then that I discovered the second safety zone which was the bush that hid my army headquarters. Wieder refused to chase after me into the bramble, and I pranced about unseen behind the Scotch Thistles, taunting him to come and play and rejoicing in the unqualified success of my first official operation.

Days played out into weeks, and as the summer wore on my success rate continued to climb. I bethumped him with anything I could think of: bikes, trikes and old furniture, rubber tires, an old typewriter and aerosol cans, dirt-clumped roots and sour green apples. By the time the cool air of autumn had turned my knuckles red and stinging, I had amassed an astonishing number of 'hits', everyone of which was meticulously planned and executed to perfection. The really clever thing about it was that it was always his word against mine; no one ever witnessed a strike, Danni. That was the best part of the game: the planning, the stealth, the waiting for just the right moment. Sometimes I unleashed a double whammy, so that he barely had time to react to the first strike, when the second one came whistling home to score a perfect hit. There were some cases where I left him alone for up to three days in order to lull him towards a

fatal sense of personal security. In these times I played by myself, quietly, with my toys or magnifying glass, until eventually his quick, nervous glances in my direction became fewer and fewer. And when finally he felt confident enough to stick his head beneath the hood for extended periods of labour, that was when I'd strike; broomsticks, rakes, bucket of water, a milk crate, anything that was close at hand and throwable. Never once did Wieder fail to chase me with the same gusto, crying "Bad boy! I teach you good!" Never once did he succeed in catching me.

But surely, you ask, there must have been some physical damage to his person? There must have been gashes, bruises, some blood somewhere to offer as evidence of my dastardly recreation? Well, there wasn't, and I can't supply you with a rational reason for this, so don't press me on the subject. It was a game between two children, played in a world quite displaced from the one in which my father and mother and by now, Columbine, existed. Blood would have ruined it. So there was none allowed. Call it pure luck if you need something. Myself, I'm not ready to call it anything yet.

What is really odd though, Danni, is that I don't believe that Wieder ever bothered to tattle on me. Not even once. In that respect, it was his game too, don't you think? If not his 'game' then what else can we say about it? Maybe that the persecution which I levelled upon him daily,

somehow became a part of his very intense little world of normal static routine? Horrifying to think about.

Columbine, by the way, had been born near the end of June. It was now early September and I still had not met my new sister. Mother and father were making daily trips to the hospital but I was never permitted to go; not that I pleaded all that much to see her. The concept of a sister was, by and large, more abstract than the reality of Mr. Wieder.

Anyway, time passed as time does. Then one cold day I was out in the field behind our building, on hands and knees, trying to dig a hole in the hard ground with a garden trowel. Mr. Wieder had gone to Summerside, mother and father were with Columbine. Since I was with nothing to do, I decided that I would fashion a thorn-spiked pit and impale whatever toads I could catch around the immediate area. Sometime Dunny, you will enlighten me about a few of your childhood atrocities and then we'll compare facial expressions.

My mind was on 'the game' as I scraped away at the earth. I knew that the object of the game was to not get caught. I knew that I would lose the game if Mr. Wieder were to get his hands about my neck or if, God forbid, someone were to catch me in the act. But how could I actually win the game? By simply continuing not to lose it?

It was then, Dunny, that a prickly branch snapped down hard beside me. Two torn, black sneakers stepped into view,

rolled up pant bottoms, ripped dungarees, red patch on one knee, black sweater, white windbreaker, smiling yellow teeth - Kelso. I shot up and turned to run, but found myself hopelessly surrounded by his comrades. Each one of them was brandishing a whipping branch. I had forgotten about these dreaded marauders lately, as my own, private game had escalated.

"Not fair! Ten against one," I protested!

"We've captured you," said one boy, cracking his branch in the air.

"Now you're our prisoner," yelled another.

"Prepare to die. We're going to slice you to ribbons," Kelso declared, with a forceful snap of his branch against the frozen earth.

I had to think quickly. Then it came to me. "I have a great secret!"

"What secret!"

"No one else in the world knows about it! It's more fun than anything!"

"We'll torture you for the information."

"Or we could make a treaty and all of us can play," I argued. "The secret's only good on my turf."

Kelso thought about it. "Tell us the secret. If it's good, you live. If it's bad," and he cracked his whip at my feet for emphasis, "we cut you up."

That, Dunny, was the cowardly way in which I brought

peace to our neighbourhood and more kids into the game.

It was, I believe, on the evening of that same day that mother and father introduced me to Columbine. They had been unusually quiet through dinner, and left for the hospital shortly after Mrs. Morgan, my baby sitter, had arrived from across the hallway.

I sat with Mrs. Morgan on the couch while she knitted away at something incomprehensible, and I watched the television, but I soon found that I was too restless for the CBC, which was more desolate than Charlottetown in mid-February; I wanted to meet my sister now, I wanted her to see what a terrific brother she had; I couldn't wait to acquaint her with all the wonderful things I had going in my life, all the irons I had in the fire; it was very much a matter of childhood ego, of pride. I felt as though I had been sent into this world ahead of her to scout the territory, to reconnoiter the area; to make ready the playground for the imminent arrival of Columbine.

Oh yes, the knowledge that I now had a sister to impress and entertain was very, very real to me; she would be a true, loyal confidant and companion of the highest possible security clearance -- bloodline; and I went into the nursery, newly redecorated with pink and blue walls, to be nearer to her, to stand vigil over her crib. It was my first proud act as brother protectorate.

My mind was pregnant with the image of Columbine. But

what my mother bore and brought home to me that night was a tiny thing so hideously defaced, so monstrously dissimilar to my own sweet conception that I could not look at it but in revulsion and utter certainty that this was not my Columbine. And I expressed this sentiment in explicit terms to mother and father, before fleeing the room that had so shamefully betrayed itself to that ugly, repugnant deformity. I don't suppose you've heard of the term 'collodion', Dunstan? That's the medical name for what she was; a collodion baby, a 'cotton baby', 'parchment baby'. She entered this world sheathed in a crispy filament, a scabby, peeling tissue that my eyes could not get past, to see the beauty of what breathed and cried and was my sister beneath it.

Not for a long, long time; long after the game with Wieder had ended.

I had managed to save my own skin that day in the field, by playing my only trump card: Mr. Wieder. Now we were faced with enormous logistical difficulties. Instead of just one lone attacker, there were now twenty - each one of them eager to throw something at Wieder. Chaos ruled my bush headquarters; discipline, authority, rank - all disintegrated into a garbled screamfest. How could twenty children coordinate a successful strike without some being witnessed, caught by the scruff of their necks or left out of the action? The children, naturally, in my contingent

demanded a priority status because the game was to be played on our territory. Kelso quickly reminded us of the terms of the treaty and further announced that if a solution was not agreed upon quickly to his satisfaction, he'd simply gather his fellows and head off to nail Mr. Wieder unilaterally.

That bothered me deeply. Possibly, I was unfocused by the problem of Columbine, but I knew at that moment that my love for the game had lessened. I still had not resolved the puzzling question of how to win the game with a single attacker. Now I had to deal with the participation of twenty eager attackers who had made it obvious to me that they were not concerned with the fundamentals of planning, stealth and yes Dunni, fairness to the target.

After much argument, we finally settled upon a plan that, while not universally applauded, was the best we could do.

Four cells were born, containing five commandos each. One cell would strike at a time, on a specific day, over a period of two weeks. This would allow space for planning and for Mr. Wieder to recover before the next strike. Each cell was to be responsible for its own strategy, reconnaissance, armaments and escape routes. A general oath of silence was taken that no cell under any circumstance could divulge the existence of the others in event of capture and interrogation.

Kelso and I and three others were in the first cell to

gc, code named: Desert Hunters. In our planning I had made arrangements for the other cells to be positioned in places where they could watch events unfold and pick up a few helpful pointers without interfering.

The appointed day came. It was approaching noon hour and Mr. Wieder had begun to sponge down his car with a bucket of hot water. It was now late October or early November and the air was so cold that steam was rising from the bucket and from where the water had wet the car. We took our positions, Kelso and I to the side of the building, the other three behind the elms. The rest of the children were safely hidden in the bush where they could watch and not be seen.

There was an old box of ceiling tiles - the cardboard kind with perforations - which had been left outside to go to the garbage. Each of us had taken one, which would fly end over end if we threw them correctly. The plan was for Kelso and I to sneak up from behind and nail Wieder as he was bending over to dip his sponge. Then as he chased us down the driveway towards the road and the safety zone, the other three boys would commence the ambush, completing the double whammy and the first official collaborative strike of the fall. Stirring stuff, eh, Dunny?

Everything was ready. All that remained was for Mr. Wieder to turn his back on us, bend over and dip his sponge. But then something unique happened in the history of the



game. Quite simply, he spotted us. He spotted our two, strained faces peering around the brick. He saw our ceiling tiles and he knew what they meant. "Bad boys!" he yelled at us, dropping his sponge and racing towards the front lobby. "Bad boys to throw things!" The toolbox lay open beside the car. Mr. Wieder waited behind the screen door. He was afraid of us, but he didn't want to lose sight of those things that were so important to his life.

"Lets get him!" screamed Kelso, clearly overcome by the lust of the hunt. He bounded menacingly towards the front steps, the effect of it being that Wieder retreated into the dimness behind the staircase, a blunder on his part for now he was trapped, and his voice signalled a new kind of desperate anger. "Bad boys to throw things that hurt. I'll teach you good!"

"There's nobody watching!" Kelso urged, but for me it was over. It was over because we had been seen. The effect and comic reaction which could be elicited by the tool of surprise had been lost. This sort of attack was different. But the difference was inconsequential to Kelso. "Come on. There's no one to see us." he said, with all the force and conviction that a fanatic can call upon. We opened the screen door slowly. I could hear his heavy breathing. My own heart, Dunni, began palpitations that remain with me to this day. We raised our ceiling tiles, almost more in defence than offence, as though we expected him to bolt at

us suddenly. The air was charged with a frightful, concentrated energy that was his fear and our fear combined, and yet it had become so quiet that you could have heard a paint chip peel off the wall and drop to the floor.

Kelso dropped his tile and ran outside. I remained where I was, with my arm raised and my wrist cocked, the cutting edge of the tile sighted on the horrible, tormented face that was sighted back upon me; that was skinning me alive, flaying me layer by murderous bloody layer in a frenzy to get a visceral understanding of the essence of what I was - this little boy who had made his life such a relentless misery. I know that for a split second I thought of Columbine, in her sea of cotton, impatient to be beautiful, making wonderful progress at divesting herself of the scaly ugliness that had covered her body, and wondering where her brother was. And then I threw the tile.

I was running down the driveway as fast as my legs could take me. To be honest, Dunni, I didn't know whether I had hit him or not. But it didn't matter. He was on my heels.

Out from the elms sprung the three commandos. A tile singed past my ear. Then from the bush appeared the other cells who were impatient to play and suddenly both me and Mr. Wieder were running through a hail of tiles, stones, and bottles. See, Dunni, it didn't matter to them who they hit, as long as they hit somebody. When at last I made it to the

road I didn't stop running - didn't even cross my mind - because I knew Wieder was going to chase me forever, chase me into places where even I was forbidden to go. And in a way he still does.

But I did learn one hard and unforgettable lesson about life that day, Danni. Some games you can never really win, only ultimately lose. Remember that. Now, shall we play?