For
Reba and Bob Jones
aka
Mom and Dad

Special thanks to Zimmern Beharry, my friend from Trinidad,
plus kudos to Dennis Sobin, Director of Prisons Foundation.

All Rights Reserved
by
Darrell Keith Jones

First Draft Copyright 2008
Final Draft Copyright 2019

No portion of this book may be reproduced by any means whatsoever
without the written consent of both the author and the publisher.
# Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Bleached Bones</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Fresh Bait</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Judge Not</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Irish Castle</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>24.</td>
<td>English Lit</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Overnight Express</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Subs Passing</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Shoot Me</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Gator Grub</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Ebollus Maximus</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>28.</td>
<td>MIC Center</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Thor's Hammer</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>30.</td>
<td>There's That</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The Pope</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Fish Knit</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Skuzzy Skank</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Two Kisses</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Dingleberry Pie</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>33.</td>
<td>No Fool</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Road Possums</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Magical Moment</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Say No</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Dark World</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Here Cowie</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Like This</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>The Brick</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Crystal Ebony</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Hooker Hook</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Don't Disbelieve</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note to Publisher: Underlines denote italicized text.
1. Bleached Bones

United States District Court Judge Andrew Silverspoon Moonie glared down his bulbous pink nose at the handsome convicted killer. Between incessant soft ticks from an ornate courtroom wall clock, golden silence briefly glistened like doomed summer dew.

"This is your lucky day, you worthless scumbag," the crazed judge trumpeted, trampling the tenuous tranquility. "Liberal laws may preclude me from having you publicly skinned alive with hot pliers, yet . . ." he paused to shift a Skoal Bandit pouch to the opposite cheek, then spat a looping string of brown slime into a brass pencil holder atop his bulletproof desk, " . . . upon this otherwise glorious tenth morning of April, nineteen hundred and eighty-three, this United States Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky at Lexington hereby imposes a maximum sentence of——"

A volcanic belch erupted from the prosecution table.

"Sorry, Your Highness," the Assistant United States Attorney apologized. "I had buttermilk for breakfast. Please let the record reflect that my responding outburst was strictly involuntary."

The stiff-backed court stenographer looked up abruptly from her shorthand keyboard and primly rebuked, "You need not concern yourself with my record, young man. No such key exists for that special sound effect, involuntary or not."

Resoundingly upstaged during his climactic denouncement, the feisty judge rose to his full height of five feet, one inch, and slammed down an oversized wooden gavel. Its thin stem shattered, catapulting the hammerhead off into the jury box.

Oliver Dweeble, a former carnival hawker and the current jury foreman, was struck in his open mouth, dislodging tobacco-stained dentures onto the lap of fellow juror, Miss Belinda Smythe, waking her from a smiling slumber.

"I am thorry, Mith Thmythe," toothless Oliver slobbered out. "That red-nothed midget clown in the gown tried to ring my carnie bell and win a three-hole, Kewpie doll thex toy."

"Sex toy?" she questioned vacantly.
"Yeth," Oliver confirmed, "thex toy."

Belinda nodded dazed acceptance as she dug a purple pill out of her bleached designer jeans, swallowed it dry and slumped back into blissful repose.

"After three hard decades on the bench," the irascible judge managed to squeeze in, "with nothing to show for it other than my Frankenstein-size hemorrhoids, at last I've finally heard it all. Therefore I order everybody to shut up! Counselor, your strained effort to clear the record, if not the air, is noted. Perhaps we may now bring this demolition derby to its finish line if everyone has run out of gas."

Judge Moonie paused once more to shoot another brown streamer into the pencil holder.

"Good thot," slobbered Oliver from the jury box, one tobacco connoisseur to another.

Moonie acknowledged the praise with a wink before returning to the subject of his ire. "Defendant Kevin Thomas Toler," he now addressed the convicted murderer, "you are hereby condemned to spend the remainder of your contemptible life in prison with no possibility of parole. Ever! Accordingly, you are remanded into the custody of the Attorney General for transport by United States Marshals to the escape-proof federal penitentiary located near the town of Bacon, Illinois.

"Good riddance, Toler, you loathsome maggot. Court now stands thankfully adjourned," he concluded with a soundless swipe of the headless gavel.

The judge commenced his triumphant exit across the expansive courtroom with both elevator wing tip shoes swooshing through the plush green carpet nap. Except for the snoozing Miss Smythe, the remaining general public began rising to leave.

The public defender was stuffing legal papers into his faux alligator briefcase while babbling. "Don't sweat a little old life sentence, Kevin. You're young and now have plenty of time to work on your appeal," he joked with a sneer. "Just a timely touch of my gallows humor there, son. Last year at law school I discovered how
levity lightens loads," he exhaled, releasing a pungent cloud. The reeking stench of fried garlic, poorly veiled beneath a candied breath mint, shook Kevin from encroaching lethargy. As the practiced spiel droned on, Kevin's eyes were drawn to the lawyer's bobbing Adam's apple.

"First, we appeal to the Sixth Circuit in Cincinnati," the toxic whine wheezed, "but they won't even read our brief. Two of those ancient appellate judges have dementia and the other one just sits there frowning. Rumor has it that he is actually dead."

The attorney continued gabbling while unsuccessfully trying to buckle the lid on his bulging briefcase. "Then right on up to the senile Supreme Court, who will just laugh. They only overturn tax evasion verdicts for Wall Street execs. The rest of their time is spent turning down frivolous lawsuits filed by the ACLU which has not won a case since Castro had the Kennedy brothers whacked."

Kevin peripherally registered a half-dozen marshals manning the exits as the odious attorney set the uncooperative briefcase down on his chair seat and sat down on its lid.

"Next we rebound back here to District Court with a motion to reduce your sentence to fifty years," continued the mouthpiece nonstop. "By that time you will have already served half of it. At least the spotlight will be off your case and hopefully the mangy newshounds might be chasing a fresher bone."

The lawyer bounced up and down on the case lid without ever missing a beat in his verbal rhythm assault. "When all else fails, there is always hope for a Presidential Pardon if you come up with the requisite seven-figure campaign contribution. Old age and declining health should mitigate favorably if prison food has not killed you or—"

The lawyer's eyes bugged and his cheeks ballooned as the candied mint rocketed from his puckered lips. The heel of Kevin's right hand had chopped into the public defender's neck, cutting off the oral racket and launching a wintergreen UFO on a rancid
contrail of garlicky exhaust spray.

Kevin vaulted the defense table and sprinted for the door of the judge's chamber, the one exit not manned by any marshals. Judge Moonie arrived at that same door and opened it just as the chaos began. He turned back with a scowl to see a charging killer flanked by six marshals aiming guns in his direction. A toppled lawyer beneath a cascade of fluttering papers completed the wild picture which was captured by an alert newspaper reporter with a blinding snapshot.

Gunfire boomed and the soaring tacky breath mint struck and stuck to the judge's forehead. He promptly fainted, spewing a mouthful of tobacco juice while sprawling haplessly across the threshold of his inner sanctum. His collapse brought about a momentary cease-fire while granting the defendant two life-saving ticks of the ornate wall clock.

Juror Smythe, upon being jolted back into reality, had the presence of mind to retrieve and consume two more pills before screaming into the ear of foreman Dweeble.

The toothless carnival showman spat out encouragement to both sides of the courtroom drama: "Thomebody thoot that crook! Run, boy, run!"

Two bullets were already in flight when Kevin dived across the prostrate body of the judge. The first slug passed between his extended upper left arm and ribs, ripping holes in his windbreaker and shirt without causing bodily harm. The next bullet, however, slashed the side of his head, scalping off a gory strip of hair and skin. Both slugs embedded in the door frame.

The would-be escape artist plunged through the partially opened doorway as more .45 caliber bullets whizzed overhead. He rolled back into the door and sat up with his shoulder to the thick barrier, dug in his heels and slammed it shut before jumping back up to slam home a hefty dead bolt.

Curious crunching arose from the base of the door. Four plump and purpling fingers were firmly trapped within the small gap between the door bottom and the dark green carpeting like
stuffed sausages on a bed of spinach.

All residual bedlam from the courtroom was easily drowned out by the human siren wailing against the door like the sinful squall of a politician on Judgment Day. His Honor had awakened.

* * *

Chief Ronald Milner, FBI Agent-In-Charge, disapproved. The status report on his desk began with a reasonable portrayal of facts but quickly soared into fanciful speculation.

The lengthy document purported that at 8:28 this morning, criminal defendant, Kevin Thomas Toler, a twenty-six-year-old Caucasian, had fled the twelfth floor of the Federal Building after being convicted of first degree murder. The victim had been none other than Raymond Milner, a local G-man legend and the Chief's first cousin.

When diving into the judge's chamber, the report claimed that escapee Toler most likely sustained two serious gunshot wounds: one to the shoulder area and the other to the head. Bleeding was profuse.

FBI agents on the ground floor of the building had been alerted at 8:28 and emerged onto the street at 8:29. Six federal marshals had accessed the chamber room through a secondary door and freed a howling District Court Judge who was somehow stuck under the door connecting the public courtroom with the judge's private chamber room into which Toler had fled. The half-dozen marshals progressed through a broken window of the chamber room in expectant pursuit of the absconding criminal defendant, also at precisely 8:29.

A baggy-eyed Chief Milner looked up wearily from the fat file to speak to its skinny author.

"Special Agent Wahler, am I to actually believe that eight hours ago, at eight-thirty this morning, six federal marshals were pointing weapons down from the fire escape platform on the twelfth floor while seven of my own FBI agents were looking up
from Third Avenue and pointing their weapons at the marshals. The only thing missing from this Mexican standoff seems to be the Mexican. Your detailed report indicates that inmate Toler had magically vanished."

"First of all," Agent Wahler explained, "we were not really on Third Avenue. We were on the sidewalk. Secondly, inmate Toler is an American born in Bardstown, Kentucky. Thirdly, and most importantly, he could not have magically vanished. Please try not to be stupid, sir. It's been a long day."

"'V-a-n-i-s-h-e-d,'" Chief Milner quoted painstakingly from the report. Through clenched jaws he further noted, "My Mexican standoff was simply an analogy."

"I am a Practical Lutheran and we do not use anal words," Wahler protested. "As for the vanishing act, I was going to type disappeared but did not know if it was spelled with only one pee or two pees."

Milner tapped his fingertips rhythmically on the desk in soothingly ordered strokes, "... eight, nine, ten ... deep breath ... hold it ... exhale slowly."

"Chief, you look pallid or possibly even pickled, as my old Aunt Millie would say. The color of pigs' feet in a vinegar jar. Whenever Uncle Abner suffered his ugly, complexion-sapping asthma attacks, Aunt Millie would—"

"Shut your stinking garbage hole. We will stick to the report which reveals that Toler did indeed somehow evade this baker's dozen posse, and a thorough search of the area yielded nothing except a torn jacket and a pair of cheap shoes."

Wahler asked, "What is a baker's dozen posse?"

"In this scenario I refer to the thirteen clueless federal agents who nearly shot each other. In fact, one of the marshals on the fire escape reported the sound of gunfire coming from your position on Third Avenue. Explain."

"I fired a shot, sir."

"Then why did you not fill out a Discharge of Weapon form?"

"I left it out."
"I know that, moron. I just said that. Now I want to know why. Why did you fire your weapon and why did you fail to fill out the appropriate form?"

"Sir, if you really must know, I stumbled in the rush to get out there, and my gun sort of went off all by itself. It is only the second time I ever fired it in the line of duty. I did fill out a Discharge of Weapon form once before and you tore it up and called it super stupid. So I did not fill out another form this time."

"That is certainly interesting, Agent Wahler. But since I cannot remember that incident, please refresh me."

"When Uncle Abner suffered memory lapses, my Aunt Millie would tie a piece of purple yarn around his penis. I do not know why."

"Fine, but since I am fresh out of purple yarn, please remind me about the time you fired your weapon the first time in the line of duty and I tore up the form."

"At the annual department Dog Days Picnic three years ago. I was the official starter for the potato sack race."

"And you filled out a Discharge of Weapon form?"

"Correct. I just said that. Congratulations on your short-term recall."

"Is it remotely possible," Milner wondered, "that we skip back to this morning’s fiasco? Please enlighten me with your best theory on how our prisoner eluded thirteen of Uncle Sam's Finest who were all on the scene within minutes? You report that Toler did not reenter the building because our security windows do not open from the outside. You further note that he did not have time to make it twelve floors down to street level or eight floors up to the roof."

The diminutive agent began, "As reported in my report, we know that Toler bashed out the chamber room outside window with Judge Moonie’s swivel chair which we found on the fire escape platform. We assume Toler descended past the tenth floor where we located his jacket. In all actuality, it was not even
his, but rather the one issued by the jail for inmate court appearances. Now that I think about it some more, I shouldn't even call it a jacket, since it more closely resembles one of those windbreaker things. It was sky-blue."

"Special Agent Wahler, stick to the important facts."

"I am. The windbreaker thing is critical to this discussion. It had a bullet hole through the armpit and Toler left it hanging on the tenth floor railing. I presume it snagged and instead of wasting time freeing it from the snag, he simply slipped out of it and left it flapping in the wind like a North Carolina Tarheel school pennant. I now refer to that college only because of the school colors of sky-blue, same as the windbreaker in question, not because of the school's athletic teams being named Tarheels. I don't even know what a Tarheel is, much less what color it is, but darker than sky-blue, one would think."

Milner massaged his temples. "Why me?"

Wahler hiked up his pants to expose checkered socks, then resumed. "Then there's the shoes which were on the sidewalk. Property Officer Romansky, whom we questioned over at the jail, remembered that Toler had complained about the shoes being too narrow. Romanski reminded inmate Toler that he was going to prison, not the prom."

"Anyway," Wahler summed up, "Toler must have kicked off the shoes after landing, so he could run faster."

"After landing?"

"Yes, boss. This afternoon I sealed off the judge's chamber with Crime Scene tape and had Agent Swag stand guard at the door. Then I spent a couple of hours out on the fire escape with my stopwatch. As you pointed out earlier, the prisoner could not have made it all the way down to street level before our arrival, so he must have jumped from one of the lower floors."

"Be specific, Wahler."

"Toler, sir."

"Not the man, you little brainiac idiot. The floor! What floor did Toler jump from to satisfy your time frame?"
"As closely as I could determine, he must have leaped from the fourth or fifth floor."

"Onto concrete?" the Chief asked incredulously. "Then kicked off tight shoes and sprinted out of sight like Jesse Owens on amphetamines? Not to mention that none of the pedestrians that you subsequently questioned mentioned catching a glimpse of this mortally wounded Olympian careening barefoot down an overcrowded sidewalk at ninety miles an hour, trailing blood like a broken bottle of red wine!" screamed the big man.

Wahler stammered, "Y-yessir. I m-mean n-nosir. I mean Toler was hyped up with lots of adrenaline pumping. He was desperately strong like that tabloid lesbian who lifted a bus up off of her girlfriend's toe. Under stress, the human body can accomplish amazing physical feats."

Milner stacked the loose pages of the file on his desktop and ripped them in half with his meaty hands. "Wahler, this bad report is an amazing mess. It is now dead. Dead as a catfish in the desert. Do you follow that homespun analogy?"

"Indeed. Bleached bones. But you are turning pale again."

"When I want your anatomical opinion, I will screw off your head and read your twisted mind. Now observe closely."

Milner opened the top desk drawer and extracted a deck of poker cards. After settling himself down by adroitly shuffling the cards with stubby fingers, he fanned them out facedown on the desk and instructed, "Pick a card. Any card at all."

Wahler picked a random card and peeked at it without letting the Chief see the face of the selected card.

"Nine of clubs," Chief Milner announced correctly. "Now tell me how I knew which card you picked."

Wahler glanced behind him for a mirror and seeing none, then reasoned, "The cards must be marked."

Milner clapped softly. "Brilliant. Now to back up your very astute deduction, tell me how you might go about establishing the proof that the cards are marked. Briefly walk me through the whole investigative process and estimate how long it would take."

9
"Sir, I would scan the backs of the cards with a magnifying lens looking for odd scratches. The requisite man-hours involved would depend upon the size and possibly the cleverness of those concealed marks."

"Is it fair to conclude," Milner sought, "that you would not give up your search until locating those marks, being the diligent investigator that you always are?"

"Absolutely. Thanks."

"So we may conclude that since these cards are not marked, you would be hunched over them forever while our beloved escapee is hightailing it to Acapulco in time for an afternoon, cocoa butter rubdown."

"You lost me, Chief."

"And it was simple. Just ask Toler. He lost you in a matter of seconds!" the big man cried, halfway rising to the crouch-attack position of a Chicago Bears middle linebacker, eyes ablaze with human growth hormone. "So shock me gray-headed by informing me that you recognize the similarity in stooping over unmarked cards with a magnifying lens and, stooping over on an unstained fire escape with your stupid stopwatch."

"Unstained?"

"Did your report mention any spatters of blood on the fire escape? Did all that blood also magically vanish?"

"I will check again, sir."

"You should always seek out the simplest explanations first. Don't let Toler lead you down a yellow-brick road."

"You are losing me again, boss. Are we still in Acapulco or the Land of Oz?"

"We are in downtown Lexington and inmate Toler most likely is not. Tomorrow morning, start over. Check windows for reentry signs. Find out if any windows were already open. Search heating and air conditioning ducts. Get the building blueprints and then isolate any location large enough to conceal a person. Check the fire escape, roof and sidewalk for blood. Quiz every employee.

"Any questions, Agent Wahler?"
"Boy, you's crazy! Hundreds of coppers looking all over the city for you and all this time you been right smack dab where they left you in the judge's chamber. They sealed off this here room with tape that reads: Crime Scene - Do Not Enter. Then the dummies tacked up a slab of plywood over that busted window and all this time you been keeled over in the judge's robes closet like a snoozing wino. If'n you didn't snore so loud, I'd of never come snooping under that taped off door that kept all the other snoopers out."

The wiry little black man had wrestled Kevin's body halfway out of the closet and was applying his own brand of first aid to the fugitive's head, rousing him back to hazy consciousness.

Using dry lips, Kevin managed, "You're killing me."

"Mind your manners, hotshot. I'm one of the few fellers in town who ain't gunning for you. Now stop squirming like a minner on a fish hook so I can finish patching up this here gully on your noggin. It sure looks like you got swatted with a big ole Indian tommyhock."

"Doc, is that antiseptic I smell?" asked Kevin.

"Nope and nope. Nope, I ain't no doctor. Just little old Leo, your friendly neighborhood night janitor. Right now I'm cleaning up this here mess on your melon because that's what I do. I clean up messes. And nope, that ain't hospital antiseptics unclogging your nostrils. It says right here on this green label that it just 'Cleans and disinfects with the zest of the great Northwest.' So me and my trusty Oregon Pine will soon have your scalp resistant to every single microscopic critter known to humans. It might even cure your dandruff too if'n it don't cause you blood poisoning in which case I sure ain't responsible unless there happens to be a dead-or-alive bounty."

"Leo," Kevin groggily replied, "I never heard anybody say stuff like 'microscopic critter' before. Are you some sort of hillbilly scientist?"
"I reckon I been called worser."

Kevin tried to sit up but fell back wincing. Closing his eyes to collect himself, he concentrated on the fireflies darting back and forth on the backs of his eyelids.

"Hold your prancing pony, outlaw," Leo advised. "I'll be done in a jiffy. Take your mind off the pain by telling me what went on in here this morning."

Kevin gave in. "I remember diving over the judge after he fell and—"

"Yep, I know that part," Leo cut in. "The daytime janitor was out with the flu, so I was working his shift too. That cranky old judge thought he'd been shot between the eyes, but it turned out he was taken down by a Certs. Then he got his pudgy little paw caught under the door and commenced to caterwauling just like a roasting banshee. He drummed his heels so hard that his elevator wing tip shoes flew off. They was spattered with tobaccor juice and folks figured it might be something worser, like maybe he lost his grippers right down his britches legs. I sure wasn't gonna take no chances, so I got me two toilet bowl brushes and shoved one down inside each shoe."

Kevin levered himself onto his elbows and stared hard at his new Good Samaritan friend. "Leo, this story you're spinning is making me dizzy."

"The only thing worser than a wounded wisecracker is an interrupting wisecracker. Now where was I?"

"Stained wing tips."

"Right. So I got on the elevator in the hall and everybody else got off real fast. I was standing there all alone with a speared shoe in each hand and had to press the panel button for the first floor with my nose. So what happened next?"

"How would I know? It's your story."

"Not the shoe story. That's done with," the old janitor cleared up. "Tell me what happened after you slammed the door on the judge's hand."

Kevin restarted, "I was gushing blood and knew I'd never
"What's your point, Leo? I need to get going."

"Don't rush old folks. It slows us down. Now where was I before you butted in?"

"Something about a thousand bucks being a lot of bacon."

"Exactly. But the point is that I ain't no rat, so you can trust me to do the right thing. You ain't got no car, no money, no shoes and no friends, not to mention you look like the sole survivor from a roller coaster crash. How far do you think you'd make it on your own? You'd be lucky to get as far as the elevator, much less the county line."

The old player paused for a deep ragged breath before going on. "See, me and you are tired strugglers. I ain't gonna try to explain what it's like to be a poor black man for sixty-four years, but put it this way. I ain't sure which side won that old Civil War. All I got to show for a lifetime of hard work is a bad back. I might as well have just been picking cotton. We are kinda like those salmon fishes that swim upstream against the current. When a few of us do make it to the top, we are so tuckered out, we just lay our eggs and die with absolutely nothing, right back where we started."

"I'm still missing the point, Leo."

"Then pay more attention. I'm saying that I'm going with you as far as that road takes us. Like Johnny Payroll sings, they can take this here job and shove it."

"Paycheck," Kevin corrected with a grin. "And how could any country boy like me argue with a wily old salmon who quotes a country legend like Johnny Paycheck? Just don't try Shakespeare."

"Don't worry. He don't talk normal. Now stop yakking so much and let's scram outta here."

The janitor helped his new friend to his feet with the advice, "You can lean on me, son. I may be old but I ain't feeble. And if'n you don't grab on too tight, the black won't rub off on you much. Just don't grab ahold of my right shoulder. It's been known to jump clean outta socket."

Heeding the offer, Kevin braced one hand on Leo's bony left
arm as the mismatched pair made their wobbly trek across the eerily talkless courtroom while the wall clock ticked its way through midnight.

* * *

"Christmas trees in April," Chief Milner fumed the next morning, towering over his underling. "Special Agent Wahler, I owe you an apology for criticizing your status report yesterday because today's revision is so much worse, it makes yesterday's version look Shakespearean. By comparison, yesterday's report was a literary masterpiece. If I am getting through to you, good buddy, give me a big ten-four!"

"Ten-four, sir. Loud and clear."

"In summarizing this new report, you state that we were alerted by the day-shift janitor of a mess in Judge Moonie's big robes closet. Investigation revealed substantial bloodstains on the floor and robes, indicating that Toler had hidden in that closet while you were right outside on the fire escape with your stupid stopwatch. Meanwhile over two hundred local, state and federal officers were conducting a city-wide manhunt."

"Ten-four some more, sir."

"You further note that in the vicinity of the robes closet you detected the distinct aroma of Christmas trees."

"Should I have said cedar trees?"

"No. The irony here is that the only type of tree to ever grace the interior of this building was indeed a Christmas tree. Can you guess in which month we had a Christmas tree?"

"December?"

"Correct, and it was plastic."

"Now I see, boss. No smell from a plastic tree. I forgot about the fire code ordinance."

"No, you do not see. You really need to see if you can file a status report that makes me very happy. Since we seemingly are stuck on a tree theme, scoot back to your laminated cubicle and
type up a report that makes me happy as a faggot in a dick tree."
"Ten-four, sir. Boundless joy."
"The report we send to Washington will not contain any type
of Christmas trees, cedar trees, maples, sycamores, persimmon,
plum or cherry trees. If it does, I will remove my badge and take
you down to the basement rec room for the worst butt-kicking of
your butt-kissing career."
"Roger that, Chief. I hate all trees."
"Great. Now get out, but don't forget to get a statement from
our pal, Judge Moonie."
Wahler stopped halfway out the door. "Sir, I have not been
able to locate him."
Milner groaned, "You cannot find a federal judge who is not
hiding, but you hope to find a desperado on the lam. He is in the
Buy him a chocolate gavel or something."
"How about a roll of Charmin?"
"Cute. Now do a Michael Jackson impersonation and beat it."

*   *   *

Agent Wahler inquired at the third floor nurse's station,
"Are you the nun-nurse?"
"I am Sister Magdalena. How may I help you?"
"I'm Special Agent Walter Wahler with the FBI and stopped by
to get a brief statement from Judge Moonie in room three-fifteen."
"I am so sorry, sir, but the orderly just now went in to give
patient Moonie a bath. You must wait about fifteen minutes, either
here or in the visitors' lounge down the hallway. And by the way,
those are lovely flowers. Pansies, if I am not mistaken."
"Yes, pansies," Wahler confirmed. "I did not know of anything
else that would suit the judge perfectly."
"It's the thought," Sister Magdalena suggested. "That is all
that matters."
"Precisely," he agreed. "And I will just wait right here if

you don't mind. I've always had a thing for long-legged nuns ever since the sixth grade at Saint Elmo's Elementary."

"I am sure you have, Agent Walter Wahler. Or should I call you Special Agent?"

"My friends call me Wally."

"I understand, Agent Wahler. Now if you insist on remaining here, please be quiet."

"I will. I know hospitals. I was born in one."

"Remarkably original," she mocked. "But the reason I require you to rest your pagan tongue is because my favorite call-in radio program is just about to conclude its commercial break. A screener has designated me as caller number forty-four. Caller forty-one ended the last segment, so I have a good chance of getting some air time. I shall turn up the volume for you."

Dudley: Welcome back to the final segment of "PCP" which stands for "Point-Counter-Point" for all of you uninformed imbeciles. I am your gab-gifted host, Dudley Squatt, King of Talk Radio. For those of you just now joining our broadcast, the big star guest panelist on my far right is that always ebullient Trash Limbo. Say hello to our large listening audience, Trash.

Trash: Just get this nonsense over with. I have an urgent doctor's appointment. I need my codeine.

Dudley: Also co-hosting our star-studded panel is the equally exuberant, Richard Stern, to my far left. What is that ugly contraption you are plugging in, Dick?

Dick: An electric bong. Don't bother me.

Dudley: Today's topic centers around the Hiver Vacuum Company's disclaimer of any connection to the former FBI Director, Jay Edgar Hiver. As noted at the top of this broadcast, the scandalous British tabloid Cheerio scathingly published
an archive photograph of the legendary bureau
boss wearing a party dress, pearls and high
heels. So our call-in contestants are simply
submitting suggestions for a company slogan
for Hiver Vacuum appropriately fitting with
the recently outed G-man with the same name.
Callers forty-two through fifty are all hotly
panting and salivating like Pavlovian dogs for
their fifteen seconds of airwave immortality.
Identify yourself caller forty-two, but no UFO
abductees today, please.

#42: Thith ith Ollie Dweeble.
Trash: And this is America, so you need to learn our
language, you job-stealing illegal immigrant.
#42: My teeth got buthted out. Long thtory. Here
ith my thlogan. "A Hiver in every clothet."


#43: First-time caller, long-time listener, and I
really love your show.
Dick: If I hear that lame line one more time today,
I'll· barf up a taco. Drop dead, loser. Next.

#44: This is Sister Magdalena from Saint Bernards
Hospital. I work on the third floor and——

Dudley: Skip the auto-biog, Sis, and turn down your
radio so we don't get a feedback off of the
five-second delay. Keep it short and sweet.

#44: Very well. How about, "Hiver sucks!"
Trash: Give that dame the value-pack dinner for two at
Pizza Hutch and be done with this crapola. But
speaking of values, my eight-year-old son came
home from school yesterday with a black eye for
refusing to buy drugs with his lunch money. The
left-wing moral decay proliferating within our
school system is undeniably the result of a big
bold conspiracy by Democrats to infiltrate our
local Boards of Education.

Dudley: What did you do about your son?

Trash: I did exactly what any red-blooded American father would have done. I bought him a gun.

Dudley: Glad you brought that up, because a lively editorial in today's Washington Pork Times pictures Bo-Bo, Director Hiver's live-in male secretary and constant traveling companion, holding up an enlarged business card that reads: "Have gun, will travel.". Richard, please give your closing thoughts on public education and Hivergate.

Dick: On the school issue, I suggest an attention-grabbing strike. Kick it off by tricking two dozen Special Ed kids into forming a picket line across a busy freeway. But no comment on the Hivergate scandal. Just the thought of Jay Edgar in a miniskirt is almost enough to make me start going to church again.

Dudley: With those inspirational words, we sign off another provocative hour of "Point-Counter-Point." Tune in again the same time tomorrow when you have nothing better to do with your life than listen to talk radio. Until then, this is Dudley Squatt for Trash Limbo and Richard Stern on "PCP."
3. Judge Not

Sister Magdalena turned off the old RCA radio and nodded down the hallway where a burly orderly was emerging from room three-fifteen.

"Agent Wahler, kindly bear in mind that patient Limbo is recovering from a traumatic ordeal. He is suffering from five contusions, concussion, gross, impactions of extremities, fever, shock and tongue laceration. He is also dehydrated from crying."

Wahler replied, "I understand most of that except for the gross extreme stuff and tongue thing."

She clarified, "His poor hand looks as if it spent the day on a busy railroad track and he also nearly bit off his tongue. It is inflamed, as is his hand, which is in a soft cast."

"Incidentally," she added, "he cannot use the other hand either because it is secured to the bed rail to prevent further possible injuries."

"He tries to hurt himself?"

"No, us. He throws things."

"Thanks for the warning," Wahler tossed over his shoulder as he made his way down the hall. "I'll go cheer him up."

Upon entering the judge's private room, Wahler remarked, "Judge, you look horrible."

"Waa-er," Judge Moonie croaked out thirstily through parched lips.

"I cannot tell if you are saying 'Walter' or 'Wahler' but at least you recognize me, Your Judgeship. I brought you some yellow pansies."

"Waa-er," Moonie bleated again.

"Yes, we have firmly established my identity and I am still me. The nun-nurse warned me that you might be a tad loopy."

"Waa-er! Waa-er! Waa-er!", the judge brayed while nodding his head toward the water bottle on the bedside nightstand.

"Now I read you. Yes, the pansies do need water. Don't get
so excited. There is plenty of water here on the nightstand. I have always wondered why people only call these nightstands. They stand here all day too, but nobody ever calls them daystands. It's just weird."

The judge scowled and tugged at the restraint holding his uninjured hand while still eyeing the water bottle.

Wahler shook his head. "Patience, Your Majesty. There's too much water in this plastic bottle anyway, so I'll just take a sip to make room for the flower stems. Mm-mm, that's good stuff. One never knows in these hospitals where minimum-wage orderlies often get bottles mixed up.

"By the way, Judge Moonie, did I mention I never liked you?"
"Waa-er," Moonie begged and poked out a dry, swollen tongue.
"Educated people don't do that, Your Scholarship. Too bad you can't wink in Morse code. Then we could talk for hours if I knew Morse code."

The tongue protruded further.

"Hold it right there, Your High and Mightiness. I see the problem now. A piece of lint or something is stuck to your tongue and you cannot use either hand to get it off. Never fear; that's what co-workers are for. I'll be glad to lend you a helping hand."
"Aaargh," the judge responded to Wahler's efforts.
"Hold still. It's stuck."
"Aaargh, aaargh, AAARGH!"

"There, I got it. Looks like a suture to me. Maybe there's a moral lesson to learn here. It might help to check out that blue Gideon's Bible right there beside the yellow pansies. Don't let your pride stop you. According to Gideon, pride is more or less just a discarded banana peel. And don't forget that old 'Judge not' passage. I doubt that's one of your favorites, so let me take your hand in a word of prayer."
"AAARGH!"
"Oops, wrong hand."

Sister Magdalena stuck her head in the door. "Is everything
all right in here? I thought I heard something."

"The judge was experiencing a spiritual awakening," Wahler explained, "and I was just leaving."

"Waa-er," moaned Moonie.

"Thank you, patient Moonie, but I have already made Agent Wahler's acquaintance. Nonetheless it is a relief to see that you are becoming more civil. You also seem to be getting your color back. We may reward you by removing the restraint in a few days.

"Come along, Agent Wahler. Perhaps you will join me in the visiting lounge for a nice cool glass of iced tea."

* * *

"That is the sweetest tongue I ever tasted," Kevin avowed after being awakened with a deep kiss from a sensual redhead with large emerald eyes. "If you are really an angel, then Saint Peter must have made a mistake when he let me in."

"You are not in Paradise," she cooed. "Not quite yet," she amended promisingly while straddling her lithe legs atop his naked body, adjusting him deftly with her hand.

"Oh yes, I need that," she confessed while plunging down to engulf him to the hilt. "Please, please, please," she begged as she rode him like a rodeo starlet with one hand yanking on tight red curls in unabashed bouncing ecstasy.

Kevin reflexively thrust upward to meet the agile temptress in midair. The narrow bed rose and fell, drumming out a primitive staccato beat to the age-old rhythm above.

The wanton damsel increased the dance tempo with each stroke while simultaneously circling her hips in frantic gyrations back and forth, up and down, and side to side at ever-changing angles in a barely contained fluidity threatening to flood all lowlands. Keeping perfect pace, the bongo drum accompaniment of the wooden bed legs pounding on the floor changed to a full-fledged kettle drum symphony solo as the rampaging bedstead jumped and landed in crashing crescendos, hopping across the room in its energetic yet
futile attempts to throw off the bareback riders.

"Now! Now!" yelled the kinky redhead hoarsely. And without altering her pelvic stroke, she leaned down and bit savagely into Kevin's left nipple. He screamed and ejaculated.

"Thank you," she sighed contentedly, collapsing onto his chest. "I have not had a man in six long, long years."

"Could have fooled me, babe," Kevin gasped, trying to regain his lost breath. "But if it is any of my business, do you mind filling in a few blanks? Like where we are, and whether you are a starving angel or a double-jointed demon."

"We are in King's Court," she informed him, "inside a mobile home which belongs to Leo Barker. And I am Maggie."

Kevin's mental cobwebs began untwining with the mention of Leo. He hazily recalled climbing into the cavernous trunk of Leo's rusty 1959 Cadillac in the basement garage of the Federal Building on Third Avenue.

Maggie added, "You have been out of it for a spell. Leo told me he brought you in around twelve-thirty last night, and it is now two-thirty in the afternoon. So you crashed here for fourteen hours, not counting the time you slept in the judge's robes closet at the courthouse. Your body is recovering."

Kevin mumbled something about a little bigmouthed janitor and Maggie continued, "You smelled like Pinesol and motor oil until I bathed you. No need to feel violated," she teased while snuggling into the crook of his shoulder. "I used to be a nurse, so I cleaned you professionally and dressed that ugly scalp wound. It looked as if you had been patched up by a blind witch doctor."

"Close," he confirmed. "How long have you known Leo?"

"About three hours. I was hitchhiking and he picked me up on his way home from the drugstore where he had bought bandages for your head. I had a couple of pizza coupons so he told me his life story over lunch. Wow, he can really talk. In fact, he told me all about rescuing you from the judge's chamber, Mister Kevin Toler. You have also been in the news all day and I am attracted to the famous naughty boy types," she purred.
"You work fast for someone who has been virtuous for six long years," he teased back. "I guess you've been locked away in a convent."

"Correct," she affirmed, "when not working at the hospital."

"So I just got molested by a nun," Kevin mused.

"You seemed perfectly willing."

"Still am," he replied, rolling himself on top, pinning her playfully.

A flash of black-on-white caught in his peripheral vision, so he paused momentarily to focus in on the discarded clothing littering the floor: polyester slacks, bloody shirt with a ripped armpit, socks, nun's habit—

Kevin bounded out of bed and grabbed for cover. Realizing with horror that he had latched onto the nun's garb and covered his groin with it, he draped it back onto the pile and pulled on his pants. Just as he zipped them up, Leo burst through the front door toting a large K-mart shopping bag.

The homeowner observed the disarray. "I see you two kids have gotten to know each other in the Bible sense, and gotten real comfy. Well make yourselves right at home by all means. Make babies, rearrange the furniture, whatever."

Kevin pulled on his socks. "Leo, what's the story here? The short version."

"Hey, I see a nun with her thumb stuck out, so what am I supposed to do? She comes up with pizza coupons, so we eat before I bring her back here. Then when I come back home from the store, somebody is inside hollering like his pecker is caught in a broke sausage grinder. So what's your story, Romeo?"

"She seduced me."

"You helpless boy. The mall is right down the hill, meaning I ain't been gone a hot twenty minutes. Your resistance level on a scale of one to ten must be zero. By the looks of everything I'd guess this here funny business was a joint venture. My sainted Ma always claimed it takes two to belly dance. And I see that the religious barriers didn't slow your roll."
"I didn't know she was a nun!"

"In that outfit she had on, what did you think she was? A go-go dancer? Anyhow, she ain't a nun no more. She got fired by Lake Superior."

"That explains everything," Kevin said sarcastically.

Maggie cleared her throat. "The nickname, Lake Superior, refers to my former hospital supervisor, being that she is rather widespread."

Leo translated, "Fat as a pregnant hippo."

"As it happens," Maggie resumed, "she was listening to a call-in radio show this morning and heard me phone in with an inappropriate comment. This resulted in my dismissal from the hospital and the revocation of my calling."

Leo clarified again. "So she ain't a nun no more."

Kevin observed, "I thought the only one who could axe a nun was the Pope."

"It is a bit more complex than merely getting axed," Maggie laughed, "but I chose a far less complicated option and simply resigned. We all three now share a common bond. We are free."

The statuesque beauty rose from the bed wearing nothing and strode into the bathroom.

Awestruck, Leo supposed, "No matter what happens after this, those three long steps just made it all worthwhile."

While Maggie luxuriated in a hot bubblebath, the two male conspirators conversed.

"Pal," Kevin started, "we need to get moving. That big FBI guy, Milner, will eventually question every employee who was working in the building yesterday, and that includes you. So it won't even surprise me if he sends his flunky, Wahler, out here."

"Son, I ain't worried about Wahler. He's a DS, Dumb-Smarty. That's a dummy with a high IQ and a smart mouth. Wahler's been working computers in that building for years and still asks for directions to the bathroom. Sorta like that teacher's pet know-it-all kid in high school who forgets where he laid his glasses.
"But the big boss, Milner, is an SD, Smart-Dummy. Lots of common sense but not real bright. He's the one to watch though. He'll be on us like a pit bull on a T-bone steak," Leo noted while pushing the bed back to its original position. "You done stung Milner twice by first shooting his fat cousin and then by escaping on his watch, right out from under his nose. That whole Milner clan is thick as a tangle of river moccasins. If'n you had to shoot a snake, why did you pick a Milner moccasin?"

"He picked me. I was sitting at a bar, nursing a Budweiser and minding my own business. But when I whistled at a Dallas Cowgirl on TV, he konked me over the head with a beer bottle."

"You killed a guy over a heifer?"

"She was a cheerleader, but this drunk Milner giant was a Washington Redskins fan who hated Dallas Cowboys and their fans and cheerleaders. I didn't mean to kill him though."

"Kevin, the newspaper said you shot him nine times. Exactly what part of him were you not trying to kill?"

"The papers always get it wrong. It was only eight shots from a nine-shot clip. I saved a bullet in case he had a friend. I'd had a few beers and the Cowboys were losing, so he picked the wrong guy at the wrong time."

"The paper also said you were out on parole from Leavenworth for robbing an armored car when you were a teenager," the older man noted while making the bed with military tucks at the corners. "I thought ex-cons were not supposed to carry guns."

"It's like a knife in prison. Better to be caught with one than without one."

"OK, kid. Enough on ancient history. Where do we go from here? I already packed the trunk of the Caddy with everything I own that's worth more than a dollar and there's still plenty of room left over. I also ran down to the store and bought shirts and jeans for you and Maggie, plus I got you a pair of Reeboks. Maggie told me all your sizes and I do mean all of them. I don't know how she managed to keep that serpent's tongue in its cage for six years."
"Yeah, we need to get that ex-nun nympho out of the tub and drop her off at the nearest strip joint."

"Son, maybe I forgot to mention one little detail," Leo sheepishly admitted. "Me and Maggie took a vote. We was gonna wake you up but didn't need to because we already had a two-thirds majority. Anyway, we decided she's coming with us."

"Stop joking."

"No joke. She needs somewhere to go, and we might need a good woman's touch."

Kevin rubbed his sore nipple. "She can come along for the first leg of the trip, I guess. I have to lay low for at least a couple of days and I think I know the best place. Maybe she can stay there."

"Then what?" asked Leo dubiously.

"Then we break my partner out of a maximum security prison, rob a town and retire to Brazil."

"Must be wax buildup," Leo figured, digging his pinky finger into one ear. "I thought you said something crazy about a prison break and robbing a town. I shouldn't buy Q-tips at a fire sale."

Kevin smiled. "Don't sweat the small stuff, partner. I'll fill you in on all the little details when we get on the road. Right now we need to concentrate on making it across a few state lines and then finding another car. It won't take long for the feds to connect you to me, and us to that old Cadillac. By this time tomorrow, it should be parked in a barn in Illinois and---"

"Leo, sweetie," Maggie called through the bathroom door. "I'm all done. Can you get me something?"

"Doll," he yelled back, "with those legs, you can have the trailer, the pension and the dog."

"Just bring me something to wear from the shopping bag. The door is not locked, honey, so bring it on in, big boy."

"K-Kevin, h-how's my h-hair?"

"All eight of them are behaving," Kevin replied, "but if I didn't know any better, I'd swear my fearless fellow salmon is sputtering."
Leo patted down several stray gray hairs before rebutting, "What nonsense. I sure ain't scared of nothing on two legs. Not those two long legs most of all. Back in high school, I was known as Leo the Hammer and I couldn't build a doghouse. One hot night me and Cindy Cyclone were in the backseat—"

"Lee-ooo," from the bathroom.

"On my way, sugar toes," he responded while tossing Kevin's new clothes and shoes out onto the floor. He cracked the bathroom door open just enough to deposit the bag on the tile floor.

"Leo, the Honorable Hammer," he amended.

* * *

"You were correct, Chief Milner, as hard as that might be to believe!" yelled Agent Wahler excitedly, after slamming shut the office door behind him. "I dug up all the building employees just like you suggested and sure enough, we struck gold. I first got suspicious when I was unable to locate that night custodian: You know, the janitor."

"I know what custodian means, Wahler."

"When nobody answered his phone, I drove out to his trailer park. He wasn't home but I spoke to his neighbor who was hanging out laundry. Her name is Beatrice Bowman, but everybody calls her Bebo. She lives in an eight-by-forty foot Craftsman Supreme with blue and green striped awning. The trailer park is located on a hillside out near—"

"Wahler, skip that part."

"Sure. Yesterday afternoon Bebo saw her neighbor, who is the night janitor here, and a young white man and woman pack up the janitor's junky old blue Cadillac and leave."

"Did you get a description?"

"Of course: He is about five feet, four inches tall, black, nearly bald and in his mid-sixties."

"Listen closely, Special Agent Wahler. I want to know about the younger one. A six-footer, I hope."
"According to Bebo, she was lovely. Short red hair, but long legs. Of course she would have to have long legs to be so tall, but I just let Bebo ramble along. You know how some people stray off the subject whenever you are trying to find out something very important. But instead of losing my composure, I simply remembered what our anger management instructor at Quantico told us to tell ourselves. So I said to myself, 'Self, chill out.' It worked like a leprechaun charm so I didn't have to punch Bebo in the mouth."

Milner rose and glowered down at the trifling agent. "If you intend to continue occupying space above ground, you must now tell me if Miss Bebo described the young white male."

"Yes, she did, sir."
"And?" pressed Milner.
"And what, sir?"

Milner lunged across the desk and grabbed Agent Wahler around the throat by both hands. "Was it Toler or not?" he shouted into his subordinate's bluing face.


"That's our boy. Now who is the black guy? The janitor."
"Leopold Alvin Barker. He must be one of Ma Barker's boys."
Milner glared.
"Just joshing, sir."

"While the world laughs, take your corny act down to the DMV to get a license plate number on Barker's car. Then put out an APB on them. Did you happen to learn what those initials stand for between your anger management classes?"

"Ten-four, boss. They stand for Department of Motor Vehicles and All-Points Bulletin."

"Impressive. Now try to remember we are tracking down Toler, not sidetracking onto every other pathway known to civilization."
"Sir, have you picked up any psychic vibes on inmate Toler's whereabouts?"

"Unfortunately, my psychic prowess weakens just beyond our
dear Miss Bebo's estate. All we know for certain is that Toler is not on his way to the maximum security federal prison in Bacon, Illinois. But rest assured, we fully intend to set him back on that straight and narrow path. Yet first bring me six aspirin and then leave. Better still, just leave."

"My pleasure," Wahler acknowledged, slamming the office door on his way out.

* * *

"Why are we going to a prison in Bacon, Illinois?" asked Maggie from the front seat of the Cadillac while Leo drove and Kevin rode in the backseat.

Kevin answered, "To break my partner out. But first we need to drop you off at a friend's house just outside the city limits of town. Then Leo and I will go downtown to pick up the sheriff before heading out to the prison."

"Best plan since Waterloo," Leo quipped. "Good thing my life savings of two hundred and ninety bucks is safe inside the glove compartment. Should be enough to get me a pine box," the former janitor sniffled.

Kevin commiserated, "It must be tough leaving your home and family on such short notice, but you knew all that when you signed on, partner."

"I ain't got no relatives still kicking. I'm the last twig on the stunted Barker family tree. As for that kicked around tin can I live in, a For Sale sign wouldn't fetch nothing but laughs. That ain't what's got me the blues," Leo concluded mysteriously as a fat teardrop shook free from his trembling chin.

Maggie turned to explain to Kevin. "He had to leave Dumpster with Hootie who lives on the lower side of Bebo and——"

"Thanks for clearing that up," Kevin interjected.

"I was not finished," she rebuffed. "Dumpster is Leo's dog, and Hootie and Bebo are neighbors."

Maggie turned back toward Leo while crossing her long legs.
"Sweetie, I need to stop somewhere."

"Is it an emergency?" asked Kevin with a frown.

"In her case," Leo answered, "that could mean hunger pains. She wolfed down a whole pizza and half of mine before I even had my napkin tucked under my chin. That there gal eats like a polar bear at a seafood buffet."

"I know," Kevin agreed, massaging his chest. "We can stop in a little while, once we cross the Ohio River into Indiana. But keep an eye out for a shopping center with a gun shop and also a hardware store. We need a shotgun and a hacksaw to cut off the barrel and shoulder stock. Plus look for a Radio Shack for some odds and ends, and an Army Surplus Store for several duffel bags if our budget can stand it."

"It can," Leo assured him, "because I already have a big ole double-barrel shotgun in the trunk. Barely fits. It's a hand-me-down family heirloom Great Papaw Barker bought new, back in the good old days. A dual-hammer ten-gauge with side-by-side barrels sporting openings as big around as silver dollars."

"I hope it's not black powder," Kevin said.

"Nope. Earliest line of big shell guns. Of course nobody makes them monster ten-gauge shells no more, but I still have a couple boxes of both kinds, the pellets and the slugs. If'n you are interested in the difference between a pellet load and a slug load, Maggie——"

"Not at the moment."

"A pellet shell has lots of little bee-bees for small game like rabbits, but a slug load is a giant solid bullet inside a shotgun casing with triple the amount of gunpowder."

"What do you shoot with those?" asked Kevin. "Elephants?"

"Trains. If'n a feller knew right where to aim, a triple-charged ten-gauge slug would lock up the steam engine on one of those old-timey locomotives. See, Great Papaw was a train robber. Now before either one of you two commences to wisecrackering, I'm letting you know I ain't no kin of that white trash Ma Barker clan. A real Barker man don't take no orders from no womenfolk."
"Lee-ooo," Maggie implored, twitching.
"First gas station or rest area stumble across," he promised,
"so just hang tight, honey lips."
By the rest of the convict populace, Anthony Amos Rogers was respectfully called "Ant." Today Ant was breaking his own personal record for human misery. When standing, he needed to sit. But once seated, he felt an overwhelming urge to lie down. Once in the prone position, however, he experienced a strong desire to stand back up again. If he moved around inside the small and barren prison cell, his brain commanded stillness which instantly required some type of movement. The only thing acceptable was change, so the prisoner was constantly on the move within the walls of the claustrophobic cell. Up and down, move and stop. Repeat.

These cycles were only arrested by forced periods of exercise such as push-ups and jumping jacks until exhaustion into restless sleep. Even there, the convict's brain found no peace since waking nightmares were also recurring problems.

The huge prisoner was suffering from the many tumultuous side effects of massive doses of the combination of strong psychotropic drugs known collectively in prison psychiatric jargon as Prolyx-Compound, or more simply as Prolyx-C. The double drug was produced by a mixture made up of sixty percent ionized Haldperidine, with the remaining forty percent comprised of distillated Thorapromazal. Both active chemicals had previously been used separately, in order to tranquilize aggressive zoo apes and in minute doses for treating extreme schizophrenia in humans. But for combined doses like Ant's case study, the only known human application was this particular prison experiment labeled "Behavioral Control 122J."

The BC-122J program began in 1953 as BC-122A to deter prison violence. Prisoners were killing each other in record numbers—a statistic viewed by most taxpayers as a mixed blessing. The only problem was that increasing numbers of prison staff were likewise succumbing to the mayhem. Regardless of promised salary increases or the many diversified job benefits, prison job applications were dwindling to a dangerous trickle despite the advertised proviso throughout all major newspaper Help Wanted classifieds touting:
"No experience, no skills, no education required." Even homeless vagrants could not be lured into the ancient profession of babysitting killers.

The original BC-122A program was originally brainstormed by a Congressional Committee as a viable alternative to the expensive training of prison guards in the appropriate management and humane treatment of prisoners. Rather than trying to educate numerous and largely illiterate man-keepers, it was deemed more cost-effective to medicate the most violent criminals into a stupor rather than continue the customary use of clubs and chains which did not seem to be working satisfactorily anymore.

Since the new drug experiments were inhumane to the extreme, the feds set up a fake, but highly publicized, test study at the big Medical Center Correctional Facility in Lexington, Kentucky. In this front page public distraction, inmate volunteers — of which there was no shortage — were given significant doses of lysergic acid, more commonly referred to as LSD. A much unhappier control group had to settle for a sugary placebo.

Predictably, the LSD group witnessed their prison cell bars melting and attempted to fly out through the openings, resulting in headaches. The sugar placebo group was marked by toothaches.

A large contingent of invited press corps eagerly reported the head-banging antics of the acid freaks whose offspring would be subsequently categorized as "flower children" due largely to their colorful lineage.

While LSD headlines in Kentucky gained nation-wide attention, the feds were conducting their secretive BC-122A experiments at the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri. Twenty violent convicts had been transferred from the island prison of Alcatraz to Springfield as volunteers for this medical cruelty. The operation had previously basked in an eighty percent success rate with highly aggressive chimpanzees, reducing them to listless primates. The drooling creatures would quietly await feeding time, yet display very little anxiety when the food was withheld.

But for the human captives, the results were much different.
As with the chimps, a local anesthetic was applied to the left temple. Next, a long needle probe was inserted through the temple and directly into the brain. An electric current of one hundred and sixty volts was then applied to the probe and thereby to the brain for thirty seconds.

Eleven of the convicts died on the operating table of massive stroke. Five became comatose and expired within days due to the fact that brain-dead prisoners are never subjected to the medical indignity of life-support apparatus.

The least fortunate remaining four felons eventually regained consciousness, only to be classified as "cognizant/catatonic"; the fully alert minds were now forever trapped within paralyzed bodies to exist as always knowing, perpetually suffering, tube-fed social anomalies.

Government officials graciously allowed a local news release proclaiming that a new program to "Reduce Prison Violence" had enjoyed an unprecedented one hundred percent efficiency success rate although a few minor refinements were under consideration. Thus the death throes of 122A and the birth pangs of 122B, C, D and E. The BC-122E series — twenty-five seconds of three hundred volts — had instantly killed all twenty of the latest batch of selected inmate volunteers and marked the transition from direct cerebral shock treatment to extreme psychotropic drug therapy.

This evolving project had finally progressed to its BC-122J series and a few of the relic psychiatrists of the earlier decades who had sketched out the original madness were still in charge and just as hopeful of the looming success of their Behavioral Control 122J program as they had been of its forerunner thirty years prior in the fifties.

Today's cons called it, "liquid lobotomy."

In order to keep the program's results from so easily leaking to the general public, these latest experiments were relocated from Springfield, Missouri to the more remote and central national locale of Bacon, Illinois. There, Anthony Amos Rogers was Designee Nine of the twenty inmate patients randomly incorporated into the
BC-122J test series group.

Ant's first month in the program had passed by in comparative bliss. Daily injections of Prolyx-C kept him in a hovering cloud while a feeding tube running up his nose and down into his stomach provided food. When his body built up tolerances to the powerful drug combination, the prison psychiatrists countered by increasing the dosage amount.

On day thirty-one, the nutrition tube was removed and daily doses reduced to several pills, allowing eight wakeful hours for the convict to give himself a sponge bath and consume a bowl of foul smelling, vitamin-fortified mush. For the next five months the intake of Prolyx-Compound would be steadily increased up to whatever dosage of pills Ant's body could tolerate while still allowing enough semi-sedated consciousness for bathing and eating. If ordered to step off a cliff to certain death, the mind-altered prisoner would be expected to comply without hesitation.

A model inmate.

But today was only day forty-eight of treatment and Ant was remarkably strong both physically and mentally. Weighing roughly five hundred pounds with an IQ well above average, Anthony Rogers represented the ultimate challenge to the prison medical staff. It was reasoned that if BC-122J could tame the wilful yet intelligent giant, it could conquer anyone. After thirty years of catastrophic failure, all Behavioral Control was finally within reach, leading to practically unlimited social subjugation scenarios, and inmate Rogers was a prime experimental specimen.

Unfortunately for staff, Ant was proving highly unreceptive to the latest efforts on his behalf after only eighteen days off the feeding tube. It was therefore determined that a one-on-one therapy session might help discover any underlying motives for the inmate's resistance. If not, it might at least provide hours of scintillating water cooler gossip fodder for prison staff, since prisoners do not enjoy the privilege of confidentiality normally accorded to public doctor-patient relationships.
Doc: Good afternoon, Anthony.
Ant: Right.
Doc: I see by your chart that you were awake for nine
hours yesterday, so I shall need to increase your
medication ahead of schedule again. If you would
spend more time in bed and let your mind and your
muscles relax, the medicine would become so much
more effective. Simply stop fighting it, Anthony.
Ant: Can't sleep. Hunger pains.
Doc: You already receive double rations of Mega-Meal.
That should satisfy any cravings for real food.
Ant: I'm contemplating cannibalism. Please assign me
a chubby cell partner.
Doc: First consider the possibility that the manifest
hunger stems from your self-imposed, compulsive
regimen of ridiculous and repetitious physical
exercises. If you insist on continuing with this
barbaric form of self-abuse, I shall be inclined
to implement the correctional measure of revoking
your visitation privileges. It is imperative that
you conform to all of our program directives.
Ant: I know what you old shrinks are up to.
Doc: Feel free to verbalize your paranoid suspicions.
However unlikely they might be, the unburdening
may provide a remotely therapeutic benefit, yet
to be perfectly candid, I doubt it shall.
Ant: You old coots are trying to turn me into a four
hundred pound mound of mindless Jell-O who just
sits around grinning and picking his nose.
Doc: May I remind you that you have lost sixty pounds
in the last forty-eight days. According to your
chart, you are down from five hundred and forty
pounds to four hundred and eighty.
Ant: Exactly. I'm melting away.
Doc: Possibly your metabolism is genetically induced.
Tell me about your parents, Anthony.

Ant: Moms and Pops met on the job at Ringling Brothers. She was the Fat Lady and he was the Strong Man. They both really loved their work. Moms got paid to eat and Pops got paid to strut his muscles.

Doc: But I see that your father's name is not listed on your visitation list. Did the two of you fall out?

Ant: No, but Moms did. She fell out of bed.

Doc: What, if anything, does that have to do with the absence of your father from the visitation list?

Ant: Plenty. See, Moms called our doctor when she got too fat to get out of bed. He put her on a strict exercise and diet plan where she would twirl her wrists and flex her toes and eat nothing except ten cantaloupe each day. Her weight dropped down to about a thousand pounds and Pops tried to help her get out of bed. But his knees buckled and so when Moms fell on top of him, Pops smothered.

Doc: Bizarre.

Ant: Pops could pick up a baby elephant, but I guess this would be more like drowning in quicksand.

Doc: Did your mother take it badly?

Ant: Very. She quit the circus and bought a grocery store with the life insurance money.

Doc: That seems to me to be a positive response. Not many people are capable of redirecting the angst of grief into a business enterprise. Do you mean to imply that the venture was not profitable?

Ant: You got that right. Moms didn't sell any of the groceries. She was on a big guilt trip so she ate everything.

Doc: She consumed all the food in the entire store?

Ant: All seven aisles, plus a deli section in a month-long binge.

Doc: So how does she now support herself financially?
Ant: She was freaky fat again so Ringling hired her back with a bonus. She married Siamese twin midgets who registered at the magistrate's office as a single two-headed midget to get around anti-polygamy laws.

Doc: And how are they all getting along now?

Ant: Moms seems happy again. She complains a little about him talking to himself, but she says the two-headed oral sex is an adventure.

Doc: Perhaps we might pursue that further at some future therapy session, Anthony. It appears that our time today has expired. Have a pleasant evening.

Ant: Right.

* * *

Leo nodded off, resting against the front passenger window, and Maggie drove with one hand while selecting pieces of extra-crispy chicken from a KFC family-size bucket with her other hand. In the backseat Kevin was busy sawing off both barrels of the long shotgun he had retrieved from the trunk.

"How can Leo sleep with all that racket going on?" inquired Maggie around a mouthful of chicken leg.

"Be thankful," Kevin responded.

"Well, tell me more about your partner in that prison," she insisted. "How can he weigh so much and not be really fat? Is he ten feet tall or what?"

"Ant is about seven feet tall and he exercises a lot, plus he is thick and wide. This sawed-off ten-gauge should fit his big hand perfectly. He might be the only man alive who can shoot it with just one hand without the recoil dislocating his elbow," Kevin guessed while reversing the weapon to renew his efforts on the wooden stock. "Ant once beat the back door off a Wells Fargo truck with a diamond-tipped sledgehammer in a little under three minutes."

"I thought you guys were going to rob a town, not a truck,"
Maggie commented between crunches.

"Correct," he confirmed. "No truck hunting this season. Been there, done that."

"Too bad," Leo jumped in. "I reckon Big Loo could just about stand a truck up on its rear license plate."

Maggie noted, "I thought you were sleeping."

"He was spying," Kevin concluded.

"Darn right," Leo confessed. "A slice of Spam caught between two crackers better be ready for anything."

Maggie laughed, "Leo, I love you."

"Right," he sighed. "You just want me for my body."

"By the way," she returned to their topic, "was Big Loo one of your infamous gangster ancestors?"

"Nope. Big Loo's the right-side barrel of that heirloom Kevin is butchering. Great Papaw Barker loaded it with a solid slug. And Little Loo is the left-side barrel he loaded with birdshot or maybe double-aught buckshot."

"What exactly do you do with buckshot?" asked Maggie. "Shoot male deer?"

"Quit it," Kevin scolded.

"Anyhow," Leo resumed, "if'n you happen to be the sad feller on the business end, then Big Loo is pointed at your right eye and Little Loo is pointed at your left eye."

"Hold on, pal," Kevin argued. "If Big Loo is the barrel on the right side, it would be pointed toward the target's left eye, so Little Loo would be pointed at the right eye. I think you said it backwards by mistake."

"My mistake was letting a one-cylinder motor-mouth butt in. Ain't nobody in my neighborhood so stupid as to ever be facing a ten-gauge pointed at them. They would be running away. So left is still left and right is right. If'n your single spark plug brain forgets which side is which, just pull both triggers at the same time. Even when you miss, the big boom gives your victim heart stoppage, and that double recoil kicks you all the way back into yesterday so you don't need no getaway car."
Maggie noted, "The barrels both look the same size to me. Why is one called Big Loo and the other one called Little Loo? It would be less confusing to simply call the gun Loo-Loo."

"That's why you ain't in charge," Leo explained. "Trim your ear hairs. Big Loo shoots big slugs and Little Loo shoots little pellets. Now you two better stop chasing me off the subject and tell me exactly how we aim to break this Ant freak out of that there slammer. Are we going to use, uh, Loo-Loo to shoot down the guard towers?"

"Hopefully this will be a nonviolent maneuver," Kevin began and then detailed the plan to free Ant from the nation's highest security prison.

When the narrative ended, Leo observed, "That's as bodacious a plan as I ever heard tell, but there's one or two teensy-weensy flaws that stick in my craw. You ain't got me doing much more than spectating. For that I coulda stayed home and watched a rerun of 'Mission Impossible' on the boob tube."

Maggie intervened, "You men let me know if you spot any of those golden arches. Big Macs are my favorite snacks."

Leo snaked his hand into the KFC bucket. Empty. Shaking his head like a big league pitcher denying the catcher's sign for a curve ball, the cagy veteran resumed his delivery.

"Now fair is fair and pardners is pardners, so I aim to tote my fair share of this here pardnership. So if'n you don't mind, Kev, or even if'n you do, let me suggest a few minor role changes in your script. I always fancied a pinch of Hollywood simmering in my soup and this might be my last request meal before I step through the Pearly Gates."

When the orator paused for another sonorous intake of oxygen, Kevin joined in with, "Please continue, O mad mixer of merciless metaphors."

"If'n you got two more cents to add, don't go using college words. Talk like us normal folks. Now where was I?"

Maggie reminded him, "The last supper."

"Yep. So I'm saying that this is kinda like that late season
game for my old bones and I ain't gonna be stuck on the sidelines like a knobby-kneed cheerleader."

Maggie recalled, "You have cute knees, Hammer."

"How would you know?" inquired Kevin. "Second thought, never mind. Some secrets are better kept secret."

"If'n you two will hush for one single minute," Leo advised as Maggie floored the gas pedal to pass a farm truck, "I aim to fine tune Kevin's original plan with a little more balance to the costarring roles."

For fifteen minutes Leo rehashed and revised Kevin's earlier plan. Then Kevin voiced his objections and Leo amazingly suggested several workable compromises. Meantime, Maggie scanned the horizon for golden arches.

After some lively give-and-take with reluctant concessions thrown in from both Leo and Kevin, the two hardheaded antagonists finally agreed on a tentative proposal as to their respective roles in Ant's unlawful bid for freedom. Maggie would be dropped off at least temporarily at the farmhouse of a friend of Kevin and Ant — a retired priest who lived close to the prison on the outskirts of Bacon. Then Kevin and Leo would take care of their business and pick up Maggie afterward, assuming all went well.

Maggie mentioned, "Anthony certainly sounds like quite a man, and he has been locked up for a long, long time . . ."

"OK," Kevin filled the waiting moment. "When we all get back on the road after picking up Ant, you may ride in the backseat with him, but he takes up most of the seat all by himself. I don't suppose you mind riding in his big lap, do you, Sister Magdalena?"

Maggie sighed, "My life is a sacrifice, Brother Kevin."
5. Every Sunday

Father Joseph McCreary, known as Papa Joe, was ninety-two. He had vacated an inner-city Chicago parish over two years earlier to live out his sunset years on the rural homestead willed to him by his sister. Yet for the spry clergyman, retirement to this wooded, six-acre tract near Bacon, Illinois, did not entail reminiscing in a back porch rocking chair. Papa Joe was busier than ever with a wide variety of activities ranging from gardening, to visiting prisoners, to collecting strays.

Upon arrival at the ramshackle two-story frame house, Papa Joe had been greeted by a large mongrel to which the old man offered the salutation, "Hi, dog." The dog stayed and so did the name. The fearless canine estate guardian would henceforth be known to folks as Hi-Dog.

Shortly thereafter, a scruffy gray tom cat made an appearance and to no one's surprise was dubbed Hi-Cat. A long-clawed feline defense during their first and only fight convinced Hi-Dog that a territorial truce was wiser than serious damage to canine hide and pride. The formerly homeless duo formed an inseparable pact solely dedicated to the protection of the McCreary acreage. Solicitors bypassed.

Stray number three was Adrian Johnson, a bundle of mischievous turmoil. AJ had been orphaned at the age of eight when his family perished from a house fire. The boy's absence was due to one of his periodic attempts to run away from home. Each perilous journey was financed by a shiny new quarter from his dad and normally ended an hour later when this largess ran out at the local five-and-dime candy store.

Now a rambunctious nine-year-old, AJ was definitely the most trying experience of Papa Joe's oft-tried career. The boy could not be dissuaded from his self-imposed destiny to become a pirate.

The fourth and final arrival was Sherryl Granby, an unwed mother-to-be at age sixteen. Sherryl had become an outcast from the Granby household after her father locked her inside her room one
evening demanding that she write down an exact description of the stranger who was obviously the rapist responsible for her swollen condition.

At midnight Sherryl slipped a note out from under her door requesting more writing paper. Her pious papa nodded approval and her mousy mama fetched additional paper.

At sunrise Sherryl was still writing when her baggy-eyed papa stormed into the room and snatched up Sherryl's work-in-progress of thirty pages and growing. Not only had she provided descriptions, but also names and addresses of possible fathers for the unborn child. The endless list began with the next-door neighbors, then spread through town like a male census before branching out into the rural county.

Sherryl, now more than eight months pregnant, was once again in the process of refusing another one of AJ's marriage proposals. "AJ, never start a love letter with 'Dear Wench,'. And what book did you copy this last part from? 'Restore thy stolen honor in this, the eleventh hour.' Not to mention that a romantic pirate would never wear that polka dot eye-patch with its Fruit of the Loom logo."

"Then kiss me moon, lass," AJ fired back, spinning to drop his jeans, exposing a bare bottom. Peering back between his spread legs he added, "Feast yer eyes, trollop, or be flogged with me cat-o'-nine."

"Cat-o'-three is more like it," she snickered.

AJ pulled up his jeans, conceding, "I forgot you were the expert."

Papa Joe came in through the screen door trailed by Hi-Dog and Hi-Cat. The cleric was wearing garden-grimed bib overalls. His first symbolic yet practical act of rural retirement had been to exchange his priestly garb — collar especially — for overalls. The current wardrobe consisted of seven bibs: six denim blues and one Clorox white for his Sunday visits to the federal prison two miles up the mountain.
Instantly recognizing the boy's "not-me" look, Papa Joe investigated. "Now what devilment have you transgressed upon our dear Miss Granby this time, Captain Hook?"

"Holy cow, Papa Joe, you got me guilty before I even been charged with anything. That's against the merry-time laws of all seven seas. Besides, she insulted my manhood."

"Young man, while under this roof, leaky though it may be, we shall not verbally integrate divinities with bovines. Cows may indeed be blessed creations, albeit I have yet to witness one with a halo. And unless I am an unobservant nincompoop — stop shaking your head in agreement — I would venture to speculate that you have committed some unspeakable crudity in Miss Granby's presence and now owe her an apology."

Sitting side by side on the maple flooring, Hi-Dog and Hi-Cat swiveled their heads in unison back toward AJ for his response, like curiously synchronized spectators at a tennis match dutifully anticipating the return salvo.

AJ did not disappoint his four-legged fans. He dropped down to his knees and clasped both hands together in shameful remorse. "Adorable Mistress of Treasure Island, please find it in your not quite maiden heart to forgive a noble sailor."

"Cut the crap," Papa Joe warned.

"OK, I'm sorry I showed my butt, Sherryl. But if you won't marry me today, can we at least go down to the creek for some real friendly skinny-dipping?"

Sherryl giggled as Papa Joe lamented, "A pitiful prospect for a romanticist, particularly one who aspires to steal some damsel's heart as a swashbuckling sea captain. I suggest that you swim by yourself since Miss Granby's present condition precludes most of your mermaid plundering fantasies at the stream."

"I don't want to play pirate today," AJ corrected while he sidled out the door with the pets. Over his shoulder he lobbed a parting shot. "I'll be King Tut instead. Sherryl can float on her back while I straddle her hump like I'm crossing the Nile River on a camel."
The child dashed for the swimming hole with the estate pets scampering at his heels while Papa Joe shook his head in abject exasperation. Next month Sherryl's baby was due, meaning another mouth to feed. The credit account at the nearby general store was maxed out. The old house was falling apart. Property taxes were late. In fact, last year's taxes were in arrears, as well as the year or two before that.

Oh well, the old man mused silently. Things could be worse. We still have a bountiful garden, a home and each other.

Down at the creek bank, he could distantly discern a naked AJ screaming threats while chasing Hi-Dog with a wooden sword.

Papa Joe glanced upward through the torn mesh of the screen door and cast his prayers to the clouds: Lord, grant me patience. Aloud he added, "ASAP."

* * *

Sundays were historical disasters for Captain Wilhelm Seaver. As a youngster he had endured two-hour-long Sunday sermons aboard unforgiving pine pews. He had married Mildred the Mouth one dark Sunday. And he had very nearly suffered a career collapse on an overcast Sunday two decades ago when the Harmon brothers pulled their dramatic escape stunt while he was the prison's designated Officer-In-Charge of Security.

The memorable year was 1963. Alcatraz had recently been once more condemned as "unfit for human habitation." Normally, such prison reclassifications evoked little public sympathy and even less response since most of the Alcatraz inmate population barely qualified as "human" by public standards. But the old California rock fortress was crumbling, routinely pelting prisoners and staff every time that coastline burped the slightest earthquaking tremor, not to mention a looming fear of annihilation by The Big One.

Congress grudgingly appropriated emergency funding for a new maximum security facility to house the nation's most dangerous and despised criminals. The replacement site was the centrally located
town of Bacon, Illinois. All basic construction was complete by April of 1963 when ninety minimum security inmates were brought in to finish the odd jobs of plumbing, non-security wiring, minor landscaping, and painting in a rare flash of fiscal propriety. Why pay union scale when this inmate "incentive wage" rate of only fifteen cents per day for each worker was readily available.

Yet not all of these new conscripts were happy about their relocation from a comparatively posh minimum security camp to this stark, super-max prison. Three such malcontents were the Harmon brothers, each serving a one year sentence for their conspiracy to transport marijuana across state lines. The interstate commerce charge carried a maximum penalty of five years, so the three boys had eagerly accepted the one year conspiracy plea bargain since they had been caught red-handed with a truck bed filled to capacity with the illegal herb.

Ralph Harmon, eldest of the siblings, was a college certified electrician by trade and a compulsive tinkerer by inclination. His novel field was gadgetry. If it hummed, pinged or buzzed, Ralph felt compelled to dismantle and rebuild it to his own improved specs. The likable mechanical whiz was affectionately singled out among the Harmon kin as "our better-mouse-trap man."

Today, Ralph stood reviewing the prison's state-of-the-art perimeter security measures with his younger brothers, Jake and Clem. Two fourteen-foot Hurricane Stress Fences enclosed the prison compound, crowned by another seven feet of vee-shaped extensions, all liberally laced with scalpel-sharp concertina wire. Between the fences, the twenty-foot gap called "dead-man's-alley" was saturated with coils of razor wire.

Interwoven through the fence meshing, sixteen inches off the ground, ran a hollow strand of rubberized tubing filled with anti-freeze and metallic filaments. This vibration detection sensor was an integral component of the Perim-Guard Sensory System which signaled perimeter disturbances to measuring meters spaced along both fences at forty-foot intervals. Disturbed filament information would be instantly transmitted to the Master Control Booth inside
the prison's primary building complex. A generator-powered panel in the manned booth identified each forty-foot fence sector and displayed a digital readout from one to ninety-nine in proportion to the disturbance.

Slight agitations to the fence, such as moderate winds or birds alighting, would merit a readout below twenty. Strong winds might earn a readout of thirty. But a man scaling the fence would result in a digital value of sixty or higher, depending upon the person's size and haste. Any reading above fifty automatically triggered a siren claxon heard easily within a five mile radius.

"Why can't we just snip the fence open real easy-like with homemade wire cutters?" asked Clem after Ralph had explained how the Perim-Guard worked.

"Yeah, boy," Jake agreed, "and if we really need 'em, I'll betcha I could steal some bolt cutters and stash 'em in the sand in the horseshoe pit till the heat died down."

"Cutters might work if it weren't for the Intruder Infra-Scan projectors," Ralph advised, pointing to cameras mounted on top of the Perim-Guard meters. While Clem and Jake listened open-mouthed, the educated older brother patiently explained, informing them that the Infra-Scan cameras projected beacons of ultraviolet photons in cross-thatched patterns, creating invisible fields of detection. If breached by anything larger than a rodent, the physical outline of the intruder would be captured and simulated on computer screens in the Master Control Booth as well as the guard towers.

The towers were currently unmanned but would later house two marksmen apiece when the higher security cons were brought in from Alcatraz. For now, these towers were of no concern to the Harmon brothers — a blessing for the trio since Ralph's expertise did not encompass new-age Gatling guns or laser-guided missiles.

Clem and Jake departed for the horseshoe pit as Ralph returned to his cell to do what he did best: assemble. It was rec period and most inmates were pitching horseshoes or playing with a variety of sports balls such as softballs, basketballs, bocci balls, handballs.
and occasionally each other's. But Ralph recreated somewhat more productively by assembling spare parts he had filched from his work detail responsible for non-security wiring. He salvaged bits of scrap wire and borrowed miscellaneous odds and ends whenever supervisors were not diligently supervising. Slowly he accumulated the wherewithal to construct three handheld gadgets.

One overcast June Sunday, the Harmons stood before the rear sallyport entrance for visitors' cars, supply trucks and the reception or departure of prisoners. The sallyport was the only sector of dead-man's-alley devoid of razor wire between the outer and inner perimeter fences in order to provide clear vehicular passage for the gap between the two fences. In this paved section between the rolling gates was a one-room checkpoint booth which would later house a guard to identify incomers and search their vehicles for contraband. Yet like the guard tower just beyond the outer gate, this checkpoint shack was not yet manned, pending the arrival of any higher security convicts.

But the Perim-Guard and Infra-Scan sensors at both gates were fully operational with their humming meters and whining cameras for continuous high-tech security monitoring.

Ralph respectfully approached the Perim-Guard meter box and clamped on two small aluminum clips. Color-coded wires ran from each clip to one of the handmade gadgets in his open shirt pocket. After fastening on the clamps, Ralph’s hands were free to take the freshly attached gadget out of his pocket and flick on its toggle switch. A light on the Perim-Guard meter box instantly changed from blinking red to solid green, signaling clear-passage sector deactivation of that sallyport gate meter.

Jake then handed Ralph a similar but slightly larger version of the first gadget which the electrician attached to the Infra-Scan camera. The repeated process again proved successful as the projector wound down with a fading mechanical whine.

Clem next unpocketed the third of Ralph's small contraptions. Except for a double-A battery pack secured with electrician's tape,
this rectangular plastic gizmo resembled a remote control garage door opener. Clem confidently pointed the device at the aerial antenna on the gate's roller-mount motor, then held his breath and thumbed a button on the handmade remote.

Nothing happened.

When another thumping failed, he looked to Ralph for further instruction but only received a shoulder shrug from the inventor, so Clem thumped the remote with the heel of his free hand and tried again. This time the gate motor sprang to life, turning a chained cog. The large gate rumbled open along its ball bearing castors to the delight of the three escape artists.

Ralph disconnected the clamps and the brothers skipped into the sallyport where Clem retargeted the motor and closed the gate. Then the boys repeated the entire process on the outer fence gate with its meter and camera. Once free, with the gates shut, behind them, the happy-go-lucky Harmons strolled beneath the vacant guard tower and proceeded into the small town of Bacon where they stopped to get roaring drunk at a small tavern and eatery named Billy Bob's Bar and Grill.

Three hopelessly inebriated desperados shouting out for more Jim Beam after their funds expired left Billy Bob little choice but to summon Sheriff Roberson. The young lawman coaxed Jake, the most lucid, through a slurred recital of the Harmon brothers' hairy escapade. Then Billy Bob and the sheriff lugged the nonresisting fugitives into the bed of Billy Bob's Chevy pickup truck and took the slumbering bodies back to the prison under a light rain. The escapees had not been missed.

A footnote in the Congressional Record for July of 1963 noted that within the very first two months of operations, the nation's new escape-proof federal penitentiary had suffered three undetected escapes.

Congress was not pleased.

* * *

51
Today was Sunday and way too peaceful.

Captain Seaver's radio crackled loudly to life: "Two-six-two calling zero-zero-one. Come in, Captain."

"This is zero-zero-one," Seaver immediately responded. "Go ahead, Sergeant Drip."

"Sir, we have an incident developing in the parking lot. That crazy old priest who lives right down the mountain is demanding to see inmate Anthony Rogers even though the inmate's visiting rights have been suspended for disciplinary reasons."

"On my way," Seaver replied.

Outside, the captain discovered the old familiar figure of Papa Joe waiting in his customary white bib visiting overalls. But instead of his usual brogans, the priest now stood barefoot in a liquid filled washtub with the bib overalls rolled up over exposed and surprisingly muscular calf muscles. Silky white hair and beard fluttered in the stiff breeze.

The cleric was smoking a large cigar while delivering a loud tirade to the dozen prison guards who had him encircled but were carefully standing a fearful distance of ten feet from the madman.

Alongside the tub lay the brogans and a blue, five-gallon gas can upside down, its contents now in the washtub.

Captain Seaver bustled his way through the jittery guards. When he broke into the inner ring ten feet from the tub, Papa Joe ordered, "Stop or die!"

Seaver stopped.

"Jostling me may prove to be highly inflammatory," the priest warned. "I am weary and ill-tempered from my perilous trek up here this morning. First I walked two miles to this desolate outpost to visit inmate Anthony Rogers, only to be denied entrance. Then I went home to pick up a wash basin and a gasoline container, then back to this hilltop bastion of misery. I am an unhappy camper."

Papa Joe paused for a deep draw on the cigar before picking up the story again through exhaled plumes of blue-gray cumulus.

"I have exercised the liberty of contacting a loyal associate
in Chicago. In the event you underestimate my resolve, tomorrow's Tribune banner headline shall proclaim: PRIEST DENIED RIGHTS — GRISLY CASUALTIES FOLLOW!"

"Papa Joe," Captain Seaver appealed with his eyes glued to the cigar's lengthening ash, "haven't I always tried to accommodate you? But inmate Rogers violated chapter ninety-four, subsection two hundred and sixty of the Federal Bureau of Prisons Inmate Disciplinary Code, so he absolutely cannot be allowed any visits for two years. It's just that simple."

"Farewell then, Captain Seaver. Perhaps we shall meet on the other side of the River Jordan. Or not."

"Let's not be hasty," Seaver proposed nervously. "I feel almost certain we can talk this out."

"Stow it, Cap. We have precisely five seconds left on this earthly planet."

"Surely y-you w-won't—"

"Four, three, two, one—"

"Stop!" screamed Seaver. "You may visit!"

"Thank you, kind sir," Papa Joe acknowledged while stepping out of the fluid.

After lacing up his brogans, the old man draped one arm over Seaver's shoulder and whispered into his ear, "It's only water, yet if you go back on your word, I shall return with real gasoline every Sunday."
Leo woke up when the old Cadillac bottomed out and died a rattling death in the rutted driveway. Hi-Dog circled the car barking ferociously, foam dripping from snapping jaws. Hi-Cat pounced on the hood, hairs stiffly porcupined along an arched spine.

AJ sprawled on his belly across the front porch, targeting the newcomers with a fully extended, marble-loaded slingshot. Sherryl straddled the doorway, lightly touching a rusty fire poker against her ballooned midriff, instinctively reassuring her unborn child.

"Why don't you jump out, Kev, and introduce me and Maggie to all your fine friends?" inquired Leo innocently. "They seem to know you pretty good."

"After you, pal," Kevin chuckled. "Now's your first chance to become a star instead of a sideline, knobby-kneed cheerleader."

"I sure ain't scared of no kids or pets," Leo claimed while warily unlocking the front door. But just after he eased it open a few inches, Papa Joe burst through the high brambles bordering the other side of the driveway. The unshaven, wild-haired old codger carried a washtub and a gas can.

Leo slammed the door shut and through the window slit yelled, "We surrender!"

"Kevin, my son," Papa Joe cried, dropping his cargo as Kevin stepped out into a robust embrace from sinewy arms.

"Papa Joe, you look stunning. We've been on the road for some long hours and need a safe haven overnight. I couldn't help noticing this place seems to offer first-rate security."

"Then welcome to the McCreary Motel," Papa Joe laughed. "Free fellowship and plenty of running water whenever we are blessed with rain. Now kindly introduce me to your friends."

Maggie introduced herself with a gentle kiss to the old man's leathery cheek. "I am Magdalena, but please just call me Maggie. Thank you for taking us in for the night and I hope we are able
to repay your generosity. By the way, is that a garden over there beside the house?"

"Indeed, my dear. And consider the kiss as payment in full. At those rates, I pray you remain here forever."

"Be careful," Leo warned while disembarking. "She smells fresh veggies."

After introductions, including Hi-Dog and Hi-Cat, Papa Joe shepherded his straggling flock into the front parlor with the cautionary instructions to be seated. "Just locate something that appears capable of bearing your weight. I am not the handyman I once was, so there are no guarantees you shall not crash to the floor or even through it. When you get comfortable, Kevin, kindly explain to your surrogate father the depths of this hazardous hole you have recently dug for yourself. The last I heard, you were in the splendid care and custody of our beloved Uncle Sam."

"It's a long story," Kevin dodged the retelling after sinking into a sagging sofa, "but since my new partner is a magnificent teller of tales, I'll gladly give him that honor."

Leo coughed uncomfortably. "Don't pass that buck to me," he hedged while carefully sizing up a beanbag chair. "My tongue is dried out as a roadkill, lizard carcass. I seen a well pump in the side yard. Ain't had no fresh well water since Papaw lost the farm in Reno."

The priest pursued the topic. "Your family owned real estate in Nevada, Mister Barker?"

"Nope, Kentucky. But Papaw lost it in Reno shooting dice. And now if you'll excuse me, maybe this little villain here with that colorful eye-patch will help my dry old bones to a splash of that there natural well water."

"You're not so old, Mister Barker," AJ quickly pointed out. "Just look at Papa Joe. He's old as Count Dracula. He's older than the Old Testament. He's so old——"

"You made your point," Papa Joe admonished. "Now assist our guest with the procurement of a thirst-quenching remedy. Meantime perhaps the lovely Miss Maggie will bring me up to date on your
past adventures and future aspirations."

After Leo, Sherryl, AJ and the pets made their noisy exit, Maggie recapped for Papa Joe. "We have the FBI trying to put us in the prison here in Bacon, so we came here figuring it was the last place they would look. And since we are in the neighborhood, we might as well break Kevin's partner out of the local slammer. Then we just rob the town and retire to Brazil. Meanwhile we must keep up our energy, so I was wondering if you had any munchies?"

Papa Joe stroked his wispy beard thoughtfully. "That was most absorbing and beautifully rendered. For your well earned reward, kindly step into the kitchen and look inside the refrigerator. On the middle shelf is my famous squash casserole. If you place the dish into the oven at three hundred and twenty-five degrees and set the timer for forty-five minutes, that should give us all an ample opportunity to relax and freshen up before dinner.

"Plenty of spare bedrooms if you desire to nap, which is my own intention. But at my age, one does not take waking for granted. So in the event I fail to open my eyes, just cast my brittle bones into the hole behind the tool shed."

One hour later, everyone was assembled at the dining table. Papa Joe, revived by his nap, shot a warning glance toward AJ just before announcing, "Youngest son, you may have the privilege of giving thanks for our food. In view of our guests, I am somewhat hopeful you shall garner a modicum of inspirational respect."


The large ceramic pot of squash began circulating as Papa Joe set the tone for the topic of discussion. "Kevin, the peculiarity that I find the most disconcerting in your grand itinerary is the safety of Miss Maggie in the aftermath of your crime spree. She fails to strike me as criminally inclined, so what then justifies placing her in harm's way?"
"Ask her," Kevin answered, "since she invited herself."

Papa Joe shifted his inquisitive gaze to Maggie who replied between bites. "I have . . . nowhere else . . . to go."

"I see," Papa Joe acknowledged. "Then perhaps the applicable resolution to your dilemma, as is often the case, may be found within the verbiage of the conundrum itself."

After an uneasy moment of silence, Leo said, "I think maybe you stumped us all with that one, Father Joe."

"More clearly stated," the cleric clarified, "when one has nowhere to go, perhaps one should go nowhere."

To everyone's amazement, Maggie put down her fork. "Are you implying that I should not have come along?"

"Not at all, dear. An ancient sinner such as myself would look ridiculous casting stones upon your brief past. I am merely concerned with prolonging your future."

Still uncertain, Maggie ventured, "But surely you are not inviting me to stay here after the guys leave, are you?"

AJ broke in, "Excuse me for changing channels on this sappy old soap opera, but I need a knife for the squash."

"I should think," Papa Joe chastised, "that your fork and spoon are sufficient utensils for the consumption of this soft casserole with its delicate crust."

"I sure don't plan to eat it, if that's what you mean," the boy shot back. "I plan to kill it. It moved."

"Another remark of that nature shall merit your removal from the table, young man."

"Anything but that," AJ mocked. "I might miss out on a second helping."

"Mine was awesome," Maggie declared while exchanging her now empty plate for AJ's full one.

AJ avowed, "I love you."

"Bless you, Miss Maggie," Papa Joe concurred. "Now returning to your predicament, the important question is not where you might go, but rather, why should you stay. To resolve this new dilemma, simply look from me to AJ to Miss Granby. Suffice it to say that
we need you."

"Just look at the squash," AJ directed. "Case closed."

"Please stay, Maggie," Sherryl pleaded, rubbing her swollen belly.

Leo approved, "From the mouths of babes."

"Why not!" laughed Maggie, succumbing happily to the hearty peer pressure.

"Then welcome to my growing family, daughter," Papa Joe endorsed the deal as he rose and circled the table to hug the newest addition to the McCreary household.

Sherryl urged clarification. "Should we call you Maggie or Miss Maggie or big sister?"

"Anything but sister," Maggie implored clearly. "Now what's for dessert?"

Papa Joe revealed, "I believe we have one of Miss Granby's fresh apple pies in the kitchen window sill if AJ will procure it for you. I am full and a bit worn, so please excuse me until we enjoy breakfast together. This memorable day has been a joy beyond words, beginning with my successful sojourn to visit son Anthony, followed by son Kevin's return, and culminating in the addition of another beautiful daughter. I bid you all a good night."

"Good night, Papa," Kevin replied. "Leo and I will be leaving early in the morning to pick up Ant. So give me another hug and I'll pass it along to your number one son tomorrow, and then I'll bring him home."

"Nothing would please me more," the old man confided with a final embrace. "You shall be armed with countless prayers," the cleric whispered before turning for the stairs.

AJ corrected Kevin after Papa Joe was gone. "Ant was made the number two son after I got here. I guess that makes you the number three son now."

"I'm thrilled to settle for third place, little bro," Kevin allowed.

Maggie tapped her fork impatiently. When AJ glanced back to see what his new sister wanted, she reminded the lad, "The pie."
Doc: Good afternoon, gentlemen, and welcome to group therapy. Most of you have undergone one-on-one therapy, but that cuts into my golf schedule, so I will see you all at the same time from now on. You may even earn certificates. Some of you may already be acquainted, but for altruistic purposes here, I ask that you now put aside any preconceptions or petty grievances to ensure that we all begin with blank slates. Also bear in mind that failure to participate shall not look good in your file and disruptions shall not be tolerated. So let us begin with self-introductions from the five of you. State your name and what you hope to gain from these half-hour sessions. So Maxwell, please get the ball rolling and then proceed clockwise around the table to Phillip, Anthony, Rajah and Michael. Go ahead, Maxwell.

Max: Hi. My name is Max and I am an alcoholic.

Doc: That group meets on Thursday, Maxwell. Since this is an open forum, however, feel free to discuss your drinking problem.

Max: That's the problem all right. I need a drink.

Phil: Hold on one cotton-picking second, Doc. You said we go in turn and now it's my turn. But you gave Max back-to-back turns. If you ever do that again, I'll break into your office and strangle all your bug-eyed goldfish with dental floss. Unwaxed!

Doc: Let us move on to Anthony.

Ant: Can't compete. No calories. Where's the coffee and doughnuts promised on the sign-up sheet?

Max: He's right, Doc. Cough up the goodies. Do you
think we came to hear your fly-trap snap open and shut?

Doc: I believe it was Rajah's turn, Maxwell.

Phil: Oh, I see. Now that it's an A-rab's turn, we are going in order again. But I'm not in the mood for any Jew jokes, and why does Raj get to wear a turban? There's probably a car bomb under it.

Raj: Now you know why I hate countrified Europeans.

Phil: I am from Hickory, North Carolina. My grampa owns a seven-hundred acre hog farm and my pa works at Richard Petty Enterprises. So there!

Raj: You are just upset about being denied your stupid request for an all-pork diet.

Doc: Gentlemen, pettiness shall not be tolerated.

Ant: So speaks the doughnut thief.

Phil: That's right. Doc, I'll sit on your wrinkled neck and bite liver spots off your old face.

Max: Who cut the cheese? I smell Mega-Meal.

Raj: Or white boy feet.

Doc: Michael, why are you here if you do not plan to contribute to the discussion?

Mike: I am here because I'm a magician.

Doc: I mean why are you in group therapy, not why are you in prison. In any event, I certainly do not see being a magician as a crime.


Phil: Do a tougher trick. Make Doc shut up.

Mike: OK.

Doc: How did you get my pencil, Michael?

Ant: He's a magician.

Mike: This Number Two pencil is a magician named Half-Mighty Karma since it only disappears
halfway. Watch this closely, Doc. The hand is quicker than the eye.

Doc: Give it back or I shall call secur—

Mike: OK.

Ant: Wow, Doc. I hate to be the party pooper, but there's a pencil embedded halfway in your eye socket. Does that mean no certificates?

Phil: Grab Doc's cigarettes before the band marches in, clubbing away like the baton twirlers who never forgave us for taking their lunch money.

Max: Doc won't mind. He smokes a pipe now.

Phil: I don't get it.

Max: Doctor Pop-eye.

Phil: Oh.

Mike: I'll say that Doc sneezed while he was erasing a file note and jabbed himself in the eye.

Ant: Our good doctor looks bored to death.

Max: Failure to participate shall not look good in your file, Doctor Pop-eye, and eruptions shall not be tolerated.

Raj: The shrink is finally expanding his mind on the point of blind justice.

Ant: At least he is more color-coordinated now with Number Two Yellow complementing the pinstriping gray matter dripping down onto his gray smock.

Mike: My bad, guys. I'm superstitious and just had to get off that unlucky number.

Phil: Number two?

Mike: No, thirteen.
Sheriff Delbert Roberson was proud of the low crime rate for his town of Bacon, Illinois. Last year's town clerk ledger showed no felonies, and aside from parking tickets and speeding offenses, only three other misdemeanors: two for driving under the influence of intoxicants and the other for discharge of a firearm within the city limits. This annual crime rate for the three thousand people making up the city population was among the lowest one percentile in the whole state.

Whenever workable, the sheriff and his young deputy sheriff, Roy Masters, lowered urban statistics by escorting offenders just outside the "Welcome to Bacon" city limit sign often prior to any actual arrests or the issuing of traffic citations. The resultant county crime rate was somewhat above the national average with a sharply contrasting, low level of criminal activity within the ideal town of Bacon.

Quite naturally the sheriff and one unseasoned deputy could not be expected to completely stomp out all crime throughout the entire county. After all, shotgun weddings, homegrown reefer and hundred-sixty-proof white lightning were just as indigenous to the region as tent revivals, pig roasts and Masonic Lodges. Yet any simple perusal of the records would statistically imply that this sheriff ran a mighty tight ship.

To more publicly illustrate the illusion, a daunting array of achievement plaques and framed civic citations covered the entire back wall of the Sheriff's Office, adding even further whitewashed credence to the community's alleged uprightness.

Bacon. A slow-moving vessel in the hurtling trajectory of an oil-smoking Cadillac. A sleepy township leisurely sailing into the cross hairs of a rusty torpedo.

Sheriff Roberson was losing patience with his disrespectful deputy. For thirty minutes, he had been attempting to raise the young law officer on the local police band.
"This is Jack Daniels calling Wild Turkey for the very last dad-gum time. Do you copy, gobbler? Turn down that confounded ghetto blaster and put your ears on, Roy."

The only response was the annoying crackle of static. Ever since Roy had installed that eardrum-bursting stereo system in the patrol car, the new deputy might just as well have been in North Dakota as far as the sheriff was concerned. Right now he needed the deputy to deliver an eviction notice to the McCreary place, a possible suicide mission that the sheriff was certainly not considering doing himself. That's one reason he had hired Roy.

"Answer me, you earless turkey!" the rotund sheriff shouted into the handset with his double chins bouncing.

Deputy Roy Masters clicked off the CB and turned up the new surround-sound stereo. He had spotted that eviction notice form in the old Royal typewriter this morning. No way. Don't even think about it. He had not chosen a career in law enforcement in order to become anybody's errand boy. That sheriff could carry his own lard-bellied self out there if he was that dumb, but Roy wanted no part of it for several reasons.

First of all, he had a hot date this afternoon with Mildred the Mouth while her husband worked a double shift at the short-handed federal prison just outside of town. Roy was not about to miss that rendezvous. Old Mildred the Mouth might be a little bit talkative, but that particular character trait had nothing to do with her hard-earned nickname.

Secondly and thirdly, Roy did not relish the prospect of his death or maiming by a pair of half-wild pets or a mini-pirate with a crossbow.

The deputy resolved not to fret over the angry sheriff back in town or the crazed homesteaders at the McCreary spread. Maybe a little classic Willie Nelson would ease his mind, he figured, adjusting the volume to window-rattling decibels and then slumping down behind the padded steering wheel of the high-powered Dodge Charger patrol car. Maybe nab some speeding ticket bucks off the
books, Roy's very own personal contribution to the reduction of officially recorded offenses. But it was beginning to look like just another uneventful Monday morning on the placid outskirts of Bacon. Oh well.

Suddenly an old, squalling blue Cadillac careened around the bend and blew right past the parked police cruiser. Black smoke streamed out of a dangling, coat-hanger supported exhaust tailpipe bouncing madly off the sparking pavement. Roy's first impression was of a downed World War II-era cargo plane valiantly attempting to take off again and complete some vital mission — damaged, yet still committed to its military timetable, although unlikely to be armed or dangerous.

"Hot-diggedy-dog," Roy whooped. "The race is on!"

No need for the Starbust Radar Tracker. That high-finned '59 junker was flying through curves at ninety-five, at least. So Roy hit the ignition, then the bubble-top flasher, the siren and speed shifter in rehearsed, rapid-fire sequence. He popped the clutch and balded Goodyear Radials in a big swerving arc out onto the hot asphalt in pursuit. The kid was now in his favorite turbo-charged element with his hat snugged low on the brow and his right foot flat to the floorboard while the siren wailed out an eerie harmony to Waylon and Willie and The Boys.

The back of Roy's mind exulted: This is my calling. My reason for existence. This is why I'm a cop!

Sheriff Roberson hammered the casing of the dispatch radio. When Roy returned, that traveling music show was going to be torn right out of the patrol car. Every last tweeter wire.

But hold the fort. Calm down. No need to let that pipsqueak wanna-be Matt Dillon ruin the day. Retirement was right around the corner. Six more months, then off to the lake cabin for beer, bass and more beer. Maybe a gold watch as a token of the townspeople's appreciation for keeping them safe from the explosively expanding criminal element festering throughout the rest of the state.

So just cool it, Delbert. That old eviction notice can wait.
until after lunch at Billy Bob's. He'd most likely catch Roy there
downing a long-neck or two. So take a Tums, drink a hot Sanka and
enjoy the serenity of peaceful life. Think about important stuff.

"Bass and cold beer," the sheriff spoke softly into the cool
morning air.

"Cold cowards," Roy bemoaned after the old Cadillac skidded
to a halt half a mile down the road. The beginning of a thrilling
high-speed chase had sadly anticlimaxed in twenty seconds flat.

He pulled in behind the idling clunker while noting the blue
and white Kentucky license plate. Probably some hicks up from the
sticks to visit their inbred kinfolk at the federal prison. Roy
could just imagine how convoluted those visiting forms might end
up. The "Relation to Inmate" blank space might be filled in with
Pa-Bro-Cuz to indicate that the visitor in question qualified as
all three relatives in the gnarled family tree.

Better check for an inspection sticker. No rush. Make those
hillbillies sweat at least until Waylon and Willie and The Boys
got done feuding like the song lyric's Hatfields and McCoys. How
appropriate. Let the scared bumpkins in the clunker ponder the raw
power of all those thirsty horses chugging gas under the shade of
the Charger's hood scoop. The impression of barely suppressed fury
would reinforce the futility of attempting the old moonshiner's
trick of making a mad dash for the hills as soon as the lawman got
out of his own vehicle to approach the suspect's car.

Patsy Cline gave Waylon and Willie a breather, so Roy slipped
on his mirrored sunglasses, then climbed out and sauntered up to
the rusted-out automobile. Leaning over with his arms crossed on
the driver-side door panel, he coolly stared down through the open
window at the white-knuckled, fragile old black man hunkered down
behind the wheel.

"And all my life," Roy wisecracked, "I've been thinking Mario
Andretti was white, so I'm sure you understand that I need to see
your ID."

Leo draped Loo-Loo's short fat barrels across the deputy's
folded forearms and thumbed back both hammers producing an ominous clack-clack. He complied with the request by casually suggesting, "ID this."

Roy's mind identified a connection: Imminent Death.

Sheriff Roberson's blood pressure was soaring once more as he shrieked into the unresponsive radio. "I know doggone good-'n-well you hear me, deputy boy. You sit out there sipping Miller Lite from a Dixie Cup while I sweat this eviction notice of tax-dodging loony tunes. You think you'll get my job if I get shot or mauled beyond recognition. Well think again, Mister Soupline Einstein, because you're fired!"

"Why did I take this job?" whimpered Roy.

Leo sympathized, "A pretty boy like you should be out selling Hiver Ultra-Vacs to lonely housewives. But since you chose another position, I suggest you hold it. Don't move even if'n a big horny grizzly bear comes snuffling up from behind your hunched backside."

Roy cracked. The left lobe of his brain retreated back to the cozy confines of his childhood bedroom in the attic with its life-size Dale Earnhardt poster clinging to the slanted roof. Stuffy but warm. Dark yet safe. Mama yelling up the pull-down staircase for him to hurry up and get dressed for Sunday School. The manic Holy Roller preacher threatening the backsliding congregation with eternal fire and brimstone.

"Not even if'n two hordes of pollen covered, snot sucking killer bees swarm up your nostrils," Leo rolled on. "One contagious sniffle from you might commence Loo-Loo into a fit of sneezing ball bearings that could level the stand of Spruce Pine across that big holler behind you, and kinfolk could mourn a different piece of you every day for five years."

Roy's returning half-brain left lobe absent-mindedly wondered 'Who is Lulu?'

'Go back to the attic,' the right lobe silently reciprocated. 'I was not lonely.'
From the open window of the squad car, Patsy Cline cut loose with "Cra-azy!"

Kevin eased out of the Cadillac's passenger door and padded softly around the deputy's vehicle, approaching him from behind, then gently removed the lawman's holstered .38 Police Special.

"Back to your car," Kevin ordered, but Roy remained perfectly still.

'Horny Bear talks,' the right lobe of Roy's cracked-up brain noted of the disturbance to his rear.

'Could be worse,' the left lobe pointed out.

"Move it," Kevin tried again.

Left side noted, 'Big grizzly bear with small gun told us to move.'

Right side countered, 'Small psychotic preacher with big gun told us not to move.'

With both sides in agreement and without moving his lips, Roy reported, "We stay."

Kevin glanced back toward the squad car for the missing half of Roy's "we." Nobody there but that crazy Cline girl.

"Pardner," Leo admonished Kevin, "this here boy is froze up solid. He's got a bad case of PPS. I seen the same thing in Korea. Puckered Pooter Syndrome. You'd have more luck telling the Statue of Liberty that somebody else done answered the question, so she can put her arm down. Better let me handle it."

He stared at his reflection in Roy's sunglasses, patted down one gray hair and softly instructed, "Do like he says, son."

Right lobe thought, 'Preacher called Horny Bear a "he."'

Left lobe admitted, 'Not good.'

Kevin gently prodded the wide-eyed deputy back to the police car and tucked him into the backseat, then slid behind the padded steering wheel and motioned for Leo to lead the charge on into the small town in the Cadillac.

Roy groped for reassurance behind the heavy mesh partition screening off the rear interior. One hand closed on the air in his holster while the other hand clasped air in the hollow door handle.
socket. Empty-handed and empty-headed, Roy heard his mama singing, curled up on the backseat with a quivering smile, then sobbed.

Patsy crashed and Willie bounced back to life whining about being on the road again as Leo led the two-car convoy into Bacon.

* * *

The portly sheriff relaxed when he finally heard the rumble of the gas-guzzling Charger pull into its reserved parking slot out front. That highfalutin upstart deputy was certainly in for a bummer when he heard about his future unemployment status. The sheriff could hardly wait to break the news to the smart alec boy and watch his grinning face transform into open-mouthed shock. It was not going to be such a boring Monday morning after all.

Careful not to give away any hint of the upcoming unemployment bombshell, the sheriff leaned way back in his swivel chair to prop both booted feet onto his spacious desktop while cupping his hands together behind his head. He hoped the hyper young deputy was in a good mood so the bad tidings would have maximum effect right after the high-strung lad bounded into the office.

Roy trudged in, one staggering step at a time — a B-movie zombie wading through quicksand. Dried rivulets of depleated tears streaked his vacant face. Sunglasses dangled perilously from one ear, threatening to dislodge entirely with each tottering step. He passed straight by the desk without the slightest acknowledgement of his boss, then turned into the rear lock-up annex. Entering the first cell, Roy stripped down to his boxer shorts and climbed onto the stripped top bunk. With his face pressed down against the hard warm steel, he sighed contentedly into the stuffy darkness. Before shutting his eyes, Roy fervently prayed that his beloved mama would not risk the wobbly stairs, but leave for church without her boy.

Two somber strangers had trailed Roy as far as the sheriff's desk. Roberson knew their type. Probably federal flunkies on some prison business. Rent-a-cops who hid out most days behind fancy-smancy computers. They might bully the pants off of Roy with their
takeover tactics based on federal jurisdiction, but Roberson was Old School. State's Rights still had meaning in this neck of the woods. If they performed their tough-guy act on his stage, old Sheriff Roberson would give those city-slickers a small sample of small-town hospitality, like a size twelve, triple-E cowboy boot right up their back alley.

No, scrap that plan, Delbert, the sheriff told himself. It requires taking my feet down off the desk which might be mistaken for mutual respect. They blew all that with whatever they did to Roy, that poor kid. But if they try any strong-arm stuff with me, they've seen a bad day in Bacon.

"Morning, Sheriff," Kevin broke the ice with an extended arm which Roberson ignored. "My partner and I just dropped by to take care of a little business over at the federal facility," he added with his arm still stubbornly extended.

"I would've never guessed," Roberson said with a sneer while reluctantly sticking out his own palm but not bothering to stand or remove his feet from the desktop. Breaking eye contact in order to locate the federal man's outstretched hand, the sheriff jerked back his whole upper torso with a discovery that he had nearly shaken hands with a pistol pointed at his unmissably corpulent belly. The already overburdened swivel chair squealed a shrilling slaughterhouse protest to the reeling, top-heavy load while the sheriff's flabby arms windmilled an airy backstroke. Both large cowboy boots flew up off the desk as the fated chair submitted with one final, agonized squeal and the butterball law enforcer cartwheeled back onto the tiled floor.

Shaken but largely undamaged due to his natural padding, the sheriff wisely offered no resistance when Leo stooped down slowly to relieve him of his side arm. A faint but unmistakable metallic click informed the downed officer that Leo had released the gun's safety catch. Without knowing the game, at least Roberson now knew the stakes: all the marbles.

"Will you answer one question?" the sheriff grunted out while struggling back up to his feet.
"Make it snappy," Leo barked. "This ain't 'Jeopardy!!'..."

"Don't you fellas realize," Roberson huffed, "that new, modern day technology now makes it practically impossible for any perps to successfully flee the crime scene, even from a rural area like our Bacon? As soon as you leave town, after whatever it is that you now hope to accomplish, National Guard helicopters will be overhead and tracking you within minutes. And unless you plan to kill everyone in town, what's to keep folks from using their phones or CB radios?"

Kevin turned and shot the dispatch radio five times.

Leo enthused, "Plus we got heat-seeking Loo-Loo slugs for any nosy choppers."

"Where do you keep the court order forms?" inquired Kevin. "I need a Habeas Corpus Ad Prosequendam writ allowing for the timely jurisdictional transfer of any prisoner for prosecution on other charges. We've got a friend at the federal prison who is not happy with the room service, so we plan to help him check out."

"Fellas, fellas, fellas," Roberson chuckled. "If you think you can just waltz into a maximum security prison and wave a standard writ to obtain custody of a prisoner, then you've got more loose screws than the bride of Frankenstein."

"We ain't that unbalanced," Leo assured him. "That's why we got you, Humpty Dumpty. Now quit yakking and git cracking."

The sheriff grudgingly retrieved the requested form from a wobbly file cabinet beneath the wall plaques and inserted the paper into the manual typewriter. Kevin supplied the requisite information while the sheriff hunt and pecked his way through the blank spaces on the writ. Finally the document was signed at the bottom by the Honorable Leopold Hammerstein, then stamped and notorized by one Kalvin Klein Kloppers.

"That's it, I quit," claimed the sheriff. "There's no way you two fruitcakes can pull this off, even with my help. And anyway, I would much rather get shot with that little pistol than with one of those howitzers from a guard tower."

Kevin then pocketed the gun and pulled out two jerry-built, hand-held gadgets while Leo kept the drop on the fat sheriff. The
modified Radio Shack items resembled transistor radios with extra wiring, electrician tape and double-A battery packs.

"Be serious," Roberson hooted. "That trick is twenty years old. Times have changed since the Harmon brothers pulled off their caper. All the prison perimeter electronics have been upgraded and the guard towers are now manned around the clock. They've even got military-grade weapons that can vaporize a tank."

Kevin shrugged indifference. "I never even heard of any Harmon brothers, and we don't plan to excite the tower hermits. Right now I'm more concerned with your own cooperation, so please meet my double-A packs," he explained, lifting one gadget in each hand. "This baby in my right hand holds four ounces of C-5 plastique explosive. The extruding gold wire serves as an aerial receptor."

"A what?" asked Roberson.

Leo supplied the answer. "An antenna, Sheriff Jumbo Dumbo. Ain't you got no schooling?"

Kevin continued, "This hoop on the back is for your belt to go through. Until we leave your peaceful jurisdiction, you'll wear this bomb at the base of your spine."

"Or what!?" challenged Roberson.

Leo warned, "Or we find a shadier spot for it. Sideways and with no grease so it don't pop out."

Kevin held up the other device in his left hand. "This is my remote detonator which I will now activate."

"Don't!" shouted Leo, causing the sheriff to jump and jiggle. "I once seen two ounces of that there stuff blow a redwood stump clean outta sight. It rained sawdust all day."

"Leo, calm down," Kevin placated. "I said I would activate it, not detonate it." He pointed the remote at the plastique and pressed a visible button on the side panel of the remote. At the same time he secretly thumbed a hidden button on the back panel of the plastique gadget which lit up a red light on its front face. To the sheriff it appeared that one device controlled the other, although this was beyond Kevin's limited engineering skills.

"I'm not wearing that dad-blasted thing," Roberson blustered
with his own bluff. "If you can activate, then you can detonate."

Leo promptly fired two shots into the tile floor between the
sheriff's boots. "You can't call no shots with no gun, Sheriff
Dumpty Dumbo. Now pull yourself together and live longer."

The large lawman hesitantly undid his belt halfway around,
allowing Kevin to thread it through the device allegedly filled
with explosives. When Roberson reattached, a tingling chill ran up
his backbone.

"Sir," he politely addressed Kevin, "why do you call this a,
double-A? Would that refer to the battery size?"

"No sir," Kevin replied with reciprocal diplomacy. "Those
are its initials. They stand for Attitude Adjuster."
"Why now?" inquired Papa Joe dreamily of the hooded, cloaked figure at the foot of the bed. "It is time," the spirit silently confirmed. "I was afraid you might mean that," the old cleric admitted as numbness spread down his left arm. "Albeit you have heard this supplication on numerous solemn occasions from souls more worthy than mine, I must nonetheless appeal for an extended dispensation. Not on my own behalf," the priest clarified, "as I am content with my lengthy passage upon this earthly starship. But my family needs me here just a little longer, so on their behalf, I pray that you return later."

The guest nodded understanding, but remained. "Don't make me go over your head," Papa Joe warned while he stared directly into the grim shadowed face.

The spector wavered uncertainly, then receded back into gray nothingness.

Sheriff Roberson eased the Charger to a stop in the long dark shadow of a looming guard tower. A speaker mounted on a steel post commanded him to pop the hood and trunk release catches to allow inspection. After both clicked open, a colossal Kevlar vest clad female Correctional Officer sporting a blonde military crew cut emerged from a one-room checkpoint station in the sallyport area between the fence gates ahead. She unlocked a heavily meshed doorway portal set into the large outer gate and stepped through, then relocked it. She methodically inspected the engine compartment and trunk before making a visual check of the underside of the vehicle with the aid of a small mirror attached to the end of an aluminum collapsible rod.

After closing the hood and trunk, she spoke into a portable radio clamped to her shoulder. "Vehicle clear. Open outer gate."
The motorized gate rumbled back and she waved for the car to follow her into the sallyport.

"Secure outer gate," brought it closed, trapping them between the two closed gates.

The lady behemoth approached the driver's open window and ordered the car's occupants to declare their weapons.

Leo leaned across the sheriff and declared, "I got a thirty-eight, mace and handcuffs. Are you into any of that, my healthy little darling?"

She answered, "You have ten seconds to hand over your side arms butt-first, butt-face."

Leo and Kevin quickly passed their handguns through the open window and Leo added, "That's all we got, Goldilocks, unless you wanna see my bazooka."

"Open inner gate," she advised her radio and the car eased over a speed bump into the nation's most secure prison. As usual, getting in was easy.

Captain Seaver and company were waiting just inside the gate, pointing to a parking spot beneath a sign reading, "Reserved for Receiving and Discharge." Roberson, Leo and Kevin got out and went through the introduction and handshake routine with Seaver who then stated to the sheriff, "My secretary gave me your message, Delbert. Your prisoner is being dressed out as we speak, so I hope your boys here have a writ."

"Of course," Kevin responded, handing over the document which Seaver perused and returned.

"Now your ID," Seaver directed.

Roberson cleared his throat nervously as his backbone tingled. "Wilhelm, like I told your secretary on the phone, these guys are Secret Service Agents on loan to the FBI for the transport of this political prisoner. I checked out their bona fides with their home office in DC and their affiliates in Springfield. They are legit."

"So where's their ID?" pressed Seaver.

Kevin cut in, "Secret Service Agents do not carry ID in case of capture."
Seaver admitted, "I never knew that."
Leo whispered, "It's a secret."
"Well, I've known Delbert all my life and if he vouches for you, that's fine," Seaver huffed. "But for the record, I'm turning the prisoner over to him and if he turns the prisoner over to you, that's on him. Inmate Rogers is a handful. Is that why the Secret Service is handling the escort security instead of the Federal Marshals who usually handle escorts?"
"Can't say," Roberson admitted.
Seaver turned to Kevin and Leo who merely responded with four raised eyebrows.
"Must be another secret," Seaver concluded with a frown. "So here comes your bad boy now," he pointed out as Sergeant Drip came out of the nearest building with inmate Anthony Rogers in tow, accompanied by an escort of eight more guards.
"Be sure to use caution with him," Seaver gravely admonished. "He's a valuable asset in one of those insane behavioral projects. He's also an accomplice in the murder of a staff psychiatrist."
Roberson was curious. "Why wasn't the doctor protected by the guards?"
"Usually each time an inmate is out of his cell, there are eight guards present, but this time the guards were otherwise preoccupied right after escorting the inmates to the therapy room."
"Otherwise preoccupied?" questioned the sheriff. "Would you be referring to the call of nature?"
"Uh, no. Doughnuts. And now I leave you in the very competent hands of Sergeant Drip," Seaver concluded before heading back into the building, thankful today was Monday instead of Sunday.

The sergeant pulled Ant forward. "Here's your monster," Drip growled. "He's wearing extra jewelry that we will need back later. Two sets of leg shackles on his ankles and the same on his wrists which are like fence posts and way too big for regular handcuffs. Wait until you get him into a maximum security cell before taking off the restraints. He's heavily medicated right now and easy to handle, but when the medicine wears off, he can be a real beast."
Leo had his own take on the bald, bearded giant. "More like a chrome-domed, double-wide trailer."

Roberson promised, "I'll get your silverware back to you real soon, Sarge. Now let's get this tranquilized rhino loaded and off to the three-ring circus in DC."

As they stuffed the drooling and compliant prisoner into the Charger's backseat, he smiled lopsidedly at Kevin and slurred out, "They've got me all doped up, bro. Triple dose."

Kevin snarled, "Shut up, mister, before my stun gun goes off and lights up all that steel you're wearing."

Sergeant Drip wondered, "Does inmate Rogers know you guys from somewhere?"

"Imagine that," Kevin scoffed after shutting the rear car door with Ant lolling inside.

But as Roberson turned to climb into the passenger door, the sergeant raised even more suspicion. "Delbert, what's that little box on your backside with the wire poking out?"

"That's my double-A pack."

"Does double-A refer to the batteries?"

"No," Roberson replied hesitantly. "It stands for, uh . . ."

"Anal Activator," Leo supplied, "for cases of constipation in older fat folks. My papaw wears one. A medical marvel. Sorta like a pacemaker for the butt. Now radio Brunhilda and tell her to get these gates open before that double-A pack activates. It ain't a pretty sight."

Kevin got behind the wheel with Leo and Roberson bunched up beside him and Ant nodding in the back, then eased the Charger over a speed bump and up to the inside gate. It rumbled open, then shut behind the cruiser after it passed into the sallyport. Just after the butch blonde matron returned their pistols, Captain Seaver ran back outside shouting, "Hold that car! Hold that car!"

Events occurred together: Two cannon barrels emerged from the top of the guard tower; Kevin goosed the gas pedal while holding the brake down; Leo dug under the seat for Loo-Loo; Roberson cried.

Leo solemnly stated, "I always hankered to go out in a blaze
of glory so I reckon this is it. My only regret is leaving Dumpster with a white woman.

Captain Seaver unlocked and entered through the inner gate doorway portal and ran up to the passenger window. "Glad I caught you boys before you got away," he panted while passing the sheriff a jar of pills. "Here's the inmate's medication. For your personal protection, make sure he takes it as prescribed on the label."

"Th-thanks," Roberson blubered as he accepted the pills like a death sentence pardon.

"What in tarnation is that rotten smell?" asked Seaver as he jumped back from the car. "Catfish bait?"

"S-sorry, Wilhelm. When those cannons came out, my activator activated."

Seaver ordered the outer gate to be opened immediately, then shooed the rancid vehicle on through while pinching his nose firmly shut.

As the patrol car passed beneath the cannons with Leo trapped snugly in the middle of the front seat, the old soldier made one final request: "Please shoot me."

* * *

Roy awoke to the reverberations of monumental snoring. What animal could possibly cause such a disturbance while sleeping? The dim 'light obscured visual clues, but a sense of height persisted due to the snorts coming from some hidden space down below. Was this the attic? Probably not. The nostalgic odor of dead sparrows and mothballs was absent. This was even more basic. Primal. It sounded more like a hibernating bear restlessly snorting itself awake with springtime hunger pains. Some fleeting fixation on bears rang a distant warning bell.

'Stop that bell!'

"Who are you?" asked Roy.

'Your brain. I am getting Myself back together right now, so I do not need bells. Not even distant ones. Now quit talking to
Yourself and try to figure out where we are, and what unearthly animal is sawing down the whole forest.'

"You can't tell me what do do," Roy argued with Himself.

'Of course I can. I'm your mind. But if you keep arguing with Me, I might split again and this will turn into a three-way. We do not need that trauma.'

"That makes sense, I guess," Roy agreed over the snoring.

'Shhh.'

The nervous deputy sat up on his hard perch and reached for the ground with his bare toes. Nothing but air. Is this a rock ledge in a bear's cave?

'Don't ask Me.'

"Shut up!" yelled Roy at Himself.

The snoring stopped.

'Not a good sign, loudmouth,' snapped his mind.

Roy's eyes were beginning to adjust to the gloom. He spied a filtered ray of faint gray light slanting its way down into the empty cavity below his dangling feet. Gripping the edge of the platform on which he was perched, he cautiously peered over to follow the dimly beaconed pathway of descending dust motes dancing their merry way into the bottomless depths of——

'AAAH!' screamed his mind. 'Don't look again!'

Despite Himself, Roy looked again. Framed at the base of the flowing, Hades-bound spectral light shaft was a massive domed head, its broad jaw encased in shaggy brown hair. The open mouth featured huge white incisors dripping with glistening saliva — an alarming embodiment of hunger incarnate.

"A bald Kodiak," Roy marveled.

The dark mountainous bulk extending down from the cavernous jaws reinforced the suspicion. Now if the brave deputy could manage to ease down without awakening the hibernating bruin, maybe he could escape unharmed.

'Have you completely lost your mind?'

"Shhh," Roy instructed Himself as he scooted his hips over the edge of the precipice. His searching toes miraculously found solid
purchase on the corner of the beast's bed.

'Thank You, Jesus,' his terrified mind addressed the upper end of the light shaft. 'If You get me out of here alive,' he bargained while his other foot made comforting contact, 'I swear on a stack of Bibles, I'll become a missionary in the Congo.' He further pledged while easing on over the edge, 'I might donate my Elvis record collection to an Appalachian orphanage, or give——'

"EEEK!" he shrieked when two huge paws clasped the deputy's ankles. The beast from the dark pit below arose, snatching Roy off the top bunk to dangle upside down with his fingertips brushing on the cell floor.

'The jail,' his torn mind finally registered. 'I am in jail with a giant!'

"Please don't hurt me," the suspended cop begged. "I'm the deputy sheriff here, so I can get us both out of this," he offered as he squirmed.

"Be still, wishbone," the giant warned the spread-eagled lad, "or I'll make a wish," he concluded with slight outward tugs of both ankles.

Roy stopped struggling. "Blood is rushing to my head and you cannot even begin to imagine the complaints I'll get from Myself, so please put me down."

"All right," the giant agreed and dropped Roy on his head.

'Ouch!'

'Ouch!'

Roy rolled into the corner of the cell and tucked his knees up into his chest, yielding the smallest possible target.

"Get up," the giant ordered.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"This is not a democracy, deputy boy. It is a dictatorship where you have no say. You will do exactly as ordered or suffer the formidable consequences."

"Yessir, Mister Giant," Roy whimpered while climbing aboard the giant's vacated bottom bunk.

The massive convict sat down beside the deputy and placed a
monstrous hand on the deputy's bare thigh and declared, "All the boys call me Ant, except the special ones who call me Root Daddy. Are you special, boy?"

"Absolutely not. And I'm not a boy. I'm twenty-one going on twenty-two."

"Do you know what hard-core convicts call twenty-one-year-olds in the Big House?"

"No idea, Mister Ant."

"Tenderonies."

"That's twisted," Roy observed.

Ant leaned in closer and breathed a stale medicinal endearment into Roy's ear while sliding his big finger down the deputy's bare thigh. "Did anyone ever tell you that you have seductively inviting symmetrical kneecaps?"

Roy jumped up and started hopping around the cell, pulling his hair with both hands. "Stop it right this instant," he screamed out hysterically. "I can't take any more. First comes Minister Manson and now Sissy Sasquatch."

Ant indignantly rebutted, "I am not a homo."

"Thank goodness," Roy sighed.

"I'm bi," the giant clarified.

"Help!" the desperate deputy bawled, fleeing to the front end of the cell and shaking the cell door bars.

"Hush, boy, or Root Daddy will have to spank you."

Miraculously the door was unlocked and Roy dashed out into the corridor only to be met by Leo striding toward him toting the feared shotgun. Roy reversed course and bounded back into the cell yelling, "Save me Root Daddy! I'll be special."

Leo walked up to the bars. "It's about time you two slumber mills stopped sawing up all the wood. Now get dressed because we got us a town to rob."

"Who are you?" asked Ant.

"I'm your pardner's pardner, so I reckon that makes me and you pardners now."

Ant admitted, "I never had a nigger partner before."
Leo pulled out a large ring of keys, then locked the barred cell door and walked away.

Roy cried.
Ant smiled.

"Partner, what's up?" inquired Kevin. "You look about ready to explode."

"Unload my stuff from the car," Leo instructed. "Our solid pardnership just melted like Popsicles in a Tijuana whorehouse."

"Let's hear it, pal. The plain vanilla version."

"I just came within a gnat's hair of splattering your vanilla pardner all over the wall back there. I stick out my scrawny neck on the chopping block for that fat turkey and he thanks me back by calling me a nigger."

"OK, calm down. We've come too far to let one little word come between us. I hear black people use that word with each other all the time, so don't act like you've never heard it before."

Leo countered, "I sure don't need no black history lessons from a white man, but for your info, black folks use that word with respect. White folks cain't seem to say it without a knotted lynch rope hanging off their necks, choking off any even-Stevens."

"I have no idea what that means."

"Of course not. You're white. So I'll break it down for you. It ain't the word. It's the tone. When Ant used the N-word with that racist tone, my trigger finger got itchy like it was being swarmed by a mob of blood-sucking, vigilante skeeters. That there is one fearsome prickle I might not be able to soothe next time, so I reckon we better split up now, and then there won't be no next time."

"But we need you, pal. Your gift of gab is tops."

"That's mighty kind of you, son, but I'm the Johnny-come-lately in this here trio and I ain't gonna get trapped off in the middle. So I better bow out now before a last sad verse is sung, but no hard feelings. You guys can even keep my classic Cadillac and I'll take that deputy's loud Dodge."
"Thanks, pal," Kevin replied dryly, "but let's be certain. Bear in mind that Ant is still recovering from psychotherapy and probably doesn't remember you from our first get-together at the prison when he was drugged up. And he is definitely not accustomed to being helped out by a black man. He will probably need some time to adjust."

Leo crossed the office to the hot plate beginning to boil water. "I probably ain't got that kind of time," he explained after emptying a Sanka packet into a cup and filling it with hot water from the pot. "I could tell by the way that N-word rolled off his tongue so easy that Ant's had plenty of practice. We ain't talking about time for a quick pit stop to adjust one or two loose spark plug wires. Oh, no. That there wide-load tractor trailer needs a complete overhaul."

"You might be right," Kevin reluctantly agreed after plopping down on the squeaky chair behind the sheriff's desk. "I may not have mentioned that Ant is a member of a white-power prison gang called the Egg-Heads."

"That's just dandy," Leo snorted. "And besides the fact that our King Kong wears king-size jackboots, is there any other bit of kinky queerness you conveniently let slip your mind?"

"Like what?" Kevin attempted innocently.

Leo put down his coffee cup and placed both palms flat on the desk. Leaning halfway across, he hissed, "Like the probability he also squeezes his big bottom into queen-size panties. I know lust when it's thicker than L.A. rush hour smog. That pretty-boy deputy bolted right outta that jail cell like a hen escaping from a fox house."

"OK, the secret is out, pal. In prison, Ant does the boys. What you may not know is that since women are not available in there, a double standard sometimes exists. In some prisons, only the one who plays the female role — the receiver — is called gay. Ant only plays the male role; he gives. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"I understand perfectly. You mean if it looks like a duck,
walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a turkey. Well, explain all that to the runt deputy who will probably be even shorter the next time you spot him, wobbling around bowlegged like he just crossed the Wild West on a pregnant mule, with no saddle."

Kevin grinned. "Just for the record, mules are sterile and foxes live in holes, not houses."

"Well, excuse me for bending your sacred laws of nature. I reckon I'll just mosey on down below the border and find me a natural little senorita where the gals don't grow beards."

"That's up to you, pal. You and Ant are from very different backgrounds and I was hoping you could work things out. But I won't have time to play referee because I'll be too busy trying to stay alive. So for that, we all need to be on the same page."

"So let me get all this jive stuff straight," the old player summed up. "Whenever our fine-feathered, quarter-ton turkey Santa is not—"

"Santa?" asked Kevin.

"He only gives, remember? So when Ant is not out burning any crosses, he's home in bed pitching but not catching, so it won't tarnish his macho reputation. No wonder that psycho needs therapy. Plus you expect me to deal with that big mess while half the world is trying to blow us to smithereens?"

"Suit yourself, Leo, but no matter what else you think of my buddy, rest assured of one thing. When the bullets start flying in this war, the one soldier you really want on your side happens to be Anthony Amos Rogers!"

A clamorous crash resounded from the rear holding cell annex followed by ponderous footfalls and the grating scrape of steel against concrete. Ant appeared in the corridor entrance dragging his cell door by its crumpled hinges and inquired in a booming bass voice, "Did somebody call me?"

"Ant," Kevin responded, "meet Leo Barker, our new partner. Without him, you and I would be in a cell writing blues lyrics."

Ant dropped the steel cell door, traipsed across the office
and hoisted the little black man into the air, then kissed him squarely on the lips with the affirmation, "I love you, Leo."

Dangling, Leo allowed, "Apology accepted. I reckon everybody deserves a second chance, pardner. And speaking love and songs, one of my favorite soul songs is about a thin line between love and hate."

He emphasized by snaking Loo-Loo’s yawning barrels under the giant’s jaw and pressing them deeply into the folds of his neck. "In this short lifetime," Leo growled, "if’n you ever call me a nigger again, your fat ass is gonna cross over that thin line."

Ant eased Leo back down to the floor with the understanding and promise: "No problem, partner."

"No more smooching, neither," Leo tacked on. "You taste like Extra-Strength Tylenol."
9. Ebollus Maximus

Sherryl kissed Hi-Cat on top of the head, then shooed him off the sofa. The aged:tom jumped down and stared back at the girl as if she had lost her mind by both affronts.

"If it's a girl," Sherryl confided in Maggie after the not so easy task of seating herself on the sofa, "I believe I'll name her Sola Mia. I heard a song on the radio with that name. The channel kept fading in and out, but the part I heard was so beautiful, it made my cry."

"That's a lovely name," Maggie agreed, "but what if it's a boy?" she asked over a radio commercial.

"I always thought it proper naming a first male child after the father, so I'll call the baby Denny or James or Wilhelm or Billy Bob or one of the others, depending, of course, on who he most favors."

"You don't know?" wondered Maggie.

"How would I know before he pops out?"

"I see," Maggie acknowledged while sitting down beside the young girl. "Those are all strong names, honey."

"Or Albert the Second or Third, because I did Al Senior and Al Junior both. I hope the baby does not look like Spider. That's a biker I did in the park along with his biker buddies, Sonny, Tank, Mouse, Porky——"

"Slow down, girl," Maggie cut in, "did you have intercourse with all those different men?"

"Don't be silly, Maggie. Who has the time to write that many letters, if that's what intercourse means? We just had sex. Dip, stir, thank you, sir. That's how it works to make a baby, which is why I didn't include Backdoor Bob. It doesn't work that way."

"Have you ever considered marriage, hon?"

"Heck no! That would be like having meatloaf every night. I'd lose my appetite. Once in a while is fine, but meatloaf every night is not my idea of romance."

"You have a good point there," Maggie conceded, "but what about
contraceptives?"
"Then how would I get pregnant?"
"You want to be pregnant?"
"Maggie, you were cooped up in that convent too long. Having babies is a woman's reward for successful sex. Why don't you like babies?"
"Well, I do, but I never considered it from that perspective. It certainly puts a unique slant on motherhood."
"I am so glad I could help you understand sex, Maggie. If you ever decide to take the plunge, I can hook you up with some dandy muff divers. Like Spider says, 'Virginity is the Antichrist of Procreationism,' whatever the blazes that means. Spider is a Harley-Davidson philosopher. But be careful on motorcycles. I still have a gas cap imprint on my lower back."
"Honey, this is all interesting," Maggie admitted, "but right now it is time for my second favorite radio program. I called in an hour ago," she noted while pointing to the telephone receiver off the hook, "and told the conservative screener I was pro-war so I could get some air time, and it worked. I am first on the list. I have to turn the radio down though because the five-second delay creates a feedback echo that confuses many of the other listeners who are mostly stay-at-home alcoholics."

Trash: Good afternoon, ladies and generals. Welcome to another excruciating three hours of "Trash Talk" with your humble host: me, me, me, Trash Limbo. As most of my regular listeners know, I seldom have studio guests because of my zero tolerance policy toward anyone else's opinion. But today is open-line Tuesday, so I am taking calls from anyone sharp enough to get past my fine Gestapo screener. Go ahead, first caller.
Maggie: Why do you right wingnuts want to save fetuses, but destroy the planet?
[Screener: Sorry, Trash. She tricked me.]
Trash: My producer informs me that in fainess to our diverse listening audience, we have now most graciously consented to reply to a ridge-brow liberal. Caller, you green earthers claim it is a crime to chop down our oldest trees, but perfectly legal to chop up our youngest kids. Obviously you don't have the slightest clue as to what makes this country great, so I'll tell you. Our astronomical national debt. Congress simply borrows enough money to keep everybody happy. Where do you think these trillions of additional dollars come from? They certainly do not ever grow on your precious dead trees.

Maggie: It comes from the sale of bonds. Like you say, it's borrowed money.

Trash: And what backs these government bonds?

Maggie: Uhm . . .

Trash: Fetuses! You hear me? Fetuses! The collateral is future tax revenues from unborn workers, but you liberals want to wipe them all out. What is wrong with you? Stop hugging old dead trees and start kissing young live babies like every smart politico does. Forget saving big lazy whales. Save tiny taxpayers. Americans are an endangered species due not only to all those abortions, but also because man queers do not recognize the right hole for reproduction.

Maggie: For your bigoted information, I am neither pro-choice nor gay, yet I cannot condone excessive spending financed solely by indenturing future generations.

Trash: Get used to it. The free ride is over. From now on, the kids will pay our way for a nice change. So we can spend all we want. I say we not only increase spending but also reduce taxes at the
same time. Voters will go for that line and babies can't vote against it. Someday a far-sighted politico will implement tax cuts right alongside runaway spending. Now there is one platform we can all support. Everybody wins.

Maggie: Except the children. Within a few generations, they won't even be able to pay the daily multi-billion dollar interest payments, let alone the trillions in principal. The first day the interest can't be paid, the credit is cut off and the Union dissolves. You offer no long-term solution other than total chaos.

Trash: Which is exactly why I spend time every day teaching my kids the essential basics of life, such as: "Keep it on full-automatic and aim for the head." Once again I have masterfully segued us into our commercial break. Now let me find some patriotic background music that is just as original as myself.

[O beautiful] Do you ever feel the urge [For spacious skies,] to just shoot somebody? [For amber waves of grain.] Possibly a T-ball umpire or that pushy Tupperware saleslady next door? [For purple mountain majesty] Why wait any longer? [Above the fruited plain.] Guns R Us is now having a buy-one-get-one-free sale. [A-MER-i-ca, A-mer-i-ca,] We stock Mac-10's, AK-47's, napalm and nerve gas. [God shed His grace on theeeeee.] Flamethrowers, grenade launchers, rebel flags and abortion clinic bomb kits. [And crown thy good] No ID is not a problem. [With brotherhood] Free militia membership card with each purchase. [From SEEEEA] No waiting period. No background check. [TO000] Ammo and dynamite [SHII-NIING] half-off to minors. [SEEEEEEA!]

*    *    *

88
Buford Milhouse Hightower surveyed the five visitors to his office at First Federal Savings of Bacon: Sheriff Roberson and Deputy Sheriff Masters; a curly haired man in jeans and Reeboks; an older black man wearing a white smock; and a giant.

"Gentlemen," the bank president resumed, "let me make sure I fully understand those proposals along with all my options. First I am to instruct employees and customers that the bank's money has become infected with the deadly South American virus known to the scientific community as Ebollus Maximus and must be turned over to you men who work for the government's disease control task force. Then we collect the cash and place it in these duffel bags that you have so generously provided, Mister . . ."

"Kloppers," Kevin supplied.

"I then accompany you all to every business in town and we also confiscate their diseased money using the same explanation, and I give them a cashier's check for the amount taken. But if I refuse to participate in your preposterous charade . . ."

"We shoot you," Leo filled in.

"Then may I suggest we begin with teller stations after I make the appropriate announcements, then proceed to the walk-in vault. Perhaps while I apprise people in the lobby of the dire situation, you might distribute your supply of rubber gloves for the handling of contaminated currency, Mister . . ."

"Hammerstein," Leo said. "And no whispering or else . . ."

"I get shot," Buford completed. "I am certainly with you, Mister Hammerstein. Everyone fantasizes about robbing a bank at some point in their life, and bank presidents are no exception. Should I refer to you as a minority scientist?"

"Nope, I just look young. Now we ain't got all morning for jabber-jawing. Leave the details to us because we done hashed it out. Billy Bob of Billy Bob's Bar and Grill ain't gonna know a scientist from a Health Department Inspector. So git out there to sell the story or else . . ."

"Yes, I know," Buford replied while rising from his desk, careful as always not to bump the silent alarm knee button for
summoning local law enforcement. Both of Bacon's Finest were, after all, already at the scene.

Buford straightened his tie, cleared his throat and led his troupe out onto the marble floor of the bank lobby. "May I have your attention!" he barked authoritatively.

A hush fell over the small bank as tellers and patrons ceased transactions. "We shall be closing the bank temporarily due to an emergency. There is no need for panic, but it seems that a portion of the bank's currency has been tainted after passing through the land of Columbian drug dealers."

"Who cares?" asked a customer. "As long as it's not counterfeit."

"I wish it were that simple, Gloria," Buford exhaled heavily while wringing his hands in despair, "but the situation is more complex. The money has been infected with a particularly toxic strain of the South American virus we call Ebollus Maximus. The special green ink used in printing U.S. Treasury bills provides an inviting host for the jungle virus to invade for transport to living organisms," Buford ad-libbed with an approving nod from Leo.

People began staring at the suspect cash in their hands, some holding it away from their bodies. Gloria even broke line to pass hers to a teller, and then demanded a receipt. Other customers grumbled and fidgeted nervously, glancing at the exit.

"Please remain orderly," Buford cautioned. "We have the whole situation under control. Doctor Hammerstein," he nodded toward Leo in the smock, "of the NCTD, National Center for Toxic Diseases, based in Atlanta, will be distributing rubber gloves for your protection. Agent Kloppers," he pointed to Kevin, "of the EPA, Environmental Protection Agency, assures me that due to your low exposure, the chances that any of you will contract the fatal illness are no higher than fifty-fifty, so please exit the building in an orderly manner.

"By the way," he added, "watch for cold symptoms."

Except for an occasional sniffle and butterfly fluttering
of dropped currency floating to the marble floor, stunned silence
gripped the small crowd. But Gloria sneezed and pandemonium broke
out. All customers fled for the single exit, elbowing their way
out like English rugby fans after a late match, aware that pubs
would soon be making the last call for pints.

"Out of my way, you old geezer. You're almost dead anyway."
"Move it, Mabel, you bloated armadillo!"
"Get off my toe, Reverend, unless you want your family jewels
skewered on my crocheting needles."

Two of the four tellers vaulted the counter to join the melee
while two remained, awaiting instructions. "If four rotten husbands
didn't do me in," proclaimed one of the loyal tellers, "then a few
little bacteria won't either. Just tell me what to do with all this
diseased jungle rot."

The other remaining teller stood transfixed with both hands
covering her mouth, whimpering, "Well, kiss me bloody Blarney stone
with livered lips."

"Ma'am," Kevin intervened, "please do not put your hands near
your mouth after handling the cash. Dormant viral cells are often
rejuvenated via moisture and the mouth provides an ideal entrance
into a living host. So kindly wear rubber gloves to bag up all the
money and do not speak unnecessarily."

"I'll say this, laddie," she retorted on her way across the
counter. "You bag it. I'll be settin' me sail for Dublin."

Kevin chose instead to escort Buford into the walk-in vault
while Ant kept busy ushering trampled customers back to their feet
and out the door. Roy, seeing his big chance, sidled into the bank
president's office and closed the door.

'Are you nuts!' his mind screamed.

"Don't start," Roy warned Himself.

He snatched up the phone, dialed zero and demanded a direct
connection to the FBI Office in Springfield, Illinois. After many
rings a bored nasal voice finally whined, "This is 555-5555."

"Is this the FBI?"

"Check this out, wise guy. If you just dialed the FBI Office,
what are the chances that the phone will be answered by the Black Panthers?"

"OK, so you're the FBI. Listen up," Roy implored. "The Bacon Bank is being robbed."

"Yeah, right," the whiner chuckled, "and pork chops are a dime a dozen."

"I am serious. The bank is being held up right now."

"Mister, if this is another one of your Jew jokes, it better be better than the one you phoned in Monday. I am recording and tracing this call."

"I swear I never called before. I am talking about the town of Bacon, not pig bacon. I'm a deputy."

"Officer, please state your name and exact location."

"Deputy Sheriff Roy Masters, First Federal Savings on Main Street, downtown Bacon. You can't miss it. There's a big clock out front."

"If you are truly a deputy at the scene, then why don't you arrest the robbers?"

"The bank president and the sheriff and I are supposed to be helping the bank robbers," Roy tried to explain with a nervous glance at the office door. "We are hostages."

"But the crooks let you call the FBI?"

"I slipped into the president's office while they were busy, but I have to get back before they miss me. They're crazy!"

"Settle down and describe the robbers."

"There are three. One has his head split open, one is an insane preacher and the other one is a five hundred pound stalker who just escaped from the escape-proof federal prison near town."

"I am a fed so I would have heard about any federal prison break, especially here in Illinois."

"It's true. Call the prison and ask them. But there's more. After the bank job, the crooks also plan to rob the whole town with some wild story about Ebollus Virus. Like I already told you, they really are crazy!"

"Aren't we all!" Roy thought out loud.
"Who was that?" asked the whiner.
"Never mind. You don't want to turn this into a three-way."
"I understand now, sir. Please take your medication."
"I am not taking any medication."
"Your choice," the nasal voice concluded.

"U.S. Penitentiary at Bacon," the telephone voice answered.
"This is the FBI," whined a nasal voice. "Have you had any recent escapes or outbreaks of Ebollus Virus?"
"Look here, crackpot. No sick nuts are loose today except for you," the phone responded before slamming down.

The office door flew open. Ant filled the doorway, glaring down at the deputy still cradling the telephone receiver to his ear.

Roy cleared his throat and ordered the dial tone, "Hold the anchovies."

His Self conceded, 'Nice recovery.'

*   *   *

"Welcome fellas, and what'll it be?" asked Billy Bob behind the counter of Billy Bob's Bar and Grill.

"Give us all a PBR," Sheriff Roberson spoke for the six men as they planted themselves on bar stools. "Billy Bob, you know Buford, Roy and myself. These other men work for the government. We came to collect your cash because it has been infected with a killer virus. We have to gather up all the contaminated money in town and send it to Atlanta. Buford will give you a cashier's check for the amount you give us and you may cash the check when the Chicago Brinks truck arrives tomorrow with our fresh money. Any questions?"

"How am I supposed to conduct business the rest of the day with no cash on hand?" the old proprietor asked while setting out six cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon.
"Not easily," Kevin said, "but you don't want any infected money from customers anyway. Maybe you could allow credit to your regulars or take personal checks."

"No thanks. If word gets out that I'm running liquor tabs, I'll be out of stock by lunch and out of business by closing time. Credit and checks do not mix well with booze. I'll just play it safe and go quail hunting with Uncle Chaney," he figured while counting money from the cash register. "Do you guys want the coins too?"

"Nope," Leo replied. "That virus can't breed on silver. It needs green. The color reminds it of the jungle where it first hatched as a baby virus."

Billy Bob froze. "I never heard such malarkey in all my life. When I received my PhD in molecular biology at Yale, I did my thesis paper on lethal viral organisms. They may lie temporarily dormant upon a carrier host in transit, but would certainly never incubate or reproduce within an inorganic substance having the properties of currency ink."

He glared at Leo. "That leads me to wonder exactly what type of position you hold with the government."

"I'm a Health Department Inspector General. I ain't no expert on bugs, but I do know that part of what you said is partly right," Leo fudged. "It is, and at the matching same time, it ain't. See, it is the virus, but it ain't the original. It's more like a tough, cheating second cousin that don't play fair."

Billy Bob suggested, "A more resistant mutation?"

"Exactly," Leo confirmed, "and as much as I'd love to sit here and kick it all day with a fellow follower of the microcritter kingdom, we got lots of other businesses to see today. So just keep right on counting cash, Billy Bob."

The barman resumed his count, then announced, "Two hundred and ninety-one dollars," which he handed over to Ant who stuffed it in a duffel bag already bulging with cash.

Meanwhile, Buford was writing a check. "I'll make it for an even three hundred to also cover the beer."
"How about another Blue Ribbon on the house?" the proprietor offered up for his former surliness.

"Thanks, but we have to run," Kevin replied as the six men departed for the Guns R Us franchise next door.

*   *   *

"You carpetbagging blue-coats will try anything!" brayed Robert Earl Lee, the Eighth. "I'm not about to hand over my hard-earned cash to you government men. If that stuff was infected, I'd already be foaming at the mouth. You pinko commies got zactly five seconds to get out of my store."

"Says who?" inquired Ant.

Robert Earl laid a .357 eight-inch barrel magnum on the waist-high glass counter separating him from the six intruders. "Says me and my two security guards, Smith and Wesson."

Ant snatched up the long pistol and bent the barrel into a curved arc with his bare hands. "What would possess you to threaten federal agents, especially with an altered firearm? That really tends to disturb my mental stability and you should know just by looking that having me unbalanced is dangerous," he assured the gun store owner while leaning his bulk across the display case counter, bringing it near its shattering point limit.

The shop owner stared in disbelief at the bent handgun and demanded of the sheriff, "Arrest him, Delbert. He ain't human. Plus destruction of private property. Three hundred dollars' worth at retail and a hundred and fifty wholesale."

"Now settle down, Bobby Earl," Roberson placated. "These fine gentlemen are here to help. I'm quite sure they'll give you one of their cashier's checks to cover any damaged merchandise."

"In fact," Kevin added, "we'd also like to purchase some of your top-end products like that flamethrower right there. When the virus turns into an epidemic, fevered folks might do anything, so we'll need crowd control weaponry."

Robert's angered face transformed into instant gratification.
"Why didn't you patriots say that when you first came in? Just poking around and see what strikes your fancy while I tally up what I got in my cash register. I got me a floor safe too, because I don't trust banks — no offense, Buford. I just figure bad guys would rob the bank before they'd rob me."

"So true," Buford admitted.

"Better get all that money from the safe real quick," Leo cautioned as he began pulling weapons off the wall racks. "Use these rubber gloves," he paused to dig them out. "Money germs breed best in dark places like safes."

With everyone pitching in, a stockpile of armament was soon stacked on the floor. Robert finished counting the cash in the register and began ringing up sales for the weaponry when Kevin asked, "Do you sell this stuff to any John Doe who walks in off the street?"

"Of course not," came the indignant response. "To get those full-automatics or the high-tech military weapons, the buyer must be affiliated with law enforcement or a licensed militia."

"And by any chance," Kevin followed up, "do you happen to sell militia licenses?"

"Sure do. Three bucks for a printed card or six bucks for laminated. But not to just anybody."

Leo ventured a guess. "Male, twenty-one and white."

"Naturally," Robert affirmed. "Now my figures show eight hundred and twenty-two dollars from the register; nine thousand, four hundred in merchandise including tax; plus the fifty-three thousand, five hundred from the floor safe for a total of sixty-three thousand, seven hundred and twenty-two dollars. Now how about a genuine nine-by-five nylon rebel flag for only ninety-nine, ninety-five?"

Leo warned, "Don't push the envelope, General Blisternect."

"By the way," Robert E. continued unoffended, "why don't you federal boys buy this same hardware from your own Department of Defense?"

"Are you kidding?" chided Kevin. "At five hundred dollars a
pop for plastic toilet seat lids, imagine what grenade launchers go for."

"Well then," Robert blustered, "to show my appreciation for an all-American slice of Uncle Sam's pie, I'll throw in a case of dynamite on the house, plus that pistol you customized for shooting crooks around a corner," he laughed alone. "Don't you get it? See, the barrel is bent, so when——"

"Can the corn, Bobby Earl," Buford cut in, unamused. "We have eighteen more stops to make before closing times," he finished and handed over a bank check.

The no-nonsense, six-man army loaded up their arms with the gleaming artillery and marched diagonally across the intersection to the corner drug store.
"I have a special job for you, Special Agent Wahler," Chief Milner advised after glancing up from his computer terminal.

"I already have a job. I work for the FBI, just like you."

"I said a special job, Wally. I've been reviewing fugitive Toler's prison file and think I've got something."

"It might be that killer virus that's going around," Wally commiserated. "You do look even worse than usual. Whenever Uncle Abner got that near-death-experience look, Aunt Millie would give him a teaspoon of ketchup laced with celery salt. I never knew if she was trying to cure him or kill him until they took a second honeymoon. It's a good story."

"I don't want to hear it, Agent Wahler. Pay attention now. I may have a lead on Toler. It says on the computer screen that he had a partner by the name of Anthony Rogers who might be able to point us in the right direction."

"Aunt Millie told Uncle Abner that he could cure his chronic hiccups by going over Niagara Falls in a barrel."

"Are you done, Wally?"

"Not quite. The day after she got the life insurance check, a blackmail postcard arrived from the Bahamas demanding half the money or else he would show up again. Uncle Ab had risked a barrel stunt just to get away from her and hatch a tidy little nest egg at the same time."

"OK, Wally, you have me hooked. What was your aunt's reply to the postcard?"

"I have no idea, Chief, but it seems to me that our time now would be much better spent pursuing that new lead on the hot Toler revelation."

"We finally agree, Wally. Toler may have told this Rogers guy about some possible place to lay low after an escape. Their prison files indicate they were tight."

"How tight, boss? Tight like buddy-buddy tight, or tighter like hanky-panky tight?"
"Just friends. No funny business."
"Chief, my cousin Boobsie—"
"Wally, if you tell me one more story today, I'll throw you out that window."
"Big deal," Wally scoffed. "We are only on the ground floor."
"But the window is closed, Agent Wahler."
"Good observation, boss. I follow you now. Broken glass and gushing cerebral hemorrhage. I have abandoned Cousin Boobsie. May we return to the special job you had for me?"
"Go interview inmate Rogers at the maximum security prison in Bacon, Illinois. Promise him anything as long as it's not put in writing. If he doesn't know any relevant facts, at least get his best guess as to Toler's possible whereabouts. Family, friends, lovers, other criminal associates, hangout spots, all he knows."
"Can do, Chief. I'd better fly first class to prepare myself for the mental challenge. Bacon is a prison for killers so I will stay sharp by limiting my mind to only three or four cocktails on the flight."
"You drive, Wally. No drinking."
"How about a couple of Valiums? Killers make me nervous."
"No pills either. Rogers is smart and dangerous. He kills killers. It says here on the computer screen that inmate Rogers backhanded another prisoner for telling a fat joke. The autopsy report cites the official cause of death as 'multiple fractures of the upper vertebra.' That must be one mean backhand."
"Can you send Agent Peedmore instead of me? I have Bingo."
"No. Just think of Rogers as an angry tennis player with a titanium snow shovel. And speaking of backhands, I ran into your old pal, Judge Moonie, at the firing range yesterday. He asked about you, Wally, despite the obvious pain he suffers from his efforts to speak. But it certainly has not adversely affected his marksmanship abilities. He was hitting bull's-eyes with pistols in each hand."
"Chief, I'll see you later," Wally informed his boss on the way out the office door. "I'm on my way to Illinois. The
sooner, the better."

* * *

"Why do you also want the narcotics?" asked Nellie Barnwall behind the emptied cash register at Bacon Drugs. "I thought you said the virus was only in the money."

Ant gravely clarified the situation. "Do not repeat this, but we just got word of an outbreak in Hicksburg and we need to get them something for pain. Since there's no known antidote, the best we can hope to do is to ease the suffering of the victims as they expire."

"Do you mean it is always fatal," she questioned, "regardless of early diagnosis?"

"Up in Warchester, Canada," Leo provided, "the sole survivor was a half-wolf sheepdog that was left completely blind, deaf and toothless."

"We don't mind paying retail for the drugs," Kevin soothed. "When the outbreak occurs here in Bacon, the absence of drugs from privately owned business establishments will help deter vandalism. All medicines will be dispensed by the Red Cross. A Medivac van will arrive tomorrow from the Hicksburg site."

"I never heard of Hicksburg," Nellie proclaimed. "Would it be in Illinois?"

"Down near the state line," Kevin invented. "It's currently under quarantine by the National Guard. This is a Contagion Level One disease."

"Here's the front door keys," Nellie offered, "and the stock room key. Just take whatever you need such as disposable surgical masks or alcohol pads, and be sure to lock up and set the alarm when you leave. I think I'll go visit my mother-in-law in Peoria. You all have a nice day," she finished on the way out the door, not slowing to retrieve her sweater from its wall peg.

"Where's the muscle relaxer?" asked Leo. "All this jabbering has done made my jaw muscles sore."
"That would truly mark the end of time," Kevin surmised as the entry bell over the front door continued its monotone melody even after the pharmacist's departure. A dozen grim-faced citizens marched inside, carrying cash wrapped in everything from aluminum foil to the Bacon Gazette.

Leading the solemn crowd, a grimy mechanic spoke up. "We all heard the news flash on the local radio station and we aim to get us a bank check for our dirty money just like those bigger business people. We know our rights," he ended by thrusting forward sixty dollars in an oil-spotted blue rag.

"Womenfolk got rights in this town too," claimed a housecoated housewife clasping a cookie jar sealed with silver duct tape.

"No problem, folks," Ant assured the gathering. "Form a line and Buford will issue your checks."

Other town dwellers streamed in behind the initial group and within minutes a winding queue had snaked its way out onto the sidewalk and halfway around the block. Some business owners had closed up shop ahead of the disease control task force and joined the line. With white-knuckled grips on their night deposit bags, they warily held these securities away from their bodies. Furrowed foreheads portrayed confused priorities.

"Sheriff," Kevin ordered, "call that local disc jockey and ask him to make a public service announcement. For the next three hours, anyone living out in the county may come to the drug store to exchange their contaminated cash for a bank check. Buford and Leo will remain here for that purpose with Ant for crowd control. You and your deputy come with me to the businesses still open. Get some blank checks from Buford and we will all meet back here when we get done."

The line of anxious townies continued to lengthen out as Ant distributed rubber gloves along with nose/mouth cotton fiber masks to mute the mounting momentum of small-town gossip. Downtown Bacon was bubbling.

* * *

101
"Ant! Ant!" squealed AJ as the old Cadillac pulled up to the house, sputtering to a stop in a cloud of gravel dust. Kevin and Ant stepped out and the giant swept AJ into his arms.

"Ant, you're laughing and crying at the same time, so make up your mind. Papa Joe was right. He told me Heaven has an open eight hundred number, so I called every night for free and it worked. Now you're free too but put me down. I'm way too old for all this hugging stuff."

"Thanks for the toll-free calls, little bro, and for all your visits and letters," Ant replied as he tossed the squirming lad over one shoulder and traipsed up the creaking porch steps with Kevin a pace behind.

A tortured scream of final agony curdled from the bowels of the house. Ant set the youngster down and bounded inside.

"What in the world?" muttered Kevin while closely following his partner into the house.

The pair halted abruptly in the front parlor, staring in horror at the sight ahead. Papa Joe stumbled toward them with his hands outstretched and dripping fresh blood. Eyes dancing in sheer ecstasy, he proudly proclaimed to the new arrivals, "It's a baby girl! My first grandchild. And now I am doubly blessed by the return of my other wayward son. What a glorious day!" he concluded with a fierce hug of the giant, both men heedless of the smearing crimson stains.

Kevin noted dubiously, "That scream we heard wasn't possibly generated by the tiny lungs of a newborn. That was a full-bodied, glass-shattering opera ender."

"Oh," Papa Joe smiled, "that was simply Miss Granby's final word on the whole ordeal, but she is fine now with Miss Maggie's professional nursing skills. A bit ahead of schedule, but who are we to question celestial timing? As soon as they are presentable, I shall introduce you both to your adorable new niece," the priest jubilantly promised.

"Right now I must visit the well pump to cleanse the evidence produced by the mutual labors of Miss Granby and myself, albeit
her labor was considerably more intense than my own. After I bathe, I shall prepare an additional pot of cucumber casserole for all my children.

"Adrian," he addressed the late arrival, "kindly remove your hands from your throat and desist gurgling. Otherwise you might not be permitted to partake of the freshly churned strawberry ice cream following our humble repast."

"He means dessert after we eat," AJ clarified for everyone.

* * *

"Can we at least have some coffee?" begged the sheriff on behalf of the three men locked in the cell.

"This ain't the Ritz," Leo reminded them from the other side of the bars. "You already got a Better Homes and Gardens and a deck of cards. Next you'll want a back rub. Jail does that to soft guys."

"Gin," Buford declared victoriously while spreading his cards out on the bunk. "That's sixteen thousand dollars you already owe me, Roy."

"Double or nothing," Roy stipulated again, scooping up the deck for another shuffle.

"One more lost hand," Leo observed, "might win you a full-body massage, pretty-boy-Roy. I hear you got priors. And as for you, Sheriff No-neck, if'n you lay down and rest your bowling ball head for a minute, I might go get you a Sanka, but don't try sending me to fetch nothing else because my fetcher broke same time as my own mama's water."

Out front, the locked front door of the Sheriff's Office began booming repeatedly from an assault by a government-issued steel-toed work boot. "Open up!" an angry voice demanded. "We know you're in there!"

"Cries from sizzling Baconites," Leo told Roy, Buford and Roberson. "One peep outta you three chickadees will have you all waking up roasting over fire and brimstone," he softly warned the
prisoners and walked out of the back annex and into the front office.

Holding Loo-Loo hidden behind his leg, he unlocked and flung open the front door to be confronted by an angry mob of townies led by Sergeant Drip. "Make it snappy," Leo ordered. "I'm expecting a call from the President."

"I knew it was you liars," declared Drip, "from the second I heard about the bald, bearded giant. What's your story now, Mister Secret Agent Man?"

Mob citizens gained courage from their leader and began using their own verbal jabs.

"He sure don't look like James Bond."

"A dream peddler."

"Sold us snake oil in a Pepto-Bismol bottle."

"Get a rope."

Leo raised Loo-Loo's gaping barrel mouths to within inches of Drip's eyes. "Stand back, folks," he cautioned the crowd. "The first sign is the stutters. Ain't that right, Sarge?"

Drip stared into the monster ten-gauge barrels and sputtered, "W-W-What?"

"See there," Leo confirmed, "he's got the virus and you folks up front are within saliva range."

The mob backed up a step as Leo further pointed out, "Look, there's blue snot dripping." The group retreated another step as the sergeant wiped his nose on the blue sleeve of his prison-issue uniform shirt.

"No doubt about it," Leo laid it on. "Stage Four EBollus. When his fingernails start popping off, it's all over."

Sergeant Drip attempted to gather himself. "You can't get away with any more wild——"

"Stop spouting germs from that nasty spigot, Drip, or my big shotgun will have you leaking like a blind bullfighter. I'm placing you under quarantine along with the other three patients who got over-exposed collecting diseased greenbacks."

"What saved you?" someone from the back yelled out.
"My skin. I got the virus too, but it ain't real smart because of its brain size. It ain't active when it's asleep and the black makes it think it's always nighttime. Which reminds me that this town will be sealed off later tonight, thirty minutes from now. So anybody trapped inside the perimeter ring will be stuck here for the duration of the epidemic. Don't worry. It ain't real long. We will all be goners within twenty-four hours after those little ole green assassins git a toehold."

Leo clacked back both hammers on the double-barrel shotgun and Sergeant Drip stammered, "Bu-bu-but——"

The mob burst like a water balloon, spraying out in different directions for trucks and cars, hoping to escape town before the quarantine deadline. Left without backup, Drip raised his hands in surrender as Leo nudged the prisoner on in to join the other three captives. But once safely ensconced within the locked cell with Buford, Roy and Sheriff Roberson, the sergeant refound a measure of his former bravado.

"The long arm of the law," he predicted, "will hunt down you animals no matter where you run to."

"Meanwhile," Leo fired back, "the long leg rabbit gots the gun."

* * *

Sherryl glowed contentment at the supper table as the infant suckled hungrily at her ample breast while Papa Joe presided with pride, saying, "I trust my sons shall excuse our little familial informality, but I deem it appropriate that the entire family dine together, inclusive of our newest member. After all, one may never tell when the next opportunity for reunion might present itself. Fortunately our dear Miss Granby has recuperated sufficiently to join us."

"It wasn't too bad," Sherryl confided, "but maybe I'll wait a little while before trying it again."

AJ mumbled, "The next trip to town plus nine months."
Maggie implored, "May we eat now? I seem to have worked up an appetite."

"This should be a good one," AJ calculated. "Maggie against Ant. I'll bet my lunch money on Maggie."

"We may commence our nourishment," Papa Joe stipulated, "as soon as Adrian finds time between unscrupulous asides to seek the Lord's blessing. Go ahead, son, and try to make some small effort to share the limelight with Our Heavenly Father."

Heads bowed respectfully as AJ began, "Dear Lord, please forgive me for not knowing which one needs Your blessing the most, this icky cucumber gunk or my new raisin-faced niece . . . "

Papa Joe cleared his throat menacingly.

". . . but help the little thing grow dull teeth so she won't do any damage to Sherryl's beautiful, swelled-up——"

"Adrian," Papa Joe hissed.

". . . and also forgive Ant for coming to the table wearing a bloody shirt. We are real glad to have him here anyway."

"Amen to that," Kevin intoned.

"I was not done yet," AJ pouted.

"Your brother was merely providing support," Papa Joe softly clarified. "Now please finish before the food gets cold."

Maggie offered, "Amen to that too."

AJ sighed, "And Lord, like I was going to say before all the support, please remind my other brother, who drives a Cadillac with four big green sacks full of cash in the backseat, that my ninth birthday was a whole month ago and I don't even own a bicycle . . . yet. Amen."

A relieved consensus of amens circled the table followed by covered dishes while Papa Joe apologized for the solely vegetarian fare. "No fatted calf for my returning prodigal sons. Nonetheless we are blessed by the diversity of entrees due to Miss Maggie's myriad culinary skills."

"We had a cow when I first got here," Sherryl noted with a sigh of nostalgia, "but AJ has school and Papa Joe has a touch of arthritis in his hands. So when I got too big to keep my balance
on the milk stool, ole Bessie Mae bloated up and sort of exploded or something. The Purina man came and hauled her away, but my baby will never run short of milk. I'm healthy as a blue ribbon sow."

"Don't," Papa Joe warned AJ.

Kevin asked, "Sis, have you decided on a name for my darling niece?"

"Yes," she answered with certainty. "Her name is Magdalena Sola Mia McCreary."

"Oh, Sherryl," Maggie blubbered while chewing a mouthful of spinach and wild onions.

"Don't cry, Maggie," AJ consoled. "The baby's not really all that ugly."

"Adrian! My granddaughter is beautiful," Papa Joe opined.
AJ rebutted, "Except for that dented head like a motorcycle crash helmet. Spider would be proud."
Sherryl laughed, juggling the nursing infant. "AJ, you're jealous."

"You got that right," he agreed in bug-eyed fascination.

Papa Joe lightly reprimanded the lad, "Stop ogling and eat your beets."

Ant requested more fried tomatoes and observed, "This is the best meal I've had since Moms barbecued a moose."

Following a brief respite, disturbed solely by the serious scraping of forks across porcelain, Maggie inquired around a big mouthful of creamed asparagus, "Where is Hammer?"

"Who is Hammer?" asked Ant.

Papa Joe answered the last question. "She refers to Mister Barker."

Kevin responded first to Maggie's query. "Leo is babysitting at Bacon City Jail. But Papa Joe, how did you know Leo's nickname was Hammer?"

"As entertaining as it might be, son, I am not now at liberty to discourse in detail on the rather graphic confession made by Miss Maggie concerning certain acrobatic endeavors at King's Court hillside community."
Kevin moaned.

"I am further disinclined," Papa Joe resumed, "to elaborate
in light of Mister Barker's current absence and thus an inability
to present any necessitated rebuttal. Yet since you asked, Kevin,
and are here to refute any fabricated allegations, and without
infringing upon the sacred secrecy of confessional privilege, I
feel somewhat comfortable revealing that you indeed received what
might loosely be categorized as honorable mention."

"Maggie," Kevin ensued, "how could you?"

"It was confession," she reminded him, frowning. "I couldn't
lie about it."

"Look, everyone," Kevin offered lamely, "I had no idea that
she was a nun or ex-nun or defrocked or whatever it's called these
days. Honest, I didn't."

AJ piped up. "Is defrocked a cuss word?"

"Curse word, not cuss word," Papa Joe corrected, "and no,
defrocked is not a curse word. Kevin is well aware that in this
household we do not accept profanity as a tolerable excuse for
one's inability to properly articulate."

"He means no cussing," AJ translated.

"Cursing," Papa Joe corrected again. "And now my youngest
son, please take over for me and see that the ice cream is served
when appropriate. This has been a miraculously taxing day and I'm
pooped, so good night."

While Papa Joe climbed the stairs, AJ moved to the vacated
seat at the head of the table as Ant helped himself to a third
helping of casserole and Maggie polished off another ear of corn.

"Dead heat," AJ ruled. "Now let's clear up this defrocked
business, Maggie."

"Trouble," Kevin predicted.

AJ ordered, "Eat your beets."
"Belly up to the bars, boys," Leo invited as he set out four Styrofoam cups on the cell bars.

"Buford and I want another cell," the sheriff complained. "Roy snores and farts and Drip's feet smell like burnt garlic toast."

"The only vacancy ain't got no door," Leo informed him. "Stop sniveling and drink your coffee."

Buford took one small sip and gagged. "This stuff tastes like you used Ajax for sweetener."

"Old southern recipe," Leo confided. "Sanka, chicory and a dozen Percocets."

"I'm beat anyway," the sheriff admitted after draining his cup in two gulps. "Don't call me until breakfath," he slurred and stretched out on the thin mattress.

"Poison," Sergeant Drip decided after one swallow and poured the remainder of his coffee into the steel toilet. Its roaring flush did nothing to alter Roy's steady snoring rhythm from one of the top bunks.

Buford risked another sip, smiled and claimed Roy's untouched cup. "Wasted not, wanted not," he giggled and slurped with gusto.

"Sweet dreams, fellers," Leo saluted as he turned back for the office. "Now for a nice quiet spell of R-and-RD: Rest and Recreational Drugs."

Once again the front door resounded like the bass drum of a marching band at halftime. "I'll never lock a door again," Leo swore as he stomped back through the office, unlocked and flung open the front door.

An attractive, heavyset woman of middle age barged inside carrying a steel-banded briefcase. "Tell me what kind of funny business you silly clowns are trying to operate here, Bozo!" she demanded after slamming down the briefcase on the sheriff's desk.

Leo likewise slammed the door shut. "If'n you're looking for a circus gig, your best bet is the Horror House."
"If that is your idea of a joke," she retorted haughtily, "then I certainly am not laughing yet."

"My papaw always said that he who laughs last is slower than a pigeon-toed penguin."

"You old papaw should know," she fired back, "since he is probably slower than a one-legged caterpillar."

"Oh yeah?" Leo exclaimed, pleased with the challenge. "Well your mamaw is slower than a pregnant whale in a mud puddle."

"Only if your mamaw is slower than a quadriplegic cow in a coma," the bosomy madam responded.

Leo strutted around the desk, sat down in the swivel chair and popped his knuckles. "Then your fat mama is slower than a retarded pig on a two-wheeled tricycle."

"I'll have you know I am Charlotte Beau Cartier of Cartier, Limited. Before marriage I was a Borlington. My forefathers were bluebloods of the textile empire and original founding fathers of the Industrial Revolution. I married into a highly distinguished family of jewelers. So top that, Mister ..."

"Hammer, of Arms and Hammers. Two of my possible four fathers fathered lots of Crips and Bloods in the Watts Revolution. Arms and Hammers are in banks, railroads and, uh, refrigerators. And I married into a highly disturbed family of sanitation engineers."

"Aha! Your father-in-law was a garbage collector."

"Was not. He drove the truck, Miz Harlot."

"My first name is Charlotte. What is yours, Mister Hammer?"

"Jack."

"And who is your employer, Jack Hammer?"

"Barker Security. Wanna see my big blackjack?"

"It would likely draw more laughs than your jokes, but I am not here to see you. I have heard rumors that Buford Hightower is currently here at the jail and I require his immediate assistance, so go fetch him for me."

"Buford took a powder. Besides, my fetcher is broke. You do not wanna go there."

"Truce, Jack. Let's start over. Kindly overlook all my deeply
embedded southern roots. I desperately need to see my banker, one Buford Hightower, to place some valuable items in my safety deposit box. I realize it is after banking hours, but this is an emergency because the entire town is poised on the brink of riot. As the most prominent jewelry store owner I am concerned with possible looting."

"You just grabbed my undivided attention, Charlotte Beau. I recall you mentioned Borlington Industries."

"Yes, in my family history, but at the moment I wish to deal with the present crisis."

"You spoke of big business, Miz Charlotte."

"Again, the past. My current shop is elite, but quaint."

"Roots in the deep south."

"Yes, yes, but where are you headed with this?"

"Cotton."

"We have since diversified into polyesters," she tried.

"What's in the case? Shackles?"

"Certainly not. It contains my most exclusive stock. Roughly a million dollars' worth of jewels and loose diamonds."

"Then let me lock the front door and fetch you some southern coffee, Dumplin."

*   *   *

"I have not yet partaken of my morning coffee," Papa Joe forewarned from the depths of his inner sanctum in response to the knock on the bedroom door, "so enter at your own peril."

"Sorry, no coffee," Kevin apologized as he came in, "but I did bring something else you might welcome," he confirmed by dragging along a cash-filled duffel bag.

"For which mortal locution does immortal injustice in fully elucidating my manifest gratitude."

"If that means thanks, then you're welcome. Consider it a contribution from the citizens of Bacon to the local McCreary Orphanage. I hope it doesn't bother you that some of them may have required a little coercing."

111
"Son, I never question mysterious ways and means. Perhaps now my ramshackle asylum may be properly renovated to comfortably shelter more displaced souls."

Kevin agreed with a glance at the watermarked ceiling. "Yes, the leaking ark could stand a refit and there will be plenty left to see all your stowaways through college."

"Indeed," the old man realized with another look at the size of the army surplus canvas. "Yet my first priority is on a smaller scale. I must purchase Adrian the bicycle I promised him, lest my hanged corpse becomes a salty snack for hammerheads."

* * *

"Never let it be said that Hammer the Honorable left a maiden dangling in distress, Miz Charlotte. Even a light-skinned New York City black gal who passed herself off as white to marry a wealthy jeweler in a small, all-white town in rural Illinois."

"What gave me away?" she sniffled. "I knew I should have dyed my eyebrows blonde to match my wig."

"A southern belle does not slip into a New York accent when she gets excited, or play The Dozens like a boldly seasoned tavern tart."

She admitted, "I knew I couldn't beat you though, after I got run down by that retarded pig on a broken tricycle."

"The cow in a coma wasn't bad at all," he conceded. "Did you learn that one in Harlem?"

"The Bronx."

"Same zebra, different stripe. More coffee?"

"Why not, Mista Hamma?" she drawled out playfully. "Maybe you can tell me how you got that name?"

"I can show ya better than I can tell ya," he drawled back with a playful wink. "There just happens to be a semi-private cell vacancy in the back. No door but four beds. I don't suppose your highfalutin husband will know the difference."

"Probably not. He died years ago, just six weeks into our vows."
Local legend has it that I was too much for his heart. Are you up to it tonight, big guy?"

"The big guy stays up all night," he assured her. "Follow me to our suite."

"That coffee has me boiling, Jack. Why don't we just use this big desk?"

"You move the typewriter, Dumplin, and I'll grab the jewels."

* * *

"Be sure to counsel your treasure-hungry little brother before you leave."

"But Papa Joe," Kevin protested, "Ant is better with him than I am. I've never been good with kids, not to mention we are short on time."

"How dare you shirk your responsibility or lecture me on the subject of time being short!" the old cleric erupted as he sat up in bed. "I am an expert on the latter subject. It does not require a master jeweler to ascertain that my life's clock is very rapidly approaching midnight."

"Easy, Papa. You'll outlive us all."

"Patronizing platitudes are beneath you, son. This is not about my longevity or lack thereof. It is about your brother. You fail to realize that AJ is teetering over a bottomless abyss of foul trouble. You and Anthony roll in here in that gangster car with your big money, fancy guns and adventurous plans without one God-given moment of thought as to how it might affect our Adrian. Has it even crossed your mind as to how your example might wrongly influence the mind of a rambunctious nine-year-old who already harbors renegade aspirations? Is it your desire that he follow in your footsteps?"

"I'm sorry, Papa Joe. You're right, like always. I've just been undermining everything you've been trying to teach him. What was I thinking? Ant and I never should have come here."

"Nonsense. This is your home also. Just speak with Adrian. 113
Thus when I make my final sojourn, I may go smiling."

"I hear you, Papa. I don't really know what to tell him, but I'll give it my best shot."

"The truth suffices, Kevin. Now humor an ailing old man with a healing hug. I shall soon put in a good word for you. Above and in person. Meantime, should you ever lose your way, I shall find you in my prayers. Farewell, favored son. I love you dearly."

* * *

"I love . . . you too," Leo lied and labored on.

"How'd we . . . get on . . . the floor?" Charlotte cried and carried on.

"Desk broke," he panted. "Thin . . . office . . . furniture."
"It's oak," she gasped.
"Diamonds," he huffed, "all over," and puffed, "the floor."
"And plaques," she squealed.
"File cabinet toppled," she added.
"Typewriter totaled," he noticed.
"Oh! Oh!" she yelped. "Can't take . . . any more . . . of those—"

"Thor's Hammer," he exploded, "strikes again!"
"
—diamonds poking," she finished, "my back."

"Bummer," Leo exhaled, deflated. "Dumplin, you sure know how to burst a guy's ego."
Eye-patch in place, AJ sat on the dirt floor of the tool shed sullenly tapping his wooden sword. Hi-Cat posed alongside, a stoic yet vigilant Sphinx watching over the royal heir apparent. The cloying ambiance of tension caused Hi-Dog to circle his young ward protectively.

Kevin casually strolled into the stifling shed with feigned indifference to the strained atmosphere. "Hey, little brother, what's happening?"

"You're not my real brother. My only brother burned up. I don't need any more fake family brothers who are running away to a whole other country and maybe never coming back."

The blow buckled Kevin's knees, sitting him down beside the boy on the dirt floor. "What about Ant?" he asked, stalling for time. "Isn't he still your brother?"

"Ant already gave me the man-of-the-house speech," the savvy youngster ducked the brother issue gracefully. "So I'm all talked out. Why don't you guys just leave?"

"You do not have to talk to me, bro. Just listen a little. I really need practice with this kid stuff. When I said good-bye to the girls, they all got weepy. When Sherryl and Maggie finally did stop sniffling, I tried to pick up Little Maggie, but guess what happened?"

AJ remained silent, not suckered into the conversation.

"Well," Kevin went on, "the little opera soloist cranked up and wailed like she'd been kidnapped by a wicked witch. So I just passed her off to Ant and in two seconds flat he had her cooing and waving her chubby little arms and legs — Yippee — like she had been rescued by a handsome prince. Ant was holding her in the palm of one of his big hands and I guess that made her feel secure, so I figured I could do it too, except maybe with both hands. But when I took her back . . ." he paused hopefully.

"She started bawling again," AJ filled in. "She does the same thing to me. I guess maybe Ant is not nervous like we are, and she
Hi-Cat and Hi-Dog sensed a truce and abandoned their posts in favor of more compelling pursuits elsewhere on the sparsely wooded acreage.

"Yeah," Kevin admitted, "my big bro, Ant, knows a lot of good things that I don't know. That's why it's good to have a big bro. Or maybe even two."

"Ant's been my penpal for a long time," AJ reminded him with an exhaled sigh of patience. "About a whole year, so I know him pretty good. He's real smart. Almost as smart as Papa Joe, except for big words. Ant taught me all kinds of neat stuff."

"Like what?"

"You know, heavy stuff like how to pick up girls and how to get rich," AJ noted while scratching the dirt floor with his toy sword, terrorizing ants.

"I do all right with women," Kevin bragged, "but could always use a good tip in the get-rich-quick department. The last advice I got was a response from a classified ad that cost me a dollar and a self-addressed stamped envelope. The ad had guaranteed I would become a millionaire."

"What did you get back in your envelope?" the seemingly awed boy asked innocently.

"A form letter advising me to take out my own classified ad and get a dollar apiece from a million other suckers," Kevin ended smugly.

"Kev, you should know better," AJ reasoned to set up a one-two punch combination. "That one is older than Papa Joe."

Kevin walked right into it with, "What, the scam?"

"No," AJ countered with a grin. "That joke."

"Good shot, killer. So tell me a better one from your year-long stroll down Memory Lane with Ant."

"My biggest brother and I don't joke around when it comes to serious stuff," the boy replied indignantly, the grin gone. "We have man-to-man talks."

"Aha!" Kevin pounced on the slip. "So now Ant is your brother
again."

"I never said he wasn't," AJ fended off the charge.

Kevin pushed, "You said you didn't need any more brothers."


"No more," Kevin surrendered. "I told Papa Joe I wasn't any good at this stuff. I can't even win a fight with a nine-year-old, not to mention losing a smart little brother."

"You still got Ant," the champ consoled with a gentle pat on Kevin's shoulder.

"I said little brother," Kevin countered feebly. Down, but not out.

"Maybe I'll let you be my brother again," the champ graciously allowed.

"Thanks, kid."

"I said maybe," AJ reminded him, grinning again.

"What's the catch? A new bike?"

"Cool. A Harley."

"Imagine that."

"And a Jet Ski."

"Kid, you've got me punch-drunk. Can we get back to something on the level, like you and Ant's man-to-man, get-rich scheme? How's that work?"

"It's easy and only costs a dime, not a dollar."

"I'm not biting, AJ," Kevin pouted. "You lost my trust with your crack about my classified ad."

"This is no joke. You just save a dime out of every dollar you make."

"That's the whole plan?" asked Kevin suspiciously, guarding against another setup.

"The rest is easy," AJ patiently explained. "See, poor people spend all their money. That's exactly why they're so poor. So they need to borrow some money from the guy who saved his dimes. That guy gets his dimes back plus interest, and gets rich. It's simple."
"AJ, I see your logic, but I want to become a millionaire and that takes a lot of dimes."

"Not that many," AJ argued and began scratching in the dirt, using the point of his wooden sword as a giant pencil . . . "bring down the zero . . . one times zero is zero . . . one times zero is zero again . . ."

"I flunked algebra twice," Kevin confessed to fill in a long conversational void.

". . . one times zero is another zero . . ."

"Kid, you need a TV in here for bored guest. While you figure out this math problem, I could be watching all the great reruns of 'I Love Lucy.'"

". . . comma every three places to the left . . ."

"Hey, Howie Hughes, will you be done in time to take a dime out of every dollar I get from Social Security?"

"There, I got it," AJ finally announced. "One million dollars equals ten million dimes. But for somebody my age it doesn't take that many dimes for real."

"I knew there was a trick to it."

"No trick. It earns interest and doubles, and then doubles some more times. If you got time, I can figure out exactly how long it takes," AJ offered, lowering the sword point again.

"NO!"

"You don't have to shout, Kev," the boy complained, twisting a grimy finger into one ear. "I'm not deaf, or at least I wasn't till you screamed in my ear."

"Sorry, champ. Just a survival instinct. I simply had a flash of gumming myself senile while you kept scratching in the dirt with your wooden cane. But it looks like you and Ant have it all worked out. Have you run it by Papa Joe?"

"Sure," AJ affirmed with renewed vigor. "Papa Joe called it a certainty, which means it will work. He also promised me a bicycle so I can deliver newspapers. I already mow lawns so I've got a big gallon jar full of dimes. Well, almost full. So at least I'll have something saved up even if I don't go."
"I'm relieved to hear you're off the Harley and back on the bicycle, but what's this business about going somewhere? Surely you don't plan to run away."

AJ turned partway so his uncovered eye was now recessed in shadow. Kevin's view was restricted to the silently eye-patched profile with its accompanying visual message becoming perfectly clear: 'You are cut off. Cast aside with villainous disdain.'

"I don't want a stupid Jet Ski either," the boy added aloud. Exasperation mounting, Kevin pleaded, "What did I do now?" But AJ maintained his unapproachable freeze-out, avoiding eye contact or explanations.

"AJ, we are brothers and I love you. Don't hate me for some crazy thing when I don't even know what it is," Kevin floundered, a novice sailor adrift in the fathomless psyche of a nine-year-old pirate.

The blind profile sniffled, "I don't hate you at all. I want . . . I want . . . "

"You're killing me, kid. Just tell me whatever it is you need and I'll buy it for you," Kevin promised, "no matter how much it costs."

One industrious teardrop engineered its escape from the snug rim of AJ's eye-patch, hung shimmering for two elongating seconds . . . then plunged to freedom.

Abruptly the child jumped up and fled, crying out, "I want to go with you!"

Seated alone, Kevin whispered into the stagnant, dusty air, "Papa Joe, I'm lost," then flopped back onto the dirt, down for the count.

* * *

"I want to go with you, Hammer."

"Have you flipped your Dolly Parton wig?"

"I'm going and that's final!"

"When the Pope poses for Playboy."
"I'll tell. Ebollus Maximus, my fat fannie."
"Relax. Take fifty Percocets."
"I'll throw in the jewels."
"We get hitched at the first stop, Dumplin."

* * *

"Wake up, Kev, wake up," AJ implored, shaking the dreamer. "You've got dirt all over you. It's in your hair and everywhere. Plus you've been talking in your sleep, using big words."

The boy moved behind the fugitive and helped him to sit up, then began gingerly dusting dirt off of the back of Kevin's head, carefully avoiding the healing scalp laceration.

"Ah," Kevin gasped, arching forward.

"Sorry, bro," AJ apologized. "Some dirt fell down the back of your shirt. I was worried about touching that scabby bullet wound and didn't watch out very good where the dirt was falling. Don't freak out but there's a few ants in there too. Pull out your shirttail so the dirt and ants can fall out."

"Good advice," Kevin acknowledged, doing exactly as he was told, "but how did you know my head injury was from a bullet?"

"People talk, and some people say, more than other people."

"I see," Kevin surmised with a knowing chuckle. "And did your little confidential source also happen to mention his outlaw papaw or suicidal salmon?"

"You can't trick me into snitching. Ant schooled me on all that stuff."

"It looks like Ant has covered a lot of ground, and Leo has certainly added in his own two cents, as usual. Throw in education and family values from Papa Joe, and that doesn't leave very much ground uncovered. I guess I'm stuck with the job of informing my little bro of this unpleasant truth. Sorry, champ, but you can't go with us and that's just the way it is."

"I know I can't go, Kevin. I'm not stupid. But that doesn't keep me from wanting to go. Man, oh man, I sure get sick and tired
of playing like I'm a pirate all the time with this toy sword and underwear eye-patch. You and Ant are doing the real thing."

"When I was your age, AJ, I played the same silly games and I guess you're right; I'm still at it. But the longer I play, the less fun it is. It's like you said, it's real, but I can't stop now and sometimes I think I'll never grow up."

"At least you did what you wanted to do," AJ rationalized. "That's what I thought too, but then I kept finding myself in spots I didn't want to be in."

"Like prison?" the smart youngster inferred.

"Yeah, but not just that. Look at this spot I'm in right now. I don't like leaving you and the girls and Papa Joe to fend for yourselves, but I can't stay here or the law will get me. It breaks my heart to leave and it breaks the hearts of all the people who love and care about me. When love turns into pain, all the fun goes out of the game."

"But we all still love each other, Kev."

"Sure we do, bro, but I've made it so painful that nobody wins."

AJ tried again by arguing, "But you still have Ant and Leo and all that money."

"Friendship is fantastic, but I'd gladly give the money back for a chance to start over. This time I'd do things differently so it wouldn't end up hurting the people I love."

"What would you do different, Kev?"

Kevin peered out through the open door of the shed where a small dust devil twirled down the dirt path before dissipating into the hungry vacuum of time.

"I'd save dimes."

"For real?" the wide-eyed youngster pressed.

"For real," Kevin reaffirmed. "Some folks say that crime doesn't pay, but they're wrong. It pays, but it's not worth that final price you pay. Not even close."

AJ noted, "Ant says that the only crime that really pays is some government scam called deceit spending or something like
that. It means stealing from babies and Ant told me if I ever sank that low he would sell me to Alaskan slave traders. Back then I wanted to be President, but I've grown up a lot more now," the boy concluded with a guilty glance at his toy sword.

"Ant is smarter than I am," Kevin conceded, "so he probably can help you out more with those kinds of things. On second thought I don't think Ant ever quite figured out the growing-up stuff too well himself. That's something you may have to work out yourself, little brother."

The horn of the Cadillac blared twice and the boy helped Kevin to his feet. "Don't worry," AJ promised, "I won't get all blubbery when you guys pull out. That's for girls."

The pair walked out of the shed and down the dirt path to the gravel driveway. Ant was wedged tightly behind the steering wheel impatiently tapping his fingertips on the dashboard. Sherryl waved from the porch swing with Little Maggie in her lap, kicking the air in an offbeat dance to the creaking chain supporting its full load. Miss Maggie sat on the front steps studiously snapping green beans into a pail of salt water being carefully overseen by Hi-Dog and Hi-Cat, both somewhat oddly restive with uneasy tails flicking intermittently.

Kevin stopped to stare at God's most unique, most baffling, most beautiful creation: Woman.

"Maggie, I feel a lot better knowing you'll be around to help out the family. I'm a little worried about Papa Joe's stamina. You may have to take on more responsibilities as time catches up to him. I left some money upstairs but don't know how much. There wasn't time to count it."

Head down, she continued snapping string beans in half.

"Anyhow," Kevin labored on. "I'm not very good with words sometimes, but I just wanted you to know that ever since we first met, things have happened so fast I never really had a chance to say exactly how I feel about us and, I mean . . . well, I don't mean . . ."

Maggie rose silently and walked back into the house, softly
shutting the screen door after her as if reluctantly closing a good book which had ended too quickly.

"Women," Kevin grumbled, then ruffled AJ's hair and ambled down the gravel driveway to the idling Cadillac. Just after he climbed in, an unseasonably chill draft descended upon the old homestead. The feathery tail of a gauze curtain fluttered out through an upstairs window, its ghostly fabric waving a gossamer, final farewell.

Ant goosed the cranky car down the rutted driveway, but then braked to a squealing halt when AJ came chasing down the fleeing felons while crying out, "Wait! You guys wait!"

"Kev," Ant pleaded, "if the kid tries to get in, you stop him. I'm not that strong."

AJ approached Ant's door and pulled the toy sword out of his belt, then also peeled off the eye-patch. With somber ceremony he passed both childhood treasures through the open window and patted the giant's shoulder. "You guys take these," the youngster stated firmly. "I don't need them anymore," he finished as Ant and Kevin nodded their mute acceptance beyond the ken of words.

As two aging boys drove away, one young man returned home and an old man upstairs cried smiling."
"Chief Milner, guess what happened."

The FBI chieftain drummed his fingers slowly on the laminated desktop.

"I take that to mean you would rather not guess," Wahler said. "We often communicate quite well, sometimes without even speaking, just like an old married couple."

Milner removed the service gun from his shoulder holster and laid it on the desk pointed at Wahler.

Agent Wahler continued, "I was on my way out the door to go see that con with the killer backhand when all the sudden the AP wire service machine started clicking like a tap-dancing centipede and spewing ticker tape as if the Yankees had won the World Series. But you won't believe what the real story was. I'll give you one last chance to guess."

Milner placed his hand on the gun and inserted his stubby index finger into the trigger guard.

"Toler and Barker busted that tennis guy, Rogers, out of that maximum security prison, then robbed the town of Bacon, Illinois. The whole town and most of the county!" Wahler referenced the wire service tape he was holding. "Eight hundred and forty counts of robbery by deception, plus a whole list of other charges including kidnapping, false imprisonment, fraud, forgery, impersonation of government agents, destruction of public and private property, lewd misconduct and discharge of a firearm during a felony takeover."

The Chief raised his eyebrows at the firearm charge, so Wally elaborated. "It says here on the tape that they shot a radio. It must have been one of those obnoxious ghetto blasters. I've always wanted to do that, haven't you?"

Milner snicked off the safety release with his thumb and the agent returned to the facts. "They nabbed over two million dollars in cash; another million in jewelry; ten thousand dollars' worth of narcotics; twenty grand in weapons; and sixteen supreme pizzas."
Typical gourmet feast for trailer-park trash if you ask me, but some of those numbers are probably inflated to rip off insurance companies. Remember that case involving over-reported theft of Girl Scout cookies?"

Milner lifted the gun. "Agent Wahler, if you utter one more word the rest of the day, I will shoot your lips off. Nod once if you understand."

Wahler nodded.

"Great," Milner acknowledged. "Now we will concern ourselves with what we know about the general location of the fugitives. It is safe to assume that they have left Bacon and quite probably the state of Illinois by now. We know for certain that they know that we know where they were. Are you still with me, Agent Wahler?"

Wally nodded again. A lie.

The Chief summarized, "The felons realize that they are also hotter than a Texas taco, so their only chance of eluding us is to blend into a large urban population. With all that money, our high rollers will most likely check into a first-class hotel under assumed names. Bring me a map so we can see exactly which major cities lie within a radius of how far they could have traveled from Illinois by now," he ordered while shooing the agent out with a waving gun.

Wally scurried off, biting his lips.

* * *

Both sides of the sign were printed in big bold letters:

Welcome to Paris, Illinois. Population: 1

A shiny new Cadillac pulling a U-Haul trailer stopped directly across from the welcoming sign at the town's only building: a barn. Ant and Kevin climbed out of the front seat while Charlotte and Leo got out of the back.

"I'm still hungry," Ant complained.

"You just polished off two large pizzas," Leo groused. "If'n we have to feed you all the way to Brazil, we'll be broke long..."
before we cross the Rio Grande."

"Don't worry about that," Ant assured him. "I've got plenty of traveler's checks."

The foursome traipsed into the open barn door and were met by the town's sole inhabitant. Her head was shaved except for a strip of spiked, multi-colored hair running across the top of her shining skull from ear to ear.

"A peacock mohawk," Leo gawked in awe.

Sharp triangular teeth splayed from her narrow mouth at odd angles. Multiple hairy moles sprouted from the fertile crevices of her startling features.

The crone ogled the potential customers greedily, took a big gulp from a brown pewter jug marked XXX and crowed, "Welcome to the Creacher Comfort Inn. I'm Lizzy Creacher, owner and operator, plus mayor, doctor, dentist, beautician, Justice of the Peace and a lot of other positions at your humble service." My credentials," she stated with a sweeping gesture toward a sagging wall loaded with more odd plaques and certificates than had graced the rear wall of the Bacon Sheriff's Office.

Charlotte and Leo exchanged blushing glances of nostalgia.

Ant approached one of the framed faux parchment diplomas under the plaques which further certified that Elizabeth Bodine Creacher had received her master's degree in Paranormal Astrology from the Oxford University in Oxford, Montana.

"You must have spent a lot of time and money on this one, Miss Creacher," he observed.

"Just call me Creach. That one set me back nine dollars and ninety-nine cents and took six to eight weeks for delivery."

Charlotte eased up to the wall for a closer inspection and asked, "Where's the one for Justice of the Peace? Oh, here it is. Hmm. Harvard, New Mexico. Good enough."

"I need a drink of that firewater," Leo confessed.

Creach questioned Kevin, "How about you, Rock Hudson?"

"Too early," he declined.

"No such thing," she refuted as she pulled another jug off
a peg and passed it to Leo. "If you had a face like mine, you'd start drinking early too."

"At birth," Leo agreed, taking a test sip of the liquor. "Now let's get this ceremonial crap out of the way. Kevin, if'n you don't mind, I'd like you to be Best Man."

"I'd be honored."

Leo took a big swig and offered the jug to Ant who declined with, "No thanks, I don't drink after, uh, anybody."

Creach pulled down a fresh jug for Ant. "My goodness, you do have big fingers," she observed while staring at his crotch. "You can be my best man anytime."

Leo suggested, "He can be the ring bearer if'n he wants to."

"Proudly," Ant beamed.

"And the flower girl," Leo added.

Creach pried, "Am I missing something here?"

Leo informed her, "He's bi-talented."

* * *

"What a pleasant surprise," Bebo declared as she answered the door of her trailer home. "If you had called first, I would have shaved my legs. Just make yourself comfortable and I'll make us a small cocktail."

Wally followed her into a compact living room and sat deeply into a love seat while she hustled into the kitchenette and pulled an ice tray from the freezer section of her half-fridge.

"What brings you back?" she wondered while placing one ice cube apiece into two sixteen ounce glasses, then filling them to the rim with straight vodka before adding a floating lemon wedge. Upon returning to the living room, she surrendered one of the tall glasses to the FBI agent.

"First things first," Wally stipulated to delay the purpose of his visit by tasting his drink. "Great cocktail," he conceded. "Have you ever tended bar?"

"Only for my parents and grandparents. I come from a big long
line of trailer-park alcoholics. We like our drinks macho, and our sex violent," she mused, sinking down beside him. "So get to the point, copper. I'm missing 'The Price is Right.'"

"I have a problem, Bebo. My boss wants me to go track down some crazy killers, but if I don't go, I'll probably get killed here by a crazy judge."

"How wimpy can you get, Wally? I've got lots of guns if you need another one, but other than that, I don't see how I can help. Just tell me if we are going to have sex," she implored and guzzled half of her drink.

"Keep your bloomers on, Bebo. I figure the only two excuses my boss will accept are death or a honeymoon."

"Same difference," she adjudged.

"Bebo, I'm asking you to marry me."

"Well, you do have a job," she admitted, "but I'm accustomed to real men, honey. On this side of the tracks, the men walk the walk," she informed him while picking up the TV remote.

"Put that down," Wally demanded. "I offer to spend the rest of my life with you, and you tune me out in favor of Bob Barker. I ought to sock you right in the kisser, you ungrateful skuzzy skank."

"Is your socker stuck on scared?" she challenged.

Wally set down his drink on the coffee table, stood up and belted Bebo under the chin. She flew back over the love seat into a hanging wall mirror. Bebo and the shattering mirror, along with a gaping section of the wall, crashed into the adjoining bathroom. Her head grazed the hot water valve on the flight into the bathtub and her feet brought down a rack of assorted bath oils and mineral salts.

Engulfed in a perfumed steam cloud, she yelled back through the newly excavated breach in the plastic persimmon paneling, "Is that all you got, copper?"

* * *

128
"I do," Charlotte vowed.
"And do you, Jack Hammer," Creach resumed, "take this woman, Beau Dumplin, to be thy artfully wedded wife?"
"I reckon," Leo mumbled and took a long pull from the jug.
"Present the ring," Creach instructed Ant, who opened his palm to reveal a sparkling, twenty carat diamond ring which Leo retrieved and slipped onto Charlotte's trembling finger.
"I now pronounce you man and wife," Creach decreed. "Mister Hammer, you may now kiss the bride, and then kiss me. My town, my rules."
Leo spewed out the liquor.
"Just fooling," Creach cackled.
Charlotte quickly kissed Leo's cheek, then inquired, "Is there anywhere around here to take a bath?"
"Sure," Creach confirmed. "What do you think I am, some kind of wild animal?"
"Don't say anything rude, Leo," Charlotte cautioned.
"Good advice, wify. Never insult toothy reptiles."
"There's a creek right over that little knoll," Creach said while pointing through the open barn door, "and an antique bathtub in the honeymoon suite up in the loft. It's under a drain spout, so it might be full from last week's rain. That old tub is plenty big enough for two."
"Sounds good," Charlotte accepted, "even though I'm a little on the shy side."
Leo gagged on another swallow. "Me too," he lied along with her. "I turn out the light when I pee in public bathrooms."
"What about chow?" asked Ant.
"First you two boys get your dirty buns in the creek," Creach directed Ant and Kevin. "In the meantime, I'll go cut down an aged country ham."
She appraised Ant again. "Or two. But don't track back any of those briars from the thorny blackberry bushes."
Ant produced a roll of hundreds to pay for the two hams.
"Or three," Creach revised once more.
Ant and Kevin headed for the creek while the newlyweds climbed the loft ladder. Creach waited a moment before creeping after the boys, prompting Charlotte to pause midway up and ask nosily, "You cure hams outside?"

"Hams shmams. I have to see that real big boy in his birthday suit."

"Too much info," Leo lamented, goosing Charlotte's plump rump on up into the overhead loft. "I really cain't handle any more of those nightmare naked bodies on my wedding night. Done been there. Done done that."

*   *   *

"Strip."
"Uzis are illegal," Wally objected.
"Strip," Bebo commanded again.
"Can we discuss this, honey-bunch?"
"Game time, cowboy," she answered, firing a ten-round burst into the ceiling.
"I take that to mean no discussion," Wally figured out while removing his clothes, gun and handcuffs.
"Nice," Bebo complimented, looking down.
"Thanks. Don't hurt it. It's the only one I've got."
"Handcuffs," she stipulated.
"Absolutely not!"
She sprayed his discarded clothing into a jumble of rags and then aimed between his legs.
"I always wondered how it felt to wear these," Wally noted while bending to put on the cuffs.
Bebo threw the machine gun on the love seat, reached underneath and pulled out a long flat case. Squatting down she opened it and withdrew some family valuables with the grand announcement, "Let the games begin!"
"I'll scream," Wally threatened.
"Promises, promises," she sighed after rising with the items
from the case: a bullwhip, with a pair of leather driving gloves.

"Not Monopoly tokens," Wally observed, "but I'll bet you are going to tell me the name of this game."

"Rodeo Drive."

* * *

Kevin stirred from the bed of hay when a drop of soapy water struck his cheek.

"They woke me up, also," Ant complained beside him. "It seems they are back in the tub already. I thought people were supposed to wait thirty minutes after eating before getting back in the water. I hope they get ham cramps," he wished while uncorking his second jug.

A muffled demand came from overhead. "Hold your breath longer, you homeless gutter tramp."

Kevin reflected, "Leo really gets into it."

Ant corrected him. "That was Charlotte speaking."

From the adjacent stall, Creach called out, "Sounds like fun. Can I come over?"

"That's not us," Kevin called back. "The orgy is in the loft. Go right on up. They probably would enjoy a threesome if you're into that sort of—aaah!" he exclaimed as a splash of sudsy water doused him. Looking up he could dimly make out a clawed bathtub foot steadily digging its way through the wooden plank right above his head.

"Whah!" Ant added after he likewise got soused from another excavation by a different brass claw. Within minutes the other two remaining talons followed, resulting in four clawed feet flailing the air in search of footholds or prey. The holes quickly enlarged and rained down soapsuds and water as the old-fashioned tub sloshed back and forth and side to side from the oceanic efforts of its aquatic contestants.

"Rock my rubber duck, Hammer!"

"Don't squeeze the Charmin, Dumplin!"
Loft boards buckled and more water cascaded, drenching Ant and Kevin.

"Watch out!" the big man roared. "It's about to go!"
He grabbed Kevin's ankles and yanked him clear just as the boards surrendered to the assault from above, dumping the twisting tub upside down onto Kevin's vacated straw bed.
Ant anxiously tapped on the bottom of the inverted tub.
No response.
He dug powerful fingers under the rim and levered up the thick shell about twelve inches. Charlotte's dark soaked head emerged like a beached sea turtle.
"Five more minutes," she pleaded before ducking back inside the antique shelter.
Ant lowered the tub, concluding, "Now that's love."

* * *

"You're a real bull, Wally. That's the first time I've ever been bucked off in under eight seconds."
"Does that mean you'll marry me, Bebo?"
"I just did. Trailer-park folks call it 'common law.' It's quicker and cheaper. Now where are we going on our honeymoon?"
"Niagara Falls."

* * *

"What a mess," Creech wailed, her webbed toes sinking in mud, "with no flood insurance."
"It's OK," Ant placated with a comforting arm wrapping around her racking shoulders. "We can pay for any damages."
"I just adore a take-charge he-man," she reacted, clasping stubby arms around his thick neck with her long incisors snapping hungrily. "Now kiss me, Incredible Hunk. I haven't had a real man since the UPS driver this morning."
From the upturned tub, its lifeless feet reaching skyward
in insectile rigor mortis, came nine pinging knocks: three short, three long, three short.

Ant disentangled himself from the clinging crone, bent down and flipped the bathtub over. Charlotte, with little more than her dark curly hair showing, had modestly covered herself in hay. Leo sat cross-legged with the wooden sword covering his loins. A multicolored eye-patch obscured one eye while a dripping blonde wig, slightly askew, adorned his head.

"A pirate," Creach laughed in delight, bending low for a more critical assessment, "with a long dark sword."

"Am not," Leo rebutted indignantly. "My wife and I were just playing Sink The Viking Ship."

Ant muttered, "Erik the Black," before taking a pull of brew from his jug.

"I'm freezing," Charlotte made known from the soggy remains of the straw bed.

"There's firewood in that last stall on the left," Creach told them. "If you boys take some outside, I'll go get the matches."

"While I get us some duds out of the loft," Leo tacked on as he sidled toward the ladder with the toy sword shielding his loins. "Don't nobody look at my butt on my way up," he ordered. "I don't play that tune."

Kevin carried an armload of wood just outside the barn door where Ant was busy constructing a sacrificial teepee stuffed with newspaper. "I learned this watching 'The Flintstones.' I had a big crush on Fred's ole lady, Wilma, when I was four years old."

Kevin argued, "Back then, I thought Betty Rubble was cuter."

Creach reappeared carrying a dripping box of kitchen matches. "These were flood victims too," she moped as Leo descended wearing a bathrobe and carrying one for Charlotte.

"No problem," Ant responded after draining the dregs from his triple-X jug. "I was in the army," he informed everyone and then staggered off toward the car.

"What did he mean by that?" wondered Charlotte. "We tried out the Cadillac's cigarette lighter once before, so Ant knows it is
"I think," Kevin guessed, "he plans to get a spark off the car battery. Soldiers have been doing that ever since cigarettes were introduced to jeeps."

Leo confessed, "I get a little edgy around drunk, white fire starters."

"It's a dark night in Paris," bemoaned Creach.

"Don't sweat it," Kevin soothed. "We'll make it up to you and you'll feel a whole lot better whenever Ant gets a toasty little fire going."

"Stand clear!" the tipsy giant bellowed from just behind the U-Haul. A flamethrower was perched across his shoulder aimed at the would-be campfire.

Everyone scrambled to the sides as the big man screamed out, "Wilma!" and molten lava erupted from the tube, igniting on contact with oxygen. The racing inferno obliterated the pointed woodpile and streaked through the open barn door, bursting the entire wooden structure into towering flames.
"No."
"No what?" asked Agent Wahler.
Milner continued to study the map spread out on top of his
desk. "No to whatever it is you want. I won't even consider it.
Now I'm busy, so shift into reverse, pop your clutch and back up
your backside back out the door."
"But I need a month off for a honeymoon."
"Whose?"
"Mine."
"Impossible. Nobody would marry you," Milner said, rising
with a glance at his Timex. "It's time for my workout anyway, so
if you think up any more lies, you'll have to tell them down in
the basement rec room," he stipulated while brushing past Wally
into the outer hallway.
"I'm allergic to barbells, boss," Wally whimpered as they
boarded the elevator which was already occupied by two very tall,
identical gentlemen.
"Hello," the men said in unison.
"I am Barney Martin," one introduced himself.
"And I am Bailey Martin," the other one echoed.
"We are twins," they said at the exact same time in perfect
unison as the elevator began its stomach-dropping rapid descent.
Barney bragged, "We are the Minnesota State Fair hot dog
eating co-champions. One hundred and sixteen hot dogs apiece in
ten minutes."
"That story will have to wait," Wally cut them off, "because
first I have to explain my marriage before we get to the basement
where I will break out in hives. My new wife's name is Bebo, but
she isn't actually new, since she is my age which is forty-two.
But she is new to me except for when she was hanging out laundry
last week when she wasn't my wife quite yet."
Barney and Bailey raised inquisitive eyebrows at each other.
"When I informed my parents that I was finally leaving home,"
Wally continued, "my mommy got the hiccup giggles and my daddy dropped to his knees and pulled out a checkbook. He wrote out a check to our church for ten thousand dollars while humming a hymn about the power of prayer."

"I believe that," Milner asserted.

"We do too," the Minnesota twins chimed in unison.

"Don't do that," Milner ordered them.

"Don't do what?" they asked in perfect sync again.

Milner drew his gun.

"Bad nerves," Wally excused his boss, "but you might have a little better luck by talking one at a time. My boss gets easily confused sometimes, possibly due to an abusive childhood."

The elevator pinged to a stop.

"Saved by the bell," Milner responded gratefully. "It was nice meeting you fellows and it gets even better now because this is where I get off."

Bailey noted, "We get off here too."

Barney explained, "Before lunch we do our aerobic stomach stretches in the basements of FBI buildings since nobody else uses them for weightlifting. Well, nobody but you."

"Come on," Milner grumbled at the unopened door.

Barney added, "We are competing at every single state fair. After Kentucky comes Florida, Texas, Georgia, Alaska, Rhode Island, Caloof—"

"We know the fifty states. We're feds," Milner growled while jamming his service revolver barrel into Barney's stretchable belly. "Understand that the elevator door is stuck for some reason. While we wait, I refuse to be jawed utterly senseless by two tall, professional wiener eaters."

Wally began hopping up and down. "Maybe it stopped a couple of inches short, and now the door won't open. Let's try to jar it loose."

Barney and Bailey also began hopping, then Milner reluctantly joined in, but Wally stopped abruptly, bringing everyone else to a halt. "We need to hold hands so we all hit the floor at the same
time to maximize the jarring effect."

The quartet formed a circle as Milner took Wally's hand, who took Bailey's hand, who took Barney's hand, who completed the full circuit by gingerly clasping the barrel of Milner's gun. After a couple of false starts, the group was as adept as any televised ring of athletically giftless, synchronized Olympic swimmers all performing solely for their enthralled mothers while everyone else changed channels.

"This . . . is . . . fun," the bobbing twins happily chanted, "but it . . . is churning . . . our tummies," they confessed while passing simultaneous and voluminous gas.

Milner dropped Wally's hand and jerked the gun barrel out of Barney's fingers, then jabbed the panel alarm button which set off a wake-the-dead bell. "If I somehow survive this gas attack," the big FBI boss swore, pinching his nose shut with his free hand, "I will murder Oscar Mayer."

Shaking his fist toward the elevator ceiling, Wally taunted the fates. "Is that all you've got?"

An acrid wisp of smoke immediately began snaking down through the overhead vent followed by pulsing blasts of rust-colored pipe water from the sprinkler system. From the near distance came a closing siren song.

* * *

"If'n we had some coat hangers," Leo supposed, "we could roast some marshmallows, if'n we had some marshmallows."

Creach cried, "I don't have fire——"

"Insurance," Kevin finished for her. "Our money is still safe in the U-Haul, so we can cover rebuilding costs."


"She can have my trailer," Leo offered. "We have to go back through Kentucky anyway, on our way to Florida."
"Florida sounds good," Creach revised.
Leo nodded, "That's your swamp genes calling."
"I can ride in Ant's lap," she volunteered.
Kevin advised, "We better stop picking up women at every stop on the map."
"Tell Private Flintstone here, with his fire cannon," Leo admonished as Ant sheepishly approached.
"Sorry about that," Ant wheezed drunkenly.
"Don't breathe on us until the barn goes out," Leo instructed, "or we'll all be fried fritters."
"Guess what, bad boy," Creach cooed to Ant. "Leo said I could go back to Kentucky with you guys."
"Where will you sit?" asked Ant suspiciously.
"We have it all worked out," Leo answered. "If'n it gets too crowded, just toss her out and she can run alongside barking."
"That reminds me of a joke," Creach mused as the barn baked away the night's chill. "Anybody want to hear it?"
"Not a soul," Leo answered.
"Overruled," Charlotte decreed. "Tell it, Creach."
"Well, there is this man building a brick house and he has one brick left over, so guess what he does with it."
"I know," Leo claimed. "First he turns it sideways—"
"Don't say it, hubby," Charlotte admonished. "Be nice on our wedding night."
"It already feels like our silver anniversary," he replied. "I reckon I better admit it now; I can't handle twenty-five more years of nagging."
Creach solved her own riddle. "The man throws the brick out into the street." She grinned and waited.
"And?" pursued Kevin.
"And what?" she asked back.
"You mean that's the whole joke?"
Creach looked stricken.
"It's all right, hon," Charlotte pampered her new friend. "I doubt any of these jokers knows a funnier one."
"Divorce is funnier than that joke," Leo said.

"I know a better one," Creach rebounded. "This lady is in a taxi with a little doggie in her lap and the cab driver is smoking a big cigar. The lady complains that the cigar smoke is bothering her doggie, so the cabbie grabs the dog and chucks it out the window. The lady gets mad and snatches the cigar out of the driver's mouth and throws it out right behind the dog. Then two blocks later they stop for a red light and here comes the dog running back to the cab. You'll never guess what it has in its mouth."

Stillness. No takers.

Creach waited.

Kevin finally ventured, "The cigar."

"No," Creach guffawed. "The brick!"

"That's not fair," Ant. justified for his partner. "You never told us the two jokes were connected."

"Professional connection criticism," Leo observed, "straight from The Missing Link."

"The fire is nice," Charlotte said, "but I'm going to get us some blankets out of the trunk for later on, when the chill sets back in."

"I'm sleeping in the car," Kevin announced, trailing after Charlotte.

"Anthony," Creach purred, "I know a snugly little spot just over the knoll."

"Not right now," he put her off. "I'm too depressed about the barn. Maybe I'll get a pencil from the glove compartment and finish a blues song I outlined in prison. That might cheer us up."

"Can I help?" she begged. "I have a Fine Arts degree directly from Penn State, Idaho."

"Sure," he gave in, rising to get the pencil.

"Well now, Erik," Creach shifted to Leo, "I guess that finally leaves us alone together at last. I've always had a fetish for big Viking swords."

He took off the Nordic wig and eye-patch. "Erik don't cheat
on his wedding night. Try the zoo."

"Then help us write a song," she implored.

"I'd sooner eat flies."

Charlotte and Ant returned with blankets and writing supplies, and the couples lounged atop the trampled weeds while gazing up into the blazes. When Ant started scribbling, Charlotte produced a thermos of cold bitter coffee and poured a shot for everyone.

Creach took a sip and grimaced, then another nip and the frown reversed into a shark-eyed smile. She chugged the remainder and turned to Ant. "You done yet? I'm hot to trot."

"I finished half of the first line."

"Let's hear it," Charlotte prompted.

Ant read, "'I left without a word, in our old Thunderbird.'"

"That is so sad," Creach sniffled.

"If'nh you unhappy campers are gonna do the sing-around-the-barnfire song and dance," Leo objected, "I'm gonna start up the car and curl up under the tailpipe. I'll be warmer, plus it won't kill me as quick."

"To finish that line," Ant continued with disregard, "we'll need a food item that signifies revenge. Something like a poisoned apple, but it needs to rhyme with the word dime."

Creach offered, "How about a poisoned apple?"

Charlotte submitted, "When I divorced my first husband, I baked him a fake chocolate cake, but I don't think you want to include my smelly secret ingredient in your song lyrics."

"Charlotte Beau, you didn't," Creach giggled.

"Did too. Clyde was a real stinker."

Creach noted, "I like John Denver trucker songs best."

"We want blues," Leo reminded her, "not a choking goat's mating call. After half a line, we've all got writer's block, so I quit."

"Let's come back to that part later," Ant advised. "In the chorus we need the name of a gospel singing group."

"Black Sabbath," Leo suggested.

"I thought you quit," Creach pouted.
"Don't think," Leo instructed. "You'll drain your brain cell."

Charlotte brought them all back on track. "The only gospel group I like is The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but they might sue if we use their name."

Ant figured, "I can probably word it without provoking any litigation, but a tougher word comes up in the outline's second verse. It calls for the name of a foreign country that rhymes with the word glider."

"Canada," Creach suggested.

"That's the coffee talking," Charlotte excused her ally. Leo solved the dilemma. "Glider rhymes with Chiner."

"That does it," Creach declared. "We don't need more help."

She stood and easily pulled Ant to his feet, then led her captive over the ridge.

"Hamma," Charlotte drawled, "you know how our southern coffee blend warms my pipes."

"Not now, Dumplin. That pair is still too close. I'm having flashbacks of an old TV sitcom called 'The Odd Coupling.'"

"They're just writing a song, Leo, not making a baby."

"You won't say that when T-Rex Junior chomps off your foot."

From the far side of the grassy knoll, Ant's big bass voice rolled back over the hilltop:

I left without a word
in our old Thunderbird,
back when the price of
rubbers was a dime.

My Fred Flintstone lunchbox
you packed with dirty socks,
and one fresh slice of
Dingleberry Pie.

"I've lived too long," Leo lamented.

"Hon," Charlotte probed, "how did you get that scar on your shoulder and the other smaller one down below it?"
"Korean shrapnel up high and appendix down low."
"Liar. This lower scar is still too high for your appendix."
"I'm just short."
"Leo, tell me the truth."
"OK. The doctor stuck a big needle in there and sucked out a sliver of my liver for tests. It had been hogging too much of my beer."
"So you admit you had a drinking problem."
"Nope. I had a nagging problem and she drove me to drinking, but I stopped drinking beer in spite of her."
"I admire your willpower, hubby. It must have been tough to give up your beer."
"Not at all. I switched to whiskey, but that nosy old doctor caught on and made me give that up too. I was a wreck until I realized he never said a thing about gin. I'd kill a quart for my breakfast and everything would go smooth as silk for the rest of the morning, but then Estella, my wife, started going to that crazy Pentacostal church in East Los Angeles."
"Slow down, buster. What does East L.A. have to do with this? I thought you lived in Kentucky."
"We did, but I got the divorce papers in the mail from the West Coast. That was the last time I ever heard from her."
"I'm sorry, hon. I didn't mean to bring up such a sad memory on our wedding night."
"Are you kidding? That was the happiest day of my life. I celebrated for two years straight, but I finally stopped drinking altogether."

Charlotte sighed with relief. "I knew there was a happy ending here somewhere. I just hope it wasn't too late for your liver to recover."
"It might not have been too late if I hadn't turned to pills along with a little coke free-basing on weekends. That old recipe finally fried my liver to a crisp."

From the far side of the grassy knoll floated Creach's alto:
Your Dingleberry Pie
hangs on my mind.
My just dessert
for leaving you behind.
I'll set my hair on fire
and join the Mormon Choir,
before I re-try
Dingleberry Pie.

"Creach, that was beautiful."
"Oh, Anthony, I am not."

* * *

"I'll drown first," Wally predicted as the water level began
to lap over his chin, "because I'm the shortest."
Milner speculated, "No government sprinkler system is this
efficient. Fire Department hoses must be flooding the basement."
"We need to pee," Barney and Bailey chimed together.
"Well hurry up," Wally admonished. "I'm freezing."
Milner pointed to the elevator drop-ceiling. "That looks like
a trap door up there, Wally. I'll cup my hands together and lift
you up so you can reach it."
He inhaled a deep breath of spoiled air in preparation for
the plunge, but stopped short after a glance at the blushing twins.
"You didn't," Milner challenged.
They grew rosier and Wally moved closer to them.
"Get back over here," the Chief ordered his subordinate.
"It's warmer over here, sir."
Milner replied, "I always wondered if these water-resistant
revolvers really worked underwater."
Wally weighed the risks and tip-toed back to his master who
then laced his fingers together and ordered Wally to place one of
his feet in the handmade stirrup. The agent complied and grasped
a handful of Chief Milner's hair for balance as he was hoisted up
to the ceiling.

143
"It's locked, Chief."
"Let go of my hair, Wally."
"Is no an option?"
"No, no is not an option."

When Wally reluctantly released his grip, the Chief further instructed, "Now stiffen up your back and count down from ten to zero."

"Math was never my forte, boss."
"The water is over your head now and according to your mom, you never learned how to swim, so count down or drown. It's not rocket science."
"Ten, nine, eight . . . ."

Chief Milner beamed double-edged daggers at the Martin twins before gulping another foul breath, then submerging himself into the yellowed water.

"Seven, six, five . . . ." Wally continued the countdown, going down with Milner.

Tip-toeing to inhale above the rising tide, Barney looked at his similar sibling accusingly. "You just had to see blue grass, didn't you?"

"Yes, and it turned out to be a myth. We are going to die for a lie."

"One, zer——" the subordinate fed finished with an inhalation of murky water, sinking below the six-foot waterline to join his big government boss.

"Barney, will you hold me like you used to hold me naked under the cover whenever it thundered outside."

Milner thrust up from his coiled squat on the elevator floor, propelling Wally out of the water and on through the drop-ceiling like a smoking submarine nuke arrowing out of its oceanic lair to pierce an unsuspecting heavenly cloud en route to the apocalypse.

Wally screamed.
15. Road Possums

Unable to sleep, Kevin reached over the front seat, rotated the ignition switch halfway and turned on the radio.

Dick: ... of you just now joining me, Richard Stern, for the final segment of "Late Nights With Dick." Tonight's efforts to address the vital social issues of our Empire State center largely around the broad topic of terribly appalling shortages in styling choices for New York City's exploding population of DDT's, Distinguished Dwarf Transvestites. So go ahead caller number three-hundred and sixty-nine.

Dafni: Hi, Dick. This is Dafni, a local DDT from here in Manhattan. Even in the Business District, it remains dreadfully difficult to find any decent specialty clothing accessories that really fit.

Dick: Hold it, Dafni. My water pipe is boiling over. OK, now what were you moaning about?

Dafni: Trust me, Dick, that stuff really stunts one's growth. But back to the topic, I require certain types of specialty clothing items in order to properly present myself as a sexual pioneer.

Dick: Your pimp should have connections in the Garment District.

Dafni: Don't be flip, Dick. I star in the Blue Balls, Dry Ice Striptease at Yo Mama's Bar off Broadway. It's the freakiest gig since "Roseanne in Tights." I open in an ice blue, off-the-shoulder evening gown of tear-away taffeta.

Dick: Three-sixty-nine, this is getting so boring that some listeners are now changing channels to the Islander's post-game hockey show. So spice it up or we move along to caller three-seventy. Maybe
you could enlighten us on the mystery of dwarf schlong length. Are you guys really super-size or is that just a false stereotype?

Dafni: Unfortunately it is a misnomer. A big optical illusion of basic contrast. The old endearment "down to his knees" is not nearly as awesome within the context of a nine-inch thighbone.

Dick: Thanks for sharing, Dafni, but I suspect I have squeezed about all I can from you.

Dafni: Hang on, Dick. I haven't even told you about our after-hours Dwarf Bowling. It is ever so much more stimulating than the lame Midget Toss over at Shell-Shocked Shorty's across from the V.A. Hospital. Here at Yo Mama's, we pyramid beer cans on the end of the bar, then I hike my bare gownless body up there and roll up into a ball. Bowlers dip their right thumb into a family-size jar of K-Y Jelly, then—

Kevin quickly snapped off the radio, shaking his head slowly. "Sorry to cut you off, Dick and Dafni, but that topic is not very conducive to pleasant dreams." He rolled down the window a fraction for fresh air but only let in the aroma of burnt barn. Resigned to the choice of hickory smoked hay over suffocation, he snuggled down under the blanket on the roomy backseat.

A disembodied voice, not unlike Dafni's, echoed softly through the window crack: "Your Dingleberry Pie hangs on my mind-ind-ind."

He jerked upright immediately and kicked the blanket off onto the floorboard while peering suspiciously over the top of the seat at the silent radio.

"My just dessert for leaving you behind-ind-ind."

Kevin located the entry point for Creach's eerie alto and cranked the window closed again, opting for suffocation. But now fully awake, he stretched to turn the radio back on, this time punching a random channel button in search of honest UFO abductees.
Scoop: Good morning, America. Drug war correspondent, Scoop Fuller, reporting here from South Beach where ATF agents have just taken radio superstar and pill kingpin, Trash Limbo, from his seaside mansion in handcuffs. In a daring predawn raid, the federal foot soldiers swarmed the estate of the infamous talk show icon who is forever enshrined in broadcasting history as the only man to ever talk himself deaf.

Kevin groaned and pulled the blanket over his head to hasten his airless demise.

Scoop: The redhead beside me is another former radio host and the current informant, Dudley Squatt. So, Squatt, other than the fact that Limbo's show, "Trash Talk," had hammered the ratings of your own show, "PCP," causing the bank to foreclose on your mortgage and your family to sleep under a bridge, why on earth would you rat out a fellow radio colleague?

Dudley: He stiffed me for a big bar tab.

Scoop: Not good enough, Duds. Our inquiring-minded listeners want sordid details.

Dudley: Trash invited me to a posh party with some prime time radio jocks and—

Scoop: Name names, Duds. You're a snitch.

Dudley: Well, Larry Kink for one.

Scoop: Do you mean that geek who wears those mail-order eye glasses that see through clothes?

Dudley: That's him. In fact, Larry started the whole ruckus. We were all standing around nursing horrid little cocktails with paper umbrellas in them. Larry had his back to a big window while talking to a short guy wearing a back
brace plus a toupee hair rug. A ray of sunshine passed through the window and straight through Larry's X-ray glasses and set the short guy's toupee on fire. He jerked off——

Scoop: Dudley, we do not jerk off on family radio.

Dudley: The toupee. The short guy jerked off the toupee and tossed it behind the bar. We all expected a huge explosion of alcoholic fumes, but nothing happened, so we figured it was all over. Wrong! Larry started gawking around and setting off flash fires everywhere he looked. Finally the firemen and cops arrived, and Trash slipped out leaving me with a two thousand dollar bar tab.

Kevin came out from under the woolen cover now regretting his failure to bring a jug.

Scoop: Two grand's worth is a lot of booze, Dudley, even for two old lushes like you and Trash.

Dudley: I only had two drinks, but Trash had eight. A detective wondered why no alcohol exploded, so he pulled out a Port-a-Dope field kit and conducted a litmus paper test on the bottle contents. Straight morphine. Two hundred bucks a shot. I tell everything and get immunity in the Winless Protection Program with this old flame-resistant red wig, high heels and party dress from the Hiver collection.

Scoop: So, you burned Trash and Kink.

Dudley: Yes. Kink is in the clink and Trash got nabbed with his little black book full of smoking red hot phone numbers.

Scoop: Prostitutes?

Dudley: No, pharmacists.

Scoop: And there you have it folks, another exclusive
from me, Scoop the Snoop Fuller, and you heard it right here first . . . but hold everything. As we speak, ATF agents are ramming a gaping hole in the compound wall. My producer tells me that this area houses the Master Bathroom. Now an industrial forklift is entering into the excavated site . . . now backing out with a glossy case . . . wheels spinning . . . men yelling . . . watch out, it tipped over . . . a crane is being called in . . . what is that huge thing? It looks like . . . no, it can't be . . . but it certainly is . . . a gigantic medicine cabinet!

"Enough."

Kevin turned it off, thankful for the ensuing silence as he opened the window again for survival air. A big bass voice promptly invaded his airspace. Nearby a giant was not sleeping.

I did not even look to see which flight I booked.

A glider bound for Chiner sounded fine.
'Tween Boise and Beijing I ate that wedding ring you baked inside your Dingleberry Pie.

A mellow alto accompanied the bass voice on the chorus.

Your Dingleberry Pie hangs on my mind . . .

Over the background serenade Leo softly confided, "I have now experienced leftover cucumber casserole (My just dessert for leaving you behind.) and non-refundable hair-growth tonics, not to mention Pentacostal divorce counseling pamphlets (I'll set my hair on fire and join the Mormon Choir) before I ever tried quietly relaxing to
a sweet gorilla and crocodile duet in a blackberry patch." (Before I re-try Dingleberry Pie.)

"That calls for another round of cocktails," Charlotte said, refilling their cups from the thermos. "Here's to a rich life full of sun, sand and coconuts," she toasted, raising her cup.

"I'll pass this round," Leo declined as a pain crept into his face.

"It must be bad," Charlotte surmised, setting her cup aside. Leo remained quiet.

"Honey," she bargained, "I can handle anything but secrets."

"OK. I got maybe three months left," he confessed truthfully.

"Until what?"

Deathly silence gripped the knoll, even the crickets grimly mute.

"Don't try it, buster!" she cried out. "This is the happiest day of my life and now you tell me on our wedding night that you have ninety miserable days left on planet earth? Well thanks for the memories!"

"I'm a coward," he admitted. "I should have told you sooner."

"Leo, honey, we have tons of money. We can get you the best treatment available."

"Too late. It's done spread. I ain't gonna lay up in no big stinking cancer hospital with tubes up my nose and pecker, fending off some hairy orderly chasing me with an enema bottle. But don't you dare breathe a word of this to Kevin or Ant. They need my help and that's about all I have left now, a chance to help those two boys."

"You still have me, Leo."

"I know. That's the best worst part."

* * *

"Unique arrangement," Nurse Dixie Dahmer noted of the flowerless bouquet.

"Thank you," Judge Moonie responded. "I am not overly skilled
with colors, so I stuck to basic green-on-green."

"Even though I have worked here at Saint Bernards for twelve years," the nurse freely admitted, "I still do not recognize those particular plants. The one with the triple pointed leaves, however, reminds me of my Girl Scout Camp days for some reason."

"Ivy," the judge identified.

"What about the other one? Could it be related to parsley?"

"Hemlock. I picked it myself."

"How thoughtful," she commended. "Patent Wahler will certainly appreciate your originality."

"It's the thought," Moonie pointed out.

"So I have heard. Now please bear in mind that patient Wahler has suffered a severe concussion and is still what we refer to in the medical profession as 'looped.' He is also in a body cast while being further evaluated as to the full extent of his possible spine displacement."

"How does he, uh . . . "

"The cast has a hole down there. Since I have already given him his sponge bath, you may take your time. He became so aroused during the bath rubdown that the cast hole cut off certain circulation for the lower extremities, if you get my drift, but I handled it professionally. Most male patients claim that I have chronically double-jointed wrists. Are you into recreational physical therapy?"

"I am into plain talk in the interest of saving time," the judge emphasized by glancing at his diamond-dappled wristwatch.

"Splendid," Dixie decried. "After visiting hours, meet me in the linen closet and we will see what you're working with. I could never dehy any old sport who sports a Rolex. By the way, what's in the case? A machine gun?" she joked.

"A chain saw," he joked not.

* * *

"Stop sniveling," Leo instructed, "and look at the bright side. Maybe I'll get lucky and get shot."
"Honey, please," Charlotte begged, "don't even joke like that."

"The Barker family hex. We die hard and before our time, even the pets. Mama Barker had a black cat named Horseshoe that drowned in an abandoned oil well."

"Leo, stop it," Charlotte chuckled.

"Right before they hanged her for shooting Papaw's lover, old Mamaw's last words were: 'One man's treasure is another man's trashy wife.'"

"Anthony, it's time we got down to sex business."

"Creach, we have to knock out that last verse."

"All right. I'm just glad to have a strong sexy man here for company. What are you thankful for tonight, Anthony?"

"Darkness."

"You are so romantic, Ant."

"And occupied," he quickly reminded her while writing by the light of the silvery barn.

Creach claimed, "I think I am falling in love. Do you love me back?"

"I don't, uh, dis-love you, Creach."

"Oh, Anthony," she sobbed, "that's the sweetest thing anybody ever said to me."

* * *

Judge Moonie stepped into Agent Wahler's hospital room where the patient was suspended in four-point traction like a spread-eagle camper about to be tossed into the swimming hole by four fellow pranksters.

"Who are you?" asked Wally blankly. "For that matter, who, what and where am I?"

"You are a local super-hero who saved yourself and three others by screaming louder than the fire truck siren while flying up an elevator shaft. And I am the Rim Reaper which will become
clearer as we proceed."

"No thanks. I already got reaped by Nurse Dahmer. And why are you bringing me weeds and a violin?"

"Unfortunately for you, my good tastes are neither floral nor musical. I just stopped by to thank you kindly for the day off of work, if you were the one responsible. Some fool bought a Christmas tree and left the lights on which resulted in burning down most of the Federal Building where I work. Why anyone would buy a Christmas tree this time of year remains a mystery."

"To save tax dollars," Wally defended the unknown federal tree culprit. "Christmas trees and Christmas tree lights are a whole lot cheaper in the spring, just like bikinis and suntan lotion can be half-price during the winter. If Uncle Sam bought millions of April Christmas trees, the savings would trickle down to the kids in time for Christmas presents in December."

"Brilliant," Moonie conceded. "You should run for political office after recovering from your toothache."

"I don't have a toothache."

"Open your mouth," Moonie ordered while separating a fistful of hemlock from the grim bouquet. "The good news is this herbal remedy will take away all your pain."

"I am beginning to not like you much, Rim. Whenever my Uncle Abner got a funny feeling about somebody, Aunt Millie would—"

BLAM! Moonie punched Wally in the mouth. When the super-hero attempted to unleash his all-powerful scream, the judge planted the toxic stems in the opening among the now aching teeth. "The bad news," Moonie concluded as he revisited the lower end of the hospital bed and snapped on a pair of rubber gloves, "is that my other herbs are not at all likely to cure the rash within other body cavities."

With super-human effort, the unremorseful Christmas arsonist flying hero spat out the flowerless stems and raved, "Is that all you've got, Rimmy?"

"No," Moonie answered with a wink, abandoning the poison ivy in favor of the chain saw. When it roared into life, every panic
buzzer at the nurse's station blinked and bleeped its own manic contribution to the expanding cacophony. An overloaded electrical panel shorted out, showering a torrent of sparks onto a large note covered bulletin board which burst into flames. Lights went out as the emergency generator exploded and sinners at Saint Bernards all prayed for salvation from the prophesied conflagration.

Nurse Dahmer unlocked the drug cabinet and swept its entire contents into her big purse, then departed the inferno smiling.

* * *

Like possums on the road
that semi-trucks explode,
your clinging love has
splattered my mind's eye.
A Rocky Mountain goat
with rope around its throat,
can't hang as tough as
Dingleberry Pie.

Your Dingleberry Pie
hangs on my mind.
My just dessert
for leaving you behind.
I'll set my hair on fire
and join the Mormon Choir,
before I re-try
Dingle-berry Pie-IIE!

"Love hurts, 'Hammer."
"I feel ya."
"Does that mean you love me?"
"It means your head is on my bad shoulder."
"Will you keep holding me anyway?"
"I reckon, Dumplin."

154
16. Say No

Doc: Good afternoon and welcome to group therapy. My name is Billy Hyde, but most people here at Bentview Memorial call me Doc. Introduce yourselves starting with Walter Wahler, then continue around the table back to Nancy Regan. Participation might result in the removal of your straitjackets. Or not.

Wally: I don't know who I am and my nose itches.

Igor: Mine too. Let's Eskimo kiss.

Mike: I am a psychiatric transferee here for pre-trial evaluation for a murder in Illinois. I can get out of this straitjacket if I want to because I am a magician.

Moonie: Release me immediately. I am a federal judge.

Doc: You may be whomever you want to be here at Bentview. We have Ricardo Nixon, Tiny Tim, Marilyn Manson, Pharoah—

Moses: Let my people go.

Moonie: I really am a federal judge.

Doc: According to your file, you used a chain saw to rob a drug cabinet. What do you say now?

Nancy: Just say no!

Doc: Quiet! This is a mental hospital.

Igor: Where is our regular doctor?

Doc: Doctor Spock had a double ear infection.

Moonie: Please call my attorney for me.

Doc: What is the number and where is my pencil?

Mike: Anybody want to see a magic trick?

Nancy: No.

Moses: Let my people go.

Nancy: Hell no!

Igor: Doc, aren't you the greenhouse gardener?

Doc: I quit when Tiny Tim stomped the tulips.
Moonie: You're not a real doctor?

Doc: Yes and no. I'm a licensed tree surgeon.

Igor: I need my medication.

Nancy: No! No! No! According to my zodiac guru—

Wally: Wow! A stolen pencil in her ear. Deep.

Mike: Farewell, number fifteen.

Moses: Thou shalt not kill or steal or—

Mike: Sixteen.

* * *

"I ate too much," Ant admitted after crumpling a pizza box. "That's a first," Kevin acknowledged from behind the wheel while Creach, Charlotte and Leo dozed in the backseat.

A convertible of college cheerleaders sped by in the right lane, then slowed for a closer inspection of the colossal bearded bald head in the front window of the new Cadillac. They laughed and hoisted Pepsi cans in salute.

"I get that a lot," Ant bragged as the convertible stayed abreast of the Cadillac, backing up traffic on the double-laned highway just northeast of Louisville.

Egged on by her peers, one of the young ladies took out a tube of lipstick and printed a message on a piece of cardboard, then held it up for Ant to read. It said: MOON US!

Kevin laughed, "They want to see your buns."

"Forget it," Ant advised. "They'd follow us all the way to Brazil."

Kevin goosed the gas to lose the girls, but the sports car matched speeds, enjoying the game. The cheerleaders also ignored the honking horns behind and kept pointing to the lipstick sign message, making the deal perfectly clear: freedom in exchange for rump roast.

Kevin lamented, "America's Most Wanted are being blackmailed by noisy cheerleaders and things may get worse if we pull over and they do too," he cautioned with a glance in the rearview mirror.
"Face facts, Ant. The girls have a winner. Every state trooper in the state of Kentucky has our picture on his dashboard, so we don't need this added attention."

"I can't help being pretty," Ant grumbled.

"So give them a quick thrill and let's move on."

Ant glanced hesitantly back at the sleeping trio in the rear seat, then grudgingly wrestled down his pants and shorts. The giant pulled his feet up onto the front seat and placed both bare soles against the side door as he knelt atop the cushioned vinyl. With final submission he backed his bulging glutes into the open window space.

Touchdown! Cheerleaders cheering, pompoms pumping, breasts bouncing.

"Move, Ant. I can't see."

"Actually, this is quite liberating," Ant confessed and began to snuggle in tightly.

"That's the awfulest sight I ever seen," Leo piped up from the backseat, "since Estella got her teeth pulled."

"Do us all a favor," Ant suggested, "and go back to sleep until we get to Brazil."

"How can anybody sleep," Leo wondered, "with those gals over there carrying on like widows at an Elvis sighting?"

"Oh goody," Creach squealed. "I love cheerleaders."

"So the dragon lady does damsels too," Leo bemoaned. "Ant, you two fright-night fruits are a match made in Hollywood. Gay Godzilla meets Queer Quasimodo."

"Leo," Charlotte scolded.

But Creach confirmed the same-sex indifference. "I can't afford to be choosy."

"Get your bonanza bottom back in here," Leo instructed Ant, "before you flip the car over."

Ant wriggled, increasing the volume of raves by the grateful convertible critics.

Charlotte innocently inquired, "If it is any of my business, may I ask why Anthony has his posterior hanging out the window?"
"He had to pass gas," Kevin lied as Ant grunted and contorted with blue-faced efforts to extract himself.

"I'm stuck."

Kevin threw up his hands. "Anybody have a suggestion?"
Leo offered, "Chain saw."
Charlotte pointed out, "We need one of those things rescue workers use to cut people out of car wrecks."

"The Jaws of Life," Kevin supplied, "but I don't know where to buy any. Maybe the Fire Department or an ambulance service."
Leo directed, "Just grab Creach by the ankles."
"Leo actually likes me," Creach informed everyone. "We're going on a date to the zoo."

"I'm getting windburn," Ant reminded everybody.
Kevin pulled the car into a gas station with the cheerleaders right beside them. Everyone but Ant got out.

"The view is even worse out here," Leo observed. "A close-up of Natural World Wonders numbers eight and nine."

The cheerleaders formed a semicircle around Ant, oohing and aahing.

"You can touch," Leo instigated.
Creach assured them, "It's warm and fuzzy like a teddy bear."

A grizzled mechanic with Slim embroidered above his shirt pocket approached, shaking his head. "Is the big fella a-tryin' to git in or a-tryin' to git out?"

"He's stuck," Kevin confirmed as he pulled out a fat roll of hundred-dollar bills.

The cheerleaders moved closer to Kevin, oohing and aahing.

"No problem," Slim answered and ambled off toward a tow truck parked on the corner of the lot.

"I'm a billionaire," Creach lied to the cheerleaders, "with no heirs yet."

The tow truck backed up to the driver's side of the Cadillac and Slim climbed out, then tossed the loose end of a thick chain to Ant across the car's front seat, saying, "Grab ahold."

Jumping back into the truck, Slim slammed it into gear and
eased away. Rusted links unkinked into taut alignment while Ant clung fiercely, determined to be free. The big luxury automobile lurched sideways in ungainly hops with four tires scooching out a suctioned protest against the cross-tread maneuvering. The slow waltz skipped across the asphalt, accompanied by the teath-gritting growl of a trapped giant and the cloying aroma of burning rubber. Yet the bond between man and machine held fast and the twisting trailer tagged along like a broken tail.

Slim slammed the tow truck into neutral and jumped down from the cab while spraying colorful venom in every direction. "What in blue blazin' pink tarnation is goin' on here?" After scratching his balls, he dug into a large tool kit welded to the side of the truck cab and came out with a grease gun, then circled behind Ant.

"Kevin!" the giant bellowed for assistance.

"Stop caterwauling," Leo scolded. "Whatever Slim has in mind with that grease gun, you're sure to like it."

Slim squirted grease around the edges of the window holding Ant, then returned to the truck and began pulling away again. Like a super-sized champagne cork, Ant popped free, sprawling facedown across the front seat. The cheerleaders gathered around the car oohing and aahing as Ant scrambled back into his pants.

As if in communal telepathy, the girls chanted as one; "Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? Big boy (clap, clap). Big boy (clap, clap). Two, four, six, eight . . . "

*   *   *

"FBI. Milner speaking."

"Chief, it's me, Wally. I'm on the car phone and just wanted to thank you for getting me out of that nut house with your phone call."

"You're welcome. Car phone calls are expensive. Good-bye."

"Wait. Judge Moonie asked me to ask you to get him out too. I probably could have signed him out myself after I was declared sane, but then I'd have had to listen to him all the way back to
Lexington. So to make a long story short, I left him with my new friend, Igor, who's a hunchback skywriter. That's a pilot who writes messages in the sky with airplane exhaust. One time Igor wrote a marriage proposal to the President over the White House and got shot down, both figuratively and literally. Some of his friends are protesting out in front of Bentview with signs that read: 'Gays are people too.' Old Moses Moore --- may he rest in peace --- was also trying to get him let go. Hey, some idiot in a fifty-nine Cadillac pulling U-Haul trailer cut me off."

"Wally, I'll call Bentview about the judge. Good-bye now. It has been a pleasure hearing --- wait a second. Didn't we get word from Bacon that the fugitives left town in a fifty-nine Cadillac pulling a U-Haul trailer?"

"Yes, Chief, but now is not the time for your idle chitchat. These car phone calls are expensive. Good-bye."  "Wait! Check the license plate number on that old Cadillac."  "He only cut me off, sir. I'm over it now."

"Special Agent Wahler, I order you to check the plate number against the number on your dashboard under the pictures of Toler, Rogers and Barker. There can't be too many fifty-nine Cadillacs pulling a U-Haul."

"Well you don't have to be snippy, sir. Anyway, the trailer is in the way, but there's a license plate on the trailer, and yes, that's the same number registered to Barker's car. Too bad it's not on the car. Then we'd know it's them."

"Agent Wahler, give me your exact location."

"I am sitting in my car, just like I already told you. You know, sometimes I worry that you have a memory deficit disorder which could come from working for Uncle Sam. But like I told you earlier in this same conversation, I am on the phone in my car right behind a U-Haul trailer hooked up to an old Cadillac. You know what? I'll bet that is the fugitives ahead of me and they put the car tag on the trailer to throw off pursuit."

"Wally, just tell me what road you are on so we can set up a roadblock."
"You should have asked that question to start with and we would have saved a bundle on this phone bill. As we speak, I am taking the exit off the freeway and onto the Bluegrass Parkway to Lexington."

"No, Wally! Stick with the fugitives!"

"I am right behind them. They must be returning to the scene of the crime where Toler made Swiss cheese out of your fat cousin. We are traveling northeast because the morning sun is parked at two o'clock. I learned that from a Scout Master who liked to pin merit badges to my bare breast."

"How fast is the Barker car going, Wally?"

"No idea. Our FBI vehicles are not equipped with speed radar guns. You should know that by now. Don't you feel stupid for even asking?"

"Wally, how fast are you going?"

"The same speed as my car, Einstein. About thirty miles an hour. I estimate the Barker Gang and their car are going roughly the same speed as myself and my car, which should at least help you establish an ETA for Lexington. ETA stands for the Estimated Time of Arrival. I learned that from a creepy, hands-on small arms instructor at Quantico."

"Agent Wahler, how far are you from Lexington right now?"

"I would estimate fifty-five point five miles, give or take five miles either way. But why wait? I can shoot out all their tires right now."

"Forget it, Agent Wahler. They have enough firepower to win Armageddon. But the Bluegrass Parkway has a stretch of new road construction just south of Lexington. There will be a lot of heavy equipment at the site we can use to set up a roadblock."

"Freaky cool, boss. Just like that movie where the bad guy realizes he can't avoid the roadblock so he floors the gas pedal and pulverizes his car and himself into particles of cosmic dust. Now what was the name of that movie? Something like, Missing The Point. I hate it when something is on the tip of my tongue and I can't spit it out. Maybe I should buy some purple yarn."
"Wally, I am going to make arrangements for a welcome home party for our long-lost friends. Keep this line open and let me know if they turn off or speed up."

"Chief, they're slowing down in the fast lane and that old Cadillac is beginning to swerve back and forth. The U-Haul is slow-whipping like a stegosaurus tail. We have them cold on DUI which stands for Driving Under the Influence. But I would rather just ram them into some of those orange barrels that are always at construction sites, then jump out and yell, 'Freeze!' just like Joe Friday on 'Dragnet.'"

"This is not television, Wally. Don't try to be a hero."

* * *

"Ant, do you want to drive?" inquired Kevin sluggishly. "I can barely keep my eyes open and Leo's special blend coffee does not seem to be helping me stay awake."

"You're doing better than I could, bro," Ant claimed, "and I have no beefs with this coffee. But maybe we should pull over for a burger or two or three."

From the backseat, Charlotte offered, "There's still some of that leftover cucumber casserole back here."

"No thanks," Ant declined.

"I'm hungry too," Creach made known.

Charlotte asked her, "Do you want some cucumber casserole?"

Leo answered for her. "Sharks don't eat vegetables."

"How about you, hubby?"

"A starving broke-wing buzzard would run from that mess."

* * *

"Agent Wahler, are you still there? Click on the phone if you can hear me."

"Sorry, Chief. I am relieving myself out the door with the car still moving and I only have two hands. I'm holding the door
open with one hand, peeing with the other hand, nestling the phone against my shoulder with my chin and steering with my right knee. The wind is roaring in through the hinge crack, so I can barely hear you. Did you ever think of the name of that movie where the crook vanished against the bulldozer at the end?"

"Are you still following the fugitives?"

"Of course, but it's getting really boring. They are slowing down more now and swerving worse and worse. They need to speed up if they expect to self-destruct against that dozer blade. Now you get back in your cave, big guy."

"Do what?"

"Oh, that last line wasn't directed at you, boss. Sorry. I am done peeing now."

"Listen up, Wally. We have two dozen state troopers coming to the construction site in a few minutes with another three dozen locals from the Fayette County Sheriff's Department already there. The Marshal's Service is sending ten men and our FBI people will have at least two dozen officers at the scene, along with three helicopters. Plus we got lucky. The National Guard is conducting exercises nearby and will supply thirty-two soldiers and two tanks to supplement the on-site heavy equipment that includes bulldozers, graders, plus an earthmover."

"I hear you, Chief, but while you were running your mouth, I lost them when I was trying to find a decent rock station on the radio. Country music people should have their own country."

"Wally!"

"Just joking, boss. I'm on their trail like a bloodhound on a menstruating rabbit."

* * *

"Kevin," Leo begged, "can you please put both hands back on the steering wheel? I'm getting car sick worser than a wino on a roller coaster."

"I can steer with one hand, thank you very much. Anyway, I
need the other hand for my coffee. This is the finest drunk I ever drunk," Kevin slurred.

Creach volunteered, "Do you want me to drive? I have a NASCART certificate from London, Kentucky, so I can drive with either hand on either side of the road."

Charlotte leaned forward to tap Ant on a shoulder. "What's it called when a person can use either hand equally well?"

"Ask the mad professor from the Kentucky Commonwealth Trade School," Ant nodded toward Leo. "He knows everything."

Leo surveyed Creach critically before supplying the missing word: "Amphibious."
"Wally, are you still there?"

"Where else could I possibly be, Chief? This is more fun than bingo at my LIHoP, Lutheran International House of Praise, where I play two bingo cards at the same time, one with each hand. I have not been caught a single time."

"You make us all proud, Wally. Now tell me exactly what you see through the rear window of the Cadillac."

"I can barely hear you, Chief. Turn down that television in the background."

"That's not a TV. I'm in a helicopter directly over your car. Now tell me what you see in the Cadillac. Yes, yes, I see you waving your arm out the window."

"The back window of the Caddy is too grimy from all the oil smoke pouring out the exhaust, but don't worry because I'll know them by sight when they get out. The car does look full though."

"Wally, listen carefully and do exactly as I say. You are a half mile from the roadblock. When the fugitives are forced to stop, I want you to pull up to their rear bumper to pin them in. Do you copy, good buddy?"

"Ten-four. Their car is down to five miles per hour and is falling to pieces. Parts of the motor are coming out from under it and it's weaving worse than ever. That U-Haul trailer is just hanging on for dear life."

Leo's old car coughed and sputtered bravely on in spasmodic death throes, determined to meet its final fate head-on. Heavy road construction vehicles sealed the highway horizon ahead while a potpourri coalition of federal agents, local police, soldiers and state troopers awaited the deadly confrontation.

The ailing automobile gasped out gouts of smoke and fluid as it lurched down the last fifty feet of navigable roadway. Finally the high-finned old bird wheezed out its last acrid plume of gray exhaust, spewed its transmission out onto the pavement and died a rattling death as its front bumper dinged lightly into the blade
of a gigantic bulldozer.

Two army tanks pulled up, one from each side, with their gun turrets trained on the deceased vehicle. Agent Wahler closed up snugly from behind and a road grader rumbled across the highway and parked horizontally behind the FBI car, trapping both cars within the metallic pit. A vast array of weapons from .38's to M-16's to anti-tank missiles targeted the dead Barkermobile sealed in its steel grave.

One helicopter hovered low and Chief Milner jumped to the ground brandishing a bullhorn in one hand and an Uzi in the other.

* * *

"Ambidextrous," Ant corrected Leo.
The ex-janitor groaned, "English lessons from a Neanderthal Nazi."
"Why are we stopped?" asked Charlotte.
"R-road c-construction," Kevin groggily confirmed.
"While we wait," Creach said, "would somebody explain the part about the extra U-Haul trailer? I don't get it."

* * *

"Step out of the vehicle with your hands over your head!" the bullhorn barked.
Nobody stepped out.
"Move it or die!"
Nobody moved or died.

Wally lumbered out of his car, pulled out his service pistol and sauntered up to the Cadillac. After tapping on the driver's window with the barrel of his gun, he asked, "Sir, may I see your driver's license?"

The window rolled down slowly and a pallid hand drunkenly emerged bearing the requested identification. Wally very carefully scrutinized the card and then the driver for comparison. He also
critically surveyed each passenger.

"Chief," he yelled over his shoulder, "it's safe to come out from behind that earthmover. We have successfully captured Deputy Sheriff Roy Masters of Bacon, Illinois. He appears to be stoned and his three passengers are passed out, probably from booze or drugs. None of them are members of the Barker Gang. I wonder if I could conduct sobriety tests."

* * *

"The extra trailer was my idea," Charlotte told Creach. "My Roy decoy ploy. See, there were four prisoners: Roy, the sheriff, the banker and a prison guard. First we had them all swallow two of Ant's model inmate pills, then piled them into Leo's old blue Cadillac in the alley behind the jail. Next we had Roy eat a box of Nō-Dōz caffeine pills so he would stay awake while the other three guys zonked out."

Creach asked, "What's with this new car?"

Ant took up the narrative. "Leo had a talk with Roy after the pills and instructed him to drive back to Lexington. Then we took the bank president's new Cadillac and rented another U-Haul, and stayed overnight at your place, Creach, to give Roy plenty of time to stay ahead of us. He was in no condition to break any highway speed limits."

Creach wrinkled her ridged brow. "But why did you come back in the same direction as the deputy? It seems like you would want to go in the opposite direction."

"We have to do the unexpected," Kevin explained, "plus Ant and I know a man in Florida who might be able to charter us a boat with no questions asked, so this is not really that much out of the way."

When a construction flagman waved the new Cadillac on past some orange barrels, Kevin observed, "A detour around a detour. I wonder what that's all about."
"Igor, how did you manage to get out of that straitjacket?" inquired Judge Moonie while nervously glancing around the otherwise empty group therapy room except for himself and the quirky hunchback pilot.

"Mike showed me how. He is a postal magician from Illinois. I like Mike."

"Would you help me get out of mine?"
"No. Nancy taught me to say that; may she rest in peace."
"Then I guess we can just talk, Igor."
"I will listen. I am into ear massages. Your lobes protrude so cutely. Just relax now. Become one with your inner ear."
"Stop that, Igor."
"I cannot. Ears are my calling."
"I thought you were a skywriter."
"That too. I'm diversified. I started off in crop-dusting and later branched out into skywriting after hearing that inspirational army slogan."
"'Be all you can be.'"
"Right, but my truly favorite motivational military mantra comes from the marines."
"'Semper Fi.'"
"Wrong. 'Looking for a few good men.' The story of my life."
"Somehow I knew you were going there, Igor."

Mike came back into the room carrying a handful of sharpened yellow pencils. "Can I play?"


Judge Moonie stipulated, "No penetration."

* * *

Suburbs succumbed to lush farmland and mile upon mile of white picket fencing lining both sides of the highway. Picturesque three-story, pillared mansions dotted the landscape accompanied by two-story immaculate barns. Groomed horses munched carefully manicured
meadows.

" Richest farms in the whole world," Kevin bragged of his home state.

Charlotte asked, "Do they raise marijuana or poppy plants?"

"Neither one. They raise thoroughbreds. Million-dollar race horses that sleep in million-dollar barns with central heating and air conditioning."

Leo mused, "I reckon we shoulda been horse thieves instead of town robbers."

"Where's the blue grass?" wondered Creach. "All I see is the green stuff."

"The sun has to be at a certain angle to create the famous bluish tint," Kevin explained. "At sunrise, especially with heavy dew, you can see the sparkling—"

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Ant in delight, pointing out to the pristine pastures.

"Where?" asked Charlotte. "I don't see anything except tall horses and fat cows."

"Over there," Ant directed, indicating a small herd of steer. "Find a place to pull over, Kev."

"Stop drooling," Leo scolded. "How long were you in jail? I can overlook the bi-guy thing, but tri-sty is where I draw a line in the dirt."

Kevin clarified his partner's position. "Ant does not molest animals. Where we see healthy cattle, he sees prime rib. We'd better get off this main road, though," he added as he cautiously swung the car onto a dirt lane.

"If'n you silly white boys are talking about hijacking a cow for supper, then you both done bursted a brain vein."

"Not supper," Ant made clear. "Lunch."

"So how do you aim to cook a cow?" persisted Leo. "Set another barn ablaze?"

Kevin parked the car just out of sight of the main highway and Ant unfolded his bulk from the front seat out onto soft, non-blue fescue. The giant removed his shoes and waded across a fast flowing
stream and selected a football sized rock from the creek bank, then unlatched a fence gate and tip-toed stealthily out into the pasture.

"Ant prefers fresh food," Kevin further explained, "especially of the all-you-can-eat-for-free variety. He won't be long, so let's wash up and get a roasting fire going."

"You kids handle the kitchen detail," Leo suggested. "I wanna watch Ant. I ain't never seen a steer stalker on the prowl."

Out in the field, Ant approached a fat steer with an extended handful of lush grass while keeping the rock concealed behind his back with the other hand. "Here cowie," he crooned in a singsong voice. "Come to Big Papa Moo-Moo and I will solve all your worldly problems."

"If'n we'd sent Creech," Leo complained about the creeping progress, "we'd already be passing around the steak sauce."

The leery steer blurted a communal alert, moo-000! and waltzed backward in staggered half-steps.

Charlotte divulged, "I never realized before that cows had a reverse gear," then turned away to assist with the wood gathering. "I can't watch this."

A pulverizing CRAAAACK rang out across the pasture and curious eyes looked to see Ant dragging the now deceased beast toward them by its horns. The smiling giant towed the carcass through the gate and into the rushing stream where he unpocketed a large hawkbill knife and gutted the bovine from stem to stern. Swirling current assisted with the internal cleaning by washing the freed entrails downstream.

Kevin lit the fire and began sharpening roasting skewers as Ant dumped the eviscerated carcass upon the near bank beneath a sturdy overhanging tree limb, then returned to the trailer for a nylon tow rope. He looped it through the car's front bumper before tossing one end over the branch and tying it securely around the animal's thick neck.

Leo surmised, "The Grand Wizard is gonna lynch a dead cow just for practice."
Ant cut a groove through the hide all the way around the dead steer's neck and worked free a flap of skin at the nape into which he enfolded a stone the size of his fist. He then tied the loose end of the rope around the skin flap below the encased stone to secure the rope's purchase on the hide. The rope began as a noose around the steer's neck before looping over the tree limb and down through the car's front bumper, then returning full circle in order to secure the hide just below the animal's neck.

"That poor creature," Creach lamented.

Kevin warned, "It only gets uglier."

Ant scrunched himself in behind the steering wheel, shifted into reverse and backed off slowly from the tree. Slack tightened as the steer rose into the air while its hide peeled off due to one end of the rope pulling the beef up while the opposing end tugged the hide down.

"We can add more crimes to our rap sheet," Leo noted. "Cattle rustling, hanging, torture and cruelty to animals."

The rising steer neared the limb with hide peeling first off its torso and then off the legs, but hanging up on the large hooves pointing high-strung accusations down at the offending Cadillac. Ant nudged the accelerator and the hoofed feet gave up their prized hide: pop-pop, pop-pop. One-sided tension release teamed up with increased horsepower to catapult the naked prime bovine over the tree limb. It flopped, amazingly, onto its former hide already spread out on the grassy turf.


Ant rejoined them with announcement, "Lunch is now served," and began carving out a huge steak. "Everyone help yourself."

"Don't mind if I do," Leo replied hungrily. "Let me borrow your hawkbill, Big Mama Moo-Moo."

Leo then asked Creach, "You gonna cook yours?"

* * *
"Are you hungry, Chief?"

Milner glanced up from the map of southern Florida spread out on his desk to see Wally entering the office carrying a big box of doughnuts. "As a matter of fact, I worked right through lunch. So thank you very much, Special Agent Wahler. This is unusually nice of you."

"Double thanks back at you, boss. I like compliments."

"Well?" the Chief wanted to know as he eyed the doughnut box. "Aren't you going to offer me one?"

"Why should I do that? I was hungry, so I simply wondered if you were too. But since you make considerably more money that I do, it would be totally illogical for me to splurge for doughnuts every time a big guy like you gets the urge to scarf down a snack. On the other hand, if I received a slightly larger paycheck via a simple recommendation from my supervisor which would cost him nothing, then I could not only afford to offer him this entire box of tasty assorted delights, but also take him out for a late lunch at the new Pizza Hutch all-you-can-eat buffet."

"Special Agent Wahler, are you seriously trying to bribe me with doughnuts?"

"And pizza," Wally reminded him.

Milner leaned across the desk and snatched the doughnut box, then crushed it between his powerful hands before dropping it into the small trash can beside the office desk. "Special Agent Wahler, I really, really, cannot tolerate any more of your nonsense at the moment."

"Really? Then do you really believe that you can really get away with strong-arm robbery of a government agent specialist, compounded by destruction of vital evidence?"

Milner rose to his feet with beads of sweat popping out from his forehead.

"But considering the totality of the circumstances," Wally quickly amended, "I might not be inclined to press charges against my only co-worker friend in the interest of workplace unity."

"Brown-nosing won't work either, Wally. Now please take this
court order form to Judge Moonie for his signature."

"Boss, I've been a bit disoriented ever since we moved into these temporary headquarters down here in the basement of this post office building, so I have no idea where the judge has his new office now. Really."

"Wahler, I won't even ask if you know anything about the crazy Christmas tree fire that burned down most of the Federal Building."

"Good. Then I don't have to lie."

"But I do insist that you get the judge to sign this phone tap order. It's for the unlisted number of Pablo Diaz of Mackerel Isle, Florida. You'll find Judge Moonie's temporary quarters on the top floor of this very building."

"Two questions, sir. First, how do we tap an unlisted number if we do not know the number because it is unlisted? Second, why are we tracking down an illegal immigrant when we should be looking for the Barker Gang?"

Milner rubbed his temples. "The phone company will supply us with the number, and Pablo Diaz is an American citizen. Our big computer spat out his name in connection with Toler and Rogers. They all did prison time together in Leavenworth. This sleazy Diaz character is second-in-command of the Cuban Mafia in Miami. He can fence the gems and drugs, or even help the fugitives leave the country. Time is of the essence, so go, go, go."

"Sure thing, boss. I'll even save you some time by taking out the trash."

"No thanks."

"But it's a fire hazard and is sure to draw flies."

"Beat the feet, Wally. The doughnuts are dead and stinking."

"Sir, I was just thinking of giving one to the judge as a peace offering. Rumor has it that he had a bad experience during his stay at Bentview Memorial."

"Forget it. He can't possibly eat anything this soon after the piercings."

"Body piercings?"

"Ears, tongue and navel," Milner confirmed.
"Ouch."

"With pencils."

"Boss, it might be better to have Agent Swag go get the mad judge's signature. I am still recovering from my wild wedding night. You do not want to hear about it."

"You got that right, Agent Wahler, so perform a magic trick by disappearing."

Wally left and Chief Milner retrieved the crumpled doughnuts from the trash can.
"Who is Pablo Diaz?" asked Charlotte.

Kevin answered, "An old acquaintance who lives in a resort area in Florida near Miami. He might be able to fence the jewels and get us a decent boat. He could even want the pills."

"If there's any left," Ant said as Leo popped two more pills into his mouth.

"Mind your own beeswax, queen bee," Leo quickly shot back as he scanned out the car window.

"Home, sweet home," Kevin announced grandly when he wheeled the Cadillac into King's Court. "I left fond memories on this old molehill mountain."

When the car pulled up to Leo's lot, a three-legged mongrel dashed out from underneath the mobile home, yipping nonstop. The car door opened and the dog bounded onto Leo's lap and began to lap up the old man's free-flowing tears. The homespun orator wordlessly hugged the mutt to his bony chest.

Charlotte looked on, observing, "I gather we have now met the notorious Dumpster."

Yip-yip, Dumpster affirmed.

The group disembarked and walked up to the trailer. Kevin tore off the Crime Scene tape across the front door and entered into the stuffy interior followed by Creach, Charlotte and Ant. Leo remained on the loose, concrete block front stoop to bring the news-hungry dog up to speed on current events.

... and then we broke a bi-Big Foot out of prison, Dumpy. Stay away from him if'n he ain't ate nothing for more than three minutes. But his girlfriend is even worser. She eats raw meat and mates animals of every sex."

Inside, Creach surveyed her newly acquired home with concern. "What's with the crime tape? I don't want to live where somebody got murdered."

"Legend has it," Charlotte gossiped as she approached the neatly made bed, "that this was the scene of a rampaging sexual
assault, although no lingering injuries resulted."
"Not true," Kevin rebutted.
"No assault or no sex?" probed Creach.
"Those parts are factual, but lingering injury did result. I
was brutalized and scarred for life."
"Show me," Creach demanded.
Kevin pulled up his shirt to reveal tiny bruises dotting his
chest.
"I can do better," Creach bragged.
"No doubt and no thanks."
Leo's voice filtered in. "Don't be bothered by the guns,
Dumpy. We are just playing Cops and Robbers. You know how I always
wanted to be a cop."
Ant shook his head. "He even shoots the bull to his dog."
"I heard that, you cow cannibal!"
"Don't get excited, honey," Charlotte called out, returning
back outside and closing the door behind her. She sat down on the
stacked blocks of the porch to join Leo and Dumpster.
"I been thinking," Leo revealed.
"I guessed as much," Charlotte answered. "You want me to stay
here and take care of Dumpster."
"Not quite. I want you to stay here, but Dumpster comes with
me. You and Creach can have the trailer."
"My dream house."
"Look, I know it ain't much, but you can also have my share
of the money."
"Leo, it's not about material things. For that matter, I still
have a million dollars coming from the insurance company for the
jewels. You just don't want me to see you wasting away in a strange
hospital."
"Nope, that ain't it, Dumplin. Things are fixing to heat up
and I can't handle seeing you get hurt. When the time comes that
I can't help the boys no more, I'll just eat a bottle of pills
and die smiling."
"So," she huffed out, "you want to get rid of me because you
think I can't deal with danger or death. You must have forgotten
I was raised in the Bronx. Nothing ever came easy for me, buster,
and I make my own decisions. I see all the bad angles involved in
our situation and you or nobody else is going to tell me what to
do. You got that?"

"Yes, ma'am."
"And don't rush me."
"No, ma'am."
After a full minute of silence, she stipulated, "If I stay,
then Dumpster stays too."

"What difference does it make to you if'n Dumpster leaves or
stays?"

"I will not be dumped for Dumpster."
"We can change his name."
"I will not be dumped for any dog, but I'll be reasonable and
let him speak for himself."

"He's part German shepherd," Leo explained, "so he don't bark
English none too good."

"Dumpster," Charlotte addressed the dog, "do you want to stay
here with me?"

Yip, Dumpster barked clearly.

"Cheater," Leo grumbled under his breath. "He never says nope
to the ladies."

Creach came out the front door of the small trailer. "There's
no way I can survive in this sardine can. I'd suffocate for sure.
I need open country," she informed Kevin and Ant who had followed
her out.

Leo agreed, "She needs swamps."

Kevin turned to Creach. "We could give you some money for the
barn."

"I could never accept money from you guys. You've been like
family to me."

He asked, "Would fifty thousand dollars be fair?"

"Done deal!" she whooped.

"Well, I'm going back to Bacon," Charlotte made known, "to
collect my jewelry insurance and sell the shop. Creach, you are
welcome to stay with me at my apartment until you find something
else, or maybe we could even go in together on a house or a small
business."

Ant suggested, "We have friends on a small plot of land near
Bacon. They would love to have you both, plus we need to let them
know we are all right."

"It is really none of my business," Creach confessed, "but
about how much do you think you'll get for your business, Charlotte
Beau?"

"Not much. It's small."

"Then maybe I'll go to Boise," Creach wavered. "I've had Boise
on my mind ever since you guys helped me write that cool song."

Charlotte added, "But I get a million bucks from the insurance
policy on the stolen jewelry."

"On the other hand," Creach revised, "Bacon sounds a lot more
appetizing than Boise. This could be the beginning of a long and
prosperous business partnership."

"But right now, I'm going to give Dumpster a bath," Charlotte
declared. "He will probably want to come with us."

Yip, the dog agreed upon hearing his name.

"Rent a car," Leo advised. "I don't think Greyhound will let
her on board."

Creach argued, "I think Dumpster is a boy doggie."

"He is," Leo confirmed. "I was talking about you."

"Leo," she replied, "I have always appreciated your honesty.
In return, I'd like to give you a small going-away present if my
friend, Charlotte, doesn't mind."

Leo was apprehensive. "As long as it's not the dreaded good-bye
kiss. I'd sooner stick my lips down a garbage disposal."

"No, not the dreaded kiss," Creach assured him as she reached
down and pried out one of the porch stoop's loose concrete blocks
which she raised up to shoulder level with a smile and dropped on
Leo's foot.

"The brick!"
"Come wight on in, Wally," Judge Moonie welcomed. "I have been anticipating this weunion with maniacal glee. Is the pwesent fo me?"

"You bet, Your Honesty. It's a get well gift. Your tongue is regenerating quickly from the piercing at Bentview, especially considering your age or worn out muscles in your jaws. But since you are so busy judging, why don't you open it after I leave?"

"Nonsense," Moonie deflected, snatching the box and tearing off the Christmas paper wrapping. "Thwee bwand new pencils. Wally, you shouldn't have."

"Why do people always say that whenever they receive a nice present, but they really mean the exact opposite?"

"In this case," Moonie corrected as he delved into his very deep robe pockets, "I weally do mean that you shouldn't have." He emphasized by pulling out two matching, pearl-handled Colt 45's.

"That is quite all right, Your Thankfulness. You don't have to give me back anything in return. Actually I just dropped by to get your signature on a phone tap order for a criminal tycoon in Florida named Pablo Diaz. He's a high ranking Cuban cartel gang member who knows Kevin Toler and Anthony Rogers from Leavenworth."

"Wight," Moonie mumbled while he cocked the pistols with both thumbs.

"No, Your Prudence, race is not an issue, even though this particular subject is brown-skinned."

"I did not mean white, as in black and white. I meant wight as in wight and wong. I am having twouble with one consonant that I can't pwonounce cowectly."

"My Uncle Abner had that disorder. Aunt Millie called it his Elmer Fudd complex."

"If I wecall cowectly, Elmah Fudd liked guns, so what do you think of these twin pistols I got at a two-fo-one sale?"

"Well, they are big," Wally ovserved, "especially with those illegal silencers."
"Just like you, Wally, my boss is Uncle Sammy, so I have immunity. I can also shoot you and get away with it, especially considering that I was recently released from a mental asylum."

"That's right, Your Kinship. We are brothers in law, both standing together against civilian scum. And I would never impose upon my brother to make a hasty decision over a stupid phone tap, so I'll see you later."

"Wally, you won't be going anywhere wight away."

"I was afraid you might say something like that."

"Let's get back to the guns. Besides the style, size and big silencers, do you notice any other differences between my guns and the one you have in that shouldah holstah?"

"Well, yours are pointed at me but mine is not pointed at you, if that's what you mean."

"Precisely, Wally, which means you belong to me."

"I wouldn't go that far, Your Courtship."

Moonie lowered the barrels and squeezed both triggers at the same time. Pfft, pfft, the silenced muzzles spat, blowing the tips off Wally's shoes to reveal grazed, bleeding toes exposed upon a sea of green carpeting.

"I'm yours, Your Ownership."

"Wally, I looked up those helpful Bible passages just like you suggested when I was in the hospital that time you visited."

"Did you come across the inspirational verses on the rewards of forgiveness, brother Moonie?"

"No, but I picked up a few tips from Cain, Abel's justice-seeking brothah. And speaking of blood sacrifice, bloody toes now staining this gween carpet, bring back othah unpleasant memowies."

"Your Sharpness, I never figured out how Toler cleaned up the blood trail from the window to the office closet that smelled like Christmas trees."

"Two possibilities," Moonie postulated. "One: he put something ovah his head. Two: he used Miwacle Blue stain wemovah that we see advatized on television. A twenty dollah value fo foue. You only pay shipping and handling of twenty dollahs a bottle."
"That must be it, Your Quickness. I should have known since I ordered a bunch of it at that great price. You would have made a great con man, brother Moonie."

"Thank you, brothah Wally. Now let's get back to the business of guns. Please hand me yo' gun."

"Federal Regulation eight thousand, subsection zee prevents me from surrendering my weapon under any circumstances."

"Then on the count of thwee, I will begin shooting off yo' toes. One—"

"I was never much on the fine print of all those regulations," Wally admitted as he placed his gun on the desk blotter next to a bottle of Crazy Glue.

"Is that glue for your dentures, Your Eloquence? You do talk a lot."

"That is Chapstick."

"No, it says Crazy Glue on the label."

"If it is not Chapstick, it must be Pwepawation H."

"You were correct the first time," Wally revised on second thought. "I believe it is Chapstick."

"Use it."

"I had a feeling that was coming, brother."

While Wally smeared his lips, Moonie put down one of the Colts and dialed the local news station. "Hello, this is Fedewal Judge Moonie down at the post office building. I sentenced a psychotic exhibitionist to the Bentview Memowial asylum in Louisville last week. Appawently he got loose because he is now pwancing awound on my fiwah escape, butt naked except fo a lampshade on his head."

* * *

"Mister Doe, you remind me of somebody," claimed Nurse Dixie Dahner, "but my memory is not what it used to be before I started taking my pain management medicine every hour. If you could talk, I'd ask if you were ever a patient at Saint Bernards where I used to work until the bulletin board fire burned it down. But I really
must admit that things are much more lively here at our Bentview Memorial. As you probably know, we house all types of irritating weirdo types: such as bug torturers, telemarketers, and anyone who owns more than two cats."

"Mmm-mm," Wally hummed.

"The police report indicates that you were apprehended on the top floor fire escape of the post office building wearing only a lampshade on your head. It seems your lips have been chemically bonded together which makes communication a bit cumbersome since you cannot write notes while wearing a straitjacket."

"Mmm-mm."

"Mister Doe, I hope you do not mind if I call you John. After all, I've already seen you naked. I brought you some medicine, but since you cannot open your mouth, I'll take the pill myself. Now don't you tell," she giggled.

"Mmm-mm."

"Mmm-mm, I agree, John. These little speckled pills are the best. Now you will have to answer some important questions using our Simpleton System. Simply nod your head one time for 'A' and two times for 'B' and three for 'C' and so on. Nod your head if you understand."

Wally nodded twenty-five times for 'Y' and five times for 'E' and nineteen times for 'S'.

"Perfect, John. See how easy that was. Now spell out what kind of substance was used on your lips so we may administer the appropriate dissolving agent."

Wally nodded out the letters: 'GLUE.'

"What type of glue?"

'CRAZY,' he nodded.

"Leave diagnostics to our doctors, John."

'CRAZY GLUE, YOU IDIOT,' Wally nodded vigorously. 'I AM FBI SPECIAL AGENT WALTER WAHLER.'

"Every patient here at Bentview is special, John. You may be whomever you wish, such as FBI, CIA, MIA, PTA, John Hinky, or even Freddie Sanford. We also have a patient called Benny Franklin who
invented spring-loaded condoms for the morbidly obese. And I am not at all ashamed to confess that I have a cousin here," Nurse Dahmer admitted, "who is very special indeed. He is a chef named Jeff and I think you two will get along splendidly. Hopefully you won't disappear like most of his other friends. Jeff is a nice boy who volunteers to help out in the kitchen, so follow me," she concluded while leading Wally down a long sterile corridor and through a set of swinging doors. The large industrial kitchen was empty except for one short, roly-poly denizen busily stirring a bubbling caldron.

"Something smells delightful, cousin Jeffy," Dixie Dahmer claimed, "but what is that ugly thing perched on top of your head? It looks like the top half of one of those dreadfully gruesome, Halloween skulls made out of plastic."

"It's not plastic," Jeff clarified. "Who is this skinny guy? You know I hate stringy ones. Can't you find me somebody with a little more meat on his bones?"

"His name is John. Since we don't know much about him except for his lamp fetish, perhaps you should leave him temporarily in the straitjacket. He will be quiet since his lips are glued shut."

"Well, there's that," Jeff conceded thankfully. "I cannot abide screamers."

"Take off that awful half-skull," Dixie demanded. "It's very disconcerting talking to two heads. Don't those teeth hurt, clamped like that onto your scalp?"

"It makes me look taller. By the way, do you have any Xanex?"

"Of course. Do you have any money?"

"I'll trade you a bowl of stew for two pills."

Wally nodded the letters, 'I AM HUNGRY.'

Dixie handed Jeff two pills. "I'll spring for a bowl of stew for John, but you will have to figure out how to feed him. When you get off work, take him back to your room because he will be your new bunky. Right now I need to pass out meds, so you boys be good," she finished and swished off in her cushioned nursing shoes with the white mesh stockings self-destructing between cellulite
thighs.

Jeff opened a drawer, rummaged around and came out with an ice pick and a meat cleaver.

Wally ran.

Never an advocate of physical exertion beyond the minimal, Jeff declined to give chase, opting instead to throw the cleaver. It struck the fleeing agent on his tenth loping stride. Although the galley hatchet failed to penetrate the armored jacket, it nonetheless impacted with sufficient force to knock Wally off his feet, propelling him onto a headfirst belly skid across the tiled floor. Unable to raise his arms, he torpedoed into the locked door of a walk-in freezer.

Chef Jeff waddled over to the downed lawman, flipped him over and sat down on his chest. He then placed the point of the ice pick between Wally's sealed lips, picked up the meat cleaver alongside and turned it sideways to employ the flat plane as a hammer. Using two delicate taps, he deftly drove the pointed pick through the glue seal, then rose and dragged the stunned G-man by the hair, back to the simmering stew pot. Jeff jerked Wally to his feet and removed the ice pick before inserting a plastic straw through the hole. He then pushed the agent's head down to within six inches of the bubbling broth, allowing the straw to pierce just beneath the roiling surface.

"Suck," Jeff ordered.

Wally arched his head back into Jeff's tight grip fourteen times for 'N' and fifteen more times for 'O.'

"Oh yeah?" smirked Jeff, naturally well-versed in Simpleton Shorthand. With his free hand he pinched Wally's nose shut. When the fed was forced to suck air through the straw in an effort to breathe, Jeff pushed him down again with the straw once more poked into the stew mixture.

"MMM!" screamed Wally as he sucked hot stew.

"Swallow," Jeff demanded.

Wally nodded 'N' and 'O' again.

"If you swallow," Jeff bargained, "I promise you a breath."
Wally swallowed.
"Again," Jeff insisted.
Wally swallowed hot stew once more.
"Again," Jeff giggled. "I lied."
Wally tried again but no more stew flowed up the straw, so Jeff curiously pulled back the lawman's head.

"No wonder," he surmised after seeing the object stuck to the end of the straw, blocking the opening. A toe.

Jeff shook Wally's head until the toe plopped back into the protein enriched goulash, then courteously inquired, "How about an after-dinner cigarette?"
'I DON'T SMOKE.'

"Learn," the chef advised while sticking a cigarette into the end of the straw. But before he could light it, Wally puffed his cheeks and blew the cigarette into the stew pot.

"You ruined my stew recipe specialty!" wailed Jeff while he picked up a metal spatula and began slapping the guilty culprit across the face. "You (slap) ruined (slap) my (slap) stew!"

'WHAT?'

"You (slap) ruined (slap) my (slap) stew!" reiterated Jeff before once again digging through the big drawer, this time coming up with a roll of masking tape. He fished a fresh cancer stick out of his shirt pocket, stuck it into the straw and secured it with a round of the silver tape. But when he tried to light it, Wally countered by breathing through his nose and Jeff then recontested by pinching Wally's nose closed.

"Suck," Jeff demanded.
Wally sucked.
"Turn blue-green."

Wally turned blue-green and nodded.

"IS THAT ALL YOU GOT, YOU FAT LITTLE PUNK?"

"Not hardly," Jeff confirmed as he slung the jacketed agent back across the tile floor headfirst into the freezer door again, which he then unlocked. After kicking Wally across the threshold into the dark and frigid vault, Jeff politely made an impromptu
introduction. "Please meet my cold-blooded friend, Art Belt. He is not all there, but that's par for an all-night psycho."

Jeff flicked on the overhead freezer light to reveal the ghost white, upper half of Art Belt's legless torso, skewered to a steel, swaying meat hook, yet gamely sporting a forever frozen smile.

Special Agent Wahler began nodding rapidly. 'SO THIS IS THE MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING ART BELT, LOST FOR EONS FROM COAST TO COAST.'

"I see why someone glued your mouth shut," Jeff deduced as he straightened his skull cap, then slammed and locked the freezer.
"Hey, baby boy," someone distantly enticed. Ant had been watching Charlotte give Dumpster a bath in a plastic kiddie pool when the voice invaded from afar. The giant swiveled his head but saw no one. "Up here."

He moved his gaze up to locate a lovely pair of oval eyes gawking down from the roof of a red trailer two doors down from Leo's lot. "I'm Hootie," the lady yelled. "I'd ask you to come up and join me for some sun, but I'm afraid you might be a little too much for this tin roof even though it is reinforced for my hooker hook."

The big man shrugged and yelled back, "I've been locked up a while so I don't know what a hooker hook is."

"Come on over and I'll show you for twenty bucks."

"Sure," Ant readily consented as he circled around Bebo's domicile for a closer inspection of Hootie's home.

"Hold out your hands," the lofty damsel instructed when Ant stopped below. He complied just in time to catch her as she dropped squealing into his arms with her two, long braided pigtails lashing freely.

"That was risky," he admonished. "You are greasy with lotion and naked."

"Prevents tan lines," she justified. "Yes, I am a risk taker by profession and life is often too short for clothes or foreplay. I learned that from a wandering biker philosopher named Spider who needed a bath."

"He gets around. Is that hooker thing inside?"

"Golly gee, you are smart to be so big and stupid looking. Carry me on in."

When Ant paused at the doorway, she reached down to turn the knob, allowing them passage into the dim, red-lit interior. "Where do I set you down?" he asked.
"Nowhere," she answered while tying the ends of her braids together and looping them over a metal hook just above Ant's head. After pushing herself free to hang by her hair, she cocked both of her ankles up behind her head and directed Ant to remove all his clothes and pull the maroon couch beneath her so he could stretch out on his back after having it lined up underneath her torso.

Bumbling around in the unfamiliar environs, he hurried to accede to her wishes by prostrating his nude body below the hanging nude woman. Following further instructions, he palmed the glutes swaying just above his groin, then twisted. As her pigtails twined together, Hootie's bare body spun slowly upward.

Ant aligned himself and was about to release the torqued body on its downward unwinding journey when he was distracted by a yip. On the trailer threshold sat the suds covered Dumpster in panting canine curiosity.

"We left the door open," Ant observed.

"No big deal. This is a trailer park," she reminded him. "The neighbors don't call cops."

"What can we expect in a worst-case scenario?"

"If we are not entertaining, they might boo."

"I can live with that," Ant conceded as he released the high-strung hooker on her spiraling earthbound odyssey. After her braids unwound at the base of the spinning plunge, impaling her upon the giant's rigid pelvic member, momentum carried her back up when the braids wound back together again in the opposite direction. Ant instinctively tapped the rotating glutes with his fingertips to add a touch of manpower to the process.

At the top of the spin cycle, the tanned body paused, fully torqued, then repeated the spin back down in the other direction. Following another pause back at the top, the cycle repeated itself in the original direction. Down, up, pause, reverse, repeat. Down, up, pause . . .

From the doorway, Dumpster yipped encouragement.

On downstroke number eighty-six, Ant erupted, blasting Hootie off his launchpad seat. She expertly hoisted herself on up and then
freed her hair from the ceiling hook before plopping down upon the spent customer.

Ant inquired, "Is that all I get for my twenty bucks?"
"No."

* * *

"Chow time," Jeff proclaimed as he opened the freezer door.

Wally charged, plowing headfirst into Jeff's stomach to drive him backward. Face encased in belly blubber, Wally managed to spell his reply with fifteen nods for 'O' and eleven for 'K' while rapidly propelling the stew cook's lower back into the caldron's metal rim, flipping the creative chef over into the brew.

Wally's bared belly, bulging out below the straitjacket, came to rest against the hot pot. Looking down to see his belly button blistering, he nodded once, then eight times, eight more times, and eight final times for 'AHHH!' before backing away from the scalding kettle.

Head Chef Jeff surfaced in the middle of the simmering stew screaming, "Call for help!"

Wally giggled and nodded the letters: 'HELP!'

Sinking, the chef bubbled out, "Needs-eeds more-ore salt-alt," before succumbing to the low-sodium solution.

A sharp fingernail tapped on Wally's padded shoulder, nearly causing him to inhale his straw in expectation of the lost soul of Art Belt.

"John," Nurse Dahmer petitioned, "do you know where my cousin Jeffy went?"

'OH,' Wally nodded, 'SWIMMING.'

"Well, he is late with dinner and the patients are becoming agitated which is seldom a good sign in a mental asylum. Oh, I see he left his skull cap floating in the stew pot."

'GOT A CIGARETTE?'

"You may smoke when you get outside. A nice little man named Moonie has signed you out. He is waiting in the lobby."
"MAY I STAY HERE?"
"No."

* * *

"What's that racket?" wondered Creach after emerging from Leo's trailer while eating a frozen hot dog.
Charlotte wiped suds from her hands. "That red trailer down there seems to be having seizures."
Two lots down the incline of King's Court, a thirty-by-eight red Coachmaster Deluxe was rocking and shaking nuts and bolts from its foundation.
"These folks know how to party," Creach mused wistfully. "We should probably reconsider Leo's kind offer to stay," she concluded as she took in the panoramic view of the hillside community of all seventy mobile homes overlooking a decrepit shopping mall.
Creach then tilted back her head to inhale a deep scent from the direction of Hootie's humble abode. "Just what I thought," the crone determined as she stomped down the slope. "Cocoa butter and hormones. Count me in," she finished while heading to Hootie's home and entering through the already open door. Dumpster scampered past her feet to rejoin Charlotte in the kiddie pool.
"Don't people knock anymore?" asked Hootie as she smeared a handful of cocoa butter into Ant's navel.
"Sorry," Creach professed. "I was born in a barn."
"It's not what you think," Ant lamely attempted to explain to his former flame.
"It is now," Creach determined, tearing off her clothes and slamming the door shut behind her loud enough to rouse Kevin's curiosity two doors up the hill. He gazed out the window to see Hootie's trailer once more begin rocking to a timely tradition, but this time with sufficient energy to shake free from its base blocks and commence rolling slowly backward down King's Court hill, dragging behind a pronged hitch in the dirt.
"I can't watch," Charlotte told a cringing Dumpster, but both
watched spellbound as Hootie's mobile home crashed into another neighboring trailer on the lower lot twenty feet away. It was likewise nudged from its moorings and rolled off at a different angle. The two tag team trailers began gaining momentum while crashing into other trailers further down the slope, jarring them loose to join the mobile home avalanche. Dust billowed and then resettled into a shallow muddy river when water lines disconnected beneath the freed units, providing additional lubrication for the flow of aluminum barges. Trailer after trailer joined the downhill demolition derby as the leviathan tin lizards slid down a slippery surface in a slow-rushing, can-crushing suicidal elephantine pact of earthquaking proportion.

Jilly Bean King, owner of King's Court, stepped out onto the redwood deck behind her double-wide Starfleet Imperial at the base of the hill. As the landscape quaked, she looked up to see her lifetime investment of sixty of her seventy rentals descending upon her in the form of a monstrous mudslide. Jilly jumped off the porch deck and fled across the street to the more civilized safety of the dilapidated shopping mall, but pavement provided smoother passage for the wild herd of berserk mobile units as they stampeded across the parking lot, then trashed K-mart, Payless Shoes and the Pizza Hutch, all fortuitously closed.

* * *

"Stop squirming," Judge Andrew Silverspoon Moonie insisted while dabbing paint remover onto the sealed lips of Special Agent Wahler with a Q-tip as they rode in the back of the judge's Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce.

"James," Moonie paused to lean forward to get his driver's attention. "Why are we stopped in this desolate section of town? I ordered you to take Agent Wahler home. Does he no longer live with his parents?"

Wally's mouth plopped open for the first time in hours. "Why are most chauffeurs named James?" he wondered.

191
"What have I done?" the judge asked himself, immediately regretting breaking the Crazy Glue seal.

"Possibly," Wally continued, "people named James feel truly compelled to become chauffeurs because they cannot be anything else. I recall an actor in an episode of 'Twilight Zone' named Shoemaker who went bonkers when he tried to become a baker. And I've never heard of any brain surgeons named James, but then I don't know a plethora of brain surgeons since I never needed brain surgery."

"That is debatable," Moonie pointed out.

"There was the Apostle James, but that was long before we had cars, much less chauffeurs. Still I am somewhat confident that if Jesus had a chariot, that odds were better than twelve to one that James was the driver. After all, how wrong does this sound? 'Home, Bartholomew.'"

"Your Honor," James redirected, "concerning the questions prior to the biblical discourse, Agent Wahler recently moved to this community for some inexplicable reason. As to our delay, it appears that a disorganized army of mobile homes has just ransacked that shopping mall dead ahead."

Wally concluded, "That observation pretty much explains any lack of surgical degrees. Our James is not the sharpest scalpel in this operation."

The inquisitive judge got out of the Rolls and marched toward the muddy mall parking lot which was packed with twisted trailers. Wally followed, peering hopefully up the grade of King's Court hill where ten more trailers perched unscathed upon the crest of the hilltop.

"My righteous home was spared from the destruction," he noted.

"My wife is safe."

"I am happy for you," Moonie politely confided.

"Why's that? I've really hated her ever since she branded me on our wedding night."

"Why did you marry her?"

"Both of my parents gave me their full retirement accounts in
exchange for leaving home. Daddy cut back on root beer and Mommy got a job at a peep show."

A rumble wafted down from the peak of the hill as unanchored soil gave way into the gap created below Wally and Bebo's trailer, and the ten hesitant modules began their delayed trip to the mall. One after another they slithered down the mud mountain and crunched into the vast wreckage in the parking lot. Lastly came a portly, middle-aged woman clutching a three-legged yipping dog as they surfed the mudquake in a plastic kiddie pool, finally spinning out of sight beneath the carnage of Jilly Bean's Starfleet Imperial double-wide redwood deck.

Wally's recent home looked incapable of yielding survivors, prompting Wally to smile. Other trailer parkers emerged from the mangled mess laughing, none having spilled their cocktails.

Pete, the day care center night caretaker, slapped his knee and chortled, "We haven't had a ride like that since the tornado of seventy-three."

Mitzi, the upholstery cover recoverer, crawled out a broken window, hoisted a dented beer can and toasted, "Life on the edge is better than fudge."

"I'll drink to that," cheered dozens as they climbed from the debris, all clutching their unspilled drinks.

"Somebody call Arnold and have him come tow these trailers back up the hill," a somehow sober voice suggested.

"Later," the more popular Pete redirected. "First we loot," he advised before leading a merry band of rowdies through the now shattered K-mart storefront.

An eardrum-splitting scream arose from the very rear of the wreckage, followed by more terrified outcries and scrambling as the remaining King's Court dwellers scattered from the crumpled carnage like ants fleeing an aardvark picnic.

"Kill it!" yelled Wally at Judge Moonie who had drawn his two pistols for protection from the horrific apparition that had arisen amidst the mangled aluminum.

James panicked and tromped down the gas pedal, enveloping the
federal agent and judge in a cloud of gravel dust. The Rolls-Royce
slewed sideways into the underside of Leo's former trailer which
had been turned over on its side. Leo raised the front door like a
submarine hatch, took one look at the new source of pandemonium,
then ducked back inside and locked the overhead door hatch.

Atop the red trailer embedded in the Pizza Hutch entrance
stood a primitive poseur wearing nothing but army surplus combat
boots. Surveying the destruction, this former mayor of Paris said,
"Boise is looking better and better."

"Freeze!" the judge ordered, pointing both pistols at the nude
nightmare.

"Is that your Rolls, cutie pie?" inquired Creach of the wide-
eyed judge.

"We've been invaded," Wally calculated. "Take us to your
leader," he beseeched the unearthly species.

Creach glanced down and grinned, then bent over to retrieve
a half-eaten frozen hot dog. She tossed it into the air and caught
it in her upturned jaws.

"You may be right for once," the judge concurred with Wally's
otherworldly assessment. "Bullets may only rile it up. Head for
the car," he instructed with a nod back toward the Rolls which
James already had in reverse.

"I'm staying," Wally brayed bravely. "Maybe I'll get beamed
up and probed and discover the origins of the unknown universe."

"You want to be probed?" marveled Moonie.

"Why not? I've tried everything else and am still vacantly
unfulfilled. Probation: may turn out to be my cosmic revelation."

The pronged front end of Hootie's home began to rise like a
big red teeter-totter, sending Creach sliding down the tin roof
decline and over the back edge to drop into the newly reopened
Pizza Hutch.

Moonie and Wally watched in wonder as the trailer was pried
six, eight, ten feet into the air before being flung aside with a
rivet popping boom. Standing in the spot Hootie's trailer had just
vacated stood yet another specimen of alien proportions: a seven-
foot, quarter-ton mass of naked hairiness sniffing the air like a cartoon cave bear straight out of Bedrock.

"I smell pepperoni," Ant declared.

"Run!" squallled Wally, deserting his universal probation plan by dashing for the reversing Rolls-Royce. The judge, however, was already churning his short legs through the mobile home junk yard, beating Wally to the car.

"Home, James!" commanded Moonie, slamming the rear door shut.

"Should we wait for your friend?" queried the chauffeur.

The judge pressed the tip of each pistol barrel into the ears of his driver and clicked back both hammers.

"I t-take th-that to mean n-no," James stammered, shifting into drive and stomping the accelerator to spray the following fed with loose trailer-parts shrapnel.

Wally dived and grabbed the rear bumper of the Rolls as it rollicked through the muddy parking lot of trashed trailers. He nodded eight, five, twelve and sixteen times for 'HELP!' in belly burning panic, momentarily forgetting that his lips were no longer glued together. Upon realizing his mistake, he nodded to himself, 'REAL BRIGHT, WALTER,' before losing his grip. He was slung under Jilly Bean's mangled manor, coming to rest up against Charlotte's spongy midriff.

"Who are you?" she interrogated the hot body panting beside her in the darkness. "Never mind," she amended before he could respond. "I'm recently divorced and the world is ending," she summarized while ripping off his shirt, "so let's make the best of it."

"Rape!" Wally wailed.

"Rape is legal in a trailer park," she informed him.

"Be gentle," Wally pleaded. "I've had some bad experiences lately, including but not limited to, cannibal stew and Crazy Glue Chapstick," he finished just as Dumpster tried to rescue Charlotte by biting into the agent's ankle holster, dislodging his derringer into the mud.

"Let go, Dumpy," Charlotte demanded while yanking down the
lawman's pants. "I need him fully functional."

Dumpster obediently released the ankle leather and sat back on his haunches to spectate another entertaining social act of human interaction.

"I cannot do this with a dog watching," Wally objected as Charlotte peeled off the agent's checkered socks and darted her long tongue between his toes.

"Well, maybe," Wally revised.

When Charlotte slurped her way up one shin to engulf a bony kneecap, Wally avowed, "I'll never leave you."

"Dumpy!" yelled Leo, poking his head beneath the wrecked deck. "Are you under there? I knew this would end bad."

Yip! the dog responded.

"You dirty rat," Wally accused the mutt.

"Keep your drawers on," Charlotte called back to her ex. "We are on our way out."

"We will finish this later," Wally promised as he scrambled back into his trousers and pried his miniature pistol out of the mud. The couple crawled out into the sunlight only to be nearly trampled by a deliriously happy herd of looters stampeding out of K-mart with armloads of merchandise made by imprisoned children in China.

"Freeze!" cried the vigilant FBI agent, instantly recognizing America's most wanted janitor. "You are under arrest for small-town robbery, lewdness, jaywalking, speeding and some other stuff I can't remember," he informed Leo while nervously pointing the muddy derringer.

"Put that pea-shooter away before you hurt yourself or one of us," Leo advised the G-man.

Wally placed the barrel against Leo's frail chest and pulled the trigger. The gun exploded and Leo crumpled like a discarded rag doll.

Charlotte screamed and fell beside her old lover, cradling him in her arms.
"I'm sorry, Dumplin," Leo choked out. "I should have told you a lot sooner."

"It's all right, hon," she soothed. "I understand why you did not really want me to know about your liver cancer."

"Not that," he whispered. "Something else."

"Whatever it is can wait," she insisted tearfully. "Save your strength."

"Gotta tell you right now, just in case I don't pull through this."

"All right, all right," she gave in. "What is it?"

"One time I was molested," he sobbed.

"Poor baby," she sympathized.

"By a nun," he elaborated. "My dog watched."

"What?"

"I'm just jiving," he laughed after sitting up and plucking something from his shirt: a globule of mud that held an embedded .22 caliber spent bullet. "Looks like that pea-shooter was all clogged up. That goofball lawman is lucky his hand ain't blowed off. Why are you just about naked, anyway?" he asked suspiciously of Charlotte.

"Why not?" asked Ant as he walked up behind Leo accompanied by Creach and Hootie, all munching pepperoni sticks while nude. "This is a trailer park."

"Either put some pants on," Leo bargained, "or get out from behind me."

"Are you gay?" Hootie asked Ant.

"A little bit," he admitted sheepishly.

Wally cut in, "You all have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney who cannot otherwise get clients. Did I mention that you are also under arrest? I have a gun and I know karate, sleeper holds and the Heimlich maneuver."

Kevin approached the largely clothesless group. "If you guys are opening a nudist colony, then count me in," he volunteered, peeling off his shirt.

"Not that I know of," answered Hootie, "but we can have a fun
Crisco party."

"What's that?" asked Creach.

"First we grease each other up with Crisco, then—"

"That's already too much info," Leo cut her off while eyeing Creach. "Scales rub me the wrong way."

Wally cleared his throat for attention. "What part of arrest do you punks not understand—Yikes!" he shrieked as a bullwhip bit into his back.

Bebo, wielding the whip while wearing a pink cowgirl hat with matching thong, joined the gathering. "Walter, how dare you have an affair with another woman," she scolded her husband, "without inviting me!"

"Kev," Ant mentioned, "maybe we'd better scoot on down the road before we attract too much attention."

"Yeah, you're right," Kevin agreed as he turned to Creach and Charlotte.

"I guess this means good-bye, girls," he concluded. "You've been great friends."

"Anthony," Creach pleaded, "may I have one little kiss to remember you by?"

"Yes," Ant consented. "Kevin will be glad to do the honors."

"I mean you, Anthony," she clarified by leaping onto the big man's chest and wrapping her strong arms around his neck with her stubby legs gripping his wide waist by having her ankles clamped onto each side of his torso. In a great suctioning slurp she locked her lips to his, prying his mouth open with her thick tongue.

Ant struggled in herculean but futile efforts to free himself from the masterful lip-lock. After a full minute of oxygen deprivation, the giant's knees buckled, toppling the entwined pair into the mud. Their bodies rolled past Wally's bare toes and disappeared beneath Jilly Bean's damaged redwood deck.

Agent Wahler aimed the empty derringer at the remaining group. "For the very last time, you are all under arrest—Argh!" he screamed as Creach's stubby arm snaked out of the double-wide underworld like a stunted python and then coiled around his ankle. In a blink,
he was bodily snatched below deck.

A muscular Jilly Bean King materialized on deck with a large blue and white can of Crisco. "I hear a party in the basement," she explained, grabbing Charlotte's plump hand. "Come right along, strawberry," she insisted while leading the way down below. "You look ripe."

As the sun set behind Hootie's twisted trailer, she proposed to Kevin and Leo, "Do both you guys want to help me fix my hooker hook for a future discount?"

"Done sampled that dish before," Leo noted. "And?" sought Kevin.

The elder surveyed the ruins of his old neighborhood before concluding, "A man's gotta get nourishment."

* * *

"James, are you familiar with Bentview Memorial?"

"Certainly, sir," the chauffeur affirmed. "I have a cousin in there by the name of Dahmer," he mentioned while pressing buttons on the dashboard.

The glass partition separating the driver from any passengers glided up. Simultaneously rear door locks snapped down into the locked position, imprisoning the judge in the backseat section.

Judge Moonie gasped, placing a trembling hand over his racing heart.

James reconfigured the dash panel, lowering the glass with a whir and popping up the door locks. Straight-faced yet lightly accented, he dryly explained, "British humor, sir."

199
"Leo, you can't put mustard on french fries," Ant scolded. "That's downright un-American."

"Un-American diet orders from a fat Nazi," Leo observed. "You gotta be right," he admitted and tossed the hot french fries out the car window.

"And don't litter or waste food," Ant further advised. "Dirty little pot-bellied kids in Ethiopia are starving on the television commercials."

With a stiff thrust of his right arm, Leo saluted and yelled, "Heil Hitler!" and then screamed out in pain, "AAAHH! AAAHH! AAAHH!"

*  *  *

"Welcome aboard, Senor Moreno," Pablo greeted the old Cuban warlord. "My humble vessel is enriched by your presence."

"Nice boat," Moreno observed. "How much did it cost you?"

"Three mil," Pablo answered offhandedly. "I probably could have gotten it for a couple hundred grand less, but I was not in the mood for haggling. Plus it is rigged for deep-sea fishing, my latest addiction."

"So you have become such a big shot tycoon that few hundred thousand is no longer worthy of your attention."

Pablo shrugged, "I only try to emulate the great Don Moreno."

"Emulate? What kind of word is that? I work my fingers to the bone to send you to the best Americano Universities and now I can't even understand what you say."

"It means imitate. I try to be like you."

"Then do not throw away our money!"

"Easy, Don Moreno," Pablo cautioned, then yawned and signaled over a lithe deckhand. "Dos cafes, Marcos. Pronto."

"Si, Pablo Diaz," Marcos acknowledged as he ducked into the deck cabin to fill the order, leaving the two gangsters lounging on plastic recliners while the small yacht made its way out into
the Florida Gulf. When he returned with the thick sweet coffee in tiny cups, the older Cuban sipped and stared south as if seeking sight of his island homeland.

"Twenty years ago I made the crossing on a patched inner tube in the dead of night," he reminisced. "No food, no money and no friends. Just the sharks and me."

"So I have been told," Pablo nodded indulgently, "many, many times."

"I was an outcast and had only one thing, my good friend, Pablo Diaz."

"Heart," Pablo supplied from the oft-told tale.

The unlistening old-timer, lost in another era, scanned the modest waves, unchanged in eons. "I had heart. I came here and worked with my hands and brains and saved my pennies. Now I am too old to work but my pennies have grown into dollars. Not so many that I can afford to overlook thousands on an over-priced fishing boat like my tycoon partner, but still enough for a very modest retirement."

"You have billions, Don Moreno."

"Which brings me to the subject."

"Finally," Pablo murmured.

"Walk carefully," the elder Cuban warned. "My hearing is still greater than my tolerance for disrespect."

"Forgive me, great Don."

"Unfortunately I was never granted children, and my nephews are a series of dope fiend disasters. But you know I have always looked upon you as a son, Pablo."

"You are a father to me, Don Moreno."

"However . . ." the older man hesitated, casting his gaze across the gentle swells.

Pablo filled the pause. "I doubt if your however will bode well for my wallet."

Moreno countered, "Perhaps not so bad in the long run. You stand to gain control of South Florida. The Miami cocaine operation alone will be worth many times your investment."
"I also have trouble with this investment. But life is full of troublesome words. Perhaps we could, as the Americans often say, cut to the chase. How much?"

"I have given the matter much thought, my son, and have now decided I need little else for my golden years."

Pablo pressed, "How much?"

"One billion. In cash, of course. You have one week from today to come up with the money."

"Don Moreno, I have always enjoyed your sense of humor."

"I have no time for jokes," the old gangster flared with some trace of his youthful ruthlessness resurfacing. "As the barbaric Americanos say, take it or leave it."

"Calm yourself, great Don. Stress is not good for the heart. Possibly I could interest you in a slightly overpriced fishing yacht as downpayment."

"You could not give me this stinking tub. It smells like the tuna casserole they serve mi madre at that retirement home. Two hundred dollars a day and they feed her canned tuna. Why did I even bring her over? She ate better in Havana."

"We all have bills to pay. It is somehow called a free market system. But I am grateful to you for allowing me a full week to raise a billion dollars. I, too, have been giving thought to this possibility. And now that we have disposed of that business, I feel certain you will join me for a bit of barracuda fishing since we have fresh bait aboard."

"I didn't become wealthy in order to act like a hungry fishing peasant. When I have a taste for fish, I will send a servant to the market. Now order your skinny boat boy to turn this stinking tuna tub back toward civilization."

Marcos began slapping a long, curved filleting knife against a sharpening strop as Pablo addressed him curtly. "Prepare my rig for barracuda."

"Are you deaf!" shouted Senor Moreno. "I said no fishing."

"But I insist," Pablo countered with a flash of gold crowned teeth reflecting the noonday sunshine. "We have new bait that you
must be dying to discover."

Marcos raised his eyebrows in question and Pablo responded with a condemning nod toward his old partner. Don Moreno stared open-mouthed from the adjacent deck recliner like a criminal rendered speechless by the surprising guilty verdict with little recourse but to await sentencing.

Pablo casually identified the new bait: "Heart."

*    *    *

"I no understand," replied Doctor Alfonzo Bonsai Dang of the Tampa All-Night Meditation franchise.

Kevin tried again. "Our story is weird. We were in the car when Leo gave a Nazi salute and his shoulder popped out of socket. The Yellow Pages ad claims you treat people who have been abducted and probed by aliens, so we came here hoping you wouldn't ask too many questions since you've probably pretty much heard all kinds of weird tales."

"Come on," Leo gritted, his right arm fully extended up and out.

"Veddy good," Dang declared. "I see now. I fix, you pay two doggies."

"Come on," Leo growled.

"What do you mean by two doggies?" asked Ant.

"You no speaky Engliss? You pay with doggies."

"We only have cash," Kevin explained, "not dogs."

"Cash cool. I buy doggies, but cost much in Chinatown. One thousand dollar."

Ant admitted, "I never knew Tampa had a Chinatown."

"I from Tibet, but close enough."

"Fine," Kevin agreed, handing over a thousand dollars.

"You Engliss real bad. One doggie, one thousand. Two doggies, two thousand."

*    *    *
From the rear seat of the bank president's Cadillac, Ant addressed Kevin and Leo. "We need to ditch this ride pretty soon. Buford will be awake by now and missing his new car. Maybe Pablo can take it off our hands."

"Just when I was starting to get the hang of all these fancy thingamabobs," Leo complained as he removed the sling from his shoulder and flexed his right arm. "I ain't never seen a seat that moves in eight different directions," he admitted as they slowed for the last school zone just south of Naples, Florida. "Truth be told, I never even knew there was eight directions. I sure coulda used a car like this back in high school to pick up cheerleading squads. Do you guys wanna hear about the time I got a job jumping out of giant cakes at bachelorette parties?"

"No."

"No."

"My wardrobe was a pink suit made out of cotton candy. The gals would put on bibs and——"

"You told us that one before," Ant cut in. "I actually lost my appetite."

The suburbs thinned out and finally vanished while the wild everglades reasserted rights on both sides, fencing the Cadillac onto a narrow road lined by ancient greenery.

"We shoulda kept Creach," Leo lamented from the front seat passenger side, wincing as his sore foot throbbed along with his shoulder. "I ain't gonna change no flat tires," he stipulated as Kevin tapped the brakes to allow a ten-foot alligator to finish crossing the black tarmac.

"Watch for the Mackerel Isle bridge," Kevin reminded his two partners. "This resort is not advertised since the residents are rich and don't encourage tourism. It's an exclusive retirement community for old gangsters and politicians trying to spend some stolen gold before their kids and Uncle Sam dip their fingers in the estate inheritance pot."

"We won't fit in," Ant noted from the backseat.

"Why not?" asked Leo. "We're rich and retired. But my foot
is killing me," he noted with a grimace.

"Maybe I can make you feel better," Ant suggested, "by telling a joke about a man building a brick house."

"Very funny, Alice," Leo responded as the view suddenly opened onto a pure stretch of sparkling white sand meeting the ocean. A long thin bridge arched its rainbowed spine across three hundred feet of salt water out to Mackerel Isle, exotic winter haven to the elite. Kevin slowed to toss a quarter into the toll booth machine on the near side bridge entrance.

Leo observed dryly, "The millionaires charge the common worker two bits to come to work and two more bits to go back home. If'n that's how to be rich, then I'm glad I ain't."

Ant reminded him, "A minute ago you said we were all rich and retired. Make up your mind. And if we plan to blend in with these upper crust socialites, we need to start acting like them."

"Fine," Leo grumbled. "So give me a quarter or get out and walk."

"Can't you two stop squawking at each other?" asked Kevin as the car descended down the island side of the bridge. "Pablo will think you're a couple of sea gulls."

"Heaven forbid," Leo cautioned as they passed a lush golf course, "that we offend the morals of your ex-con, dope dealing, mafioso friend."

"There it is," Kevin said. "That second house on the left." He indicated a nondescript, one-story brick house on the beach.

"Not a very swanky hacienda," Ant carefully observed, "for a Latino godfather."

"It's the building code ordinance," Kevin explained when he parked out in front of the modest home. "Most of the residents live down here only during the winter months when the heat and humidity are bearable. They prefer simplicity, as opposed to any cluttering of the beaches with gaudy mansions. But don't be fooled by the size. These small lots start at seven figures, not counting the house itself."

He added, "Pablo stays here year-round. It's his main business
base. Unlike most of the elderly residents, he is not retired."

"Are we gonna swelter here all day or go inside?" asked Leo impatiently.

"Chill out, partner," Kevin admonished. "Pablo has been told of our arrival so we are expected. I phoned from that gas station in Naples."

On cue, the front door of the house opened and a big muscular hispanic emerged. Kevin rolled down the window to hear the summons.

"Don Pablo will see you now. Do not bring weapons inside."

Kevin stepped out first and asked, "What's with the Don stuff? I thought Senor Moreno was the Don down here."

"Heart attack," the escort explained. "Follow me," he added while leading the visitors into the house where they were frisked by two more large dark men.

"What's this big lump in your pants?" asked the Cuban who was patting down Ant.

"Here's two clues," Leo answered. "It ain't the Alaskan pipeline and if'n you don't let go, he's gonna kiss you."

Ant warned the groper, "I'll give you exactly fifteen more minutes to stop doing that."

Disgusted, the man removed his hands with the declaration, "They're clean," then led them into a small elevator while the other two henchmen posted up on either side of the metal doors. After boarding, the elevator descended slowly and then opened on a cavernous room featuring a modern, full-size Olympic swimming pool.

Pablo Diaz climbed from the water and was immediately handed a steaming towel by still another employee, this one also swarthy and sinister, yet thin. Pablo toweled himself off while sizing up the callers. "Kevin and Anthony," he greeted them warmly, "you look great. Ant, I see you have even shed a few pounds, but my chef will remedy that." He nodded toward Leo. "Have your servant return upstairs so we may discuss our business."

"Have your pool boy fetch me one of those hot towels," Leo ordered while stripping down to boxers and diving into the pool.
The slender servant asked Pablo, "Should I slice him, boss?"
Ant answered, "Only if your hospitalization is covered."

Turning to the servant, Pablo stated, "Marcos, a better idea might be to bring the beverage cart."
"Now you're talking," Kevin intoned after settling himself onto one of the poolside wicker chairs.
"Little house, big basement," he continued. "I like it, but I thought house basements were banned in Florida due to the high underground water levels."

"Normally," Pablo confirmed, "but I have connections in the U.S. Attorney's Office."

Ant asked, "Do the neighbors complain about the noise under their homes?"

"They did," Pablo conceded, "so I bought both the adjoining properties from their heirs after an unfortunate propane tank explosion at my neighborhood cookout. Now all three pieces of real estate share one common connecting basement with no complaints and I have my space without violating any above-ground building codes. It also provides multiple escape routes — a claustrophobic urge from my government sponsored vacation in Leavenworth."

"But today we are here to discuss your business," he went on, "not mine. It appears you have become a favored topic of national news agencies, not to mention your recently acquired wealth. You make criminals everywhere proud."

"But we'd gladly trade it for a little peace of mind," Ant pointed out.

"I certainly sympathize with that sentiment," Pablo concurred. "Ever since Congress passed their RICO Act to eliminate organized crime competition with the government, all my business enterprises have been under continuous attack. I spend millions in legal fees and bribes. I should have opted for politics years ago."

Marcos appeared, pushing a liquor cart. "Your Remy," he said to Pablo while handing over an iced drink.

"Same for me, but bigger," Leo ordered as he pulled himself from the pool, "and where's my hot towel?"
"Help yourselves to refreshments from the cart," Marcos told Kevin and Ant. "And I suggest," he turned to Leo, "that you blow yourself dry with your unlimited supply of hot air."

"Don't even try me, Castro," Leo warned. "I'd hate to have to drown the pool boy before he finishes all his chores. That water is full of salt. You must be sneaking your clam-shucking kinfolk indoors for baths."

Pablo laughed and walked over to a computer console mounted in the poolside concrete where he entered a code number. At the far end of the enormous pool, an underwater partition slid open, admitting a churning school of barracuda.

"My pets," Pablo boasted. "I catch them at sea and release them into a screened-off sector of the pool, but for any special occasions such as this, I allow them out into the main pool area. Both sections are vented to the ocean, thus accounting for the salt content."

"Are we the special occasion?" asked Ant.

"Partly, but I already had a special guest today anyway. My tax attorney."

"What's special about him?" Ant probed further.

"It is special only for the fish," Pablo explained while he entered another code number into the console keyboard.

A water slide slid out of the wall on the opposite side of the pool and began gushing down a white-frothed torrent of salt water. From a dark hole at the top end of the slide, two pale, fat feet protruded, seeking flailing purchase within the briny cascade of ocean water.

"Today's menu features fresh lawyer," Pablo announced as he worked the console to increase the waterfall volume. Scrabbling legs followed the feet, all attached to a beer-bellied white torso connected to the puffy head of a squealing, wrinkled male. Only his hands remained inside the wall opening, apparently clinging to some hidden support piece.

"Don Pablo, please!" came the waterlogged plea from the tax lawyer. "I have a family. They all like you," he yelled above the
roar of the water jets.

Pablo entered a final code number and the intensity of the flow increased to drown out any more last minute appeals for a stay of execution. "They will truly love me," Pablo reasoned, "as soon as the life insurance check arrives. Adios, amigo."

The overruled attorney choked on a gulp of ocean water and lost his grip to sluice down into the pool where his blood boiled as the captive pet carnivores carried out the death penalty.

"Refreshing," Pablo judged, "which timely sets the stage for productive negotiations." The Ivy League educated gangster lit a large Havana cigar. "On the phone, Kevin, you mentioned two of my favorite D's: diamonds and drugs."

"That can wait," Ant interjected as the murky waters calmed. "What's for lunch?"
"U.S. Attorney's Office," the clerk answered the telephone. "Be brief."

"Good afternoon. This is Senor Pablo Diaz. I am calling from Mackerel Isle. Please connect me with Senor Nachoz."

"Look here, Diaz, you cannot just call here expecting direct access to an Assistant U.S. Attorney in charge of the Miami Office. Francisco Nachoz is a very busy man. If you wish to leave a message for him, I will ensure that it is passed on to the local Assistant Attorney's assistant who will send it to his secretary's assistant secretary who will probably file it away and everyone but you will forget all about it. You know how the government works."

"I would be very grateful if you would inform Fran that his cousin, Pablo Diaz, is calling."

"Wait a second. Are you the Diaz character who owns most of South Beach?"

"Indeed."

"Why didn't you say that to start with? I'm now putting you on hold."

Following ten minutes of canned violins, Nachoz picked up. "Make it quick, Pablo. I had black bean gumbo for lunch."

"I believe I have resolved my income tax problems."

"This better be rich. You owe millions."

"In exchange for having my tax evasion charges dropped, I can give you the three fugitives at the very top of the Ten Most Wanted list."

"Do you mean the Barker Gang?" asked Francisco skeptically.

"I can deliver the bodies dead or alive."

"Talk to me, cuz."

* * *

"Papaw Barker once swore that if'n it sounds too good to be true, it is for sale," Leo reminisced. "This here shady Diaz guy
not only offers top dollar for the drugs and jewels, but he also suggests a free trip to South America on his yacht since he just happens to be making a drug run that way in a couple days. What's to keep this big brown-skin from feeding us to a great white shark and keeping our cash and merchandise, or selling us down the Styx River to that big white lawman, Milner? It all sounds whitewashed to me."

"And my pops taught me," Ant countered, "that it's better to keep an ace up your sleeve than to always play the race card."

"Well roll me down a bumpy hill in a barrel of rusty nails, Master Ant, but I cain't recollect any such thing as great black sharks or a black devil lawman."

"Black Bart," Ant tried.

"He was white and confused, like you."

"Shaft," Ant tried again.

"Cut it out, kids," Kevin scolded. "We are all aware that Pablo has the scruples of a snake-handling faith healer, but at least he got us this other car and a place to chill out for a day or two," he concluded, swinging the used BMW into the driveway of another one-story brick house.

The trio disembarked and cautiously let themselves inside with Ant still uneasy. "You're right, Leo. That whole story about a coincidental trip to Brazil was fishy and has me on edge, so I hope the fridge is full."

Leo plopped down on the couch and dug a pill bottle out of his pocket. "I just wanna have a coma."

"No cola," Ant called from the kitchen, misunderstanding, "or groceries. We have to go shopping, so I volunteer."

"You might be a tad bit conspicuous," Kevin reminded the big man. "Maybe you should start thinking up a disguise. We are all on the evening news again," he noted loudly enough for Ant to hear over the television as he turned it on.

Ant returned. "I always wanted to be a cocktail waitress."

Leo rolled his eyes. "People won't pay any attention to a big broken down school bus, so just paint yourself yellow and flop down
in a ditch."

Ant gazed around the living room and pulled the curtain off the picture window, then wrapped it around his waist. He pranced off toward the bathroom in search of a mirror.

Leo and Kevin both shook their heads and settled in to watch television. From the screen, Larry Kink returned their scrutiny.

Kink: Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to another thirty minutes of "Larry Kink Livid" with me, Larry Kink, because someone has to be me, and nobody else has zero personality whatsoever. I am currently out on bond after a totally false statement from Mister Dudley Squatt, the former amateur radio big shot now turned government informant. If any listener out there knows diddly about Dudley, or if you are a hit man or hit woman looking for a quick buck, please call the number flashing at the bottom of your screen. Meanwhile my guest star has blackmailed me into letting him be on my show in return for posting my bail. So please put up with this recorded applause for the top paid-off lobbyist in our nation, Maximillion Washington.

[applause]

Max: All but Josie Helms. She makes more.

Kink: Don't be modest, Max.

Max: It's true. She assigns page boys to members of Congress. Pages earn three hundred dollars per hour or a thousand for an all-nighter.

Kink: Let's leave that can of worms on the bait shop shelf and concentrate on you, Maximillion, and your employees, Congress. Exactly how many of those national politicos are on your payroll? Recent rumor has it that every single puffed up lawmaker is on the take.

Max: All but Teddy Kandy. He's already made big bucks
messing around with escort services, white-water river rides and bridge demolition.

Kink: Stay with me, Max. We are talking about the big business of buying and selling special interest legislation. Surely that is your big cash cow.

Max: Surely not, bacteria brain. The big bucks are in exit strategy planning.

Kink: That sounds like fire escape procedures for movie theaters.

Max: More like Bermuda Beach condos or Peruvian pent-houses, coupled with stock options on British gold sovereigns and Chinese McDonald's. Legislators are investing abroad before going abroad.

Kink: So if the fat politico rats are abandoning the sinking U.S. ship, where does that finally leave us? On life preservers?

Max: No. Prosac.

Kink: Other than pharmaceuticals, is there any other hope for Americans?

Max: Plenty. Booze, crime, lotteries and lawsuits.

Kink: Lawsuits?

Max: First sue your kids. What have those ungrateful moochers ever done for you in exchange for that eighteen years of migraines. And sue your church. That building cost you and your drinking buddies a bundle, but what is your final reward? Bring-your-own-food potluck dinners on Styrofoam plates or sex with seventy-two frigid spinsters or ten zillion years of the same old hymns on plinking harps.

Kink: Let's return to earth with exit strategy condos. Do you have anything in the six-figure range for a small-fry like me?

Max: Maybe a coconut tree house time share on Guam.

Kink: Max, you paint a dark portrait of our future, but
I believe in the all-American credo: "Where there's guns, there's hope."

Max: Stop staring at me through those big glasses. You're giving me a sunburn.

Kink: Thank you for reminding me to plug our great visionary sponsor. So let me just share an unsolicited testimonial letter from this one satisfied, random customer.

Dear Son,

Thank you so much for recommending Ogles Eyewear. My glasses arrived today and transformed me from Ray Charles into Clark Kent.

I got the basic Super-Nerd frames and am more satisfied than a fat lap dancer at a biker rally. I can stand on my Miami rooftop and see what Castro is up to, or spot incoming North Korean ICBMs long before they land in my azaleas.

My near vision is equally spectacular. Just like the glossy brochure guarantees, I simply hold my hand on a light bulb to read my own DNA.

I even see the future! Believe it of not, I picture one truly honest politician sometime within the next century. Son, I envision hope for America through my Ogles.

Love,

Mom

P.S. If you do marry that skinny Hollings girl, just know that her mother, Eunice, tweezes her upper lip. You know genes skip a generation, so my granddaughters would have mustaches. Well, I'm just saying.

* * *

"Agent Wahler, I am certain you have a perfectly good and fruity explanation for your blistered lips. Have you been sucking hot light bulbs or working at a kissing booth in a leper colony?"

"I cannot tell you, Chief. Judge Moonie warned me that if I
told anyone he glued my mouth shut and made me wear a lampshade hat, he would have me sent back to the nut house where patients are the secret ingredient in the toe goo stew."

"What kind of glue is strong enough to keep your mouth shut? I need a dozen bottles."

"Let's change the subject, boss," Wally proposed while taking a UPS package out from behind his back and placing it on Milner's desk. "Surprise, sir. Have a brownie. My only son, Winkie, baked them at his vocational training class at Berkeley. Since doughnuts did not work, I figured a brownie bribe was my next best shot. An edible treat is always a good bet with big guys with big mouths."

"Why thank you, Wally. You must be proud to have a son who is majoring in brownie baking. Mm-mm, they are delicious. May I have another one?"

"Help yourself. They are addictive."

The telephone rang just as Chief Milner selected a second nut-encrusted chocolate square. After a dozen rings, the Ma Bell machine stopped chiming.

"Answer the phone, Wally," the Chief carefully enunciated as he reached for another sweet treat.

"It stopped ringing, sir."

"No, I still hear it."

"That's the brownies. Winkie says they are dusted by angels. For eight years, I've been mailing tuition checks and he sends me back brownies."

"Expensive snacks," Milner giggled.

"It's worth it to keep him in California. He talks too much. Takes after his mother who is now my ex-wife, hallelujah. Most responsible fathers of college kids appreciate the value of an out-of-state education," Wally added as the telephone started ringing again.

Wally answered, "Federal Bureau of Investigation and postal office offices. Special Agent Not-In-Charge Wahler speaking. No collect calls."

"This is Assistant U.S. Attorney Francisco Nachoz from the
Miami Office. You may call me Fran. Please connect me with the official in charge of the Barker Gang investigation.

"That would be my boss, and luckily he is sitting right here across from me. I will put you on the three-way speaker so I can add my own two cents if necessary. By the way, thanks for allowing me to call you Fran. My name is Walter and if we were old friends, you could call me Wally, so don't, because I don't know you from Adam."

"Agent Wahler, have you been snorting confiscated cocaine?"

"No, but I had heavenly brownies for breakfast."

"Wally," Milner cut in, "I hear voices."

"Chief, that would be you, me and a spy with a nasal accent who claims to work for the Miami U.S. Attorney's Office. His name is Fran and he sounds like Cuban KGB."

"I say he is legit," Milner argued. "Ivan would never recruit some man named Fran."

The speaker speculated, "Have you men been nipping Kentucky moonshine?"

"California brownies," Wally reminded him.

Milner added, "Out-of-state colleges are appreciated by dads of fags."

"Whatever tilts your windmill," Nachoz replied. "I'm calling to inform you that we received a hot tip on the Barker Gang. My computer screen indicates the case originated in your district, so I figured you would want to be included on the takedown."

"When and where?" asked Chief Milner, instantly sobered.

"Here and soon."

"On our way," Milner concluded, snapping off the speaker phone and snatching up his jacket along with the last brownie.

* * *

Southern Baptist rock blasted from corner speakers as striped and solid balls collided on felt covered slabs of slate. Billowing above the pool tables, satanic clouds of cigarette smoke choked off
illumination radiating from hanging hood lamps.

"I'm weak for large women," the big burly biker confessed as he prominently displayed his **I LUV MOM** forehead tattoo.

"Stuff your one-liners, Casanova," Blondie responded.

"My street name it Tattoo."

"How clever."

"Can I buy you a drink, big mama?"

"Can I buy you a toothbrush, Tats?"

"There's a bed of soft sand out back, under the dock. We can rock and roll until high tide."

"How romantic, but I'll pass, sailor."

"Call me Tattoo."

"I'll call the EPA if you breathe on me again."

"You would love it, big babe. I'll do anything you ask, no matter how freaky. Just name it."

"Die."

"We can do this the hard way or the greasy way. I learned that line in prison."

"Scram, Tats. I'm waiting for somebody and he is out of your little league."

"Excuse me, lard butt," Leo cut in after tapping Tattoo on the back. "I'm looking for a big bald guy with a beard."

"That fits half the guys in here, Pops," Tattoo growled over his shoulder. "Why don't you pull up a stool and order a double shot of Geritol."

"Boy, don't make me make your mama cry."

The biker spun around, glowering, both fists balled up into hams. "You don't know my mom."

"True," Leo admitted, "so I'm ten bucks richer."

From the barstool on Leo's other side came Kevin's drunken mocking of Tattoo's biker buddies crowding the bar. "Don't you panty-wearing greaseballs know that 'Monday Night Football' is a bar tradition all over the world?"

"You don't get a vote," came the surly reply, "because you're from out of town. As a sorry fan of the Cowboys, just be thankful
we're watching 'GUNSMOKE.'"

"I'll give you gun smoke," Kevin promised as he pulled out a machine pistol and sprayed the bar TV into electronic scrap. When the clip expired, Tattoo tromped past Leo, grabbed Kevin from behind and hoisted him up in the air. But before the burly biker could slam his captive to the floor, he and Kevin were both lifted by the giantess blonde. When Blondie squeezed, Tattoo farted and fainted, releasing Kevin who began reloading.

"What a gal!" someone shouted while Blondie whooped, "Wilma!" and pitched Tattoo across the mahogany counter into an exploding bar-length mirror.

"That ain't no gal," Leo chuckled after recognizing the newly shaved and powdered face of the bewigged blonde. "That there is a Neanderthal steer stalker in drag."

Two of Tattoo's pals snatched pool cues out of the wall mount as Ant straightened up Charlotte's former wig so the Nordic curls flowed freely across his broad shoulders. He then patted down two wrinkles in his curtain caftan and picked up a pool table over his head.

"Catch," the giant warned the pool cue armed bikers as the six-pocket table flew toward them. Ant reloaded with another table while Kevin gunned down the pinball machine and Leo sipped Johnny Walker Black Label.

Kneeling below bar level, the cringing bartender clutched a telephone receiver to his ear and complained to a sleepy police sergeant on the other end of the line. "This is Joey down at Spud's Suds on Gypsy Street. Can you send over a dozen cops right away? We've got a cross-dressing giant terrorizing our local biker club with flying pool tables and a post-traumatic stress vet spray-painting with an Uzi!"

"So what is your complaint?" the sergeant wanted to know.

"Forget it," Joey cut off the call while the jukebox blared "Peace in the Valley."
"What's up?" asked the precinct captain after the sergeant hung up mumbling about more overtime.

"Trouble again at Spud's, Cap. An AWOL P.O.W. is redecorating with a machine gun and a big half-queer is busting Skull Dagger skulls."

"Do you mean that motorcycle gang with the tattoo of a blood-dripping knife smashed down through the lopsided skull of a smiling skeleton?"

"That's them."

The captain lamented, "I sure am getting tired of having to rescue those slobs. Last Friday night they picked a fight with the two smallest guys in the bar, but the pair turned out to be midget tag team champs. We ran out of stretchers."

"Should I send over a cruiser, Cap?"

"Sure. First thing in the morning."
"Zero-zero-one, calling Bald Eagle. Come in, Bald E."
"Agent Wahler," the radio responded, "kill the secret call
signs. We are only FBI, not CIA."
"Ten-four, Big Bird."
"Wally!"
"All right, sir. Don't stain your Hanes. I just wanted to
warn you about a suspicious vehicle parked half a block from the
criminal hideout. A white getaway van of indeterminate make and
model with gray tinted glass, a twelve-foot antenna and government
tags."
"Wally, I am in a white van with the Miami SWAT team."
"Chief, that Barker Gang thinks they are clever by getting a
van like yours, but was I fooled for one nanosecond? No chance.
On the count of three I will shoot out the van's tires. Meanwhile
I will hold down this radio transmit button with my chin for a
continuous update to you. My two-handed pistol gripping stance
requires two hands on my pistol, which is why it is called exactly
what it is called."
"Wally, I order you to stand down."
"One."
"Agent Wahler, release the transmit button so you can receive
my incoming transmission."
"Two."
"Please don't shoot!"
"Three!"
Tires popped and the SWAT team hugged the floorboard.
"A full clip in the gas tank should finish them off," Wally
added while reloading.
Chief Milner and six sweaty SWAT teamers bailed out the rear
doors moments before the van exploded in a ball of flame.
"Boss, what were you guys doing inside the suspects' vehicle?
Incidentally, your eyebrows are on fire."
A large SWAT officer tackled Milner and started beating out
the face fire. Milner showed his gratitude by macing his rescuer in the eyes, whereupon Milner was mobbed by the other five SWAT members and thoroughly swatted. Wally shot several rounds into the pile of thrashing, smoldering humanity in a futile attempt to help his boss, but bullets merely ricocheted off of the Kevlar, forcing Wally to take cover behind a neighborhood fire hydrant.

Finally succumbing to tropical heat exhaustion, the swatters fell away to claw in vain at the unreachable itches beneath their padded vests.

Wally warily approached the smoking chieftain. "If you die, sir, I promise to feed your cat until the heartless animal shelter executioner comes to gas her."

"Agent Wahler," Milner moaned through swollen lips, "did you not hear me order you to stand down?"

"That is a big negative, sir. I was transmitting. Regardless, I know how to stand up, but not how to stand down. That is just an oxymoron for ox-like morons. Need I say more?"

"Wahler, now that you have shot our undercover vehicle out from under us, how do you expect us to get back to the downtown police precinct?"

"Spring for a cab, sir. If Uncle Sam can spend four million tax dollars studying the nocturnal mating habits of arctic hares, he can surely afford cab fare, and I hope it has air conditioning. Your boys are sweating like missionaries at a cannibal cookout."

"Wally, is that your idea of a joke?"

"No, but this is. There were three guys in a bar bragging on their sons."

"I don't want to hear it," the big fed boss groaned, letting his burnt head loll back onto the hot sidewalk. "Ouch."

"So one guy says, 'My son bought his new girlfriend a pink Corvette for her eighteenth birthday.'"

"Wally, please. My brain is melting."

"The next guy brags, 'Well my son bought his girl a Picasso painting on her eighteenth birthday.'"

"I believe my ribs are cracked, Wally."
"So the third guy claims, 'My son bought his gal a castle in Ireland for her eighteenth.' So to make a long story short . . . "
"Way too late for that, Wally."
". . . . the three proud papas call for refills to toast their successful sons. When the bartender arrives, they ask him if he has any enterprising sons and he informs them that his only son is a drag queen.

"They all three offer separate advice: 'Don't tell a soul.' 'Disown the scoundrel.' 'Shoot him.'"
"Wally, I'll give you that raise if you'll shut up."
"But the barkeep beams. 'Actually my boy is quite a hustler.'"
"And?" the Chief pressed.
"Boss, you can't rush a good joke. I remember one time at a hostage negotiating seminar, the main speaker was telling a long joke and I thought he would never get to the punch line. Know what I mean?"
"You win, Wally. Tell me what the bartender says after telling the three bragging customers that his drag queen son is also a good hustler."

"My raise," Wally reminded him.
"Fine. Whatever."
"And a corner office with a microwave."
"Yes, yes."
"OK. The bartender just crosses his arms and puffs out his fat chest like bartenders do whenever they drag out a story on and on and—"
"Wally!"
"He says, 'My boy just turned eighteen and received a pink Corvette, a Picasso painting and an Irish castle.'"

*   *   *

"Side pocket," Leo called as he banked in the eight ball.
"That's an even twenty grand you owe me, sucker," he informed Kevin, "and I don't take American Express."
Kevin complained, "Ant warped the tables when he was tossing them at those bikers. I haven't won a game yet."

Leo retrieved the balls from the pockets and carefully racked them within a plastic triangle. "You might try using both hands."

"Great idea," Kevin agreed as he dropped the pool stick and placed his emptied hand on the bottle of Southern Comfort already gripped in his other hand. With a sure, two-handed hold, he turned the bottle bottoms-up to drain the last ounce.

"I used to think I could drink like that, but it was killing me," Leo confessed, "so I quit thinking."

"True," Ant acknowledged from behind the counter where a tall mountain of empty chip bags littered the big bar which was deserted except for the three fugitives. "I am amazed that you finally told the truth."

"That means a lot to me," Leo accepted, "especially coming from a wigged walrus. You'd make a shark turn vegetarian."

"I've got next game," Kevin called out, picking up the dropped cue stick.

"Don't worry, loser," Leo chastised. "Nobody else is here to take winners. A herd of wild Clydesdales couldn't pull Ant away from that last bag of Fritos."

"Wrong again, Jaws," Ant responded, heading for the door. "I am on my way to that Waffle House we passed on the corner. It's almost breakfast time and I doubt we have enough money for Kevin's bar tab anyway."

"One more for the road," Kevin suggested, dropping the cue stick again and snatching up a couple of unopened bottles of Wild Turkey.

"That's two," Ant corrected him.

Leo reasoned, "When he's drinking, he counts like Noah at high tide."

"Don't confuse me when I'm drunk," Kevin warned. "I recently shot Howard Cossell."

"My partner transforms into a TV serial killer whenever the Cowboys don't cover the point spread," Ant revealed.
"If'n we leave, I want my money," Leo demanded. "But since we are pardners, Kev, I'll use that push broom leaning against the wall as my cue stick and shoot you one last game, double or nothing, plus the loser pays for breakfast."

"Spare me the drama," Ant told them on his way out the front door. "I'll save you guys a table. And just in case either of you were wondering," he added while powdering his nose on the move with the aid of a gold-plated compact mirror, "this gold trinket was a gift from Pablo. I alway suspected there was a sweet spot in his closet. So there!" he finished and left through the door with his thunderous thighs swooshing under the curtain caftan and blonde curls bobbing.

"If'n that's natural," Leo figured, "then I'm really Elvis on a unicycle."

Kevin replied, "Leo, you say the strangest stuff."

"You gotta lotta nerve to talk about strange when your first pardner is a killer whale in a curtain dress."

"You just worry about covering our breakfast bill," Kevin advised as he lined up the cue ball and slammed it into the racked triangle of balls. The twelve ball fell into a corner pocket and Kevin blew on his cue stick tip like Annie Oakley after shooting a fly in flight. "I was the eight ball champ at Leavenworth," he boasted while taking aim on the eleven ball, "and was only waiting for you to raise the stakes."

When he started his forward stroke, Leo yelled, "Time out!" causing Kevin to miscue, jumping the cue ball off the table. It hopped twice before landing in the corner trash can. Leo retrieved it and wiped it off with a bar rag before setting it back on the felt playing surface. He then walked over to the push broom leaning against the wall and unscrewed its wooden handle to which he began applying chalk on the tip end.

"This is not basketball," Kevin fumed angrily. "You can't call time out!"

"All right," Leo said, then banked in the two ball.

Kevin dug the ball out of the pocket and slammed it back onto
the table. "It's still my turn, cheater," he determined and lined up a straight-in shot on the thirteen ball, but stopped mid-stroke as a test.

Leo stood statue-still, silent as granite.
Kevin realigned and refocused, facial muscles tightened with total concentration, then faked another attempt.
"Kev, please. What's forty grand plus breakfast between two homeboys from Kentucky? Sometimes you gotta trust a pardner."
Kevin stretched and took a deep breath to relax his muscles. Just as he brought his stick forward, Leo bellowed, "STOP taking so long!"

The cue tip tore into the green velour, sending the cue ball flying off the table once again.
"Scratch," Leo ruled and retrieved the bouncing round white sphere. The old hustler then placed the cue ball back on the felt and sank a double combination followed by a three-rail kick-in. Five more solid spheres quickly followed before Leo took aim on the eight ball.
Kevin shouted, "Time out! Stop! FOREST FIRE!"
Leo calmly stroked the cue ball which bounced over Kevin's fourteen ball, landed and bounced over the fifteen ball, then drove the eight ball into the corner hole.
"You forgot to call your pocket," Kevin objected.
"Sue me," Leo suggested while removing a set of foam earplugs, "after breakfast."

* * *

"Chief," Wally called over the radio, "I have hidden myself just like you suggested. I see you guys are rescuing a smoking body from the burned van. You might be too late. It looks stiff as a battering ram."
"Wally, it is a battering ram," came the response across the airwaves. "We are going to mow down the suspects' front door."
"Sounds like a plan, sir, but I suspect I could have figured
out that last part after you told me what it was. After all, what
other options are available for a battering ram? When neighbors
see you guys charging the front door with that contraption, there
is not much chance they'll mistake you for door-to-door salesmen
or Jehovah's Witnesses."

"Thanks for that helpful tidbit, Wally. Now identify your
exact location."

"I am crouching behind the birdbath in the suspects' front
yard at three-fifteen, West Palm Boulevard. They won't see me;
I'm skinny. But then again, we sort of forfeited the element of
surprise advantage with the van explosion. We might as well just
break down their front door now and mow them down."

"Exactly, Wally. Over and out."

The next sound in the peaceful retirement community was Chief
Millner's blood-curdling war cry: "Charge!"

*   *   *

"How can a Waffle House be out of waffles?" asked Kevin of
the gum-popping waitress.

"I give up," she said. "I don't have my detective's license; but it could have something to do with that cross-dressing hunk, sitting over there behind that stack of dirty dishes."

"I'll have the piggies in a blanket," Leo ordered, "alongside
grits, hash browns, eggs-over-easy, sausage, orange juice, toast
and chocolate milk for starters."

Gum-popper replied, "We're fresh out of all that," once again
nodding toward Ant.

"Great," Kevin said with relief. "We're on a very tight budget
anyway. Where's the children's menu?"

"All we have left now is Corn Flakes and coffee," she informed
them.

"Coffee is fine," Kevin assured her. "Two smalls."

"Make mine a double jumbo," Leo revised, "along with your home
phone number, princess. I'm a freelance Playboy photographer. I'll
leave a tip for your cab fare plus my temporary studio address at Holiday Inn. Just bring your nightgown and a camera."

"Right," she called over her shoulder while heading for the coffee machine. "Just as soon as I get permission from my husband, Prince Charles."

Ant rose ponderously from his table, patted his bloated belly and ambled across the room to join his partners. United growls of disapproval arose from the packed crowd of customers as they all consumed their Corn Flakes.

"This is the first time I ever got full in a restaurant," Ant professed. "Try the pigs in a blanket. They're fabulous."

"No snuggled piglets available," Kevin informed him, "thanks to an inconspicuous giant in a Dolly Parton wig."

The waitress returned with the coffee and told them that the manager had gone out for milk. Meantime powdered creamer along with saccharin was available for their coffee.

Ant asked, "Do you mean that artificial sweetener that looks like sugar, measures like sugar and tastes like sulfuric acid?"

"The same," she confirmed.

"Cereal and creamer," Ant ordered instead. "I learned to eat it like that in prison."

"Anything else, big man?" she prompted, bending down to amply display her large breasts, but then departed disappointed when he declined with a negative shake of his head.

Ant grumbled, "How did she know I was a man? I worked so hard on my makeup."

Kevin offered one solution. "Maybe the ropy hair nestled in your cleavage was her first clue."

Ant defended his low-cut styling choice. "Tattoo didn't seem to mind."

Upon her return with Ant's cereal and creamer, the waitress wrinkled her pug nose and inquired, "Is there a polecat under your table?"

She then lifted the edge of the checkered tablecloth, gagged and dropped the Corn Flakes on the floor. Spitting her gum out into
the palm of one hand, she tore the pink wad in half and stuffed a clump into each nostril. Tearing off her apron, she raced for the front door, ignoring complaints from customers.

"Waitress, is there a garbage can on fire?"
"Miss, please see if a toilet is overflowing."
"My grandfather is having a stroke!"

But gum-popper flew past each table and dashed out the door to a battered Ford Fairlane, jumped in and sped off with retreads shedding like old snake skins and pistons knocking like starving woodpeckers.

People at tables nearest Ant, Kevin and Leo began to get up and back away from the terrible trio as the odor of decayed dog spread across the dining room.

"Ant, you didn't," Kevin scolded. "Not one of your deadly silent assassins."

"Only a little one," Ant confessed, "so just count yourselves lucky."

"Hiroshima was luckier," Leo calculated as he pulled up his jacket over his head and blindly zipped it up over his face.

"Oops again," Ant grunted. "Sorry, guys. It must be that maple syrup."

Customers abandoned any pretense of lingering decorum and sprinted for the exit. A shuffling senior citizen snagged one leg of his walker on an exhaled wad of bubble gum and toppled halfway out the door where bodies piled up in a human logjam. The dammed wave of panicky patrons reversed its flow, now heading for the kitchen door only to be confronted head-on by an outgoing gang of teenage Waffle House chefs and acne-faced dishwashers.

Kevin lamented, "My life story is punctuated by timely gassed exclamation points. First the trial prosecutor, then Tattoo, and now a Waffle House public panic attack."

An enterprising bus boy pulled the warped walker out of the writhing mass of arms and legs clogging the doorway. With a mighty swing of purple-faced determination, be belted a Babe Ruth blast straight through the restaurant's front plate glass. Cheering fans
followed the Bronx Bomber out into the parking lot. Slamming car
doors and screeching tires signaled that the world still spun and
a forgiving breeze brought in the comparatively sweet aroma of
burning rubber.

Kevin concluded, "We are forever indebted to Goodyear," as
the Barker Gang headed for the post office.
Dear Hammer,

I am sending this General Delivery to Mackerel Isle like you told me, so I won't know if you got it unless you write me back. (That's a hint.)

Creach and I tried to rent a room at the McCreary homestead, but they would not accept our money. We stayed, but only imposed as little as possible. They did insist that we tell everything we did with you guys. Creach did quite a number on the burning barn saga. You may tell Anthony that we were all impressed by his many limber sex positions for such a big man.

The insurance company finally paid off the jewelry claim and I sold the shop and its upstairs apartment. I have been considering investment strategies and will meet with my financial planner soon to figure out the options. His name, as you may have guessed, is Buford Hightower. He just bought a new Cadillac. Don't be jealous, but he still thinks I am white. I think I'll lure him in, do him, then tell him the whole truth and watch him turn colors like white people do.

Creach only hung around a few days before taking off on the back of a motorcycle with a talkative migrant philosopher by the name of Spider. He bears a creepy resemblance to Sherryl's baby daughter, Little Miss Maggie. Creach and Spider have this insane scheme to recruit some bikers at a rally in South Dakota to start a hard rock band.

Besides Buford, I am dating a handsome young man named Roy Masters, who used to be a deputy. He recently found salvation and moved back in with his mother. Roy now sells Bibles and vacuum cleaners door-to-door out of the back of his car, a hot rod Dodge he received as severance pay incentive to resign.

The old sheriff, Delbert Roberson, took early retirement and drowned after tipping over his canoe while fishing. Speculation is that he was drunk on beer again, but no autopsy confirms it since the skeleton was not found for a few days and the fish had
de-fleshed it. According to the Bacon Gazette, someone caught a state record bass there last week.

The new sheriff is Robert Earl Lee who went broke because he had no insurance on his Guns R Us franchise.

* * *

"Four diamonds," Marlene bid.

"Double," opponent Alicia countered.

Marlene's partner, Rocketta, the youngest of the four ladies at the bridge table at seventy-six, upped the bid to six notrump which was promptly doubled by Alicia's partner, Madge.

"Seven diamonds," Marlene announced, boldly reentering the auction.

Alicia tilted her head down and to the right, peering over the reading glasses perched on the end of her nose. "Then I must obviously be obliged to double again. Since I doubled the bid of four diamonds, it only stands to reason that a contract of seven diamonds is unattainable. It appears that I need remind you again, Marlene, that the game of bridge requires memory and patience."

"I'm eighty-five and fresh out of both," Marlene fired back. "I redouble!"

Madge sipped her bloody mary and inquired, "What set you off, Marlene?"

"I'm on my period," Marlene answered and the four ladies all tittered together.

Suddenly the unlocked front door imploded from an assault by a steel battering ram manned by a galloping team of six men wearing Kevlar basic black. Stenciled on the door-smashing device were the words: Miami Vice. The team's momentum carried them past the full bridge table in the living room; on through the kitchen and out a back door which was propped open to admit the morning breeze.

"Don't people knock nowadays?" asked Madge, then played the opening lead card to the table.
Rocketta spread the dummy hand out on the table before she suggested, "Perhaps we should call the police."

Marlene pulled an ace from the board to cover the lead card, evoking a throat clearing gurgle from Alicia who nixed the phone call. "No need. That was the Miami Vice. I would recognize the rear end on that Johnson boy anywhere. But we might now consider phoning one of the lifeguards in Rocketta's Rolodex. Those officers were headed straight for the patio pool and I cannot picture them surfacing wearing all that heavy gear."

"They won't drown," Rocketta informed her guests. "My pool boy ran all the water out yesterday but did not have the energy to refill it," she giggled. "He got drained too."

"Way too much information," Madge insisted after emptying her glass. "Let's break for refills."

* * *

... Papa Joe passed. He was buried out behind the shed. This all happened before I got here, so I never met him, but from all I hear, he must have been quite the charmer... *

* * *

Scoop: Scoop the Snoop Fuller here with a live feed from Mackerel Isle, the winter haven resort for retired mafia and senators. I stand in the home of former Vegas stripper, Rocketta Roselli. The screaming you hear in the background is a rescue-in-progress of six SWAT officers from the bottom of an empty swimming pool on the back patio. What this Miami Vice task force is doing all tangled up together ninety miles from home is a badly knotted plot we intend to unravel. And to further complicate the matter, I am joined by FBI Special Agent Walter Wahler. Say something into the microphone, Agent
Wahler, so our stoned WHIZ radio listeners will know you are not merely a pigment of my colorful imagination.

Wally: I want to give a shout-out to Willie Longfellow, my former Cub Scout den daddy who taught me to love myself in the dark.

Scoop: Please enlighten our scandal-starved listening audience on the reason for your presence here on Mackerel Isle accompanied by your boss and six of Miami's Finest who now have more broken bones than a mastodon buried by a glacier.

Wally: All I remember is that when Chief Milner and I followed the vice squad into the house we were attacked by a Toy Poodle which I shot nine times from my nine-shot clip. As a result, I was mobbed by a fearsome foursome of senile citizens.

Scoop: A red-commie terrorist party?

Wally: No, a blue-haired bridge party.

Scoop: But why were you here to begin with?

Wally: We were acting on a confidential tip from Senor Pablo Diaz saying the notorious Barker Gang who uses germ warfare on hick towns was holed up here at three-fifteen, West Palm Boulevard.

Scoop: But this is East Palm.

Wally: That explains it all, Stoop. You should apply for an instructor's job at Quantico.

Scoop: I'm Scoop, not Stoop, but let's get back on the right track. What happened after the blue-hairs gang-banged you?

Wally: My next memory is being pulled out of a bright tunnel by a medic who jammed an amonia capsule under my nose, Scooper.

Scoop: And how did you respond to that?

Wally: Like any card-carrying ACLU member whose rights are violated. I demanded my right to morphine.
Anyway, Hammer, getting back to my suitors (just in case you weren't jealous yet), I was briefly courted by an intellectual tavern owner named Billy Bob. (My popularity soared when people learned about the seven-figure insurance on the jewels.) So like I was saying, that romance with Billy Bob was short. He made it clear that he wanted to settle down and make a sizeable addition to Bacon's population. I just could not picture myself heating midnight formulas for a succession of squalling miniature science majors who aspired to tend bar.

After that, I considered giving up men. Sherryl and I had a woman-to-woman chat and decided to take a stroll on the wild side, but changed our minds when we saw each other naked. By the way, Sherryl is pregnant again but trying to pick the father is a lot like a lottery pick. That girl ruts like a pig on prom night, but she enjoys life more than anyone I know.

AJ says hello and wants you to remind Anthony and Kevin to visit here again as soon as the heat dies down. That young man is becoming a grand entrepreneur. He started off with a paper route and bicycle repair business, then developed it into a corporation with stock certificates he made himself. He employs two more paper carriers and three other kids who work for his lawn care business. The tool shed has been remodeled into a state-of-the-art worker's station, complete with a new computer, an old refrigerator and an army cot for camp-out nights.

The pets also have elaborate new digs with flowery indoor/outdoor carpet. Hi-Dog is developing cataracts, so Hi-Cat serves as his seeing-eye-cat on their periodic forays into the woods. Both are slowing down a little, yet still clinging to tattered shreds of independence. They even allow Dumpster to tag along with them sometimes. He loves the country but sneaks off into town on Friday night, no doubt to rendezvous with the lucky ladies. Late yesterday evening around sunset he was squatting in the dirt lane with his hind leg stump tucked under him. Those mopey, watery eyes
seemed to be gazing far back down that lonesome roadway, blinking away the lingering gravel dust . . .

* * * *

"Get that microphone out of my face, Scoop," Chief Milner warned, "unless aluminum is your favorite flavor."

"He's angry," Wally excused his boss. "BMSD."

"For our millions of goalless soccer mom listeners, kindly define BMSD," Scoop spoke into the microphone.

"Big Man, Small Dick," Wally expounded. "One time on an all-day stakeout, he asked me to hold an empty peanut butter jar for him. When I saw his little Vienna sausage, I started laughing so hard I couldn't keep the jar still. The CB radio got splashed and short-circuited."

"You're fired," Milner declared.

Scoop probed, "So the radio got splashed from pee in the jar?"

"No. I accidentally moved the jar and the radio took a direct hit from the Vienna sausage."

"That is all very interesting, gentlemen," Scoop persisted, "but at the moment we are attempting to get to the bottom of the swimming pool story."

"Forget those pain freaks down in the pool," Wally advised. "Your unemployed, sex-starved housewife listeners would prefer the scandalous Jiffy jar revelation."

"When this is all over," Milner explained to his sidekick, "you're dead."

Wally went on. "Stooper, did you know that blue sparks from a shorted-out CB can travel upstream?"

Scoop admitted, "You now have America's undivided attention. Don't leave us hanging."

"My boss bellowed like a skydiving hippo wearing a crocheted parachute."

"Quite colorful," Scoop allowed, "but the shrieking drifting in from the patio brings me back to those broken men. Would either
of you care to enlighten our listeners on a downfall of a forced entry squad of specialists by a quartet of senior citizens and a Toy Poodle?"

"No comment," Milner replied curtly. "Right, Wally?"

"Wrong. You fired me so I am free to divulge state security secrets such as the intimate details surrounding the famed Hiver evolutionary theory known as Homo-Erectus."

"You are hired again, Wally. Now I am giving you a direct order to remain silent. Anything you say will be misquoted and used to convict you of espionage. If you disobey this order, then your punishment includes season tickets to the Pittsburg Penguins hockey team."

"What about another raise? My dog needs a new coat."

Rocketta interrupted by tapping a flour covered, old dented rolling pin against her thigh. "Which one of you lowlifes shot my dog?"

Wally inquired, "Do you refer to that adorable little animal splattered all over the wall?"

"That's him," she sniffled.

Wally pointed to Scoop and lied. "He did it."

"I don't even have a gun," the reporter protested. "Liberal news people are strictly forbidden by union rules to possess any firearms and—"

KAPOW!

Scoop toppled under a mushroom cloud of flour as the rolling pin plowed a furrow into his forehead.

Wally drew his empty service weapon and trained it on the media man stretched out cold on the floor. "Freeze!" he ordered the comatose body. "You have the right to remain silent," he giggled. "You have the right to a court-appointed attorney who may or may not speak English. You have the right—"

KAPOW!

Wally crumpled on top of Scoop.

"Two for two," Madge approved from the wet bar. "I'll drink to that."

236
"I surrender," Chief Milner declared, raising both hands in capitulation. "How did you know that my agent was the one who shot your dog?"

"I really couldn't remember. My memory has been slipping ever since I started crushing and snorting my sleeping pills, so I just figured I would get all three of you to make sure my Prudence was avenged."

"Would that be Prudence?" asked Milner, nodding at the bloody clump of fur sticking to the wall.

"No, honey," the old woman said tiredly as she lowered the awesome dough roller. "Prudence is creeping up behind you."

Milner glanced back at nothing.

KAPOW!

"Sucker," Rocketta snickered.

* * *

. . . Hammer, I remain miffed that you chose to kick me to the curb, but I understand how you macho types want to be remembered as healthy studs, not sicklings. You better write me a letter soon or I will hunt you down, even if it is to a remote, diseased old village below a volcano. I suspect the only reason you would put up with eagle-sized mosquitos is to romance Amazon women warriors strutting around in boar-skin breastplates.

At least Kevin might get his temper under control. Drunk or sober, I cannot picture him ever shooting local tribesmen over a soccer match.

Maggie was looking at Brazilian travel brochures last night. She would never admit it, but Kevin probably broke her heart. I hope he at least has the decency to write her a letter.

AJ is impatiently awaiting a letter from Ant, so I hold you personally responsible for reminding Ant that his little brother is checking the mailbox every morning. Put your foot down if it has healed (smile). Creach felt bad about that brick incident. Actually, no, she didn't.
Hon, I am running out of chatter but afraid to stop because this may be my last communication to you and I don't want to let go. That sounds so corny. Sorry. I don't worry about what to spend the Pulitzer Prize money on for letter writing, if there even is such a thing.

But I don't need pity. We Bronx gals get tougher with time, not to mention I have a ton of money and a morning appointment for liposuction. What poor fat girl could ask for more?

Who am I kidding? The only thing I really want is the only thing I can't have. A little know-it-all who wouldn't even say he loved me except that one time on the sheriff's desk, but that was during sex, so it doesn't really count.

Now I'm so stressed out that I'm not even making sense to my crazy self. Why does it have to end like this? Where in the world is my gold-hearted Hammer?

Nobody will ever love you like your

Dumplin
"My old friends," Pablo begged while strapped to a poolside wicker chair, "how can you take the scandalous word of a left-wing reporter named Scoop Fuller? He likely crawled out of that most dubious gene pool known to western civilization—the ancestral fornication of liberals with the media. Please don't tell me that there is any creation more obnoxious than a pacifist with a press pass pinned to his lapel."

"Explain those fancy words to the barracooters," Leo stated as he tipped Pablo's chair toward the swirling bloody water. "Your bony butler wasn't much more than an appetizer. I reckon those fish critters are spoilt on USDA prime, pot-bellied lawyer."

"Kevin," Pablo appealed, "please exert some control over this barbarian. First he feeds my loyal servant to the pool pets, then also threatens me, your best friend from Leavenworth."

Kevin rebutted, "We all heard the news flash. You snitched us out, so now you better give us a very good reason to spare your ratting hide."

Pablo did. "I have five million dollars in my safety deposit box."

Leo carefully resettled the chair back on all four legs and patted the cringing crime lord on the head. "Why didn't you say that to start with, Migo? I got your back. Us minorities gotta stick together against Whitey Warbucks or we'll all be shining shoes at the barber shop."

Ant opined, "I say we let Pablo practice his backstroke. We already have plenty of money."

Leo stared at the giant in disbelief. "Boy, have your stem cells been researched? The way you eat, we'll soon be broker than female prostitutes at a San Francisco hairdressers' convention."

Ant wondered, "Did you learn that one from the West Coast outlaw in-laws?"

"Nope, size sixty smarty panties, but we sure can't pass up five mil. Papa Barker would do a backflip underneath Boot Hill. He
always schooled us raggedy young: "uns to never gander a golden-egg gift-goose in the mouth."

Pablo recanted, "I majored in English Lit, so please throw me in the pool immediately."

"Right after we make a small withdrawal," Ant conceded when he sliced through Pablo's bindings with the hawkbill, then prodded the crime boss toward the elevator. All four men squeezed inside and Kevin pushed the UP button, causing the velvet lined cube to begin its creeping ascent back up to sea level.

Leo eyed Ant's bulk accusingly. "Are we daredevils or what?"

Ant deflected the barb to Pablo. "A Cuban Cosa Nostra should be able to offer classier transportation for house guests."

"What would you suggest?" challenged the home owner.

"This will be interesting," Leo predicted. "Ant's interior decorator impulses have longed to jump outta the fag closet and frighten some fellow queer into rethinking his orientation. It's called Scared Straight."

"Hush your lips," the big man pouted, "but for your bigoted information, I could ceratinly suggest a more suitable conveyance than this slo-mo velvet case, if I were so inclined."

He waited.

Nobody pushed the issue.

"Yet since you did ask, Pablo," Ant continued undeterred, "I recommend a spiral marble escalator with gilded pink handrails."

"That's more queer than a man purse," Leo compared when the elevator finally jolted to a stop. "Watch out feet. I'm about to toss my milk-free Corn Flakes."

"If you keep that up," Ant threatened, "I'll let loose a big silent assassin. In this cramped box, I'm talking lethal ejection."

The sliding door opened and Leo jumped over the crumpled bulks of three unconscious Cuban henchmen, then raced for the front door while holding his nose.

"What hit my men?" inquired Pablo. "A bomb?"

"A backhand," Kevin revealed.

"That evokes a fond Leavenworth recollection," Pablo recalled.
"I graphically remember a close encounter of the worst kind when Chester Incestor was plotting rear reconnaissance on your position, Kevin. Ant was not amused."

"No need to revisit old war stories," Kevin closed down the tale while pushing Pablo out the front door. "Just hop in your limo here, and I'll drive us to the bank. I always wanted to pilot one of these smooth tankers."

Ant politely opened the rear door for Pablo and then scooted in after him. Leo rode shotgun while Kevin climbed in behind the wheel and turned the key that was already in the ignition slot.

"Low crime rate neighborhood," Pablo explained about the key. "Not to mention that only a real fool would consider stealing my car. Or real fools, plural."

"Then answer this riddle, wise guy," Leo growled from the front seat while turning on the radio in search of more news from Scoop Fuller. "If' n a fat-mouth fool skates on paper-thin ice, who's gonna save his frost-bit butt? Let me know if' n you need any more hints, El Stupo."

Pablo wisely withheld any further comment as hyper airwave personalities took over, competing in a gabfest frenzy beneath the click of dashboard buttons where Leo finger-surfed the radio dial.

[click] But wait, folks. That's not all. Those of you who order my new video within the next eight seconds will also receive a free copy of my latest best-seller: "Dummy Corporation" whereby you instantly become a millionaire in two short weeks without ever leaving your couch. No selling, no investing, no working, no——

[click] She answered with teardrops of salvation flooding her angelic cheeks and beseeched me, "Pastor Poi, guide my heart and my pen as I write this check to your Bangkok Radio Ministry."

[click] It slices, dices, peels, grates, minces, chops, mangles, amputates, disembowels, massages, clips
hangnails and the hedge bush, babysits, answers the phone, walks the dog, cheats on your taxes, satisfies your wife twice a week——

[click] I'm telling ya now, they're taking over Florida. Ya need a doggone interpreter to eat at a Miami restaurant even though all they serve is pork, black beans and rice. Then while ya try to choke down this gloop, a trio of Cuban cowboys torments ya with a ukulele, a big tamborine and a doggone accordion. They circle around yer table and, hold ya hostage while they sing through their noses about a crippled cockroach. Ya have to pay them a dollar apiece to go extort some other tourist.

[click] Bad credit? No credit? Career criminal? We don't care. Crazy Carl's Classic Used Cars will almost give you the car of your dreams almost free of charge. Crazy Carl has tied his diabetic grandmother to the flagpole on the showroom roof and refuses to release her until we sell every car on the lot.

[click] O'er the laa-and of the free-EEEEEE!

Leo switched it off. with unanimous sighs of relief. from the limo occupants as they turned into the parking lot of Mackerel Mutual Trust.

"Pull into my reserved slot," Pablo instructed. "All these islanders love me, naturally."

Leo countered. "That's about as natural as a KKK rap song."

"What is a rap song?" inquired Pablo.

"A new form of entertainment," Ant assured him, "for people who can't sing, and a form of torture for people who can."

"Wrong again, jelly brain," Leo reprimanded. "Real torture is 'Your Cheating Heart' played by a beginner fiddler."

Kevin intervened, "Can we get a time-out to come up with a plan? Even though we are only going to empty out Pablo's safety 242
deposit box, I remind you that all bank lobbies make me somewhat greedy."

"The smell of fresh money," Ant concurred.

Leo dug into his front pocket and came out with four pills that he washed down with a gulp from a flask he fished from his back pocket. "Leave this here caper to me. I'll take Pablo inside and get his five mil, then rob the bank. Kev, you and Ant wait here in the getaway limo."

"Sounds good," Kevin approved with a yawn.

"Hurry up," Ant admonished. "It's almost lunch time."

Leo and Pablo stepped out onto the pavement and went inside, the Cuban whispering out the side of his mouth. "We can leave out the back door, Mister Barker. Forget about those losers in the car. My businesses are worth millions. You and I can form a real minority partnership."

"No dice, Migo," Leo turned him down. "You sealed your deal with the viper when you clamped your traitorous fangs into our backsides. Your ticket is already punched to the eternal snake pit of fire and the only plea bargain left is a bullet if'n you behave or an electric sander if'n you don't."

They entered the building, then the loan office to be greeted by the prim bank manager, who rushed to meet them. "Senor Diaz," he gushed, "what an unexpected surprise. And who is this little guy with you? Perhaps he's a jockey or your lightweight bodyguard," he laughed.

"With those ears," Leo responded, "you don't need more jokes, Dumbo."

"Actually, Archie," Pablo explained, "we are here to withdraw some cash from my safety deposit box."

"And to rob the bank," Leo reminded him.

"Even if you were serious about the robbery, you would fail," Archie explained. "Our large money reserve is due to our isolation. Once robbers exit the bank, a call to the toll booth attendant gets that bridge closed and traps the stupid robbers on the island."

"We have a submarine," Leo lied.
"Those cost millions," Archie replied doubtfully. "If you were really that wealthy, you would not need to rob banks. So please state your true business."

"My name is Doctor Doomlittle, and I work for the Department of Nuclear Energy," Leo professed while removing an ink pen from his shirt pocket. "This innocent looking device is, in fact, a highly explosive explosive. If'n I push down the plunger on top, this whole island will sink, sending a tidal wave across the Gulf of Mexico that will have cowboys in Texas wearing waders."

"It seems quite small," Archie noted dryly.

"Of course it's small, peanut brain. It's an atom bomb."

"If that is a nuclear device," Archie offered, "then I am Paul Bunyan with a chainsaw."

"Nice comparison because both of you are dead," Leo promised as he pulled out a pistol and jammed it into the bank manager's pencil-lined mustache, driving the banker's nose up toward the ceiling. "Say good-bye, Dumbo."

"On't oot," Archie squeaked.

"He won't shoot," Pablo informed Archie, "just as long as we both cooperate."

Leo nodded consent and withdrew the gun tip while issuing instructions. "Here's the lick. Close the bank and say it's an FDIC audit. Get all the cash except the ones. No silent alarms, no dye packs and no dead heroes."

"Do it, Archie," Pablo ordered.

"Yes, boss," the manager affirmed.

"Boss?" asked Leo.

"Violence is not necessary," Archie admonished. "Apparently Senor Diaz failed to inform you that he owns the bank. So you may put away your gun and atomic ink pen with the highlighted letters: Bacon Drugs - High on Satisfaction."
Concrete raindrops showered the hood of Wally's rental Buick idling at the base of the arched toll bridge. The center section of the rainbowed architectural wonder no longer existed except as a vacant gap between its entry and exit ramps, both merely stump ruins jaggedly pointing false accusations toward a blameless blue sky.

Wally turned his attention to the dazed attendant manning the wrecked toll bridge booth across the strip of ocean now separating Mackerel Isle from the Florida mainland.

The FBI agent cupped his hands and shouted over the water to the attendant, "I want a refund!"

The dazed worker stared briefly across the gap at Wally, then began rummaging inside the remains of the toll booth in search of his dislodged glasses. Unable to locate them amid the scattered debris, he kicked the dangling booth door free from its one solid remaining hinge and staggered out into the blazing sun. Muttering about a crazy Cuban missile crisis, he stumbled blindly into the knee-high guardrail and toppled out of sight into the shallow surf below.

Wally, ears still ringing from the earlier bridge explosion, thumbed the transmit button on his radio handset and yelled out, "Honey Bun calling Cream Puff! Come in, Puff Daddy!"

"Don't shout, Wally," the radio responded. "I don't have time for any of your nonsense right now, and you will address me as Chief Milner or not at all."

"Ten-four, Not-at-all," Wally whispered, "but now I can't even hear myself, which really doesn't matter as long as you can hear me. To be perfectly honest, not having to hear myself is a mixed blessing. Maybe I should pour Jell-O in my ears and let it gel so this blessing will last. But I'd have to gel one ear at a time by turning it up to the sky or else the Jell-O would drain out before it gelled."

"Wally, please, please."
"Chief, I can barely hear you because my ears are buzzing, but I am glad that you are doubly pleased. Unfortunately I do not have time for any whimpering. I am on the trail of a toll booth deserter who abandoned his post; AWOLed the perimeter; yellow-bellied the red zone; derelicted his dutiful—"

"SHUT UP!" the radio blasted.

"Chief, you'll tear a tonsil."

"Wally, we feds have no jurisdiction over local toll booth operators. We only rule the ones that man booths on the interstate and in the District of Columbia."

"But boss, he was wearing a uniform. Besides, he refused to refund my quarter which is federal currency."

"Forget the toll booth operator. There's been a very large explosion in the vicinity of the bridge. If you are near the toll booth, surely you heard something."

"That sounds logical, sir."

"So?"

"So what?"

"So where are you?"

"Right here at the other end of the radio. Too bad we aren't kids with tin can phones connected by string. Then you could find me easily by simply following the string," Wally sighed. "Why was I in such a hurry to grow up? Now all I want is to be a freeloding brat again. But there are unfortunately no more tin can telephones for me now."

"Wally!"

"No more Barbies or Kens."

"Agent Wahler, please pretend to be an adult for one minute and give me your location because I am also receiving information about a local bank robbery and that is federal. Toler and his two friends took dynamite from that Guns R Us store in Bacon, so it is entirely possible that our desperados robbed the bank here and then blew up the bridge to hinder pursuit. I want you to get over to the blown bridge or whatever is left of it."

"Sir, I am obviously already at the destroyed bridge. How else
would I know about a toll booth deserter? Sometimes I worry about your state of mind. Maybe you could use some down time. Disney is not far away. Why not drink a Miller with Mickey?"

"Wally, I am on my way. ETA, thirty seconds."
"You'll love it, but hot dogs are expensive."
"I am on my way to the bridge, not Disney."

"Great. You can help me track down the toll booth bandito. He is probably halfway to Havana with his uniform pockets filled with American quarters."

"Wally, see if you can locate a boat to ferry us back to the mainland. Time is critical. We have to get Toler before he gets to Miami."

"Ten-four, Puff Daddy, so I have a better idea that will speed up the process. This new rental Buick has four hundred and fifty-five cubic inches of raw power under the dinged hood due to some concrete rain. Another story."

"Agent Wahler, get a grip. I now have the bridge in sight. Wait right there for me. Don't try anything stupid."

"Don't worry, boss. I saw this done one time on television. A daring man on a motorcycle jumped over a dozen eighteen-wheeler trucks and broke every bone in his body. Why didn't he just go on around? Nobody knows."

"Stop, Wally."

"If I don't make it, please feed the gerbil I keep in the bottom drawer of the office filing cabinet."

"Don't try it, Agent Wahler. That is a direct order."
"My gerbil's name is Chub and he likes sunflower seeds."

"Quit revving that engine. I see your car at the base of the jump ramp. Uh, I mean at the base of the former bridge."

"Salt-free sunflower seeds. Chub has high blood pressure. The vet says he needs one of those wheel thingies that don't really go anywhere," Wally concluded as he stomped the gas pedal.

The heavy sedan lumbered up the steep, stubbed ramp, climbing to six miles per hour in preparation for its wingless flight. The two front wheels crossed the broken precipice into tractionless
space, bringing the car's metal undercarriage crashing down on the jagged concrete cliff edge at the top. Sparks flew from the grinding contact, causing sufficient braking force to catch the endangered automotive species on the brink of extinction.

The Buick rocked with the wispy wind, front wheels spinning unrestricted, thirty feet above the salt water. Both rear tires clawed the air two feet above the broken abutment like a brainless amphibian teeter-tottering indecisively between land and sea.

Wally stuck his head out the driver's window, looked down and screamed, then rolled up the window.

"Don't move a muscle!" came the instruction from Chief Milner as he yelled through a bullhorn after screeching to a halt at the base the bridge stump in the warm spot recently vacated by Wally's Buick. "I'll call a wrecker and the Coast Guard. We can't afford to lose another vehicle after the van explosion."

Wally yelled back, "Let me borrow your Jiffy jar!" and smiled at the memory. The smile turned into a giggle that evolved into a loud laugh that grew to full-throated howling. He pounded on the steering wheel with hysterical glee, creating the added impetus to tip the balancing scales forward. The Buick dipped ponderously over the pinnacle, performed a full, three-sixty rotation within thirty feet of restricted airspace, then belly-flopped onto the Atlantic Ocean.

Astoundingly, the General Motors humpback swam for shore with its rear tires churning out twin slipstreams of salty froth. But halfway to land, intake valves choked and Wally's vehicle sputtered and sank. When the mechanical beast settled on the seabed floor at a depth of fifteen feet, Wally, dazed but dry, peered through the windshield into the grinning face of a curious dolphin staring back fearlessly into the belly of the steel whale resting upon the ocean bed.

Wally drew his service weapon — Jonah with a gun.

Above the submerged standoff, Chief Milner scanned the filmy sea, noting only streams of small bubbles rising to the surface. Apparently his second-in-command was safely entombed within the
automobile's spacious interior. Until help arrived, the seasoned subordinate surely would not attempt any hasty self-help tactics such as rolling down a window or opening a door, since he could not swim.

The dolphin playfully thumped the windshield with its snout. Wally aimed and fired.

* * *

Archibald Peabody, esteemed community pillar and manager of Mackerel Mutual Trust, awoke in the back of Pablo's limousine. The far back. The trunk. In a golf bag. Headfirst.

Unable to move his arms which were firmly pinned down to his sides, he blindly stomped his feet through the canvas club-holder opening, striking the back side of the backseat. But the sturdy seat held firm, resulting in a reverse thrust sufficient to blast the banker's hard head through the plastic bottom of the golf bag. Replete in this sporty custom straitjacket with his head now flush against the taillight panel box, the industrious bank manager then kicked once again. This time the big backseat budged, letting in a blinding ray of hope. A flurry of determined stomps dislodged the seat from its mounting, creating a cavernous passageway to mote-filled freedom.

Archie churned his feet to bring his body parallel with the cave entrance, then logrolled himself into the car's rear luxury compartment, now an outdoor oven. Dehydrated worse than a humpless camel, he focused on a wet bar inches from his nose—a close-up mirage of exotic tonics.

Still unable to escape the confining golf bag, he tried the door handle with his teeth.

Locked.

In abject desperation, he banged his head against the tinted door window. A hairline fracture appeared on his wide forehead to match the hairline fracture in the glass, providing inspiration to the adventurous capitalist. He tucked in his legs and then launched
himself headlong into the wounded window, torpedoing through to splash down in beach sand.

Out of the oven and into the fire, Archie stared straight up into the flaming Florida sun. A stone crab stopped to rubberneck, clicking an arthropodic tsk-tsk at human oddity.

With his last gram of energy, Archie rolled himself down the beach and into the life-giving sea. Like all thirst-racked humans throughout history, he ignored his mother's admonition to never drink ocean water and gulped down mouthful after mouthful of the salty broth tasting like nectar wine from Eden's forbidden fruit tree, easily the greatest taste sensation of all time. Mother was obviously a chronic liar, just as he had suspected after not going blind while playing with himself in the bathtub.

In suckling incremental tugs, his swaddled body was nursed out to sea by the ebbing tide, finally floating . . . drifting . . . luxuriating . . . sinking . . . drowning . . . his tired mind telepathing a prayerful S.O.S. to Poseidon along with an apology to Mother.

Forty-eight seconds, he calculated, blessing his childhood sessions of brain-damaging, breath-holding record attempts of which he had also been cautioned. Peace was near. No more pain. No more taxes. No more unsolicited motherly advice. Archie's colorful world began to dim.

On the drowsy nosedive to his eternal seabed, he risked one last peek at the oceanic world, prepared to carry that calming, aqua-marine memory with him forever. Coming up slowly through the murk was a dead dolphin with its snout blown off. Yet even now in death, the fish seemed determined to assert its last animal rights to surface belly-up to the heavens.

Clinging to the tail of the rising carcass was a fully clothed man, kicking his feet desperately in order to assist the dead fish to its rightful surface graveyard.

As Archie and Wally silently glided by each other like subs passing in the night, Archie realized that no assistance would be forthcoming except to the dearly departed and snoutless dolphin.
Incapable of using his hands, the opportunistic loan shark clamped his teeth into one of the churning ankles of the passing stranger.

Wally screamed a giant bubble that rose silently like some wordless cartoon caption balloon, yet the swimmer kept paddling on with his unencumbered foot.

The snoutless dolphin surfaced tongue-first and immediately rolled over, submitting its belly to the sky. The agent followed by bracing his bitten foot against the dorsal fin now acting as a rudder. Wally flung his free foot over the dolphin's belly to straddle the bobbing creature. The broncobuster waved his gun in victory, finally fulfilling his nursery school daydream of riding a seahorse, or close enough.

A pain in the ankle reminded Wally of the stowaway. Reaching below the surface, he latched onto a large earlobe and yanked the banker's head back into oxygenated environs.

"Excuse me for snapping," Archie apologized from the confines of the golf bag, "but I was drowning."

Wally sought, "Have you ever considered a scuba suit with arm-holes or sleeves?"

"It was on sale," Archie fired back.

"Then to show my appreciation for your biting wit, please let me introduce you to a new sport invented just south of here at a resort called Guantanamo Bay."

"No thanks. I am not athletically gifted. In school I was more into Glee Club."

"I insist. It's called waterboarding and you will find it joyfully absorbing," Wally announced while dunking the ear, mouth and nose inches below the waterline. "So how do you like me now, Michael Phelps?"

Archie's eyes widened while Wally counted off the seconds: ". . . forty-three-a-thousand, forty-four-a-thousand, forty-five," Wally finished by tugging up the ear, bringing the sputtering glee clubber with it.

The banker informed the FBI man, "Dolphin poaching near Miami mandates the death penalty. I'll tell."
"Have Satan fax it," Wally instructed as he dunked the head again until it turned from red to white to blue, launching the federal agent into off-key song: "O-o say can you see . . . "

When the lyric arrived at bombs bursting in air, Wally brought the waterboardee up to hear, and Archie coughed out: "Is that all you've got, Glen Campbell?"

"No," Wally gave notice and crooned off-key again: "Like a rhinestone cowboy . . ."

Archie tried to pull his head back under the water, but Wally held it aloft.

". . . I'm gonna be where the lights are shining on mee-eEE-eee!"

"I give, I give," Archie pleaded just as Chief Milner rowed up in a commandeered kayak. After briefly surveying the scene, the fed boss resumed rowing on toward the horizon, absently wondering whether anyone would cry if he kept going right over the edge of the world.

"Ouch," Archie cried out as something smacked into his cheek, followed by distant chuckles.

"Yikes," Wally added when something dinged into his knee, too, also accompanied by giggles from afar.

When a third assailant skipped between them across the ocean top, the two men glared toward the coastline a hundred strokes away. Knee-deep in the shallows, the toll booth operator dug into his bottomless uniform pocket to produce another quarter. He curled his index finger around its perimeter, drew back and slung the spinning saucer. It skipped gamely across the water and struck the banker between the eyes, ricocheted into the wavelets and winked out of sight, joining the trove of sunken silver coins around the bottomed-out Buick below.

The unidentified booth attendant whooped with delight and reloaded from his depth-defying pocket.

Wally aimed his water-resistant service weapon, fired and missed as another quarter sliced into his thigh. He fired again. Another miss. Another quarter set sail. Another hit.
When the federal agent ran out of bullets, the local booth operative lost interest and sat down in the surf. Scanning the horizon, he chanced upon Chief Milner's sinking silhouette now slipping below the earth's curve.

The unknown deserter wept.

"Paddle us back to shore by kicking your feet," Wally ordered Archie.

"No."

Wally belted out, "Getting cards and letters from people I don't EE-vén know."

"No."

"And offers coming over the pho-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-"

"OK, OK."
Pablo and the Barker Gang wrestled the last of the twelve duffel bags into three-fifteen West Palm. Ant dropped the two sacks he was dragging and headed for the kitchen and Kevin chucked his bag into the corner, then sprawled onto a recliner.

Leo emptied his big bag of money out onto the sofa, then began systematically dumping out the cash from all the other eleven bags. One by one the canvas bags flattened as the cash couch fattened with the final deposit burying the last vestige of the sofa beneath a flutter of greenbacks.

"You Americanos amaze me," Pablo admitted. "First you rob an island bank and then blow up the only bridge to the mainland while you are still on the island. Next you dump out the money, along with the money you already had, onto a living room couch. Have you completely lost your minds?"

"We blew the bridge," Kevin patiently explained, "to make the cops think we had gone back to the mainland and were trying to keep them from following us. They won't think we stayed on the island after blowing up the bridge. As for the money on the couch, I have learned to never second-guess our more experienced, senior statesman partner."

"Boy, you're getting smarter and smarter," Leo informed Kevin, "but for Ping Pong ball brain," he turned to Pablo, "let me spell it out. When I was a rotten little kid, I'd rake leaves into a big pile and jump in, pretending it was money. So this is just something I always had a hankering to do, and now that I can, I am. It might not make a whole lotta sense to those people who only wanna grow up, but I like being a kid again sometimes. See, my adult life sure ain't been no bed of roses."

"So?" pursued Pablo.

"So I wouldn't trade nary a minute of it for this big pile of rotten leaves," Leo summed up, then dived into the money, sinking nearly out of sight. Moments later, light snores filled the room with contentment.
Pablo concluded, "Most Africano-Americanos are beyond Latino comprehension."

"Don't speak to me for the rest of your short life," Kevin ordered the Cuban. "If you do it once more, you may never get the chance to do it twice."

The mobster wisely withheld any other remarks and Kevin leaned forward to turn on the Bose radio built into the Ethan Allen coffee table. George Jones lamented over the airwaves that he had stopped loving her today and Pablo held his hands over his ears. "You win, Kevin. Kill me pronto, por favor."

"To quote one of my cool-handed heroes," Kevin mused, "'What we have here is a failure to communicate.' Pablo, you don't understand blacks, you don't understand country music and you really don't understand me. It is bedtime and if you say one more word, I will handcuff you to the bedroom bed."

Pablo shrugged macho indifference.

"Where Ant is sleeping," Kevin clarified.

The crime boss drew his index finger across his mouth in the universal lip sealing pledge and curled up on the floor.

Satisfied, Kevin relaxed and turned on the recliner's back massager. When George Jones finally got carried away, Kevin rotated the radio dial with his toe.

Sid: Good, good, good vibrations to all you schizoid insomniacs out there in the stratosphere. Sidney Strange here, filling in for Art Belt who has been mysteriously missing. Welcome to the WARP, Whacked Alternative Radio Programming from Area 54, Albuquerque. Our program guest tonight is a Tibetan transcendentalist, Doctor Al B. Dang, from Tampa All-Night Meditation who specializes in PTSD, Probed Traumatic Stretch Disorder for alien abductees. Doctor Dang will heal deeply probed patients telephonically from midnight to dawn. Callers south of the Rockies, call 1-900-
WHACKED. Go ahead carnival caller.

Ollie: Thith ith Ollie Dweeble. I wath abducted off the top theat of a Ferrith wheel. You know thometime how you have a thilly fear of thtopping up top? Well, it ith not tho thilly after all.

Sid: Put your teeth in. I'm getting a mental image of spit balls rolling down the telephone line right into my ear.


Dang: Ha! Veddy funny. Both us no speaky good Engliss.

Sid: Possibly you two share the same giant, ancient alien ancestors. But that's another topic for another night. Our next caller may now enter Area 54.

Rocky: Hi, Doc Dang. Do you offer mail-order Valium? My little dog was shot and so are my nerves.

Sid: Dang's doctorate is in UFOlogy Proctology, not psychiatry. Call back Friday night when Doctor Laurel will be answering neurotics. She is not a real doctor either, but she does know plenty of nut cases. Tonight our topic is abduction probation, not government conspiracy.

Rocky: I was just getting to that. The FBI tried to abduct me. They had handcuffs and everything. At my age, I am game for almost anything, but then they shot my Toy Poodle.

Dang: Why shoot toy? Maybe danger if made in China, or maybe bob head and bang cymbals.

Rocky: A Toy Poodle is a real dog that is smaller than a Miniature, but larger than a Teacup. I had a Teacup Poodle until I scalded it to death with Folgers. My eyes are milking over so I moved up to a Toy Poodle. By the time I go completely blind, I'll be up to a German shepherd.

Sid: Thanks for sharing, Rocky. I see a line blinking from Flatt Butte, South Dakota. No Uranus jokes.

Caz: Great show, Sid and Doc Dang. I'm Casper Jacks, but most people call me Caz. I have been abducted and probed thirty thousand times and was wondering how that ranks nationwide, Sid. I'll also welcome any soothing hindsight from Doc Dang.

Sid: Caz, your numbers don't fare well against tougher competition. Remember you are up against certified psychotics who lie so regularly that they convince themselves they have been kidnapped and then later mechanically invaded by asparagus-shaped visitors from Mars. Were all of your abductions by aliens?

Caz: All but one, which was worse. When I was seven, Grandma Jacks nabbed me for a whole week. She had me attend Vacation Bible School where I built a hummingbird hotel out of used Popsicle sticks. I hung it in our elm tree and a tree snake moved in and lived happily ever after on hummingbirds. I suspect hummingbirds have small brains.

Sid: Good contribution, Caz. Perhaps Doctor Dang has some healing post-part-'em advice for our loose cannon Flatt Butte fabricator.

Dang: No soy sauce.

Kevin turned it off and stared out the curtainless window. A newborn star burned through the overcast heaven, resting a subdued reflection upon the hardwood floor.

"Papa Joe," Kevin softly petitioned, "please ask God for me, why He tilted the world."

* * *

257
Captain Pedro Valdez emptied his whiskey flask in four gulps while piloting the Coast Guard Huey and his two passengers above Alligator Alley. Two miles west of the Miami exit he noticed the roadblock below. "Nothing here but state troopers," he yelled over the helicopter's roar to the big FBI man occupying the copilot's seat to his right. "Maybe your bank rob mob had a getaway submarine and took off below the radar," he snickered and reached under the seat for his secret reserve flask.

The chopper circled high above the manned barricade while Chief Milner scanned the surrounding everglades through the latest magnifying lens of a high-powered scope on an M-1 sniper rifle.

"Thank you, Captain Kangaroo. Alert me if you spot any periscopes. Meanwhile please keep both hands on the wheel or the stick or whatever it's called."

"You look for bank robbersh," came the drunken reply, "and I'll drink and drive or fly or whatever it's called."

Milner continued scoping the barricade area as a voice from the rear jump seat offered some friendly advice. "Don't shoot the troopers, boss. They're on our side."

Chief Milner focused in on the deadly swamp three hundred feet below, but was contemplating shooting Wally when the captain throttled full speed back toward Mackerel Isle.

"Why the big rush?" asked Milner.

"I'm late for AA," Valdez chortled. "That's a joke," he tried to explain and took another swig.

"Can you get me one of those sniper rifles?" Wally asked his boss. "I always wanted to shoot a gator and mount it over my fake fireplace to give it a little theatrical authenticity."

"Is it remotely possible," Chief Milner wanted to know, "that I be given a moment or two of silence to ponder how a carload of fugitives magically vanished?"

Captain Valdez appealed to Wally. "Smarty calls me a kangaroo and then asks for silence in a helicopter."

Ignoring the drunk pilot, Wally responded to the vanishing act of the fugitives as Toler's courtroom escape sprang to mind.
"Look for a drive-in closet."

"Sheesh," Valdez muttered, "I've been hijacked by two armed fruit salads."

Chief Milner postulated, "Toler probably had a boat hidden in the marsh. Fly us back slowly and give me a sip of that stuff in your flask. Take us out over the Atlantic too, just in case."

"One sip," Valdez stipulated, reluctantly passing it over.

"But we have to remain within our jurisdiction of seven miles from the coast. Your little rifle won't be much defense against Cuba's Russian MiGs. I'm only authorized to operate these unarmed search-and-rescue craft. I've lost a few points off my pilot's license," he pointed out.

"And take a drink or give it back," he continued. "I'm getting antsy, which is closely followed by edgy, which comes right before panic."

"Don't worry about any jurisdictional boundaries," Milner said, looking at the flask. "If necessary, we will follow the fugitives into a foreign country and kidnap them. It's legal as long as we don't read them their rights till we get them back to our country. Other countries don't mind us collecting our trash off of their streets. And as for Cuba's MiGs or the whiskey . . ." he finished by tossing the flask out the passenger opening.

"Are you nuts!" screamed Valdez, slamming the joystick all the way forward and jerking the throttle all the way back which resulted in a helicopter nosedive in hot pursuit of the flask, like a steel eagle hunting down an aluminum sparrow.

"Chief, do something!" shouted Wally over the engine's full-throttled clamor. "Whatever copilots do!"

On an enlarging panoramic backdrop of grayish-green swamp with stunted cypress trees growing steadily larger, Chief Milner saw his life flash before his eyes. Within the noonday nightmare, he closed his eyes and voicelessly lip-synced, "Yea, tho I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ."
Kevin woke up at noon, stretched his arms and muttered to himself, "I'll bet our federal cowboys are reminiscing the good times over Pina Caladas on the beach somewhere. I can picture a couple of blue-hairs tottering around near them with their metal detector in search of lost wedding rings from dieters. I almost hear Wahler screaming at them to quit blocking the sun, yelling that they should go back inside their cabana to watch Bob Barker and marvel that anybody could bid higher than fifty-nine dollars on a washer/dryer combo."

* * *

Wally's scream cracked the Huey's Plexiglas bubble just as Valdez leveled out the diving helicopter fifteen feet above the swamp. The pilot then scanned the murky water and spotted a quick reflective blink just below the surface --- either the flask or the eye of a submerged alligator. The desperate pilot hovered the craft directly over the sinking twinkle, then held his nose and jumped out.

Wally reached over the vacated pilot seat, grabbed the joystick and hauled back with all hundred and eighteen sinewy pounds. The steel bird dipped its tail to within inches of the hungry marsh where it hung vertically for three agonizing seconds, then finally found purchase in the cloying air and clawed its way straight up toward the midday sun.

"Chief, the stick is stuck," Wally warned. "Flip on those copilot controls."

Milner responded, "I will fear no evil," as the upper atmosphere thinned into insufficient resistance to support the rotating airfoils. With the gracefully dignified fluidity of a Polynesian cliff diver, the chopper leveled out very briefly before streaking headfirst for the shallow swamp once again.

Milner concluded, "My cup runneth over."

* * *
"You look rough in the morning without your makeup," Kevin chided as Ant came into the living room wearing a Speedo and the blond while scratching his thick chin stubble.

"It's not morning, sleepy head," Ant protested. "I was up earlier and made breakfast for everybody," he mentioned with a glance at the two feet protruding from the mountain of money from which soft snores still issued.

"Thanks, bro," Kevin replied. "I'm famished."

"Kev, I didn't want to wake you guys up because you were both sleeping so peacefully, but I didn't want to see all that food go to waste either, so, uh . . . "

"You ate it," Kevin gathered.

"Guilty," Ant confessed, "but you didn't really miss much. Just eggs, bacon, ham, sausage, fatback, hash browns, biscuits, toast, Pop Tarts, Captain Crunch and Count Choculas."

"What are Count Choculas?"

"This great new cereal that was invented while we were locked up. It's got little chocolate marshmallows and blood-red raspberry hearts."

"You're making me miss prison chow. I presume you are ready for lunch now. Why don't we pop some of those TV dinners into the oven?"

Ant hung his head.

"You ate them too?"

"Sorry, bro."

"Is there any food left?"

"Some moldy olives."

"All right, let's go shopping again, but put on something besides that Speedo, and either shave or ditch the wig."

"By the way," Ant wondered, "where's Pablo?"

"He must have slipped out sometime last night. Saves us one bullet," Kevin figured as he flicked on the radio with his toe. A screeching band of demons joined in with Charlie Daniels and the devil as they dueled over a golden fiddle.

"Thank you, white devils!" the leafy money mountain erupted
as Leo sat straight up. "Next time just ram a flaming pitchfork up my rear coal chute!" exclaimed the aroused word monger, then spotted the giant with his stubble, wig and Speedo.

"Hell no," Leo swore before burrowing back down into the roots of all evil.

*   *   *

The search-and-rescue helicopter dived hell-bent for the deadly swamp. Bracing one hand against his jump seat and the other hand on the jammed joystick, Wally followed Chief Milner's pious example with his own prayerful plagiarism, "Lord, give me strength."

Like a blind Samson at the Philistine coliseum, Wally closed his eyes and heaved with all his strength in opposite directions. The joystick miraculously popped free and slid forward to level out the chopper forty feet above the fetid fen.

"One other thing," Wally beseeched Heaven. "If I am now chosen to survive this magnificent test of faith, please give me a sign."

Instantly the overstressed rotor blade snapped completely off of the fuselage and spun away, leaving the capsule body without a propeller.

"Lord, I'm not sure I follow You."

Like a butterfly morphed back into a caterpillar, the module plummeted gracelessly into the the marsh muck.
Leo waved away the waking annoyance pester ing his ear and dug more deeply into his financial shelter, unwilling to face life as he remembered Ant thirty minutes ago. Reluctantly, he gave up his dreams to the real world when the annoyance grew cold and hard. Opening one eye, he spotted an ugly Cuban pointing a large pistol in his face and smiling with green teeth.

"How does it feel, black Americano, to wake up to a nightmare?" asked the scar-faced Cuban.

"I've recently seen lots worse," Leo referenced Ant, "but if'n you aim to kiss me good morning, I'd much sooner you just pull that trigger first."

"It is afternoon," the thug announced, "but for you it's good night," he concluded as he squeezed the trigger. A .44 caliber big blast rang out and Leo closed his one open eye with the expectation of another awakening featuring Lucifer himself. The storyteller smiled; the company would be improving.

Scarface's exposed brain shimmied and toppled out, then rolled down his back and plopped on the floor like a beached jellyfish, yet the empty-headed enforcer remained on his feet. Pablo tapped his former employee with the hot muzzle of a .44 magnum and the big Cuban promptly crumpled with his hollow cranium bonking off the hardwood floor.

Pablo informed Leo, "When hired hands lose their minds and proceed without my orders, I simply reduce payroll overhead."

Leo sat up in the pile of greenbacks. "Migo, I been doing the refiguring on your minority partnership proposal. You might really have something there."

"As you see, I already have plenty of help," Pablo waved his magnum at the half-dozen hoodlums behind him. "But you may mitigate the excruciation of your demise by informing me of the whereabouts of your two fine companeros. In other words, tell me exactly where to find Kevin and Ant, and I won't torture you for more than a few weeks."
"You don't need to make English easy for me, Cuban college boy. And if'n you think I'd rat out Kev and Ant, then you're just crusading for a bruisading."

Kevin walked in the front door carrying a case of Budweiser. "Excuse me," he told the henchmen as he shouldered his way past. "Leo, Pablo," he acknowledged on his way to the kitchen while also stepping over Scarface.

"Stop right there," Pablo commanded, "or I'll blow your brains out."

"He's got priors," Leo pointed out.

"I'll say this just one time," Kevin informed them after he calmly turned around to face his would-be executioner. "When I left home, the happy part of me died. What's left is simply waiting to be put out of its misery," he finished and turned his back, then carried the beer on into the kitchen.

Leo grasped at the opportunity to stall for sufficient time for Kevin to arm himself. "Well, this here kinda reminds me of a time when Papaw Barker wrestled down a grizzly and made it say 'uncle.'"

Caught between Kevin's disdain of death and Leo's tall tale, Pablo stood momentarily rooted to the oak floorboards. Even the non-English speaking Cuban thugs seemed caught up in Leo's home-spun yarn.

"Yep, Papaw had that poor, pitiful thousand pound critter in a figure four hammerlock when—"

A baseball sized missile broke through the curtainless window pane, rolled across the wood and disappeared inside Scarface's big brainless head. Recognizing a hand-lobbed bomb from his Korean War days, Leo yelled, "Concussion grenade!" and dug back down into his retirement funds on the million-dollar divan.

Pablo dropped his gun and his jaw.

The ensuing explosion rocked the room, knocking over furniture and people indiscriminately. The green money mountain erupted like a rain forest volcano, spewing leaflets of every denomination in all directions.
Six bald men barreled through the imploding front door manning a battering ram stenciled Miami Vice. Stumbling over and into the downed Cuban cartel, the chaos quickly elevated to Jerry Springer proportions as the dozen guests engaged. Elbows, blackjacks and mace battled against knees, brass knuckles and straight razors. Bones cracked and plasma spurted.

Suddenly dual shock waves from a cataclysmic double blast sucked air from the packed parlor, freezing the warring six-packs into a stupor of stunned admiration for any earthly power so overwhelmingly devastating. White gypsum drops of ceiling plaster came raining down upon the battle zone challenged solely by the ominous clack-clack of another pair of triple-charged ten-gauge shotgun shells being reloaded.

Ant filled the doorway with a bulging bag of groceries at his feet and Loo-Loo in his hands. The scowling giant lowered the twin cavernous maws to target the mangled mass of shell-shocked humanity as growls of painful reality returned to the combatants.

"Chill," Ant ordered.

They chilled.

From the last batch of party crashers, one bald guy poked his bloody pate out of the scrum, spat out a brown finger and revealed, "Ant, it's me, Dawg."

"What took you guys so long?" asked Ant after lowering the sawed-off. "I called yesterday."

"First we went to the wrong address," Dawg explained. "East instead of west, or west instead of east, or something like that. We'd all had a brew or two. Anyhow, these nice ole ladies were outside having a yard sale. We bought a battering ram, concussion grenades, mace and a tiny dog collar. Then we got invited out back for some skinny-dipping and a bloody mary. The youngest sweet ole lady of the bunch could hold her breath underwater for nearly one whole minute. When she lost her dentures and showed some lowdown skills, I invited her to join our Chapter. She's out front right now on the back of my Harley."

"Excuse me," Kevin apologized, barging in from the kitchen.
carrying an AK-47.

"So the calvary finally arrives," Leo observed from under the couch. "Thanks a lot, Kevin Custer. By now I coulda been scalped or strung up by my tits."

"You tell him partner," Pablo said to Leo.
"Can we get up?" asked Dawg. "I'm starting to like the guy under me."

Leo answered while crawling out from under the sofa. "Finish your story first, so we know who to shoot."

"Well, when we finally got to the right address," Dawg continued the tale, "we saw these foreigners through the front window threatening Pops, so we crashed the party."

Leo dusted off a few dollars left on the couch and sat down. "Boy, if'n I'm your pops, then yo mammy musta been that buck-tooth quadroon down in Luzzianna who charged me twenty bucks at the last Mardi Gras."

"What was she selling?" Dawg wanted to know.
"Not Amway. Now introduce us to your ugly friends."
"Sure," Dawg agreed while the massive mess disentangled and separated into opposing camps of six bald bikers facing six angry Cubans. "On my side are Moody Blue, Fat Chance, Skunk Weed, Motor Mouth, Oil Pan and me, Dawg Pound. My new ole lady out front on my bike, changed her name from Rocketta to Sage Bush."

"The Miami Chapter Egg-Heads," Ant clarified. "I figured we might as well have a memorable farewell blast and these guys are professional party animals."

"If'n I'm dreaming," Leo offered, "just pinch my bony black butt with boiling bayou crawdads. A Barker man getting rescued by Nazi bikers is as likely as a hog using chopsticks."
"Which reminds me I'm hungry," Ant added.
"And I need another brewsky," Kevin admitted, heading back to the kitchen. "Anybody else want a Budweiser?"

Six Egg-Heads answered, "Yes," and six Cubans said, "Si."
"Sorry I asked," Kevin lamented. "I forgot that Budweiser is international lingo. There goes half a case."
"Make it an even thirteen," announced Sage Bush, formerly Rocketta, as she made an entrance with a gleaming, freshly shaved head. "What did I miss?" she inquired suspiciously while tapping a stained rolling pin against her thigh.

"She's our second round backup," Dawg explained. "The enemies who've already heard about her rolling pin usually lose the first round on purpose."

Ant took over. "Unfortunately, my brothers, we're on a tight schedule, so we have to run. I'll cover the Cubans while you guys gather up the cash and put it back in those army bags over there in the corner. Take out whatever you need for booze or any party supplies. We'll take Pablo with us to pilot his yacht. Do whatever you like with the other Cubans."

"Thanks, bro," Dawg responded. "We'll get enough booze for everybody to stay drunk until tomorrow morning. When the liquor runs out, we'll all be in the mood to rock and roll again with a slam-bang tequila sunrise."

"I'm game," Sage Bush readily consented, yanking out her dentures and a pink cell phone. "And I know thome experienthed ole party girlth," she slobbered.

Oil Pan smiled. "Booze, brawls and broads. Life don't get no better than this."

* * *

Landing skids and the tail section snapped off on impact and buried in the marsh. Remarkably the Plexiglas fuselage bubble still existed partially intact and temporarily afloat like a big bobbing apple amid a party of lounging lizards——gator grub under glass.

"Yikes!" yelled Wally when an evil creature clamped onto his ankle. He snatched out his pistol and pointed it down toward the encroacher only to discover the alcoholic pilot clambering aboard with a steely grip on the agent's lower leg.

Wally warned, "You have until I finish this sentence to let go."
Captain Valdez released the ankle halfway aboard and pulled out the recovered whiskey flask. After knocking back a big slug, he exclaimed, "I'm redeemed!" The inebriated atheist continued to blaspheme, "Called to a higher purpose; chosen to spread the word to all creatures great and small; baptized in the blood of the—"

Valdez was bodily snatched back out of the cockpit by nature's most powerful jaws as a fourteen-foot behemoth slammed into the hypocrite's hips and pirouetted down in an ancient death dance. The unfaithful pilot's last view was the murky underwater lair where he was stashed by the grinning monster as a midnight snack for more leisurely consumption.

Wally aligned his pistol sights on the gator's great uncle and shot it between the eyes. It blinked once and kept coming.

"Not good," the federal agent concluded as he climbed out onto the top of the cracked Plexiglas bubble. Exhausted, he sat down on a metal stump which had recently housed the rotary blade. Assuming the universal thinker pose with elbows on knees and chin cupped in one hand, he stared out over the taxpayer-supported, malarial egg hatchery and avowed, "I hate liberals."

"Wally! Help me!" cried Chief Milner from the cockpit below.

"I think my back is broke."

"Broke or broken?" the subordinate agent quizzed Milner. "Out of money or out of alignment?"

"Wally, please not now."

"Miss Ironspine, my fifth grade teacher, would never answer any student until they used the proper grammatics. She had the most perfect shins."

"Broken! Broken! Broken!" wailed Milner.

"Better," Wally allowed while surveying the numerous circling, federally protected man-eaters. "And now I will tell you the same thing Miss Ironspine told me whenever I offered to rub her tired feet. 'Forget it, Walter.' But in this case it would be, 'Forget it, Chief.' Otherwise I would be mimicking Miss Ironspine while talking to myself, and that's getting out there a little too far,
even for me. Maybe you'd be better off sending a two-way radio S.O.S. to that Australian crocodile hunter. He often wrestles alligators in his spare time."

"You are absolutely correct, Wally. Death by mastication is better than listening to your pre-pubic romantic fantasies or any swamp survival advice. On the other hand, next week I sign off on pay grade raises," Milner hissed in pain. "Or not."

"On my way, Chief. Don't move."

While Wally pondered potential methods of saving his big boss, a coral snake slithered into the cockpit and coiled itself around Chief Milner's ankle. Warily, as a child might sample fried liver, it nosed its diamond head up under the trouser leg cuff and flicked a forked tongue onto Milner's tensed calf muscle.

"Hurry, Wally. There's a snake in my pants."

"I've heard that one before, boss. Tell the one about that prostitute who gave you a discount due to the size of——"

"Wally, I'm not joking. A snake is tonguing my leg and——"

"Wally to the rescue," Agent Wahler announced while leaning down into the cockpit and grabbing Milner's necktie. With both legs wrapped around the rotor's housing stump, Wally began hauling the Chief up out of the copilot seat.

"Wa-ee, st-pf," Milner choked out.

"Shameful grammar," Wally chided as he reeled in the sturdy, pre-stretched polyester material hand-over-hand while the great uncle gator laboriously boarded the capsule. The coral snake sensed a higher food chain predator too late when it poked its pointy head out from under the trouser leg cuff. Delighted with an exotic and colorful appetizer, the gator clamped down on the triangular hors d'oeuvre and pulled. The serpent instinctively tightened its tail grip on the human ankle and the tug of war for earthly domination among men and beasts stretched on.

* * *

"Thanks for nothing," Kevin informed Pablo when the BMW's air
conditioner died on the cross-island trek to the yacht club marina.
"Did you steal this car from a church parking lot?"

"I'll have you know," Pablo huffed indignantly, "I bought this classic used car from a local business maverick called Crazy Carl in order to save his diabetic grandmother from sunstroke."

"Speaking of sun," Kevin was reminded, "earlier I had a vision of those FBI agents stretched out on the beach at some high-class southern resort, having the time of their lives on the taxpayer's tab," he revealed while checking the dashboard radio for any local news flashes.

Scoop: This is your always dependable spy in the sky, Scoop Fuller, aboard the WHIZ whirlybird, above another less fortunate helicopter stuck in the muck just west of Miami. My zoom lens espies two old acquaintances I once met at a bridge party. They are now sniping alligators from the top of a crashed chopper. These party-crashing puppy killers have evolved into chopper-crashing gator poachers as the organized criminality in Florida rises. Where's the Coast Guard when we need them? Now back to our regularly scheduled programming.

Caller: The gator scares my poor cat up a tree and she won't come down. Next morning the cat is frozen solid, so I have to saw off her feet to get her out of the tree. Well, I'm a little depressed over my cat freezing to death in South Florida, so I turn on the tube for a relaxing dose of reality TV, but I get a politico loser ranting about how the world is definitely going to end in two weeks due to guess what. Global warming!

Kevin turned off the mania as he pulled the used BMW into the Mackerel Yacht Club Marina parking lot.
"Mackerel Intensive Care Center," nurse's aide Monika Looski answered the telephone. "State your name, credit rating and credit card number. In the event your card expires before you do, we will bill your nearest surviving kin. In the event you require a hearse or ambulance, that's extra."

"Congratulations," the receiver responded. "You have just won the Bahreini Lotto. Please give us your credit card number in order to receive your fifty million dollars."

"You called last week," Monika reminded the accented voice, "and I gave you my card number. Now I owe Americano Expresso nine thousand bucks for a twelfth century Persian rug and twenty cases of champagne, neither of which was ever ordered or delivered. I am still waiting on my first lotto installment check so I can quit this stinking job. You wouldn't believe how many silly people have a big meal with a whole bottle of wine, then wreck their car and crap their bloomers."

"If you simply supply us with a fresh number from a different credit card," the voice replied, "we will instruct you in the old traditional western art of transferring debts from one credit card to another until you become so old that collection agency calls become welcome distractions from your joint aching loneliness."

Monika put out her Winston 100 in a butt-filled bedpan and exhaled a perfect smoke ring up toward the fluorescent lighting, amazed by her own talent. "That sounds swell, but call back later. Right now I have to make my rounds and turn off all the machines of patients who have flat-lined. That continuous shrill alarm at the end is even more nerve racking than the heartbeat beeps."

She hung up and waltzed out of the front reception area into the patient's pre-morgue hospice section where all five beds were occupied and inquired, "Anybody dead yet?"

When nobody answered or moved, she glided up to the first two beds in her rubberized, white stalking shoes. The two rolling beds had been double cranked up for head and knees, then pushed together
side against side to form a single, double-wide recliner. Beneath the sheets lay leggy, pot-bellied twins, holding hands and gazing happily into eternity.

"Not in public," Monika scolded the siblings while she tried to separate the wheeled beds without success. The unified palms held defiantly, the ethereal metacarpal bond locking two sleeping units into one joint graveyard staging scene.

Equally determined, the nurse's aide leaned over the foot of the juxtaposed mattresses and grabbed the brothers' unified wrists in order to pull apart the two hands. Both dead joints were frozen together in ice-cold resistance.

"Nice caboose," noted a voice to Monika's rear.

She squealed in surprise, lost her balance and toppled forward onto the outstretched arms of the twins. Now the wheeled hospital beds did separate, creating a chasm that sucked all three bodies onto the gleaming linoleum floor. Both deceased brothers unwillingly flung their free arms across Monika's round rump, sandwiching the squealing nurse's aide on the sterile floor in a cool cocoon of frigid flesh.

The crash landing forced a putrid postmortem exhalation from the brothers that enshrouded the threesome in a thick gray cloud of decaying luncheon discharge: the undeniable revenge of Oscar Mayer abandoned in an unplugged refrigerator. Monika's shrieks elevated into the heart-rending cries of a virgin cat during nonconsensual intercourse.

"There now, Miss Meloncheeks," soothed the caboose commentator while sidling across the tiles in sivlery paper slippers along with matching silver leg shackles. One hand pulled a squeaking I.V. trolley with castors screaming for a shot of WD-40. Extending the other arm in a seemingly gallant gesture of assistance, the pudgy wanton codger clawed the air with his fat-fingered free hand.

"Oh thanks, patient Limbo," Monika gushed, grasping for the hand of deliverance. But just before making the connection, the drooling radio genius dropped his groping gripper onto the lady's exposed thigh and commenced walking his fingers up under the hem
of her candy-striped skirt, like a five-legged spider seeking out hidden sanctuary.

Monika renewed her screeching and instinctively grabbed for the invading hand, destroying what little remained of her admirer's precarious balance. Limbo toppled over onto the trio, bringing down the trailing I.V. trolley cart with him.

The undeterred hand spider continued its exploration on the unending ancestral quest begun by the first horny caveman. Yet the radio host slowed his rightful pursuit of happiness to momentarily reflect upon a professed lifelong adherence to family values—a temporary backslide to the far right.

Monika stopped squealing long enough to wrap her long fingers around Limbo's flabby neck rolls and threaten, "If you stop now, your life expectancy will become shorter than a chubby chihuahua in Chinatown."

From the fourth bed, patient Milner complained softly to his neighboring patient. "I thought an intensive care facility was supposed to be quiet."

Bed five replied, "I know about this guy who thought so long that he petrified himself into a stone statue."

"Wally, you just reset the bar for inane remarks."

"To make matters worse, he was on the commode."

"I'm a hard right-winger, Wally. Toilet humor ranks somewhere between blasphemy and gun control."

"MENSA named the statue The Thinker Stinker."

"I never heard of MENSA."

"Don't let it bother you, sir. I seriously doubt that you're on their mailing list."

Between the wide-eyed, dead twin brothers, Monika directed the radio celebrity superstar, "Higher. Now round and round."

"Hold on a sec, babe," her partner implored, "while I tape down the button on this morphine pump."

"I smell hanky-panky," Chief Milner noted with a deep intake of foul air, "and defrosting Frigidairs," he added while straining against his back brace for a peep at the show below.
Wally remarked, "Chief, that dumpy talkster sounds gratingly familiar. Another mystery is the Dade County Jail lettering that is stenciled on the back of his orange jumpsuit."

Milner revealed, "He's an inmate from Dade County Jail."
"Glad to see your ESP sensors working again, sir. Any more scintillating vibes?"

"His name is Trash Limbo. The jailer could not tolerate his perpetual monolog of complaints and sent him over here for spinal treatment. Some high-powered attorney left him after getting his money, drugs, mansion and first-born son. Now he is represented by a team of ACLU transvestites."

From below, Limbo's liberalized voice wafted aloft, "Save the tree frogs. Save the tree frogs."

"Instant conversion," Milner rationalized. "No liberals in foxholes and no conservatives in jailhouses."

"Maybe so," Wally almost agreed, "but a few closet queens are still being recruited undercover by the armed forces using that screwy 'Don't ask, don't tell' doctrine, even though they are easy to pick out. I mean, here comes a platoon of soldiers storming over the hilltop with bayonets affixed, all except one who is swinging a big leather purse over his head."

"That's not funny," Monika Looski rebuked as she rose from the floor, carefully preserving a crusty stain on her candy-striped blouse. "My son is a Green Beret with an Irish castle."

"Forget blouse blackmail," Limbo advised Monika after zipping up. "Most of us converted liberals have no money, no morals and no shame."

Wally looked puzzled. "What's the deal with the state fair champion wiener eaters? I told them my life story last night which proves they are good listeners."

"It only proves they're dead," Milner figured, "not to mention the rancid odor of spoiled liverwurst abandoned in a condemned food mart."

"Impossible," Monika argued as she inspected the twin brothers still embraced and timelessly peering into one another's wide eyes,
exploring the mirroring dried wells to discover, at long last, the
bottomless nirvana; of clueless contentment. "They were, only here
for chronic bloatation. The single fatal case I ever saw before
was a night watchman from a burrito factory. He popped like a fat
Rodney King pinata at the Policeman's Ball."

Milner inquired, "Is she your cousin, Wally?"

Nonfluxed, Monika continued, "Aside from that, whenever any
patients reach their expiration dates — that's a politically
correct term in the presence of grieving kin — a loud flat-line
monitor begins whahing."

"Whahing?" asked Milner.

"You know that eardrum piercing alarm that the life support
machine makes when it is ready for its next victim. It goes WHAAAH
with such irritating urgency that the dead are glad they are now
also deaf."

Wally probed, "How do we even know that dead people are really
deaf? Isn't that an unsolved philosophical riddle like the tree
falling silently in the forest, only because nobody is around to
hear it crash?"

"Please stop, Wally," Chief Milner pleaded.

"But I say that if nobody was there when it fell, then how do
we ever know it fell in the first place? It creeps me out to even
hypothesize that some suicidal sycamore made all that racket, only
to discover later that every tree is still standing tall."

Miss Looski asked Wally, "Are you married?"

"I'm not," Milner answered.

"Not surprising," Monika noted.

Wally concluded, "Eventually some nerdy philosophy student
will bury a tape recorder in the forest to solve that riddle. But
since trees outlive all animals except for sea turtles, we must
wait for technology to produce nuclear powered double-A batteries.
Even that bass drum pounding pink Ritalin rabbit cannot outlast a
Giant Sequoia."

Limbo lifted the toppled trolley cart only to discover that
the hanging drip bag had run out of morphine. He carefully removed

275
the pouch from an aluminum hook, ripped open the plastic and licked clean the inside lining, then ate the bag. With a sated smile, the rotund celeb sank back down onto the floor where he crossed his stubby legs and wept.

"That is so sad," Monika sympathized. "Don't you fret, Trashy. I'll find you some dope."

"Bless you, Miss Looski. I love you more than ravioli."

"Stop," Monika gushed, blushing. "Just help me figure out what happened to the Martin twins."

"They died," Milner pointed out.

"We know that, Sherlock," she responded in exasperation, "but we got lost in the woods before figuring out exactly what caused their earthly departure."

"Maybe Wally's life story put them in a coma," Milner tried again, "or Trash talked them to death. He's got priors."

Monika studied the identically deceased brothers rapturously entwined on the floor below the silent deathwatch monitor. "But neither theory explains why the whaher is not whahing."

Limbo said, "Miss Looski, with all due respect, nobody cares what killed the incestuous wiener eaters. The only question here of paramount significance at this particular moment in history is whether you do or do not have the key to the medicine cabinet."

"No, I do not. I am only an aide, not a nurse."

"But you promised," Limbo whimpered, welling up for another shameless bout of public bawling. "And you seemed so truthful, so honest, so pure."

"Can the rubbish, Trash," she said. "I'll get your dope from my pimp. Don't look so surprised. Nobody can afford these shoes on an aide's salary."

"I have a theory," Wally volunteered.

Chief Milner jerked the pillow out from underneath his head, smashed his fist through it and pulled out a handful of synthetic stuffing. With the monumental consequence of a Dutch boy plugging a leaking dike, he began earnestly cramming the pillow fillings into his ears.

276
"First of all," Wally postulated, "when it comes to unplugged patients on life-support apparatus, we must first consider those obvious suspects."

"Who might they be?" probed Monika as she surveyed the two bloated victims on the floor.

"Impatient heirs, clumsy janitors and mercy killers. And as none of us are heirs or janitors, we may deduce that the murderer among us is a mercy-killing liberal with a rap sheet longer than Wilt Chamberlain's, uh, knee socks. Probably an overzealous new convert," he finished with a glare at Limbo.

"Death with dignity," Limbo partially confessed. "It is truly sad to realize that until my recent left-wing conversion, I really believed that murdering terminally ill patients was wrong."

He then began swaying and singing in a melancholy tenor: "I-I once wa-as lost, bu-ut now a-am found . . ."

Milner crammed in more stuffing.

"Wa-as blind, bu-ut now I seeeee."

Unconvinced, Monika said, "This who-done-it cannot be resolved quite that easily. We switched over to battery-powered life-support after a number of unfortunate incidents. Although it is true that none of us are heirs or janitors, it is also true that there are no plugs to be pulled. Mackerel Intensive Care Center was losing too many paying patients early due to a number of preliminary deaths involving electric monitors. The last straw came when our top death consultant, Doctor Jack Ripper Califorkinem, pulled a main circuit breaker and we lost all five patients in hospice. An investigation revealed Doctor Califorkinem was secretly financed by the FDA."

"Now I'm really confused," Milner admitted. "Why in the world would the Food and Drug Administration investigate when nobody was drugged or poisoned?"

"Not them," she clarified. "The Funeral Directors of America. The ones with that catchy slogan: 'Your loss is our gain.' But my personal opinion is that they are all vampires. Have you ever seen a mortician with a tan? Whenever I see one, I hear organ music and am telepathically compelled to shake their cold, long white fingers
when they thrust them at me with smirking condolences of big teeth. But I have to be nice to them because sooner or later I'll be on my back defensively butt naked and strapped to a tilted table in a windowless room where they'll drain me dry as—AAAAH! AAAH! AAAH!"

Patient Limbo stood behind the aide, slapping her quivering glutes with electric resuscitation paddles. "Stop raving and get my pills!" he commanded.

Monika, ionically charged, sprawled forward across one of the twin's twin beds with a close-up of the postmortem embrace below. "But Trashy, I told you I don't have the key, so even if I wanted to get—AAAAH! AAAH! AAAH!"

Wally sat up. "You're under arrest, Limbo."

"I'm a jail inmate; I'm already under arrest."

Wally persisted, "You have the right to a cigarette if you snitch out all your crime partners. You have the right to a first-year attorney who—AAAAH! AAAH! AAAH!"

Milner raised up partway against his restraining back brace. "Inmate Limbo, stop or I'll re-rearrest you for assault on a fed. You would then face the horrific prospect of minimum security lock-up with free dental, free medical, supervised tennis and cable TV. Most big butt porkers like you make friends fast in a cold shower, so—AAAAH! AAAH! AAAH!"
"I minored in criminology," Pablo regaled his captors. "My education was financed by my dearly departed godfather, Senor Moreno. Recently I found myself in position to properly repay him for putting me through a liberal arts school."

"We've heard the stories before," Ant reminded him as they traversed the short gangplank onto Pablo's small yacht in the soft harbor moonlight. "Tomorrow you can tell your tales to Castro."

"Nice boat," Kevin observed.

"If'n you like the smell of fish guts," Leo stipulated as he stepped aboard.

Ant stooped and pulled in the gangplank while admitting, "I like fish."

Leo noted, "You like most anything that fits in your mouth."

Pablo complained to Leo, "Must I endure your diatribe all the way to Havana?"

Leo moved up behind him and pressed the barrel of Sheriff Roberson's .38 Police Special into the gangster's back. "You make the call, big shot operator. One more crack like that might get your spinal cord disconnected."

"Peace, my partner," Pablo apologized as he removed a gold Rolex and passed it over his shoulder. Twelve diamonds redirected captured moonbeams.

Leo lowered the weapon and accepted the peace offering with his free hand. "I love you, Migo."

"However," Pablo tacked on, "your language skills were likely passed down through mixed plantation genes."

The Korean War veteran began whistling a soulful ballad about a thin line between love and hate, then shot Pablo twice, once in each buttock. The crime lord crumpled to the deck while writhing in pain and the three partners continued on into the small deck cabin.

Ant paused in the doorway with the gangplank tucked up under one arm. Turning back to Pablo, he advised, "Don't run off again."
"This is a blast," Trash manically revealed after lifting up the shock paddles from Chief Milner's jumping body. "How about a double?" the glib celeb asked the unresponsive Maritn twins when he dropped to his knees and applied one paddle to each of the two clinging brothers. Both convulsed in synchronized spasms, like an untimely tantrum of dancing puppets forced to endure another one of mankind's dire manipulations.

Following the electrifying aerobics, the Minnesota twins sat straight up, brought back from deep spaceless serenity to be reinstated as top contenders for the WWB, World Wiener Belt, held by the legendary ninety-three pound Ito Yakalotta. But the Martins declined reentry with a simultaneous "Nah" and flopped back onto the sterile tile, dead again.

Wally figured it out. "Nobody can blame them for taking the high road. They would never have beaten Ito anyway. That little champion swallows weiners whole with no gag reflex. Was he born that way or did he choose?"

"Don't go there, Wally," Milner warned, "or you might get us zapped again by that left-wing libertine."

Monika still looked puzzled. "This makes the second time the twins have croaked and we have not heard the first bleep out of their high-tech battery-powered bleepers."

'Limbo grinned guiltily as he put aside the shock paddles and reached inside his jumpsuit pocket to retrieve six C-size batteries. Like a remorseful child whose punishment includes returning Oreos to the cookie jar, Trash grudgingly replaced the batteries in the backside of the deathwatch monitor.

WHAAAAAA . . . it squalled its macabre mega-note loud enough to reawaken the twice-dead twins. Barney, elder of the brothers by one full minute and thus spokesman for the duo, yelled angrily above the din, "They must leave us alone!"

The maddened siblings joined all four hands to ogle into their soulmate's big eyes to exchange privileged telepathic communiques
a licensed-to-kill, pistol-packing Assistant U.S. Attorney. And in this office you run nothing but your mouth," he snarled, rising behind his fabricated fifteen thousand dollar desk engraved with the Scales of Justice logo below the Government Surplus Agency stamp.

Favoring each leg in succession, Pablo limped gingerly across a red, white and blue carpet. After lifting the telephone receiver and placing it on the desktop, he dialed a number and also pushed the console speaker button.

A hörsey voice answered, "Esquire Escorts."
"This is Don Pablo. Get me Carlito."
Fran paled. "You know Carlito?"
"My son-in-law," Pablo said and smiled.
Carlito came to the phone immediately. "Hi, baby doll," his effeminate gravelly voice of unidentifiable gender greeted the Cuban godfather. "Trigger is out on call, but I can let you talk to Mister Ed if you're still seeking stable phone sex."
"This is business, Carlito. Pull that hidden camera video on Senor Nachoz. First name, Francisco."
"Just a sec."
"No elevator music," Pablo insisted.
Following thirty seconds of golden silence, Carlito came back on the line. "I found it, Don Pablo. The cover title is: Fran and Francis Go Yard."
"Who is the supporting actor?"
"A mule."
Pablo hung up and waited.
"Cuz," Fran gushed, "I can get you our very latest Coast Guard cutter with computerized battle station and surface-to-surface deck torpedoes."

* * *

"Try the Coast Guard," Scoop Fuller suggested while strapping into the pilot seat of the WHIZ traffic-and-weather-together heli-
copter. "I only do local coverage, not international shoot-outs."

"We called the Coast Guard," Chief Milner explained from just outside the cockpit, "but our line beeped three times, meaning a maniac judge had authorized a tap on our own FBI phone. Whoever might have been listening probably overheard the call from Florida pinpointing Toler's location."

Wally also added from behind Milner, "Don't forget the minor detail that we already crashed one Coast Guard chopper."

"I was there," Scoop the Snoop reminded them while firing up the news copter. During the rotor's warm-up, he signed off, "Later, gator poachers. I've got a hot story simmering. Crazy Carl Rovers has commandeered a speeding busload of third graders and is now threatening to chuck them out one at a time unless their parents buy up all of his classic used cars by noon."

Milner climbed aboard uninvited, lugging an army carrying case. Wally scooted by Milner into the rear jump seat with his own specialty case, packing the small cockpit with humans and luggage.

"Get out!" the newsman ordered.

Milner opened his case and unpacked a scoped M-1 rifle.

"Or not," Scoop amended, easing back on the joystick as the small helicopter struggled into the air, roaring its protest to an over-capacity payload.

"Where to, Annie Oakley?" Scoop questioned Milner.

"Southwest."

"I don't suppose you professional bounty hunters have any longitude or latitude reference points for the hillbilly band on the run," Scoop remarked with a sneer.

Wally frowned and rebuked, "If we knew where they were, we wouldn't be trying to find them."

"That makes sense," Scoop continued the sarcasm. "What's in the other case? Einstein's footnotes of relativity?"

"A flamethrower," Milner revealed as they ascended into some low-lying clouds piled high with condensation. "The bad guys have one, so we did not want to be out-gunned."
"Fight fire with fire," Scoop mocked. "That makes sense too. Glad to see you are both on the same intellectual page."

Milner growled, "If you repeat the 'makes sense' mantra one more time, I'll shatter your femur. Now start a search pattern or whatever it is that search pilots do."

"Circular," Wally instructed; "like a buzzard."


Chief Milner touched the rifle's business end to Scoop's leg and tapped the trigger once. The single shot resounded within the rounded cockpit like a cherry bomb in a football helmet.

Scoop squalled and the helicopter whipsawed back and forth across the overcast sky like Ben Franklin's kite after losing its tail to lightning. Gritting his teeth, Scoop somehow managed to bring the swooping bird under control.

Wally chided his boss, "Oh my, aren't we touchy today."

Milner pointed the rifle at Wally. "You want some?"

"No, I want to pee. All this drama," Wally justified. "Did you bring your Jiffy jar?"

The news pilot complained; "I can't feel my right leg, which operates the right rudder, so we can't turn right, just left."

"Same difference," Wally surmised as he began unpacking the flamethrower. "Either way takes us to China."

* * *

"Before I re-try Dingleberry Pie," the boat radio song ended.

"That was Harley's Angels," the announcer identified, "with this week's chart topper, 'Dingleberry Pie.' This new Viking band features a biker chick lead singer named Erika the Red who wears a studded mask along with a bright red wig. And next we have Roy Orb with 'Partly Woman.'"

Kevin cut Roy off and mused, "So Creach hit the big time. Do you want to go back, Ant? I'll bet that torch is still blazing."

"No," Ant declined, "I prefer the Amazon. Creach showed me the beauty of piranha."
Leo complained, "I should get my royalties for that beautiful song."

Ant stared.

"All right," Leo admitted, "you helped a little."

"Gee thanks," Ant returned.

Kevin eyed the dash compass and adjusted the helm wheel to return them back onto their southwest heading. "According to my vast nautical experience, I believe we just now passed beyond the seven mile boundary into international waters."

"I never knew you sailed before," Ant noted.

"I haven't," Kevin clarified, "but I never miss 'Gilligan's Island.'"

"They shipwrecked," Ant reminded him darkly as the first drop of rain leaked from the sunless sky.

"Company," Ant announced, squinting back across the widening vees of the speeding yacht's trailing wake. "It looks like a Coast Guard cutter."

Kevin throttled to full speed ahead and Pablo's luxury craft skimmed the wave tops. Yet the yacht speed was no match for a new coastal warship designed to chase down drug runners when not otherwise occupied defending our sacred shores from varied international invaders.

"They're gaining on us," Ant warned. "Everyone man, your battle stations!" he shouted.

"What the heck does that mean?" asked Leo.

"I'm not sure," Ant admitted, "but it sounded right."

* * *

"Fire torpedo one!" commanded Pablo.

"Si, Don Pablo," Julio assented. "Torpedo numero uno is now launched," he affirmed after jabbing one red button on the deck computer. The ship trembled as a heavy deck rocket ignited with a roar and dived into the water, sailing away just below the surface. But instead of tracking the fishing yacht, the cigar-shaped missile
continued its starboard trajectory, harmlessly streaking off at ninety degrees from the Coast Guard cutter.

Aboard the compact battleship bridge, Pablo stared at his hired captain accusingly.

Julio bunched his shoulders while raising both palms. "Boats and guns, I know about;" the drug runner explained, "but computers and torpedoes, not so much."

"Pull up beside them and fire again," Pablo ordered.

The fifty-million dollar vessel responded, paralleling the yacht and Pablo sang out, "Fire torpedo two!"

"I know, I know," Julio snapped while punching the computer console's second red button. "Adiós, numero dos," he noted, as the second loaded cigar smoked out of its deck rack and set sail just below sea level.

But with no compensation for a forward moving target, the million-dollar amphibious cigar missed the speeding yacht by ten meters to the rear. The deadly stogie crossed the yacht's trailing wake and exploded against an already dead and snoutless dolphin that had instinctively drifted out to deep sea for its peacefully scenic transition to Atlantis or wherever departing dolphin souls congregate.

Pablo pulled out his magnum and emptied the clip into Julio's chest. The ill-chosen captain cartwheeled off the bridge, flipped bonelessly over the deck railing and toppled into the ocean among a school of recently released pet barracuda.

With mind-numbing machismo fueled by an unsated thirst for revenge, Pablo gunned his warship forward, outdistancing his prey across the waves.

"He's gone yelller," Leo surmised.
"He's circling," Kevin pointed out.
"He's comming straight back at us," Ant warned.
"He's gone loco," Leo revised.

Kevin spun the helm wheel, barely avoiding a deadly head-on collision. The passing boats swapped hull paint nearly capsizing.
the smaller yacht.

Pablo circled once more, grinding the white gold caps off of his filed down teeth nubs. With kamikaze accuracy he approached from a side angle, now lining up his steel-hulled cruiser for a more certain crash impact.

Overhead, an ink-black thundercloud opened to dispatch neither rain nor lightning, but rather a vintage biplane. A pair of custom snow skis with elevator insoles was strapped to the top side of the upper wing. Judge Andrew Silverspoon Moonie, his tiny feet buckled securely into the skis, stood atop the wing blazing away with twin pistols at anything moving below. Pearl-handled Colts belched a steady stream of bullets from both hands as the judge indiscriminately dispensed death sentences.

Pablo ducked below the bulletproof bridge shield and crawled into the mini-battleship's fifty-caliber machine gun mount. With total disregard for the lunatic standing on the upper wing, the angry gangster zeroed in on the cockpit and fired.

Igor hunkered low with the natural expertise common to all hunchbacks and howled at the moonless sky, then pulled a lever releasing a lethal contrail of DDT.

Pablo choked on the poisoned vapors enveloping his cruiser. Jumping out of the gun mount and onto the deck helm just recently vacated by Julio, the gangland godfather resumed control of the vessel. He spun the wheel hard right and left, zigzagging back and forth in a frantic effort to evade the toxic fumes. But directly overhead, Igor stayed the course zig for zag in unrelenting and suffocating warfare.

Unable to breathe, Pablo abandoned ship, diving overboard into the churning sea. A freshly trained school of carnivorous barracuda lurked just below the surface. Bloated from a fat tax attorney, a skinny hitman and now Julio, the pack refrained from swarming their former trainer, momentarily content to watch the human agonizingly tread water with his wounded hips. From that curiously upright oceanic posture associated with barracuda and seahorse, they circled their mentor.
The two boats and plane sped away, leaving the sadistic cartel heir stranded in the water surrounded by his final beneficiaries.

Pablo continued to tread water painfully, churning his bullet-riddled hips. Scabs dissolved, releasing diluted reddish rivulets to the surface and reawakening some small measure of blood lust in the circle of former pool pets. They crowded closer, surrounding their master in a closing ring of razor-jawed terror.

Inevitably the aquatic pack leader nipped at one of the two enticing sources of pink plasma streamers. A few square centimeters of flesh peeled away and Pablo screamed. But like that unobserved falling tree in the deserted forest, no one heard.

Another playful nip from another smiling meat-eater produced another scream from Pablo, who prayed to the darkened heavens for deliverance.

Heard, but unanswered.


Pablo offered his soul to the devil in exchange for his quick death. Satan, no fool, declined to barter for what already belonged to him.
The billowing white contrail hung in stark contrast against the rain darkened sky. In bold looping prose it solemnly proposed:

**Marry Me Mister President!**

"A sign," Wally prophesied. "We are Chosen."

"Surely not," Chief Milner disavowed. "Eternity with you would be worse than 'Trash Talk' reruns. It's probably just some nut case practicing out over the ocean."

"You're right," Scoop the Snoop concurred, grimacing from a pain shooting up his thigh. "Any rational person would do it over the White House."

Milner cast a leery glance toward the goofy news pilot.

Wally confessed, "I once proposed to my school teacher, Miss Ironspine, when I bumped into her twenty years later at the top of the Empire State Building. It was a magical moment."

Scoop probed, "She accepted?"

"She jumped. I'll never forget that frilly red garter belt."

Milner looked from Scoop to Wally. For the umpteenth time he reflected upon a career choice that now had him sitting between a pair of dingleberries aboard this drafty, hell-bound helicopter above a stormy sea. Why, pray tell, had he not simply married that lonely little Abigail Hiver who was ugly, semi-retarded and heiress to millions.

"There," Milner indicated, snapping out of his wishful reverie by the sight of a fishing yacht below, running wide open for the southern hemisphere. "It's them," he confirmed by peering through the high-powered magnifying scope lens. "Now get me down close enough for a head shot on Toler."

"I'll roast that fat tennis pro," Wally promised, uncapping the flamethrower barrel.

"Put that thing away," his boss ordered. "You don't even know how to operate it."

Wally shook his head. "That's exactly why I have an operator's manual, big dummy," he added while extracting a booklet from his
shirt pocket. "Right here in this clear illustration, it shows how
to slide the Safety Release over to Position Red," he explained,
"like this."

"Closer," Milner ordered Scoop while ignoring Wally.

"Then," Wally went on, "I simply apply finger pressure to this
Activation Trigger."

Chief Milner aimed at Kevin's head and began slowly squeezing
the trigger, but Ant's face suddenly popped into the scope's cross
hairs. As the giant pointed the double-aught loaded ten-gauge, the
two big men from different worlds' locked eyes.
Near the cosmic womb of the Milky Way, a tiny fledgling star radiated an inarguable word of inspiration to a dark world: Rise.
Leo heard.
Leo chose.
"Like this," Wally demonstrated just as Milner's rifle scope darkened and both he and Wally pulled their triggers at the same time.

The cockpit combusted into a roaring fireball with the force of the eruption blasting all three occupants out both sides of the chopper's entrance openings. As the man-made comet blazed across the lightning-lit skyline, the discharged crew fell flaming while the downpour continued. For five agonizing seconds in space, the twitching trio of tortured souls sizzled down through a storm in perfect stalemate --- fire not subduing rain --- rain not subduing fire.

Ultimately a mercifully omnipotent ocean engulfed the flaming daredevils. Not since uozo-swilling ancient Greek mariners first concocted sea gods, have three mortal souls welcomed Poseidon more thankfully.

Charred, clueless, yet still alive, the death defyers bobbed to the surface.

"I saw 'Jaws' eight times," Wally gasped as he clung to Chief Milner's broad back.

Snoop responded, "Jaws won't have time to get to us. I see you obviously can't swim and my right leg is not working."

Blisters swelled across Chief Milner's forehead as he moaned, "Where's the Coast Guard when we need them?"

"Right behind us, boss," Wally informed him. "By the way, you could use a dab of sunscreen."

Milner twisted around to witness a miracle. Fifty feet away, a coast Guard cutter listed lifelessly on the waves.

"Help!" bellowed Milner. "Down here!" he emphasized by frantic arm waving. "In the water!"

"They know that, Chief," Wally pointed out. "Where else could we possibly be? Maybe you should pop one of those nitro tabs under the tongue. I always wanted to try one, but was afraid it might blow my jaw off."

When no response came from the rescue ship, Scoop concluded,
"It's a ghost-ship. Maybe we could—yikes—something just now nipped my leg."

Wally noted, "Baby sharks arrive first."

"Look," Milner pointed through the pouring rain. "That might be metal ladder rungs running down from the deck to the waterline."

Wally puffed his cheeks in exasperation. "Don't they realize that it's quicker to just jump?"

As Chief Milner dog-paddled for the abandoned ship with Wally clinging to his back and Scoop following painfully, an old vintage biplane swooped low in pursuit of a flock of squawking seagulls. Judge Moonie, still secured to the upper wing, fired from the hips with both hands, expending his last bullets. One old gull exploded as the judge smiled, but then wept—not for the dead avian, at last at rest, but for those left to labor on.
"AYEEE-EEE-EEE!"

The giant's wail of inconsolable grief rippled the blanketing cloud cover, drowning out any protesting thunder.

"AYEEE-EEE-EEE!"

Even the tireless waves seemed to lie still for one timeless tick.

"Leo raised straight up into the line of fire," Ant keened to Kevin. "He gave that chopper the finger so fast and hard that his trick shoulder popped out of socket again," the big man cried out. "He saved me."

"He couldn't have known that," Kevin ventured a guess as he placed a comforting hand on Ant's back to share the burden.

"He knew," Ant asserted with certainty. "I was kneeling down aiming Loo-Loo and Leo popped up between the chopper and us."

He knelt to pick Leo up off the slimy deck. One of Leo's eye sockets lay hollow and a missing rear patch of skull identified the exit passageway of a high-powered rifle slug. The old soldier's right arm reached forever for the sky with a closed fist, minus the middle finger from the bullet's initial point of contact.

Ant then presented Leo to the elements. A black curtain of rain obligingly cleansed the elder in fine crystal ebony.

* * *

Three fried tamales lay face to the sky on the coastal ship deck. Satin sheets of rain soothed their scorched souls.

Wally confided to the comforting cloud cover, "Just two more celestial signs may almost persuade me to shave my head bald, wear a terry cloth toga and hand out Harry Potter books in the airport lobby."

Lightning struck twice, frying the control panel.

"In revival mode," Wally foretold, "I shall soon hitchhike to India and seek wisdom from a starving guru guy who sleeps upon a
bed of nails and taunts cobras with a squeaky clarinet."

Chief Milner mumbled, "Man your battle stations," then fell blissfully into unconsciousness.

"Or become a progressive Hindu monk," Wally revised, "and marry a cow."

Lightning licked at the salty sea one final time and Wally responded, "Haki waki du mahara."

"That sounds cool," Scoop moaned. "What's it mean?"

"Who knows? It just came to me."
A sleeping sun awoke to begin dispersing covetous clouds. A tropical wind joined the chase, driving the rainmakers to northern hemispheres.

A young giant held an elder storyteller patiently beneath the warming rays and drying gusts while Kevin lowered the yacht's aluminum life raft onto the crystal-tipped wave tops. With the raft's tow line secured to the yacht's low railing, Kevin ducked inside the wheelhouse cabin and emerged dragging two stuffed duffel bags. A return trip produced two more filled bags. Four of twelve: Leo's share.

Ant and Leo remained unmoved, bonded by the soft ministrations from air, sun and sea.

Kevin emptied the four bags into the raft. A gentle sea breeze wafted a token portion of the green currency out onto the salt water like oceanic lily pads — a tithe to Poseidon.

Demonstrating the amazing grace of extraordinarily large men, Ant carried his weightless senior partner to the railing and lowered him delicately upon the floating altar of greenery. Kevin started to untie the lifeboat but stopped short when Ant shook his head and padded back into the wheelhouse in search of more fitting travel accessories.

Leo drifted away with the tepid trace of a satisfied smile framed on his rain-washed face. One bright eye stared fearlessly, painlessly into the blinding sun. The other eye cavity lay hidden beneath a colorful eye patch while a golden Nordic wig made other cosmetic amends.

Leo's calming left palm covered a heart finally luxuriating in perfect silence. The tireless warrior's right arm reached up rigidly toward the unseen stars with a fist firmly brandishing a treasured wooden sword as a dire warning to unsanctioned meddlers, either here or hereafter.

Destined for unchartered deep waters, Leo paused atop the sea.
... awaiting closure.

Kevin hoisted a can of warm Budweiser and toasted across the gently rocking wavelets, "Pal, I'm not much good with fancy last words, but even if you never dunked a ball, you're still going out rich and like a Viking. Two outta three ain't bad."

He paused to ask Ant, "Did Leo ever grow up?"
"Sure, he just did."
"Will we?"
"Maybe."
"But how will we know?" pressed Kevin.
"Adults don't argue."
"Maybe the best question is not how will we know, but when will we know?"
"I don't mean to argue, Ant, but some people say tomorrow never comes."
"It always comes, Kev. Even for Leo."
"I can't argue with that, big bro."
A warm gust descended.
"Ant, do you believe in Valhalla, the Viking Paradise?"
"I don't disbelieve."

The giant carefully aimed the flamethrower at the restless raft, whispered, "Rest in Paradise, Erik the Black," then fired.
About the Author:

Darrell Keith Jones, exiled King of the Comedy/Thriller Genre, has reigned forty years and counting . . . in prison. Writing.

DKJ to readers: May your smiles outlive me.

Darrell Keith Jones
#21034-101, Unit 1B
Post Office Box 3000
Pine Knot, KY 42635
decipherable only to identical entities who once shared the same cozy, crowded womb. With the bloated, balanced dignity of pot-bellied Buddhas, they each crossed their legs in meditation and inhaled deeply. Holding their breath, they hunkered down with jaws clenched and then grunted.

"They're turning blue," Monika observed.

Wally recalled, "I used to do the same thing whenever I was not allowed to put peanut butter on my broccoli. When I let my breath out, Daddy would spank me for giving him false hope."

Monika continued to monitor the progress of the twins. "Now they're turning purple with black streaks," she noted as the boys continued their mysterious straining, "like giant grape lollipops laced with licorice."

While everyone watched, volcanic rumbles began building beneath both intensive twins. With doomsday reverberations, the eruptions crescendoed into roaring lift-offs as the grape-faced angry brothers magically levitated six inches off the floor.

With play-by-play exuberance, Monika followed up on her coverage of the gravity defying performance. "Now their bellies are deflating as we witness the first ever human hydroplanes. Their grimaces are transforming into twisted smiles of contorted satisfaction, like fat babies nursing. Maybe it's just gas," she proposed with a sniff of air. "Good grief, it is gas!"

Like untended campfire marshmallows, the tiles below the twin engine rocket boosters broiled from sterile white to spotty brown to bubbly black. Wall paint peeled off in beige sheets of latexed leprosy. Plexiglas windows melted down into molten rivulets that were impervious to the peeling paint or bubbling tiles, but flowed like recycled lava traversing ancient landscapes in age-old pursuit of thonged toes.

Eventually the twins ran out of gas to resettle on the burnt floor. Finalizing their death pact, they released long-held breaths and suicidally refilled their deprived lungs with the otherworldly stench now traumatizing the trauma unit.

The twins died once more, this time not only beyond medical
revival, but further dooming their stinking souls to everlasting disbarment from all other repopulated planes — cast into deepest space without so much as an entry interview into any after-life realm, high or low, good or bad.

Yet from the private care center, Oscar Mayer had arisen in atonement for every civilized pig deceived by farmers through a spoiled lifetime of irresponsible languor and perpetual fattening, only to be castrated and impaled on a slaughterhouse sword or shot between the eyes, then beheaded, boiled hairless and ground into wieners.

Trash dived through a melted window and rolled down the slope into a parking lot. Rising from the hot tarmac, he started hobbling on down the grade in his leg shackles. But halfway to Palm Subdivision, the orange-clad man paused and turned back toward the MIC Center as if weighing the risk of returning to a house fire just to rescue a pet turtle.

Decision made, he climbed the slope in restricted half-steps and hurled himself back through the same window with a nimble roll past the thrice-dead Minnesota twins. Trash then shuffled into the front reception room and ripped the medication locker off the wall. With the pomp of a ponderous penguin, he marched out the front door clutching the treasure to his chest.

"Wally, save me," Chief Milner begged, "but don't forget about my broke back."

"Broken, broken, broken," Wally reminded him. "We've been all through this before at the chopper crash site. Have you ever even considered GED night school?"

Milner turned his attention to the overworked nurse's aide as the twins' toxic fumes permeated the care center. "My lungs are collapsing, Miss Looski. Do you have access to oxygen masks?"

"There is no escape for sinners," Monika wailed as she climbed into bed with Milner. Snuggling up against his side, she pressed her streaking mascara onto his shoulder, stuck a thumb into her wide mouth and continued with perfect enunciation. "He warned the flock several times," she cried. "I took out that second mortgage,
but it was not enough. I feel so guilty. Now the flock must repent and repay."

"You're jabbering and streaking my gown," Milner complained. "Plus I really don't want to hear about a dude who talks to flocks of birds. Shut up and get up."

"No," she negated. "Pastor Poi prophesied that unless the congregation gave six million dollars to enable starving Thai boys to go to his baseball camp, all of us could expect a cataclysmic reckoning worse than a plague of Egyptian frogs. But I am sitting in the back pew thinking that doesn't really sound all that bad. Frogs don't even bite."

"Wally," Milner moaned, "come get your cousin out of my bed."

"No relation, sir; but she's right. Unlimited fried frog legs sound more like a blessing than a curse."

Milner pulled his service pistol out from under the sheet and thrust the tip into Monika's wide mouth alongside her thumb. "Get me out of here now," he ordered Wally, "or your cousin gets a quick tonsillectomy."

"No problem," Wally agreed while raising the aluminum guardrails on both sides of Milner's hospital bed. After pulling the wheeled bedstead away from the hot death detector that was still whahing as if Moscow had launched fifty nukes, Wally put one foot high on the headboard, yelled, "Geronimo!" and shoved.

The bed glided down an aisle and out into a central reception area where Limbo had liberated the medicine cabinet. The double occupancy twin bed rolled to a squelching stop atop rubber mats in front of the wide glass entrance/exit doors. Following the silent signal from the electronically wired doormats, the glassed portals parted — a phenomenon guaranteed to forever awe small children and disquiet adults.

On an infamously pungent breeze, in wafted the South Florida ambiance of sun-dried sardines to which all senior citizens are inexorably drawn, summoned back to their ancestral seaside roots by the evolutionary piper.

"That smells worse than the Martin brothers' resurrection of
Oscar Mayer," Monika moaned around a mouthful of thumb and gun.
"Worse than buzzard burps," Milner agreed.

Wally walked up behind the bedded couple, placed his foot on the headboard and shoved again, this time propelling the bedmobile out the exit and down the safety ramp. Gathering momentum through the sloping parking lot, it careened out into traffic, passing new Cadillacs piloted by squinting seniors on Palm Drive headed to the beach at golf cart speed.

* * *

Dear Maggie,

Tomorrow morning we sail south. We have not hit any major snags so far, which makes me leery about what might be in store for us down the road. I just hope we have not used up all of our lucky chips. But Ant is edgy and Leo doesn't have much to say. Super strange.

Our biggest concern is a news flash we saw on the local TV channel. It showed FBI bossman Milner and his sidekick, Wahler, being wheeled into the private intensive care center right here on our little stopover island due to some crazy hunting accident involving alligators between here and Miami. Their presence is a coincidence too farfetched for us to write off. We just can't seem to shake those guys.

Fortunately we leave tomorrow. We would have gone today, but Leo made us stay until I wrote to you and Ant wrote to AJ. When we get situated below the equator, I'll send you a postcard, but I'm not much of a letter writer. I'm really not much of anything, just a self-centered criminal. Maybe you could have reformed me if we had met sooner, but probably not. Still, it's a thought. A real nine-to-fiver, a boss, kids, bills, therapy, P.T.A. and all that. Who knows? Maybe next lifetime.

Feel free to write or come see me when I send my new address. Just understand that the grass is not always greener on the other side of the all-American white picket fence. My neck stays kinked
from looking over my shoulder. But like most crooks, I'm hardheaded and won't ever change. Instead of trying to correct my mistakes, I find ways to justify them. Well, justify them to myself, anyway.

I guess it all boils down to the fact that I'm not a good bet for you, Maggie. Just a long shot. Sure, I'd like to see you again, but it's probably better for you if it never happens. Time will tell.

Give my love to AJ, Sherryl and Little Maggie.

Always Kev
The first hole at Mackerel Isle Country Club was a downhill sixty-five yard par five. Three geezers in the tee box, Wilbur, Boyd and Wenchel, were carefully considering possible remedies for the foursome's remaining member, Edsel, whose back had locked as he was bending down to tee up his ball.

"It's my back," Edsel whimpered while stooped over and frozen into a human croquet wicket.

"We can see that," Boyd observed. "Try pressing that emergency button on the plastic necklace your kids got you for your ninetieth birthday so they could inherit your house instead of it going to pay for a nursing home."

Edsel creakingly complied and the pendant came to life: "Thank you for contacting Last Ditch Services. Please state your type of emergency along with an unexpired credit card number. Rates are five thousand dollars for the first minute and three thousand for each additional minute. In the event of fatal expiration, your home equity shall be debited prior to estate dispensation."

Wilbur noted, "Edsel Junior must not have read all the fine print."

"Am I supposed to talk into this confounded contraption?" asked Edsel as he released the button and thumbed it again.

"Thank you for contacting Last Ditch Services. Your account is five thousand dollars in arrears from the previous call. Failure to remit immediate payment shall ensure resolution via Louisville Slugger Collection Agency. Please call again."

Wilbur proposed, "It would be cheaper to goose him with a sand wedge. Right, Wenchel?"

"I don't know."

Boyd commiserated, "That's all Wenchel says ever since turning a hundred."

"Saves time," Wilbur pointed out while scooting up behind his pal, Edsel, with a sand wedge.

"Have mercy," Edsel pleaded. "I've got external rhoids."
Unsympathetic, Wilbur lunged. "Giddy-up, you old gray mare. This is the closest thing you've had to sex in decades."

"Yowser!" exclaimed Edsel, snapping to attention with his straightening vertebrae popping like the Gatling gun at Little Bighorn. "Confound your hide, Wilbur, You're queerer than my earring wearing son-in-law."

"Judge not," Boyd rejoined. "Just because your son-in-law sells Avon and has pink flamingo wallpaper in his bedroom should not have us jumping to conclusions about his sexual preferences."

"He married my son," Edsel reminded Boyd.

"Well, there's that," Boyd conceded. "Tell us what you think, Wenchel?"

"I don't know."

Edsel placed the head of his driver squarely behind the teed ball and commenced his backswing with a grunt. Back, back; up, up; pausing, pausing, pausing . . .

"He's asleep," Wilbur asserted. "I'd better goose him again."

After a light goosing, Edsel awoke with another grunt and began his downswing, bringing the clubface down and through, slapping into the ball which rose into the air.

"That's a beauty," Boyd praised.

"Right down the middle," Wilbur agreed as the four players tottered to their golf carts and climbed aboard.

They sped fifteen yards down the fairway and stopped beside Edsel's ball. He lumbered out, assumed a wide stance and slapped at the ball once more.

"Beauty."

"Right down the pike."

Edsel absorbed the acclaim, then inquired as to his friends' lack of participation. "Where's your tee shots?"

Boyd vacantly inspected the ball-free Bermuda grass and then concluded, "We forgot to tee off."

"All the excitement," Wilbur excused them. "Should we start over?"

"I don't know," Wenchel answered.
Dear AJ,

How's it going, little bro? I hear you are now taking over Illinois. If you end up in the White House, you'll be the second honest politician in American history elected from that state. The other one presided over a Civil War that was anything but civil. Wow, I'm rambling already. Sorry, bro, but this running from the law stuff is not as much fun as it looks like in those old gangster movies. I know Moms hated it. When I was locked up, she would say, "Well, Anthony, at least I know where you are." I sent her some money but I can't visit. The feds are most likely camped outside her circus tent disguised as people. (That was evil of me. I hope you never get that cynical, Adrian.)

I am lucky to have three friends like you and Kevin and Leo. Being around Leo has taught me not to waste so much time hating black people. Sometimes I can't even remember why I'm supposed to hate them.

Kevin and I mailed another box of money to help restore the house and for your schooling or whatever. We addressed it to Miss Maggie, but I suspect she won't mind investing a little in your corporate enterprises. Give her a big hug from me and a kiss to Sherryl and the baby. Add a scratch behind the ears for Hi-Dog and Hi-Cat and Dumpster.

If Creach ever comes back, give her my congrats on her new rock music career. Hopefully she has finally found her niche in life. Maybe someday I'll find mine.

I have to go now, bro. It's late and this boat is rocking me to sleep, plus I haven't spoken to Papa Joe yet tonight. He is sitting in an upstairs window high enough to look after us both and patiently awaiting our trivial complaints while the old world keeps up its wild spin through space and time. I have always had a feeling I'm being watched. Since Papa Joe passed, I understand now. It's because I am.

He is watching you too, AJ, and pulling an occasional string...
to smooth out your path. We both love you.

Your big bro,

Ant

* * *

"Why does Wenchel get to tee off on the green?"
"Because he's a hundred, Wilbur," Boyd reminded his golfing partner.

Wenchel waggled his driver behind the ball teed up three feet from the hole, then began his swing. Back, back; up, up; pausing, pausing . . .

Edsel was suddenly struck and whisked away by a hospital bed as it zoomed straight across the number one green adjacent to Palm Drive.

"Now that's service," Boyd commented favorably. "Those high-tech characters at Last Ditch don't mess around."

Unaware of the hit-and-run kidnapping, Wenchel kept his head down and smashed the driver into the ball which toppled off the tee and trickled eight inches toward the cup.

"A beauty," Boyd admired.

"Right down the middle," Wilbur added his own two cents.

But Wenchel's drooling grin of accomplishment cascaded into pouting disappointment in the absence of the obligatory, awestruck last word of congratulatory praise from the missing Edsel. With the indisputable clairvoyance of those already having one foot on the Other Side, Wenchel's addlepated cerebrum diagnosed the faux pas correctly; Edsel was gone.

Wenchel solemnly removed his golf visor, placed it reverently over his heart and mourned his lost friend. With no discernible lip movement, a baleful tune keened forth from his mummified sad mouth.

"I-I-I'll fly away," he warbled, then paused for a long phlegm-gurgling intake of oxygen before adding, "Oh glory." Another humid inhalation sonorously preceded the second bubbly refrain. "I-I-I'll fly away."
Boyd and Wilbur chimed in with a passably harmonious, "In the morning."

Distracted by the supplemented harmony, Wenchel stopped, their song abruptly, smirked at the other survivors of the now fractured foursome and predicted with obvious pride, "I'll outlive all you bastards," then fell dead.

* * *

My Dear Dumplin,

I ain't never wrote no whole letter before because my school never let me go past grade 6. I reckon I did learn a thing or two in my six and a half decades on this hard rock, but I sure ain't learned it in no classroom. I always aimed to go back to school, but then all the sudden the mean old shaving mirror showed me my daddy's lined face and there went another fine plan right on down the drain.

Sometimes we just gotta accept things the way they are, or the real world will just slap us silly. So don't try to change me into no saint you aim to pine for when I cash in my chips at the Pearly Gates Casino. You'll just drive away all your friends with that sad story until you're too old to get outta your rocker and there ain't nobody left to help you get up.

Why cain't you just be satisfied a little bit? Was 2 people ever more satisfied than me and you that night on the sheriff's desk? Gal, we put the QT in Quality Time!

I ain't no hero, just a coward. Kev and Ant might think I'm real brave to risk everything so late in life, but that's a crock. The plain truth is I ain't got nothing to prove to nobody anymore and nothing to lose.

The pills ain't working real good no more, not even our good southern coffee. I just hope to hang around long enough to maybe see these 2 boys safe. I lost 2 boys once, a long time ago. Kev and Ant are my family now, along with you, of course.

I'm scared, Dumplin. Scared of whatever might be on the Other
Side. Scared there might not be nothing there. Scared of the pain at the end. Scared I'll mess the sheets and die dirty.

Besides being a coward, little old Leo is a big old liar. I am the only black Barker. My war stories are true about losing my sons and fighting in Korea, but all my Barker kin got made up by a dreamer. Me. My real daddy was Hansel Hamilton. He chased me out of the house with a straight razor when I was ten. I never did go back to see what he was so mad about.

Social Services sent me to live with a big family way out in the county and get this. They was white! How could I ever tell anybody that? A mom and pop, 4 brothers, 3 sisters, 20 chickens, 2 oxes and 1 pet rabbit. All white! Even a white house and pickup truck. Little Leo stuck out like a chocolate covered cherry on a coconut wedding cake. We raised chinchillas and soybeans until I run off with the carnival. End of story.

Like I told Key, I always hankered for 3 things. To be rich, to dunk a basketball, and to go out like a Viking. So far I'm 1 for 3 and just about as wore out as that old sammon at the top of the mountain stream.

Love is hard to come by and hard to turn loose of, even when it's wrong and even more when it's right. So I don't use the L-word much. You will be the one left behind to pick up the pieces. Just know I LOVE YOU, Dumplin, but I don't want you chained to this old dead tree stump. I want my baby to be free!

The boys need me sharp tomorrow, not hungover like some Sunday morning sailor, so I will try to catch my dreams tonight without no pills. Maybe drift back to that barnfire with you in my arms and let Creach and Ant sing us to sleep again. My trick shoulder ain't hurt as much ever since you laid your pretty head on it.

Thanks for the lift, Dumplin. Thanks for the ride.

I'm still,

The Hammer

P.S. You made the right choice at crunch time without no argument.

That's all that counts, so be satisfied and hug Dumpy for me.
Kevin rolled out of bed, slid down the tilting cabin deck and came to a crunching halt underneath Ant's empty berth. Two seconds later, Leo crashed into Kevin when the boat canted even more as if a killer whale had hooked onto the portside anchor with intentions of capsizing the small yacht.

"Get off me!" yelped Leo into the morning mist seeping through the open porthole.

"I'm not on you," Kevin pointed out when the craft escalated its slow Titanic emulations by dipping even further. "You're on me, Leo. Ant headed out for doughnuts and I went back to sleep and the next thing I know, you're drowning me or molesting me, and I can't figure out which is worse."

"Don't take that trail, son," Leo bargained as he tried to untangle their bodies, "and I won't mention all those nights you celled with a pansy giant panda."

Kevin laughed and licked his index finger, then twisted it into Leo's ear.

"Rape!" screamed the elder partner, finally managing to free himself and scramble partway up the slanting deck before losing traction in the slippery humidity and smashing back into Kevin in the dawn dimness.

"You win," Leo surrendered, "and since we are now so intimate, I'll tell you a little secret about myself, pardner."

"Whatever," Kevin chuckled.

"I sleep naked."

"Help! Help!" cried Kevin, all traces of amusement instantly eradicated, like a prankster arsonist who realizes that the leg of his pants has just caught fire. "Someone get this freak off me!"

Leo further teased, "Don't wake me up for breakfast, dear," and laid his head on Kevin's shoulder.

Two strange heads framed themselves in the porthole crying, "Help! Help!"

"We yelled for help first," Kevin shouted back to the talking
heads. "Throw me a line."

Leo surmised, "We've beenouted, sweets," as a noose slipped through the opening and slithered down to the prone shipmates. "By the Klan."

"Grab that noose, Leo."

"When fish knit."

"Then get out of my way," Kevin insisted, pushing Leo aside and snagging the hawser line himself. After pulling in sufficient slack through the coiled slipknot to enlarge the noose, he slipped the loop down over his shoulders and tightened it underneath his armpits.

"What about me?" complained Leo. "You just gonna leave me in the ditch like a runned-over dog?"

"News crews might be filming this rescue," Kevin demurred. "The world will not be treated to the spectacle of a naked old man clinging to my back."

"Heaven forbid I tarnish your reputation," Leo returned, "and slow your climb up the ladder to Public Enemy Number One."

"Pull me out!" shouted Kevin through cupped hands.

The lifeline drew tight but failed to budge its human cargo, forcing Kevin to resort to a hand-over-hand technique to help pull himself out from under the berth. Yet he still remained stationary, managing only to pull in more rope.

"That's not working, Kev."

"Thanks," Kevin intoned dryly. "Let's at least find out who's the lightweight on the other end of this rope," he finished while reeling in the line, one handful at a time.

Two knarled hands clutching the far end of the rope gradually slid through the porthole followed by two more fists full of hemp. Four stubby arms then made their entry, leading to a double set of shoulders, each complete with its own massive head—so large, in fact, that each head required passage through the oval portal one at a time. The separate chests tapered down to form a single waistline tucked into one pair of pants. Finally two very short legs and feet scraped through the hole along with the other body
parts and plopped onto the cabin flooring.

With admirable agility, the two-headed creation latched onto Kevin's earlier vacated berth at the upper end of the angled cabin to keep from sliding down toward the displaced yacht occupants at the bottom of the room.

The left head said, "We need help."
Leo agreed, "We cain't argue with that."
The right head clarified, "He doesn't mean either of us needs help. He means our wife. She is unusual."
"No," Leo said.
"Yes," the same head insisted. "By the way, I'm Clyde and my brother there, is Claude. We are Siamese twin midgets, which is a tale too twisted for the moment because we have to help rescue our wife right away."
Kevin asked, "Will we find this distressed damsel in a damp dungeon weaving straw into gold?"
"Come and see," Claude instructed, tying his end of the hawser rope around the berth on which he and his brother sat. The Siamese siblings exchanged confirmation glances of like minds, then jumped up and scampered out the porthole in less time than it takes to say Rumplestiltskin.

"Don't touch me," Kevin reminded Leo as he started pulling himself toward the window, remembering Leo's nudity. Reaching the empty berth Clyde and Claude had just left, he climbed aboard and loosened the lasso around his chest, then slipped it down past his feet and tossed the loose end to Leo who scaled the slope with surprising ease.

"You move fairly well," Kevin praised his pal, "for an old-timer," he couldn't resist adding.
"Thanks."

Following a moment of silence to catch his lost breath, Kevin wondered, "Well, aren't you going to fire back with one of your old family hand-me-down wisecracks?"
"Nope, you win."
Kevin asked smugly, "Is the competetetion too tough?"
Leo exhaled heavily, "No challenge. That's 'sorta like playing checkers against a cheeseburger."

"I have no idea what that means."

"My point exactly," Leo confirmed. "Now help me get through that outhouse hole in the wall before this stinking shrimp boat sinks."

"You lied," Kevin observed. "You've got on boxers," he pointed out as Leo stood on the berth and stuck his head and shoulders out through the porthole. "Pink heart classics," Kevin noted with a poke at one of the hearts.

Leo squealed and vaulted through the opening. Kevin chuckled and waited for Leo to clear the landing area, then hoisted himself up on the berth. Skulls cracked as Leo barreled back through the porthole headfirst, knocking both of them onto the slanting deck. Together they tumbled back down again and smashed into the lower wall beneath Ant's berth.

"I'm going down with the ship," Leo vowed.

"What changed your mind?" queried Kevin, gingerly checking his old scalp wound for further injury. "I don't suppose you saw the unusual wife, by any chance?"

"Sure did," Leo answered, "but don't be asking for details. Daniel Webster could not find the right words to describe that woman. Stephen King neither."

"Come on, Leo. After experiencing Creach, my only remaining fear is gas station restrooms."

"If'n you're so brave, Tonto, go scout her out for yourself. But I'm telling you now, this here squaw could squash Creach flat as a buffalo nickel on a train track."

Kevin climbed over Leo, snagged the rope and restarted the trek back up the canted deck one last time. Strangely stationary, the port-leaning vessel offered only token hindrance, as if still moored by a mighty anchor.

At the opening, Kevin began wriggling out. Once he was halfway through, Leo proposed, "Why don't you just use the cabin door? It's open."
Kevin flopped awkwardly onto the outer deck. With unsteady legs, he staggered to the edge of the tilted cabin and cautiously peeked around toward the lower side of the imperiled boat. But he immediately snapped his head back behind the false security of the cabin corner, like Jim Bowie dodging the first round of Mexican musket balls at the Alamo.

He slapped himself twice on each cheek, then took one deep breath and looked again. The small yacht's busted railing had sunk below the waterline at midship and was slipping further into the sea, inch by precious inch. Plopped at the lowest point, immersed up to her blimp-like breasts, sat Ringling Brothers star attraction featured as: World's Most Voluptuous Twelve Hundred Pound Woman.

"I'm sinking and I can't get up," she informed Kevin. "Do you have any cookies?"

*   *   *

"Hi, Marlene. It's me, Madge . . . No, nothing urgent. Just wanted to give you a ring while Fabrio is doing my toenails. I'm going orange base with mother-of-black-pearl highlights and fake diamond chips. Fabrio calls it his Trashy Tiger look. Two hundred dollars per toe, by appointment only . . . Yes, he does make house calls for an extra thousand, but that includes all the trimmings, if you catch my drift. Yes, I'm at home now . . . Don't be crass, Marly. No, I'm not bent over the dishwasher. We are both out by the pool . . . Yes, I'm nude, but we have privacy. On my seventy-fifth birthday the whole neighborhood chipped in and bought me a tall backyard fence for my skinny-dipping . . . Oh my. Fabrio just rubbed warmed coconut milk into the pores between my tootsies and now he's blowing them dry . . . Fab is a real beast, Marly. Now he's . . . he's . . . he's floating facedown in my pool . . . No, I did not kick him during an orgasmic spasm. A rolling hospital bed crashed through the fence and flew into the pool, taking poor Fabrio with it . . . The bed is now resting in the shallow end with three passengers and I know every single one of them. The
great big ox is that poodle killer who raided our bridge party. And then there's that lecher, Edsel Cordoba, who goosed me at my third husband's funeral. And sandwiched between those two scoundrels is that big-mouth Looski girl . . . That's right. Thelma Looski's baby granddaughter. The same old Thelma who still skinny-dips in our old church baptistry with Reverend Feelwell . . . No, they aren't doing The Nasty in my pool. The puppy shooter has his big hairy derriere hanging out one of those backless paper gowns by E-Z-Rape. He is fending off Fabrio who's trying to climb over the bed rail. Edsel, the perv, is sniffing a golf club and the Looski girl is slurping a big gun . . . No, Marly, I did not say big 'un . . . Yes, I'm sure . . . No, don't come over. I'm going for a quick little swim. Toodle-loo."

* * *

"Moms! Moms!" bellowed Ant, upon spotting his mother going down with the yacht.

The loving giant dropped a white paper bag that split open on contact with the wharf, spewing out coconut-sprinkled, jelly-filled doughnuts. As the long-lost only child bounded toward her with outstretched arms, Moms could not stem her deluge of joyful tears.

"Doughnuts!" she cried in ecstasy tinged with trepidation. "Do not let any roll off the pier!"

"Here, grab my hand," Ant offered, kneeling down on the wooden wharf and reaching across the small gap to the boat. She clasped his hand and he pulled. The boat edged closer, bumping up against the wharf, but Moms did not budge.

Leo, who had crawled out the cabin door, nudged Kevin as they both clung to the corner of the wheelhouse cabin for balance. "He's gonna need a cargo crane," he remarked on Ant's lack of success.

"Moms," Ant pleaded, "pull or something."

She pulled, toppling the hefty baby boy onto her lap. The floundering yacht surrendered like a harpooned whale by lolling over in the choppy sea. Mother and son crashed through the broken boat railing and plunged into the harbor, creating a tidal wave.
that swamped the wharf. Leo, Kevin, Clyde and Claude all followed helplessly down the nearly vertical deck planks straight through the wide railing excavation.

Free of its side-heavy load, the capsizing yacht resought balancing buoyancy by returning defiantly upright on an even keel. With more damage done to tradition than structural integrity, the gallant vessel resettled back into its tummy tossing dance atop the rolling waves, smirking through the gapped railing from which it had just dropped its troublesome boarders.

"Help!" yelled Leo. "I cain't swim!"

A meaty arm clamped around the retired janitor's scrawny neck and hugged him to a magnificent bosom.

"Will you adopt me, Moms?" Leo choked out.

"Do you own a restaurant?"

"A chain of them," he lied.

Four muscular short arms began to pummel at Leo from behind when Clyde and Claude laid claim to the breasts.

"Those are mine!" shouted Clyde.

"Mine too," added Claude while they tag-teamed their victim with a quartet of knarly fists, meanwhile treading water with their one pair of legs.

Leo snuggled more deeply into the sheltering cleft.

"Now boys," Moms chastised her husbands and rolled back to float belly up, weightless as a blue whale. Leo was lifted entirely out of the ocean like a water bug on a beach ball.

But as Moms kicked for shore, her size twenty-five left foot accidentally caught Claude under the chin; popping the connected twins six feet out of the water. When they splashed down; Claude's head remained facedown in the surf with his arms limply afloat.

Clyde snatched Claude's matted hair and jerked the unconscious skull back up above the surface. With his free arm and one working leg, he followed in Mom's turbulent wake by using a resourceful sidestroke.

Ant and Kevin staggered through the shallows while receding undertows tugged against their progress. Upon finally clearing the
clinging shoal, the drenched pair dropped to the welcoming sun-baked sand.

Moms walked ashore carrying Leo and leaving deep imprints in the sand — photo ops for tabloid proof confirming Big Foot's emergence from the sea. Demonstrating circus-like agility, she gently set Leo down while simultaneously picking up a sand-covered doughnut which she shook off and gulped down in one bite.

Clyde crawled onto the beach dragging his head-drooping half-dead, twin brother. Claude's slack face featured a bluish-green aquatic hue.

"Ma'am," Leo whispered confidentially, "I really done seen about all the weirdiness I can handle for one day, so if'n your two husbands start giving theyselves mouth-to-mouth, just toss me back to the sharks."

Moms plodded over to both prone mates and placed one big toe on Claude's unmoving chest, then carefully applied a tiny fraction of her body weight. Clyde screamed as a geyser of salt water spewed out of Claude's blue lips. All onlookers, including the reanimated Claude, held their collective breaths when Moms removed her bare elephantine foot and stumbled back toward the ocean while fighting earth's gravitational pull for balance. In earthquaking, stomping reverse, she backed down the sloping sandscape, chasing a fleeing tide.

At water's edge, gravity finally defeated Mom's best acrobatic efforts and she butt-plopped into the shallow surf, spraying the onlookers' eyes with stinging saline solution and creating another photo op for the supermarket newspapers — a meteoric sand crater worthy of dinosaur extinction speculation.

"How do we get her up?" inquired Kevin of anyone.

"Army Corps of Engineers," Leo answered.

Moms laughed and rolled further out to sea, eventually gaining sufficient buoyancy to stand and wade back onto land.

"W-What h-happened?" sputtered Claude as he bolted up into a sitting position, whiplashing Clyde up with him.

"Moms and I saved you," Clyde informed him. "You drowned and
I swam us to shore where Moms kick-started you," he explained as he also kneaded the nape of his neck.

"All I remember," Claude recalled, "is swimming up through a tunnel toward a bright light with angels singing 'Lady Madonna.' For the first time in fifty years I was free from humiliation. Free of two-heads-are-better-than-one jokes. Free to masturbate without taking a vote. Yes, it's been a good ride, Clyde, but I've seen the light. I want a separation."

"Sounds reasonable," Kevin interjected.

"Stay out of it," Ant advised.

"You have been through this before," Moms reminded her mates. "It always goes back to who gets the family jewels."

Leo laughed and then apologized. "I'm sorry. It ain't funny having to share one. I just cain't help picturing that Hollywood judge on 'Divorce Court' rendering the verdict. He looked down his nose to the right and mimicked, "'You get the house.'" Now looking left, he ruled, "'And you get the car.'" Right again. "'You keep the kids and appliances.'" Left. "'And you keep the poodle and the pecker.'"

"We'll have to fight for the rights," Claude decided. "Winner take all."

"Ant can referee," Leo suggested. "He's had lots of experience fighting over, uh, these things."

"Stop it, you guys," Kevin intervened again.

Moms warned, "I'd stay out of it if I were you."

Clyde predicted, "This is going to hurt me just as much as it does you," then sank his large fist deep into their single common stomach.

"Oof," Claude cried.

"Oof," Clyde cried.

Claude countered with a right cross to his brother's nose, drawing a torrent of reddish-green blood. Clyde came back with a smashing left hook to Claude's throat, evoking a death-rattling gurgle. A mutual roundhouse to one another's chin flipped both brawlers onto the sand. Gouging, clawing, mauling and biting, the
duo rolled down the beach to the water's edge.

The wayfaring stone crab peered at the passing odd combatants, then looked to the heavens and clicked a coded thanks for its own lack of evolutionary progress.

Clyde grabbed a handful of mutual privates and squeezed.
"AAY-EEE!" screamed Claude.
"EEE-YII!" screamed Clyde.

Claude snatched a flopping clump of Clyde's hair and banged down Clyde's face into the shoreline sand. Clyde responded by then grinding his knuckles into Claude's eyes.

The dueling pair rolled on into the surf and vanished out of sight in the moon-size crater Moms had created with her butt-plop. Bloody bubbles rose to the surface as the donnybrook continued unabated beneath the swirling tide.

"Anthony?" implored Moms.
"I'll get them," he responded.

"Don't worry about those two," she said. "They do this all the time. I was simply curious as to how far it is to that doughnut shop. I can always use a little exercise."

The Siamese siblings surfaced momentarily, each one's neck being strangled by knobby fingers attached to powerful forearms. Grim and growling, the self-throttled sibs managed one deep, ragged sardine-scented inhalation before roiling back down into the woman-made pool.

"That's enough," Kevin unwisely judged while wading out into the water to break up the family feud. He dipped his hand into the bloody sea, fished around and pulled up Claude by the hair of his head. Clyde naturally followed and immediately diagnosed that an uninvited third party had lain hands on his better half. Switching alliances faster than Benedict Arnold in thumbscrews, he torqued over sideways and savagely sank horse-sized teeth into the newest enemy's thigh.

Kevin screeched and buckled, submerging all three gladiators into the sunken arena.

Moms shook her head while concluding, "He should have stayed
Kevin managed to come up for a quick gulp of air and a fast plea for assistance, "—elp!" before succumbing to the ferocity of the close-knit kin. The entangled trio sank once more, prompting Ant to intercede by stepping into the edge of the sea and grabbing onto the first ankle to break the surface. The giant then backed out onto the shore, hauling the entwined mass of humanity which included his partner and stepfathers.

The stone crab shrieked, reminding the world that not only boiling lobsters possessed crustacean vocals. With the graceless dexterity of a Special Olympics sprinter, it raced for the ocean, hissing a dire resolution to never again set tentacle upon mankind's dry and demented domain.

"I'm sorry, Clyde," Claude panted breathlessly. "Forgive me."

"Don't go for that, Clyde," Leo instigated. "He still wanted to take your manhood."

Needless, Clyde tearfully forgave. "It's all right. You're still the best brother in the world."

"Give me a hug then," Claude sought while wrapping strong arms around his only living blood kin.

"I'm here, Clyde," Clyde wept. "I'll always be here for you, but that's enough. You're hurting my ribs. Stop!"

"Toldja," Leo reminded Clyde.

When Clyde's head lolled listlessly forward, Claude met him with a head-butt. Clyde's large dome flopped back, exposing a big jugular vein that Claude chomped into like a famished pit bull at a Michael Vick training camp.

Clyde gurgled, "Is that all you've got, brother?"

"No," Claude cried while scooping a handful of swollen gonads.

"III-EEE!" they both squallled and rolled back into the ocean.

Breaking its new resolve, the displaced stone crab returned to shore and its buried beer can stash for another broken resolution.

Kevin wondered, "Where's Pablo?"
"One million dollars plus your freedom from custody," offered Judge Andrew Silverspoon Moonie from the visitation side of the glass partition, "all for one little charter mission."

"Andy," Igor implored through the meshed speaker hole, "I am a peace-loving skywriter, not a search-and-destroy fighter pilot, and I do not need money. Here at Bentview Memorial, everything is free. Why else would I keep coming back?"

"You like it here?"

"Certainly. It's a lawless liberal paradise. I'm registered as fully certified, which means immunity from all mortal law. Every single thing is legal for me: murder, treason, cat-skinning; you name it. Residents even have their own toll-free number to call in Presidential threats and are rewarded with an additional five year sentence in here. Besides, where else can anybody get away from the IRS?"

"Name your price," Moonie suggested. "Money is no object. I've been bribed by the wealthiest, most influential citizens."

"You actually know a lobbyist, Andy?"

"Several. So how much will it cost me?" asked the judge.

"Two kisses."

"Be serious."

"French."

"Not an option."

"With a two-handed, wrap-around fannie grope."

"Listen, Igor. I'm a federal dictator. I can get you out of any madhouse whenever you want to leave."

"I'm a self-commit, so I can already leave whenever I want."

"That's what they all say."

Igor stood and opened the unlocked door connecting both sides of the visitation booth. After squeezing into Moonie's cramped, one-person cubicle, he pulled the door shut and turned off the overhead light.

The judge pressed his palms flat against Igor's panting chest,
holding off the hunchbacked assailant as much as possible within a confining booth.

"Oh my, yes," Igor moaned, "please mash my nipples."
"Rape!" the judge screamed.
"Rape is legal for me."

* * *

"That was fun," Clyde admitted while dabbing Claude's swollen lip with a sterile alcohol pad Kevin had produced from a first-aid kit in the yacht's wheelhouse.
"That's the first time I ever cried 'uncle' underwater," said Claude. "After all that, I'm ready for breakfast."
"Hallelujah," Moms rejoiced.
Ant informed them, "The doughnut shop is on the far side of the island, so we'll have to take your truck, Moms." He nodded his head toward the dump truck parked alongside the wharf.
"Can I drive?" asked Leo. "I know the gears. In high school I drove a garbage truck to the prom."
Ant teased, "Did she oink or just stink?"
"Don't be cruel, Anthony," Moms scolded. "The world would be one big dump without garbage men . . . and women," she added.
"Yes, ma'am," Ant acceded, taking his mother's arm and then escorting her to the customized dump truck. Now in the full-tilt posture having its tailgate touching the ground, the velvet lined bed angled up to serve as the chair back of a gargantuan throne. Its seat was a cornerstone block of granite draped in a polar bear fur.

Moms stepped regally upon the tailgate, turned with practiced pomp and lowered herself twelve inches onto the royal recliner. Claude and Clyde scampered into the cab and started up the low-g geared engine. Hydraulics hissed as the nearly vertical truck bed lifted several inches off the ground and tilted back a bit more to ensure that the queen would not be dethroned by any big bumps in the road.
"Honeys," Moms called out to her husbands, "let Anthony's friend drive."

The twins reluctantly scooted over to the passenger side, allowing Leo to climb behind the wheel, eyes alit like a Christmas morning toddler astride his first Big Wheel. Ant and Kevin opted for the BMW and led the way across the densely populated retirement retreat at the stately speed of five miles per hour.

From her elevated position, the formidable queen waved to a group of seven seniors in motorized wheelchairs, each with its scientifically dumbfounding turning radius of three hundred and sixty degrees. Out for a joint venture, they giddily tailgated the royal dump truck and were immediately followed by an ice cream truck tinkling out the maddening melody to "The Candyman."

Traffic backed up as a silver-maned couple aboard red Mopeds zoomed along with them, deftly weaving in and out of an eight-pack of nature-defying, sixty-something joggers in gray sweatsuits.

With the peculiar innocence of tone deaf singers worldwide, Claude crooned, "Who can take a rainbow . . ."

Clyde likewise agonized, "Dip it in a dream . . ."

Leo poked his head out the driver's window and yelled for Kevin to shoot the roof speaker off the ice cream truck. Failing to receive a response, he switched on the dashboard radio and then twisted the volume knob all the way to the right to drown out the tuneless duet beside him.

Caller: You are a great American, Shane Wannabe.

Shane: You are a great American too, just like all the strangers who phone in to compliment this show.

Caller: You are almost as great as Trash Limbo.

Shane: Careful now. No blasphemy. But I do come from a long line of great Americans beginning with my great-great-American grandfather whose father was from Denmark. A great Dane.

"Great," Leo mumbled while punching another channel button.
now entering the third overtime period of this suspense-laden Special Olympics basketball thriller with the score still tied at zero.

Leo tried a 'different channel.

Take Max-Lax today and lose four pounds in four minutes, plus a chance to win three days and two nights at any Budget Inn in [drumroll] downtown Cleveland.

Leo moaned, now resigning himself to the outcome of the nail-biting Special Olympics basketball thriller.

Indiana Special Olympian Joey Frazer miraculously hits a lay-up at the buzzer, but unfortunately it is in the other team's basket. Euphoric bedlam is breaking out as Joey's team mobs him in triumph. They think they've won! But wait; here comes the Indiana Coach Bobby Nightmare wielding a folding steel chair. Down goes Frazer! Down goes Frazer!

Leo backed the truck into a Canal Street parking lot at the No-Nuts Do-Nuts shop and reached for the lever he assumed to be the parking brake.

"Don't pull that lever—" Clyde cried, but was not able to finish as Leo heaved. The truck bed popped straight back into a completely upright chair, tossing Moms out onto the sidewalk where she began tumbling toward the bakery shop.

"She's on a roll!" warned Claude.

"Fore!" yelled Clyde.

Moms rolled across a squat, chocolate colored, new Corvette after its occupants had just vacated the vehicle. Its light and fragile fiberglass body crumpled flatter than a Hershey's Bar without almonds. The human wrecking ball smashed through a glass
facade of the bakery and plowed down the Formica counter before vanishing into the kitchen through a wide set of slatted swinging doors.

Ant stepped over the nut-free Chevy, tossed aside a dangling No-Nuts Do-Nuts sign and kicked a cracked countertop out of the way, then treaded through swinging doors and a cloud of floating flour. Moms lay unmoving on the floor among several overturned bakery racks. The grand queen of the Canal Street parade was buried under a large assortment of every imaginable kind of doughnut other than, of course, any with nuts.

Ant dug through the doughnuts to uncover his mother's peaceful face, eyes blessedly closed against the outside world's ceaseless stares.

"Moms, speak to me," the distressed son beseeched while gently patting her rubbery cheeks.

Slowly the heavy eyelids folded up, like double doors on a two-car garage, vacantly misinterpreting the sight of countless pastry delights. "Heaven," she concluded, turning her head to gulp down two of the nearest sugary treats.

"Moms, are you all right?"

Still somewhat disoriented, she questioned her prodigy son.

"Anthony, how did you ever get through the Pearly Gates with your record?"

"This is a bakery, Moms, not Paradise."

"Even better," she amended, twisting her head to engulf more doomed doughnuts.

From the oven area, a merry voice claimed, "Those babies are three dollars a dozen."

Clad in baker's whites with hands on hips was the owner and operator of the remains of No-Nuts Do-Nuts. "I'm Philby Pilsbury," announced the five-foot tall, three hundred pounder, "and no, my belly button does not produce giggles."

Kevin entered, saw Philby and ordered, "I'll take a baker's dozen, chocolate-covered twists with pecan sprinkles."

Philby proposed, "Choose the right answer and you receive a
"Can we play?" asked Moms for Ant and herself. 
"I think not. Just the pecan person," the baker judiciously stipulated. "Here we go. This establishment is called No-Nuts due to the fact that: one, that's my name; two, I'm a eunuch; or three, I don't serve nuts."

"Three?" Kevin guessed.
"Correct, so get out."
The Siamese twin midgets rushed in asking, "How's Moms?"
Philby warily scrutinized all of his guests before asking, "So who's next? Abe Lincoln in short-shorts?"
Leo stepped in wearing a white smock along with a cotton fiber nose/mouth mask for protection from the flour smog. An army surplus bag was folded under one arm.

"President Lincoln," Philby addressed the latest newcomer, "I demand my right-wing right to have these terrorists waterboarded for sabotage of an American free market enterprise."

"Three dollars a dozen is a long way from free," Moms chided upon quick reflection.

"I ain't the Prez anyway," Leo corrected Philby. "Just old Leopold Hammerstein, your friendly neighborhood Health Department Inspector. It's gonna take a mighty big bag of doughnuts to bribe your way outta this mess, Pilsbury."

"How did you know my name?"
"I heard it on a TV commercial," Leo revealed, tossing the army bag to the cook, "so git to packing."

* * *

"You get the other kiss after the mission," old Judge Moonie bargained, pushing away the hunchbacked crop duster.
"I just adore coy boys, Moonshine."
"Stop touching me back there. I'm not like that."
"Oh yeah? Then explain the banana in your front pants pocket."
"I don't have a bana—Oh, you mean my erec—well, you do kiss better than my wife."
"Honeymoon," Igor cried passionately, "you are softer than medical cotton."
"Somebody help me," Judge Moonie pleaded his case to the door at Igor's back. "Anybody."
Like a voice-activated secret cavern entrance, the hinged barrier swung slowly open. Revealed upon the dark threshold was not Ali Baba with golden Arabian treasures, but Mike with yellow American pencils.
"Are those for taking notes?" prayed the judge.
"No."

*  *  *

"No, not a lucky guess," Moms answered between large wooden spoonfuls of doughnuts back at the dock. "I called Oil Pan and he told me you guys were down here in Florida. My chair faces the rear, so I'm sure we were not followed by the police."
"Oil Pan?" asked Kevin.
"Dawg Pound's pal," she clarified.
"Eggs," Kevin now recalled.
"Anthony's Miami Chapter associates," she expounded, "from his book club."
Leo sputtered coffee. "Wrong pipe," he apologized. "Willie Shakespeare always chokes me up."
She proudly patted Ant on the knee as they all sat on the shoreline sandbank while Pablo's boat, anxious for exotic adventure, tugged at its mooring post. "My baby boy always had a flare for drama," she boasted.
"A rose is a rose," Leo agreed as the leisurely breakfast party watched the sparkling sun star rise toward mid-morning while doughnuts disappeared by the dozens.
Kevin watched in wonder as Moms ate. An absolute professional, he deduced prior to observing aloud, "Never before have I witnessed
anybody else pour coffee on their doughnuts and eat them with a spoon like Cheerios."

Clyde joined the conversation. "I once saw a skinny Asian eat one hundred and thirty-nine hot dogs in ten minutes."
"One hundred and forty-nine," Claude argued.
"Was not," Clyde refuted.
"Was too."

In a blurring half-second the joined brothers had throttled each other by the throat. Ant secured a sturdy finger around their belt to prevent them from rolling down into the ocean again, but the determined mutual destruction continued until both stranglers passed out together.

Kevin noticed the gangplank stretching from the docked yacht and remembered Ant removing it after boarding the night before, so he turned to Moms and asked politely, "How did you get on board the first time?"

She pointed to the hawser rope securing the yacht to the pier. "I just took that string and pulled your little boat up close to the dock, then stepped over the rail," she explained with the aged patience of an elementary school teacher.

"Oh," Kevin acknowledged, like an elementary school student.

Moms then managed to dismay Kevin, Ant and Leo by setting her ultra-carb breakfast aside unfinished. Looking out across the timeless ocean's diamond-tipped swells, she simply asked her only son, "Anthony, when are you coming back?"

Leo nudged Kevin and nodded toward the yacht. Both stood to leave, so mother and son could share a private moment. Before his departure, Leo bowed to the queen of the Canal Street parade and proclaimed with unmistakable sincerity, "Ma'am, you are truly a beauty beyond compare."

Blushing slightly, she graciously extended the back of her hand which the black knight knelt to kiss.

"Sir," she seriously commissioned, "please look after my boy. He's my world."

"I shall," Leo pledged. "You have my good word on it."
Kevin bent down to give Moms a silent hug, then he and Leo traversed the gangplank.

Moms shifted her large eyes back toward her only child, the unanswered question still lingering heavily in the air.

Ant attempted to cover his thoughts from her all-knowing gaze by deflecting attention to the unconscious Siamese husbands. "Are they all right?" he asked.

Clyde snorted restlessly, somehow sensing the heightened scrutiny.

Claude blindly placed a calming palm on his brother's near shoulder, easing them both back into that gray rest area between life and death.

"They're fine," Moms sniffled. "I'm not."

Ant took his mother's hand. "I'll come back, Moms," the son vowed. "Please don't cry."

"Crying is a mother's prerogative," she informed him, "but if it makes you feel any better, I guess I can wait until you're gone."

"Aw, Moms," the boy giant sighed, cradling her hand against his cheek.

Clyde and Claude awoke.

"Were we fighting again?" asked Clyde, groggily.

"I think so," Claude presumed, "but I can't remember why."

"Men are so silly," Moms chided with a chuckle. "Now toss me the belt."

The husbands hustled over to the parked dump truck which was backed up to the wooden wharf. Fishing under the polar bear fur, they extracted a rodeo belt normally used on bronco bulls, and drug it over to Moms. With expertise, she wrapped it around her wonderous waist and fastened it with a silver-studded, gleaming buckle onto which Claude fastened a thick tow chain.

Clyde and Claude returned to the truck cab and fired up the engine. When the vehicle slowly eased forward, the connected tow chain tightened and Moms dug her heels in the sand. As theatrical as a full moon rising above a barren landscape, the world's most
voluptuous, twelve hundred pound woman rose from the seaside.

Ant hugged his mother and reaffirmed his promise to return, then walked across the gangplank and pulled it aboard after him. Another bridge burned.

The yacht sped out to sea: Kevin at the helm, looking sober; Leo on the prow, leaning forward against the wind; and Ant aft, bawling like the world's biggest baby.

Moms, Clyde and Claude stood silently on the shore, holding hands and witnessing the small ship grow infinitely smaller until finally fading out over the sinking horizon.
33. No Fool

"My hiney hurts," Pablo whimpered.
"Stop sniveling," Fran admonished. "You are supposed to be a mucho macho mobster."

"What about the chopper, cuz?" the wounded warlord wanted to know as he peeked out cautiously through the window blinds of the Miami U.S. Attorney's Office.

"Negative. Our Uncle Sam just lost a Coast Guard helicopter to those two federal men. The pilot is still MIA and presumed to be alligator doo-doo by now."

"Fran, I need that war bird to track down the Barker Gang. My underworld reputation cannot survive humiliation by a band of Kentucky hillbillies headed by an old janitor. They kidnapped me and robbed my bank, then shot me in both butt cheeks. I can't even take a crap without crying."

"How did you get away?"

"You won't believe it. This thousand-plus pound woman pulled my yacht up to the pier where her midget, two-headed husband—"

"You're right; I don't believe it," Assistant U.S. Attorney Francisco Nachoz cut him off. "Now go collect some protection fees from feeble shop owners in Little Havana so you can pay your back taxes. Otherwise you might end up sharing a cell with Trash Limbo. Imagine listening to him twenty-four/seven."

"I heard he escaped."

"He's back. Turned himself in after he ran out of pills. The whole world is relieved. Now I'm really busy, so turn around and make the back of your head grow small."

Pablo peeked out through the window slats again, scouting the streets for a psychopathic janitor. "I'm not leaving until I get my military helicopter. I want it fully equipped with the latest hardware including Gatlings, Sidewinders, nerve gas and any other available weapons of mass destruction."

You've got a lot of nerve," Francisco smirked. "Your biggest problem is that I am not some old, trembling street merchant. I'm