

Undercover White Trash

By

David L. Kilpatrick

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*To Loyd and Darlene:
The greatest parents on the face of the Earth.*

1

I thought I was perfect. I really did. In fact, my entire company thought I was perfect. I was the consummate ad man; the new Princeton whiz kid who had come to town to put this tired old advertising firm back on the map. I earned every penny of my six-figure salary doing what they had hired me to do: find ways to make people buy what they really did not want to buy. I was darned good at it too, or at least I thought I was.

My delusions of grandeur ended the day Big Billy Barnes called me a peckerwood.

He did this in the middle of my firm's board meeting. I thought that the president had asked me there so I could be congratulated for the great job I had done on the BillyMart account. I had spent three months on that one and had projected a twenty-percent increase in overall sales for Mr. Barnes' chain of wholesale consumer outlets. Instead of the pat on the back and the accompanying stroking I had expected, Big Billy Barnes, the Wholesale King of the Southwest, unleashed a verbal tirade upon me and the entire upper management of my company, L. R. Dickey Marketing Concepts.

He started by throwing a copy of *Newsweek* magazine across the boardroom table. It landed in front of Lawrence Dickey, our president. Mr. Dickey picked it up.

"I was taking a crap yesterday when I saw that," Barnes snarled. Mr. Dickey dropped the magazine as if it were radioactive. "What the hell is that supposed to be?" Billy continued, pointing.

Mr. Dickey pushed the magazine across the table to me with his Mont Blanc. It was open to one of the ads that I had placed as part of Phase One of my marketing campaign. It was a half-page spot showing a typical family in the aisle of a BillyMart Wholesale Warehouse. The caption at the top read: "Convenience, Quality, and Savings. It's Here at Your BillyMart." It was a simple spot, but an eye-catcher.

"Why are you shoving it over to him?" Barnes asked Mr. Dickey.

"Uh, well, Mr. Barnes, that is Edward Prescott, our Director of Market Research and Planning. He designed the BillyMart ad campaign, sir."

Barnes looked at me over his bifocals. "So you're the peckerwood who's responsible for this bullshit?"

I looked around at Mr. Dickey and the rest of the executives. The look they had on their faces was the same one the crowd has just before the matador delivers the *coup de grace*. I knew; I had seen it on a *National Geographic* special before.

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When I looked back at Barnes, he was pointing the middle finger of his cigar hand at me.

“My sales have dropped fifteen percent since I gave you people the account six months ago. Fifteen goddamn percent. That’s about ten million gross, gentlemen, and I don’t need to tell ya that I’m not very damn happy.” He looked at me and pointed at the ad. “Who in the hell are these people supposed to be, son?”

I hesitated before saying, “Well, they represent a typical American family.” I knew I shouldn’t have said it the moment it left my lips.

“A typical American family?” Barnes repeated as he lifted up the ad with one hand and pointed at it with the other. “What’s this man wearing, son?” he asked as he pointed to the father figure.

“A...suit. A suit and tie. And a white shirt,” I observed.

Barnes replied softly, “A suit and tie. And a white shirt, right?” I nodded. Barnes’ face suddenly flushed and he shouted at me so loudly, I could smell his cigar breath all the way across the conference table. “Son, the only people who come into my stores wearing ties are cops looking for one of my employees for a parole violation! And the broad; she looks like she just stepped out of the Neiman goddamn Marcus catalog, pearls and all.” Barnes took a deep breath and continued. “You ever been in one of my stores?” he asked. I thought for a minute and shook my head. He then looked at the other executives. “Any of you shitbirds ever been in a BillyMart?”

Mr. Dickey and the others just looked at the ceiling.

“I didn’t think so,” Barnes said as he looked at me again. “You the guy who did them TV commercials, too?”

I nodded.

“What do you think you were trying to prove with that one?” he asked, shrugging his shoulders. “Looked like a bunch of crap you’d see on the goddamn rock video channel; I hate that shit.”

“But the research...”

“Research? For crying out loud, man; the All-American family pulls up to the store in a Volvo! A friggin’ Volvo! I couldn’t believe it.” Big Billy got up from his chair and walked to the head of the table. Mr. Dickey looked nervous with the man standing behind his chair like that.

“Man, you people have missed the damn boat. I want to tell you something; I have four million dollars tied up in this campaign. You were supposed to be the best, according to my people. Well, I’m on my way back home now to fire those sons of bitches and I’d like to do the same to you assholes, but my lawyers tell me I can’t right now. Seems I got six months left in the contract and about the only way I can get out of it now is to sue your asses, but that’ll tie us up in court a long time. Another way is to let the contract run out, then take you to court, show your incompetence, and win the case. When that happens, I’m gonna come back and

turn this office building of yours into the biggest goddamned BillyMart ever built and put you shitwads to work in it mopping the floors.”

Mr. Barnes went back to his seat and put the *Newsweek* into his briefcase. Then he said softly, “People: my customers don’t read *Newsweek*. They don’t wear Armani suits and they don’t drive Volvos. They’re common people, man. They work for a living, and they don’t make shit. They come to my stores to save money on the bare necessities of life for them and their families. They don’t go to BillyMart on some kinda status trip. I can take one look at you fellas and tell you don’t know bear shit from wild honey, and that’s why you’ve screwed up this campaign so royally.”

I was feeling pretty low by now, and it looked like the others were, too. Barnes took his briefcase and walked to the big oak door. He opened it and turned around to face us.

“You’ve still got my money and you still got six months; there ain’t shit I can do about that right now. Y’all need to do some serious thinking to see if you can straighten this mess out.” With that, Barnes closed the door behind him.

We sat and looked at one another for a long time. Mr. Dickey finally allowed me to leave the room; I guess he could sense my confusion. I did not know what to think. My mind was reeling; this was my first failure in this business. As a matter of fact, this was one of my first failures ever. Besides, no one had ever called me a peckerwood before. I didn’t even know what it was.

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Mr. Dickey called me about an hour later to come up for what I thought was to be a brainstorming session. It wasn’t. As I walked into the planning room, or the War Room as we liked to call it, I saw only Mr. Dickey sitting there. His sleeves were not rolled up. “Have a seat, Edward,” he said as he gestured to the seat across the table. “We have a problem, as you know. I’ve been thinking about what Barnes said this morning. He was right, Edward; we don’t know ah...anything about the ‘common people’, as he likes to call them.” I sat in the big leather chair and listened as he continued. “You and I, Edward, and as a matter of fact our entire staff here at L. R. Dickey Marketing Concepts, are not common people. No, Edward, we are indeed different; we all know it. In actuality, we carry a great deal of pride in this distinction. Some people, such as Mr. Barnes, may call us snobs or whatever, but we even take pride in that label, Edward.” Mr. Dickey put on his reading glasses and looked at a portfolio that was lying on his desk. “I see here that you graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton. Attended St. Mark prep school before that, four-point average there and an excellent extracurricular resume as well. Your father is Vincent A. Prescott; I think I remember his name from *Money’s* list, am I correct?” Mr. Dickey peered over his glasses at me.

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“Yes,” I said cautiously. I was not sure what he was building up to, but I didn’t feel comfortable.

“You were raised in the Highland Park area of Dallas and your mother operates a hotel, if I remember.”

“She owns a chain of them...”

“Yes, I knew it was something like that. And you, Edward, really do not need to work. I understand that your trust can support you quite sufficiently. You work to avoid boredom, I assume? A challenge and all that.”

“More or less.”

“Edward, every person on this staff has a life resume that looks just like this one, including me. We are indeed a bunch of elitist bourgeois snobs, just as Billy Barnes accused us of being. Normally I would not care about that redneck’s opinion, but a four-million-dollar account is nothing to be sneezed at. Even more important is the fact that Barnes can spread a very negative word about our agency to more contacts than I care to know about; his kind always seems to know someone just about everywhere. That is why this account is so important, Edward; that is why drastic measures are needed to save it.”

I did not like the way he said “drastic measures.” He said it the way “M” always does when he sends James Bond on a suicide mission.

“We need insight; real insight into the minds of the common people, Edward. The way they think, the way they act, the way they feel. Without this, any campaign we develop for the BillyMart stores is doomed to fail.”

“I understand, Mr. Dickey. I will get with my staff immediately and...”

“No, Edward, I do not believe that you understand. I am not talking about more surveys and interviews. I am not talking about mountains of demographic data fed into one of your computers. What I am talking about, Edward, is the need to step into the shoes of these people.”

“You mean we need someone to...”

“Not just someone, Edward. You.”

“You mean?”

“Yes, Edward, you are going to live with the white trash for awhile.”

“But...”

“No arguments, Edward. I have thought this over. It has to be you. Second-hand information is no good; that is what sank our boat the last time. The only way to assimilate this information is to live it.”

“Sort of like...”

“Yes, Edward; like Jane Goodall with the monkeys.”

“Oh, my God.”

“You have three months to gather your data...”

“Three months? I was thinking more along the lines of a long weekend, sir...”

“It will take at least that long to truly get the overall picture, Edward. Now as I was saying; that will leave enough time for you to design a new campaign and

implement it before the contract expires.” Mr. Dickey stood up and walked me to the door. “You know what you have to do, Edward,” he said as he shook my hand. “I will leave all the details up to you. I do not want to see your face for the next three months.”

“Yes sir,” I replied. I could hear Mr. Dickey close the door behind me as I walked down the hall to the elevators, still trying to figure out what the hell had just happened to me.

“How did it go?” my secretary Ingrid asked innocently as I walked past her into my office.

“Call Dr. Leonard for me and set an appointment for this afternoon,” I whined.

“Are you ill?” Ingrid asked.

I shook my head. “No, but I’ll likely be needing some shots.”

2

I wasted no time. The sooner I could get started, the sooner I could get this ridiculous assignment over with. I went home to make my plans.

I have always been painfully compulsive. This compulsiveness led to my success in life, I had always believed. I am the type of person who dives into the water headfirst; not the type to wade in just enough to get my feet wet. I submerge myself entirely into whatever project I am working on at the moment. But I am not reckless; before I jump into that water, I check a Corps of Engineers' topographical map to find out just how deep it is. The BillyMart assignment would be no different.

In my study, I developed a flow chart to organize my thoughts. It was apparent that I was going to have to leave my home for the duration of the assignment. There was no way I could do this on a nine-to-five basis; it was a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. I would have to work, eat, socialize, and even sleep in the underprivileged community. I could not come home to my domicile on the golf course; it would be a barrier between me and the information that I needed to obtain. As long as I had a safe haven to which I could escape, I would never truly feel the isolation I needed to feel. And isolation was the key to the entire project; once I felt isolated, I would learn what it was like to be from the other side of the tracks.

The first thing was to make sure that I would have a house to come back to once the project was over. Conchita, my housekeeper, could take care of the house well enough. She had keys to the place, the alarm code, and she pretty much ran the house anyway, so my absence would not be that important. Before I talked to her, I went into the study and telephoned my accountant and good friend, Bradley Rollins.

"Brad, this is Edward. I'll be going away for awhile, and I need you to take care of a few things for me." Bradley took care of all my big financial matters. He managed my trust accounts and I had him pay most of my bills for me automatically. I still paid my everyday household expenses from pocket money, so I needed him to take care of that sort of thing in my absence.

"Where are you going?"

"Well, I would rather not say, but I can say that I will be gone for about three months."

Bradley was silent for a few seconds. I could hear him turn down the classical music on his stereo.

"Are you sick?"

"No, it's nothing like that, really."

"Cancer! Oh, my word; you have cancer."

"No. I told you I am not sick."

"Edward, is it...drugs?"

“No, I’m not going into rehab, Bradley. You know I don’t use any chemicals...”

“Insomnia. That’s it; you’re going to that sleep disorder clinic we were talking about the other day.”

“No, Bradley, I’m not going to a sleep disorder clinic. Caffeine. Remember? Since I quit drinking coffee after three o’clock, I quit having insomnia.”

“Oh, yes; I forgot.”

I could still hear Bradley’s mental wheels turning, so I went ahead and told him the story of Big Billy Barnes and the BillyMart undercover assignment.

When Bradley finally stopped laughing, he said in his best television announcer voice, “Edward Vincent Prescott the Third: Undercover White Trash. A genuine redneck, licensed to drink beer and raise hell...”

“Not funny, Bradley. This is serious; my reputation is on the line here.”

“Okay,” Bradley giggled. “What do you need me to do while you’re...indisposed, buddy?”

“Just make sure that my housekeeper gets what she needs,” I began.

“From the petty cash account?” Bradley asked.

“Yes, that’s fine. And take care of anything else that comes up. I’ll tell Conchita to call if she needs anything.”

“You’re really going to go into this thing deep, aren’t you?”

“Yes, it’s that important.”

“Well, I’ll take care of things on this end, Edward.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I’ll talk to you when I get back. And be sure not to tell anyone about this, okay, Bradley?”

“Roger Wilco,” he began giggling again. “And Edward...”

“What, Bradley?”

“Don’t eat too much possum.”

He was still laughing when I hung up the phone.

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The scent of cedar filled my nose as I walked into my closet. I flicked on the light and looked at the row of suits on one side and the row of shirts on the other. Some of the finest garments in the world were in that closet, but none of them would be of any use to me now. Even my casual wear would make me stand out like a sore thumb among the common folk; it was all designer-made. I did, however, have one pair of jeans that I bought for a country-western barbecue that we threw in honor of a client of ours from New Mexico. I also had an old sweatshirt from my rowing days at Princeton. I put these two items on, along with my most worn-out pair of sneakers.

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Since no one would be seeing it, I went ahead and packed some of my underwear and socks in a gym bag, but I left my Rolex and car keys on the nightstand. Conchita passed me on the stairs.

“Mr. Prescott...” she began to ask.

“It’s okay, Conchita. Everything is fine. I have to go away for a while. Three months to be exact. As you can see, I’ll be travelling light. Will you have any problems taking care of the place while I’m gone?”

“No sir, it will be no problem. Are you okay, Mr. Prescott?” she asked with a concerned mother look on her face. “You’re not sick, are you? You don’t have cancer or something...”

I smiled and said, “No, Conchita; I’m fine. My boss is sending me out of town on a special job.”

“Oh.” I could tell by the look on her face that she was still not convinced, but I decided that I was not going to tell her the story of Big Billy Barnes and the BillyMart undercover assignment. Too many people knew already.

“You have Mr. Rollins’ number, don’t you?”

“Yes, I have it with the emergency numbers.”

“You just take care of the house as usual, okay? If anything comes up, call Mr. Rollins. He’ll take care of it. He’ll also be giving you your paychecks. Don’t let him cheat you like he tried to last time,” I said as I walked the rest of the way down the stairs to the foyer.

“Oh, no I won’t. I will watch that *baboso* this time, Mr. Prescott.”

I didn’t remember that word from my high school Spanish class, but whatever it was, Bradley probably deserved it.

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I went to the garage and took a last look at my BMW and Range Rover. I would have liked to take one along, but like the clothes, they would have given me away. I turned and walked down the long driveway to the street. The clouds were growing darker and the wind was picking up.

It was the hour of reckoning.

I took a deep breath, gathering courage for the long journey on which I was about to embark.

I had decided to throw myself headfirst into this assignment. There was no time for research or further study of the matter. Mr. Dickey was right; one had to live that life in order to understand it. There was only one thing left to do, and that was to get on with it and quit wasting time.

I began to think about Bradley and Conchita believing that I was sick. As I stood on the side of the road with my thumb outstretched, I wished that I had been. A terminal illness had to be better than this.

The first thing that I had to do was buy a car. I made this decision while the police officer was running a Wants and Warrants check on my driver's license number as he sat at the little computer in his car. I was on the outside of the car, spread-eagled with my hands on the fender. It was raining.

I had already walked a long distance from my house when he pulled up behind me. Because my driver's license had an address in the most exclusive neighborhood in the city and because I was wearing a three-piece Brooks Brothers suit on the license photograph, he didn't believe that the license was really mine. I guess he thought that I was some serial killer who had just murdered Edward Vincent Prescott III, stolen his identification and underwear, and was now fleeing the scene of the crime. He finally got the dispatcher to call my house, and Conchita told them what I was wearing when I had left the house earlier. This seemed to satisfy the officer, who then got out of his car and walked up to me.

"What the hell is a guy who lives in a million-dollar house doing walking around in the rain carrying his underwear in a bag? What did you do, run away from home?" he smirked.

I was going to tell him the story of Big Billy Barnes and the BillyMart undercover assignment, but I knew that he wouldn't believe it. "Uh, well..." I stammered.

"Never mind, I don't wanna know. There ain't no vagrancy laws anymore, so you can walk wherever the hell you want to walk," he said as he got back into his car. He drove past me and splashed mud all over my Reeboks.

I looked around. I was on a street that had seen better days. Once a main thoroughfare on this part of town, it was now well on its way to the state that social demographers liked to call "urban decay." In the distance, I saw what I was looking for; a big metal sign perched above an old Quonset hut. It read: "EAST SIDE AUTORAMA" then underneath, "WE TOTE THE NOTE." I headed in that direction.

The rain had subsided by the time I reached the car lot, and I began to look at the row of cars that were parked facing the street. I needed a car that would allow me to drive amongst the common people without attracting attention to myself. Vehicular camouflage, I guess you could call it. The little dealership had quite a variety. The first car in the row was a Cadillac coupe that was about four years old; too new for my needs. Next in line was a Plymouth Roadrunner, bright blue and about thirty years old: a possibility. A Toyota Corolla was next: too frugal and foreign. This was followed by a Chevrolet pickup truck that had its exhaust pipes running straight up alongside the cab like a Mack truck: a definite possibility. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw the car. It was perfect. I walked over to it and gazed at it longingly. As I was doing so, I heard a voice behind me.

"Can I hep ya, sir?"

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I turned to see an older man in a brown polyester leisure suit. I pointed at the car and said, "Tell me about this one."

The guy got pretty excited and said, "Well, sir, that's a 1971 Pontiac Bonneville; the top of the line Pontiac. It's got a four hundred four-barrel dual exhaust motor that's only got five thousand miles since it was rebuilt. Got the papers to prove that, too. It's got new rubber and fairly new paint. It's also got a brand new eight-track tape player, and I'll throw in a whole box'a tapes fer the thing to boot. Just repo'd the car yesterday..."

"Did you say it had an eight-track?"

"Brand new."

"How could it be brand new? They haven't made those since the 70's."

"Well, we kinda pulled it out of a wrecked Catalina we found in the junk yard. Only had fifteen hundred miles on it, so the tape deck was new."

I couldn't argue with that logic.

"Don't let the old jokes about Pontiac throw ya; this is a fine, fine car," the old guy said.

"What jokes?"

"You know, like what Pontiac stands for? Poor Old Negro; Thinks It's A Cadillac." He guffawed loudly. I was glad none of my ACLU friends were around to hear, but I was also aware that I had better get used to this sort of thing.

"Can I take it for a spin?" I asked.

Scrawled across the car's windshield in white shoe polish was "RUNS GOOD - \$1500." I sat in the driver's seat while the salesman went to get the key.

It was wonderful. There was more legroom in there than in my den. In fact, sitting behind the wheel on that big bench seat was like driving my sofa. I could lie completely across it without even bending my knees. The back seat looked even bigger.

The old guy came back with the keys and I started the engine. It fired up immediately. The roar of the big Detroit powerplant was almost sexual: a far cry from the repressed pattering of my BMW. The salesman was right; there was an archaic eight-track tape player bolted under the dash. It was connected to two Radio Shack speakers that were lying loose on the blue-carpeted rear deck. In the rear window was a decal that read, "PRAISE JESUS."

"I'll take it."

I thought the old guy was going to jump out of his white shoes as we walked back to his office. He sat me in a chair in front of a desk. Behind the desk was a seedy-looking man with a bad perm job and rose-colored sunglasses. The old guy introduced him. "This here is Gene Taylor, our finance manager."

He didn't look like any finance manager I had ever seen; he looked more like an ex-convict. The "Born to Lose" tattoo on his forearm didn't help his image much, either. After taking a deep drag on his cigarette, Gene asked, "You gonna pay somethin' down?"

Before I began this mission, my original intention had been to rough it, just like Jane Goodall would have done. No conveniences or comforts from home; I was going to survive on my wits. I was going to make my own money and spend that money like the underprivileged would do. Under no circumstances would I resort to the financial safety net that I had left behind. But as I sat in that metal folding chair, feeling my cold wet underwear cling to my genitals, I reconsidered.

“Yes,” I replied, “All of it.”

“Cash deal, huh?”

“That’s right.”

Gene punched some figures into his calculator. “With title, tax, and license that’ll be seventeen hundred and sixty-two dollars and thirty-seven cents. You got that, hoss?” he asked as he took another drag on his cigarette.

“Can I use your phone?” I asked.

“Local call only.”

“That’s fine.”

Gene turned his phone around and set it in front of me, as if he were daring me to try his patience. The old guy looked at us intently, like a spectator watching a gunfight in an old western movie. I picked up the receiver and called Percy Halsbrook, my banker.

“Halsbrook,” he answered.

“Perc, this is Edward Prescott. I need you to do a little favor for me.”

“Sure thing. What do you need, Edward?”

“I need you to transfer some money from my account...”

“Which one?”

“Oh, any one.”

“Okay; how much and to where?”

“Seventeen hundred and sixty-two dollars and thirty-seven cents to...” I looked at Gene. “Your bank?”

He hesitated; he must have thought I was pulling a scam on him. The old guy must have seen his sale about to go down the tube and spoke up.

“First American, right down the road here. The account’s listed under Autorama Enterprises.” Gene looked at him angrily.

I relayed the information to Percy. I could hear him punching the keys on his computer terminal. After a few seconds, he said, “Done. What are you doing, Edward, buying Conchita a car or something?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “But I’ll tell you later. Thanks, Perc.”

Gene was still unconvinced. “If you think I’m gonna let you drive a car off the lot with just that, you’re crazy, Jack.”

“Then call your bank and check your account,” I stated.

“I will. You wait outside. And leave the keys with me.”

Gene had definitely never read *In Search of Excellence*, I thought as I leaned against the big Pontiac. Within a few minutes, the old guy came out carrying a

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cardboard box and some papers. He said, "Just sign the back of this title here so I can get it put in your name."

I did so, and the guy gave me a temporary title, registration, and a sales receipt. He also gave me the cardboard box, full of eight-track tapes, just as he had promised.

"You sure pissed Gene off," he said through some bad-fitting dentures. Then he laughed and slapped his knee. "Made my day." He shook my hand and looked at me as if I was some kind of knight in shining armor, then handed me the keys. "You have a good'n."

"You, too, buddy."

I started the car, put in a Barry White tape, and cruised off the lot.

3

I had only driven about a mile when I saw Marshall Harding. He stopped next to me at a red light right next to the adult bookstore. I had really been enjoying the ride until I saw his Lexus pull next to me. I glanced over at him, but luckily he was not looking at me. I turned my face away from him. Harding had a big mouth; I would have been ruined if he had seen me behind the wheel of that behemoth. He would not have understood about the BillyMart assignment. In fact, none of my friends would have understood what I was doing or why I was doing it; they would have told Mr. Dickey to shove his undercover assignment.

But I wasn't like that. They would not understand that I had accepted a challenge, possibly the most difficult challenge of my life. It wasn't merely a power play between Dickey and myself. No, it was more than that, much more. It was a struggle against myself. Just as some men joined the paratroops, climbed treacherous mountains, or explored the uncharted wilderness, I was taking on the BillyMart undercover assignment. It would be my *Odyssey*, my rite of passage.

I hesitated at the green light long enough for Harding to drive away. I realized at that moment I was at risk to come into contact with my peers in my guise as a commoner. When I first began planning this operation, I had given serious thought to conducting the study in another town. This would have minimized the chance of accidentally encountering anyone who knew me. I decided, however, not to leave. Safety was my primary reason for not doing this. If things got bad, I was only a short distance away from my own world. Even Jane Goodall kept a lifeline established. Besides, the chances of actually running into anyone who knew me would be negligible; after all, this was a big city. But if I did happen to be seen, the ridicule I would receive would be unbearable. I would have to be careful.

I thought about this world as I motored down the street. Just who and where were the people that I was to study? It was imperative that I determine the proper sociological target population before I began my study. Classical logic mandated that if the first step in a process was done incorrectly, all the following steps would likewise be wrong. This was the fundamental flaw in my original BillyMart hypothesis; I had misidentified the target group, and everything subsequent had been pure folly.

I had done much thinking about Mr. Dickey's derogatory comment concerning "the white trash," as he called this particular group. At one time, I thought that I had understood what he meant. The first thing that came to my mind when I began the original groundwork for the BillyMart ad campaign was that the stores' prime customer group was a rural-based populace, almost completely isolated from the civilized world. Uneducated and poverty-stricken hillbillies, or hicks as we called them. But this was not the real target group. The country-dwellers were not the

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prime customers of a BillyMart store; my demographic studies soon revealed that fact. BillyMart stores were all located in major metropolitan areas. The data had also shown that the majority of customers lived within a ten-mile radius of the store and were of moderate income. These facts excluded the hillbilly hypothesis, which was then replaced with the hypothetical target group that I used to develop the failed ad campaign. On paper, the typical BillyMart customer appeared to be an average low-middle-income suburbanite. Other studies had shown that this group was very interested in upward mobility, so I geared my ad campaign to that desire. I attempted to make BillyMart into a YuppieMart, and the attempt had failed miserably.

Somewhere between the computer-generated facade of the Yuppie target group and the myth of the indigent hillbilly target group were the true BillyMart customers: the missing links of wholesale consumerism. So just who were these people? There was only one way to find out. It was time for a field observation.

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It was a weekday, but the parking lot of the BillyMart was practically full. I cruised up and down every lane, noting the vehicles. Big Billy had been right; there were no Volvos to be seen. I parked the car and walked to the front of the immense building. The electric doors opened with a hiss.

I was dumbfounded; the place was cavernous. The store was actually a functioning warehouse and had originally been built as such. Industrial steel shelving soared thirty feet from the concrete floor. Shoppers looked like tiny dolls as they strolled among the seemingly endless aisles; there must have been a hundred corridors running from two larger main aisles. Fifty cash registers stretched across the front lobby and each one had at least twenty shoppers in its line. Behind the registers was a huge pile of empty cardboard boxes that customers were loading with their purchases. No wonder Barnes was a billionaire.

Barnes had been right; I had never been inside one of his stores. I had sent some of my people to one in order to take photographs and such, but I had never thought it necessary for me to actually *go* to one of the places. In fact, I don't think I would have been caught dead in one under any circumstances. But as I stood there, soaking in the capitalistic glory before me, I wished that I had taken the time to come here before now; the place was magnificent. I snapped out of my trance and retrieved a shopping cart from a row of about fifty. There were ten of these rows altogether.

I went down a non-food corridor first. The shelving was divided into sections, each containing a specific item. There was electronic gear, hardware, barbecue pits, tires, furniture, lawn mowers: everything imaginable, and all at cut-rate wholesale prices. You see it, you like it, you load it onto a cart, and you buy it. No customer service, no flashy ad displays, no subliminal p.a. system. It was a twentieth-century

version of the public market, and Big Billy was merely hocking his wares on a grand scale. It was pure American free enterprise at its best, truly primitive and wonderful.

Setting aside my fascination, I began to focus on the reason I had come to BillyMart to begin with: to observe specimens of the target group. I walked back and forth among the throngs of people, looking for a typical example of common folk, but I was unable to focus on any one individual. Contrary to what I had anticipated, there was a staggering variety of people in the place. None of them seemed to fit the stereotype I had created in my mind.

My thoughts went back to Big Billy's comments in the board meeting. He had said that his typical customer was someone who went to BillyMart to save money on the bare necessities for his family. That was the key word: Family. I needed to observe a family. I stood in the hand tool section for a while and thought about the best way to go about this.

Families meant children. Children tend to eat. "What did they eat?" I reasoned. Then it came to me: cereal. The main staple of a kid's diet is breakfast cereal. I wheeled my cart to the grocery section.

Groceries were sold in a unique way at BillyMart. Quantity buying was the hallmark of the BillyMart sales philosophy, and groceries were no exception. All foodstuffs were sold in restaurant sizes or in multiple-unit packages, as were all of the household items such as laundry detergent and the like. The section was Bedlam.

I was looking intently for the breakfast cereal area when I accidentally ran my cart into a woman who was pushing one cart and pulling another, each one completely full of eight-packs of toilet paper. I started to apologize to her, but was startled by the blaring of a horn behind me. I turned just in time to see I was about to be run over by a forklift carrying a huge pallet of Tang. The driver gave me another blast on the horn as I jumped headfirst out of his way like Bond dodging a carload of S.P.E.C.T.R.E. henchmen. The machine sped past, scattering shoppers before it. As I picked myself up off the floor, I noticed that the shoppers all took the incident in stride. I guessed that the risk of sudden, gruesome death under the wheels of such a machine was one of the hazards one must face in order to enjoy the benefits of wholesale pricing. I grabbed my cart and followed the forklift to the breakfast food aisle.

Again, I was amazed. Breakfast cereals were being sold in twenty-pound plastic bags. I mentally calculated that there was over a ton of Captain Crunch sitting right in front of me, and there were at least a dozen other varieties in that same amount along the aisle. I was standing there with my mouth open when a frenzied shopper pushed me aside rather roughly.

"Excuse me," she growled as she heaved a bag of Frosted Flakes over her shoulder.

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I realized that I had better get out of the way, so I parked my cart at the far end of the aisle. It was time to stake out the area. I picked up a ten-pack of strawberry Pop Tarts and pretended to read the package so no one would notice me. My wait was not long. Within minutes, a prospective family came around the corner.

The wife was pushing the cart. She was a bleached blonde and weighed about two hundred pounds. She was wearing some polyester slacks that zipped on the side and a rhinestone-studded sweatshirt. Her husband was about half her size. He had on jeans and an oil-stained NASCAR T-shirt. His face was unshaven and his hair unkempt. The baseball cap on his head read: "SEX IS A MISDEMEANOR; THE MORE I MISS IT, DE MEANER I GET." Judging from their five offspring that were surrounding them, this was probably the man's true credo. Four of the kids immediately ran to the Lucky Charms bags. The mother lifted one of the bags and manhandled it into the cart, simultaneously slapping the hand of one of the kids as he tried to touch it. This sent the kid howling down the aisle as if he were on fire. Another kid chased after him, and a third kid walked up to me and stared at my Pop Tarts as if she hadn't eaten in months. This really was beginning to make me uncomfortable, but I was rescued by mamma, who grabbed the girl and swatted her on the behind.

"Crystal, you leave that man alone; you got Pop Tarts at the house," the woman snapped as she led the kid away. I was thinking that corporal punishment was a bit extreme for the situation until a fourth kid outflanked me and pointed a very realistic cap pistol at my face. He pulled the trigger twice and giggled when I flinched at the noise.

His giggling ended when mamma yelled at the top of her lungs, "Jason, you do that again and I'm gonna call the police and they're gonna come and take you to jail!" This seemed to strike a nerve with the kid, who added himself to the growing list of children now squalling in the vicinity.

The father was strangely silent throughout the fiasco. He must have learned to tune them out completely. "An enviable talent," I thought, as I watched the toddler who was riding in the basket throw his bottle on the floor at mamma's feet. She wiped off the nipple and gave it back to the kid. By the time the family finally moved out of the aisle, I was practically a nervous wreck.

I made a mental note to call my doctor to schedule a vasectomy as soon as this assignment was over.

I followed the family to the refrigerated food section. They loaded the basket at least a foot past the top with every kind of processed food imaginable. I could almost feel my cholesterol level elevate as the mother placed a twelve-pack of frozen pizzas on top of the pile. A ten-pound bag of pre-cooked breaded chicken nuggets was next, followed by a pack of bologna that was the size of a large thermos bottle. The husband wandered from the group and was gazing intently at a cold-box full of frozen ribeyes. Mamma gave him a "don't even think about it" look and he rejoined the herd. I was beginning to feel sorry for the poor guy.

They had evidently saved the cold goods for last, because they went to the registers to check out as soon as mamma threw the last of six whole fryer chickens into the basket. I grabbed a forty-count box of cheese crackers and got in line behind them. The line moved surprisingly fast; Big Billy had the foresight to install a sophisticated computerized cash register and inventory control system at the checkout stands. But then again, he wasn't the Wholesale King of the Southwest for nothing. Mamma paid for her goods in cash. They had spent several hundred obviously very hard-earned dollars, but they would probably not have to shop for food for at least six months. I bought my crackers and walked past them as they enlisted the help of the kids to put the groceries in boxes. I went outside and munched on a cracker as I waited for them to emerge from the warehouse. I also jotted down a few notes about my observations.

The family seemed to represent the missing link that I was looking for: that elusive socioeconomic group that had slipped through the cracks of my earlier demographic research. These people lived in the netherworld between mainstream suburban America and ignorant, backwoods isolation. They appeared to possess more of the qualities of the latter group, yet lived among the more sophisticated metropolitan dwellers. They weren't complete country bumpkins; they were more like suburban bumpkins.

I started the Bonneville as the four ambulatory kids ran out in front of their parents, who were both pushing carts now. I lowered myself in the seat so they couldn't see me. Mamma yelled something at the kids who had already dashed to the car and were jumping up and down impatiently. Dad let them in the back seat, where they proceeded to have what appeared to be a hockey game brawl while mamma unloaded the boxes into the trunk of their car, a seventies model Plymouth Fury. For a second, I thought mamma was going to chunk the toddler in the trunk as well, but she didn't. Instead, she picked him up in one arm and used the other to push the carts off to one side, where they proceeded to roll downhill across the parking lot and crash into an unoccupied Pinto. Mamma didn't notice this gravitational phenomenon as she sat in the front seat with the toddler standing firmly on her lap.

Dad cranked the Plymouth for about five minutes before its weak starter finally kicked over the engine. He eased the big car out of his space and proceeded to the exit. As I followed behind them, I noticed that the car appeared to have once been a police car; it had one of those searchlights mounted on the frame of the driver's side door like all police cars have. It also had no hubcaps and no gas cap; an old garage rag was stuffed into the filler tube as a substitute. The left exhaust pipe was smoking so much that I dropped behind them several hundred yards so I wouldn't have to breathe the cloud that they were leaving in their wake.

I followed them exactly four miles. It seemed that they fit the distance criteria as well: under ten miles from the store. It looked like I had the perfect test family as I watched them pull into the Seventh Heaven Mobile Home Park. There was

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nothing park-like about this place. It consisted of a gravel road about two hundred yards long that ran between two major boulevards, both of which were well on their way to a terminal state of urban decay. I had passed at least a dozen mobile home parks as I followed them. In all fairness, this one seemed the nicest of them all, with trailers that looked like they had been built in this decade. Some of the residents had even decorated their humble homes with some dignity. Houseplants, shrubbery, and even decorative statuary surrounded some of them. However, my target family did not have their neighbors' flair for decorating.

Their trailer was an old one, probably built about twenty years ago. It was only about fifteen feet wide. It sat on concrete blocks in the middle of a huge plot of bare dirt. I counted five old bicycles lying on the dirt, as well as an assortment of a dozen toys, a Big Wheel, some tennis balls, four dogs, and one tough-looking cat. Dad pulled the car next to the trailer and parked it behind two other cars that appeared to be non-operational. I was unable to identify the first one; it consisted of only a frame, fenders, roof, and trunk. That was it. It sat on the same kind of blocks on which the trailer rested. The other car was covered with a tarp. All I could see of it were the lower halves of two very large rear wheels.

The four kids fell out of the car like a Marine Corps assault squad and headed for the bicycles. The dogs scattered. The cat didn't budge. Mom and dad unloaded the boxes from the trunk and transferred them to the trailer while the kids dispersed throughout the park. The toddler took up a position by the base of the trailer and began playing with a few of the toys that were there. The scene soon stabilized and it appeared that the family had settled into their evening routine. I realized that I would probably arouse suspicion if I lingered in the park much longer. One brush with the law that day had been enough for me, so I started the Bonneville and prepared to leave. More observation was needed, but I could not risk trouble by hanging around any longer. But as I pulled the car adjacent to the family's trailer, something I caught out of the corner of my eye offered a possible solution to my problem. In the window of the trailer directly across from the family's home was a sign that read "FOR RENT."

4

It only took fifteen minutes to rent the trailer. The manager of the park and I sat on his living room couch and made the deal between belches while he drank a beer and watched an *I Dream of Jeannie* rerun. I was expecting something a little more formal. Instead of the deluge of questions that I was expecting, the man only asked me two.

“You got a job?”

At that point, I realized that I could not tell him about my job at L. R. Dickey Marketing Concepts. He would not have believed it anyway, and it could have blown my cover. I had to tell him something.

“No; I’m on unemployment.”

That seemed to satisfy the guy. He must have reasoned that a steady check was a steady check, no matter where it came from. His next question was just as direct.

“You a fugitive?”

“No.” Unless, of course, that cop still thought I had killed myself and stolen my underwear.

“I hate to ask, but I get tired of have’n to replace doors after the SWAT teams rip ‘em off with their crowbars.”

I almost got up and cancelled the whole thing right then and there, but instead drew upon my inner strength and resolve. Besides, Jane Goodall didn’t run away screaming on her first day in the bush.

“Ain’t never been in trouble with the law,” I said. I could not believe that those words, that dialect, had crossed my lips. To the best of my recollection, I had never said the word “ain’t” in my entire adult life. Returning war veterans brought back Delayed Stress Syndrome. Upon my return to the world, it looked as if I was going to bring back Delayed Grammar Syndrome.

The guy gave me the rundown on the rates. Rent was seventy-five dollars a week, all bills paid. I put up two weeks’ rent and he gave me the key. He never took his eyes off the TV set the whole time.

It was getting late in the afternoon when I wheeled the Bonneville next to my new home. The five kids across the street stopped playing in the dirt and stared at me as I stepped on a plastic milk crate to reach the lock on the front door. As I switched on the lights, a few dozen cockroaches sauntered lazily across the floor.

The trailer was long and narrow. There was a living area on the end that faced the road. At the far end was a narrow hall that connected two small bedrooms. In between the hall and the living area was a kitchen with all built-in appliances. With the exception of the vermin, the place was surprisingly clean. I checked to make sure that there was hot water, that the toilet flushed, and that the air conditioner worked. I wanted desperately to take a shower and go to bed but realized that,

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except for some underwear, I had no clothes in which to change. As a matter of fact, I had no towel for the shower. For that matter, I didn't even have a bed. Or furniture. Or anything.

I scared away a few roaches and sat on the kitchen floor. I needed a plan. My first option was to get to a phone, call an exterminator and a furniture company, and go to a department store to buy a new wardrobe and all the necessities of daily living. I would just charge it all on my credit card. The second option was to start from scratch. I would sleep on the floor until I got a job and a paycheck. Then I would buy the things that I needed bit by bit as I could afford them; just like the target family would do. I had, after all, decided early in the assignment to rough it. The two sides of my brain wrestled with the dilemma: comfort and convenience versus scientific purity. I was at a complete loss until a roach ran up my pants leg. I opted for Plan A and spent the night at the Hyatt Regency.

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I woke up early the next morning and made some phone calls, the first of which was to an exterminating company. With my credit card number, the guy agreed to spray the place that morning. Next, I phoned a furniture rental company. I found out that I could rent an entire suite of furniture and have it delivered on the same day; all I had to do was go to the store and pick out what I wanted. Finally, I called the trailer park manager and told him to let the exterminator in to spray. After I finished my phone calls and breakfast, I put on some clean underwear and my other clothes, which I had washed in the hotel laundromat the night before.

My first stop of the day was the furniture store. Renting furniture, I reasoned, would satisfy both of my needs. Scientific purity would be maintained, since I would actually have to pay for the items weekly. I could use the money made in my job, whatever it would be, to make the payments. Renting would also satisfy my need for comfort; I would not have to suffer the indignity of sleeping on the floor.

A very attractive young woman met me at the door of the furniture rental store. Normally, I would throw the old Princeton charm into high gear at about this time, but it was painfully obvious from the moment she walked up to me that I was just another renter; in her own socioeconomic hierarchy, the scum of the earth. She walked me to the living room section first.

"Here are our living room ensembles," she droned, avoiding eye contact with my lowly self.

I hated to ask, but it would be necessary for me to maintain a low profile. I choked back my pride and spoke up.

"Ah, do you have anything that looks...older?"

The girl turned her head so I couldn't see her rolling eyes. "Well, we do have some pre-rented items," she said, adding sadistically, "that are less expensive."

"Let me see them." I wanted to get it over with.

She led me to a back room full of furniture. It smelled of dogs and baby urine. Well-worn furniture sat on either side of a wide aisle. I picked out a couch, coffee table, dining room set, bed, dresser, and nightstand. I strategically chose each item to make sure it did not match any other item. This would add to the realistic look I wanted. The girl turned her head and again rolled her eyes at my plebeian selections. She tagged each item and then asked that I follow her to her office.

She was not like the mobile home park manager. I had to fill out about twenty reference forms that would be used, I assumed, by the police to track me down if I decided to abscond with my used, mismatched, dog-smelling furniture. She made a photocopy of my driver's license and then asked for a credit card for identification purposes. I took out my wallet and hesitated for a second before I decided to do it. It wasn't necessary, but I handed her my American Express Platinum Card.

She had never seen one before. She must have thought that it was a fake, for she excused herself politely and went out into the main office. I watched her at a secretary's desk as she called the American Express verification number. I could not help but grin when I saw her mouth open stupidly when the operator on the other end told her that my credit line was a hundred thousand dollars.

She walked back to her office with a noticeably enhanced sway in her hips. "Can I interest you in an entertainment center?" she asked.

I arranged for delivery that afternoon.

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Next on the agenda was clothing. From the furniture store, I traveled about three blocks to a store that seemed to be the place to buy clothes in this blue-collar neighborhood. Actually, BillyMart was the place to buy clothes, but I vowed that I would never go back to that place; it was too stressful. I parked the Bonneville in the hole-ridden asphalt parking lot and walked up to the doors of Garment City.

It was far more sedate than BillyMart. There were only about twenty people in the store, mainly women with small children. They seemed to be clustered in the children's section, where items of clothing were piled on large box-like tables. Each table apparently held one type of garment in a variety of sizes and colors. They were all one price. As a matter of fact, everything in the section seemed to be one price: three dollars and ninety-nine cents. Shirts, pants, coats, shoes; they were all priced the same. From a marketing standpoint, an interesting approach.

The organization of the men's merchandise was a bit more orderly. Instead of being stacked on tables, the items were hung neatly on racks. Each rack had a placard that proclaimed the price of everything that was hanging there. There were at least two dozen of these racks, holding everything from sport clothing to dress suits. The suits didn't look half bad, either, but I passed this rack by. I decided to go for a more casual look. Using the father of my target family as a model, I began loading my cart with some clothes.

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First were the pants. I chose five pairs of jeans, all factory rejects. As BillyMart's hallmark was quantity buying, Garment City's hallmark appeared to be damaged merchandise. Every placard had some euphemistic expression such as "Factory seconds" or "Minor irregularities." The items looked fine to me.

T-shirts seemed to be another staple garment, so I put an armload of them into the cart. At a dollar ninety-nine, I couldn't help but throw in a couple of extras. Four of the shirts had beer company logos on them. I thought these were a nice touch, but I avoided the imported brands. Two of the shirts had football team colors, and two more had the logos of what were apparently a couple of popular heavy metal rock bands. I liked the skulls on these. The rest of the shirts were plain solid colors.

Footwear was next. This section was serve-yourself, also. Hundreds of shoes, still in boxes, were arranged in racks according to size. I found the rack with my size and selected a few pairs to try on. I looked around for some type of chair, but a very large woman occupied the only one in sight. Judging from the trouble she was having trying to stuff on a pair of petite French pumps, it looked like she was going to be awhile. I sat on the floor in front of the rack and tried on my first selection, which were cowboy boots. They had a tag that said they were "Genuine Cowhide;" I guess there had been a problem at one time with fake cowhide, or maybe with real hide from something other than a cow. Even with their narrow toes, the boots were surprisingly comfortable. I stood up and walked around a bit and determined that they fit well enough to buy. To this day, I don't know if it was the boots or the heavy metal T-shirts, but at that moment I got an almost uncontrollable urge to kick someone in the face. I shook off the feeling and hurriedly removed the boots. They were fourteen dollars.

Next was a pair of high-top sneakers, the kind I had seen kids wearing unlaced. They fit fine, and I promised myself that they would always remain fully laced, no matter what the fashion trend happened to be at the time. The last pair that I tried on was a pair of work boots. They had steel toes and oil-resistant soles, the tag said. I did not yet know what my job was to be, but these blue-collar Florsheims might come in handy.

I threw a bag of white tube socks in the cart and went toward the checkout line. On the way to the line, I saw the *piece de resistance* that would complete my look: a blue and white flower-patterned welder's cap. I tried on the tight-fitting denim cap and could feel my hair sticking straight out from under the cap's edges. It felt good. I wore it home.

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I spent the next couple of days observing the target family through my living room window with a pair of binoculars. Mamma and Papa left the trailer every morning at five o'clock and she returned alone with the car about a half-hour later. I

assumed that she was taking Papa to work. About two hours later, Mamma would then load up all of the kids in the car and take the two oldest to school. She would then return to the trailer, roust the other three kids out into the yard, and plop herself down in front of the TV set with a liter bottle of Pepsi, a pack of Virginia Slims, and a box of Ding Dongs. Other than trips to the restroom and a quick lunch of canned ravioli for the kids, she remained in this position for the entire day. At three o'clock, she would again load up the kids for the ride to pick up the other two from school.

Papa usually returned home at about six, having bummed a ride from some guy in a wrecker. Until the evening of the third day, I did not realize that Papa was a wrecker driver himself. He pulled up in front of the trailer in that wrecker and stayed there for the evening, leaving twice during the night for about an hour each time. Judging from the beeper on his belt, I assumed that this particular evening was Papa's regular night to be on call.

As I perused my surveillance log on the evening of the fourth day, I realized that the data that I was collecting, while useful, was not enough. I needed more data; data that could only be collected in firsthand, personal contact. That meant I had to open up a line of communication with these people.

I was not sure if I could pull this off; fooling a few individuals in a very limited encounter, such as the furniture rental agent and the trailer park manager, had been easy enough. However, keeping up the facade for an extended period of time would be difficult. One slip would bring suspicion upon me and probably end all contact with these people. But as I thought more about it, I realized that this scenario was the worst that could happen if my cover was blown. I would not face the prospect of being torn limb from limb as Jane Goodall would had been had she blown her cover with the apes.

I thought awhile about the mode of attack. Just walking up and introducing myself did not seem the way to go; during my surveillance I saw no such geniality amongst the trailer park dwellers. As a matter of fact, they seemed pretty much inhospitable. I needed a different approach. Somehow, I needed to make the target family come to me first. I at first thought I could throw a barbecue and invite them over, but I quickly dispelled this idea. The last thing I wanted was to have their five little hellions destroying my trailer. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. I decided that my best chance was to work my way into the good graces of the family via Papa. He would be the contact.

Papa had to have a weakness, something that I could use to lure him over to my place. Once he was there, I was sure that I could befriend him. The information I would be able to glean from him would be invaluable; in fact, it could be the foundation for my entire study. But even after watching him for those few days, I could not see anything that seemed to interest him. When he came home from work, he settled in front of the television set with Mamma and drank beer after beer.

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He would just sit there, numbed, as the maelstrom of his family life whirled about him.

As I looked through my binoculars at Papa on that fourth evening, I tried to envision what on earth made this man go on with life. He was obviously not overjoyed with his family; I saw him grimace as the toddler spilled a plastic tumbler of red Kool-Aid on the coffee table where he had propped his feet. He was also not much into keeping up with the latest trappings of suburban life, I reasoned as I scanned the outside of his decrepit trailer house. As I watched him down his fifth beer and belch out loud, I realized that he didn't even care about his own personal appearance or even his health.

Just what *did* this man care about? What kept him from jumping off a bridge? It was then that it came to me. He did care about something. He cared for it so much, he had placed a tarp over it to protect it from the weather; he wouldn't have even done this for his own wife. No kids bothered it. Even the mean-looking cat wouldn't go near it. I turned my binoculars to the unidentified car that was nestled so closely to the trailer.

I could not tell what kind of car it was. All I could see were the bottoms of four very wide tires that protruded from under the tarp. It had a strange shape, one that I could not put with any car that I had ever seen before. I needed to get a closer look at the thing. I waited until the family went to bed, then made my move.

I put on one of my black T-shirts and covered my face with black soot that I made by holding a match under the blade of a kitchen knife; I had seen William Holden do this in a commando movie once. Having sufficiently camouflaged myself, I then turned out all of my lights, grabbed a flashlight, and slipped out the front door very quietly. I only got about two steps before the four dogs across the street began howling at me. I ran back into the house and waited a few minutes to see if the barking had disturbed the park. Nothing happened, so I went to my refrigerator, retrieved a pack of pickle loaf luncheon meat, and went out the front door again. As I crouched behind my Bonneville, I took the meat out of the package and hurled it, grenade-style, across the road. The four mongrels immediately pounced on it and proceeded to chase the poor dog that had gotten to it first. I made a beeline to the car.

I raised the tarp a little and flicked on the flashlight. The first thing that could be seen was a large number "22" painted on the side of the thing. All over the side of the car's dented and damaged blue body were stickers from various oil and tire companies. Inside were just one plastic seat, a stick shift, and a fire extinguisher. A heavy roll bar ran across the roof. Dried mud was caked all over it.

It was a dirt-track racing car.



Luckily for me, the Bonneville had a trailer hitch. I wheeled a flatbed trailer behind me as I drove into the park. On the flatbed was the bait. Very expensive bait, but something that would get Papa out of the house and into my research in no time at all. As I deliberately motored slowly past Papa's trailer, I saw him exert some uncharacteristic energy as he sprang from his couch. He practically stuck his head through the plate-glass window trying to get a closer look at my 1969 Chevelle dirt-tracker, complete with straight pipes, wide tires, and a huge sheet metal wing that was welded on a frame about five feet above the trunk. I personally doubted the aerodynamic merit of this silly-looking wing, but the guy at the welding shop where I bought the car said that it helped keep the rear end pushed down, which in turn would keep the car from "flying off the track." That was fine, but I had no intention of ever driving the rolling coffin to begin with.

I maneuvered the flatbed next to my house and stopped. I could still see Papa staring wide-eyed through the window as I unhitched the trailer from the Bonneville. After propping it up on two cinder blocks, I took an old towel and proceeded to taunt the poor slob by rubbing the car's Cherry Bomb High Luster Super Metallic paint job like I was drying off Anna Nichole Smith after a dip in the hot tub. After a few minutes of this, he couldn't stand it any longer.

I pretended not to see him approach until he said, "Hey, whatcha got there?" The trap was sprung.

"Oh, hey," I said, climbing down from the flatbed. "Well, I gotta old Chevelle."

"You do a little runnin', huh?" he asked.

"Yeah, here and there," I responded. "I had my excuse ready. "But I haven't been able to in awhile: hurt my back at work."

"I heard that. I got a little runner over there, too," he said as he pointed at his car under the tarp. "But I can't drive it because I blew the motor awhile back and ain't got the cash to get a new one. Whatcha got unner the hood?"

"Three-fifty, twin Holleys, and a radical cam." I had no idea what any of those were, but that was what the guy at the welding shop had told me when I asked him the same question.

"Pretty stock, then."

"I like 'em stock," I ventured, looking for signs of doubt on Papa's face. There were none. "Less complicated the better."

"I heard that. If I wanted somethin' sophisticated, I'd race a son-of-a-bitchin' Porsche!" he guffawed.

"I heard that."

"Oh, by the way; I'm Conley Fulmer."

"I'm Edwa...Ed...ah...Eddie. Eddie Prescott," I stammered. I thought the name variation was a nice touch.

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We shook hands and spent the next hour talking about cars and looking over each other's vehicles. He told me all about his racing history. He wasn't exactly Jackie Stewart, but he did have some experience with dirt track stock car racing, a sport that seemed closer to a demolition derby than a Formula One grand prix.

"Can I fire her up?" he asked, nodding his head in the direction of my car.

"Sure," I replied. Since the doors were welded shut, Conley had to climb through the window, a feat that he accomplished with remarkable grace. He pushed the start button and I quickly learned what the term "straight pipes" meant; there were no mufflers on the thing. The pipes ran straight from the engine to the undercarriage of the car. It was the loudest thing I had ever heard in my life; it sounded like a B-17 bomber was warming up for takeoff right in front of me. I looked around and saw the angry faces of all of my neighbors as they stared out of their trailer windows, contemplating a lynching. I could see Conley talking to me over the din of the engine as if I could really hear him. He was pointing at the hood and appeared to be trying to relay some technical information to me. Not wanting to arouse his suspicions, I did not cover my ears. Instead, I just nodded and motioned for him to cut the motor. My ears were still ringing as Conley climbed out of the car.

"Whoa; that's a bad mother, Eddie," he said. "Wish I had it in mine."

This gave me an idea.

"You know what, Conley?" I began. "I can't race for a long time because of my back. And you can't race because you don't have a motor for your car."

"Yeah..."

"So why don't we pool what we have and race as a team?"

"You mean I can put that motor in my car?"

"Better than that; you can just drive my car."

Conley thought for a minute, but I knew that he liked my car better than his. "That sounds good to me."

This was a stroke of brilliance. It would be a perfect way for me to have close, frequent contact with Conley and his family without arousing suspicion. It would also allow me to mingle in what I pictured as an almost perfect target group social activity: stock car racing.

Jane Goodall would have been proud of me.

5

Conley invited me over to his house for dinner and I accepted. His four dogs met us as we crossed the road and immediately began sniffing me and wagging their tails. I guess they remembered me as the pickle loaf intruder and were just showing their gratitude. Conley yelled some obscenities at them when they began to jump on me, and the foursome scampered toward the back of the trailer.

“Dumbass dogs,” he yelled. “Worthless as tits on a boar hog.”

I filed away Conley’s colloquial expression. He fired these off usually faster than I could interpret them. I was beginning to believe that most of his lexicon was made up of expressions such as this one, and I found them to be very interesting. I planned on keeping a list of them; they might come in handy.

I followed Conley into his trailer. The smell of food cooking met my nose as I walked inside. After nearly a week of eating frozen dinners, this home-cooked meal was going to be a treat, I thought to myself. This feeling ended when I turned to look at the dining table. Sitting at the table were the Fulmer kids: the Five Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They sat and stared at me dumbly, either out of curiosity or because each was silently contemplating the devilish thing that he or she was going to do to me over the course of the evening.

“Honey; this here is Eddie Presley,” Conley said to his wife.

“Prescott,” I interrupted.

“Oh, hell. That’s right; Prescott. I invited him over for supper if that’s okay,” Conley stated as he turned his back on both of us and sat at the table.

From the irritated look on Mamma’s face, it wasn’t okay. I felt myself begin to turn red at the embarrassing situation. Mamma was holding a large pot of some sort of steaming victual, and I could see by the look in her eyes that she was seriously thinking of dumping it on Conley’s head.

I took off my hat and said to her, “If it’s no bother, of course.” Taking off my hat seemed to impress her considerably. The look of hostility on her face disappeared and was replaced with a tobacco-stained smile that made me feel much more comfortable.

“Well, that’s okay, Eddie. I’ve got plenty to go round,” she said as she directed me to the seat at the head of the table. “You sit here.”

To my left was the kid who shot me with his cap gun at the BillyMart. He stared at me as if he were trying to remember just where he had seen my face before. Next to him was the girl who had eyeballed my Pop Tarts. She didn’t recognize me, either, but still managed to smile at me flirtatiously. Next to her was one of a pair of twin boys. The other sat directly across from him. Each was picking his nose to the amusement of the other, and the mutual gross-out soon turned into a contest to see which one could stick his finger farther up his nostril.

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One kid had his index finger buried to the second knuckle when Mamma rapped him on the back of the head with a wooden spoon. Both of the boys just giggled. At the opposite end from me was Mamma's chair, and next to this was the toddler in her high chair. She grinned and bubbled some gooey food out of her mouth in some sort of infant salutation.

The table was already set, and each family member waited impatiently for Mamma to put the food into serving bowls. I could tell by the puzzled look on everyone's face that this was not the usual way of eating dinner at the Fulmer household.

Mamma finally put the food on the table and brought Conley and me each a beer. I hadn't asked for a beer but decided to go ahead and drink it. We all passed our plates around and Mamma filled each with helpings of fish sticks, macaroni and cheese, canned green beans, and a piece of Wonder bread. The kids went to the refrigerator and filled their plastic Tupperware tumblers with red Kool-Aid. The toddler had a bottle filled with the same substance.

"Well, since he's not gonna, I'll introduce the family," Mamma said, nodding in Conley's direction. "Next to you is Jason; our oldest. He's eight. Then there's Crystal; she's six. And these are our twins, Ricky and Randy; they're five."

Ricky opened his mouth wide to show me a semi-chewed fish stick.

"You do that again, boy, and I'm gonna tear you a new one," Conley said as he pointed a fish stick menacingly in the boy's direction. Both of the twins giggled some more.

"And this here is Alexis," she said as she handed the toddler a spoon. The kid promptly took the utensil and slapped it down into the middle of her macaroni and cheese, splattering the stuff all over everything in a four-foot radius. Now I saw why they put me at the far end of the table.

"And I'm Barbara, but my friends call me Barbie," she said as she wiped the cheese sauce from the table without batting an eye. "You live across the road, right?"

"Yes, I moved in about a week ago," I said.

"Well, I'm glad them other folks moved outta there," Barbie began to say.

"You ain't lying," Conley continued, "They was nothing but trouble. The police was always out here looking for them. They finally kicked their door in and hauled 'em off one night. I don't know what in the hell they's into."

"Must've been something else, though," Barbie added. "Looked like the FBI who picked 'em up."

"Yeah; they's wearing suits," Conley said.

"What do you do, Eddie?" Barbie asked.

"Ah, nothing. I hurt my back and can't work right now."

"You getting Workman's Comp?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

“Well, if you weren’t, I was gonna recommend a lawyer for you that we used once.”

“No, they’re treating me pretty well. I’ll be able to go back to work soon,” I said. I did not want to back myself into any corners. Not working was acceptable for now, but I needed to enter the work force at some point in my research. It would be necessary for me to do this in order to obtain a complete picture of the target group. But for now, being unemployed would suffice.

“What did you do before you got hurt?” Barbie continued. She did not let up; she wanted to know just who her neighbors were.

I had to think quickly. “Ah...I worked for the highway department.”

“I had a cousin who used to work for them,” Barbie chimed in. “What did you do for them?”

“This and that. Mostly I was a flagman...” From the look on Conley and Barbara’s faces, this position was a bit low, even on their social scale.

“...and a heavy equipment operator.” The look on their faces changed to approval.

It didn’t take long for us to finish eating. There is something about fish sticks and macaroni that just makes you want to shovel the stuff into your mouth. It must be the additives. Barbie ordered the kids to take their dishes into the kitchen, whereupon they promptly ignored her and made a mad dash for the living room and the television remote. They proceeded to fight over the device as Conley went to the stove and ate the remainder of the macaroni directly from the pot with a big wooden spoon. Barbie ignored everyone as she took the toddler from the high chair into the bathroom, leaving me at the table alone.

Conley saw me sitting there by myself and said, while wiping some cheese sauce from his chin, “Just leave all that shit and come on in here.” He handed me another Pabst Blue Ribbon and led the way to the combat zone.

“Gimme that damn thing,” he snarled as he grabbed the remote from Jason’s grasp, “and sit down.” Jason obliged, bumping one of the twins unceremoniously from his perch on the couch. Conley sat next to him, and in a strange display of Darwinian theory, the rest of the kids struggled over control of the prime television viewing seats that remained on the couch. After it was over, Jason and the twins held supremacy and Crystal was on the floor. Luckily, I was spared from the natural selection process by being told by Conley to sit in “the good chair,” which was an old recliner that no longer reclined. Barbara and the toddler came in as Conley was flipping through all of the cable channels one by one. She ousted one of the twins who then joined Crystal on the floor in humiliation.

The Fulmers possessed a surprisingly sophisticated entertainment center. The television was a large one and had all the latest features, as did the DVD player and stereo.

“Nice setup,” I observed.

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Conley swelled with pride as he said, “Yeah, we got it about a month ago; costing us twenty-five a week.”

“For how long?”

“Just two years.”

I calculated just how much money this was; it was enough to pay for the system five times over. This was a five-hundred-percent markup from the retail price of the system. Wholesale would make the difference even larger. I was in the wrong business.

Conley finally found the program he was looking for. The kids all squealed their approval as a large, hairy man with red and blue paint on his face was screaming into a microphone just inches from the camera.

“...and Pretty Boy Lloyd says he can take me! Well, I say to him; come on, Pretty Boy! You ain’t gonna take my belt like you took it the last time! You ain’t gonna hit me from behind with a chair again, like a coward. Yeah; a coward! Coward...coward...COWARD! You heard me, Pretty Boy, and if you wanna shut me up, just come on and try it. Any time, any place, anywheres, Pretty Boy. Any time, you pathetic, lowlife, scum of the earth punk...yeah, I’m talkin’ to you, Lloyd...I’m talkin’ to you!” At this, the guy bit the top off the microphone, handed it back to the announcer, and stormed offstage.

“Looks like he’s pissed off tonight,” Conley ventured. “And I don’t blame him. I saw that fight he’s talking about. Ol’ Pretty Boy hit him on the head with a damn chair from ringside. Man, there was blood all over the place.”

I could not believe what I was watching. Three more wrestlers did their bit with the announcer as soon as he obtained another microphone. By the end of the third interview, I could feel my blood pressure rising. I swallowed some beer, hoping it would calm me down.

The first bout was uneventful. According to Conley, the champion’s opponent was a professional ringer who specialized in letting the more famous wrestlers pound him into oblivion for the sake of publicity and crowd-pleasing. He was pinned in the mandatory three-count within minutes, but not before he experienced some techniques such as hammer fisting, rope diving, and power slamming, to name a few. I had never seen those moves in the Olympics...

The second bout was more interesting. It was a tag-team match between two champion teams. The first was a pair of Polynesian-looking, leather-clad behemoths who called themselves Mongolian Beef. The other team consisted of two suntanned Caucasians with long bleached hair who called themselves The Miami Pain Machine. The ring announcer introduced both teams amid cheers and boos from the crowd. Interestingly, instead of giving the weight of each team member, he gave the combined weight of the team. According to the stats, there was a half-ton of maniacal human flesh out there in that ring. The bell sounded without further ado and the bout began. From what I observed, it appeared that one member of each team would battle it out in the ring while the other two members

waited outside of the ring. When one member got tired, he could go to the ropes, tag up with the other member who would then take his place. This seemed fair enough. I watched about five such exchanges as the two teams fought to an apparent standoff with one team winning, then the other, then back again to the first team, and so on. It was getting rather old until both Mongolian Beef team members got into the ring at the same time and proceeded to drop kick one of the surfer guys unmercifully while the other stood helplessly on the outside. I looked at the Fulmers to see their reaction. They did not seem to view this as anything unusual or unfair. I reasoned that this must be some sort of obscure rule that I did not know about. I was, after all, a novice to the sport.

The two Mongols had pretty much beaten the blond senseless before the other one decided to break the rules and jump into the fracas. The referee tried to stop him but was thrown out of the ring headfirst by both members of Mongolian Beef, who apparently wanted to beat up the other surfer, too. This they proceeded to do as the crowd began throwing everything from coins to shoes into the ring. I fully expected a riot to break out as one of the Mongols taunted the audience with a lock of blond hair that the other Mongol had just chewed from the first surfer's head. Jason and the twins were giggling out of control when the cavalry arrived to save the surfers in the nick of time.

From out of nowhere, four other wrestlers entered the ring as the crowd went berserk. All were in their street clothes as if they had merely been spectators. The television announcer identified each of them as they proceeded to trounce the Mongols from one end of the ring to the other, while The Miami Pain Machine lay dazed and agonizing on the ring floor. There was Corporal Punishment, a military commando-looking character complete with a drill instructor's hat. Next was a black wrestler with a shaved head named Bullethead Watson. The third wrestler was a huge man of oriental extraction called The Samurai Express. The fourth guy was called Two-By-Four Townsley whose specialty appeared to be beating others with a large board. The melee ended when both of the Mongols were thrown out of the ring and onto the press table, which shattered into a thousand pieces.

"That was a good'n," Conley observed as he got up and walked to the kitchen. "Want another beer?"

"No, I'm fine," I stammered as I watched in amazement as Bullethead Watson took the microphone from the ring announcer and yelled insults at the Mongols as they dragged themselves to the dressing rooms, pelted all the way with debris from the audience. The scene switched to another match in another city.

Conley hurried back from the refrigerator shouting, "All right!" as the announcer told of the next bout. This was the main event. It was billed as a "Fight to the Death."

"Did he say, 'fight to the death'?" I asked stupidly.

"Yeah; you ain't never seen one of these?"

Yes, I had heard of these, but I thought they had ended with the Bronze Age.

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“No; can’t say that I have.”

The camera panned the auditorium. The ring had been completely surrounded by chain link fencing that ran about twenty feet high on each side and also covered the top.

“What they do is they lock the wrestlers up in the cage so they can’t get out,” Conley explained.

“Then what?” I asked.

“Well, they fight. But nobody ever really gets killed, though,” Conley added disappointedly. “Something always happens.”

Conley was right. They put the two wrestlers, one dressed like an African witch doctor and the other like a cowboy, in the cage and some workers welded the gate shut. Before going in, each handed their huge championship belts to their attendants. It appeared that everyone in the business had a championship belt; even the ringer from the first match had one. I wondered how this was possible. It would be like every team in the NFL calling themselves the champions whether they had even been in the Super Bowl or not. But not wanting to seem ignorant, I kept my mouth shut.

The bout proceeded pretty much as any other bout, the only twist being that no one could be tossed out of the ring this time. The two wrestlers showed some remarkable agility as they climbed and jumped around on the chain link cage, alternately winning and losing the advantage over the other as the crowd cheered. Things changed quickly, however, when the witch doctor produced a handful of white powder that he blew into his opponent’s face.

“Oh, no!” Conley cried. “He mojo’d him!”

“He what?” I asked as the now white-faced opponent lapsed into unconsciousness and fell backward, stiff as a board, to the canvas. The witch doctor then proceeded to dance around the cowboy as the crowd booed loudly and began throwing things into the cage. The cowboy started to convulse violently at the direction of the witch doctor’s hand movements as if he were a puppet on the end of invisible strings. The announcer came on and said in a panic-stricken voice that the cowboy wouldn’t be able to take it much longer. At about that time, more wrestlers and some firemen came into the arena and tried in vain to get into the cage. The witch doctor stood inside and taunted them.

“Get him out!” Barbie squealed, an obvious fan of the cowboy.

Personally, I was displeased with the outside interference. After all, a fight to the death was a fight to the death; this was no time for gross sentimentality. Fair was fair.

The audience’s boos changed to cheers as a huge wrestler dressed like a lumberjack appeared out of nowhere. He produced a chain saw and began cutting through the fencing as if it were butter.

“Foul! Foul!” I yelled at the screen, angry at all the meddling. I looked over to see the Fulmers staring at me with puzzled looks on their faces.

By this time, the lumberjack had cut through the cage. He went in first, followed by the other wrestlers and the firemen. The firemen loaded the still comatose cowboy onto a stretcher and carried him out through the hole in the cage as the others proceeded to pound the witch doctor senseless to the ecstatic cheers of the crowd. The program's end credits began running over this scene, and the program faded out as the witch doctor was still being beaten.

Conley flipped the remote until he found another channel. The announcer said, "Welcome to B.L.O.W.; the Beautiful Ladies of Wrestling!"

I could not handle any more of this. I stood up and said, "Thanks for dinner."

"You leaving already?" Conley whined. He obviously enjoyed the respite from his family that my presence gave him.

"Yeah, I can't sit too long or my back will start hurting."

"Oh, I understand," Conley said as he walked me to the door. I said goodnight to everyone, even the twins, who both stuck their tongues out at me. With the dogs jumping on me the whole time, I walked across the road to my trailer. I went to my bed and promptly fell asleep. I was completely exhausted.

6

I spent most of the next morning entering into my surveillance log the data that I had collected the night before. It had been an interesting evening, to say the least. I recorded the data in succinct notes. Hopefully, these notes would be of some use later on when I began to develop a new strategy for the BillyMart account. But right at that moment, my data was pretty much a hodgepodge of loose ideas and unconnected observations. Looking out of my trailer window at Barbie chasing the twins out of the house with a broom, I came to the realization that this family itself seemed to be a hodgepodge of loose ideas and unconnected observations.

Conley came over at noon and asked me if I wanted to go hunting. It was Saturday and he was off from work. I was off from work permanently, so I decided to go. Hunting would be a good vehicle through which to study their recreational activities. I did not have a gun, but Conley said he would get one for me. He also volunteered to drive us to the location of the hunt. I met him at his trailer after I had locked up my own, and we proceeded to sit in his Plymouth for a few minutes while he attempted to start the thing. It finally turned over and we pulled away. Barking dogs chased us all the way to the main road.

"I'm gonna stop off and pick up a couple of buddies of mine. Then we can head out," Conley stated as he made a right turn off the boulevard.

"That's fine with me."

As we motored down the street, I began to think about this hunting business. I did not know much about the sport, but I knew enough to know it was not hunting season.

"What are we going to hunt?" I asked.

Conley smiled and said, "Just cans."

Cans. I could relate to that. An afternoon of shooting empty beer cans and the like with small caliber firearms. That was harmless. Plinking, I think the gun enthusiasts called it. I was a pretty fair skeet shooter at my country club, so I felt I could plink with the best of them.

Conley continued. "Yeah. We're just gonna go shoot some cans."

"That'll be fun."

"Yeah, some Afri-cans, Mexi-cans, and Puerto Ri-cans!" Conley howled, repeating his play on words a few times to himself.

For a brief moment, I thought that I was in real trouble. I knew Conley wasn't exactly Mother Teresa, but I didn't think that he was a homicidal racist maniac, either.

"Just kidding," Conley said, wiping a tear from his eye as he spoke. "That was my daddy's favorite. No, man; we're gonna shoot some dove out in the country at a little place I know. We'll be back in a few hours."

Doves. I had never considered this cute little bird a game animal before, but then again, there were many things about this culture that I did not understand. We arrived at a dilapidated apartment complex and parked next to a guy who was changing the oil in his car.

“This is where Leon lives,” Conley said as he turned to me. “Now, I wouldn’t piss in his ear if his brain was on fire or nothin’, but Leon’s an okay guy. His car’s broke down again, so I had to come pick him up.” Conley continued talking as we walked into the complex. “I hope that Bobby is over here already; I don’t wanna have to go pick that son of a bitch up, too.”

We finally arrived at Leon’s apartment and Conley knocked on the door. A huge man with an enormous belly answered the door with an Old Milwaukee beer in one hand and a television remote in the other. We exchanged no salutations. Instead, the man just left the door open and walked back inside, yelling behind him, “C’mon in; my man’s about to open up a can a’ whupass on these mothers.”

I assumed that this was Leon, since that was the name imprinted on the back of his western belt. We followed him inside and shut the door behind us. He was already sitting on his sofa, leaning forward intently and watching his big screen television. At the far end of the sofa was another guy who was as equally engrossed in the program. Conley and I stood behind the couch and looked at the television, also. I had expected to see a prizefight or perhaps a football game on that screen. Instead, I saw a poorly-dubbed Chinese kung fu movie.

The scene appeared to be a restaurant in nineteenth-century China. A young man, obviously the hero of the film, had just entered through doors which looked conspicuously like the saloon doors from an old American western movie. In front of the hero stood at least a hundred men, all dressed in waiter’s uniforms and armed with kitchen knives, meat cleavers and other culinary accoutrements.

“Oh, this is *Flying Ninjas of Death*,” Conley observed.

“You seen it?” whined Leon. Then in a more irritated voice he said, “Well, don’t tell me what goddamn happens; it’s almost over.”

“I won’t,” Conley stated. “Got any beer left?”

Leon did not speak, but instead gestured towards the kitchen with his thumb. On the screen, the hero had established himself firmly in the middle of the restaurant and had ripped off his shirt. The waiters gasped in shock at the tattoo of a winged dragon on his chest. This obviously held some important significance, but since I had not seen the beginning of the film, I did not know exactly what. The *maitre d’* was not as impressed with the tattoo and made the first move against the hero. He was felled by a double kung fu chop to both sides of the head. Fake-looking blood poured from his mouth.

Leon and his couch mate both yelled “All right!” at the same time. Leon turned to the other guy and said, “I told you; now watch this.”

By this time, the hero had already trounced at least six more waiters, all of whom lay in a heap on the floor. He was working on number seven with a series of

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vicious kicks to the face, each of which was heavily overdubbed with the sound of a bullwhip.

“Boy, he’s really hittin’ him hard,” the other guy on the couch ventured. Leon grunted in agreement.

Conley tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to follow him to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and took out two beers for us.

“Is the other guy Bobby?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s a dumbass,” Conley whispered while shaking his head. “He thinks that shit’s for real. I hate to tell him that Fung Lo gets his ass killed at the end of the show.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. You see, it was foretold at the beginning. The Shaolin priest told Fung Lo that his destiny was to die at the hands of someone who is ‘one with the herbs,’ or some shit like that.”

“Who would that be?”

“The cook, man; Fung Lo whups all the waiters, but the cook gets him in the end. Skewers him to the wall with a big shish kabab-looking thing.”

“No kidding,” I said before I took a long draw on my beer.

We went back to the living room, where Fung Lo was thrashing yet another waiter. Scattered on the floor all around him were at least forty more bodies. He wasn’t even sweating. Leon was laughing with glee while Bobby was making kung fu hand movements and strange guttural sounds in his throat.

Fung Lo had now moved on to the banquet room, where he was using two pepper grinders to pound another waiter. As I watched, I realized that even though the guy was outnumbered a hundred to one, only one waiter at a time would attack him. Maybe this was an oriental martial arts movie tradition; the Marquis of Queensberry rules for kung fu flicks.

It didn’t take long for Fung Lo to make his way to the kitchen. Here, he met feeble resistance from a couple of dishwashers, but a few well-placed kicks sent these two sprawling. One landed in a wok full of hot grease face first, at which point the producers had overdubbed the magnified sound of hamburgers sizzling on an open grill. It was pretty sickening.

“They’re gonna need a spatula for that mother,” Leon observed. Bobby giggled.

In the walk-in pantry, Fung Lo finally met his nemesis. The evil-looking cook ripped off his own shirt, exposing a tiger tattoo across his chest. Fung Lo nodded cockily; he had his man. The two combatants gave each other staredowns that would have made Muhammad Ali proud before they proceeded to kung fu one another for about thirty minutes. They fought in the pantry, the kitchen, the banquet hall, the dining hall, out in the street, in a wagon out on the street, back in the dining hall and finally, back in the kitchen. There, just as Conley had said, the hero was skewered to a wall with a big shish kabob thing. But before he died, he managed to

painfully remove the shish kabob thing and impale the cook to his own wall. Conley hadn't mentioned that.

After about ten minutes of melodramatic death scene, the movie was over. Leon and Bobby got up and introduced themselves finally, then took turns going to the bathroom. Leon was the first to return.

"Y'all ready to go shoot some cans?" he asked.

"Some Afri-cans?" Conley asked.

Leon followed, "Or some Mexi-cans?"

"Or some Puerto Ri-cans!" Bobby yelled from inside the bathroom. All three laughed at their joke, which seemed to be some sort of traditional rite before a dove hunt. I didn't want to seem too liberal, so I laughed, also.

"Well, let's get the show on the road," Leon grunted. "You need a gun, don't ya?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Let's see here," he said as he opened the door of his coat closet. I could see several old rifles stacked in one corner. "What'dya like to shoot?"

I was only accustomed to one type of firearm. "A twelve-gauge will be fine," I said.

All three of the guys looked at one another before they burst out laughing.

"We ain't huntin' water buffalo, hoss," Leon quipped. "Using a twelve-gauge for this is kinda like crackin' pecans with a sledge hammer."

Conley jumped to my defense. "He ain't ever been dove huntin'; he's a duck man." I had never told Conley anything of the sort. I think that he made this up because he didn't want to be associated with a guy who had never shot and killed the world's universal symbol of peace and love before. Regardless, his comment saved me from further questioning.

"Well, these birds ain't gonna be on the wing," Leon went on to explain. "They's usually just sittin' around. Here, take this one; it oughta do."

He handed me a single-shot .22 caliber rifle that looked to be a hundred years old. As I wondered if the thing would explode in my face if I fired it, I saw Leon hand out the remaining weapons to the others. Conley took an autoloading .22, Leon took a smallbore shotgun, and Bobby somehow got stuck with a grimy old pellet rifle that had a horse etched into its wooden stock. It looked stupid, but he seemed happy with it.

Leon grabbed a box of .22 shells, stuck some shotgun shells in his shirt pocket, and we left the apartment. I felt like Butch Cassidy as we sauntered across the apartment complex parking lot, guns over our shoulders. Conley and the others acted as if this was a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to do. The guy that was changing his oil did not. He conspicuously ran from his car as we approached.

We finally arrived at Conley's car. I got in the back seat with Bobby. Leon took, as he called it, the "shotgun" position in the front passenger seat. Conley

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kicked over the starter for the usual five minutes and the Wild Bunch was off and running.

“Need some beer,” Conley stated as he steered the Plymouth into a convenience store. “Y’all got any money?”

Everyone looked at one another blankly. I saw this as a good opportunity to ingratiate myself with my comrades-in-arms.

“I got it,” I said as I handed Conley a twenty. Everybody smiled at me.

“He’s on Workman’s Comp,” Conley explained. “He’s about to get a big settlement.”

They all nodded their approval. Leon took the bill and went into the store. He reappeared a short time later with two twelve-packs and four sticks of beef jerky. Conley motored out of the parking lot while Leon passed out beers and jerky to everyone. The beef jerky appeared to be some sort of informal ritual that the three had. I wasn’t sure if it was a drinking ritual or a hunting ritual, but I chewed on the leather-tough substance along with everyone else. With a cold beer it wasn’t half bad.

It took three beers and thirty minutes to reach the hunting grounds. I was expecting we would park the car in some secluded spot, hike through the woods a bit, and look for dove along the way. I was wrong. The hunting ground was actually a gravel farm road about a mile from the main highway. It was straight as an arrow, with low barbed-wire fences separating the vast unplanted fields from the road on either side. Farmhouses and a few grazing cows could be seen in the distance. Conley stopped the car.

“Lock and load,” Leon said as he handed me a fistful of shells. He was apparently the group’s unofficial sergeant-at-arms. I quickly figured out how to load my rifle. It was a simple bolt-action weapon like I had seen in a hundred movies. I put in a round. Everyone else did likewise. I put my hand on the door handle and began to open the door.

“Where are you going?” Conley asked. I was confused. I looked out into the field and nodded my head in that direction.

“Aren’t we going in there?” I asked.

“Hell, no!” Leon groaned.

Conley looked embarrassed. He explained, “We’re gonna shoot from in here. Now close the door; we don’t have much time.”

I did what he said. From the way everyone was looking at me, I knew I had to save face. It was time for honesty.

“Look, I don’t know what the hell we’re doing.”

“Jeez, we got us a purist here,” Leon grumbled.

“That’s all right,” Conley interjected. “I told you he was a duck man.”

“Oh, yeah; I forgot,” Leon said.

“Well, it’s like this, Eddie; see them telephone poles?” Conley said as he pointed at the line of poles that ran parallel to the road on both sides.

“Yeah, I see them.”

“See them birds sittin’ all over the wires?”

“Yeah.”

“They’s doves.”

It all made sense to me now. We were going to drive slowly down the road and shoot the birds off the telephone wires. This did not seem very sporting, but I was committed.

“Let’s do it,” I said.

Conley put the car in gear and we inched forward. “We gotta get in and out fast before the farmers get pissed and come out here,” he stated.

“Or the sheriff,” Bobby added.

We approached the first group of doves. They sat innocently on the wire, their gray wing feathers contrasting with the white down on their breasts. They were on the left side of the car, so Conley took the first shot. He hit one and it tumbled to the ground on our side of the fence. Leon let out a war whoop as Conley put the car in park and bolted to the downed animal. He grabbed it by the tail, ran back to the car, yanked open the trunk, and threw the thing inside. He came back and eased the car a little further down the road. Another group of birds were just returning to their perch after being scared away by the sound of Conley’s shot. Bobby took out one of these silently with his pellet rifle. He repeated the ridiculous retrieval procedure and we continued down the road. The next group of birds were resting on the fence in front of a row of wild shrubs.

“This one’s yours,” Leon stated.

I wasn’t ready to shoot yet. “Go ahead and take it,” I offered.

“Can’t,” he said, “My shotgun makes too much noise. I have to shoot last.”

“Oh,” I responded. I hung my rifle barrel out of the window as we approached the birds.

“Get your barrel back in!” Bobby said. “They can recognize a gun. Do it slow.”

This was apparently true. All but one of the birds took to the wing at the sight of my weapon. The one remaining just looked at me.

“It’s a big’n,” Leon observed. “I hope he don’t fall into those bushes when you hit him.”

I moved my weapon slowly out of the window, trying not to alarm the creature. I stared down the sights at him and he stared back, taunting me. At that moment, I was the Great White Hunter, sighting down a killer rhino. It was me against him. The eternal struggle between man and nature was being replayed once again. My palms were sweating as I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle popped loudly and the bird flew away. The bullet passed completely by him and sped into the bushes, where it stopped with a resounding thunk. The thunk did not sound quite right. Another sound emanated from the bushes.

“Moooooo...” A very angry cow bolted into the pasture.

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“You shot a fuckin’ cow!” Leon yelled.

“Oh, shit!” all of us yelled at the same time. A vision of being lynched by irate vigilante farmers filled my mind.

Conley punched the accelerator and the big Plymouth peeled out in a cloud of dust. I pulled my rifle inside and looked out the back window. The cow was standing in the field, looking at us as we sped away. He appeared puzzled but uninjured; the little bullet must have bounced right off of his thick hide.

By the time we reached the highway, my comrades were laughing uncontrollably. I felt pretty stupid. Leon didn’t help my ego much when he began making mooing sounds. His antics only made the others laugh harder. For a minute, I thought Conley might wreck the car because he was laughing so much.

The Plymouth ate up the highway and we neared town. It was getting dark by now and Conley wheeled the car off the freeway and into a roadside park. There the three teased me some more while we put the guns next to the dead birds in the trunk. I did not know what was to be done with the birds, nor did I really care at that point.

“Looks like you could use a drink,” Leon said to me as he slapped me on the back.

“You got that right,” I agreed. A brandy would have really hit the spot.

“Let’s go get a brew,” Leon said to the group. “Anybody gotta check in with the old lady?” he challenged.

I knew Conley did, but he did not admit it. “Naw; let’s go,” he said. I could tell by the look on his face that he was apprehensive. He knew that he would have hell to pay if he stayed out any longer than he was allowed. I could not help but admire his courage; I certainly would not have risked a confrontation with Barbie. She outweighed both of us by fifty pounds.

Conley steered the big Plymouth automatically through the city streets toward some unseen, mysterious place. I did not ask about this place, but I knew it was going to be something I would never forget. As salmon instinctively know the way to the sacred mating ground, the Wild Bunch was being drawn to their own consecrated place.

Ironically, the bar was located on the street on which my journey had begun days before. I realized this as we drove past the East Side Autorama. I was not surprised at this development. The dilapidated area seemed to be a perfect setting for a drinking establishment these three miscreants would frequent. Anyone who would shoot hapless game birds from a car window, out of season at that, was not likely to bend his elbow at a place that had valet parking.

Conley drove slowly past the bar. It sat at the end of an ancient strip mall about ten yards from the road. The exterior of the place was brick, with redwood boards hammered over the windows that were once there. A poorly illuminated marquee announced:

DRINK TIL YOU DROP
BEER BUST
25 CENT DRAFT
ALL NIGHT

“Man, it’s a full house,” Leon observed. Cars filled the pothole-ridden lot.

“We’re gonna have to park over here,” Conley stated as he wheeled toward the supermarket across the street. The store was closed, but there were at least a dozen cars parked there, apparent spillover from the bar’s overcrowded lot. The tiny tavern did not look as if it could hold all of these people. We clambered out of the car and made a beeline for the bar. Other than the marquee, I could see no signs on the place.

“What’s the name of this place?” I asked. I would need it for my notes.

“Ah, I don’t know,” Conley said. Then to Leon, who was leading us across the street, he asked, “Hey Leon, what’s the name of this place, anyway?”

“Hell; I don’t know. I guess it don’t have a name,” he responded. “But we’ve been comin’ here for about a couple of years now.”

“It used to be a fag bar,” Bobby said flatly.

Leon turned quickly and held out his hands for us to stop. A sick expression was on his face as he groaned loudly, “No! Don’t tell me that.”

“Just shittin’ ya, man,” Bobby smirked.

“Oh, man! Don’t jack with me like that,” Leon said in relief.

I could both hear and feel the thundering music through the walls as we neared the entrance. Mounted on the door was a sign that said:

NO BIKES ON THE PROPERTY
NO BIKER REGALIA (COLORS, LETHER, ETC.)

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“Had some trouble with bikers once,” Leon said as he opened the door. Standing just inside the door was a huge man in black leather chaps and a Harley-Davidson T-shirt. So much for the dress code. He was talking with a policeman who was apparently working off-duty security. I think the policeman was drunk. This looked like a rough establishment; I made a mental note to check my wallet later to make sure my health insurance emergency card was there.

Through the thick smoke I could make out several pool tables to my right. A group of rough-looking characters stood at each one. To my left was the bar. Working behind this were a couple of middle-aged women who were identical twins; they were even dressed the same. On the other side of the bar was a small room with a stage on one end. In front of the stage was a small dance floor that must have had fifty dancers crammed on it. Surrounding the dance floor was a ring of tables. There were people everywhere.

Leon was in his element. He went up to the bar and one of the twins kissed him on the mouth. He obtained four beers, still in the cans, and brought them back to us. So much for my brandy.

“Let’s get a table,” Leon yelled at the top of his lungs. I could still barely hear him. We followed him to the back room. The band onstage was posturing the usual rock and roll poses while they pounded out music that neared the pain threshold. The music itself appeared to be cover versions of popular southern rock songs: a safe enough genre for this crowd. A rendition of “I Wanna Sex You Up” would probably have gotten them all killed.

All of the tables and chairs were full, and it did not look as if any of the patrons were going to vacate their seats any time soon. However, Leon pulled some strings with the twins and they passed another table and four folding chairs over the bar to us. We set up the table just a few yards away from the bar, and Leon proceeded to make goo-goo eyes at one of the twins as she worked. Some of the standing patrons looked at us jealously and I began to feel very uncomfortable. Luckily, the band soon finished the song and took a break, diverting attention from us. Jukebox music began to blare in place of the band, but it was not nearly as loud.

Leon said in a more normal tone, “Now for some serious drinking.” He motioned for one of the twins at the bar, then whispered something in her ear. She giggled and went to the other end of the bar, returning in a few minutes with a tray that held four shot glasses. Leon set the glasses on the table. Conley, Leon and Bobby looked at me and grinned.

“Now we’re gonna find out if you’re a man or a mouse, Eddie,” Leon said as he slid one of the glasses toward me. “We’ll let you off on the cow thing; the sights are way off on that gun, anyway. But this will tell us what you’re really made of, hoss.” He and the others held up their glasses in front of them and watched what I was going to do next.

I looked at the drink. It consisted of a yellowish liqueur with a big glob of some kind of thick red liqueur floating on the top. The red substance trailed down to the bottom of the glass and was slowly forming a pink-orange layer there.

“What is it?” I asked as I picked up the glass.

“It’s called an Abortion,” Leon chuckled. I almost threw up right then and there.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Let’s see what ya got,” Leon challenged. The three downed their Abortions in quick succession. It was my turn. I summoned all of my inner strength and did likewise, trying not to grimace. It was horrible.

They all patted me on the back. I had evidently passed their initiation rite. Leon went back to the bar and placed another order with one of the twins. She returned with another tray of shot glasses. Leon placed these on the table. They held a greenish-yellow liquid this time and were much more appetizing in appearance than the previous shots.

“Kamikazes,” Leon answered before I could ask. I downed mine first, hoping it would drown the taste of the Abortion. It was pretty tasty; sort of like Gatorade.

“Not bad,” I said, rapping the shot glass on the table smartly. Leon got us another round.

I should have known it was not a good idea to consume a drink named after a suicidal fanatic, but at the time I just wanted to blend in and become one of the common guys. And blend I did. Within a half-hour, I had consumed six more of the things. Sometime after downing number seven, I was on the dance floor with a blonde who was wearing a red leather dress and six-inch spike heels. I thought that she looked pretty fetching. As I danced with her, I found myself trying to figure out a solution to getting away from the guys with her without blowing my cover. Luckily, I regained a measure of sobriety just as the song ended and I escaped back to the table where the others were sitting. “What the hell is in those things?” I slurred.

“Looks like he’s had enough Kamikazes,” Conley said to the others.

Leon agreed. “Yeah; time for some Cuervo.” The others nodded their heads. Leon returned to the bar and came back with four shot glasses of tequila. I did not want anything more to drink, but I had to maintain my cover; scientific purity was at stake. I downed the tequila. It was like swallowing napalm. Leon immediately returned to the bar for more shots. As I watched him, I suddenly realized why the guys liked this place so much; they were getting their drinks for free.

“How come we’re getting free drinks?” I asked.

Conley leaned over and said softly, “Because Leon is screwing one of the twins.”

“That sounds logical,” I said stupidly.

Bobby leaned over and whispered, “Actually, Leon is screwing both of ‘em but he don’t know it!”

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“You mean...”

“Yeah. He can’t tell ‘em apart, so they take turns with the dumbass,” Bobby whispered. We all looked at Leon and laughed. He was still standing at the bar, fawning over one of the twins like an adolescent. He turned around and scowled at us. The band started playing again at this time and Leon’s attention shifted back to the twins.

I recall that the band was playing a ZZ Top song when the girl in the red leather dress came over and knelt beside my chair. She did not say a word. As the guys watched in envy, the woman grabbed my hand and wrote her phone number on my tender forearm with a dried-up ballpoint pen. It hurt like hell but I didn’t care. I was in love.

She began walking toward the exit, purse in hand. I saw my chance about to slip away, so I got up to follow her. This was a mistake. The tequila seemed to have paralyzed my legs. Unable to move, I watched the love of my life slip away. But fate would once again bring us together, I remember thinking. I managed a feeble wave as she walked through the door.

Leon returned with the tequila shots and sat down. He stared jealously at my now red and swelling forearm; the Princeton Flash had struck again. I picked up my shot and led the three guys in a toast to women. Conley didn’t appreciate the toast; as a matter of fact, it seemed to scare him considerably. I had forgotten that he had to go home to Barbie when this was all over. Poor pathetic slob. I patted him on the shoulder.

It was then that I saw her: the woman of my dreams. She was sitting on the other side of the bar. She was a young Hispanic woman with long black hair hanging to her slim waist. Her black satin dress was open in front to an almost obscene degree, revealing an unbelievable pair of breasts. They were truly hypnotic. I don’t know why, but an old song from my youth jumped into my mind and I was unable to shake it.

“In a little cafe just south of the border...” it began. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was singing out loud. “She gave me a look that made my mouth water...” The others looked at me as I got up out of my chair. “Come a little bit closer; you’re my kind of man...” I sang out loud without taking my eyes off her. The guys looked at me, startled. “So big and so strong...” I continued as I walked around to the other side of the bar. “Come a little bit closer; I’m all alone...” I rounded the corner. I stared at her as she sat on the barstool, her beautiful black-stockinged legs beckoning me. I had to have her; I had never had a girl of a minority persuasion before.

“...and the night is so long...” I finished as I finally reached her. She looked up at me with a come-hither look on her face. I said in my best prep school Spanish, “Buenos nachos, muchacha.”

The Princeton Flash was about to do it again.



I woke up on the floor of the county jail about four hours later. The last thing I remembered seeing was the word “LOVE” tattooed on the knuckles of a huge fist as it slammed into my face. What happened after that is foggy. I remember falling to the floor and hearing a massive brawl take place all around me. I also remember that the guy who hit me seemed to be the girl’s boyfriend. I didn’t recall much in the way of details, but there was one thing I knew for sure; I was in big trouble.

My face hurt. As I sat up from the cold linoleum floor, I realized that my entire body hurt, also. In total confusion, I peered around my institutional-green cell. Various drunkards and winos sat on two narrow benches that were attached along the sidewalls. Some were snoring. One was completely wrapped in aluminum foil. Normally, I would have been intrigued with the last guy, but at the time I only wanted to get out of there. Especially before the convicts woke up; I had seen those prison movies before.

I looked out of the bars into the corridor. At the end I could see what looked like a teller’s window of sorts. Assuming that this was where someone in authority may be, I yelled down the hall.

“Hey; anybody down there?” Shouting had not been a good idea. For one, my head nearly exploded. Secondly, the noise woke up the guy covered in aluminum foil. He glared at me angrily as he stood on the bench. He then moved his arms and legs into different positions, as if he was fine-tuning a television antenna. I had to get out of there.

A burly deputy stuck his head above the Plexiglas partition to see what the commotion was. He looked disgusted as he stood up and came around the wall toward me.

“What’ya need?” he growled.

“How do I get out of here, officer?” I pleaded.

“You don’t.”

“What?” This appeared to be a violation of my Fifth Amendment rights.

“Not until nine o’clock this morning when you see the judge.”

“What did I do?”

“Public intoxication.”

I was somewhat relieved; at least I wasn’t going to the Big House.

“What time is it now?” I asked the deputy.

“It’s one o’clock,” he said, looking at his army watch. I was obviously pestering him. He started back to his cubicle.

I looked behind me. Ten more hours with this riffraff. The aluminum foil guy was now laying on the floor with his legs in the air.

“Don’t I get a phone call?” I yelled. The deputy stopped dead in his tracks. I had him and he knew it. He came back and opened the door for me. For a second I

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thought he was going to punch me, but instead he pointed to a greasy telephone at the end of the corridor.

“You got two minutes and no long distance, asshole.”

As I walked to the phone, I noticed that there were two other drunk tanks next to mine. Each was full of more wino types, except for three guys in the tank closest to the phone. I noticed Conley first. He was sitting on the bench staring straight ahead as if he were waiting for the chaplain to bring him his last meal. Leon lay stretched out on the bench next to him, his big belly rising with every snore. Bobby was sleeping across from them, propped up between two winos. He had a black eye.

Conley saw me first; he leapt from his perch and went to the bars. He did not say a word, but in his pathetic eyes I could see desperation. He had to get out; his life was at stake.

I nodded the subtle nod of bar-buddy camaraderie. A faint glimmer of hope crossed his face. I picked up the phone and dialed Monica Fontaine’s number. She was my tax attorney. We had also gone to school together and even dated for a while. Bringing myself to call this woman took courage on my part. But returning to my cell to face an entire night with the human antenna would have taken even more courage. Her phone rang ten times before she answered.

“Hello?” she said sleepily.

“Monica, this is Edward. I hate to bother you at this hour but I really need some help.”

There was a long pause as she tried to clear her mind.

“What’s going on?” she finally asked.

“You’re not going to believe this, but I’m in jail.”

“What did you do?” she exclaimed. From the tone of her voice, I could tell that she was finally waking up.

“Well, I’m...publicly drunk.”

“You don’t drink that much, Edward...”

“I know. I know. It’s a very long story, Monica; I will explain everything, really. Just please come and get me out. Hurry.”

“Don’t worry, Edward; I’ll have to make a few phone calls, then I’ll be right there.”

I glanced at the drunk tank. Conley was still looking at me with his puppy dog eyes. He had evidently stirred Bobby and Leon from their slumber; they were standing at the bars next to him. They made a pitiful sight.

“Oh, yes. Monica, there’s one other thing.”

“What is it?”

“Can you get a few friends of mine out, too?”

“A few? How many? Just what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Please, I’ll explain it all to you later. Believe me, it will make perfect sense. There are three of them. The first is Conley Fulmer.” I saw Conley look at the ceiling and clasp his hands together in prayer.

“Next is Leon...” I looked at Leon.

“Bartlow,” he said.

“Leon Bartlow,” I continued. “And Robert...”

“Hamilton,” Bobby finished.

“Robert Hamilton. I think they’re all in here for the same thing.” They all nodded.

“Okay, Edward. I’ll be there in a while. And don’t say anything to the police, do you hear me?” Monica added sternly.

“I won’t, and thanks.”

Conley asked, “Who was that?” as I hung up the phone.

“My lawyer.” The trio looked at one another; they were impressed. The deputy took me back to my cell. The human aerial was doing a handstand in the back of the cell.

It took Monica about an hour to get there. For such short notice, she looked very professional. I went to the bars when I saw her talking to the deputy. She handed him some papers from her briefcase.

“What the hell are these?” he asked.

“As you can see, officer, they are writs of *habeas corpus* for my clients. Note that they have been duly signed by a state district judge.”

“Writs of *habeas corpus*? For some drunks?” the deputy asked in astonishment. “Who *are* these guys?”

“That’s not the issue, officer; I insist that these men be released at once.”

“Yes ma’am,” he conceded. He continued mumbling some anecdotes about “the good ol’ days” as he came over to let me out. He turned and said to her, “Go wait in the bookout area. I’ll have ‘em out in a few minutes.” Monica disappeared down the corridor. The deputy turned to me. “Okay, buddy, let’s go; F. Lee Bailey’s throwin’ your bond,” he said sarcastically. He took me to the booking area and sat me at a desk in front of a very mean female jailer who proceeded to “book me out” as it is known in prison lingo. My compatriots were brought in one by one and I could hear them being booked out by other jailers. At the end of the ordeal, I was given back my wallet, belt and shoelaces.

Monica was waiting in the lobby for me. The first thing she noticed was my welder’s cap.

“What...?” She began as she pointed at the hat.

“Look, Monica; I only have a minute to explain. They’ll be out any time now. Whatever you do, please don’t tell anyone,” I begged. She backed away as I got too close to her. I had forgotten that I had just spent the last four hours in a drunk tank with a dozen sweaty derelicts. Compared to her Chanel Number 5, I smelled pretty rank.

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“Of course I won’t tell anyone; that’s privileged information, Edward. You know that.”

“Yes, of course. I know that I can trust you,” I said. I then proceeded to give her a quick rundown on the BillyMart undercover assignment.

As I finished telling her about my suburban target group thesis and my surveillance of the Fulmers, she said, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Suddenly, the electric jail door rolled open and Leon, Bobby, and Conley appeared. They were all putting on their belts.

“No, you’re not kidding, are you?” Monica concluded. They came up and shook Monica’s hand; Bobby even wiped his hand on his jeans before sticking it out to her.

“Can you give me a ride home?” Conley begged Monica and me. “There’s still time...”

Leon and Bobby smiled at her, too. Monica looked at me. I only shrugged.

“Okay. I’m parked out front.”

We followed her to her Jaguar. The three stooges piled in the back seat and I got in front. I could see Monica biting her lip as their jean rivets dragged across the glove leather seats.

“How fast’ll this thing go?” Bobby asked as he got situated.

“Ah, I don’t know exactly,” she replied.

“Hell, I bet this thing’ll do a hunnerd and forty,” Bobby said.

Leon disagreed. “Hell, no,” he said. “Gimme a Ford Boss 302 and I’ll pass this thing like it was a fart in a dust storm.”

The three continued to argue about the merits of American muscle cars until we arrived at Leon’s. There we let out both him and Bobby. Conley started to get nervous as we continued toward his home. I looked back at him and he was biting his nails. His eyes widened in terror as we pulled into the trailer park; the lights were still on at his house. As Monica stopped in front, I looked back at him. He put his hand over for a shake.

“Thanks, bud,” Conley said. “And you too, Miss Fontaine. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Eddie.”

“Sure thing, man,” I reassured him. I could see Barbie peering out of the blinds at us. Maybe I wouldn’t see him tomorrow after all. He got out of the car as if he were walking the last mile.

Monica turned to me and asked, “So, ah, Eddie; is that your place over there?”

“That’s it,” I said with a sigh. Listening to the Fulmers wage World War Three was not going to be pleasant. I envisioned Conley getting beaten to a pulp with a rolling pin.

“How does a nice dip in the jacuzzi and a nap in a real bed sound to you?” Monica asked in her sexy let-her-hair-down voice.

I looked at her and smiled. “You have no idea just how good it sounds.”

As she drove the Jaguar out of the park she added, "The invitation is conditional..."

"And what must I do?"

"You have to tell me the story behind that phone number etched into your arm."

"Oh, I can explain that," I said. "By the way, do you own a red leather dress?"

I did not talk to Conley for five days. He had evidently been grounded from seeing me; Barbie must have placed the blame for the weekend jail fiasco on me. This was not very fair, especially since it was Conley and his cohorts who led me down the path of decadence in the first place. Nevertheless, Conley was remanded to going only to work and back. And to make matters worse, Barbie drove him to and from his job; the wrecker no longer brought him home at night. I watched him return each night, his head hung in shame as he walked from the Plymouth to his trailer. Barbie managed a nasty look in my direction every once in awhile. While I waited for Barbie's wrath to subside enough to reopen a line of communication, I watched much television and put my notes in order.

By the sixth day of this nonsense, it became obvious to me that Barbie was the kind of person that could hold a grudge forever. That was fine, but I did not have that kind of time. I needed to get back into the good graces of the Fulmers so I could observe them some more. I could have started all over again with another family, but that would have taken too much time; the sooner I could gather my data, the sooner I could go back home. It was time for drastic measures.

Barbie drove Conley to work that morning as usual. She returned in a few minutes and took her place in front of the television set as she normally did. I waited for the florists to open and then called one. I ordered a dozen roses and had them put this message in the card: "I'm sorry for getting into trouble with Conley the other night. Please accept my apology. I value the friendship of your family and I would like to continue to be your friend. Besides, it was all Leon's idea to go to the bar, anyway." Hey, I felt no loyalty to the guy.

I watched out the window until the deliveryman came with the flowers. Barbie suspiciously questioned him through the screen door until he got mad and just left the flowers on the ground outside. She obviously did not get flowers very often.

She picked up the flowers and went back inside, where I saw her reading the card with a surprised look on her face. She finally came over to the blinds and peered out toward my trailer as she smelled one of the roses. I waved at her and she smiled and waved back. She continued sniffing the roses as she resumed her position on the couch. There was one thing I had learned a long time ago; the quickest way to a woman's heart was through her olfactory system.

Sending the flowers to Barbie was a risk for two reasons. First, Barbie might have thought that I was coming on to her. Second, Conley may have thought that I was coming on to his wife. Knowing these people's propensity for violence, this was also a scary problem. But I had to do it for the sake of time. I waited nervously that afternoon as Barbie left to pick Conley up from work. They returned a short time later. All of the kids were playing in the yard as Conley walked to the door.

Barbie followed and did not give me a nasty look this time; this was a good sign. Conley walked to the refrigerator. He took out a beer and went to the sofa, where he immediately flicked on the television with the remote control. He sat up higher in the couch so he could see over the roses; he had not even noticed them. Barbie stood in the kitchen with her hands on her hips, watching him. After a few moments, she could stand it no more. She yelled something at Conley and pointed at the roses. He gawked at them as if they had just magically materialized on the table in front of him. He took out the card and read it. It was the moment of truth. I could tell by Barbie's body language that she was hoping Conley would get jealous. I was hoping he wouldn't. He turned and looked out of the window toward me with a blank look on his face. After a few seconds, he turned and walked to his door. As he stalked across the street to my trailer, I began to think that sending the flowers had been a big mistake.

He knocked loudly on my door. I hesitated for a second, but knew that I had to open it; there was no back door for me to run out, anyway. I opened the door and Conley stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. I braced myself for a punch. Instead, he held out his hand.

"Thanks for getting me out of the dog house, bud," he beamed. "That was a great move; I never would have thought of it! I was wonderin' why she was being so nice to me when she drove me home, and now I know."

"Well, I had to do something; this was getting pretty old," I said.

"Yeah, she can sure stay pissed off a long time. I'm gonna have to remember that rose shit; it sure seems to work good. How much were them things, anyway?"

"Seventy-five dollars."

Conley's mouth fell open. "Seventy-five bucks? You spent seventy-five bucks on my wife? Are you nuts?"

"I had to; she would have been mad forever if I hadn't."

"Yeah, that's true. But couldn't you have sent her some daisies or somethin' cheap like that?"

"Only roses work."

"Only roses, huh? I'll have to remember that. You're a hell of a buddy, man. I just want you to know that I'm gonna pay you back for them flowers."

"Don't worry about it; I got my workman's comp check today," I said.

"Oh, okay. Well, the old lady wants you to come over for supper tonight if you want to. Man, right now she thinks your shit don't stink," Conley laughed. "She was even talkin' on the way home about trying to fix you up with one of her sisters."

"Ah, wait a minute..."

"What? You ain't dating anybody, are ya? That lawyer lady?"

This was an interesting development. An other-sex relationship could put new insight into my observations.

"What are her sisters like?" I asked Conley.

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“She’s got three of ‘em. One looks pretty good. The other two look like ten miles of muddy road.”

Conley was obviously no great judge of feminine beauty, but for now I would have to trust his opinion. I said, “Okay; if she tries to fix me up with one of them, make sure that it’s the good-looking one.”

“I can do that. Hey, this could be fun; we could double date or somethin’,” Conley said. I tried to look enthused. “Come on over in about a half hour,” Conley continued. “Supper should be ready by then.”

“What are we having?” I asked, hoping it would be fish sticks and macaroni again; the stuff could really grow on you.

“Spaghetti, I think,” he said as he walked toward the door. “Today’s the day she usually makes it.”

I let him out and then went back to my couch. Normally, I would have gone to the store to pick up a good bottle of red wine, but something told me I wouldn’t need to this time.

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I went to the Fulmers’ trailer and one of the twins answered my knock. He saw that it was me, then looked around inside the trailer to see if anyone had noticed I was there. Evidently no one had, because the brat then gave me the finger. I gave it back. He ran into the trailer yelling for his father. I went ahead and stepped inside. Barbie was in the kitchen putting a big jar of spaghetti sauce into the microwave. She smiled when she saw me come in.

“Hi, Eddie; thanks for the flowers.” She had the same look on her face that the car salesman had on his when I bought the Bonneville from him. Eddie Prescott: Knight of the Round Table. Perhaps the roses had been a bit too much.

“You’re welcome,” I responded as I took off my cap and hung it on the hat rack. The twin was now in the living area, tugging on Conley’s leg trying to wrest his attention away from the television set.

“Daddy, look: he did this to me,” he whined as he demonstrated the gesture to his dad.

Conley’s attention broke from the program he was watching just as the kid performed his demonstration.

“You do that to me again, fartblossom, and I’ll break it off and make you eat it!” Conley yelled. “Where did you learn to do that, anyway?” The kid pointed at me.

“Don’t you lie! Eddie’s got better things to do than flip off little kids, son. You go to your room and stay there until I call you.”

“But...” the kid said as he began to cry.

“No buts; you get to your room,” Conley said as he spanked the kid sharply. The kid gave me a dirty look as he ran howling past me. Revenge was indeed sweet.

I obtained a beer from Barbie and took up my roost in the Good Chair. Conley and I relaxed there and watched a *Rat Patrol* rerun while Barbie worked on dinner. Conley waited for a commercial before he mentioned the reason for my dinner invitation.

“You remember when I said the old lady wants to fix you up with one of her sisters?” he whispered so Barbie couldn’t hear.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, I was right; she was thinkin’ of one of the ugly ones.”

I grimaced.

“No, listen; I talked her out of it. See, she watches out for the ugly ones first, like an old mother hen or somethin’,” Conley said as he glanced at the kitchen to make sure Barbie still wasn’t paying attention. “But I talked her into fixin’ you up with Gretchen.”

I envisioned a stocky German peasant woman: a plowhorse with an apron.

“She’s a looker, boy,” Conley continued. “About twenty-five, five-five, blonde hair, and...” Conley looked back into the kitchen, and satisfied that Barbie wasn’t looking, held both hands up in front of his chest with fingers bent in a cup shape. “...big ol’ blue eyes,” he concluded, laughing sophomorically through his stained teeth.

“It’s ready!” Barbie called, putting Conley’s hormones back in check.

I still did not feel comfortable with this setup. Conley’s aesthetic abilities were still in serious doubt. But I put this aside and enjoyed a decent meal of spaghetti, salad, garlic bread, and beer. The twins relished the opportunity to show me some of their skills in noodle sucking, and by the end of the meal, both of their faces were spattered with the backlash of their endeavors. They were disgusting, but not as bad as they had been with the fish sticks.

After everyone was finished, the kids made their usual dash for the couch in the living room. The adults remained at the table, I soon found out, in order to set me up.

“Honey, why don’t you run to the store and get us some bread?” Barbie asked in a sickeningly sweet voice. “I’m all out for tomorrow.”

“Okay, I feel like gettin’ out of the house, anyway,” Conley said. “You want to come with me?” he asked me. I didn’t have to be Lee Strasberg to know a bad acting job when I saw one; Conley never agreed that easily to anything Barbie asked, and I had never heard Barbie call Conley “honey” before. I knew that they were planning something, but I decided to play along with them. Conley and I got up from the table and went outside.

“What’s this all about?” I asked him as we walked across the road to my car.

“We’re gonna let you see Gretchen.”

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“Wait a minute,” I protested, “I don’t feel like meeting her tonight...”

“We’re not gonna meet her; she’s workin’. She works at the 7-11 up the road; we’re just gonna go in and buy some milk.”

“You mean some bread.”

“Yeah, bread, that’s right.” Conley said as we got into my car.

I began to feel very uncomfortable, like I had in junior high school when my friend tried to fix me up with Margot Rothfelder, the head of the debating squad. But for the sake of scientific purity, I went along with the game.

“Which way?” I asked. Conley pointed left. It took about five minutes to reach the store.

“That’s it,” Conley said. I pulled into the lot. “Come on in with me,” he added as he stepped out of the car. “Don’t be a pussy.”

I certainly did not want to be considered such, so I got out. We walked in, Conley leading the way. A tall guy in a hard hat was at the counter buying some beer. Conley elbowed me and pointed at the cashier.

“That’s her.”

Before I could get a look at her, he shoved me toward the refrigerated section at the back of the store. She had not noticed us, probably because the guy in the hard hat was so stoned he was talking the poor girl’s head off. We peered over the top of the cereal and canned goods rack at her.

“See; I told ya,” Conley whispered. “The girl’s built like a brick shithouse. Look at them cachungas.”

I found myself trying to confirm the size of the girl’s chest through the ugly polyester uniform shirt that she was wearing. Coming to the sudden realization that my thoughts were beginning to be much like Conley’s juvenile urges, I shook off my lapse into chauvinism and looked at the rest of the woman. Conley had been right on the mark; she was very nice looking. She had very pretty, delicate facial features that contrasted sharply with Barbie’s rugged face. Her hair was light brown that had been frosted blonde. Unlike her sister, she was slim and also had not chewed her fingernails to the quick. As she smiled at the departing customer, I saw that her teeth were straight and white. I grabbed a loaf of bread and headed for the counter. Conley followed on my heels.

“Conley!” Gretchen said, looking past me. “Where’s Barb?”

I put the bread on the counter and waited for her to finish talking to Conley. I could not tell if Barbie had called ahead; if she had, the girl was doing a great job hiding it.

“Oh, she’s at the house,” Conley said. He then pointed at me and said, “This here is a friende of mine, Eddie Presley.”

“Prescott. Eddie Prescott,” I said to Gretchen.

“I’m sorry, man. I always do that. Well, this is my wife’s sister, Gretchen Thibideaux.”

Gretchen said politely as she finally looked at me, “Nice to meet you.” She had gorgeous blue eyes.

She and Conley made small talk for a while until another customer came into the store. We said goodnight to Gretchen and she reciprocated. As I walked away from the counter, I realized that I had neglected to pay for the bread. As I turned to go back, Gretchen just winked at me and motioned for me to leave.

As Conley and I got back into the car he said, “Man, she winked at ya! You know what that means; she craves your body.”

“No, it doesn’t. She just didn’t want the aggravation of ringing up the bread.”

“No way. It’s a family thing, man, I know; my old lady does the same thing. They all wink at people they like. Barbie winked at me the first time I saw her, too.”

“Really?”

“You wanna go out with her?” Conley asked.

“Sure; I’ll ask her pretty soon.”

“No need, bud. Everything’s been arranged.”

“It has?”

“Yep, all four of us are going out this Saturday if you ain’t got nothin’ else planned.”

Now I knew the full extent of the Fulmers’ conspiracy.

“Well, I normally like to do my own asking...”

“Too late, bud. The old lady has already done asked.”

“You mean that Gretchen already knew about all of this just now?”

“Yep. She was checkin’ you out just as much as you was checkin’ her out,” Conley laughed.

I did not care too much for the meddling and secrecy, but the Fulmers meant no harm. I decided to go along with the plan anyway; I had a feeling that it might be fun.

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Saturday arrived sooner than expected. According to Conley, Gretchen had approved of me after our meeting a few days before. Conley was still convinced that the woman craved my body, but I did not think so. Regardless, scientific research was what I was after, not a cheap thrill. At least, this is what I tried to convince myself that afternoon as I waxed the Bonneville to a high sheen.

I had spent the majority of the day preparing for my big date. I shaved for the first time in several days, got a haircut, and even went out and purchased a new shirt for the occasion. I opted for a rather preppy button-down dress shirt. It was really designed to be worn with a tie but looked fine with the blue jeans that I planned to wear. I had not asked the Fulmers about the proper attire for the evening but I assumed it would not be a black tie affair.

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My assumption had been correct. Conley walked over to my house late that afternoon to see if I was ready to go. I observed his clothing as I let him in the trailer. This was no GQ man. He was wearing a pair of big-bell blue jeans, the kind everyone wore twenty-five years ago. As a matter of fact, they looked to be about that old. On his feet was a pair of what used to be called dingo boots. They too were popular in the 1970's. Topping off this ensemble was a well-worn silk shirt with an orange palm tree motif. It had obviously been a long time since Conley had been in the dating game. He did manage, however, to shave and comb his hair. He appeared much younger when he was clean-shaven, but the bloody nicks all over his face detracted from his looks.

"Well, you look pretty spiffy," he said to me. "Like some kinda damn college boy or somethin'. You ready yet?"

"Just about," I answered as I went into the bathroom and splashed on some cologne that I had purchased earlier that day in the grocery store. It was called "Plainsman" and if I remembered the article in *The Wall Street Journal* correctly, it was selling very well in this part of the country. It smelled terrible.

"I'm ready," I announced as I came back into the room. Conley was sitting on my couch and had already turned on the television set. "What's the game plan?"

"Well, I figured we'd go get Gretchen at her house first; she lives with her folks still."

That seemed like a logical place to start, seeing as this was a double date. However, I did not like the idea of having to meet Gretchen's parents. It would be just like high school. Conley continued, "Then I guess we'll go eat. You like Italian food?"

"Sure."

"Good. We'll go to Figaro's. Barbie likes the place; says it's romantic."

Figaro's Wine Cellar: I had heard about the place; it was where high school kids go to eat bad Italian food and drink alcohol. Other than their singing waiters, the restaurant's claim to fame was a very liberal interpretation of the state's alcoholic beverage code.

"Sounds great," I ventured, trying not to sound sarcastic.

"Then I figured we'd go to a movie or somethin'," Conley added. "That sound okay to you?"

It was not a midnight flight to Paris for a continental breakfast, but it could be fun in its own way. "Let's go," I stated.

"Try not to let the girls order all of the expensive shit on the menu; her family's bad about that," Conley warned as I locked my front door.

"Don't worry about it. Tonight's on me."

"What? You rob a bank or somethin'? Figaro's is expensive, man."

"I got it covered; my settlement check came today," I said.

“Let’s do it!” Conley yelled as he gave me a high five. I started the Bonneville as Conley retrieved Barbie from his trailer. They both got in the back seat, which made me feel rather silly.

“Hi, Eddie. You ready for your big date with my sister?” Barbie asked.

“You bet; she’s a beautiful girl,” I said as I looked at Barbie in the rearview mirror. She was wearing a metallic gold blouse, black spandex slacks, and enough makeup to fill the Grand Canyon.

“You and her ought to get along real good,” she went on to say. “Both of you are quiet and polite.” I watched Conley smirking; I could tell that he was thinking of the incident in the bar when the girl wrote her name on my arm. He was dying to say something, but knew that his life would be over if he brought up the bar incident around Barbie.

Conley proceeded to give me directions to Gretchen’s house. It was not far away from the store in which she worked. The house sat on a street in an older neighborhood. It was a white frame house and like most of the others around, it had about twenty cars in the driveway and front yard, all in various states of disrepair. I parked the car by the curb and began to get out.

“Just honk,” Conley said. I turned around and looked at him.

“Honk? Are you kidding?” I asked.

“Yeah; she’ll come out,” Conley said.

“I will not honk,” I said to Conley. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Oh, go up there and get her,” Barbie said. “Conley’s just sayin’ that ‘cause he ain’t allowed to set foot on the property.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Don’t ask,” he said bitterly.

I didn’t. Instead, I walked up to the front porch. I could not see a doorbell switch, so I knocked softly. After a few seconds, an older man wearing nothing but jeans and carrying a newspaper answered the door.

“Can I help ya?” he asked.

“I’m Eddie Prescott. I’m here for Gretchen.”

“What for?”

“Ah, for a date, I guess.”

“She know about it?”

“I think she does.” I was beginning to worry. Maybe Barbie had not made the arrangements like Conley had said. Maybe I should have called her myself as I wanted to do in the first place...

The man looked back into the house and yelled inside, “Gretchen got a date tonight?”

A female voice from inside shouted back, “Yeah, she’s still getting ready. Let the guy in.”

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“C’mon in,” the man said. “I’m Gretchen’s father, Marlon Thibideaux.” I shook his hand and he glanced at my car. “What you hangin’ around with that son of a bitch for?” he asked as he saw Conley.

“Well, he’s my neighbor.” This seemed to satisfy the guy. He led me to the living room and motioned for me to sit on the couch. He continued on into the kitchen where about ten people were congregated, talking loudly and smoking cigarettes. One by one, each came to the doorway to peer at me as if I was the new exhibit at the zoo. In a manner of speaking, I guess that I was. I silently prayed that Gretchen would hurry up and get dressed. After the novelty wore off, everyone pretty much ignored me. The conversation continued in the kitchen and I relaxed on the couch. I must have been sitting there for about ten minutes when someone came through the front door. I couldn’t tell if it was male or female at first. As the figure approached, I realized that it was a young man of about seventeen. He had long dyed-black hair that fell to the middle of his back. As I looked a little closer, I could see that the long hair was only on one side; the other side of his head was shaved. He wore dark sunglasses and had a cross dangling from one ear and a swastika tattooed on the lobe of the other. He had a black t-shirt with a large capital A with a circle around it: the universal symbol for anarchy. Leather jeans were wrapped tightly around his skinny frame, and he shuffled confidently in a pair of engineer’s boots. He walked past me and said “Hi” before he entered a door on the other side of the living room.

I looked past him into the room before he shut the door behind him. The room looked like it had once been the garage but was now converted into a utility room. Covering the walls was the kind of acoustic tile normally used in commercial ceilings. As the door closed, my curiosity began to grow. This kid appeared to be a family member. He also appeared to be much different than anyone I had encountered so far in this field study.

The average person in the sociological group that I was studying was in essence a living relic of the past. Change was evidently slow to come to these people, even though they were bombarded with it constantly. They shunned most trends and stayed with their tried-and-true ways. This was evidenced in their behavior, their dress, their jobs; everything they did seemed to be a decade or two behind the times. However, here was a kid obviously from the same stock who was exhibiting a higher level of sophistication. Apparently deviating from the mainstream, he seemed to be on the cutting edge of the modern counterculture movement. Although his way of expressing this was crude and unproductive, the kid was on the road to true social and political enlightenment. I got pretty enthused; I had just found the Missing Link.

A few minutes after the kid entered the garage, I heard a loud rumbling coming from the room. As I listened closer, I made out the sound of very loud music being played. The acoustic tile was absorbing much of it, but it was apparent that there was a live band in that room. I had to see them firsthand; it was a golden

opportunity to observe a cultural bridge. I went to the door and cracked it a little. A loud wall of sound burst from the crack, prompting someone in the kitchen to yell, "Shut the damn door!" I knew that I had to go in or stay out. I threw caution to the wind and went inside, shutting the door behind me. As I turned around to face the room, the music stopped. Inside, sitting about on various amplifiers and boxes, were some of the scariest individuals I had ever seen in my life.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the bass player. He had a skull tattooed on the side of his bald head.

Looking around the room, I saw four guys who were apparently the band. The kid that I saw first had a guitar in his hands. The drummer's face was almost completely hidden behind a huge mane of black hair. The singer looked like Peter Lorre, except he was at least six-and-a-half feet tall. Scattered around the room were some racy-looking teenage girls that looked even meaner than the guys. All of them were staring at me. It looked like Jane Goodall was about to get killed by the Missing Links.

"You my sister's date?" the guitarist asked.

"Ah, yes. I am," I stammered.

"You need something?" one of the groupies demanded.

I knew that I had better think of something quick. It was time to lie.

"No, not really. I have a good friend who is a talent scout for Columbia Records. He's always looking for new faces and I, well, heard you playing and was curious." It wasn't a complete lie; I did have a friend at Columbia Records. He was an old fraternity brother of mine, but he was not a talent scout; he was head of their marketing department.

My comments seemed to have eased the tension a little. In fact, the bass player even got up from his seat on a stage monitor speaker and offered it to me.

"No thanks, I'll stand. I can only stay a minute," I decided to play this thing up until Gretchen was ready. "I'll talk to him this weekend most likely, so why don't you play something for me? What's the name of your band?"

"Yuppie Death March," droned the singer.

"Good name. What type of music are you involved with?"

"It's sort of like thrash metal, you know?" Gretchen's brother said. "Kind of a punk-metal fusion thing. Not really speed metal..."

"More like death thrash and retro psychedelic combined, man," the drummer's voice emanated from behind his mask of hair. He was obviously the intellectual of the group.

"Let's hear some," I said.

This was a big mistake. The band, led by a primal scream from Peter Lorre, launched into a thunderous rendition of what I think was Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. All of the members, and as a matter of fact the groupies as well, were bouncing their heads back and forth with incredible speed. My own head began pounding from the excruciating volume of the music. After about a minute

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of this, the lead singer wrapped the microphone cord around his neck and proceeded to act like he was hanging himself. I wanted desperately to get out of there, but felt that I could not do so without making them angry. Just then, I heard a faint buzzing in my ear. Thinking I had ruptured an eardrum, I turned in the direction of the buzzing. It was Gretchen, shouting at me.

“Hi! Are you ready?” she screamed.

I nodded. She took my hand and led me out of the room. People from the kitchen were again yelling at us to close the door, but I could not hear them that well. Gretchen obliged and then grabbed her purse from the coffee table.

“Did you meet everyone?” she asked.

My brain was still not functioning. “No,” was all I said.

“Did you want to meet everyone?”

“No.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

We left the house and walked to my car. My head had pretty much cleared up by the time we got there. I opened the door for her and then went around to my side and got in. Conley had already put an Al Green 8-track in the player.

“You wearing ‘Plainsman’?” Gretchen asked me as I fastened my seat belt.

“Yes; do you like it?” I responded.

“It’s my favorite,” she said as she winked at me.

I started up the Bonneville and eased out into the street.

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We beat the crowd to Figaro's. The restaurant was located in an old shopping center on the west side of town. I parked the car and walked around to Gretchen's side to open the door for her. I was worrying about my etiquette possibly blowing my cover when I saw Conley get out and walk away, leaving Barbie sitting dejectedly in the back seat. Conley didn't catch on, so I went ahead and opened the door for her, too. She gave her husband a dirty look as she led us to the front of the restaurant.

From the outside, the narrow storefront made the place appear to be quite small. However, after we entered I realized that the restaurant was actually in the basement of the building; a long staircase led down from the front door. Conley and Barbie led the way down the dim passageway. Gretchen and I followed.

"Let's get a booth," Barbie said to Conley as the hostess approached.

"Can we get a booth?" Conley asked.

"Certainly," the hostess answered. "Follow me." We followed the girl to the back of the eatery. The place was like a dungeon. The majority of the light appeared to come from candles on the tables and a spotlight over a grand piano that sat in the middle of the room. A pianist in a tuxedo was playing classical music.

"Here we are," the hostess said as she pointed to our booth. The girls slipped in first. I had never seen booths quite like these before. They were set back into the wall behind wooden swinging saloon-type doors. I guess a couple could close these if they wanted a bit more privacy. As I sat down, I noticed that the doors, table, and walls were virtually covered in romantic graffiti; much of it was actually carved into the wood. From the dates that I could make out, there were three decades of platitudes lovingly scratched and left for posterity.

"This is where Conley and me came on our first date," Barbie said with a gleam in her eye. Conley blushed.

"How romantic," I said, trying to hide my sarcasm. This place was about as romantic as a hockey fight. If someone had carved "I Luv Rhonda" into the table of *my* favorite Italian restaurant, he would probably have found himself on the bottom of the river wearing a cement overcoat.

The waiter brought over the menus and introduced himself. I noted that he was wearing the same kind of tux as the piano player.

"You gonna sing tonight?" Barbie asked him.

"Yes; at seven-thirty, eight-thirty, and nine-thirty," he replied. I sensed he would be a baritone, but I hoped that we would not be in this place long enough to hear him sing.

"Whatcha gonna get?" Gretchen asked me as I scanned the menu. The food selection wasn't too bad, and the wine list had a good selection of domestics.

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"I'm not sure. What's good? Have you ever been here before?" I asked. She and Barbie looked at each other and giggled. I guess that she had indeed been to the place before.

"The fettuccini is good, so is the veal," Gretchen said as she pointed to the items on the menu. Conley kicked me under the table and I looked up at him. He was giving me an "I told you so" look; the veal was the most expensive thing on the menu.

The waiter came back to the table and asked, "Would you care for some wine?"

Barbie squealed, "Oooh; let's get some."

Not thinking, I spouted, "What is your best Cabernet Sauvignon? Do you have a Mondavi by chance?"

"I believe so. But I know we still have a few bottles of Chateau St. Jean 1996 left."

"Great. '96 wasn't as good as '95, but I haven't seen either in awhile. That will be perfect. Reserve two bottles for us," I concluded as the waiter left the table. I suddenly felt as if someone was looking at me. Glancing up from the menu, I saw Conley and Barbie gawking at me with their mouths open. Turning to Gretchen, I saw that she was doing the same.

"I was thinkin' more along the lines of a pitcher of Riunite," Conley stated.

I realized that I was very close to blowing my cover. My knowledge of the vino had aroused their suspicion. I had to think of something quick.

"I saw that in a James Bond movie once," I said.

"That was pretty cool, bud," Conley said with an envious grin as he went back to scanning his menu. The girls were not as convinced. They both continued to look at me strangely for several minutes. Luckily, the waiter returned with the wine and broke their attention. The girls liked the Cabernet so much they forgot about their paranoia. I decided not to smell the cork.

I ordered the veal for Gretchen and me. Barbie ordered this, too. Conley ordered ravioli because it was the only word on the menu that he recognized.

"So, Eddie, what do you do?" Gretchen asked as we waited for our meal. I assumed that she was referring to my employment status. As I looked at those beautiful blue eyes of hers, I realized just how important my image was to me. I wanted desperately to say, "I make a quarter of a million dollars a year, live on a country club golf course, and drive a BMW." But as I sat there, I realized that I had been stripped of my identity. I was no longer Edward Vincent Prescott III, the Ivy League marketing whiz extraordinaire; I was Eddie Prescott, unemployed highway flagman. I felt low indeed.

"I'm, ah, in between jobs right now," I stammered. I could feel my face turning red.

Gretchen sensed my embarrassment. "Oh, things are rough these days; it took me five months to find the job I have now," she said. "It ain't much, but it pays pretty good and has some good benefits. Did I tell y'all what happened today?"

Well, there's this Iranian guy who works the graveyard shift. When I got there this morning, he was on the floor bowing to Mecca..."

She was smiling and telling her story with great animation. I really wasn't paying attention to the story as I watched her. Instead, I was thinking about her reaction to my self-revelation. There was no judgement in her reaction, no condescension, and no pity. She merely accepted my condition without any preconceptions or prejudices. Not only did she accept this without question, she was trying very hard to ease my discomfort. All this from a girl who really did not even know me.

I thought about my friends, especially my girlfriends. Would they have reacted this way if I had told them the same thing? Would they have accepted me anyway? It was sure something to think about.

"...and it turns out that all the stores have this problem, especially around the university." My mind snapped back to reality as Gretchen finished her story. Everyone was laughing, but I just looked at Gretchen and smiled gratefully. From the look on her face, I could tell she understood.

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We finished the meal just as our waiter began to sing. He had a good voice; he was probably a music major from the university just making some money in his spare time. But good voice or not, his rendition of *My Way* was a bit much even for this place. Another waiter brought the check, but we had to wait for Barbie to hear the rest of the song. She didn't even like *My Way*, but for some reason she just had to hear at least one complete song before leaving the place. I paid with a hundred-dollar bill that I slipped under the ticket while the three were finishing off the wine; I didn't want to arouse any unnecessary attention.

The guy finally finished singing, so we left. As we walked up the stairs, we passed a line of teenagers waiting to get tables. There must have been a hundred of them.

I opened the Bonneville's door for Gretchen and she took her seat. Conley walked around to the other side of the car with me and left Barbie standing by her door. Gretchen unlocked the door for her and I did likewise for Conley. I thought Barbie might kill the jerk when he got in, so I tried to start a conversation to diffuse the situation.

"The place is pretty interesting, isn't it?" I asked to no one in particular.

"Yes, it is. Food's great, too," Gretchen replied as she slid down the seat and parked herself right next to me. No woman had ever done that before. Come to think of it, I never had a car that had a bench seat in the front before.

"What now?" I asked as I looked in the mirror at Conley. Barbie had evidently forgiven his rudeness and was now sitting next to him, too.

"How about a movie?" he ventured to the group.

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“Sounds good to me,” Gretchen said.

“Me too,” Barbie added.

“It’s unanimous, Conley. Where to?” I asked.

Conley thought for a minute, then smiled and whispered something in his wife’s ear. She giggled and leaned forward, whispering something to Gretchen.

“No!” Gretchen said mischievously. “We can’t do that yet...” She finished saying whatever she was thinking by whispering it to Barbie, who in turn whispered it to Conley.

“Don’t count the boy out yet; there’s more to him than meets the eye,” Conley said, obviously coming to my defense. After some more immature whispering, the three finally decided that it would in fact be acceptable for the four of us to go to wherever it was they were talking about.

“Head to the store, Eddie; we gotta get some beer and stuff,” Conley said as he pointed to a convenience store across the street. I didn’t know just what was going on, but I motored the Bonneville in that direction. When in Rome...

At the store the girls, still giggling, went in and left Conley and me in the car.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re gonna go someplace fun,” he said.

“Like where?”

“To the drive in.”

That wasn’t too bad. “I didn’t think there were any of those left,” I said.

“Oh, there’s a couple, there’s a couple...”

The girls came back to the car in a few minutes. Barbie was carrying a grocery bag full of beer, wine coolers, and chips. She passed Gretchen a cooler and Conley passed me a can of beer. I normally did not drink and drive, so I just put the can between my legs.

“Where do I go?” I asked Conley. He gave me directions to get us on the freeway.

“Then just keep headin’ south ‘til I tell ya to get off,” he said.

“Where is this place?”

“You’ll see,” Barbie said.

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It took over thirty minutes to get to the drive-in theater. It was in the next county and was in the middle of nowhere. There was a line of cars waiting to get in, so I reasoned that this must be a popular spot for the rural dwellers to congregate. I couldn’t make out the movie titles on the marquee at first, but as our car moved forward in the line, I finally was able to read the titles. It was a triple feature.

NIGHTIE NIGHTS
COMMANDO GIRLS

ALIEN NYMPHONAUTS

I did not remember Roger Ebert reviewing any of these. As I looked closer, however, I saw something that explained why not.

RATED XXX
NO ONE UNDER 21 ADMITTED

I felt my face flushing again. My passengers began laughing at me as soon as they realized I knew what was going on. My car was next. I was mortally embarrassed as I approached the pay booth. Even though it was nighttime, I scrambled for my sunglasses and put them on; I didn't want anyone to recognize me.

"What are you doing?" Gretchen giggled.

"Yeah, don't worry about it," Conley added. "Everybody here is a pre-vert, too. Nobody gives a shit."

Now, I am no prude by any stretch of the imagination. I have done a few crazy things in my youth and even watched a movie like this at a frat party once. But I had never seen one with a girl present, much less a girl whom I hardly even knew. Gretchen giggled and moved even closer to me. "Go ahead," she said. "Don't worry about me."

An old lady that looked like someone's grandmother was in the booth as I pulled up to the pay window.

"How many?" she asked.

"Four."

"That'll be twenty dollars."

I handed her a twenty and drove through.

"Cut your headlights off; the show's already started," Barbie whispered. I didn't know why she was whispering.

I cut all but my parking lights and motored slowly down the back row. There were plenty of parking spaces everywhere, but I parked at the far corner of the back row, just in case someone was there that knew me.

"Think we could get a little farther away?" Conley said sarcastically, "Like maybe Canada or somethin'?"

I took the hint and moved the car up three rows and toward the center. I looked around the car for the speaker that hangs in the window.

"They don't have speakers here," Gretchen said. "Tune in your AM radio to 730."

"You've been here before?"

"Back in high school we used to come here a lot," she added unashamedly. I didn't ask her any more questions about it. I felt as if I owed her one, anyway.

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I tuned in the radio and was greeted by a loud series of groans and heavy breathing. This made me look up to the screen, where my eyes saw a scratchy image of a woman in a camouflage jumpsuit performing a sex act on a man whose physical attributes did not seem anatomically possible.

“My God,” I uttered. The can of beer at my crotch suddenly seemed very cold.

“Hey; it’s Peter the Tripod,” Gretchen said matter-of-factly, as if she were watching the arriving stars at the Academy Awards ceremony.

“What?”

“Peter Built: they call him ‘The Tripod’,” Gretchen went on to explain as she sipped on her wine cooler. Conley chuckled.

I could certainly see how he had obtained such a moniker, but I could not fathom how Gretchen knew this piece of trivia. I watched her for a few minutes. She sat there munching on a bag of chips and sipping her cooler. She offered me a chip and I accepted. In my mind, I had pictured two distinct reactions that a woman would have in a situation like this: either mortal embarrassment or uncontrolled erotic lust. Instead of either, this woman sat there as if she were watching the six o’clock news. I turned around and looked at the couple in back. They, too were watching the movie like it was a typically normal thing to do on a Saturday night. Conley had even assumed his TV watching posture as he munched on his pork skins. After my initial embarrassment subsided, I found this phenomenon to be very interesting. I opened my beer and joined in the viewing.

The movie was feature number two: *Commando Girls*. We had evidently arrived too late to watch *Nightie Nights*, but that was just as well. The depraved antics of this porno queen A-Team were adequate for the time being. Gretchen bored quickly with the redundancy of the sexual encounters.

“So, tell me about yourself,” she said to me as she held up her bag of chips.

I hated to lie. Here was this girl who was unselfishly sharing something as intimate as a hard-core porno flick with me, and I could not even tell her the truth about who I was. I took a chip and decided to wing it. On screen, the commando girls were tying some third world revolutionary guy to a tree, apparently getting ready for some field interrogation. He didn’t look very scared.

“Well, what do you want to know?” I asked, stalling for time while I thought some more about a believably fictitious life.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Not long; I’m from Mississippi,” I ventured. On screen, the commandos were taking sexual turns with the prisoner as he lay helpless on the ground, his hands tied to the tree.

“You know, they’re really married,” Gretchen said.

“Who?”

“Her: the girl on top now,” she said as she pointed to the screen. “She’s married to that guy in real life.”

“No kidding,” I said. I thought I could see some genuine affection on the face of the guy as his wife, wearing only a green beret and a pair of combat boots, backhanded him across the face a couple of times. “How did you learn this?”

“Sometimes it gets pretty boring in the store, during the graveyard shift especially. I read the porno magazines behind the counter; they sort of keep me awake.” She giggled a little.

“I can see...ah...how they would.”

“Mississippi, huh? I didn’t think you were from around here; you seem different somehow.”

“How so?”

“Well, you just seem a little more sophisticated than most of the guys.”

“I went to college for awhile; maybe that’s it,” I said.

“I’m going to junior college now,” she said proudly.

“What’s your major?”

“I’m just taking the basics now. I have about thirty hours done already, but I haven’t decided on a major yet. I guess I’ll do that when I transfer to the university.”

I was impressed. “Any ideas?” I asked

“Maybe business or marketing. Something like that. I can go several different routes.”

Now she was talking. I had to hold myself back from giving her a few pointers. I did not have to restrain myself for long, for our conversation was interrupted by a commotion in the back seat. Gretchen and I turned around to see Barbie all over Conley like a lovesick high school girl. Conley was grimacing and trying to move away from her. After a few kisses on his neck, Conley’s grimace disappeared and the two were soon groping one another passionately. Conley’s pork skins went all over the place.

“Oh, no,” I uttered. I didn’t want them to do it in my car. But God only knows, they had enough room to do it back there if they wanted to.

Gretchen giggled and tugged on my arm. I turned to look at her and she winked and motioned for us to leave. I wasn’t happy about getting ousted from my own car, but short of throwing a bucket of ice water on them, there did not seem to be very much I could do about it. I got out of the car and Gretchen followed.

“Let’s go to the snack bar,” Gretchen said as she took my hand.

“Okay,” I said as I looked back to see Barbie manhandle Conley out of sight.

We walked into a very clean and well-equipped snack bar. I was surprised at how new and clean the place was. I had expected the place to be full of trench coat-clad sickos, but instead I found a normal-looking assortment of people that could have been in the snack bar of any straight theater. I scanned the counter to see if there was anything I wanted. The guy in front of us bought a foot-long hotdog. Anyone who could eat that after an evening of the Human Tripod must certainly have an iron stomach. We ordered a couple of soft drinks and walked to a small

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playground area that sat to one side of the snack bar, a leftover from the days when this was a straight theater. We sat on a jungle gym and talked until the end of the third feature.

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The sound of cars starting caught our attention, so we abandoned the playground and went back to the car. I cautiously peeked in the side window to make sure we did not interrupt anything. We didn't. Conley was sound asleep with his head in Barbie's lap. She had a big smile on her face as she waved us in.

We followed most of the traffic back to town; it seemed that the majority of the patrons of the place were from the city, and were not locals as I had first thought. I took Barbie and Conley home first. For a second, I thought she was going to carry the still-groggy Conley inside just like she did the toddler, but luckily he regained enough consciousness to walk himself to the door.

All was quiet at Gretchen's house. I could feel no vibrations as we walked to the front door; Yuppie Death March must have been off in the underground somewhere that evening.

"I had a wonderful time," Gretchen said as we stood on the porch.

"I did, too. I really did," I said. Gretchen then gave me a quick kiss, said goodnight, and went inside.

As I drove home, I thought about what an enjoyable evening it had been. Rather bizarre, but enjoyable. I really did have a good time. To top it off, I hadn't had a kiss-me-at-the-door-and-leave-me-alone-for-the-night date in a long, long time. It was pretty nice.

10

I woke up early Monday morning and immediately started to analyze all of the data that I had accumulated from the weekend's observations. I had been into the field study for a month and was just now beginning to see some patterns emerging. Mr. Dickey had been right; it was going to take me longer than one weekend to gather the information that we needed for the new BillyMart marketing strategy. He had also been right about the gathering of this data; merely feeding poll results and other demographic information through a statistical analysis program was not going to work. I could now see why it wouldn't; no computer program could have captured the subtle nuances that seemed to be the essence of the underclass experience. A bar graph could not communicate how it feels to sit under a thirty-yard projected image of the Human Tripod while talking to a beautiful convenience store clerk about the meaning of life.

I was busy jotting down some notes when there was a knock at my door. A postman handed me a certified letter and I signed for it.

"You're a hard man to get ahold of, sir," he said. "I've been trying to get you for a week now."

It was from the city. I thought it was some sort of tax statement or something, so I opened it. It was a summons, telling me that I needed to appear in Municipal Court Number Three the next day to face charges of violating the state penal code. My crimes? Article 23.8 - Public Intoxication (Alcohol); 18.1 - Fighting; and 19.1(b) - Disorderly Conduct (Offensive Language in a Public Place).

I was not going to sit still for this. Publicly drunk I was; but I never threw a punch or cursed at anyone. For crying out loud, I was unconscious through the entire fracas. I thought that Monica had taken care of all of this, but obviously she had not. I picked up the phone and began to call her number.

As I was dialing, I thought about what I was doing. This was not right. It was bad enough that I had used her to get out of jail to begin with; I should have done my time or whatever just like everyone else had to do. I hung up the phone. This was no time for cowardice. I decided to go to court and take care of this thing on my own.

I looked out of the window at the Fulmers' place. I saw some activity, so I walked over there. The kids were running amok in the yard as I knocked on the door. Conley opened the door.

"Mornin', bud," he said.

"Good morning," I said as I went inside. As Conley went to get a cup of coffee for me, I asked him if he had received a letter like the one I had.

"Yeah; I got one of those about a week ago."

"Your court date?" I asked.

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“Hell, I don’t know,” he said as he handed me the coffee. “I threw the thing out.”

“What did you do that for? It said a warrant would be issued for you if you don’t show up.”

“Well, that’s what Leon and Bobby did. They get ’em all the time and no one has ever picked them up,” Conley said.

“Well, I’m not taking the chance; I’m going tomorrow. You had better come, too; you can’t afford to be put in jail again.”

A look of terror crossed Conley’s face as he remembered whatever horrible thing had happened to him after he returned home that night.

“You got that right, bud,” he said. “Is Monica gonna go with us?” I think that Conley wanted to ride in Monica’s car more than he wanted her legal expertise.

“No; we’re gonna do this one by ourselves. Besides, the letter said we didn’t need a lawyer; it’s sort of like...”

“The Peoples’ Court,” Conley finished.

“Exactly,” I agreed. We sat around and drank coffee and talked about Perry Mason episodes for awhile. The kids finally drove us both crazy with their constant running in and out, so we set a time of departure for the next morning and I went home.

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Municipal Court Number Three was in the bowels of the Criminal Justice Building, a forbidding, monolithic drab concrete structure in the middle of town. Armed only with a copy of my summons, Conley and I roamed the dim hallways among the throngs of police officers, attorneys, jurors, and defendants, looking for the courtroom. After riding the elevators to several wrong floors, I finally asked for directions from what looked like an attorney. He pointed toward the floor and said cryptically, “All the way down.” Conley and I looked at the guy as he vanished back into the crowd. We got back onto the crowded elevator and pushed the bottom button: “B2.” Everyone else had abandoned us by the time we arrived at our floor. The doors slid open to reveal an ominous sign on the graffiti-spattered wall in front of us. We had arrived at the Sub-Basement; Municipal Court Number Three was to our left.

Conley had dressed for his day in court. He had taken my advice and worn a tie; a brown knit job. I helped him tie it before we left the house and he didn’t look half-bad. I wore a tie with a white button-down and some jeans; I thought that a suit might be a bit pretentious for a traffic court. We were early for the nine o’clock docket call, but decided to go inside and wait there instead of in the dim hallway. There weren’t many people in the small room, only a handful of fellow drunkards and other assorted malcontents. The front row was occupied by a line of fairly attractive, well-dressed young women. From the looks of their clothes and jewelry,

I assumed they were some Junior Leaguers out on a field trip. In an effort to preserve my anonymity as much as possible, I went to sit on the back row. Unfortunately, Conley spotted the Junior Leaguers and went to sit behind them. I followed.

We sat on the wooden bench and watched a couple of bailiffs drink coffee and tell hunting stories. The Junior Leaguers filed their nails and chewed gum. Except for us few defendants, no one else was in the courtroom. We waited almost a half-hour before the judge finally arrived. I gasped when I saw the man's face.

"What is it, bud?" Conley asked. Two of the Junior Leaguers turned around and looked at me, also.

I stared at the judge's face and then turned to his nameplate on the bench.

"Oh, my God," I said quietly. It was him.

"What the hell is wrong?" Conley asked again.

Judge Milford L. Atkinson; that was what was wrong. I had known him a few years earlier when he was just a contract attorney. We had placed him on retainer to handle a lawsuit by some nut claiming that one of my television ads had caused his wife to quit having sex with him. To make a long story short, Atkinson botched the defense and we wound up paying the nut nearly a quarter of a million dollars. I fired Atkinson right after the trial.

"We're sunk," was all I said to Conley. One of the Junior Leaguers shook her head.

I watched Atkinson take his seat at the bench as the court reporter set up her equipment. I thought the black robe was a bit much for the occasion, but Atkinson always did have a big ego. He began calling the docket as soon as the reporter was ready. I hid behind one of the Junior Leaguers who was wearing a big Sunday hat.

"When I call your name, please approach the bench," Atkinson said into his microphone without looking up. "Monroe, Mary Louise."

With that, one of the Junior Leaguers stood up and sauntered to the bench. Atkinson didn't even look at her as he read the charges. I guessed that they weren't there for a field trip after all.

"Okay," he said for the court reporter's benefit, "we have cause number 0234989W; Mary Louise Monroe; charge is Manifestation of Prostitution. Are you ready to offer a plea in this case?"

Prostitution; it suddenly dawned on me that these weren't Junior Leaguers after all.

"These are hookers!" I said out loud. All twelve or so of them turned and glared at me. I sank lower in my seat.

"What did you think they was, bud?" Conley laughed. "Junior Leaguers?"

"Quiet over there," Atkinson said into the microphone. The girls turned around and listened to Mary Louise give her rebuttal.

"Guilty," was all she said.

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“The Court finds you guilty; that’ll be a fifty-dollar fine, honey,” Atkinson droned as he passed the citation over to the clerk. He winked at Mary Louise as she signed some papers. She winked back.

“Okay, next case is Bartlow, Leon,” the judge said.

“Leon’s name is up,” Conley whispered to me, “and the dumbass ain’t here.”

“Leon Bartlow,” Atkinson said one more time as he scanned the courtroom for a response. Seeing nothing, he continued. “Bond is hereby forfeited in this case. Alias capias issued.”

“What’s an alias capias?” Conley asked me.

“It’s an arrest warrant.”

Conley shook his head and whispered, “Dumbass.”

One by one, in alphabetical order, Atkinson called the names on the docket. Everyone pled guilty and the prostitutes all got a wink and a fifty-dollar fine. Us drunkards, including Conley, just got the fine. Conley even got the fighting and disorderly conduct charges dropped completely. I knew that I would not be as lucky. As I sat there behind the hooker’s Sunday hat, I tried to think of a way to extricate myself from the mess. If I stood in front of Atkinson, he was going to throw the book at me. Not only that, he might inadvertently reveal my true identity to Conley. And if I escaped from the courtroom before he called my name, he would certainly issue a warrant for me. And recognizing my name, I knew that he would make sure that his bailiffs went to my house personally to arrest me. It looked as though I was going to have to face him. My only hope now was to get rid of Conley so he wouldn’t be there to hear anything.

“You’re all done; why don’t you go on home? I’ll be there later. No telling how much longer this is going to take,” I said to Conley.

“No way, bud, we’re in this thing together come hell or high water,” Conley said stoically. This was not a good time for barroom camaraderie.

“Prescott, Edward Vincent...” Atkinson’s voice boomed over the p.a. system. I peered over the hooker’s hat sheepishly. I could see the judge looking up at the ceiling and muttering my name over again to himself. He did this for a while until a huge grin on his face told me he had finally remembered. I crouched even lower behind the hat.

“Prescott!” he ordered.

“He’s callin’ you, man,” Conley leaned over and whispered to me.

I sucked in my pride and stood up. Atkinson recognized me immediately.

“Are you coming, Mr. Prescott? Sometime today would be nice,” Atkinson said sarcastically. The remaining three hookers laughed. I approached the bench. “Well, well. We have cause numbers 0330089A, 0330090A, and 0330091A: Public Intoxication, Fighting, and Disorderly Conduct - Language. Well, well, Mr. Prescott; you must have had one hell of an evening, eh?” He said as he peered at me over his reading glasses. He was grinning like Charles Manson. I nodded meekly.

“How do you plead?”

I could tell by the look on his face that he was out for blood. If I pled guilty, it wasn't going to be any fifty-dollar fine for me; he was going to send me to the Big House. I had no choice.

“Not guilty,” I said. Everyone in the courtroom turned and looked at me.

One of the bailiffs whispered to the clerk, “What the hell is he doing?”

From the flustered look on Atkinson's face, I could tell that he was not happy. I did not quite know the full significance of what I had said, but whatever it was, it seemed to let the air out of his sails. It was working so far, so in my newfound confidence, I decided to lay it on a little thicker.

“Not guilty, and I wish for a jury trial, Your Honor.”

This infuriated the judge. “A trial? What the hell do you think this is?”

“Seems like a court of law to me, Your Honor...” I said in my best Perry Mason tone as I looked back at Conley. He was loving it; so were the hookers. One of them winked at me.

“... and the Sixth Amendment of the Constitution clearly indicates that this is my right under the law...”

“Who do you think you are, jerkoff?” Atkinson shouted in an obvious breach of decorum. I could tell that the court reporter didn't know if she should put that in the record or not. Maybe she just didn't know how to spell “jerkoff.”

“Objection!” I heard someone yell from behind me. I turned to see who it was. It was Conley.

“Who the hell are you?” Atkinson spat. Conley began to answer but was cut off before he could speak. “If you don't shut up, I'm going to hold you in contempt and throw your ass in jail!”

Conley sat down, his moment of glory complete.

“And as for you,” Atkinson continued as he pointed at me. It was then that he saw the clerk putting it all on the record. Red-faced with anger, he took a deep breath and changed his tone. “Your plea of not guilty is duly noted,” he continued. “These cases are hereby transferred to the County Court for appeal. Next case.”

From the scurrying of the court clerk, it appeared that no one pled “not guilty” very often; it took them a while to find the appropriate paperwork. I signed the papers, which evidently appealed the case to a higher court, thus taking away all of Atkinson's authority. They did make me post a fifty-dollar bond on each case, but it was better than going to the Big House.

Conley and I were feeling pretty good, so we invited the three remaining hookers out for a late breakfast at Denny's. They accepted. We ordered pancakes and *huevos rancheros* and had a great time telling court stories. Theirs were much more interesting than ours, but we didn't care.

I was beginning to accumulate too much paperwork. All of my data input was normally done on a PC, so the stacks of legal pads were starting to annoy me. I decided to get my notebook computer from my real house in order to better organize my work. From the looks of things across the street, it did not appear that the Fulmers were going to be up any time soon, so I decided to get the computer and stop for a quick breakfast at the Waffle House.

I locked the trailer and went to the Bonneville. As I got in, I noticed that Conley's pork skins from Saturday night were still all over the back seat. I made a mental note to stop by the car wash on the way home. I put the key in the ignition and turned it. Nothing happened. I tried again. Nothing. I was irritated to say the least. Normally, I would just use my other car until the mechanic could come and make repairs. However, I quickly realized that I had no other car; this thing was my only means of transportation. It was time to call Hans.

Hans was my mechanic. He was a mechanical engineer who had decided to quit working for an aerospace company in Germany to pursue his true love in life: working on cars, or automobiles, as he referred to them. He made more money than I did. I went back in the trailer and called him at his shop. He answered the phone in his thick Bavarian accent.

"European Automotive Specialties."

"Hans; this is Edward Prescott. I have a bit of a problem here. I wonder if you are available to come and look at my car."

"I can see you possibly at..." he said as he scanned his appointment book, "...two o'clock today."

Seeing Hans that quickly was unprecedented; must have been a slow time of year.

"That will be good," I said.

"Is it your BMW or your Range Rover?" he asked.

"Neither; it's my Pontiac." I knew that I shouldn't have said it as soon as it left my mouth.

"Your what? Did you say Pontiac? This must be Conchita's car, of course."

"Ah, no. It's my car. It's a long story..."

I could hear Hans chuckling as he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Prescott; I do not work on Pontiacs. I do not work on any American cars at all. As a matter of fact, I do not even own any tools calibrated in American measures; I only have metric..."

"I see. Well, never mind," I said.

"Very well. Goodbye," he concluded as he hung up the phone, still chuckling.

His reaction really angered me; he had laughed at my Bonneville.

“Yeah; I’ll put my muscle car up against that beer burner of yours anytime, you stupid kraut,” I said to the phone.

Besides, I had jumped to outside help too quickly. From what I had seen, these people tended to do their own automotive repair work. They seemed to have a working knowledge of the subject that my peers did not have. And since I was now one of the common people, it appeared that I would have to do the job myself. I went back outside to take a look at the car.

It took me about fifteen minutes to figure out how to open the hood. It weighed a ton. As I raised the thing, I noticed old asbestos material hanging down from the underside of it. Great. Not only was I going to soil and lacerate my hands repairing this car, I was going to get lung cancer as well. I scanned the engine compartment. Nothing appeared to be out of place; but then again, I had no idea what I was looking for. I don’t know why I even bothered in the first place. Maybe I was expecting to find a family of squirrels in there eating the wiring or something. Seeing nothing of the sort, I tried to start the engine again; perhaps the thing had miraculously healed itself in the last few minutes. No such luck. As I sat there wondering what to do next, Conley walked up with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“What’s it doin’?” he asked.

I don’t know why I didn’t think of him sooner; I had what an expert mechanic living right across the street from me. Now I just had to convince him to diagnose and repair the problem without letting on that I was an ignoramus regarding these matters. After all, I was supposed to be a racecar driver.

“Ah, it won’t start. Probably the battery,” I said.

“Crank it again,” Conley said. He listened carefully as I turned the key.

“Now turn on your lights,” he said. I did so.

“Lights look okay. Let me get my analyzer,” Conley said as he jogged back to his trailer. It looked as if he was going to help me. All I had to do now was figure out how to hide my automotive ignorance from him. He returned with a small black instrument with two wires hanging from it. He attached these to the battery.

“Battery’s okay, bud,” he said. “It’s probably your solenoid or your starter.”

“Yeah, sounds like it to me, too,” I agreed. I could tell that Conley was proud of himself for diagnosing the problem before I did. I went on to say, “Man, I hate this. It really hurts my back to have to climb into this thing to fix it.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I tell you what, bud; you run to the part store and get a solenoid and I’ll have this’n off by the time you get back. It won’t take a minute to put the new one on.”

“Hey, thanks. My chiropractor will be happy, too,” I said. Conley laughed.

“Take my car,” Conley said as he threw me his keys. “Go over to Pit Stop Parts; they have the cheapest prices.”

I got into Conley’s Plymouth as he went to get his tools. As I cranked the engine for what seemed an eternity, I began to have doubts about this man’s mechanical abilities. But I was already committed.

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I remembered the Pit Stop store because it wasn't far from Gretchen's 7-11. I pulled into the parking lot. There were ten cars there, all with their hoods up and their drivers leaning over inside the engine compartments. The place was very large: a supermarket for car parts. I walked up and down each aisle looking for a solenoid. I had no idea what that was, much less what it looked like. Seeing no package that had "Solenoid" on it, I looked to the back of the store where some people were congregating. A large sign above a long counter said "PARTS." Assuming this was where I needed to go, I walked over.

There were two guys working behind the counter. Both were waiting on customers while displaying the arrogant, detached attitude that only automotive repair personnel have. No other retail profession has this insidious problem; it seems to be peculiar to the business. The customer is an adversary in the transaction.

The customer in front of me obtained his part and the clerk, a long-haired kid with a bad complexion, pointed him to the cashier. No "thank you" or "have a nice day," no pleasantries whatsoever. It was as if the clerk was doing the guy a big favor by letting him buy his parts there. He then turned his attention to me. I waited for him to offer some sort of salutation. He didn't, so I started.

"I need a solenoid," I said meekly.

The guy looked at me like I was five years old as he opened a large reference book on the counter. He said in a bored voice, "What kind of car?"

"1971 Pontiac Bonneville."

"What size engine?"

I pulled down the brim of my welder's cap and said confidently, "Four hunnerd." Two could play at this game.

I had accepted the guy's challenge and he knew it. He threw out challenge number three. "What kind of carburetor?" he asked.

"Four barrel," I said.

Evidently, my responses were good enough to pass the parts store man's machismo test. The guy looked through the book for a few seconds and then strolled into the back room at a leisurely pace. He returned a minute later with a box that he put on the counter. I took the box and went to the cashier. But on the way, I found myself compelled to pick up one of those liquid-filled dashboard compasses for the Bonneville. As tacky as they were, I had always wanted one.

By the time I got back to my trailer, Conley had already used a jack to lift the front end, placed stands underneath the car to support it, and removed the solenoid. He was lying under the car as I approached.

"Hand me the new'n," he said as he put his hand out. I handed the solenoid to him. After ten minutes of cursing and banging, he crawled out and said, "Try it now."

I got in and turned the key. Still nothing happened. I looked at Conley.

“Just as I figured; it must be the starter,” he stated. “Had to change the solenoid first to make sure.”

“Of course,” I said. That solenoid had cost thirty dollars, and it wasn’t even the cause of the problem.

“I know where we can get a junk starter real cheap; there’s no use buying a new one. Hop in; let’s go to the junkyard.”

We got into Conley’s car and drove to the far west side of town. After taking a dizzying number of backroad turns, we finally arrived at Big Steve’s Pre-owned Parts Emporium. We parked the car on the street and walked to the entrance. Conley brought a toolbox from his trunk. A ten-foot sheet metal fence that was painted fluorescent orange surrounded the place. Towering over the entrance on a thirty-foot tower was an old junk car painted the same color. I felt uneasy as we walked underneath it. A sign, hand-painted on a piece of plywood, hung on the fence at the entrance. It read:

THURSDAY SPECIAL
ALL YOU CAN CARRY
ON ONE TRIP
JUST \$35
NO ENGINE BLOCKS
OR TRANSMISSIONS

Conley said, “I’ll have to remember that. I can get Leon to come with me; he can carry a lot more than me.”

We walked to the office shack, where a few grungy-looking junkyard workers sat smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. “Can I hep ya?” one of them asked.

“Yeah, we’re needin’ a starter for a four hunnerd Pontiac,” Conley stated.

“C’mon with me,” the guy said as he got up from his lawn chair. We followed him out the back door of the shack. He stopped and pointed outward to the far left side of the yard and said, “I got my Pontiacs, Buicks, and Oldsmobiles out yonder. Back three rows. Four hunnerd Pontiac, huh? Man, that was a good’n.” He turned and started back to his chair. “Y’all just bring back the thing when you get it. It’ll be fifteen bucks. Five more for the solenoid.”

“We got a solenoid,” I responded, trying to sound knowledgeable.

“Okay. And y’all watch out for snakes, ya hear?” he concluded as he went back to the office.

I thought about the Pit Stop store and the punky kid who had waited on me. Out here in this filthy, low-tech wrecking yard, this lowly junk man had been far more courteous and professional than any automobile repair person had ever been to me before. The reality should have been just the opposite; the place that was charging you more should be more civil. The price you pay for their products

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should mandate a more positive experience. But the opposite is true; something they never bothered to teach us in graduate school.

As we walked toward the Pontiac, Buick, and Oldsmobile section, I suddenly thought about the junk man's parting words.

"Did he say, 'watch out for snakes'?" I asked Conley.

"Yep. Them rattlers like to lay up in these old cars."

Great. Add snakebite to my growing list of health problems that this repair endeavor was going to give me.

"Black widow spiders and scorpions, too," Conley added for dramatic effect.

There must have been a thousand cars on the lot. Some were very old and some looked new except for body damage. I found myself looking into some of the badly mangled cars to see if there was any old blood inside; it was obvious that someone had been killed in them. I shook off my macabre interest as soon as I realized what I was doing. With all the old cars, the place took on a museum-like quality. It was fascinating: a microcosm of America's relationship to the motorcar. I probably could have spent the entire day out there.

"Here they are," Conley said as we arrived at our section. "You go that way and I'll go this way. We're looking for an old Catalina, GTO, Trans Am, Grand Prix, or Le Mans; they're about the only Pontiacs that had a four hunderd in 'em. Look for low miles on the odometer."

I didn't know how to identify these cars as quickly as Conley could, so I decided to focus on the older-looking models first. The first old car I encountered turned out to be a Catalina. In its day, it must have been a beautiful machine: a two-door monster with lines heavily influenced by art deco. I almost yelled for Conley but decided to investigate further. It was a good thing I did; when I opened the hood I realized that the car didn't even have an engine, much less a starter. An old Grand Prix was next. I opened the hood and observed that this one did indeed have an engine. I did not know how to determine the size of the engine, however. It looked like my engine, but then again, all engines seemed to look the same. I scanned around for the sticker that gave all of this data, but the car did not have one. So much for that. Luckily, I heard Conley yelling for me at that time. He had found one. I went in his direction and found him partially underneath an old Bonneville like mine. The rear end was completely torn away, however.

"We got a good'n here, man. It's only got twenty-five thousand miles on the odometer; it's practically brand new." It only took him ten minutes to remove the starter. He rolled the heavy thing out from under the car and I picked it up. After paying at the shack, Conley insisted on stopping at McDonald's for lunch. We were both covered in junkyard dirt and engine grease, but I agreed to go. After all, he was doing me a big favor. We finally made it back to the trailer park and Conley proceeded to put on the new-old starter. It took nearly a half-hour this time.

"Okay, start it up," Conley said as he pulled himself out from under the car.

I again tried the key. Nothing. I was beginning to get very irritated.

“Hum... maybe it’s the regulator. Let’s get one and see,” Conley said. I did not believe him, but I was committed.

“Let’s go,” I said.

We went back to the Pit Stop and I again had to endure the ridiculous parts clerk power game ritual. I obtained the regulator. It cost twenty dollars. As Conley and I approached the cashier, I asked him, “What else could be wrong with it, besides the regulator, I mean?”

“Well,” Conley responded as he looked up into the air in deep thought, “It could be the coil, or the battery cables, or maybe the spark plug wires, or the distributor cap...”

I stopped him and walked to the front of the store, where I obtained a shopping cart. “Let’s get everything. I’m tired of coming back here.”

Conley’s eyes lit up like he was a kid in a candy store. “No kiddin’? That musta been one hell of a settlement you got, bud,” he said.

We spent the rest of the day drinking beer and putting all the devices on the car. After each one, we tested to see if the engine would start. It never did. The last item to go on was a set of spark plug wires. I put these on myself while Conley went to his house for some more beers. He returned just as I finished my task. I was tired, half-drunk and very angry.

“Let me try it,” Conley said as he slipped behind the wheel. He turned the key and nothing happened. He sat there a minute, then jiggled the shift lever slightly. He turned the key again. The engine started. Conley began laughing.

“Oh, man!” he said as he got out of the car. “It was just the shift lever the whole time.”

“The what?”

“The shift lever; it has to be all the way in ‘park’ before it’ll start. It was off just about a quarter inch,” he laughed, slapping his leg.

I had spent the entire day, not to mention nearly three hundred dollars, repairing a problem that did not exist.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said in disgust. Conley shook his head.

“Give me a beer,” I said.

“Bet you feel stupid,” he said as he handed me one.

That was the understatement of the year. I closed the hood and vowed to never open one again.

12

Friday nights had become somewhat predictable. They usually consisted of Conley and I, along with Barbie, Gretchen, Leon, and Bobby putting away a few beers at the bar in which I had been arrested a few weeks earlier. I held no ill will toward the place. In fact, it was rather quaint in its own way, even though none of us knew what its name was.

It was a routine evening. We were all at our usual table, Gretchen at her customary place in my lap. Leon and Bobby were drinking shots again; I had sworn off the things. They were still getting them for free, but the rest of us had to pay for our drinks. That was because the twins had held me personally responsible for the brawl that night. Evidently, there had been quite a bit of damage. It took some smooth talking from Leon to convince them to allow me back into the bar. But even he couldn't stop the nasty looks I got from the twins all the time, but I could live with that.

"The band ain't coming," Leon said disappointedly as he came back to the table with more shots for him and Bobby.

"What happened?" Barbie asked. *Southern Noise* was one of her favorite bands.

"Their van got stolen. All of their equipment was in there, too. They won't be around for a long time."

The prospect of sitting in the bar all night without a live band was not appealing to me; the ambiance of the place depended on the thundering music of a southern rock band. It just wouldn't be the same without it. From the bored looks of my companions, I could tell that they felt the same way.

"Let's do something else," Barbie offered.

"Like what?" Conley whined after he swallowed some beer. Everyone sat for a while, thinking.

"Let's go see Mick," Gretchen said. Leon raised his eyebrows; he had obviously met Gretchen's brother before. "His band is playing at the Moonlight Room. C'mon; it'll be fun."

We all looked at one another. We all knew what the Moonlight Room was.

"Don't be a bunch of weenies," Gretchen challenged.

"Okay, let's go," I agreed. It would be dangerous, but it could be fun. If you could call organized S&M fun, that is.

We took an informal vote and everybody agreed to go. Gretchen and I were the only ones who really wanted to go; everyone else was going because they didn't want us to call them chicken.

We took the Bonneville because it was the only vehicle large enough to hold everyone. As a matter of fact, we had room to spare. I followed Gretchen's

directions to what was euphemistically referred to as “The Arts District.” The Arts District was actually the old warehouse district, but some off-the-wall entrepreneurs revamped several of the ruined buildings into nightclubs and weird art galleries. The club that pioneered this urban renaissance was the Moonlight Room. It was now the Mecca of every *avant-garde* weirdo within a hundred miles. I could tell we were nearing the place by the increasing accumulation of broken glass on the sidewalks.

“There it is,” Gretchen said bravely. Everyone else in the car looked scared, especially Conley. He moved a little closer to Barbie.

I parked the car under the only streetlight in sight. We piled out and followed the dark shapes heading to the nightclub. Since Gretchen was the bravest, she and I led the way. We got our first close-up glimpse of the patrons of this place as we walked toward the door. A few of them were sitting on the sidewalk with their backs against the building. All were dressed in what appeared to be the required garb of this area of town: black leather or torn denim.

“They’ll sit there until the street-washing truck comes by and sprays them down,” Gretchen said. She had obviously been here before.

A tattered sign tacked to the doorjamb caught my attention. I stopped Gretchen and looked at it more closely. It was a condemnation notice from the city.

“It says that we’re entering this building at our own risk,” Gretchen explained so I wouldn’t waste my time reading it.

Everyone in our group instinctively looked up. The three-story building looked stable enough; stable enough for just a short stay, though.

Two men were manning the counter where the cover charge was collected. One was sporting a foot-long Mohawk haircut. He didn’t have a shirt on his emaciated frame, but had enough tattoos to cover almost all of his visible skin. The guy behind him was dressed in what appeared to be an authentic Nazi SS officer’s uniform, complete with cap and jackboots. The outfit should have been in a museum. A sign on front of the counter said, “PAY OR DIE.” Bobby started giggling at the sign because he thought it was funny. The two guys behind the counter didn’t think it was funny. The first one pulled a claw hammer from under the counter and scowled at us. We broke a speed record getting the money out of our pockets.

Loud music was coming from upstairs as we entered the main lobby. There were dozens of bizarrely-dressed patrons milling about in various stages of intoxication. I saw more hair in that place than on the floor of my barber shop. Hanging on the dingy, cracked walls was an array of paintings.

“This place is an art gallery during the day,” Gretchen said when she saw me looking at them. Monets they weren’t, but they weren’t bad, either.

Seeking safety in numbers like a herd of wildebeest at the watering hole, we headed for the bar and took up positions. The club only sold beer and setups, so I ordered a draft.

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“Jesus!” Leon exclaimed wide-eyed as he nodded at a guy standing a few feet from him. “That son of a bitch is drinkin’ a can of thirty-weight, man!” We all stared at the guy. He had a large green can in his hand.

“That ain’t thirty-weight, Leon,” Gretchen said. “That’s one of those Australian lager beers.”

“Shit, I thought it was a can of Quaker State,” Leon said with relief. The place was an attack on the poor guy’s reality testing.

Since none of us had been knifed yet, I was feeling more comfortable. I decided to get into the spirit of things and ordered one of the Australian lagers. Gretchen ordered one, too. It was pretty good.

I scanned the art collection on the nearest wall. One work was an old record album that had been broken into a hundred pieces, each of which had been glued onto a canvas. I looked closer at the album label; it was a *Partridge Family* record. I then looked at the title of the work; it was called “What I Think of David Cassidy.” The price was fifteen hundred dollars.

I was in the wrong business.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Gretchen said. “Mick and his band are supposed to play in a little while.” Gretchen and I looked around and took a silent vote by judging everybody’s expression. They were obviously reluctant to go upstairs. I couldn’t blame them; going into that black hole of a stairwell was not an appealing idea. The only person who seemed completely unafraid was Bobby; he had already struck up an animated conversation with some girl wearing a sleeveless undershirt with the word “Fuck” stenciled on it. Gretchen decided to make the command decision.

“C’mon, you bunch of weenies,” she said as she pulled my hand toward the narrow entry of the staircase. Everyone else followed.

The stairwell was almost completely dark. We made our way through a few drunken patrons on the floor who nearly blocked the way.

“Bottle urchins,” Gretchen explained as one of them tugged at my pants leg. “They just bum swigs of alcohol from everybody as they pass by. Don’t give them anything or they’ll follow you around all night.” It was good to have a guide on our tour of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We followed the thumping of the heavy-metal music. As we reached the top, my nose was suddenly filled with the overpowering stench of paint.

“Spray paint,” Gretchen explained when she saw me instinctively cover my nose with my free hand. “They have spray paint parties here. The price of admission is a can of paint, and you get to paint whatever you want on the walls. You’ll get used to the smell.”

I was already getting lightheaded, but I didn’t know if it was from the paint fumes or the lager. The main room was fairly large. A band was playing on a stage at one end. I could tell by the logo on their bass drum that the band’s name was *Pap Smear*. There were probably four hundred people in there, far more than the fire code would allow. But I was sure that fire safety was the last thing on any of their

minds; every one of them was smoking something, legal or illegal. Except for a large hole in the wall at one end of the room, there was no ventilation. I was glad the hole was there; a combination of all those paint fumes and open flames could have been disastrous. Some brave patrons were straddling the hole with their legs on either side of the opening.

“Look at them dipshits,” Leon observed. “A strong wind will blow them suckers right out of the place.” Conley and Barbie nodded in agreement.

I quickly lost interest with the hole-sitters. Another group was attracting my attention. A bunch of daredevils, obviously bored with the head-bashing orgy that was taking place on the dance floor, had taken to climbing onto the stage. Then they would dive headfirst into the crowd, where some caring souls would catch them. Some other kids, obviously with death wishes, were climbing to the top of the band’s speaker towers before jumping off. They, too, were caught by the crowd.

“That’s absolutely suicidal,” I said to Gretchen.

“No, that’s *Pap Smear*,” Gretchen retorted. “*Absolutely Suicidal* will be here next week.”

“Let’s get out of here; this place is giving me the creeps,” Leon said as he looked around for his sidekick. He spotted Bobby enthusiastically gyrating on the dance floor with the undershirt girl.

“Dumbshit,” Leon growled.

Gretchen and I laughed as we watched Leon position himself against the wall so no one could get behind him. His “Ford” cap clashed with the black and silver spray paint on the walls. He took long draws on his beer, always keeping one eye open. There were no seats in the place, so the rest of us formed a loose circle at the back of the club.

I felt the call of nature and asked Gretchen where the restrooms were. She grinned and pointed. I didn’t know why she was grinning until I got there. There was no sign on the door to indicate which restroom was which, but a guy came out just as I reached the door. The restroom seemed very cold as I turned to lock the door behind me. There was no lock, so I knew I had better hurry. When I turned around, I saw why it was so cold in there. Behind the toilet where a window used to be was now a gaping hole, hammered completely through the concrete wall. I peered out of the hole cautiously. Outside, I could see the parking lot behind the building. A bunch of menacing-looking characters were playing Frisbee and drinking beer. I tried as best I could to stay out of their view as I relieved myself, but it was of no use. They all gave me the finger as they spotted me. Reflexively, I gave it back. The guy threw the Frisbee to me. I threw it back and peed all over everything as I did. It soared for a mile as the guys cheered it on. They all gave me the finger again in some sort of peer approval ritual. I zipped up and got the hell out of there.

Yuppie Death March had just taken the stage and were tuning their instruments. They must have been a popular band, judging from the number of beer cans being

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thrown at them; *Pap Smear* only had half as many thrown at them. Gretchen's brother showed his gratitude by spitting on the people in the front row.

"Holy shit," Leon grumbled. "He's gonna start a freakin' riot." He still did not fathom what this place was all about.

"Wanna dance?" a husky voice said from behind me. I turned to see a woman standing between me and Gretchen: a very large woman. She was dressed in what I can only describe as a black leather executioner's outfit. Gretchen peered angrily around the woman's torso.

"I said, do you wanna dance?" she continued as she stared down into my eyes.

"Ah, I ah..." was all I could sputter before Gretchen came to my rescue.

"Excuse me," Gretchen said loudly as she shoved her way around the woman. She put her arms around me and sneered at the hulking figure. The woman gave us both an evil smile and disappeared into the crowd.

"Looks like I'm going to have to keep an eye on you, good lookin'," Gretchen said. "Or one of these mamas is going to take you home and put you in a diaper."

I did not like the fact that the woman was still loose out there in the room. I took a safer position on the wall next to Leon. Gretchen jerked hard on my arm.

"Let's go up front," she yelled as Peter Lorre let out his opening scream. The dance floor began to pulsate like bat guano on a cave floor.

"We're not going out there, are we?" I asked.

"No, of course not. It's just more fun if you get up a little closer."

I felt the energy level increase as we fought our way around the perimeter of the crowded dance floor. We were able to get a good view of Gretchen's brother as he postured onstage, oblivious to everything around him. We held each other and listened to a couple of their songs. After awhile, I began to feel more comfortable up there. I guess it was because the people up front seemed to have a single-mindedness about them. They just wanted to groove with the music and express themselves. The people to the rear, however, were a bunch of loose cannons who had no outlet for their frustrations.

My chain of thought was interrupted by a large manicured hand that grabbed me by the collar and yanked me backward. In a split second, I was in the middle of the dance floor.

"You're mine now, sugar!" the big leather woman yelled as she spun me around. She meant it, too.

She shoved me into the melee. I began bouncing from every elbow, knee, and forehead in the place. Bobby inadvertently gave me a particularly nasty shot to the groin. I was getting dizzy from the blows and the incessant spinning. But I dared not fall; the spike heels and combat boots could have done some serious damage. I decided to ride out the fracas as best I could until the song ended. Luckily, the songs didn't seem to last very long. Plan "A" ended about five seconds later when the leather woman grabbed me again.

This time, she pulled me toward the front. I couldn't get away from her; she was too strong. She threw me into the crowd of people right in front of the stage. I panicked as they took hold of me and began drawing me up to the stage, shouting encouragement. These were the jumpers.

"No!" I yelled, but it was no use. They began pushing me up onto the stage. I could see the leather woman bulldozing her way through them. She had a crazed look on her face. It was clear that I had only one option.

Since my feet weren't even touching the ground, I reached up and grabbed the corner of the stage and pulled myself up and over the edge. Someone sprayed beer in my face and I stood up. The place looked completely different from this perspective; it was like Hell itself.

Across the room, I could see Conley and Barbie looking at me. Conley put his hands over his eyes.

A blood-curdling scream behind me made me turn around. Peter Lorre was standing just a few inches away; he had the microphone cord around his neck. His face was purple. I had to get out of there. I aimed for a spot away from the leather woman and jumped headfirst. Six or seven thrashers, strangers all, broke my fall and lowered me gently to the floor. In the chaos that surrounded me, I suddenly had a strange feeling of peace and contentment; the jump had been better than a primal scream therapy session. My solace was interrupted by a tug on my arm. It was Gretchen. She pointed over my shoulder.

"We had better get out of here!" she yelled. I looked to where she was pointing. The leather woman was fighting her way through the crowd toward us. She was not happy. I grabbed Gretchen and headed for the door.

Conley and Barbie met us as we sprinted to the exit. Leon saw what was happening and was already halfway down the stairs. We evaded the bottle urchins and broke through to the art gallery. From the cursing coming from the stairwell, I could tell that the leather woman was gaining on us. It didn't look good. Suddenly, we heard a pathetic scream. As we were running to the door, I turned around to see what it was. The leather woman came tumbling down the last few steps like some kind of giant mutant beetle. Bobby emerged right behind her. I could tell from his mischievous expression that he had just tripped her.

"Let's go, bud!" he yelled triumphantly as he flew past us. The leather woman lay sprawled on the linoleum floor, shaking her fists at us and cursing a blue streak. We bolted past Adolph Eichmann and his flag-headed henchman. Leon was holding the door for us already and joined us as we ran past him. We made the fifty-yard dash to the car in no time. I fired up the big engine and we peeled out, almost colliding with the water truck that was spraying the sidewalks. None of us said anything for several minutes.

"How about some music?" Gretchen finally said.

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“Only if it’s country-western,” Leon demanded. We all concurred.
I put in a Merle Haggard tape.

13

I drove to my real house the next day. Luckily, Conchita was out so I didn't have to explain anything to her. I picked up my notebook computer from the study, but not before I took a look around the place. For a while, I had been worried that I had grown too accustomed to my new life. Just as Jane Goodall must have found it so, I thought that I may have difficulty assimilating into my former lifestyle upon my return. But as I sat in the jacuzzi and sipped a snifter of my best brandy, I realized that assimilation would be no problem.

Before I left the house, I phoned Mr. Dickey and updated him on my progress. He said that he was impressed with my thoroughness and gave me a pep talk that would have made Vince Lombardi proud. I did not fall for this pep talk routine and I guess Mr. Dickey could sense it. By the end of our short conversation, he had agreed to cut the time frame for this study by one month. This meant that I had only one more month to gather all of the data that I needed; I was going to be cutting it pretty close.

I drove quickly away from my neighborhood to avoid being spotted by anyone. Once I was back on my side of town, I was able to relax enough to think about what I needed to do next. I motored along the back roads of a light industrial complex as I thought.

I had accomplished just about everything I needed to do in the way of studying the family life of the target group. I had shopped where they shopped, lived where they lived, ate where they ate, drank where they drank; I had even dated the way they date. I had covered the gamut of these people's life experiences. Except for one: employment.

My workman's comp injury ruse had worked well for me so far, but now it was counterproductive. I was missing out on a large part of the suburban blue-collar lifestyle, and this information would be crucial to my study. These people liked to refer to themselves as the "working people" and indeed they were. Leaving this part out of my study would jeopardize the accuracy of my research. It was time to get a job.

I needed something that involved manual labor. Conley had already said I could work for his wrecker company. On the surface, this seemed like a perfect job. But as I thought about it in depth, I decided against it. Wrecker drivers were sort of like modern-day cowboys. They worked alone, riding the trails to and from the next job. A wrecker driver was really a vagabond: a romantic, solitary figure. As much as I would have liked to, I declined Conley's offer. I needed a job that involved more social interaction with other manual laborers. There was another factor: time. I had only one month to get the feel of a job. Allowing time for the job search

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process, this was not much. Therefore, I decided to compensate for the short time period by choosing a job that involved heavy manual labor. Just like those crash courses in foreign languages, I would immerse myself into the job completely. I now had my plan: a crash course in toil and drudgery.

As I cruised through the industrial area, I tried to think about the worst job in the world. Factory work was out; it would take far too long to get hired by one of those companies. Construction work was out, also; the current building bust had pretty much killed that industry. Agriculture was out; I was studying an urban group, not a rural one. I was at a complete loss until I heard a truck horn blaring. I looked up to see a garbage truck cross the intersection in front of me.

A greasy-looking guy leaned out of the driver side window and gave me the finger as the truck continued down the road. "Watch where you're goin', asshole!" he yelled. I looked around and determined that I had run a stop sign at the intersection and had almost hit the guy. As the truck drove away, I came to the realization that this incident must have been an act of God. I turned and followed the truck.

It was a privately-owned garbage truck, not a city vehicle. Its main job seemed to be emptying dumpsters that were located on the grounds of various businesses. I remembered an article about this in the Wall Street Journal. The private solid waste industry was lucrative indeed. I even have some solid waste stock in one of my portfolios. I watched the garbage truck for about an hour as the driver and his assistants skillfully maneuvered dumpsters onto the two prongs of a hydraulic lift mounted on the truck. They then would raise the dumpster over the top of the cab, where it was turned upside down and emptied of its contents. I noted the company name and address on the side of the truck and headed in that direction. I, Edward Vincent Prescott III, was on my way to becoming a garbage man.

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The company headquarters for Progressive Refuse Management was appropriately housed at the end of a huge sanitary landfill on the south side of town. I parked the car on the dirt parking area and got out. My nostrils were immediately filled with the horrible stench of ten billion pounds of rotting garbage. Blowing whirlwinds of dust only aggravated my discomfort. I closed my eyes and made a beeline to the building. As I walked, I thought I heard a familiar sound. I looked up to see thousands of seagulls swarming both overhead and in the vast expanse of the landfill. It was pretty disheartening. In a way, they were just like me: completely out of their element.

I could feel grains of sand in my teeth as I entered the office. A gruff-looking secretary sat behind a glass window. On the wall was a list of instructions for prospective applicants. I read them carefully, took one of the applications and a pencil from a coffee can, and sat down in one of the school desks that they had

provided. The application was only one page. I found that I had to lie on it when it came to my educational background and previous employers; I did not want to appear over-qualified. I put down that I had dropped out in the tenth grade but got a G.E.D. last year. For previous employers, I listed two fictitious companies in Mississippi. The very last item on the application was a question regarding my criminal record. Other than the public drunkenness thing, I did not have one. Monica had even managed to have the case expunged, anyway. Besides, I really doubted that this company would send a prospective garbage man's fingerprints to the FBI in Washington to see if he was lying on his application.

After I finished, I returned the application to the secretary. I had expected to be told that I would be called in a few days. Instead, the secretary told me to wait for a few minutes and someone would be out to talk to me. The company must have really needed employees. I sat in the desk and waited. Within a few minutes, a very rotund guy came out and called my name.

"Back here," he growled. I followed him to a small cubicle, where he motioned for me to sit. He took his seat behind the desk as if he were Donald Trump.

"I'm Delmer Kepling. I'm the personnel director here. So you wanna job?" he said as I looked at his necktie. It hung only to the middle of his torso.

"Yes."

"You got any experience?"

"No."

"We need drivers, buddy. Drivers with experience."

"I'm sure I can do any job that you have," I said with confidence. I could tell immediately that Delmer Kepling did not like confidence.

"Yeah. Well, I tell you what, Prescott. I'll look over your application for a while and you'll be hearing from me. Okay?" he said as he stood up from his chair. I could tell by the surly tone in his voice that I was getting the brush-off.

They say that every man has his price. Delmer Kepling's was fifty bucks. That's what I bribed the cretin with to get my job on a dumpster truck. I could tell by the shocked look on his face that he was not accustomed to taking graft, at least not from a guy trying to grovel his way into the most lowly occupation in the western world. Delmer told me to report to work at five o'clock the next morning.

∞

The world is a much different place at five o'clock in the morning. To the best of my recollection, I had never been awake that early, except of course for a few all-night frat parties. The drive to the landfill was strangely quiet and eerie. The glaring lights of the company compound were a relief as I pulled into the employee parking area, which was already filling with vehicles rapidly. I parked my car and watched the other workers as they walked to the building. I assumed that we all had to check in there prior to getting into our trucks, so I fell in behind the others.

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I was wearing my genuine cowhide steel-toe boots that I had purchased at Garment City; I knew that they would come in handy one day. I was also wearing a new pair of jeans from Garment City; Malloy had always stressed the importance of first impressions, so I wanted to look sharp. I followed the others into the building. One by one, they took their time cards from one rack, stuck it into the time clock, then placed it in another rack. Since the cards were in alphabetical order, I had no trouble finding mine. I then followed the guys into a large room where everyone was sitting around drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. No one seemed to notice me; the turnover rate at this place must have been very high. The other workers were a truly dastardly-looking bunch. Conley and his crowd looked like Harvard men compared to these guys.

The room gradually filled and at exactly five-thirty, a supervisor came in and posted a duty roster on the bulletin board. All of the guys scanned this as they filed out the back door. The supervisor called my name, handed me a new set of company coveralls, and told me that I would be assigned to Truck 14. I fell in behind the others and walked out into the truck compound. There were about seventy trucks lined up in military rows, but only ten or so of them were dumpster trucks. The others were the more traditional trucks, where the men rode on the back and put the trash in by hand. I was glad that I had bribed my way onto a truck that did not require the actual handling of trash; scientific purity notwithstanding, there were some things that I would just not do.

I found Truck 14 and walked up to it. One crewmember was already there. He was a middle-aged guy with a Marine Corps haircut. Muscles like steel springs pressed against his crisp and starched coveralls. He was sitting on the truck's running board, eating a pink coconut cupcake and drinking a carton of chocolate milk. My triglyceride level went up just looking at the stuff.

"You the F.N.G.?" he growled.

I did not know what that was. "I don't know; am I?" I responded as I slipped into my coveralls.

"Yeah; you must be," he said. "I'm John Lee Paxton; just call me Buster."

I held out my hand and he shook it, leaving pink coconut icing all over my fingers.

"We gotta wait for the other guy to get here. These units have a crew of three," Buster said as he climbed into the cab and started the engine. He looked out over the compound and said loudly, "Shit," as the third member of the team approached.

"Whoa; I'm ridin' with the Colonel today, man," the guy said as he saw Buster in the cab. "Cool."

He was a young man of about eighteen. He had long hair, almost to his waist, and was wearing a satin tour jacket for a rock group called *Nocturnal Emission*. I introduced myself. The kid appeared to be under the influence of some sort of drug.

“Let’s roll,” Buster commanded. I went around and climbed into the cab next to the kid. Buster handed the kid some sort of manifest and we drove out of the compound.

“You still like the rail?” Buster asked the kid.

“Yeah, man.”

With this, Buster pulled the truck over to the side of the road and stopped.

“Let him out,” he said to me. As I opened the door to let the kid out, Buster said to him, “You doin’ acid today?”

“No acid today,” the kid replied as he went to the back of the truck and took up his roost on the running board. I got back inside and Buster continued down the road.

“Dumbass hippie bastard,” Buster hissed, “Last time he did acid, he fell off the goddamn unit six times. Fucked up my safety record. But at least he ain’t a dink or a Cuban. I hate ridin’ with those pukes. I told the bossman that I wouldn’t ride with a zipperhead under no circumstances. I spent two years killin’ those motherfuckers and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna work with ‘em,” Buster snarled.

I just nodded. I realized at that moment why the kid chose to ride on his precarious perch outside of the truck; it was probably safer out there.

“This is my first day, you know. What’s the procedure?” I asked, trying to change the subject. Buster straightened in his seat and began talking in a monotone drill instructor’s voice.

“The objective here is to empty the garbage receptacles here on the manifest. As soon as we’re done we can go home, but we still get paid for a full day’s work. We go in and get out quick. We make no noise and leave no mess.”

Sounded simple enough, but I still had a few questions.

“The system seems pretty automated. Why do we need three people; the machine seems to do all the work.”

“Because the management of this company is a cluster fuck of dumbass WOP dago dipshits who don’t know their collective ass from a hole in the ground,” Buster observed, “and because some of the scumbag customers, instead of calling us when their units are full, pile their garbage all around the thing and we have to get out and pick it up by hand.”

I could tell that I had opened up an old wound for Buster. As I was to find out as time went on, everything opened up an old wound for Buster.

We arrived at our first objective in just a few minutes. The dumpster sat on the parking lot of a print shop. Buster skillfully maneuvered the big truck in front of the dumpster, then skewered it on the prongs of the hydraulic lift. He manipulated some levers on the floor and the dumpster was raised overhead. The truck shook violently as Buster used the controls to jostle the box back and forth in order to shake loose any remaining trash.

“That little trick is what separates the men from the boys,” Buster said proudly. He gently returned the dumpster to the ground and we drove on to the next

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objective. As we sped down the road, I looked into the rearview mirror on my side of the cab. In it I could see that the kid was hanging onto the handrail at a forty-five-degree angle. He was holding on with one hand and was staring intently at the other hand, which he was moving slowly back and forth and up and down in the headwind.

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked Buster. Buster looked into my mirror at the bizarre scene.

“Frybrain little shit,” he said. “Yeah, he’ll be all right. What he needs is a month at Parris Island; that would straighten his ass up. But I like having him on board, really. He doesn’t bother me while he’s on the outside. Now, that Cuban commie they put on here sometimes; that’s a different story.”

“How long have you been with the company?” I asked.

“About six years now; ever since I got out,” Buster stated. I was afraid to ask from where it was he got out; it was better that I did not know.

“We work straight through on this unit,” he continued. “That means no lunch stops. So start bringing your lunch if you want to eat.” Eating on board a garbage truck did not seem very appetizing.

We only encountered one receptacle that day that had garbage piled around it. The kid and I got out and threw the trash back into the box after Buster had emptied it. He then emptied it again. Unfortunately, this box had belonged to a Mexican restaurant. Not that this made the garbage smell any worse, but it did mean that I had to sit there and listen to about fifteen minutes of racial slurs and expletives, many of which I had never heard before and hoped that I would never hear again.

All in all, it was a pretty easy job. It took only six hours to empty twenty dumpsters. Buster knew his route so well that he didn’t even need to refer to his manifest except at the beginning so he could see the new customers. At the end of the run, we went back to the landfill and emptied the truck where some huge bulldozers were pushing the trash into piles. Seagulls were everywhere. After we dispensed the trash, we went back to the compound and ran the truck twice through an automated washing system.

“I win the cleanliness award just about every month,” Buster boasted. “Most of these swingin’ dicks don’t even bother to clean their units at all,” he added disgustedly. He carefully aligned our truck with several others already in line.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s it, Prescott. Just clock out and go home,” Buster said. The kid just smiled blankly.

We all went into the office and punched our time cards. I took the opportunity to remove my dusty coveralls. Buster led the way to the employee parking lot, where he stepped up into a huge four-wheel-drive pickup and sped away. The kid’s car was parked next to mine. As we neared our cars, the kid said to me, “Hey, man. Did you know that one of your pant legs is about three inches shorter than the other?”

I looked down. He was right. No wonder Garment City had sold them so cheap.

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Barbie was outside feeding the dogs when I arrived home. She waved at me to come over. The dogs sniffed me viciously as I walked toward the house; I guess they could smell the landfill odors on my boots. To a dog, that must be pretty special.

“You got a job?” Barbie asked when she saw my coveralls.

I had hoped to keep the job secret from the Fulmers. Being a garbageman would certainly have caused them to look down upon me. They might have been white trash, but they had standards. The cat was already out of the bag, so I went ahead and told her about my job at Progressive Refuse Management. She gasped.

“You gotta job there? Conley’s been tryin’ to get on with them for a year,” she said.

“What?”

“Yeah; that’s the best job in town.”

“It is?”

“Sure. You work about thirty hours a week, but get paid for forty. And the money’s good, too. How much you makin’?” she asked.

I realized that I didn’t even know.

“Ah...” I began to say.

“They started off Conley’s brother at seven-fifty an hour, not to mention all the benefits and such.”

“Yeah; that’s what I’m making,” I said.

“Conley’s gonna be pissed. Like I said, he’s been tryin’ to get on there for a long time. How did you do it? You know somebody or somethin’?”

“Well, sort of,” I said. “A cousin of mine works there.”

“You think he could get Conley on there, too?”

“Maybe. He had to really push to get me on there, though. But I’ll ask.” I excused myself and went to my trailer, the dogs sniffing me all the way.

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The next two weeks were pretty much uneventful. I established myself as a permanent member of Truck 14’s crew. Except for Buster’s prejudices, I found him to be a pretty fascinating guy. He had a great sense of pride in his work. It seems that the dumpster truck crews were considered to be the elite members of the company; the Green Berets of the solid refuse world, if you will. Various people, mainly F.N.G.’s or “fucking new guys,” were assigned to our truck on a rotating

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basis. All of these guys were decent people and we had no problems. However, one morning the boss assigned a guy to us that upset the smooth, military precision of our team. I knew we were going to have trouble when I saw the guy approach. Buster's face turned crimson with anger as he started the engine.

It was the Cuban.

"Goddamn commie spic puke," Buster hissed.

The Cuban was a little guy. He was wearing a bandanna tied around his head and was carrying a paper bag with his lunch inside. He said hello to me and seemed to be a friendly enough guy, not the insidious revolutionary that Buster had painted him to be.

"You get in first," Buster said to me. He did not want the Cuban to sit next to him. I was not looking forward to being in the middle of these two for the entire day, but there was not much I could do about it.

Buster was sullen and withdrawn as we made our rounds. The Cuban guy had obviously driven with Buster before, so he was being careful not to make any waves. At about ten o'clock, we made an unusual stop in a public park for lunch.

"What are we stopping for?" I asked Buster.

"You'll see," he said as he gestured to the Cuban who had already taken a seat at a picnic table and was removing his lunch from a paper bag.

"Why doesn't he just eat it in the truck like we do?" I asked.

"Oh, he would; I'm the one who decided to take the break. I can't stand to watch the guy eat," Buster said as he stuffed a big piece of chewing tobacco in his mouth. "Go see for yourself."

I walked over to the picnic table and sat across from the Cuban guy. He held up a burrito and offered it to me.

"You want one?" he asked in very good English.

"No thanks," I said, trying to figure out what was so bad about this guy's eating habits. He used a napkin and ate with his mouth closed; I did not see any problem. I got up and went back to the truck.

"What's the big deal?" I asked.

"He's eatin' cow eyes, for crissakes!" Buster said.

"Cow eyes?"

"Those burritos are filled with scrambled cow eyes and shit like that."

Granted, it wasn't the most appetizing delicacy for those of us north of the border, but Buster had zero tolerance for ethnic differentiation. He sat on the running board and glared in contempt at the guy as he ate. After the Cuban finished eating, he filled his allowed thirty-minute lunch period by reading intently from a paperback romance novel.

Buster looked at his watch and then ordered everyone back into the truck. In minutes, we were speeding back to the route. He said to us, "Fidel here has cost us a lot of time, people. We're gonna have to make it up."

We hit the next four dumpsters in record time. As we left the parking lot of the fourth dumpster, Buster handed me the manifest and asked, "What's the address of the next place? I know it's a new one."

I scanned the list and gasped. The next objective on the list was the River Walk Country Club. My country club.

We drove along the winding roads around the golf course as we made our way to the clubhouse. Fond memories filled my mind as I watched the golfers on the manicured greens. My recollections were interrupted every now and then by comments from Buster sprinkled with the words "pansies," "wimps," and "faggots."

We finally made our way to the clubhouse, where our dumpster was located. As fate would have it, this dumpster was overflowing with garbage. That meant that the Cuban and I were going to have to get out of the truck and load the garbage by hand. Being a Wednesday, everyone who was anyone was out there. I prayed a silent prayer, pulled my welder's cap down over my eyes, and got out of the cab.

Buster took an eternity to empty the thing. I stood there and looked around nervously. He finally lowered the box to the ground, and we began to throw the extra trash into it. We were almost finished when I heard a humming noise. I turned to look behind me. Approaching on the path were two golf carts. I recognized the foursome. It was Megan Brantley and her sister in the first cart. Megan was the CEO of our rival ad agency. In the next cart were Debbie Langford, the women's pro, and her friend Patricia Rhineholt. Patricia was the club gossip and resident flirt.

I was doomed. I dropped my bag of trash and made a dash for the truck. As I bolted into the cab and cowered on the floor, Buster yelled at me, "What the hell are you doing?"

I ignored him and peered cautiously over the top of the door. To my horror, the Cuban guy yelled "hello" and flagged down the carts. He walked over to the women and began conversing with Megan's sister. I then remembered that Megan's sister was an immigration attorney.

"Oh, no," I moaned.

"I said, what the hell are you doing?" Buster shouted.

I had to think fast. Buster was in no mood for games.

"That's my ex-wife out there," I stammered.

"So?"

"So, ah, she's got a warrant out on me for not paying child support," I said, trying to appeal to his sense of masculine loyalty.

Buster grabbed me by the collar and snarled, "Buddy, I hate a man who don't live up to his responsibilities."

Things looked bad. Not only was I about to be discovered, I was going to be discovered while being a garbage man. Not just that, but I was also going to be discovered as a garbage man while getting beaten up by another garbage man. It was time for drastic action.

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“But it’s not my kid!” I said to Buster.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“Because...” I said, “the kid was black.”

Buster let go of me. A look of shock crossed his face.

“You mean...you mean...you mean?” he could not finish whatever it was he was trying to say. I just lay there and nodded. “Oh, man. Don’t worry, I won’t give you up,” he said. He then leaned out of his window and yelled at the Cuban guy. “Hey! Get your ass in gear! We ain’t got all day!” The Cuban finished throwing the last of the bags in the dumpster and climbed back into the cab, where I was still on the floor.

“Just sit down and don’t say a fuckin’ word,” Buster said to the puzzled Cuban.

Buster quickly wheeled the truck away from the clubhouse. He said, “What’s the world coming to,” about ten times before I finally got up from the floor.

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The country club fiasco was not the only close call that I had during my tenure as a garbageman. A few days after this incident, my adaptability under pressure was again put to the test.

The day had gone like any other. Buster and I were riding alone because we had quite a few people off work with the flu. Buster had a hangover and was being particularly nasty, so I decided that I needed some space away from him. It was a beautiful day and I was feeling pretty good, so I decided to tempt fate by taking up the highly-coveted running board position on the outside of the truck. Buster called this the “rear guard” position for some reason.

“You think you’re ready for that?” he asked me in the parking lot of the print shop, where he had just emptied the dumpster. “You ain’t a spring chicken anymore. It takes a lot of skill to ride out there.”

I remembered the kid who had ridden the running board on my first day on the job. He had been under the influence of a mind-altering chemical and he had managed quite well. If he could do it, so could I. Besides, I might not have been as lithe as I once was, but I certainly was not about to be committed to a nursing home, either.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

Buster shook his head softly and motioned with his thumb for me to get out of the truck. I got out and took up my position on the running board. Buster put the truck in gear and headed out onto the road. I could see him watching me in the big rearview mirror. After a mile or so, he apparently saw that I was holding my own, so he quit watching as much. The running board was about a foot wide and the handrail was sturdy, so I had no trouble hanging on to the truck. Once Buster gained some speed, I really began to enjoy myself.

I have been hang gliding before, and I must say that the sensation of riding on the back of that garbage truck, with the cool wind blowing in my face, was very similar. I held on pretty tight at first, fearing the ubiquitous chughole that could send me flying into oblivion. After a few miles, I began to relax somewhat and was able to take a more leisurely position.

As I was absorbing the wild blue yonder, I began to observe something. People in the passing cars were staring at me. I don't know if they were staring at me because they were wondering if I was going to fall off, or because they thought I was the scum of the earth. I felt uncomfortable with this at first, until a station wagon full of kids pulled up next to the truck. They were all staring at me like I was Big Bird or something. But after awhile, I could tell that they were getting bored because I had not fallen off. I took one of my hands off the rail where it had been glued and waved at them. They came alive, smiling and pointing. I decided to give them a little more. I took my hand off the rail again and dipped my body out over the road a little. The kids stared in astonishment. I took both hands off the rail, just for a second. The kids loved it. I bent my knees and leaned far out over the road, hanging on with one hand. By mistake, I looked down; the road seemed to be passing under me at a thousand miles an hour. I glanced up at the kids. Their faces were pressed to the glass to get a better field of vision. I was still leaning over, moving my empty hand like a wing in the oncoming wind, when the kids' mother decided to take a right turn. We all waved goodbye to each other.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw another car take the station wagon's place. I was really enjoying myself, so I was getting ready to continue my antics with this replacement. The first rule of show business is to size up your audience, so I gave the car a quick once-over. When I got a good look at the car, I froze in terror. It was Marshall Harding in his Lexus again. He was staring right at me.

I quickly turned my head and faced the truck. I could hear Harding's car; it was still next to me. I could feel him staring; I just knew that he had recognized me. It was all over. Once he got a positive I.D. on me, he would head straight for the country club and shoot off his mouth. I couldn't take that chance this far into the project. My heart raced when I heard a voice from inside the car yell, "Hey!"

I had to get away. Harding pulled in behind and began tailing us. The running board went all the way around the back of the truck. I went for broke and shimmied my way around to the other side. On the left side was a ladder that led up to the roof. No one had ever told me what it was for and I never asked. There was one thing that I did know; it was my only way out. I started to climb it. Luckily, it was out of Harding's line of sight. As I was about halfway up the thing, Buster decided to make a quick lane change. In an instant, my feet slipped off the rung and I was hanging on for dear life.

"Buster!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Stop!" He couldn't hear me over the noise of the engine. He made another lane change and I saw my life flash before my eyes. I managed to get my footing back. Once I had stabilized, I looked back at

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Harding. He was out of the line of sight again, so I continued up the ladder. The hole that the garbage went into took up about half of the roof. I tried to keep my balance on the undulating surface while I looked for a place to sit. At that moment, Buster hit a huge chughole and I did a perfect Olympic somersault right into the garbage hole. I landed back first on top of a pile of garbage three feet deep.

I managed to get to my feet by the time Buster arrived at the next dumpster. As he maneuvered the dumpster onto the lift, I scanned the inside of the bin for some sort of shelter. There was none; the walls went straight up on all sides. I headed for the wall behind the cab and tried to remember what dumpster was next on the manifest. I could hear the lift rising overhead. If the dumpster was the one behind the No Luck Lounge, I was finished; five hundred beer bottles dropped from twenty feet could do major harm to a person. I braced myself for the end.

I realized that we were at the Mexican food restaurant as soon as the first tortilla hit my face. Within seconds, three days' worth of rotting kitchen and table refuse, most of it liquid, cascaded over me. Of course, Buster had to do his jostling maneuver so he could get every last drop of the stuff out of the can and onto my head. He put the dumpster back down. This particular one was always full and usually had several bags of garbage piled around it. There was a long pause as Buster waited for me to come from the running board to put the bags in the dumpster. I wiped the slime from my eyes and waited.

After a few seconds, I could hear him calling for me.

"Prescott! Get your ass up here!"

I yelled back at him, but he could obviously not hear me. I heard him open the door and step out of the cab.

"Prescott? Quit screwing around back there," he shouted. "Prescott? You back there?"

I heard him run to the back of the truck. "Oh, shit!" he yelled as he sprinted back for the cab.

"Buster!" It was no use; he could not hear me over the noise of the engine.

I sat patiently in the swill while Buster retraced our route, shouting out of his window, "Prescott? Prescott?" like I was a lost puppy. If I had not been hidden inside of the bin, I would have felt pretty embarrassed.

I had a brainstorm. I took a handful of the garbage and threw it out of the hole towards the front of the cab. The truck stopped immediately. I threw a couple of more handfuls until Buster finally figured out where I was. In a few moments, I saw his face peering at me from the top of the hole.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said with relief.

"Having a Mexican lunch; what does it look like I'm doing?"

"You're a sick motherfucker, Prescott," he concluded.

"Just get me out of here."

He lowered a tow rope to me and I managed to climb out. Harding's Lexus was nowhere in sight; Buster must have lost him somewhere along the line. I started to

make up a story to explain what had happened, but Buster didn't care to hear it. "Let's not mention this to anyone back at headquarters, okay?" he said as he threw me a towel from thirty feet away. "It would screw up my safety record."

"No problem. I won't tell anyone if you won't," I said as I wiped some guacamole from my forehead. "I won't tell a soul."

The first day of my last week undercover was uneventful. I went to work as usual and had given them my notice. I had even given Delmer Kepling another fifty bucks to make sure that he considered Conley Fulmer's application very seriously when he was hiring my replacement. He said that he would. I went home that afternoon and found Conley waiting for me. I could tell by the look on his face that he was up to something.

"What's goin' on?" he asked.

"Not much," I replied. "What are you doing home from work already?"

"I called in sick. I had some rat killin' to do." Rat killing was Conley's expression for running necessary errands.

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, bud; like enterin' us in the Highball One Hunnerd," he said with a grin.

"What's that?"

"You don't know? Oh, yeah; I forgot you was from Mississippi. The Highball One Hunnerd is the big race out at the Speedoplex this weekend. It's gotta five hunnerd dollar purse."

"Are you talking about a stock car race?"

"Hell, yeah; I ain't gonna run it on foot," Conley said.

I had forgotten about my promise to Conley. When I had baited him initially, I had promised him that he could drive my car for me and we would race as a team. He was now calling my bluff.

"Oh, that's great," I said, trying to think of some way out of it.

"Good deal!" Conley yelled. He looked like a little kid as he jumped up and down in front of me. "We can start on the car today; I'll tune her up and get her runnin' smoother than a cat's ass."

He ran to his trailer to get his toolbox. I went inside my trailer and started to change clothes. I did not like the idea at first, but as I thought about it for a while I realized that it might be fun. That would be my last weekend with these people and I may as well go out with a bang instead of a whimper.

I watched through the window as Conley returned with his tools and opened the hood of my car. I smiled at his obvious excitement. All in all, Conley and Barbie had been pretty good to me. They were honest but simple people who would probably have done anything for me. I did not know how I was going to tell them about myself, especially my reason for befriending them in the first place. During my study, I really had used and manipulated the Fulmers' affection for my own selfish interests. For a minute, I thought about not telling them of the BillyMart undercover assignment. I considered just lying to them; telling them that I was moving back to Mississippi and then vanishing to my own part of town. I rejected

this idea for two reasons. First, chances were that I might run into them one day. Second and most importantly, though, I found it difficult to completely deceive them anymore. I had told them a few white lies, such as the back injury ruse, but I could not bring myself to tell them another lie of such magnitude. Therefore, I made the decision to tell them the truth, come what may.

They could react in three ways. First, they could get angry with me for using them. I would have to be very diplomatic if I were to avoid this. They could also feel very humiliated. A snooty rich guy coming down to the other side of the tracks to study them just like Jane Goodall did with the monkeys. It could be devastating to them emotionally. Third, they could just act like it was no big deal and maybe even think it was funny. I did not hold much hope for that. I had to be very careful in the way I explained things to them. I decided to tell them Saturday night after the race.

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Saturday morning was spent putting the final touches on the car. Conley had spent every evening that week working on it.

“Race starts at three,” Conley said as he closed the hood for the final time. “We have to check in at two. That gives us a couple of hours. Let me get the old lady and we can go on and get somethin’ to eat before we go to the track.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. Conley put his toolbox in the trunk of my Bonneville and went back to his house. I went inside and took a quick shower. My role in the race was to be purely technical. The race was to be a short one that would require no refueling. Therefore, there was no need for a pit crew. There was a track rule, however, that required each car to have a crew on hand in the pit area. Conley said that the track management wanted this so there would be someone there to take the driver to the hospital in case he crashed.

Conley came back with Barbie and we loaded the car onto the trailer. I wheeled the Bonneville out of the trailer park with Conley and Barbie in the back seat as usual. On the way to the track, we picked up Gretchen at her house. She gave me a big kiss as she answered her door. She and I had gone out every weekend since our blind date. I really felt comfortable with her, especially for someone whom I had only known for a short time. I guess that we had dispensed with about five years’ worth of getting-to-know-one-another with that one night at the drive-in. A porno flick is quite an icebreaker.

I knew that I would have no trouble telling Gretchen the truth. She was slightly suspicious of me to begin with, so she would be more apt to accept my story without getting angry or hurt. She was also much more sophisticated than the Fulmers and would understand the scientific reasoning behind the assignment.

“Let’s stop at Linda’s,” Conley said. “Today’s calf fry day.”

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Gretchen looked at Conley in disgust. I did not know what Conley was referring to until we stopped the car at Linda's Cafe and went inside.

"What are you gonna eat those for?" Gretchen asked Conley as we sat in a booth.

"He does it every time he races," Barbie stated. "Says it gives him 'the killer instinct'." Conley just smiled.

"What are calf fries?" I asked. Conley chuckled.

"They're gross; that's what they are," Gretchen said as the waitress brought the menus.

"I know what I want," Conley said to the waitress boldly. "I want the all-you-can-eat calf fry special." He then looked at me and said, "Are you in, bud?"

"That depends; what are they?"

"They's bull nuts. They slice 'em up and fry 'em like oysters," Conley explained. He must have thought that the hormones in the bull testicles made him more aggressive or something. I ordered a turkey sandwich on wheat.

"Pansy," Conley said.

No one ordered the calf fries except for Conley. As we watched in revulsion, Conley slurped down three huge platefulls of the disgusting things. He washed these down with a beer and two cups of coffee. This was apparently some sort of pre-race ritual for him. I almost lost my turkey sandwich on several occasions.

He finally had his fill and we left the cafe. Between belches, Conley directed me to the Speedoplex Raceway. It was about five miles south of the sanitary landfill where I was employed, right in the middle of nowhere. I assumed that it was located in such an isolated spot in order to avoid the anti-noise ordinances of the local municipalities. We wound our way down several gravel roads that led to the racetrack.

I had a mental image of what an automobile racetrack should look like. Unfortunately, this track did not live up to that image. I was expecting something that looked like the track in Indianapolis; this place looked more like a junior-high football stadium. The track was situated at the far end of a huge muddy parking area. I got the feeling that the entire property had once been a farm. A set of old wooden grandstands stood at the end of the parking area. Beyond these was the track itself. It was a flat, oval-shaped dirt track about a hundred yards across the middle. The circumference of the track must have been about a quarter mile. On top of the grandstands was a small pressbox. The grandstand area was protected from the track by an eight-foot cinder block wall. In front of this wall was a clear area of dirt that had been divided into sections with baseball chalk. Another shorter cinder block wall separated this area from the track itself. I assumed that this sectioned area was the "pit" that Conley had referred to earlier. Each of the dozen or so sections in the pit had its own table.

As we checked in with the guard at the gate, I saw that some drivers were already there working on their cars. The other cars looked like they should be in a

demolition derby. I had seen better-looking cars at Big Steve's junkyard. Needless to say, my hot rod stock Chevy Malibu with its aerodynamic wing on top turned a few heads as Conley motored it slowly into our assigned pit section.

Conley was in heaven. The girls and I walked behind him and then sat on the table as he climbed out of the car.

The other drivers soon lost interest in us and returned to their work. Conley took his flame resistant driving suit from Barbie and slipped it on.

"Yeah," he said as he zipped up the front of the coverall, "I done everything that needed to be done. I adjusted the clutch, reset the idle, rebuilt a couple of wheel brake cylinders, and some other little stuff. I think we're ready, bud." Conley gave me a high five. I looked at the girls. They were excited. This was going to be fun.

Conley and Barbie went to find a restroom, leaving Gretchen and me to wait for the race inspector to come and check the car. At about thirty minutes to race time, he arrived. He walked around the car first, checking items on a clipboard as he went along. Then he stuck his head in the driver's compartment. Next came the engine. This seemed in order, also. He completed the procedure by pasting a huge number 8 on the side of the car. Without a word, he went on to the next car.

Barbie ran up to us.

"Conley's sick," she said gloomily. "I think he ate too many calf fries."

That did not surprise me. It was sickening enough just to watch him eat the vile things. We followed Barbie to the grandstand area, where people were steadily filling the place. The atmosphere was festive.

"Here he is," Barbie stated as we arrived at the restroom facility. Conley was sitting on the ground with his back to the wall. His face was green.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"It's them calf fries," he moaned. The mere mention of the words sent him dashing to the men's room with his hand over his mouth.

"What are we gonna do?" Barbie whined.

"I guess we'll have to forfeit the race," I said.

"What about you?" Barbie asked. "Can't you drive?"

I had no intention of driving in this race. I had absolutely no experience and would certainly wind up getting killed. The idea of driving at high speed around a dirt track with eleven other cars was not appealing to me at all. No, driving was out of the question.

"You're forgetting about my back," I said.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot," Barbie said. Gretchen looked at me suspiciously; she knew that there was nothing wrong with my back.

"So the great Fulmer weenies out again," chuckled a voice from behind me. I turned around. A greasy man with a cowboy hat and a three-day growth of beard approached us. He was wearing a racing coverall. Barbie turned red with anger as he joined our group. "So Conley boy is sickie-poo, huh?" the guy said to Barbie. I

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saw her fists clench. “And his sidekick here is gonna chicken out, too.” He pointed a thumb at me.

“You get outta here before I kick your ass, Jimmy John!” Barbie yelled in the guy’s face. I would lay odds that she could have done it, too.

Jimmy John wisely backed away from her. He laughed and turned toward me.

“Too bad we ain’t gonna go for it out there, pretty boy. I’d have loved to drive right up your ass,” he said to me as he walked away.

“Who the hell was that?” I asked Barbie. She was so angry that she was shaking.

“That was her ex,” Gretchen explained. “She dropped him and married Conley. He and Conley always wind up driving against one another. He usually wins, too.”

Conley came out of the restroom at that time. He looked worse than before.

“What the hell did that son-of-a-bitch want?” he asked us.

“He’s just rubbin’ it in that we’re gonna have to forfeit the race,” Barbie said as tears welled up in her eyes. On Conley’s green face I could see his embarrassment and humiliation.

I was feeling pretty bad myself. I had been using this back injury ruse to avoid my weaknesses. And now my friends were about to be completely humiliated by this goon because I was too afraid to face my fears. But this guy had not just humiliated the Fulmers; he had insulted me personally. He may as well have slapped me across the face with his glove; he had challenged me in public.

As I looked at the Fulmers leaning dejectedly against the restroom wall, I decided to accept this challenge. My honor was more valuable than my personal safety. “Pretty boy” indeed; The Princeton Flash was about to teach this buffoon a lesson in chivalry.

“Give me your driving suit,” I said to Conley. “I’m gonna leave this asshole behind like a fart in a dust storm.”

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We drew numbers out of a baseball cap to determine our starting positions. I was going to be on the third of four rows. Jimmy John was going to be one car ahead. All of the drivers walked back to their cars. Jimmy John gave me an evil smile as he crawled into his Dodge Charger. I climbed into the Malibu and cranked the engine by pushing the start button. For some reason, the B-17 drone of the motor did not bother me now. I was so intent on beating Jimmy John that I could not hear the noise. I put on Conley’s crash helmet, his goggles, and his gloves. Luckily, the shift pattern on the car was the same as my BMW, so I had no problem getting it in gear.

One of the track employees motioned that it was my turn to get in line on the track. I put the car in first gear, let out the clutch slightly, and gently pushed on the gas. The car lurched forward and almost hit the guy before I could get it to stop. I

knew that this car had some horsepower, but I had no idea it was that powerful. I had to ride the brake all the way to my starting position. It took about five minutes for all of the other cars to get in line. As I waited, I looked over at the retaining wall at the edge of the track. Conley, Barbie, and Gretchen were looking over the top of it and waving at me. I gave them a thumbs-up. A track employee came along and made them move to the relative safety of the pit area, where they stood on the table to get a better look. Conley could barely stand up on his own.

Conley had briefly outlined the race procedures before I got in the car. The race would consist of fifty laps around the dirt track. I knew that the short dirt track was not two miles long. How they came up with calling this race the “Highball One Hundred” was beyond me. Regardless, the object of the race was to finish the fifty laps first, of course, but it was also important to avoid getting knocked off the track by the other drivers. Apparently this tactic was considered fair play.

A guy stood on top of the retaining wall as everyone revved their engines. I revved mine, too. The guy lifted and dropped his green flag. Everyone took off.

I punched the accelerator and sped into the pack. Before I had even reached the first turn, I had been hit three times by other cars that were trying to eliminate me from the race early. It must have been my Cherry Bomb High Luster Super Metallic paint job that incited such aggression. I managed to keep control of the car, but I came to the sudden realization that chivalry was not all it was cracked up to be.

Mud from the track slung onto my goggles through the open window, and I found that I could not wipe it off without losing control of the car. But I could still see well enough to dodge a few swipes from Jimmy John. He and I were neck and neck in the middle of the pack. By this time, I had lost some of my nervousness. As I looked over at Jimmy John, I decided to go for broke. A. J. Foyt would have been proud of me as I cut the wheel hard to the right, smacking the Charger soundly. Jimmy John sneered at me and I did likewise. I could see my Malibu’s deluxe metal flake paint all over the side of his car.

I held my own for the first ten laps. Three cars crashed into the hay bales that surrounded the track. One of them managed to return to the race, hay sticking out of his front grill. I was feeling pretty good as I went into the number three turn on lap eleven. There were only two cars in front of mine as I took my foot off of the gas pedal in order to decelerate into the turn. Nothing happened. I punched the accelerator and let off of it again. Still nothing happened. The throttle was stuck.

I braked hard to avoid hitting the wall. I could smell the brake pads burning under the power of the engine. I managed to make it into the straightaway, where I passed the car that was in second place. The Malibu sped toward the next turn. I pumped the gas pedal hard, trying to get the throttle loose. It did not work. I had to brake again as I approached the turn. This time, I felt the sickening sensation of my brake pedal going steadily to the floor; the hydraulic system had obviously sprung a leak; most likely the result of Conley’s mechanical ineptitude. I hurtled into the turn at full speed. By some miracle, I managed to keep the car on the track; maybe that

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silly wing on the top really did work after all. At the end of the turn, I passed car number one. I was in the lead.

I looked into my rearview mirror. Jimmy John's Charger was all the way at the rear of the pack. I wanted to beat that slob so bad I could taste it. But I also wanted to live. As my car rocketed into turn three, I knew what I had to do. I reached down and pushed the start button. Nothing happened. I pushed it again. The engine still screamed. Evidently, the button only started the engine; it did not stop it. There must have been some other method for stopping the engine. Unfortunately, I did not know this procedure. I hurtled through the turn and once more the wing kept me on the ground.

In the straightaway, I realized that the only way left to stop the car was to take it out of gear. I had avoided doing this earlier because I knew that the engine would blow as soon as I put in the clutch; taking the resistance away from the engine without decelerating would be too much for it. But I now had no alternative. I pushed the clutch pedal and waited for the engine to explode. It didn't. I looked down. The clutch pedal had come undone and was lying at my feet. The Malibu was now completely out of control.

I jostled the car left and right to try and slow it down before the turn. This worked to some degree, but I still scraped the hay bales some as I made the next turn. Cars were beginning to pull off of the track onto the infield as I continued; they could tell that something was wrong.

In my freshman physics class, I had learned that an object in zero gravity can spin in a circular orbit indefinitely. Unfortunately, my Malibu was on planet Earth and therefore was about to prove Newton's First Law of Motion by flying off this track and into oblivion, wing or no wing. It was time for drastic action.

I was travelling so fast that I was now approaching Jimmy John from the rear. His Charger looked like it was sitting still as I approached. I caught him at the edge of the retaining wall. Pulling along on his left side, I saw him look over at me, scowling. I made a decision; if I was going to go, this bastard was going with me. After all, he was responsible for all this. I laughed demonically and cut hard to the right. I slammed his car against the retaining wall and kept my wheel cut in his direction, pinning him to the concrete. Jimmy John could only look at me helplessly as a roostertail of sparks thirty feet long spewed from the side of his car as it scraped along the wall. Even over the din of the engines, I could hear the crowd cheering.

As we neared the next curve, I looked over at Jimmy John and gave him the finger just as I pulled away from him. The creep's car went headlong through the stack of hay bales at the end of the turn before jolting to a stop against a chain-link fence.

Justice was mine.

All of the other cars had left the track by now; they must have thought I was crazy or something. My stunt with Jimmy John had slowed me enough to take the

turn with no problem. But my throttle was still stuck and I knew that I had to get off the track before I wound up crashing into the stands and hurting someone. I was heading into turn one when I made my decision.

I cut the wheel early and took out a few hay bales in the infield as I cut across the turn. I then went straight across the track and into another stack of bales. On the other side of the hay bale wall was an open area about a hundred yards wide. At the end of this area was a chain-link fence with various advertisements hanging on it. I aimed the car at a large Pennzoil sign on the fence and closed my eyes. Thirty yards from the sign, I was already travelling at eighty miles an hour. As I neared impact, I made another decision. If I made it through this alive, I swore to myself that I was going to kill Conley Fulmer: Mr. Badwrench.

The Malibu ripped through the fence as if it was a Frederick's of Hollywood fishnet stocking. The sign disintegrated. Through the dirt and dust and wood I could see only sky. The car's engine revved loudly, and at that instant I knew I was airborne. A few seconds later I hit the ground. When I opened my eyes, I was in the middle of a pasture. Cows scattered in terror as the howling Malibu tore across the tranquility of the field. I don't know if the cows were more frightened of the car or from the bloodcurdling screams that were coming from inside it.

I somehow managed to avoid striking any of the cows as I flew across the field at top speed. In front of me was a long line of trees. Trees and cars don't mix, so I turned the car in a wide circle and went in the opposite direction. The traumatized cows saw me coming again and bolted in every direction. Cows and cars don't mix, either, so I cut my wheel to the left. I could see something ahead of me. It was a ribbon of white: a road. I pulled the speeding Malibu parallel to it. It was really more of a path, not a road, but I decided to get on the thing before I hit a tree or a stray cow. I saw an opening ahead in the low shrubs that ran alongside of the road. Surprisingly, I managed to jump the car onto the gravel road rather smoothly. I stared ahead and prayed that no other vehicle was using the road today. After about a mile, the road blended into another more developed road. There was scattered traffic on this paved street, and I found myself passing cars and trucks with alarming frequency. Getting on this road had been another bad idea.

As I stared ahead, I saw that the road was coming to a fork. Approaching on the left fork was a truck towing a speedboat. On the right fork were two people on mopeds. In the middle of the fork sat a large shack with a sign on it that read: BUD'S BAIT AND TACKLE. Bud sat in a lawn chair out in front of his beloved stand. I aimed the Malibu directly at him and prayed for him to get out of the way. The last thing that I remember seeing was Bud sprinting from his chair at the last moment, just seconds before I cut the Malibu into a sideways skid and plowed into the bait stand.

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The cameras captured it all. As fate would have it, a television crew was at the nearby lake doing a story on water pollution. They were on the scene at Bud's Bait and Tackle in a matter of minutes.

I was in my hospital bed when I first saw the clip on the ten o'clock news. There I was, amongst the pulverized rubble of the tackle store, being pried from what was left of the Malibu by some firemen. There were six fire trucks there in all, not to mention a helicopter and about ten police cars. The firemen finally got me out of the car with a portable hydraulic jack. Four of them carried my unconscious body and put it on a stretcher. Wiggling minnows and dead shrimp were all over the place. In the background I could see two policemen trying to restrain Bud from killing me. As I lay there in bed and watched the spectacle unfold before me, I wished that Bud had been allowed to do so.

The reporter on the scene said into the camera, "...and the driver of the runaway stock car has been identified as..."

"Oh, no," I moaned.

"...Edward Vincent Prescott III. He was taken to St. Andrews hospital and is listed in good condition."

"Oh, my God. I can't believe this."

Luckily for me, I had only received temporary injuries, including a mild concussion and some bruised ribs. The Malibu's safety cage and airplane harness had saved me. According to the attending physician in the emergency room, I had also sprained just about every muscle in my body. I could barely move because of the soreness, but some muscle relaxant pills were helping with the pain. It looked as if the only thing that was going to be permanently damaged was my reputation.

Two months of undercover work without a hitch, and now I had been exposed. Not just exposed; I had been advertised. Millions of viewers had just watched the fiasco of the year, starring Eddie Prescott: dirt track stock car driver *extraordinaire*. I was finished.

The phone rang within minutes of the news broadcast. It was Mr. Dickey.

"Prescott?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes."

"My word, man! Are you all right?"

"Well, not really, Mr. Dickey..."

"What the hell were you doing? I didn't know you were into that sort of thing."

"I'm not, Mr. Dickey..."

"You mean, this is all part of that BillyMart thing?"

"Yes, it is."

“Oh, no, Edward; I never intended it to go this far. Are you seriously injured?” I could tell from Mr. Dickey’s voice that he was racked with guilt. He should have been.

“Well, I’m pretty banged up; I might be in here awhile...” I lied; I only needed to be in the hospital another day, but I had decided to hide in here as long as possible.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Edward. I’ll pick up the expenses. You return to work whenever you are able, do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“And Edward, I think that your dedication and fortitude have been commendable. You can be assured that your efforts will not go unrewarded, especially in the financial sense. Understand?”

I understood all right. M had sent James Bond on a suicide mission and Bond had unexpectedly survived. Now M was going to reward Bond with a trinket. Big deal.

“That’s fine, Mr. Dickey.”

“Now you get your rest, young man, and we’ll see you back here whenever you are ready. Remember that your full recovery is what we want. Don’t rush back to work until you are one-hundred percent.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said before I hung up the phone. Something in Mr. Dickey’s tone was bothering me. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was not right. Perhaps he was just embarrassed for me, or maybe he was embarrassed for the company. I turned the telephone off so no one else would bother me.

I rang for the nurse. Service was surprisingly good at this place and the staff was very professional. The paramedics had brought my unconscious form to the county hospital. I guess they reasoned that a guy driving a dirt-track stock car could not possibly have health insurance and therefore needed a charity facility. I do not know what transpired during the first hour or so after my arrival. What will be indelibly burned into my memory, however, is what I experienced when I awoke in the emergency room.

The first thing that I remember was the blinding overhead examining lights. The second thing that I remember was gazing into a pair of crazed, bloodshot eyes just inches from my face. Startled, I screamed at the sight and sat up on the examining table. I screamed again, this time out of both the pain of my injuries and at the sight of the owner of those bloodshot eyes; it was the Antenna Man whom I had met in jail.

The foil-covered figure assumed a defensive position in the corner, making a cross with his arms as if I was Count Dracula. Just at that time, a nurse came into the examining room.

“What are you doing in here?” she said to the guy. He pointed at me. “Go back to your table, Lucas,” she demanded. “Somebody will be there in a minute.”

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Lucas backed out of the room, still making the cross. At that instant, I realized that I was very cold. I peered under the thin sheet that covered me. Underneath it, I was naked. On the counter at the opposite side of the room, I saw my clothes that they had obviously cut away when I arrived. As the nurse approached, I felt pretty stupid.

“Don’t worry about Lucas,” she said to me, “he’s harmless. He comes in here every Saturday night to get away from the Skylab transmissions.”

“Skylab crashed twenty-five years ago,” I said feebly.

“*You* explain it to him,” the nurse said. “The doctor will be here in a minute,” she continued as she checked my pulse. “Just relax; you’re going to be fine.” She scanned the monitors to which I was attached as she waited for the doctor. I don’t think she really needed to be there; she was just protecting me from another incursion by the Antenna Man.

The doctor apprised me of all my injuries. He was rather shocked that I was not more seriously injured; he almost seemed disappointed. He decided to admit me to the hospital for observation, even though all of the X-rays and other tests had proven to be negative. I did not complain; all I wanted to do was be sedated. My body felt like it had been run over by a train.

They wheeled me into the corridor to wait for my admission paperwork to be prepared. I just lay there, naked under the sheets, in the crowded hallway as a steady stream of doctors, nurses, policemen, derelicts, bleeding gang members, and pregnant women passed by me. A nurse and an orderly finally came. The nurse made me sign a few forms. They had evidently found my insurance card in my wallet because all of my information was already on the form. They seemed surprised that I was covered; the nurse gave a funny look as they wheeled me upstairs to my room.

The room was a double. Luckily, the other bed was empty. I could only imagine being put in there with someone who had some sort of contagious disease. That seemed to be the way my luck was running. My body was so stiff by this time that the nurse had to give me a muscle relaxant shot before I could even put on the ridiculous hospital gown. I crawled into my bed and promptly fell asleep. I awoke to the theme music of the ten o’clock news. My story fit nicely between the weather forecast and the sports segment.

I rang for the nurse and ordered some Demerol.

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It was evident that the BillyMart undercover assignment was over. I had done all that I needed to do, far beyond the call of duty. It was time to go back to the world and resume my old life. But underneath my logic, I still had a vast amount of curiosity concerning my study. I wanted to make some more observations, but my cover had been blown. But even stronger than my desire to learn more about this

other world was my desire to avoid hurting those people who had come to be my friends.

The Fulmers came to visit me just after breakfast on Monday. I did not eat very much of the meal; it tasted like it had been shipped from San Quentin. I gingerly pushed the tray over to the side. My body was still as stiff as a board and hurting like hell. I was pretty much immobile on my hospital bed and would be that way for a few more days, according to my doctor. There was not much else I could do, so I was groping for the television remote when the Fulmers sheepishly came into the room. Conley looked terribly embarrassed. He walked behind Barbie as if her bulk could hide him. It almost did.

“How are you feeling?” Barbie asked. Conley just looked at the floor in shame. Somehow he knew that he was responsible for the wreck.

“I’m pretty stiff and sore, but the doctor says I’ll be okay,” I answered. I had been very angry with Conley because of his incompetence. If I didn’t know any better, I would have believed that Conley deliberately sabotaged the Malibu prior to the race. But this sort of thing just wasn’t in him. He had no motive for doing this intentionally. And judging from his performance on the Bonneville repair job, I could see how he could make mistakes of that magnitude. Besides, when I looked at Conley’s pathetic puppy-dog eyes, I knew that I could no longer hold it against him.

“What happened?” Barbie asked.

“Well, first the throttle stuck,” I answered.

“It musta been that new idle cam,” Conley ventured.

“Then the brakes went out...”

“Wheel cylinders. Shouldn’t have used that cheapshit Jap parts kit when I rebuilt ‘em...”

“Then the clutch fell off,” I concluded.

“Fell off?” Conley said as he scratched his head. He couldn’t think of a reason for that one.

“I had to run through the fence before I went into the stands and killed somebody.”

“But not before you squashed ol’ Jimmy John’s balls to the wall,” Barbie said with a smile. Conley could not help but smile, too. Both of them gave me that knight-in-shining-armor look. We all had a good laugh. I had forgotten about wrecking Jimmy John; it was one hell of a move, come to think of it. I was feeling pretty proud until I remembered to ask about Jimmy John.

“What happened to him?”

“Nothin’,” Barbie said disappointedly. “Just broke his leg, that’s all.”

I felt relieved that he wasn’t dead, but I also felt myself wishing that both of his legs had been broken. Maybe even his arms. I shook off my macabre thoughts and decided that justice had been served. Chivalry lived.

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“Look, bud; I’m sorry about the car. I didn’t try to mess it up, really. I guess I ain’t the best mechanic in the world...” Conley began to apologize.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I know you didn’t do it on purpose. It was sort of fun, anyway.” It was not really fun at all, but I thought I had better relieve the guy’s guilt.

“You sure, bud?” Conley ventured.

I held out my hand and Conley shook it. It would take some time, but he would get over it eventually. Besides, I needed to clear the air so I could drop the bomb on them. It was time to reveal my true identity.

“Sit down over there,” I said to them as I pointed at the empty bed. “I have something to tell you.” They sat on the bed and looked at me like little kids. I thought about what I was going to say for a minute, then proceeded.

“I’m not who you think I am,” I said. The first rule of oration is to get the audience’s attention. I had theirs.

“What do you mean?” Barbie asked.

“Well, my name is Eddie Prescott, but I am not from Mississippi.”

“Where are you from?” Conley asked.

“I’m from this town; the River Walk area.”

“You mean that rich part of town? By the country club?” Barbie asked.

“That’s it.”

The Fulmers gave one another an I-think-he’s-under-the-influence-of-pain-killers look.

“Really. Look at my driver’s license. It’s in my wallet there on the nightstand.” Conley reached over and took my license out.

“Look; he’s wearin’ a suit,” he said to Barbie as he showed her my picture. “His address is in that area all right.”

“So what’s the deal?” Barbie asked.

“Well, it’s like this: I am in the advertising business. I make a lot of money and I am very good at what I do. You see, my specialty is figuring out what people are likely to respond to in the way of TV commercials, radio ads, and that kind of thing. In other words, I am like a weatherman. A weatherman tries to tell what the weather will be like in a week. I, on the other hand, try to predict what people will buy in a week and why they will buy it.” I looked at them. They were not following me.

“So what does this have to do with us?” Barbie asked.

“Well, my latest job is for a company that, ah...” I couldn’t say what I wanted to say. I couldn’t say anything about the Fulmers fitting into the target group profile. I just couldn’t do that. It was time for some fast talking.

“Well, let me put it this way. I am a spoiled rich kid and have been so my entire life. I’m worth millions; I don’t have to work if I don’t want to. I do it because it’s a challenge and it keeps me from getting bored. That’s the problem...”

“That don’t sound like no problem to me,” Barbie said. Conley nodded in agreement.

“Well, it is if you have to plan an ad campaign for a company that gears its market for working people.”

“Working people?” Barbie asked. This was the crucial moment.

“Yes. People who go out every day and work for a living. You see, I don’t know what that’s like. I’ve never had a real job in my life; one that required any physical labor, that is. I never lived in a house that didn’t have a housekeeper and a gardener. I have never had to do the things normal people have to do in everyday life. And since I don’t know what that’s like, I can’t develop an advertising plan for this company until I know for myself what it’s like to do it. Do you understand?”

“But what does this have to do with us?” Conley asked. He was still lost. Barbie evidently wasn’t.

“What he’s sayin’, honey, is that he come to live with the workin’ people so he would know what it was like to go out and work every day; to work with his hands. He can’t make TV commercials about something he don’t know nothin’ about. So he come down to our side of town to live like we do, right?”

She had summed it up fairly well.

“That’s about it. I hope you aren’t mad at me.”

“What for?” Conley asked.

“Because I lied to you about everything.”

“You didn’t really lie,” Barbie said, then thought about it. “But I guess you really did, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“That’s no big deal. He really couldn’t tell us the truth if he wanted to live like us. Everybody would have treated him different,” Conley said to his wife.

“I guess you’re right,” Barbie stated. “You really a millionaire?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“You got a big house?” she continued.

“Yeah; and you two are welcome to come over any time. Bring the kids, too; I have a pool.”

“All right!” she said.

“What commercials have you done?” Conley asked.

“Have you ever seen the ones for Pagan Lust cologne?” I asked.

“You mean the ones that have that girl in ‘em; the one with the big...” Conley’s question was interrupted by a sharp blow to the ribs from Barbie’s elbow.

“Those are the ones,” I answered. “And the commercials for Trans America Airlines?”

They both nodded.

“PKR computers?”

They nodded again.

“I’ve done a bunch of them. Magazine ads, too. I’ve done it all.”

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My physical therapist came in for my daily massage. It was the only part of the hospital stay that I enjoyed.

“It looks like you are going to have to go now,” I said to them. Barbie came over and gave me a hug. Conley shook my hand, glanced at the therapist, and then held up his cupped hands in front of his chest as soon as Barbie’s back was turned. He mouthed silently, “Big hooters...”

They both walked towards the door. Before they left, Conley leaned back into the room and said, “I told everybody that there was more to you than meets the eye, didn’t I, bud?”

“You had me pegged all along,” I responded. The therapist made me roll over and then began her massage.

Things had gone very well, much better than expected. I had managed to avoid alienating the Fulmers and had apparently preserved our friendship. I had feared that I would infuriate them, but it turned out that they were pretty good sports about the whole thing. Perhaps I had just underestimated the level of tolerance that these people possessed. Regardless, I felt very good about the outcome. The Fulmers had been my main worry. The only person left to tell now was Gretchen, and that wouldn’t be a problem.

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The first subpoena came as I was preparing to eat lunch. The process server was a balding man of about fifty who looked like an ex-cop. He came into the room and asked my name. I told him and he handed me the writ. Without saying a word, he turned and walked out of the room. I read the cover of the subpoena. It appeared that Speedoplex Raceway, Inc. was suing me. The initial hearing was set for next month. These people didn’t waste any time. I was getting ready to call Monica Fontaine when Gretchen arrived.

She must have just come from work; she was still wearing her 7-11 uniform. She had an arrangement of flowers in hand.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as she kissed me on the forehead.

“Stiff, but better. Thanks for the flowers,” I said. She put them on the nightstand.

“I came to visit you yesterday but you were asleep. Did you get my note?”

“Yes, it was sweet. Thanks.”

“What did the doctor tell you?” she asked as she sat on the bed next to me.

“Just some bumps and bruises. I’ll be okay in a few days.”

“You don’t have any family here, do you?”

“Ah...” I stammered. I knew that I was about to tell her the truth about myself and I didn’t want to lie. “Well, I do, actually.”

“That’s good,” I could tell that Gretchen’s mind was on something else besides my family status. “Just how injured are you?”

“Well...”

Gretchen grabbed the control that adjusted the bed.

“You ever done it in a hospital bed?” she asked as she pushed the button that raised the middle of the bed.

“Ah, hold on a second,” I said as my midsection was rising. “I’m pretty sore. Besides, I need to talk to you about something.” Gretchen took her finger off the button.

“Like what?” she asked.

I gave her the same explanation that I had given the Fulmers, without the weatherman analogy. She sat and listened intently.

“Did you hit your head, by any chance?” she asked, a concerned look on her face.

“Yes, but I’m not imagining all of this. It’s the truth, believe me.”

“So let me get this straight. You needed to study the working class people because you are doing a campaign for some business that what, does business with this class of people?”

“Right.”

“And you were studying us the whole time, like...”

“Like Jane Goodall did with the chimps.” I knew that I should not have said this the moment it left my mouth.

“Like Jane Goodall. With the chimps,” she repeated as a big smile crossed her face. I was relieved; for a second I thought that I had made her mad. She got up from the bed and with the big smile still on her face, walked over to the nightstand and took her flowers in hand. She pulled the flowers from the vase and proceeded to pour the water onto my crotch. It was cold.

I could not move quickly enough to get out of the way because I was still pretty much immobilized from the pain. After she finished pouring the water on me, she dropped the flowers and vase on my stomach. She then walked calmly over to my lunch tray. With the smile still on her face, she proceeded to methodically dump the food onto me as well. Things seemed to be escalating rapidly. The smile on Gretchen’s face was growing more maniacal by the second. I painfully groped for the emergency call button that was clipped to my pillow. I managed to reach it just as Gretchen reached the dessert. I pushed the button as she dumped a bowl of tapioca pudding on my face. Without a word, she then walked to the door. As she left the room, I could see that the smile was still on her face.

I was wiping some of the pudding away when I heard the door open. At first, I thought it was the nurse. It wasn’t. It was a guy who looked like a clone of the process server who had come earlier.

“You Edward Prescott?” he asked as he scanned the smorgasbord on my torso.

“Yes.”

“This is for you.”

David L. Kilpatrick

It was another subpoena. This time, James John Fornier, AKA Jimmy John, was suing me.

“Today ain’t your day, is it, pal?” the process server said to me.
Indeed it wasn’t.

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By that evening, I had received two more subpoenas. Bud the bait man and the farmer who owned the cows added themselves to the list of litigants who were after me. I called Monica and put her on retainer.

16

By Wednesday, I was ready to go home. Actually, I could have gone home earlier, but I decided to stay in the hospital an extra day or so while I ran reconnaissance trips throughout the hospital. Under the guise of walking therapy, I would get dressed and walk around to observe the clientele.

I found the emergency room and delivery room to be the most interesting. The emergency room waiting area was a thoroughly dangerous place. The place looked like a U.N. field hospital triage in Bosnia. And that was the staff; the patients were much better behaved. It was as if an unspoken armistice were in effect there. The waiting area was the only place I had ever seen in which a three-hundred pound biker would sit calmly bleeding in a plastic chair while a painfully cumbersome bureaucracy did everything in its power to slow his admission into the hospital.

The maternity ward waiting room was not like I had imagined it would be. I had expected to see young husbands pacing to and fro, nervously wringing their hands and chain-smoking cigarettes. Instead, I saw a few bored fathers who had obviously been through this before. They usually had several kids with them; the fruits of their past labors. Having babies had become a yearly routine. They looked as if they were in the lobby of their neighborhood garage, waiting while they got an oil change.

I compiled this small amount of data and added it to the rest. Conchita had brought my notebook computer to me when she had visited the day before. She also brought some clothes and the rest of my notes, not to mention some enchiladas. The food was great; three days of Department of Corrections food had been enough.

The doctor released me and I had to be out by noon on Wednesday. Working all day Tuesday and most of Wednesday morning, I had managed to put most of my data on the computer by checkout time. I was ready to begin analyzing it. I would need to be away from this place to do this. It was time to go home. I packed my few meager possessions and called a taxi.

The nurse gave me a few muscle relaxant pills to take with me, but I didn't need them. I was still pretty sore, but not any more than I usually was after the first day of ski season. I hobbled downstairs and signed a few forms at the discharge office, then went out and caught my cab.

As the cab pulled into my trailer park, I saw that the Fulmers had driven my car and trailer home after the race. Conley had even disconnected the trailer from the car and had placed each in their respective places. As I paid the driver, the Fulmer dogs were immediately upon me.

“Get off of him!” Barbie yelled as she ran at the scattering dogs.

“Thanks,” I said. There was no way I could have fended them off without considerable pain.

David L. Kilpatrick

“You must be feelin’ better,” she said as we walked to my door. “When you goin’ back home?”

“I’m not sure, but it has to be pretty soon. I have to start on my project.”

“You know, Conley’s still upset about the race thing. He’s also upset that you’re gonna be leavin’ us. He won’t admit it, but he is.”

“Well, I’m not going out of the country or anything; I’ll be right across town.”

“Yeah, but that’s a long way, Eddie. It’s a lot longer than you know,” Barbara said.

“Yes, I guess it is,” I said. No matter how long I stayed undercover here, I would never know. There would always be that barrier, that indefinable rift between our classes.

“You know my sister’s still pissed at you,” Barbie said, trying to change the subject.

Yes, I knew. I had sent Gretchen some red roses while I was in the hospital. For the first time in my life, my rose strategy had failed. Instead of the apology and reconciliation I had expected, Gretchen spray-painted the roses black and sent them back to me with a card that read: “Eat Shit and Die.”

“How long will she stay mad at me?” I asked Barbie.

“She can stay mad a long time.”

“Can you talk to her?” I asked. Gretchen had not been part of the plan. She was just someone I happened to meet in the process. I really enjoyed her company and would have liked to continue our relationship, but I think I had blown it with the Jane Goodall comment.

“Yeah, I’ll see what I can do,” Barbie agreed.

“Thanks. Tell her that I really am sorry about deceiving her. I didn’t mean any harm. Tell her that my feelings are real, okay?”

“Will do. You be sure and say ‘bye’ before you leave, you hear?”

“Of course I will.”

“Oh, by the way,” Barbie said. “A guy named Delmer Kepling called from Refuse Management today, looking for Conley. You don’t know nothin’ about that, do you?”

I winked at her and said, “No, can’t say that I do.” She smiled and winked back.

I stepped on the milk crate and opened my front door. I had a strange feeling of warmth and comfort as I went inside, as if this was my real home. I had this feeling for only a few seconds, however. It ended when I saw the dozen or so dead roaches that had piled up on the kitchen floor in my absence. Yes, it was definitely time to go home.

I made some coffee and sat at the kitchen table. The first thing that I needed to do was set a timetable for my return to work. There were four months left in the BillyMart account. The original timetable for this assignment had been six months: three for gathering the data and three to design, produce, and implement the

campaign. As it stood now, I was one month ahead of schedule. But I did not have time to waste; I had to act immediately. The longer I waited, the colder the memories would become. If I waited too long, I would lose sight of everything I had learned in the past two months. I needed to get back to work and begin debriefing my staff. With luck, we could get the campaign off and running far ahead of schedule. I was sure both Big Billy and Mr. Dickey would appreciate that.

I picked up the phone and called Mr. Dickey. He was surprised when I told him that I planned to return to work on Monday.

“Are you well enough to get out?” he asked. I had forgotten that I had exaggerated the seriousness of my injuries to him.

“Yes, I am. I’m out of the hospital already and I may go home shortly, maybe even tomorrow.”

“That’s good, Prescott. Very good. But why don’t you just take your time, so you can recover fully. We can hold on without you for a while longer.”

“I’ll be fine. You be sure and tell my staff to be ready to work when I get back,” I said.

“Ah, I will do that,” he said as he hung up.

I was anxious to leave, but at the same time, I really did not want to say farewell to the Fulmers. Barbie had been right; even though I would be just across town, I might as well have been a million miles away. Suddenly, I felt very sad.

∞

I woke up early the next morning and began to pack some of my belongings. I would not need to take most of the things with me since I already had the equivalent items in my real home. Also, I would not be caught dead with some of these things in my real home. My furniture fit in that category. I phoned the rental company and told them to come pick it up. They said that they would send a truck to my trailer late that afternoon.

I left the trailer and paid a visit to the landlord. He was in his usual position on the couch, drinking beer and watching television. I told him that I was moving out. He only muttered, “Give me back the key and don’t leave a bunch of shit in the place.” That was as close to a goodbye as I was going to get from this guy, so I went back to my place and waited for the rental truck to arrive.

They came at about five o’clock. I sat on the hood of my car and drank my last beer as I watched them move the furniture to their van. Their timing had been pretty good; Conley arrived just as they were finishing. I was going to wait until he came home so I could say my good-byes to all of them at once. I signed an invoice and the movers departed. I walked over to Conley, who was standing dejectedly by his front door.

“So you’re headin’ out, huh, bud?” he said as I approached.

“Looks that way; I’ve got a lot to do. I’ve been waiting for you to get home.”

David L. Kilpatrick

Barbie came and joined us in the driveway. “We’re gonna miss you,” she said. Conley was getting teary-eyed. I steered the conversation in another direction.

“Well, bud, I want to will you something,” I said to Conley. I put my arm around his shoulder and led him to the end of the driveway. I pointed at the flatbed trailer. “I can’t use that any more, so I’m going to give it to you.”

“But ain’t ya gonna get another runner?” he asked.

“No, I think I’ve run my last race. It’s time to retire.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Conley said.

“Just win the next one for me, bud,” I said as I held out my hand. Conley was really getting choked up by this time. He shook my hand as if I had just thrown myself on a hand grenade for him. I knew that I had better leave before this got messy.

The Fulmers walked me to my car. By this time, their brood had joined us. So had their dogs. I looked down at the kids, who were clinging all over Barbie and Conley. One of the twins stuck his tongue out at me.

“Why don’t you take one of these with ya?” Conley said as he swatted the twin on top of the head. I think he was serious.

I gave them my business card and wrote my home phone number on it as well.

“Call me anytime,” I said. “And be sure and give it to Gretchen, just in case she ever comes around.”

“Will do,” Barbie said as she gave me a big hug. “You take care of yourself. And me and Conley are gonna come and see that mansion of yours soon.”

“I’ll be waiting,” I said. I then shook Conley’s hand one more time. He was really sniveling by this point. “Bye,” I said finally as I got into the Bonneville and started it. I wheeled the car out of the driveway. The Fulmer dogs gave me their customary chase to the edge of the trailer park. I looked into my rearview mirror. The Fulmers were still standing there waving. Conley was wiping an eye with the bottom of his T-shirt.

I had to wipe away a tear or two myself.

∞

Monday arrived quickly. I woke up early that morning; I was dying to get started on the project. I had spent the previous days coming up with several theories and strategies. But sitting at home and brainstorming was one thing; developing concepts and methods that would work in the real world was another. I needed to roll up my sleeves and jump headfirst into the development of this campaign. I needed to get my team rolling, putting nuts and bolts into the ideas. Leading my team was what I did best. In essence, I harnessed the creativity of twenty people and channeled it into tangible, usable commodities. That is what they hired me for; that was what my reputation was based upon. Yes, it was time for me to stand at the helm of my ship and take command.

Shaving was a bit more difficult than it had been while I was undercover. I had found that shaving was only necessary about every three days and on special occasions. And when I did shave, it was perfectly acceptable to do a quick, ineffective job of it. No one really cared. Therefore, it took me a while to remember how to do it right.

I went into my closet and took a deep breath of the cedar-scented air. I chose my favorite suit and got dressed. The collar of my white dress shirt seemed very uncomfortable; I guess that my neck had grown accustomed to the nakedness of a T-shirt lifestyle and was now getting irritated from the starch. I finished the ensemble with my lucky Italian tie. Conchita would not arrive for an hour, so I made myself a quick breakfast. The kitchen seemed cavernous compared to the hovel in which I had been living. I felt sort of self-conscious sitting there at the big table by myself. I finished eating quickly.

I got my notebook from the study and went to the garage. My head felt strangely cold without my welder's cap. The cars were still in the garage, and it took me a while to decide which one to drive. I chose the Range Rover, but when I attempted to start it, I found the battery had died. I cursed a blue streak and tried the BMW instead. Luckily, it started. I made a mental note to call Hans for an appointment, but then remembered his poor attitude when I had called him the last time. I'd let Conley Fulmer work on it before I'd allow Hans the same privilege again.

Driving the Beemer proved to be very uncomfortable. I felt a terrible sense of claustrophobia as I motored to work; it was like riding in a golf cart. The custom-tailored bucket seats had been designed with the most advanced ergonomics that Teutonic engineering could envision, but they were a far cry from the spacious luxury of the Bonneville's genuine vinyl bench seat. And the damn car was too quiet, also. I had to roll a window down in order to hear some noise.

I wheeled into the parking garage and was surprised to find another car in my spot. I recognized the Corvette; it belonged to Haskell Moorehouse. Haskell was the manager of the Accounting Section. He was a typical Type-A if there ever was one, a hard-charger with an MBA and an ego to go with it. To make matters worse, he was also Mr. Dickey's nephew. I parked my car in a visitor spot and walked into the main building. It felt good to cross the marble-floored lobby; I was in my element once more. I took the elevator to the twenty-first floor. Our company occupied the top three floors.

My secretary Ingrid was already making coffee as I entered our suite.

"Edward!" she squealed, almost dropping the carafe. "I'm glad you're back." I could tell that she wanted to give me a hug, but decorum prevented it. I figured what the hell and gave her one, anyway; it wasn't every day Jane Goodall returned from the wild.

"It's good to be back," I said.

"I heard you had some trouble."

David L. Kilpatrick

“You must have seen the news,” I said. Ingrid nodded. “I’ll have to tell you all about it one day. It was an experience that I will never forget, I can assure you.”

I opened my office door and went inside. Everything was just as I had left it. Ingrid had already opened the blinds the way I liked them, revealing a breathtaking view of the city. I sat in my plush chair and twirled it around a few times for old time’s sake. Ingrid stood in the doorway and smiled. After a few seconds, however, the smile vanished and her face took on an entirely different countenance.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She hesitated before saying, “Nothing. Everything is fine. Would you like a cappuccino?”

“Yes, that would be great.”

Ingrid turned and went back into her office. Something was bothering her, but I could not tell exactly what. Perhaps she was just upset that her boss was back at work.

There was no time to waste. I called each of the team members and set a staff meeting for nine o’clock. They all seemed surprised that I was back at work; evidently, Mr. Dickey had neglected to tell them when I was returning. Why he failed to do this, I did not know. He was usually a stickler for details.

The team had assembled in the conference room by the time I got there. Haskell Moorehouse was sitting in my chair. He stood up when I entered the room.

“Welcome back, Edward,” he said with a sarcastic grin.

I looked down at the table. In front of my chair sat a large cake. Sticking out of the frosting was the rear end of a toy racecar. Written around the car was the caption:

HILLBILLY 500 - FIRST PLACE

“Just a little memento from the staff, right, gang?” Haskell said to the others. I could tell by their sheepish looks that they had nothing to do with it; this was Haskell’s baby. Mr. Dickey had evidently tipped Haskell off to my return, but had not told anyone else. The hair on the back of my neck began to rise.

“That’s really...something,” I said to no one in particular. “I appreciate it.”

Haskell moved away from my chair and everyone sat down. I pushed the cake to one side and said, “We’ll have this in awhile. But now, we need to talk about the BillyMart account. I have quite a bit to discuss with you...”

I looked up at the staffers. They were very nervous and withdrawn. Normally, these people were the most enthusiastic, free-thinking bunch of people that I had ever been around. Something was definitely wrong here. From the way that they were staring at Haskell, I could tell that he was behind whatever it was.

“Could someone tell me what’s going on?” I asked.

“Nothing is going on, Edward,” Haskell retorted abruptly. “You’ve just been away for awhile and everyone is still, you know, feeling you out.”

Feeling me out? I had known these people for years; they had felt me plenty. I played his game for the rest of my abbreviated staff meeting, but decided that I would get to the bottom of things later.

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I was sitting in my office when Ingrid uncharacteristically came in without knocking.

“Edward,” she whispered, “I need to talk to you.” I motioned for her to come into the office. She shut the door behind her.

“I need to tell you something, but I don’t really know how to start,” she stammered.

“Just say it.”

“Well, it’s about Mr. Moorehouse.”

The hair on my neck began to stand up again.

“He, well, was appointed temporary head of the division in your absence.”

That was not so bad; somebody had to do it.

“That’s perfectly...” I started to say.

“And he was given the go-ahead to develop his own campaign for the BillyMart account,” Ingrid blurted.

“He what?” I could not believe what I was hearing.

“That’s why everyone is acting so strange. They are already working on a BillyMart campaign, and now you are starting another one. They don’t know what to do. They like you and everything, but they are afraid of Mr. Haskell. You know, because he’s Mr. Dickey’s nephew.”

The enormity of what was happening suddenly dawned on me. The undercover assignment had been a ruse. Mr. Dickey had used me. He took advantage of my compulsive thoroughness to get me out of the office long enough for Haskell to usurp my position. It had all been a setup from the very beginning. They had no intention of using my studies. Judas Iscariot had nothing on these guys.

“And one other thing,” Ingrid said. “The presentation of Mr. Haskell’s campaign is in one week. Everyone will be there, even Big Billy.”

The treachery of these two was unbounded. Not only did they undermine my project, they had even set the presentation for Haskell’s counterfeit campaign nearly a month before the time that I had been scheduled to return. No wonder Mr. Dickey had seemed surprised when I told him that I was coming back earlier than planned.

“Thanks for telling me, Ingrid,” I said as I escorted her to the door. “I owe you a big favor.” I immediately went to Mr. Dickey’s office.

His secretary tried to stop me as I walked past her into his office. He stood up from his chair as I approached.

“Tell me why,” was all I said.

“Why what?” he asked innocently.

David L. Kilpatrick

“You know what,” I said.

“You must be talking about the BillyMart campaign,” he said as he stalled for time. I could tell that he was trying to think of something that would appease me.

“Yes, I am,” I said.

“Well, ah, I had to go ahead and develop a backup plan just in case you didn’t come back on time. You know, due to the accident.”

I knew that he was lying. He and Moorehouse had planned the entire thing before I had even entered the race.

I had two choices at that point. I could have resigned and gone on to greener pastures or I could have fought them tooth and nail. I opted for Plan B; after all, I had beaten Jimmy John Fornier at his own game, and I’d beat these misanthropes at theirs.

“Backup plan, huh?” I repeated.

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Dickey said nervously. “You did not think that I would...”

“No, of course not, Mr. Dickey,” I said sarcastically. “I just want to assure you that my campaign will be ready for presentation on the eleventh.”

Mr. Dickey looked shocked; he had no idea that I knew of the secret presentation date.

“Have a nice day,” I said as I left his office. I knew that I could get the account. Even with only one short week to put it together, I was confident that it would be the better campaign. After all, I had something that they did not possess: knowledge. I had received on-the-job training from the experts. Conley and Barbie, Gretchen and Buster, Leon and Bobby; these people had been my tutors, not to mention my friends. No, Haskell could not duplicate that; he could not feel what I felt.

I would not be able to utilize any of the staff; they were already pledged to Haskell and his program. I would have to do this one on my own. It was going to be tough, but I knew that I could do it. I went back to my office and began to work.

17

High noon finally arrived. I was ready. Working alone, I had prepared the greatest advertising campaign of my career. In one short week, I had turned two months of life experience into a specific plan that would steal, to coin a phrase, the hearts and minds of the blue-collar populace. Simple and direct, it was a work of pure genius.

I say that I worked alone. Actually, several people helped me prepare some of the items that I would need for the presentation. They did this clandestinely, fearing retribution from Haskell if I happened to lose the battle. For it was well known among the rank and file of our organization that the winner of the account would be the new Director of Market Research and Planning. The loser would be designing Yellow Pages ads for the rest of his natural life.

I waited until ten minutes before the meeting before I left my office. The halls were virtually deserted as I made my way to the boardroom; no one wanted to get caught in the crossfire. By the time I arrived, all of the players were already there. At the head of the table sat Mr. Dickey in his usual perch. To his left sat Big Billy Barnes. Next to him was Billy's attorney. The attorney had a tape recorder and was getting ready to take notes; Big Billy was out for blood. Filling the rest of the table were the board members. At the opposite end of the table from Big Billy and Mr. Dickey sat my nemesis.

Haskell Moorehouse was wearing a suit that was identical to Mr. Dickey's. I don't know what he hoped to accomplish with that stunt, but I thought he looked pretty stupid. He sat there with an arrogant smirk on his face, looking more like a fighter pilot after a confirmed kill than an ad man. In front of him sat a laptop and projector; he had brought out the audio-visual big guns.

I placed my portfolio on the easel near the wall and sat in the chair across from Haskell. Mr. Dickey stood up and began the presentation.

"Mr. Barnes, we hope that this new campaign will show that this agency is indeed the finest..." he began to say.

"Just cut the bullshit and get on with it, Dickey," Big Billy interrupted. His lawyer jotted something down on a legal pad.

I could tell that Mr. Dickey was angry, but he obliged the man and sat down. Without a word, he motioned for me to begin my presentation.

I stood up confidently and went to my easel. From the portfolio case, I removed the first of five visual aids that I had put together for the project.

"Television is the medium of choice for the new campaign strategy," I began. "From my studies, I have concluded that it is the number one method of mass communication that reaches our target group. All other media are not effective..."

David L. Kilpatrick

I looked at Big Billy as I spoke; he wasn't even paying attention. It was not as if I was boring him; I had just begun. It was painfully obvious to me at that moment that Big Billy had made up his mind, before he had even come to the meeting, that he was not going to listen to what we had to say. Being there only fulfilled his legal obligation.

I stopped talking as he began cutting his fingernails with a clipper that he produced from his coat pocket. Haskell beamed at me in triumph.

"Choker," he mouthed silently to me.

At that precise moment, I realized what was happening; two months of hard work was about to go down the drain. Two months of undercover work was going to be discarded like yesterday's sink water. All of my painstaking research, all of my analysis... Everything was going to waste. It couldn't end this way. I had been punched out in a bar fight for this project. I had been threatened by thrash-metal punk rockers. I had almost been killed in a stock car race. Hell, I had spent time in the Big House for this project! No, this was not going to happen; I would not allow it. It was time for drastic action.

I set my pointer down on the table, then calmly walked over to Haskell. I grabbed him by his Neiman Marcus tie and jerked him to his feet. As he stared at me in disbelief, I punched him in the nose.

He fell into his chair. The chair flipped over onto a potted ficus tree. The clay pot shattered into a thousand pieces as dirt went everywhere. All of the board members stood up. Haskell didn't; he was out cold.

"Now let's cut the bullshit, gentlemen," I said as I loosened my tie. I looked at Big Billy. He had come alive. On his face was an animated expression that I had never seen on him before: a look of pure delight. He was intently watching me like a schoolboy who had caught his gym teacher smoking in the teacher's lounge.

"As I was saying, television seems to be the medium of choice here. These people don't read newspapers or magazines. They do one thing: they watch the tube day in and day out, all day long..." I continued as two of the board members carried Haskell out of the room. Mr. Dickey followed them.

"Dumping a bunch of money into anything but TV is a royal waste of time. And the television spots will have to be attention-getters. You see, these people watch the most mind-boggling, high-energy entertainment that you could imagine and some that you couldn't. The trick is to produce a commercial so flamboyant that you can capture their attention, much like I have captured yours today, Mr. Barnes."

Big Billy chuckled and lit a cigar.

"I have here five different TV spots, each of which uses situations and personalities already familiar with your customers..." I said as I was walking back to the easel. I never got the chance to finish the sentence. At the direction of Mr. Dickey, two security guards jumped me from behind. As they were dragging me toward the door, I could hear Big Billy yelling in protest.

“Hell, Dickey; let’s hear the boy out...” was all I heard before they slammed the door shut and ushered me down the hall.

Three more guards joined the two who had me pinned against the wall in Mr. Dickey’s foyer. They grew tired of my struggling, so each took a limb and carried me face-up through the hallway. Everyone came to their offices to see what the commotion was all about. I watched the stunned looks on their faces as I went past. As we neared my office, I saw that Ingrid was going to hit one of the guards with a stapler, but I managed to talk her out of it.

They took me to an elevator and used their passkey to express me to the basement garage. There, they unceremoniously dumped me onto the concrete floor.

“Dickey says to get off the property. I want to see you in your car and out of here in five minutes,” the head guard said to me as they got back onto the elevator. I lay there for a while, staring at the harsh industrial lighting above me.

It was all over. For the rest of my life, I would be doing paste-up ads for a tabloid newspaper. And that was if I was lucky; I might be blacklisted out of the industry altogether for this stunt. Oh, well, I always had one job on which I could fall back; I could always scrape up fifty bucks and bribe my way back onto a garbage truck. Every cloud has its silver lining.

I finally pulled myself up off the floor and brushed the dust off my suit as best I could. To get into character, I had driven the Bonneville. It was parked in one of the visitors’ spots by the elevators, so I didn’t have far to limp. I had just reached it when I heard a honk behind me. I turned to see a huge black limousine inching its way closer. As it pulled up next to me, the back window rolled down and smoke billowed out.

“You got balls, son; I’ll give ya that much,” Big Billy chuckled. “I was lookin’ over your stuff up there after you was taken away; you got some good ideas. Maybe we can get together and talk about ‘em. Here’s my card. Call me this week; I mean it. Screw these shitbirds. Neither one of us needs ‘em.”

I nodded.

“That your car there?” Big Billy said as he pointed at the Bonneville.

“Yeah.”

“That got a four-hunnerd?” he asked.

“Yep. Four barrel, too.”

“They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.” He looked me up and down. “Man, I thought you’d be drivin’ a Beemer or somethin’,” Billy said.

“Not anymore.”

He tapped his driver on the shoulder. As the car pulled away, Big Billy leaned out of his window and shouted, “There might just be hope for you yet, son!”

Indeed there was. I started the Bonneville and put in a Lynyrd Skynyrd tape.

Exactly one month after my BillyMart ad campaign hit the airwaves, Big Billy called me into his office. I was apprehensive at first, but Billy told me that his sales had gone up thirty percent. He was so happy that he handed me the keys to a 1949 Cadillac that was waiting downstairs in the parking lot for me. I thanked Billy and went to get my new car. I noticed that the keychain had the word “Peckerwood” engraved on it. That was his nickname for me. Working for Billy wasn’t bad; my salary nearly doubled and the office atmosphere was like being on vacation. No dress code, no pretentious surroundings, no micromanagement. Just nice folks who cared about the job and about each other. Big Billy took care of his people.

I went down to the garage and found the car, a huge two-tone green Coup de Ville with real whitewall tires. It took me a while to learn how to shift the thing, but I managed to get it out onto the road. I was finally driving a car that surpassed even the Bonneville in spacious luxury. The big green monster turned a few heads as I motored by the country club toward home.

Conchita was gone when I arrived. Come to think of it, I had given her the day off. I had also given her the BMW; I just couldn’t stand to be inside the thing anymore. It made me nervous.

I made a beeline to my refrigerator and pulled out a can of Old Milwaukee before sitting down in the living room. I noticed that Gretchen had left one of her porno tapes in the VCR again, so I got up and removed it. She could pick it up and return it to the adult bookstore this weekend when she and the Fulmers came over to swim.

Turning on the television, I saw the familiar face of Bullethead Watson on the big screen. It was one of my BillyMart spots. Bullethead stood in front of an old junk car that was covered with the names of BillyMart’s competitors. After snarling insults at these businesses, Bullethead then proceeded to cut up the car with a power saw. In a time-lapse sequence, Bullethead reduced the car to a hundred small pieces in a matter of seconds. The spot was one of Big Billy’s favorites.

Remembering why I had come home early in the first place, I let out a satisfied belch and changed the channel; *Flying Fists of Pain* was the afternoon movie.

It was a classic.

Finis

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(available Winter 2001)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David was born in the metropolis of Beaumont, Texas in 1961 where he lived a somewhat normal existence until his 18th birthday (his parents might disagree, however). He moved to Fort Worth, Texas at that time and soon became part of the landscape there. He received a B.S. degree in Education from Texas Christian University in 1984. After a semester of teaching English, he decided he would rather work with convicted felons than eighth graders. He became a probation officer at that time, and has been one ever since. He currently lives in Fort Worth with his wife Antonia.

His body of work includes four novels, many short stories, and some poetry as well. His first novel, *In The Way That Elephants Do*, was published by 1stBooks in 2000. He is currently working on two new novels. Visit his web site for more information about him and his work:

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