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# Valley at Dusk

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1983

*Gary Gala*

**VALLEY**

**AT**

**DUSK**



*gary j gala*

Valley at Dusk

Gary J. Gala

## Acknowledgements

It goes without saying that there are many more people to thank than I have space or time for here. A first novel, more than any other work, is probably the most likely place to find outpourings of gratitude for everyone who has touched the author's life, even in the briefest way.

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G.J.G  
Holy Cross College  
Spring 1983 .

cover design: Jeanne Lightbody

for my mother

Valley at Dusk

If you should go skating  
On the thin ice of modern life  
Dragging behind you the silent reproach  
Of a million tear stained eyes  
Don't be surprised, if a crack in the ice  
Appears under your feet  
You slip out of your depth and out of your mind  
With your fear flowing out behind you  
As you claw the thin ice

from "The Thin Ice"  
by Pink Floyd

But what about the villagers? What happens  
to a man when he has to live his life in the  
twentieth century deprived of the sovereignty  
and lordship of science and art? What is it  
like to be a layman and a consumer? Does this  
consumer, the richest in history, suffer a  
kind of deprivation?

What are the symptoms of this deprivation?

From The Message in the Bottle  
by Walker Percy

## Part I

Our age is like nothing so much as a valley at dusk. A time when the gods of the day have departed but the new ones of the night, possibly holding promise for a new day, have not yet come. Yet, some still feel rich, immersed in the fertile soil of our valley. But the afternoon light which once guided us has grown dim, making everything once distinct, now grey, indistinguishable. We are assaulted by everything at once, more than ever before and yet nothing stands forth, nothing stays with us. Everything is simply shades of shades, white sound. The once friendly gurgle of our river now roars by unseen, with blandness as its new name. It is the Blandness of the Many, like six million voices, hushed forever, accusing their betrayer, their savior.

The mountains, stalworth sentries that they are, still keep watch, yet no trail to their peak has yet produced a new Way, only new vistas on the valley, blanketed by evening mist, dissolving into the night.

from Floyd A. Patterson's PhD.  
dissertation, written some years  
after the events of this story



## Chapter I

That fine fellow Floyd Patterson crouched beside the flattened tire of his weights and measures van. His face with its peculiarly imprecise nose and too-wide ears, was screwed up in perplexity and pain. An innocent passerby might have concluded that Floyd was agonizing over the immediate fate of the tire and the ultimate fate of his van.

But of course he wasn't. Once you have the adulterated pleasure of Floyd's further acquaintance, you'll understand that the tire and the van were the last thing on Floyd's (how shall I say it?) petit mind. The pained expression was for local effect only. He was anxious to appear respectably overwrought about this flesh wound incurred by his servant-machine.

Flooding his mind, in fact, were thoughts of doing nothing more startling than taking a drink. In a saloon called O'Leary's Village Tavern, a dingy sort of wooden cave, exerting what I can only term an indescribable fascination over Floyd and other denizens. But you can well imagine the sort of place. "O," as he is called by the loser clientele that lurks in his establishment, is as fat as his role in life is lean. His mother, a dear woman,

smokes unfiltered cigarettes and is even given to chewing tobacco on occasion. She rocks from foot to foot in tune with the outdated juke box, stirring a kettle of chili special: a witch's brew unseen since the time Birnam wood came to Dunsinane.

"All hail, Floyd Patterson," Ma would crow between well spaced teeth. Well, words to that effect, at least.

Floyd, blached specimen of the great unwashed, would simply smile and wave, pushing past her fuming bulk to the scale it was his gratified destiny in life to inspect. Today was a banner day at O's, as far as Floyd was concerned. Scale inspection and certification day. Floyd lifted his tool kit from the rear of the van. He kept his tools separate from the precision weights, which were wrapped each in its own velour bag and nested in a white plastic case.

"Hey Hoh!," cried O. "Frosteroo coming your way, Floyd?" Floyd, conscious of deserving a break after such a vexing day at work, accepted. Down the bar, Brenda, the antique hooker, and Claude, moving man emeritus, smiled briefly. Further down, an emissary of the vast Fuller Brush sales task force soaked his face in a jar of bar whiskey. Ma could be heard back by the bathrooms endlessly stirring the chili, lamenting untimely births.

Floyd dumped the empty mug down on the bar, wiped his mouth, and turned to stare at the business-type. The throat of his polyester co-ordinates had unintendedly released the tabs of his clip-on tie. The tie, consequently, was presently secured by nothing more than the VFW tie-bar. Give me a break, Floyd groaned

to himself. The status of his complaint was unclear, though. Floyd's own white cotton shirt, solid blue tie, and removeable plastic "nerd pac" pencil retainer, did not offer an unambiguous alternative to the fashions he was deriding.

Quite the critical mood this particular afternoon, eh, Mr. Patterson? Not the least of Floyd's peeves was O's negligence in switching off the television that hung over the drinking platform, depriving Floyd of an opportunity that came only twice a year (supermarkets had no televisions): to indulge simultaneously in his two favorite pastimes. TV addiction and obsessive scale certification.

Floyd slurped up his beer. Goddam, did O' keep this place dark or what?, he mused. Muse away old boy. Muse and ponder that all-important progression from television to aviation to science. Floyd considered himself very well read. But he ultimately gave up books for television. Just ran out of things he wanted to read. Not that he had ever consumed any of the almighty classics, you understand. When I speak of his being well read, I mean that he devoured junk like romances and mysteries and, God forbid, adventure stories. He read absolutely nothing of any lasting worth. After all, how could he? He thought television was God's most precious gift to the twentieth century.

Antique Brenda disengaged herself from the talons old Claude, Moving Man Emeritus, had sunk into her petulant flesh and slobbered next to Floyd who was musing about the God-given efficiency of his bowels. Gently releasing some gas he relayed this fact to Brenda when she asked him if he would like to buy

her a drink. Floyd found Brenda disgusting but in a seductive sort of way.

"You know," smiling yellow teeth affectionately at her, "you may be an old washed-up whore, but there still is something appealing about you." Antique simply laughed and laughed. She thought Floyd with his nerd-pac and his polyester slacks was just about the funniest thing she had ever seen. "You're just a big ol' polyester John, Floyd," she would say. And Floyd winking, sucker that he is, would buy her that drink.

"Brenda," Prince Charming Patterson would continue, "the body is a wonderful machine. At least mine is. It's a little more advanced than anything man has yet devised. This show I saw last night was describing how your various parts work." The rogue indicated a few. "And I thought to myself, that my digestive system and my bowels were pretty neat. You know, I'm never blocked up or watered out? Nope. And when I eat, not five minutes later do I eliminate. That's the word, Brenda. Eliminate."

O', swirling down yet another domestic frosteroo, simply shook his puffy head in disbelief. Sometimes the things Floyd said amazed him. Easily amazed he was. But Antique liked it. She always anticipated Floyd's visits, which were much more numerous than his job demanded. After all, O' only had the one nearly archaic scale.

"Got a goddam flat tire O', but you bet I'm gonna finish my beer before I call it in. No need to upset A.M. Gammon before it's absolutely necessary. The old bastard. Woman stealer." Floyd winked again and grabbed Antique by her gluteus maximus. "Whoa

honey, have another drink! And give me some of those beer nuts, O'." Floyd meandered across the floor to phone in his flat tire. From the sound at the other end it was going to be a while.

Claude, Moving Man Emeritus, gaped at three white young youths in "Prep High Chess Team" jackets stabbing Floyd's tires, and painting an almost unmentionable obscenity on the side of the van utilizing a can of white spray paint. "Some chess players destroyin' your van, Floyd." The Chess Players were a notorious street gang, that had commandeered its uniforms while robbing a school bus which contained the jackets of the Catholic Prep Chess Team. The gang had found the idea of a chess team so irresistible that they had cut their hair, bought clip-on ties (with the school insignia) and donned the jackets to give them a novel identity.

"No shit!" Floyd dashed outside but the adolescents had already made haste. White paint dripped down the side of the van, collecting in small pools on top of the wheel wells. "Damn, those chess players work fast." Back inside, Floyd telephoned the garage again. "Some chess players just destroyed the van," he said. "Better just bring the tow truck." McPhearson the mechanic and transvestite immediately telephoned Floyd's boss to inform him of the situation.

"Don't you even want to call the police?" O' asked. Ma, servant of the kettle, simply shook her head.

"Sure, call 'em," Floyd responded. Tell them what happened while I get some work done." He squeezed past Ma's fuming hulk and assumed the position in front of their scale. He commenced by

wiping the scale clean, carefully swiping bits of ham and swiss cheese that had adhered to the table. He then placed the tool box and the weights container on the counter beside to the scale. Opening the former he selected the third smallest allen wrench and inserted it into the zero balance slot. A quick turn brought the meter to its proper resting place. Floyd replaced the wrench and carefully set the one-pound weight in the center of the pan watching the meter jump first to beyond a pound and a half, then settle back to point nine five. Removing a slightly larger wrench, Floyd adjusted the tension in the scale's main spring bringing the meter to one point oh exactly. Well, not exactly, for the scale would only be good to within a certain margin of error.

That was the next step. To determine the margin of error.

In the standards box Floyd searched for and found the container which housed the smaller weights. He opened it and tugged with felt-tipped tweezers a small disk weighing almost exactly point two five ounces. Floyd knew that in reality this sort of care was not called for on so imprecise a scale. However, he took a certain satisfaction, I guess you might call it, in following procedure. Procedure guarantees accuracy. That's what he always said. Or maybe it was precision. To be honest, neither Floyd nor I could ever keep those two words straight.

Floyd set the small weight atop the larger one, positioning himself so that he could detect any movement in the meter. There was none. Floyd had expected as much since these old scales simply lacked that sort of sensitivity. No one but Noone was

going to clamor: I say, I think you've cheated me out of a quarter ounce of ham. It simply did not matter, to Floyd nor anyone else. He stacked another quarter ounce on the pile but still detected no movement. Archaic, he thought. The new digitals would have taken a jump. Finally Floyd set a third of the same magnitude and got the response he was looking for. Just a little hop in the meter and then back to one. Well, not quite one; now somewhere around one pound, one half ounce.

The real danger though in checking the sensitivity of the scale lay in dropping the weight with too much force and thereby allowing the good ghost gravity to sink her claws into the procedure and cause the response in the meter. Thirty-two feet per second per second. That's how it traveled. That old ghost would get you every time if you were not careful.

And you always had to watch out for parallax. That mattered all the time; whether you were checking the sensitivity or just the accuracy or the precision or whatever. The way you looked at it all mattered. Find a different point of view half-way through the procedure and you were dead. It was essential in the weights and measures game to establish one point of view and hold on to it. Curiosity for some new perspective could get you decapitated in this business.

Fortunately, Floyd had parallax prevention down to a veritable system. Or at least today he did. Each day he practiced looking at objects first with one eye then the other. This quaint practice pervaded all aspects of Floyd's daily existence to the extent that when he brushed his teeth in the morning, he was

careful to observe only a particular tooth with only one eye. Good parallax prevention practice he would say. He began by placing his feet about shoulders' width apart, then lining up his Dallas Cowboys' (god forbid) belt buckle (he wore the same one every day) with the center of the scale. This gave him good lower body alignment which was absolutely crucial to an accurate reading but would not necessarily guarantee one. The key to the next stage involved keeping the neck steady and this too was related to eye alignment. Floyd worked well to achieve proper eye alignment.

Once he had finished insuring that no consumer, regardless of race, sex, handicap or place of national origin, would be harmed by inaccurate scales at O'Leary's saloon, he twisted a new wire seal onto the scale and covered the old certifying sticker with a new one. Writing 'inspected by 3' on this shield of safety Floyd squeezed past Ma, scooped another beer off the towel-streaked bar, and strolled to the window.

Outside, Chaos had decided to expose her hideous visage. The police, McPhearson, and Floyd's boss Mr. Gammon, were all assembled, stroking their stupid heads and studying the van. Claude, Moving Man Emeritus, babbled on about what he had seen. Gammon the greek, whose wife would insure that he received his just deserts, scowled his best scowl but the fool Emeritus continued his incessant chattering. Gammon felt sure that Floyd had somehow caused all of this. He rubbed his finger across the K of that inutterable obscenity. The paint was nearly dry.



"Patterson," he bellowed. Floyd emerged from the dark den into the blinding white outside. His fingers tingled with anticipation for the comic-melodramatic skit about to be acted out. All of his favorite characters were assembled, including the angry boss, the sympathetic bartender, the compassionate, hard luck hooker, the police (both rookie and veteran), an idiot (Claude), and an old affectionate motherly type who smoked unfiltered cigarettes.

"Jesus, they did a job on the old van. 'Fuck you Dept. of Weights and Measures'." That is what it said. Or, in keeping with the moral story-telling practices of the day, F--k Y-u. The F--k Y-u stood as tall as the letters on a movie screen, in big white letters. The rest in carefully printed s--t brown.

"Fuck you Dept. of Weights and Measures," he repeated. Everyone gaped, perplexed.

\*

Rodney Allucida Patterson, Floyd's teenage son and only living offspring, had suspected for quite some time that his father was losing his mind. He based this suspicion on a number of facts, not the least of which was his father's increasing penchant for distraction. Succinctly put, the old man was losing touch with reality. Or, as Rodney liked to say, he was too in touch. That was much closer to it; the old man was just so in touch with what was going on around him that he was unable to discriminate between what was important and what wasn't. He had been as it were, bombarded to the point of confusion. Fact heaped upon unneeded fact. Images stacked and dumped, crushing,

smothering; millions upon millions of words, badgering until...

"Dad, can I borrow the car?"

"Ummm."

"Does that mean yes?"

"The digestive system is a wonderful thing, wouldn't you agree?" Floyd simply never heard a word that was spoken unless one touched upon some insignificant topic of imminent importance to him. Rodney had gone to his mother on several occasions throughout the past spring.

"Your father is fine, dear," she would reassure. "He has a lot on his mind. His brother is in the hospital and this and that and this and that wears on him."

"Yey, like bowel movements." Rodney was absolutely convinced that the old man was not quite right. Why, of course, the boy was the most astute in the family. While Nana, the grandmother, Ulna, the wife, Sam, the dog, Gammon, the boss and the rest of them accused, angered, or annoyed Floyd, Rodney showed brilliant and not uncommon adolescent perception in realizing that his father was losing his mind.

In fact, by late in the evening following the incident at O'Leary's, Rodney set about his plan to diagnose and cure his father's illness. He was convinced that he could do it. He wasn't quite sure how, yet he considered the fact nearly accomplished simply by having made up his mind. Lying in bed the next morning, after having masturbated successfully, Rodney saw, in a flash of brilliant light, the solution. He must attempt to crack his father's psyche by feigning madness himself, thereby breaking

into Floyd's isolated world as a comrade in arms, discovering the cause of the trauma and devising the cure. Then again, maybe some sort of shock treatment filled with flashing lights and smouldering sparks would do the job, he mused. Poor deluded boy. In his mind, he actually imagined that trips to his local lending library would provide sufficient background in psychology to enable him to actualize his plan.

Rodney simply had no conception of the forces at work behind his father's psychosis. He knew nothing of my existence, or the role I would be playing in his father's life. To be fair to this juvenile, it was after all rather touching that he cared enough about his dear old dad to spend so many waking hours contemplating his condition. But the fact of the matter was that the boy would soon have his own problems, almost as powerful as his father's, and would soon be looking for help and guidance at the same well from which he hoped to remove the poisons of a lifetime.

\*

The dream was an old one. In it the old man sits drunkenly at the kitchen table muttering to himself about nothing in particular in half tones. Floyd enters unseen by a door which he does not remember and stands watching both reflections in a mirror, pinched between two cabinets by the stove. The television blares but is soon replaced by the sound of many sets, voices bleeding together from one to the other. With agonizing slowness, the man drinks from a small crystal glass half-filled with a golden liquid. He finishes and passes his tongue along his lips.

He turns towards the mirror. Floyd says "push" and suddenly he feels as if he is in the mirror. Now there is only one face to be seen. It is Floyd's.

\*

The breaking of the fast at the Patterson ranch was always an abominable fiasco and would doubtless have been abandoned long ago by any person of well-formed character. It was a testament of the degree to which they had drifted from the grid that they perpetuated this absurd ritual. Not only did the kitchen become a veritable zoo, with each animal scratching about to have his bowl filled first, but the home's peripheral organs such as the bathroom were vied for with equal ferocity. Just a sampling of this buffoonery was enough to turn even the most stalwart stomach.

"Mom," the obnoxious yet perceptive adolescent would scream from his room, "I don't have any underwear. How am I supposed to get dressed without any underpants to wear?"

"Get them yourself. They're in the laundry room."

"Kids today," Nana moaned. This is, as I mentioned earlier, the grandmother. What a delightful oddball! Full of surprises. Nose-picking Nana, Rodney has always called her. A wonderful woman. Had all the manners and tact of Ghengis Khan. Floyd could not stand her, either. "But she's my mother, dear," Ulna would whine.

"I think Sam shit again," Nana offered to Noone in particular smearing a snot beneath the table. Noone simply took no notice, not yet concerned enough with Floyd's life story to

comment on the grandmother's observation. Sam, the faithful canine, was unfortunately only marginally house broken. The Patterson clan tried to train him but like most of their other ill-formed ventures, Sam's training was only marginally successful. The dog was a failure, but in truth a nice one. It eliminated. Ulna cleaned. Somehow in the larger Cosmic Order this made a kind of sense, although I wouldn't want to let her hear me say that. Considered herself quite liberated actually. Spends a lot of time reading womens' radical magazines such as Good Housekeeping. It is my own particular theory that these magazines are inspired by the radical communist element in American society.

Our fine fellow Floyd was a bit distracted that particular morning. He hopped out of bed before anyone else which was unusual, and spent some time wandering about the living room and kitchen looking very profound and consumed with pressing matters. He would stop his journey for a moment and gaze intently at the photograph of the Patterson family which rested atop the mantel-piece next to a large mirror. In the mirror he studied the reflection of a sea scape which hung on the opposite side of the room. Ulna and he had purchased it when they were first married for a mere pittance at an outlet of the Sears and Roebuck Corporation. It was actually quite dreadful, the worst kind of bourgeois art, the sort which gave any well-formed person the impression that cultured people must inhabit this domicile, when, in truth, if you looked a bit closer you saw that this was a very poor print in an even cheaper frame. Water frozen forever over

blurry stones, waiting to crash, yet eternally impotent. A static, unnatural sea, forever the same and never changing.

Floyd wandered about the lower level of his castle occasionally mumbling some obscenity or picking a copy of People magazine off the coffee table and leafing through it. Ulna thought People was great. Nana preferred the Enquirer and the Star. She was particularly fascinated by psychic phenomena and the sex lives of celebrated American movie stars. Floyd occasionally glanced at the personals which he found intriguing in a way he found difficult to describe.

"GWM seeks companion to share culture and more. Fun loving. Write PO 654 and send picture." Floyd desired to respond sometime simply out of curiosity. He wished to see for himself what the people looked like who solicited strangers in national gossip magazines. He imagined them as ugly misfits who bore little resemblance to their descriptions. Little oily men who masturbated most of the time and fondled small boys in the bathrooms of parks and bus stations. As Chance would deem it, Floyd would soon learn that a co-worker, Sherman Weatherbee, was in fact one of these men. Sherman was large and broadly built and anything but oily. Floyd would discover Sherman through his ad, although he would never admit that he responded for any reason other than curiosity. Just remember that it killed my cat.

"Mama, I think that Nana has gone to sleep in this chair and peed herself," Rodney observed as Ulna was getting breakfast. Floyd read the paper. The headline told him:

BUS STRUCK BY TRAIN

## 15 CHILDREN DEAD 20 INJURED

He stoped and went away for a while. Where he went, he does not even know. No one else realized it but for a time he was with the children on the bus babbling away in Spanish and then bang!, there was a loud screeching sound followed by a silence more deafening. This too was pierced eventually by the cries of the wounded. But it was the silence that Floyd thought about. And it was the silence which Floyd could not stand. He groped for the television on-off switch. And then the children were playing again and it was before the accident and his daughter was still alive and he still could... and Rodney was holding his head and complaining to Ulna that he just could not "deal with the old woman anymore," that now she has gone and peed all over the furniture.

"Well wake her up and help her to the bathroom while I clean it up."

"No way, uh, uh. Forget it! I just can't deal with it." He grasped his head between the palms of his hands and squeezed releasing a loud wail. "I can't stand it anymore. Waaaaaaaaaaaaa." He leapt onto the counter, snatched an egg from his mother's hand and smashed it against his forehead. "Death to the eggs. No more chickens in this mad world. Granma's peein' in the living room." He sang. "She's peein' in the living room. She's peein' in the living room. She's peein' in the living room early in the morning."

"Rodney, get a grip on yourself for Chrissake," his father told him.

"No way! Seven thirty in the morning and I have to deal with this." He pointed towards the living room. "Death to the urinator," he shouted and tossed an egg at his grandmother which splattered against the carpet by her feet. He took up some more into his hands. "DON'T TRY AND STOP ME! You'll never take me alive." His mother lunged so he squashed one against her ear. He lobbed a few more like mortars at his father.

Suddenly he stops and pulls his hands towards his eyes. "I can't see. It's happening again. Dad, I can't see. Mom. Shit. I can't see." Ulna dropped the egg flipper and rushed to him. Floyd chanted: "One two three four five six seven. All good children go to heaven. One two three four five six seven. All good children go to heaven."

This is of course the great problem I spoke of earlier. Chaos swirls about. Rodney has managed to contract some strange eye disease beyond the comprehension of so-called modern science. No better than the alchemists and sorcerors of old I say. The doctors, in their infinite wisdom, even invented a new name for it and in doing so feel they know it better. Persistinitis. Now he sees. Now he doesn't. Now he sees. Now he doesn't. The first time it happened was about a month before this breakfast was prepared. It would last about a week and a half more and then appear to stop as mysteriously as it started.



Once Rodney had recovered, Ulna made a list of the destroyed produce, packed him off to school, plopped Nana down in front of the television and sought Floyd out to discuss that day's trip to a new specialist in the area of retinal persistence of vision. She found him fully naked, dripping wet, planted in front of the hallway wallpaper, stroking it with the flat of his palm. It was poor purple patterned, separated where adjacent rolls came together. It had been there when they had bought the house. Ulna absolutely hated it, and it was somehow made all the more ghastly by having her husband fondling it stark naked.

The scene repeated ad nauseum both horizontally and vertically was of a young woman, dressed in what I suppose the uneducated designer thought was a 19th century summer dress, sitting beneath a nondescript tree, a smile splayed into a sneer upon an otherwise nondescript face. A small child appeared to be playing near by. He frolicked, caught for time in memorial in mid-air grasping for a branch of the tree. Well, that is what it appeared he was doing in a single scene. Collectively however, the scenes had a different effect. It appeared that in every direction, the child was trying to attract the woman's attention in the next scene.

"Floyd, what the hell are you doing? You'll catch your death." Floyd came back from where he did not know. He saw the sense in what she said, so he stepped into the bathroom and dried off. Ulna shook her head but said no-thing nor no-word either. Unsurprisingly, she didn't know what to think so she thought nothing.

"Floyd," she called through the bathroom door. "I'm taking Rodney to that doctor today." Downstairs a talk show raged. "I'm worried about it. I've made a list of things to ask the doctor." Floyd emerged fully clothed.

"Please. I've got a lot on my mind right now. We'll talk about it tonight."

She nagged some more but he heard not a word of it. He chanted instead of listening. In eighteen years of marriage she had said little worth listening to. Nana laughed and laughed at the comedian getting his big break on Kaffee Kalsch TV. One two three four five six seven...Floyd scrutinized the bunch of lists magnetized to the refrigerator. They were everywhere all at once.

"Now why'd you go and knock the lists on the floor? I wouldn't know what to do without them." She crouched, gathering them up into her little hands.

"I'm gonna be late." Sam the faithful pet slipped out behind him. He was discontent with the running of the Patterson household and had voiced this unhappiness the best way he knew how. He had urinated in the corner.

\*

The dream was a new one. In it Floyd crouches beside the van with the now defunct Saint Christopher sitting rather uneasily on the dash. Floyd takes the knife, which hangs on a key chain, from his pocket ever so slowly and opens it. Click it says. He smooths the dust away from the rubber. "Push," he says and suddenly all is a swirling chaos of electron clouds. Nuclei, brilliant as suns, are miles away. "Pop," he says. All is as it was but

nothing is as it should be. Floyd sighs the sigh of a billion modern men. Then he counts to seven and the air goes to heaven.

## Chapter II

Floyd scrounged about in his polyester slacks for three coins with which to trouble la machine for a soda. He was determined to rid himself of that evil scourge known as an early morning drink, that same scourge which had buried his father. Sipping slowly, he made his way to the lounge. Uncle Cronos had graciously donated almost ten minutes to separate Floyd from the evil boss who wanted to discuss yesterday's little incident with the van. Gammon had scowled his best scowl at Floyd's reaction to its destruction; had felt that he might have been just a bit more cautious. Floyd, as you by now probably expected, had simply laughed; had seemed strangely aroused by the occurrence.

Everyone, from Claude on up, had yelled and screamed when Floyd jumped into the van and attempted to pull away from the curb in order to, as he said, "run those Chess Playing Vandals down." The deep brown weights and measures van with unmentionable obscenities smeared on its side had gallantly wobbled for a few feet before tilting threateningly enough to one side to convince even our valiant commander that it was going nowhere of its own power. Only Floyd had been amused.

The lounge suddenly sprouted conversation. All of Floyd's favorite workaday characters were present including Franny the Fornicator, Dom the lame Puerto Rican, Dick with gumstuck slits for eyes, toothless Tony, and Steve, Dom's son, a budding machismo and latent homosexual. Only R.J. Vinny was absent. He always flew into the office only milli-microseconds before the clock struck eight. His initials denote such an unspeakable act that I shudder to even think it, much less place it here as a matter of public record.

Floyd took another sip of his soda and instead of joining the mainstream of human activity he simply studied the veins protruding from the back of his hand. The greenish tint of the fluorescent ceiling lights embedded in Armstrong panels cast the purple-blue of the blood into a sickeningly yellowish color. The lounge was functional. Functional. That was what that renowned art critic Mr. A.M. Gammon had called it.

American seating, smooth curved plastic (one slope fits all), over a functional easy clean orange carpet. There were no windows. These conditions were beyond barbaric. They were downright untenable. No easy chairs. No windows through which to view the wonder which is nature. It is no wonder that the folks Floyd associated with in this haven for disguised perverts spent most of their time devising indecent associations for their god-given names, not to mention the disgusting practice of deriding each others' wonderful mothers.

Floyd, displaying a rare flash of Christian charity really did try to sympathize with the office girls who spent their days in the adjacent offices. These were really not offices at all but simply one large room divided into cubicles (not really cubes) by functionally (you guessed it) color-coordinated walls or more accurately half walls which could easily be spied over but nevertheless did offer some semblance of privacy for some young lady stuck at her desk for an entire day. Of course, it was only the illusion of privacy which the wall offered, for Floyd had many times planted himself with hands stuffed in polyester slacks outside of this so-called office and studied the girls, unseen, like a ghost. They spent much of their pitifully insignificant day sitting at those formica desks filing reports filled out by inspectors such as Floyd. Everything had been color-coordinated by social scientists hired by that leader in innovative office management, A.M. Gammon, to determine a maximally efficient scheme for the space at hand. These "scientists" reasoned from some trumped-up logic that light, cheery tones encouraged a pleasant work experience. One need no longer suffer drabness, they argued. Puritanism, that cornerstone of your American culture, had been replaced by functional professionalism.

A slight pounding about the dorsal cranial region indicated to Floyd that the caffeine he had ingested had begun to work its legal wonder. Nothing excessive or reality distorting, you understand, just a potent punch for the blood. He was well aware that it was no good for the blood pressure but in a day to day sort of way this made little difference.

Floyd departed this Earth for a while to recall his one semester of community college physics. Pressure is related to some quantity directly and to something else, some other way. Muzak from the lounge loudspeaker intruded on the quiet complexity of this thought. Audible yet nearly subliminal sounds filled the lounge. Floyd detested (and in so doing showed admirable perception, I might add) these dentist office arrangements of popular songs done by some bowling alley sax player with his brother accompanying on brush drums. At times, he even felt this stuff was inescapable. He suddenly noticed that his workaday characters holding their heads, twirling about as if maddened by what they heard. Floyd sat strapped to his American seat as Odysseus had been strapped to the mast, with electronic wax stuffing his ears making him impervious to the deceptive Sirens afflicting the others. It seemed that this deadly poison was everywhere. Supermarkets played it, hospitals played it, even the Department lounge and the dentist's office played it. One was hard pressed to find public places without it. Innocuous was what it was. And strangely satiating too.

Floyd came back and recalled a television documentary which described the use of subliminal suggestions placed underneath the music in supermarkets, below the level of conscious audible discrimination, but there nevertheless, loud enough for some part of the brain to respond to them. He sensed that the voices were there and wondered if there was not some other ghost world hidden behind everything he could see.

He had laughed when the tapes were played of the actual suggestions. The narrator had elevated the importance of this part of the show as if the mere words Floyd were about to hear would actually have some lasting effect on his life. The voice had turned out to be a big disappointment, droning on again and again: "you don't want to take that product. Stealing is wrong." Followed by: "Why not buy that extra-special something that you've always wanted. Go on, give yourself a treat. Why put off till tomorrow what you can have today?"

He had laughed so hard at all of this that he feared his sides would burst. Tears had spilled from his eyes. Anyone could see that only a moron would do anything but laugh.

Floyd wondered what sort of people spent their lives sitting around producing stupid tapes that people would never hear. His mind was simply unable to comprehend the subtleties of the scientific theory behind subliminal suggestion. Up until the Spring which we are discussing at this very moment, if Floyd could not see, feel, taste, or touch whatever was being discussed, he had no use for it. He felt confident in letting Dom, who had just returned from the bathroom, know that even the subconscious brain would have a good chuckle concerning this entire question.

"What the hell are you babbling about," Dom queried.

"Cheap sunglasses," Steve, the budding Machismo said.

Floyd stood to gain a better perspective from which to address his co-workers more cogently.



"And all the time I'll bet you think that you're just pushing the cart along the aisle listening to some rearranged Beatles' tune which has become unrecognizable through the efforts of the brush drummer in a leisure suit with his brother on sax who is interrupted every once in a while by the tape moron's brother saying: 'Hey shoppers, check out today's meat specials. Pork roast only \$3.95 a pound. You can't beat deals like this. And don't forget to clip the coupons from the Sunday color supplement.' Then right back to the Beatles' song, just as unrecognizable as before."

"Floyd, what the hell are you talkin' about, boy?" Tony asked. Everyone else simply looked dumbfounded. Buy US savings bonds, the speaker told them.

"What, you don't hear it?" Floyd responded. "You don't hear that music with the voices underneath it speaking to us, telling us what to do, and what's worse not telling us enough what to do."

"You're serious," Dick said. The other men looked up at the little speaker embedded in the drop ceiling. Their faces screwed up in suspicion as they realized that music was actually playing.

"What voices?" Vinny asked.

"You guys can't hear them because you don't have the proper receptors. Your ears are stuffed full of wax. No, not wax. Filters. Filters which let the music in but keep the voices out." The men began to laugh. "Cheap sunglasses," Dom said. A few of the characters began to trickle out of the room like raindrops from a leaky gutter. Floyd simply smiled and sat down. He was

going nowhere until he met with Gammon.

"Admit it, Floyd. You took some drugs before you came to work, didn't you?" R.J. Vinny asked. Floyd said nothing. He had somehow known that they would never listen.

When the final raindrops had fallen, Floyd departed the lounge for other worlds once again. By far the best part of the whole show had been that everyone in the supermarket had been green since the idiot filmmaker had forgotten the filter which blots out the effects of the fluorescent lights. This may well have been a supermarket on Mars for all Floyd knew, and he had not been particularly happy when the consumer groups had put an end to the subliminal seduction since he felt sure that thousands of radio, TV and print advertisements pounded into his head since he was child had been quite enough to mold him into the consumerist monster he was.

Draining the final mouthful of Coke from his recyclable aluminum can, Floyd took particular pleasure in crushing it down to a mere fraction of its original size. His violent nature was apt to emerge more frequently these days. Floyd strolled outside to mug an old lady. Unfortunately, none was about. He pondered the wonder of aluminum. Al-um-in-um. As a small child who is content with his rattle, Floyd amused himself back in the lounge. His mouth twisted to form the word. It possessed none of the evil qualities of styrofoam which wasted precious fossil fuels in production and became virtual garbage after only one use. La de da, Floyd. No one in his right mind wanted to see the space ship earth go under, our hero mused, to find our fragile ecosystem

irreparably damaged by the forces behind a throw-away society, at least that is what the television commercials for some political figure had said.

Noises from the hallway forced Floyd's interest back into the lounge once again. The fellows were getting ready to leave. That was good for them. After all, a happy scale...

Brush-drummed "We'll Meet Again" poured into Floyd's ears. He wondered if some voice were not gnawing away at his subconscious at this very moment telling him that everything was fine and that a happy scale was after all a balanced scale. That was it.

Near the far corner of the office sat Mr. Gammon's personal secretary Janet. Miss Worth, she was known to all but her most intimate friends, and there were quite a few of them, squatted by the phone smiling at someone whom she could not see. The strumpet! At thirty-two the carefree luster of young twentyhood had grown more solemn, and though nothing had yet begun to sag, everything was just a bit better worn. Floyd went back outside to check for another old woman or possibly an old man.

Janet was a bit worn. But Floyd did not consider this a particular disadvantage. One does, after all, develop a kind of affinity for a well-worn machine, he reasoned, a sense of congruence with the onset of a subtle wearing of the more critical components. Floyd had come to think of people as complex machines. He found Miss Worth's components, critical or otherwise, to be in fine running order.

She was before all, impractical, vain, self-centered, small minded and light-headed to name only a few of her more desirable qualities. Yet Floyd had developed a sort of affinity for all of these things. He particularly enjoyed her obsession with tinted panty hose, a slight over-use of poorly applied make up, and a penchant for a rather garish shade of nail polish. Janet Worth was not at all the young executive on the move, today's woman who stalked the banking tower at the center of town in search of some unwitting prey to practice her newly defined sexuality (or lack of it) on. Floyd took comfort in the low-cut, well-slit dress. Although he would never admit it, he was intimidated by women who donned the moderate blue suit with mid-length skirt, no tint stockings, no nail polish and no nonsense make up applied to look as if it weren't. Janet was more of the old style woman with large breasts and neither the mind nor the inclination to break with what she considered proper.

There seemed to be no mugges about. Floyd considered assaulting his friend Martha, the tainted lady of Cheltnum Street.

Floyd and Janet had been lovers once after last Christmas' office party, but it had been only once and she had returned after that night to sleeping with Mr. Gammon, without another thought to poor Floyd. His pride had been hurt. He had not slept with that many women, so the shock of her indifference had precipitated considerably more pain than he expected. We'll meet again, the song told him. "Will we?," he cooed.

Suddenly, as part of some crazy inspiration, Floyd saw himself kick open the door to the office and burst amongst the secretaries, seizing Janet by the dress, tossing her onto his mighty steed and riding off into the sunset. Alas, he returned to find himself still planted, hands protected deep in polyester, outside the office. Man of action that he was. Bah! This impotent weights and measures inspector lived vicariously through his dreams and television shows only. Feeling aroused, Floyd recalled another documentary describing the new sexuality. It displayed, for any prime time audience to see, teenagers bursting with excitement over the fact that they were on Television, primping and stroking themselves and acting very blase about having engaged in that holiest of unholy acts, sexual intercourse. Some sweet things not more than twelve or thirteen had confessed openly to having engaged in intercourse more than once. One leering sociologist, drooling to snatch the knee of one of these young maidens, proclaimed the entire situation a tragedy and a profound weakening of the already strained fabric of our society. Oh yes! Doubt not, you unbelievers. Where were these children's parents when they were trolloping about on national television, that bastion of all that is true and beautiful? Floyd's own attempt at instructing his child in the mores of sexual behavior, although somewhat bungled, had shown as a shining example against the background of this seedy attempt, for those parents unsure of how to proceed in these matters. It had done not the slightest bit of good, but this was, as usual, far beside the point.

Most of his workaday characters had left already, leaving Floyd alone with his fear of what torture Gammon would devise as Floyd's next assignment.

Some days Gammon's almighty Department would allow him to dock at some safe port where friends like O' welcomed him as more than simply the inspector hailing from the Department of Weights and Measures, here to examine the scales and determine if everything was, in the final analysis, up to snuff. The feeling that he was simply a nuisance, a gadfly, was the one that Floyd encountered most of the time. Especially from the bandit supermarketees. Ensnared in their domicile Floyd knew only Noone, my good friend from Nowhere, and he not very well, spending much of his time tinkering at the scales. He mused that he was probably more efficient in these unfriendly situations, simply slipping from one scale to the next, oblivious to his surroundings. Snap, crackle, pop, a newfangled digital LED with a calculator and a printer for figuring the price. Then simply slide over to a meat machine with large sides of newly felled steers dangling beside.

Oftentimes, in especially organized operations, some assistant to an assistant manager in charge of store logistics would be given the task of assembling all the scales for inspection on a vacant bench at the rear of the stockroom. These were by far Floyd's worst stops since all the visual stimulation he received (sometimes for an entire day) was a dingy lukewarm plasterboard wall, once white washed but now enhanced by nothing more than years of accumulated dust. This so-called scale fixer's

bench was usually placed at the very back of the warehouse beyond the scintillating facade of the store front, and even beyond the spotless food storage, health-inspector-regulated areas. Floyd often found himself in the deepest recesses of the store, adjacent to the employees' washroom which reeked sweet urine, especially in the summer time. The light in this part of the warehouse was often poor, making it difficult to read the scales in the first place. Floyd had learned from that task master Experience to carry his own torch, a small pocket flashlight to illuminate the gauges.

Fortunately for this fine fellow, days in these conditions were not a never-ending experience. They seemed to be delegated to him according to some sort of cycle, coming in groups but interspersed with generous dollops of smaller, less unpleasant surroundings. Floyd speculated that he was about due for another bout with these bourgeois villains.

"Floyd, come into the office, please." Mr. Gammon obscured the entrance to the lounge. Floyd snapped away from the functional American seating but Mr. Gammon passed on into the bustling office without looking back.

Floyd felt school-boy nervousness shatter the studied wandering expression he had developed over the course of the morning. In the hallway he could hear the trucks starting to pull away from the docks at the rear of the building. Unhurriedly moving, Floyd found his way into the beehive of the secretaries. "Buzz, buzz, buzz, ladies," he said to no one in particular. Noone looked up. She had attended him the entire morning but with

this usual astuteness he had missed her completely. They were however destined by fate to meet soon. Gammon had already disappeared into the inner sanctum. Floyd brushed past the telex and the computer terminal with its video screen lit up with assignments.

Janet sat cross-legged on the telephone, her silver blue eyes fixed upon nothing, her hands busy adjusting her skirt back down over her knees.

Seeing that Mr. Gammon's door had been left slightly ajar, Floyd stalked by without a word, although out of the corner of his eye he detected a startled expression flickering past her face as she realized it was he that had disrupted her apparent reminiscence of activities gone by.

The office decor was well beyond functional but still within the limits of efficiency and certainly not approaching that limit of limits, excess. The desk, contemporary and unimposing, was composed of stainless steel posts with a sheet of glass or more likely some acrylic product stuck between them. Two chairs, one high-backed leather, the other a cheap naugahyde model, stood before it. Mr. Gammon reclined assuredly in his captain's chair scrutinizing pieces of paper which he held in his hands. Floyd relaxed in the high-backed chair.

"Floyd," Mr. Gammon placed the tips of his fingers together emphasizing gentle pressure between them, his elbows sinking into the arms of what he considered to be the ideal chair for an executive.



"Floyd, why don't you tell me about yesterday? Whatever you say will remain between us. It can just be our little secret."

The captain's chair tilted again, a self-satisfied look pouring over Mr. Gammon's face. It was obvious to Noone and myself that he felt in control, his mostly weathered eyes gone smooth all of a sudden. Floyd knew that a trap had been set for him. He was being baited. Mr. Gammon wanted his confession but Floyd was no child and he would be damned if this idiot was going to get it. He knew this sly bastard well enough. How he had stolen Janet away from him. Old Father Time on the other side of the desk wasn't dealing with some kid, wet behind the ears, simply waiting to spill his guts to the first copper who put the screws to him. No sir. Floyd had seen this game played out a thousand times before and he wasn't going to make the same mistake as the rest of them.

He smiled. He knew what it was time to do.

"You'll just have to speak to my attorney."

Mr. Gammon bolted forward as if he had been slapped. "What! Floyd, do you think that this is some sort of game or something? You don't have any fucking attorney and you know it."

Floyd took a breath but said nothing. He would simply remain quiet and let the bastard wait. Let him bring in the goon squad he mused. He pondered how well he would do under torture. He feared only the dentist. If they drilled his teeth one at a time he was a goner and he knew it. But Gammon didn't and Floyd sensed in his feet that this was his greatest strength.

Mr. Gammon had recovered. "Floyd, is there something else, something bothering you that you would like to tell me about?"

"I already said all I was going to say about it yesterday."

Mr. Gammon wondered if Floyd had heard him but he went on anyway.

"Now, Floyd," Mr. Gammon folded his hand on the desk, "it's better in the long run if you tell me. I'm your friend and I'm here to help you work things out. If there's a problem maybe I can relate to it. Let's examine the causes together." He smiled.

Putty in his hands and Floyd knew it. Once the old bastard turns on the sophisticated Californian shit, it's all over. Mr. Gammon didn't have a chance of getting Floyd to crack. The dentist would have been much more effective. But even this psychological approach was tricky torture that would get you if you weren't looking. The relating shit was the best. Next Mr. Gammon would encourage "counseling" or, even worse, some "encounter session" so that he could get "in touch with himself." Maybe the dentist would not have been so bad after all.

"Floyd, if you won't talk to me openly and honestly I'm going to have to send you over to counseling for a battery of tests to see if there aren't deeper problems at work here. Maybe they can help where I've obviously failed." He smiled. "I know that your brother's been ill and that must be difficult for you and the other day one of the men in the motor pool mentioned to me that your son was sick. Rodney's his name, isn't it? Trouble with his eyes or something."

The bastard, Floyd thought. Pulled out all the stops this time, haven't you? Images and sounds began to rush in from the corners of Mr. Gammon's office. Gammon himself was metamorphosized into the parish priest of Floyd's youth, pontificating from the pulpit. This was shattered by the screams of forty children chanting "De train, de train," followed by Floyd's brother as a boy falling from a rope swing into a canal near their home and drifting downstream to where Floyd's father sat fishing. He got a bite, but when he reeled in the line it was Floyd's brother Benny that had been hooked. The barb was right through his lip.

And Floyd started to laugh.

"Floyd, I really don't see what is so funny."

But Floyd did. Benny looked nothing like a fish. Much more like a bear.

\*

The dream was a spooky one. In it Floyd and his brother are driving down a newly paved, tree-lined road. It is afternoon but the sun has already dipped below the tree line, giving the impression of a valley at dusk.

A road appears off to the side. It is narrow and dirty and cluttered and blocked by a Road Closed sign which sits unpretentiously about fifty yards off the main thorough-fare. The brothers turn off, stopping in front of the sign for no other reason than curiosity. It strikes them that they have never stopped before to explore a true offshoot of the main path, a road whose purpose was unknown.

They meander along, walking and yet not really going anywhere. It seems as if the trees themselves are moving and the men are simply stepping in place. Around a bend they catch sight of a large building, flat-roofed and ultra-modern in design. The building is low to the ground, giving the impression that most of it is beneath the surface. There are thin narrow windows squeezed between slabs of white concrete.

The brothers go inside and are confronted with a long counter at which people are waiting in lines and men dressed in blue and white uniforms attend them. To the left, a long corridor disappears into the distance. At its beginning, there stands a rectangular archway, similar to those used for metal detection in airports. Both brothers get the impression that the people want to pass down the corridor. That is why they are waiting in the lines.

Floyd tells Benny to create a commotion so that he can slip through the arch and down the corridor to satisfy his curiosity. His brother complies and Floyd passes through the arch surprisingly easily. No alarms sound. Nothing happens so he moves quickly to the end, turns right, goes down an identical corridor, turns left, then right, then left again. By the time he arrives at what appears to be the end, the overwhelming feeling he receives is one of detachment from the counter and his brother and the people waiting in line.

At the end of the last corridor, people are sitting on large couches and overstuffed chairs, not speaking but not trying to remain silent either. They don't seem to care one way or the

other that Floyd has arrived. And yet Floyd also gets the feeling, not from what is said but more from some of the hollow looks he receives, that he was expected, that they have been waiting for him. Not just for some person, but for him.

He looks up from the people and notices a large door at the end of the room. It appears for a moment to be made of stone but when Floyd looks again it seems like wood, then metal, then some strange substance he has no name for. It is locked and is so monolithic that it gives one the impression that it could never ever possibly be opened. But suddenly a loud roar is heard and a pounding and the door begins to swell and contract as if it were being pushed from the outside. For all its strength, it actually bulges. And then it bursts and a large creature with a tail, looking for anything like some childhood creation of the devil, enters the room. It roars again and, snatching the nearest person, gobbles him whole.

The people have all been quiet to this point, and even when the man is grabbed no one but he cries out. He screams bloody murder, but the others simply look a bit more frightened. Especially those further away from the monster. The ones closer do not even move. Floyd is still standing and he begins to shout to the people to run, run for their lives. He creates such a commotion that the monster, with steamy entrails dangling from its mouth, stops chewing for a moment and focusing on Floyd says "You! I've been waiting for you and you've come. But quicker than I thought. How!"

Floyd turns and flies for his life, twisting down one corner to the next. He can hear the monster's laughter roaring in his ears. After some unknown time he realizes that the exit is not to be found. He sits panting in the center of a passage, as far from the corners as possible. He waits for how long he does not know, and then a shadow appears.

## Chapter III

Rodney Allucida had adopted the interesting habit of crossing himself three times before zipping up his fly after urinating. This rather odd practice had brought considerable ridicule upon his adolescent head as of late but he remained impervious to assault. After all, it was simply part of his plan. If others did not see visible signs of his insanity, then how did he ever expect to convince his father that he was in truth a comrade? His soul mate Mario had concurred. Simply wear funny clothes, say odd things, perform strange acts and most will succumb to your cry of insanity. Or rather, your vehement denial of insanity. Although Catch 22 had been banned at that bastion of higher learning, Lakeshore Central High School, a few of the more diligent students had snuck copies past the aging librarian and part-time pederast, Mr. Dinkle, to delve into its secrets in the confines of their homes. The result of reading this master-work was the conviction that it was always better to do exactly the opposite of what one intended.

That morning in homeroom after his incident with Nana, Rodney had revealed his plan to Mario. His only fear was that the hysterics involved would precipitate bouts of persistenitis which would completely derail his calculating exterior, leaving him a mere shattered shadow of his former self. But Mario had been quite encouraged. He reclined at his desk, arms folded across his chest nodding as the plan to feign insanity unfolded. "Mint," he would nod now and again whenever a particularly impressive segment of the scheme came to light. Others however were not so impressed. Ernest, Mario's fraternal twin, pointed out in no uncertain terms that Rodney need not act the part of insanity to be effective, that he had already achieved this higher state of being.

"Cheeg," Mario slurred from his twisted mouth. "Ern, you wouldn't know a good idea if it jumped up and bit ya in the ass."

Such comprised the dance of brotherly love. Rodney blessed the Fates for having made him an only child. He had thoroughly enjoyed the little combats between Mario and Ernest but feeling precious time wasting away, chimed in with a compromise. "Look gentlemen. This is all fine and good but one of you has to talk to my father, to come to him as 'my best friend,' letting him know that something has gone seriously wrong and that he should maybe take a closer look at me and this problem I'm having. Save the fighting for later."

"No problem," Mario said. "I'll let the old man know the score." He thoughtfully stroked the peach fuzz beneath his chin.



"Yey, and you'll fuck it up too."

"Come on you guys, don't start again. I'm serious about this. I'm askin' you for help, so if you could put today's war on hold for a bit."

"For a bit," Mario laughed. "I'll be damned if you don't know some of the most weirdest phrases I've ever heard." Rodney shook his head. They stood for the pledge of allegiance.

Later that afternoon during lunch, while his father flirted with an old time friend and flower lady, Rodney discussed a matter of most pressing urgency with Mario and two other friends, Howard, a tall uncoordinated boy with bright red hair which he constantly insisted was auburn, and Taylor, a small, sharp-witted lad whose suspicious eyes darted continually from boy to boy searching for some sign that the daggers of verbal assault were about to be flung his way.

"Look," Rodney was emphasizing, "I just don't think it will work is all. Whose going to believe that we're going on a camping trip anyway? Especially with Howard and Taylor. The camping types they're not."

"What's the difference," Mario responded, "as long as we look like we're goin' camping, no one is going to say anything."

"But you think for a minute we're really goin' to get those girls in American Lit. to go to a motel with us for a weekend of sex. Mario you've really lost it this time. Do you actually believe we can get away with this. The girls especially. Do you think that their mothers are going to let them go 'camping' for chrissakes."

"They won't say they're goin' camping, you idiot. They'll say they're...goin' to look at colleges. That's it." He rose from his seat, spreading his arms to address them all. "They're going to look at colleges! Their mothers will love it." He reached down and pinched Taylor by the face. "Mint. Everything's mint. Right now!"

"I don't know," Howard said. "I just don't think it's goin' to work."

"Howard, don't you worry about no thinkin'. You're so stupid you couldn't get laid in a whorehouse with hundred dollar bills stickin' out of your pockets."

"Your mother," Howard mumbled softly.

"No, your mother, Howie. If you're not in, you're not in. Loser."

Taylor's delicate fingers toyed with his milk carton. "I'm not in either. I think the whole idea of taking these girls to a, a motel is barbaric." He got up without further ado. Howard simply shook his head.

"All right," Mario said. "You're all losers, but that's to be expected. Rodney and I will just half to go it alone. Right!" He squeezed Rodney about the neck. Howard, still shaking his head, left as well.

"Fags," Mario said when Howard had gotten out of earshot. "Both fags. I'm tellin' you, Rodney, if you didn't like that little fag Taylor, I'da busted him in the mouth a long time ago. Barbarians!? Little fruit. Just cause he can't get laid and I can, I'm a barbarian."

Of course they were all barbarians since not one of them had commenced his studies of Greek. Good lord! They could hardly speak English, their native tongue. Note especially Mario's continual utilization of these rather adolescent and altogether inappropriate colloquialisms. "You know as well as I do that he'd be bangin' that beaver too if he got half a chance. You bet on it. Well, I guess that it's just you and me. And don't tell me your gonna fag out either. I won't even listen to it."

"Well," Rodney began.

"Be cool! Don't even say a word. You just leave all the details to me and I'll even take care of your father. You just worry about the..."

"The articulation," Rodney proposed.

"That's not only right, but that's exactly right. The articulation of what we're goin' to do. You take care of the words..."

"And you'll take care of the deeds."

\*

The dream was a funny one. In it a clown appears out of Nowhere from which Noone comes, a happy clown, gagging and poking with his friends in what looks like a large circus tent. Floyd cannot see the top but this does not bother him. It smells safe and the sounds are good too. He is a child, a small child, at the circus with his parents and he tosses peanuts to the elephants who are blind. The clowns look like ghosts, but happy, friendly ones. He sings and music plays inside his head. Many children sing. The clowns lead a children's song which sounds like a

nursery rhyme.

It's the good ghost gravity,  
 He's a nice ghost  
 You will see.  
 Everyone learns to play his game  
 He treats each child just the same.  
 If you don't learn to know his gown  
 then you're likely to fall right down.

Down, down, down, they fall, laughing and waiting.

\*

Jutting from the gothic facade of Mt. St. Mary's Hospital, an almost contemporary archway gave one the impression that some mad twentieth century architect shaded by neo-clasicism had been unleashed on the building's renovation leaving it not so much renovated as bizarred. Like most things in Floyd's town the project had gone awry somewhere along the way (probably closer to its inception than its completion) and all the good intentions of the folks at the chamber of commerce and the "foundation" had not been able to steer it back.

The facility itself, though by no means a mammoth Medical Center, was not completely without merit. But the white stone structure, cracked, with poured brown watersoaked streaks along its height was just unable to achieve the slightest dignity. What had certainly been fin de siecle ultra-modern was now bordering on the decrepit. Only the newly constructed psychiatric facility offered a visitor the impression that new blood coursed through its veins. Those accustomed to drop-ceilings overhanging multi-toned color-coded walls grew appalled at the exposed pipes bordered by a greyish white continuum of roughcast wall snaking through the hospital. In fact, most parts of this abomination

appeared identical to those with less than my critical eye.

Benny, Floyd's only sibling, lay quietly unconscious of his surroundings. He was not quite asleep but hovered, deluded, between this world and some other.

Floyd passed the nurses' station without so much as an inquiry or an hello. He was at the moment a bit overwrought concerning his choice of parking spots. He could not remember if he had in fact parked in a handicapped spot or not. If he had, the copper would undoubtedly spot his dot.

That is, unless the van were reported stolen by Mr. Gammon in which case Floyd would get towed along with his van. But this was definitely the long shot. As angry as Gammon had been at the conclusion of their little interview, the spineless dog wouldn't dare go outside the Department and risk embarrassment. Then again Floyd's laughter had not helped in the slightest. Gammon had come to believe that Floyd was not taking the good doctor's counseling to heart. He had begun shouting.

Floyd tried to explain but Gammon would not listen. Finally, Floyd brought him to reason the only way he knew how, by taking what he considered to be decisive action and flinging Gammon's Waterford vase across the office to shatter against his mirrored wall. The man was hysterical. There was no reasoning with him in this state. Mr. Gammon had ceased instantly. His mouth hung open but not to form words.

With that Floyd had pirouetted on one heel and made his way without ceremony from Gammon's office past little Miss Lovejoy's nest and on into the hall by the waiting room. No one was about.

All off no doubt seeing to the business of the day. Floyd started towards the street exit to get his car but thought better of it at the last moment, darted out back, revved up the old van and streaked from the Garage without so much as a wave for some of his mechanic friends.

Now standing in front of his brother's semi-private room with an old kidney patient oblivious in the other bed, TV's hung immobile at their feet, Floyd felt much more relaxed than he had earlier.

The old man slept while Benny watched a daytime show. He fumbled for the off switch upon catching sight of his brother.

"What the hell are you doing here?" They embraced. My God, Floyd mused, does he look awful. It was quite the case. His brother was lighter, greyer and less alive than the last time Floyd had seen him. The former two hundred and twenty pound Redraiders line backer had been shrunk to a measly one thirty-five.

"Easy day. Not much to do so I thought I'd come by to see you." Floyd suddenly felt funny about the flowers he held in his hand. He had bought them on a whim from an old flower woman whom Floyd knew from way back. Hunched on a corner not far from the hospital, she sold her wares to any takers happening by. Floyd met her about five years before, she had not changed a bit since. Her malodorous personality abounded now as it had then, her clothes were identical, she even had the same old transvestite friend hanging about the "shop" as she rather pretentiously termed it. This was, of course, Martha, and her flowers, like

herself, were somewhat soiled. Tainted, she would say. Her friend Gene or Gennete as he liked to be known made her a sign: "Tainted flower lady of Cheltnum street" in honor of the title Floyd had labeled her with. Saddled, she would say. Floyd had his suspicions that the Flower Lady of Cheltnum Street wouldn't mind being saddled by him with more than a title. It seemed that in the final analysis Floyd harbored a craving for hookers, flower ladies, and painted secretaries. Fortunately, he knew better than to indulge himself in the possible delights of a liaison.

Outside the room someone started shouting. Floyd's eyes dilated rapidly. Just as he was beginning to relax all hell was breaking loose. He could hear the staff scuffling about, a bell sounded, there was more shouting and then nothing. Floyd peered nervously through the crack in the sheet which divided Benny's bed from the kidney patient's. The old man slept on, oblivious to the shouting about.

"How does he do that? Doesn't it bother him?"

"What, the old man? You get used to it."

"Well what was that? It sounded awful. Somebody dying or something?"

"Cardiac arrest, I think. They happen all the time up here."

"Oh." Floyd felt cowed but his nerves still dangled razor sharp.

"Cardiac arrest huh?"

"Um."

"You get used to it?" Benny nodded so Floyd did too but unconvincingly at best. He placed the flowers on the bed by his brothers knee and pressed his hands together in an effort to calm himself.

"Damned I.V. Can't even get comfortable. Especially at night. Sometimes I can't...sleep." He turned towards the window. "You know this room looks out into a cemetery. I can't get over that. You'd think they'd know better than to put patients in rooms that overlook a cemetery...especially..." Especially when they're dying.

Floyd concentrated like some small idiot child on his fingers. He had been having a fantasy about being in church as a young boy. He often had this when he was in the hospital. It was the manifestation of some sort of misguided reverence. He muttered quietly to himself. "Here's the church, and there's the steeple, open the door and there's all the people."

In the corridor, people had spilled into the hall from the room across from Benny's. Floyd wandered out in order to gain a better perspective. Most wore the obligatory white smock over blue buttoned-down and conservative tie. Those near the back strained to see over their comrades' shoulders pushing up on tip toe to get a better look. Damned ghouls! Nurses burrowed by and orderlies and maintenance folk pushing electric floor sweepers swept unconcerned. The machine flowed first to its left, then to its right. The nurses cut first to their left, then to their right. The viewers of the scene across the hall rocked in unison first to their left then to their right. Music from some unseen



orce guided them all in a macabre dance about the cardiac arrest. The bouquet of freshly cut but slightly tainted flowers dangled limply at Floyd's side. Self-consciousness quickly metamorphosized itself to intimidation. He grew Lilliputian, and a large nurse nearly squashed him before taking note of his insignificance and scooping him up to enquire as to his intentions.

"Excuse me small sir but may I see some identification?"

"What?" he squealed. "Oh...well you see I'm just here visiting my brother is all. Didn't mean to mispark the old van. I'll just run out and move it."

She bellowed deafeningly at Floyd. "You're far too tiny to tack about on your own. Come along with me." She dropped him unceremoniously into the canyon between her breasts. It had been so long. At first he slithered between but they were young and firm and bore him up quite well following his initial plunge. Together they strolled at terrific speed past hundreds of sick and dying people until they reached optomology where Floyd, in a fit of excitement, slithered between her hefty mounds, breezing past belly button and panty hose to sway dangerously for a moment from her hem before dropping deftly to the floor.

"Is my son Rodney here?" he squealed. No answer.

Floyd came back. "I can't find a vase," he shouted more loudly than he had intended through the crack in the door. He feared that he would not be heard since he was so small. It was only a newfound booming quality in his voice which informed him that he had regained his original size. He repeated himself, this

time fiercely whispering.

Floyd pushed himself back into the room past the old kidney. He wanted to relate his adventure but feared his brother's skepticism. Instead he recalled an old fishing trip, the same one which had come to mind in Gammon's office.

"Ben. I was thinking today about that fishing trip we took when we were kids. You know the one," he passed his finger tips several times back and forth beneath his nose. "We went with dad. I think I was about five or so. And we had that old tent that dad bought. We went to some sort of camping ground. I remember that there wasn't much around, but there was a lot of water right by where we stopped and that's where we put the tent. Do you remember the trip I'm talking about?"

Benny's face screwed up since he was totally perplexed. What the hell was this poor bastard raving about now, he wondered, but decided to say nothing. Neither of these so-called brothers could say to the other what was really on his mind.

"I remember that we didn't leave until after dad got home from work. He drove like a madman and you kept telling him to slow down. Floyd's hands darted towards the ceiling, then down to the bed following the path their car had taken through the hills of New York. His eyes came back to Benny who was staring in open amazement at him. "But he got the goddam tent up in time. Yessirree." Floyd dashed to the window, cleared the floor and began to mime the pupping of a tent.

"Just like a pro. You'da thought dad was a goddam boy scout or something." The stakes were driven one, two, three four through the tile. "And I sat in the car and watched. And that night dad told stories. Ghost stories." Unfortunately, they did not concern our friend Gravity. Floyd finished the tent and assumed a position at the bottom of the bed. It was going to rain. Benny simply shook his head.

"Then you remember the trip?"

"Yes. You're out of your fucking mind."

"Aw, go on, I am not." Floyd sat down and said nothing, simply forming the church, steeple and people with his hands in rapid succession. "Just talkin' 'bout old times is all.

"Floyd, I'm sorry. You're just actin' like some sort of kid is all. I didn't mean to shout. Let's talk about something else." He reached over and touched his brother's hands. Floyd nodded a few times, never removing his eyes from his newly smushed hands. The people were suffocating.

"How about that girl I fixed you up with when you were a junior in high school," Benny said. "Remember the one with the..." Floyd looked up. Benny's hands were about a foot and a half from his chest. He smiled. "You remember the one. What the hell was her name. She had been around a bit and you told me that you wanted to..." Floyd smiled. The people could breath again. He did not want to remember this. "Right?," Benny said.

"Well?"

"Well what? I remember. It was great. A lot of water under the bridge since then. A lot of time gone by. A lot of women since then."

"Oh." Benny smiled. "That's not what you said then."

"That was then."

"All right, don't get mad about it for Chrissakes."

"All right, let's drop the whole thing."

It started to rain outside but the sky was not at all dark. In fact, it was so bright that the sight of rain startled both of the brothers. They watched it splash against the window for a while. It was coming down quite hard.

The old man in the next bed began to moan ever so softly but loud enough to arrest both men's concentration. Each maneuvered himself to see through the separation in the curtain. The kidney was in a half-waking state rolling his head from side to side.

"He's having a bad dream," Benny said.

"Should we wake him up?" Floyd knew all about bad dreams.

"Hell no. If you startle the poor bastard, you'll probably kill him."

"Oh." Floyd was not convinced. He couldn't stand to see the old man suffer so he allowed his gaze to wander about the room for something to light on.

He finally fixed on the bathroom door which stood open on the far side of Benny's bed. On it was taped a drawing of a small group of children playing in a park on a sunny day with older people with dogs sitting on park benches. The drawing was done in crayon. Benny started playing with the flowers. What struck Floyd

as strange about the drawing was the odd shape of the children's heads and the positioning of the benches so that it appeared that the adults were completely oblivious to the children's activities. This separation seemed deliberate but Floyd could not remember where he had seen something similar before. His curiosity was piqued. He wished to know more so, remembering a dream he had experienced some nights before, that dream of other worlds and "pushing" and "popping", he whispered "push" and suddenly he was in the park and the children were dancing in a circle singing nursery rhymes while elderly people with watchful canines knitted obliviously nearby. Floyd moved as a ghost among them. And the children sang, "it's raining, it's pouring, his old man's stopped snoring." But it was sunny out and Floyd stood in the center of their ring. In the distance he could envision many more children dancing about in circles, old women knitting on. Everyone's color was very funny since they were all made of crayon.

"Pop," Floyd said.

"What?," Benny asked.

"The child shows talent but the work is primitive." Floyd considered himself something of an art connoisseur. It was all a part of coming unstuck from the grid. "She's got to move beyond crayon if she ever hopes to get it looking right from the inside."

Benny shook his head. "You could have brought me something besides flowers."

"Where did that artwork come from?"

"Don't ignore what I say. You heard me well enough. Did you slip a little something through the gestapo out there?"

"I think it shows promise, especially for one early in her career. The children were obviously enjoying themselves. Sometimes they don't, you know?"

"God, could I use a drink."

"Is it someone I know?"

"Roberta's kid Irma did it for me. Was nice of her huh?"

"Ummm." Kind of strange though, he thought. Like two different pictures put on the same page. "Two different styles combined in this one work"

"Floyd, stop analyzing the fucking kid's drawing. She's only three years old."

"Does Roberta come up much?" No answer. "I remember doing those drawings in grade school, in art class. Good old PS 17. Although we didn't do impressionistic things then. More historic. Iwo Jima and the like. Washington crossing the Delaware. We didn't just do art. We wouldn't just draw to draw. There was a point. Not like today. Christ, I don't know what it is that Rodney's doing in school. I can't figure it out. He takes 'humanities' or 'science today'. We took real courses. You took science or math or reading. They were separate."

"Um."

"You never liked school did you?"

"Nope. You know that. It all seemed so fake to me. I could never of cared less. You did though. Always liked it."

His brother grew tired. The rain had stopped. Floyd took another look about the room. a germ of a thought began to form in his mind. He finally realized for the first time that it was the hospital and the doctors and the nurses and the machines which were killing his brother. The monitors. If he could only convince his brother to push like he could into another world where no one died, where no one was forced away, then everything would be A.O.K. He knew what he had to do. He would find the right piece of art for his brother's salvation and return with it.

In the hall, Floyd moved with new found aggression to the elevators. He had found a purpose. The white-walled corridors and nurses stood about in silent reproach. They knew that he would be back with the escape valve, the trap door, the cavalry, and they could not stop him. Benny could push into a book or a painting or even a photograph. He would locate the best one and there was nothing the vultures could do. Their determined bustling seemed to have come to a stop and an eerie calm pervaded. Somewhere a voice interrupted the Muzak which had been there all the time.

## Chapter IV

In starts and stops, listing from side to side, Floyd's weights and measures van lollygagged down Pinebrook Road towards a small white colonial standing round the fourth inner circle of the tract. Floyd swerved from one crater to the next in an effort to avoid the remnants of a crumbling sewer system.

Floyd's tract was a maze of Brooks and Briars infinitely permuted. A Pine, Oak or Maple had been thrown in occasionally simply to mix things up. He slid easily from Pinebriar Lane to Oakbrook, to Oakbriar, to god knows what else. Some scheme had apparently been devised to interrelate these different foliated commodities so that practically any weary traveler in search of sanctuary, or simply his aunt's two bedroom split-level, would become completely lost, never even approaching his final destination. The tract was in fact only scrutable from the air, a far more agreeable perspective, let me assure you. From the ground it appeared a tangle of loops run back to forth and back again with overlapping yards and nothing that anyone could accurately call a street.



But please do not for a moment think that the houses were as they commonly say ticky-tacky. Far from it! There were certainly three or four different designs in the tract (not to mention an amazing kaleidoscope of colors). It would take a veritable expert in these matters, say an architectural expert with a major in gothic and a minor in twentieth-century art deco, to see some pattern emerge. After all, only every third or fourth house was the same. And when one took into consideration the additional parameter of the curving streets which prevented seeing more than two or three houses clearly at a time, well...the desired diversity was obvious to anyone with a fifth-grade education.

The realtor had even commented to Floyd about the graceful sloping texture of the tract, mixed with a generous helping of lawn unobstructed by anything so obtuse as a fence.

"Fences are for those 'city folk', unlike you and me," he winked "who can enjoy some of the finer things in life, like suburban living. Mr. Patterson, let me assure you that we have applied scientific methods combined with an eye for the aesthetic to bring to life this trully extra-ordinary community."

"Umm," Floyd had answered, "but what about the down payment?"

Floyd took immense pleasure in careening his weights and measures van through the tract, rounding a "corner" much more quickly than any well-formed person would have dreamed of doing and completely ignoring large yellow signs with black lettering which told him:

## CHILDREN

## SLOW

He even nicked one simply out of a sense of spite for the idiot who put the words in the wrong order.

"Go children slow," he shouted from the van. "Go ye children slowly." He swerved to the left. "Go slow good children. Slow children must go slow. So go slow my good daughter." He pulled the van hard to the right. "Evasive maneuvers, Mister Scott. More power to the shields. Hard left! Klingon ship coming in hard to port." A green Buick nearly sideswiped Floyd, passing within inches of the van with its horn blasting and brake lights firing. "Hard right! Hard right! We nearly took a photon torpedo there. Heard it whistle by."

There were no stop signs either. Just the swerving curving tract, sometimes doubling back on itself, sometimes changing direction completely and then spilling into seeming dead ends which turned out to be circles. In fact, the whole tract was actually one big circle since the only entrance was also the only exit.

Floyd was fond of telling his friends that the in door was also the out. "I go in through the out door," he would say. His associates, crude and vulgar as they were, invented a joke at Floyd's expense having to do with going in doors traditionally meant for exit only. R.J. Vinny especially enjoyed this one.

Now remember. It was not as some people said later, that Floyd disliked dogs. After all, he had one of his own and found most canines to be somewhat pleasant when you came right down to

it. So it was not as they would eventually say many years later that he hated animals and was simply a cruel man.

But there were a few, especially that one german shepherd who belonged to that Wickstead fellow who existed on the other side of the tract in a green split level with a built-in pool and a maroon Nova, whose wife was not at all cute and definitely overweight. This, however, was not Floyd's major problem with Bum Wickstead. No, the problem was his dog and the fact that it was never confined to the yard, Wickstead's or anybody else's.

Just last week Floyd told Ulna, "Goddam stupid idea, no fences. Fences divide places. They section things off. Mine from yours and all that. They keep things separate which damn well should be kept separate. Fences would keep Wickstead's goddam dog in the yard instead of out terrorizing the entire neighborhood."

Rounding yet another loop-the-loop Floyd encountered a mini straightaway and brought his weights and measures van to a screeching halt. He had spotted old Crumpers, as the Wicksteads had affectionately named him, harrassing several small children amusing themselves with a soccer ball. Crumpers had induced one small girl to dash about immature maple trees whilst her playmates stood in a small group screaming and pointing at Crumper's privates. He had an erection, red and slimy, poking out from its furry sheath. Floyd could easily see Crumper's doghood though he was a good twenty or thirty yards away.

"Goddam that monster," he muttered. Floyd felt a sort of envy, spying a cruel canine that was more virile than he was.

Shifting into neutral, he revved the van to near fever pitch, listening as the old heap (as he had affectionately termed it) responded with only the smallest amount of hesitation.

The children stopped screaming.

Crumpers stopped chasing, his erection retracting for a moment until he realized who had created all of the noise in the first place. Floyd, although two houses away, could detect the change old Crumpie (as he was also affectionately known) underwent. He became more serious, and in a strange way more aroused. His penis seemed to strain all the harder at the sight of a large truck revving up to confront him. His eyes, which were amazingly bright for such a large dog, turned from malicious amazement to malicious malignment in a mere twinkling.

The fact was that Crumpers loved, in a truly carnal sense, to chase automobiles or vehicles of any kind for that matter. With a passion. Floyd gave it just a bit more gas simply to bring his opponent to the peak of sheer madness. His mouth began to open and close in rhythm with the engine but he was too excited to bark. His body swooshed from side to side in preparation for his sprinter's dash.

Floyd coaxed the engine up one final time and popped (a term he had learned from Rodney) the clutch, not quite spinning the rear tires, but lurching the van forward at a fair clip nonetheless. Crumpers sprang at the same moment Floyd did but the old weights and measures van still had enough uumph to put him abreast of the dog before he reached the street.

Floyd hit (Rodney again) second gear but did not accelerate too quickly since he wanted Crumpers to be able to move up next to his sliding door. He was at this point simply snapping at the rear bumper. Floyd could see him in the mirror on the left side of the van. Actually, Floyd could see the dog in two mirrors; one normal and one distorted, a fisheye mirror. This second reflector contained within the large one made the beast seem smaller and further away than he actually was. Crumpers also appeared broader, spread out and squashed at the same time. The canine was nearly astride the door as they approached a curve, when out of nowhere a late model Volare appeared on a collision course.

Floyd swerved his weights and measures van to the right shouting "hard right, Mr. Sulu" and towing Crumpers (as if by a string) with him. Mrs. O'Neill, the Klingon commander let out a wail, or rather her Volare did, and nearly struck poor Crumpers as it devastated the Davidson's mail box with a bull's eye painted on the side. Floyd observed this in his inner rearview. The scene had no depth. It was two-dimensional.

"Target practice," he shouted to Noone in particular.

With another straight away in sight, Floyd maintained warp speed.

"Activate weapons' system, Mr. Chekov."

"Aye, aye captain."

Acting quickly, he slid open the door of the van and reaching across his body, felt for and found the thirty-two inch Louisville slugger which he kept in the van to "take care of any trouble." After all, the Catholic Prep Chess Team gang could well

return. Gripping his weapon firmly by the base, Floyd brought it to rest on his lap, poised to rain many heinous blows on the head of his opponent.

Crumpers, excited by his brush with death at the Volare's wheels, thrust forth and kicked a little harder to come abreast of the door. Floyd had delicately rolled up the leg of his fashionable polyester slacks to expose a flabby yet appropriate bit of flesh for the occasion. Slowing the van a bit more so that his opponent would not lose heart, he began to bait poor Crumpers.

"Open all hailing frequencies, Ohura."

"Open captain."

"Ha! Ha you bastard. Come and get it." With this last phrase, he sent the beast into a frenzy by shaking his leg out the door just beyond jaws' reach. Completely beside himself, Crumpers began to leap in mid-gallop, coming within micromillimeters of Floyd's admittedly unathletic calf. It was at this point that Floyd acted with determination.

"Ready photon torpedoes. We fire on the next pass."

Crumpers leapt and Floyd struck with amazing accuracy (or is it precision) the bridge of the dog's nose. The beast fell away in a heap.

"A hit, Mr. Sulu. A direct hit."

"Aye, captain."

Crumpers lay motionless on the road, his legs twitching in unison. Floyd brought his van once again to a halt. He could see in his mirror (the outer one) with some sense of a

three-dimensional reality that the children who as of late had fallen victim to this beast had followed to see it brought low and now hung tenaciously a few houses away sometimes darting forward only to fall back when Crumpers twitched excessively. They awaited the contest's final outcome.

Floyd pondered his next move. As he saw it, two, no three, options presented themselves. First, he could retreat. After all, a blow had been struck. The enemy was wounded and there would always be another day to fight. Also, the series might end if the villain were actually defeated. Not to mention the fact that Ulna was back at star base Alpha holding supper and was probably anxious over his return.

Second, having brought the latest killing technology to bear in wounding the canine species, he could simply use it again, throw the van into reverse and end Crumper's reign in a blaze of squealing rubber.

Third, Floyd could do the truly manly thing, make his key break from the ranks of Moving Man Emeritus, leap from the van with only his primitive weapon in hand and confront Crumpers man to dog. Primordially.

He opted, surprisingly, for the third, abandoning the starship for earlier combat. He was now the brave Achilles come to face Hector on the fields outside of Troy. He leapt from his captain's seat shouting "bonzi" and waving the Louisville slugger about his head. The children, half fearful, half excited squealed with delight, throwing their hands into the air, retreating a few steps and then advancing in some early pagan dance which

delighted Floyd. They finally grabbed each other about their petit torsos and charged forth en masse to the brink of the road, but retreated when Crumpers, although a bit groggy, shook himself to his feet.

"Fear not brave Acheans for I, your leader, have returned to destroy the great evil, the Saracen, Bēezelbub. Grendel beware the wrath of Achilles, for you have slain my daughter and you shall know Death for this."

The children squealed again.

"I face you with nothing more than this club to defend myself."

Crumpers, not believing what he thought he saw shook his head a few times in an effort to clear what must certainly have been distorted vision. He rocked from side to side, still a bit unsteady. He noted that several neighbor women had come out on their lawns, leaving the hearth to discover what all the commotion was about. Upon seeing Floyd astride his weights and measures van about to do battle with some large yet mangy dog who, if the truth were told, looked none too well, flew as the wind to retrieve their children from harm's way. The children, entranced by their pagan dance and being mere suburban babes, not realizing the gravity of the situation, began to kick and scream and shout obscenities which their mothers couldn't believe they knew.

It was at this crucial moment that Chance caused three events to occur simultaneously. First, Floyd cried "for king and country," and charged. Second, Bum Wickstead rounded the



Henderson's well-trimmed hedge and, ascertaining what was about to transpire in a twinkling, also charged. And third, one Mrs. Spinebender, driving a 1978 Plymouth station wagon, arced one of Brookbriar manor's many dangerous curves and, attending to her infant daughter rather than watching where she was going, slammed headlong into Floyd's van, spilling herself through the windshield and onto the road. Her daughter was fortunately not hurt at all due to the miracle of the modern child restraint which Mr. Spinebender had insisted on purchasing before his heart attack, for just such an occasion.

Although the accident created a sound not heard in several months in Brookbriar manor, Floyd continued undaunted towards his canine adversary. Crumpers for his part had struggled to stay on his paws and gaped rather shakily at the spectacle before him. The combination of some madman wielding a club and an explosive accident, which ignited the horns of both vehicles, and brought the hair up on the back of his neck, was too much for the canine warrior. His sympathetic nervous system, although somewhat damaged by the blow he had received responded admirably, and like any good dog, Crumpers knew that retreat was the better part of cowardice. He fled.

Floyd remained in tow and the two headed off, away from the accident and the pursuing Bum Wickstead.

Now, although Floyd and old Crumpie occupied center ring of this afternoon circus, there were also some minor events occurring on the periphery which some readers may consider worth noting. Most of the viewers, young and old alike, streamed to the aid of

Mrs. Spinebender, completely ignoring the drama unfolding just a few short lawns away. They felt, for some reason which just escapes me at the moment, that the obviously injured, those torn beyond recognition and strewn about the field of combat were more important than the main contenders whose fight was coming to a sort of climax. Face it, they should have realized that Spinebender was a mere casualty, a simple hoplite of no consequence. Yet round they gathered, some darting away to place a call for the police or an ambulance, other administering first aid remembered from days gone by.

Not three houses away, at the Jamisons, with little Sylvia Jamison watching from the living room window, Floyd was chasing Crumpers about the house. He was on his third circumnavigation and had the dog at near bat's length (due more to Crumper's injury than Floyd's physical prowess) when Bum Wickstead, who had been biding his time in the bushes, appeared out of Nowhere and recalling his experience as a semipro linebacker with a team of no real consequence, dipped his shoulder to about thigh height and, avoiding the bat with admirable dexterity, demoed (Rodney's word again) Floyd. In fact the tackle was so effective that Floyd was actually flipped a complete three hundred and sixty degrees and landed on his bum, stunned, his weapon strewn some several yards away. Leave it to Floyd to head off in one direction and through no intention or planning of his own, end up with the same point of view he started with. Crumpers had continued on about the house, unaware of his master's handiwork and was coming up behind the two men neither of whom was aware of his arrival. He

took one look at the fallen Floyd and prepared to leap for the rear portion of his throat. Bum barely spoke in time to save Floyd from certain death. "Crumpers no!" he cried. The dog, having been trained by such diverse elements as sleep deprivation, starvation, water rationing and not-so-occasional boots to the groin, immediately halted his progress, ceased and desisted all further motion. Bum climbed to his feet.

"This son of a bitch is all mine." Floyd still made no effort to move, sitting quite dazed as to what had just transpired. Bum came on with ungirdled ferocity driving poor Sylvia Jamison to such happy shrieking that her cries could be plainly heard outside the house. Even Crumpers, struck stock still in his tracks, cocked his canine ears to one side in an expression half quizzical, half pained.

Bum too was distracted. He turned his head, caught sight of Sylvia's shrieking face, and lost his footing in a small hole (dug by Sylvia's brother Emmet) in a motion that was not without some degree of fluidity and grace. Bum tumbled harmlessly beside Floyd just barely nicking him, shrieking back at Sylvia in so grotesque a manner that she flew from the window as if she had seen a ghost.

Bum's big body battered the soft lawn and a definite popping sound could be detected, indicating most likely a simple fracture somewhere about the ankle.

It may well have been the sound of Bum's fall which induced some change in Floyd's chemical makeup, bringing his legs together and forcing him to his feet. He trotted off towards the

group of people huddled about his van and what looked like another car. Cries of "rotten motherfucker" pursued him to the street but they appeared to have little effect. He simply wandered toward the crowd, oblivious to the police car which nearly ran him over as he strolled down the center of Brookbriar lane.

Sam, the faithful pet, who had been defecating nearby throughout this entire ordeal silenced Bum rather adeptly by chomping his new damaged ankle. The big ex-semipro linebacker fainted immediately leaving Crumpers still as a statue to watch over him. If one looked closely, one could see a sort of canine smile creep over this guardian's face.

Some of the hungry spectators (it was suppertime) shrunk from Floyd as if he were a leper when they realized that it was he that was upon them. Others, however, quickly grabbed hold of his arms instructing him to lie down, and asking him to tell them where it hurt.

Mrs. Davidson cried, "Here's the other victim. Quick, he looks so pale." Floyd felt strong arms ushering him towards the grass but he resisted, wanting to see what this gathering was all about. Somewhere near, a baby was crying loudly. The sound came in and out of phase with automobile horns which maintained a more steady pitch.

The arms relaxed, allowing Floyd to move to the center of the group. People parted as the sea had in "The Ten Commandments."

At the center lay a woman, unconscious and apparently injured. Floyd could see clearly a small body in what looked for anything like the shadow of an auto wreck. The body was crying its little eyes out. Floyd began to count. Glass was strewn about. In particular, Floyd noticed a blue white shard which had situated itself in the upper pocket of the woman's pretty summer dress with large poppies painted on it. Floyd knelt down and removed the glass.

"Shatterproof," he said.

\*

The dream was a familiar one. In it a large scale standing watch over the open door to a meat cooler. Honest weight, no springs, it said. Large men with thick gloves pulled the meat in from the cold, hooked like fish to a track above their heads. Huge sides of beef swung to the weighing bar. The dial went to four hundred pounds. And then the scale was very small and it held only a small baby. But something was wrong. The baby was as cold as the meat. It did not cry. The scale did well. Floyd had worked very hard all his life to make sure it would.

\*

The weights and measures van ultimately found its own way home. The damage appeared much worse than it actually was. After some careful scrutiny, our friends the rookie and the veteran, who seem to be following Floyd in our story, let Floyd proceed on his merry way. They attributed his unawareness of reality to the fact that he had been involved in this terrible accident. There had been something rather mysterious about a dog; some gentleman

complaining that his pet had been attacked and that he had been struck about the head; several conflicting eye witness reports from the neighbors each swearing that his story was the accurate one. They were such a confused jumble that the officers had finally tossed them out en masse.

It appeared that in the final analysis Mr. Patterson had stopped in order to rescue a small girl who was playing nearby, from a large dog. Mrs. Spinebender had not seen the van in the road. Unfortunate. She would be all right but was admittedly the worse for wear. A fight had ensued with a neighbor whose dog was clearly in violation of the leash law and was threatening children no less. There was no need to press charges. Mr. Patterson's van had been in a tough spot but his explanation seemed reasonable enough and the woman should have watched where she was going anyway. This is how these simpletons figured it anyway. They detected nothing of the epic struggle which had ensued on this admittedly unlikely field of combat. Detectives! Bah! Mere servants of a crumbling bureaucracy is all they were, noting words down in their notebooks, taking testimony, bumping into each other. Sloppy work done by sloppy minds. In my day there was something to be said for the J.P. who controlled an area. Yessir. Law and order may have been amiss at times but at least those men had shown some common decency. Now, admittedly, Floyd had shown an odd concern about the dent in his van and the glass strewn about the street. He kept insisting that he be given a broom to "sweep up," as he said, and continually pointed at his van claiming that his boss would kill him since it "just got new

tires." In truth the van had been something less than regulation, what with a prominent obscenity spray-painted on its side. Odd as all this was, they had let him go. And yet, there was that thing about the baby. Kept wanting Spinebender's daughter to cry louder. Louder, he said. La de da.

Ulna brooded by the front door as he rumbled the now dented weights and measures van into the driveway. Incurable woman! It's a wonder Floyd came home at all. Rodney's head popped up at the window.

"Ta da, I'm home." Floyd trying to remain cheerful in the face of adversity bounded in through the front door. "What's for supper, I'm starving." He flew past her without another word and began slurping away at the stove. Ulna stood dumbfounded in the living room.

"Where is the car?" Floyd did not seem to hear.

"Ummmm. This isn't half bad."

"And what the hell happened to the van? Did you get into an accident or something? Floyd, I wish that you would stop eating supper. It's only two hours late already. And would you please listen to me."

"Well, if it's two hours late than I better start eating quick, hadn't I," Floyd countered deftly.

"Are you listening to me?" She stalked into the kitchen, yanking the spoon from his hand. Floyd took his seat at the table and unfolding his napkin intoned the official call for supper: "Let's eat." Rodney had already meandered in from the living room. He assumed his position at one of the lengths of the table.

Ulna sighed, counting to ten and letting her shoulders droop nearly to her waist. Stirring the sauce she said, "I wasn't able to put the macaroni in because I didn't know what time you would get home." Upstairs, the toilet flushing interrupted her.

"Mother," Ulna shouted, "Floyd's home. We'll be eating in a few minutes." She dropped the macaroni into the boiling water. "Tell your father what happened today, Rodney." Nana ambled into the kitchen, blowing her nose most violently as she did so.

"Well," Rodney said. "The doctor says that they really don't know what is the matter with my eyes. He wants to run all these tests and see this other specialist next Thursday." Floyd buttered some bread while Nana picked her nose. Rodney would never see that specialist.

"The doctor didn't have any idea what was the matter?," Floyd asked. He did not wait for a response. "Jeez. I saw Benny today. He says hello to all of you. You know that old kidney patient who was in the room with him? Well, he's still alive. The old bastard sleeps most of the time, Benny says. Some guy had a heart attack across the hall while I was there. Benny didn't even stir. Says that after a while you just get numb to the whole thing."

"Tell your father what else the doctor said, Rodney." Sam, the faithful pet, wandered in from the living room with a self-satisfied grin plastered on his face. He had proceeded most valiantly into the line of fire earlier that day and had served his master well. The telephone started to ring. Rodney dashed for it glad to be spared further attempts at explaining his eyes or



anything else to his father.

"Seems like that damn thing never stops ringing," Nana said rolling a snot between her thumb and forefinger. She passed a bit of gas without so much as an excuse me.

"Dad, the police are on the phone. They want to talk to you." Floyd stuffed the last bit of bread into his mouth. Ulna stopped stirring the noodles while Floyd stood to take the phone.

"Now it's the police on the phone. No doubt it's Rodney in some sort of trouble again. I'll tell you Ulna....," Nana babbled.

"Oh shut up, mother. Let me hear what the hell he is saying!" Floyd whispered in hushed tones. Rodney hung by the phone momentarily but backed away when he caught the glaring look on his father's face. "No, no, that's all right" was all his father said. Ulna resumed her gentle stirring of the sauce. She was putting on weight. Floyd never even so much as looked at her any more.

Nana said, "Rodney, what sort of trouble have you gotten into now? You know better than to have anything to do with the police. That's the sort of thing that you'll never escape. Believe you me!"

"Oh shut up mother!" Ulna took several steps towards the living room but returned without attracting Floyd's attention. She stirred the sauce two or three more times, then screwing up her nose said, "Say what the hell is that smell?" The others in the room simply stared at her for a moment, then Rodney grabbed for his napkin in a most ungracious manner and pressed it tightly over his nose and mouth. "Oooh" he said. Nana's nose only

twitched a few times. She seemed almost to take a liking to the smell after the initial shock to her olfactory senses. Floyd returned to the kitchen.

"What the hell is that smell?"

"I think it's Sam," Rodney said. "He just shit on the floor."

"Don't say shit," Nana said. "It's impolite." She gobbled another snot. Rodney jumped to his feet. "Just stop telling me what to do you snot-eating pervert. You're all fucking crazy."

"Don't swear," Nana said.

"Don't swear, don't swear. Is that all you care about? Swearing! Ahooooooooo!," he screamed. "This is a lunatic asylum. I think she's got the right idea." Rodney sauntered to the brown pile steaming beside the refrigerator and struggling his boyhood from his ultra-tight blue jeans urinated on the faithful pet's excrement. "There! That's for all of you."

Ulna began to cry. Floyd smiled and counted to seven.

"Old Sam is getting old," Nana said. "But then we all are. You do strange things when you get old."

Later that night Ulna finally cornered Floyd in front of the television set. She had purposely waited until everyone else had retired for the evening. Nana had shouted repeatedly, "Good night all!" until Rodney had answered with a semi-polite "Goodnight Nana." He often told his father that he "just could not deal with her" any longer. "You've got to, son," Floyd would reply. "You've got to learn to 'deal with' all sorts of people and all sorts of things in this world. Life is full of strange things. But that's

half the fun of it, don't you see. You just don't let it bother you."

"But she's so...gross."

"That happens when you get old, son. Strange things go on in your mind. Things that used to not seem right seem O.K. all of a sudden. It's as if the little boxes which kept things separate in your head, that kept you from picking your nose at the dinner table or threatening people for things you did all the time, had developed leaks so that information in one bled into another and the result was strange."

"These kids today," Nana began later. "Thus is marked the end of our brave new world. Believe me." Floyd spent the evening watching several television shows which ranged from an uproarious comedy concerning the lives and loves of three night maintenance people toiling within a huge impersonal skyscraper to a serious docu-drama tracing the utilization of condoms as an effective means of birth control. Ulna missed these important and diverse expressions of artistic sentiment choosing instead to make lists of things that she had to do in the kitchen. Around eleven, when she was absolutely sure that no more disturbances would interrupt, she closed her note book. "Floyd, we've got to talk about a few things. First of all, why don't you have the car?"

"I took the afternoon off and I didn't feel like going back to the garage for it. Gammon won't mind and if he does he'll get over it." Floyd spoke in a staggered monotone never stirring his eyes away from the television.

"All right. Fair enough, I guess. You know best what will and won't be tolerated. Secondly. What happened to the van today? Why does it have that big dent in it?"

"It was in an accident."

"Where were you?"

"Battling a dog."

"Floyd, you're not making any sense. Now if you're trying to get me angry just keep it up." Ulna put on her "I'm very upset and you had better take notice" face.

"It's simple." He reiterated what had transpired then returned to more important matters unfolding on the television.

Ulna started to say something, but before she could, the telephone rang.

"It's eleven o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" the television asked. The truth was that he knew the whereabouts of only one. "Floyd, there's some strange woman on the phone." Floyd ceased listening to the television and stared at the phone. He believed in his heart of hearts that Janet Worth had called, thinking that his wife must surely be in bed by now. Of course she wasn't. Ulna was answering the phone and this breach of security could spell curtains for this tenuously reviving, carnal relationship. Ulna, the sharp-witted budding feminist she was, noticed the change but said nothing.

"Hello?" Floyd's voice almost cracked. Rodney crouched low peeking past the upstairs landing. He was prepared to urinate on his father if Fate seemed to dictate such an act.

"Hello...Mr. Patterson. This is Mrs. Clements. The mother of Susie Clements. The little girl that was being harrassed by that dog today? I just wanted to call and tell you how thankful my husband and I are that you stopped and to say that we don't think you should blame yourself for what happened to Joanna Spinebender. These things just happen you know. You simply cannot blame yourself."

"Oh! Yes. Well thank you very much. No, I don't blame myself. Casualties are casualties. I feel very sorry for the woman but I'm sure that her modern life combat insurance will cover it."

"I'm sorry?"

"Thanks again." Floyd hung up.

"Floyd, I really think that we should talk about Rodney." Floyd opened a beer and plopped in front of the television. "And turn that goddam thing off when I talk to you." She flicked the switch. Floyd did not look away from the blank screen. "Floyd, I can't stand this any more. Do you hear a word I say? Your son has some strange disease in his eyes that these doctors, these specialists have never seen before. And lately he's been acting like a lunatic. I'm talking to you!" She grabbed his head most violently and wrenched it towards her so that they were at last grappling eye to eye. Sam, who had been sleeping in front of the fireplace, slunk up the stairs. "Now, this all has something to do with his," she reads from a list of notes, "his persistence of vision. I don't understand it very well." She began to pace up and down in front of the television addressing the room more than

anything else. Floyd unwilling to confront this hysterical woman returned to the blank screen.

She continued to read. "Persistence of vision is why you can watch movies. Half the time that you are in the theater there is nothing on the screen. That's because the shutter on the projector closes while the next frame is brought into place. After that frame is projected, the shutter closes again. But see, our eye, the retina I believe they said, can retain an image long enough for the projector to get the next frame on the screen." Floyd surrendered. Before all, he enjoyed the movies as much as anyone. "So that's how we can watch a movie. That's why a movie doesn't appear like what it is; a bunch of unconnected little pictures."

"What's this got to do with Rodney?"

"Well, he's losing his persistence of vision. Or at least that's what they think is happening to him. Now, they didn't tell him this because they aren't sure yet and they didn't want him to know. His blindness really isn't blindness, it's just that his retina isn't retaining any image so his brain isn't getting any signal. There not even sure if this is a disease or not. They've never seen anything like it. Rodney sees the world chopped up, so to speak. All the images that his eye sees should be transferred to his brain in a continuous stream. But they aren't. When he can't see, nothing is transferred at all. And listen to this. "As the periods between blindness and sight become shorter and shorter, he'll start to see things as if they were broken up frames in a movie; like he was blinking real fast. I've written

it all down."

"He always did like the movies." Rodney groaned so softly that only old Sam who had wandered back down stairs having not been able to get past Rodney had heard. His ears had pricked up.

"Floyd, this is no joke."

"I know that. What do you think I am? But I'm sure they'll figure out something. They always do."

"And who is this almighty 'they' Floyd?"

"You know. They. Them. The ones who invented television. The ones who figure out all the answers to all of the problems."

## Part II

The spirit of the valley never dies.  
It is called the subtle and profound female.  
The gate of the subtle and profound female  
Is the root of Heaven and Earth.  
It is continuous, and seems to be always existing.  
Use it and you will never wear it out.

The Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)



## Chapter V

Dear MR. PATTERSON,

Thank you for your interest in "Family Tree Inc." We here at the company know how important it is to be treated like a person, to be treated like a someone and not to receive the feeling that those who have been given the privilege of delving into your past do not care.

We here at Family Tree do care, about you MR. PATTERSON. And what an interesting genealogy you have. Through extensive research, which has, I might add, spanned three continents we have been able to trace your family's origins back some three hundred and fifty years. You should be very proud to have such an interesting past.

Why you have had relatives with names running the complete alphabetical gamut. Every name from Abitar to Zeno has crept into your history at one time or another. Enclosed you will find a complete table tracing your family's past but let me just highlight a few of the more interesting things that we found during our search.

First, I would like to say something about your prestigious family name. PATTERSON. This was sort of a tricky one at first but our team of experts were finally able to crack it. PATTERSON. PATTER FROM THE LATIN "PATER," MEANING FATHER, AND SON MEANING WHAT IT DOES IN ENGLISH, SON. SO,

PATTERSON MEANS "SON OF A FATHER" OR, POSSIBLY, "EVERY FATHER'S SON." Your family name is a fascinating one, and although the meaning may be somewhat VAGUE we see this as a plus for it gives you the opportunity to revel in the AMBIGUITY.

Not only is your name interesting but so were the members of your family. Why, you've had sailors and tailers and jailers and whalers and nailers and failers and bailers and pailers and mailers and hailers and railers and kailers and quailers and yailers and even a phthaier or two. The most famous personage in the PATTERSON clan was a Renaissance land owner named Abitar Kasham. He settled in the highlands of Scotland but as I'm sure you can tell from the name this was not his place of origin. As far as we can tell, Abitar came from some area around present day Hungary or possibly Greece. We can't be sure. Written records are scarce and we've had to rely on an oral tradition as opposed to our usual procedure. But we interviewed several old families in the area and they concured that Abitar was from some exotic place (he may well have spent time in the East), was quite wealthy and lived a life of studied contemplation. His source of income was also unclear since the land he owned, although extensive, was unfit for farming or grazing or any other worthwhile project. As far as we know his only child, a son, carried on the family line. How the name became PATTERSON is also unclear.

We know that you'll spend hours pouring over all the documents and supporting evidence we've enclosed. Your family shield should arrive soon under separate cover.

Thank you again and if there is anything else we can do for you feel free to let us know.

Sincerely,  
Gustaf Sjorgen

Stumbling about his insignificant metropolis' insignificant art museum, Floyd felt rather ill at ease. Even the guard at the entrance, with his less than attractive museum pin and face no friendlier than Crumpers the mad dog, had scowled at Floyd as if to say, "Unwanted! What are you doing here, in this holy of holies. This place where art, that most noble aspiration of ignoble man has come to dwell." Floyd had simply smiled, not wishing to offend the temple but determined nonetheless to gain entrance to its inner sanctum in order that he might discover the work which would best suit his brother in his next life.

Watching the other folk mill about, mostly old women and young men with beards and what looked like purses flung casually over their shoulders, Floyd examined every work for its possibilities before deciding. The others had been kind enough to show him the procedure one was to follow. First, you must plant yourself a few feet away from the work twisting your head this way and that, looking profound and even grunting softly now and again. Parallax was not a problem. Then, for the pieces which interested you most, you approached the work, placing your nose not more than a few millimeters from the canvas. This particular motion always seemed to alarm the guard but the well-trained museum buff knew how to time his action so that he or she moved off just as the faithful watchdog motivated himself to see if you indeed had the gall to be touching the classic at hand.

After two hours of grunting, twisting and moving, Floyd plopped down on one of the uncomfortable benches to read his mail. Besides some bills and claims that he had already won one

hundred thousand dollars, there was little to hold his interest except the long-awaited letter from Mr. Sjorgren. Floyd had acquired an interest in his genealogy after viewing a much acclaimed television bio-drama several years previously. It had taken him almost this long to muster the courage to inquire about which company could be trusted with the all-important task of investigating what Floyd called "The Patterson Clan." Family Trees' ad in one of Nana's gossip magazines had brought the issue to a head and Floyd had sent his vital information to the company along with his check for some unbelievably exorbitant amount.

"A land owner in Medieval Scotland," he muttered softly shaking his head from side to side and grunting. "Abitar Kasham. Mr. Mystery, from whence they know not." Floyd studied the documents a bit longer, scrutinizing the "tree" with all his ancestors' names colored into little boxes. The room had finally emptied out. About him only the characters of the various paintings kept watch. As Chance would have it he was in the museum's new eclectic room so the faces about him were a veritable time tunnel. George Washington stared appropriately at some cherubs attempting to steal honey from a tree. Adjacent to them were some men involved in sea combat, hacking bits of flesh from each others' bodies. Across from that, colors swirled about a vortex assuming whatever meaning you chose to give them. And on the adjacent wall some art deco print gave way grudgingly to copied Norman Rockwell.

Floyd had scrutinized each and every one of these and found none satisfactory. He mused that he might have to travel to some larger city, even span the globe in search of the artistic endeavor which would most please his brother. He considered calling in expert consultants to help him decide but after his incident with his fellow workers in the lounge he despaired for a companion. After all, if they could not even hear the horrible sirens beneath the brush-drummed sax, there was simply no way that they would understand pushing and popping, or art. And if they would never understand, the so-called experts would probably try to lock him up or something for trying to do the heroic thing and save his brother's life.

What he needed was someone who would be able to help but would also be sympathetic to his cause. Suddenly, as Chance would have it while staring at the documents the germ of an idea began to form in Floyd's mind. He recalled a movie he had viewed some years earlier in which a man found happiness and security in a large rabbit that acted as sort of a companion to this gentleman. Floyd was not all that fond of rabbits but...a gentleman...an English or whatever gentleman might be just what the doctor ordered. Some sort of companion, a guardian perhaps, someone powerful enough to assist Floyd as he attempted to confront man's greatest enemy. It would have to be someone from his past, someone close enough to care about the fate of his brother. Possibly a relative, someone from the Patterson past. Floyd sat back, nearly plummeting from the bench. A smile was strewn from ear to ear. Abitar Kasham, Mr. Mystery, was Floyd's man. He would

call him back from wherever he was residing at the present time to assist in this most noble and important endeavor.

Taking his leave of the museum immediately, Floyd activated his nineteen seventy-two Galaxy 500 and set off at near light speed for his local lending library to read about the occult. He wished to discover the correct procedure for he had seen enough television movies on this subject to know the disaster of using the wrong one.

Inside, Floyd approached a small oily gentleman sorting cards and humming a bawdy song concerning certain mating practices exclusive to the Royal British Navy. Floyd had not a clue as to how to proceed in his search for anthologies of the occult so he surrendered to better judgment and approached the librarian.

"Do you have any books on the occult?" Floyd grinned.

The man did not immediately look up. The pretentious dog simply stacked and dumped small filing cards. Floyd wondered whether the man might be deaf. He spoke a little louder, straining over the counter closer to the librarian's ear. "Do you have any books on the occult?" Heads popped up about the room. The librarian raising his eyes from the almighty cards glared at simple Floyd.

"You do not have to shout. I heard you fine the first time." These words were fiercely whispered by the cad. This man's behavior is a good indication of the nadir which public employees have reached.

"Occult. Eight hundred. Or for a specific topic title consult the card catalogue."

"Oh." Floyd scratched at the top of his balding scalp. "Well, you see, I'm lookin' for a book on conjuring. I want to call someone back from the dead, an ancestor of mine and I have to find the right way to do it. I would have just watched the TV but I'm almost sure that I didn't see anything listed this week on conjuring."

Fear flickered across the oily gentleman's eyes. "Yes, well, yes, conjuring. I'm sure that we have something on that topic although at the moment I think that the book might be out. Yes, as a matter of fact I distinctly remember a young lady borrowing that particular book yesterday. I'm afraid that you will have to wait at least a month before you could get it. And then again sometimes the book never comes back. So you see, it is quite impossible."

Floyd pondered the man's words. In his heart he knew that the swine lied. Floyd would have to be more careful in the future. Enemies of his brother were everywhere. He grew cagey. "Let me just take a look at what you have left. Maybe I can find something. You see, I'm over to the Community College and I'm doin' a report on this stuff. I thought I might give it a whirl just to see if it really worked."

"Oh."

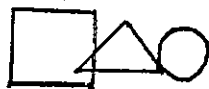
"Well, you didn't think for a minute that I really was callin' somebody back from the dead did ya? Christ, everybody knows that's impossible. Why it's been scientifically proven that

ghosts don't exist." Floyd's seeming ignorance was, of course, feigned for the unimaginative slimy gentleman planted behind the counter of this sorry excuse for that bastion of thought and learning known as a library. This dullard, although unconvinced of our hero's sanity, pushed away from his divider and sauntered towards a small sign labeled "occult."

Following him, Floyd discovered three books which appeared promising, the second one being a "how to" guide for resurrection. Floyd struggled through the lengthy prologue, then, utilizing the index, located the section outlining the actual conjuring. Feeling pressed for time, and not possessing a library card, Floyd decided to try the method prescribed while still in the library. The details were as follows:

1. Make a circle approximately two feet in diameter at the center of the room.

2. Within the circle draw a smaller circle, a triangle and a square. Make the three look like this:



3. Straddle the circle and intone the following chant.

Oh Father Cronos  
 Creator of all  
 that is right and is wrong  
 that is good and is bad  
 that is strong and is weak  
 who knows well the time  
 when opposites shall meet.  
 Send me that friend,  
 a mere shadow at the river  
 long forgotten.  
 Where heroes have come



and gone and come again  
to find less and more  
than before.

Desert me not in this time  
of woe.  
But release the ally  
who Gravity cannot bind  
to aid in what is just  
but not true.  
In what is Truth but not goodness  
in what gives but will not flow.

Ignoring the chant's footnote, which would have saved him from much that was to follow, Floyd searched for and found a small piece of white chalk with which he drew what was necessary in the center of the children's section of the library. Obeying command number three, Floyd adopted the best latinate voice he could imagine and proceeded to chant the absolutely dreadful spell which was called for. It goes without saying that he did not do this quietly. No, the idiot bellowed with such ferocity that many of the patrons, young and old alike, dashed from the seclusion of their carols to see what was the matter. The sight of this balding man, with a growing pot belly, nerd pac, and polyester slacks was simply too much for the elderly senior librarian who immediately fainted dead away. The other patrons began to point and laugh while the oily dull gentleman we encountered a bit earlier slipped away to telephone the police.

As Floyd finished the chant for the third time (nothing had happened the first two) a tall good-looking lad with familiar features darted forward, and grabbing his father by the arms began to tug him most forcefully from the children's section of this local lending library.

This was of course none other than Rodney Allucida who had been in this building researching his father's psychosis. Although he realized that this was a golden opportunity to convince his father that he was in fact a comrade in arms, Rodney knew in his heart that getting arrested at the library was simply not the way to go about it.

"Dad, let's get the hell out of here! What are you doing? Everybody's looking."

"Rodney! I didn't have a card so I decided to try out the conjuring here to see if the damn chant really worked."

"I don't know what you're dealing with upstairs, but the cops are goin' to be here any minute and they're not goin' to take you away for stealing a book."

"Well, I've already tried it three times. I don't know if it worked or not."

Floyd started to surrender to his son's pleas, leaving the circle smearing his foot across the three symbols and sauntering distractedly towards the exit. The small oily gentleman confronted them.

"Stop! The police will arrive momentarily. I want them to get a look at you, devil worshipper."

Rodney was convinced he was dreaming but the feel of his father's hand beneath his own convinced him otherwise. "Hold tight, dad. We're goin' through." Floyd noticed a rather extensive collection of Dr. Suess on display nearby, but Rodney refused to lessen his grip.

"You're hurting me, son."

Rodney squeezed all the harder.

"Stop I say!" The oily man pushed his hand out in front of him much as a traffic policeman does.

"Red light, green light?" Floyd asked. Rodney, although not exactly a giant, dipped his shoulder and mustering what he might term a head of steam struck the librarian just below his solar plexus, driving the wind from his lungs with a wuuush which was easily heard across the room and sending him sprawling to the floor. Rodney broke into a half gallop, Floyd still in tow.

Outside, Rodney wrestled the keys away from his father, activated the Galaxy 500, and roared away from the library moments before the police cruiser arrived carrying none other than the rookie and the veteran who had attended the vandalism of the van by the Catholic Chess Team gang and the undoing of Joanna Spinebender several days before.

The oily librarian, barely able to speak after the heinous assault he has suffered, described Floyd to these notorious bunglers. A bell went off in their heads. They were convinced they had seen a gentleman with too wide ears, imprecise nose, nerdpac and polyester slacks before.

"Was he driving a strange looking van?" they asked.

\*

Several days earlier, around the time that Joanna Spinebender lay shattered on the pavement, Sherman Weatherbee had gazed grudgingly at the afternoon mail. "Nothing today," he moaned. He telephoned the ad manager at the newspaper.

"Hello. Yes, this is Mr. Sherman Weatherbee. I really am rather disappointed in the personal I placed in your newspaper last week. I was informed at the time of purchase that the format you suggested was, if I may quote you, "sure fire." Those were your words if I'm not mistaken. Yes, I remember them distinctly. Sure fire, you said. I was all set to include something about my rather imposing physique, something more tantalizing but you were quite insistent that I should go with the subtler approach. Fun loving! Bah! You make me sound like a tourist. Now I know that I'm new to this game but I don't think it's fair to treat me like this." Sherman reclined, self-satisfied that he had told the person in charge of this debacle exactly how he felt.

"Excuse me sir," a pretty male voice said "I'm sorry I had to put you on hold but what was the problem? Did you want to renew?"

"Stupid bitch," Sherman raged as he slammed the phone back onto its cradle. He stalked about the house fuming at the furniture. He was determined to quit his job at the Department if some arrangement was not made to insure that he never had to associate with the inspectors again. After all, Sherman was a Comptroller, with a degree and everything. He simply could not be expected to spend his time policing the inspectors. He had certainly not been hired as a baby sitter.

Mr. Gammon had been totally unreasonable about the entire matter. And of course Sherman could not discuss his sexual preference with such a buffoon. Gammon, a mere child. Always chasing his secretary about as if he were an adolescent. He'd

even had those mirrors installed above his executive couch simply because that cheap whore that serviced him enjoyed seeing herself in action. The whole thing was quite disgusting, Sherm mused.

Thinking over the ineffective ad he had placed, Sherman concluded that the newspaper was ultimately to blame. He reasoned that the readership was simply too parochial, that not enough of the beautiful people, those akin to himself, read it. He could see clearly now that what he had to do was seek out a magazine with wider appeal. Flipping through the yellow pages, Sherm let his fingers do the walking to the number of a national gossip magazine. In his uptown mind, this was cosmopolitan. He telephoned using a pencil to push the buttons.

"Personals. Lorie Herman speaking."

"Yesssss. Good day. I would like to place an ad of a rather personal nature in your publication. What is the schedule of fees and how soon will it go to press?"

"Twelve ninety five for three lines for one week. You've just called before the deadline so if you give it to me now it will get in this week."

"Give it to you now. Yesssss. What a revolting thought. Do you have a pencil ready. Take this down. Single, attractive, articulate, cosmopolitan gentleman seeks the company of another with the same description and tastes. Enjoys gourmet cooking, exotic travel, quiet nights by the sea, and dancing. Willing to consider those sirs eighteen to forty five. Send photo and bio."

"OK. Let me see if I 've got all this. GWM seeks other for fun and more. Respond if eighteen to forty five. Send photo."

"That is precisely what has gone wrong with the media in this country today. You have no flair for language, no sense of wonder, no imagination. You are all incredibly boring."

"Do you want the ad or not?"

"All right, go ahead. I guess that I must submit to the ignorance of our day. But tell me, young lady. Where did you receive your undergraduate training?"

"I don't think that's any of your business sir."

"Did you attend journalism school?"

"Well, yes."

"I knew it! The level to which professional schools have fallen in this country is a crime. You have been done a great disservice, my dear woman. I suggest that you contact your alma mater immediately, assuming the voice of a relative and inform them that you are deceased. That way they will trouble you no further for donations. With the money you save, you might purchase a style manual and begin to unravel the damage they have done to you. Good day."

"Um, sir. I need your name and address for the ad."

"Yes, well, that would be Sherman Weatherbee. S-H-E-R..."

\*

"Mr. Kasham? Mr. Kasham are you there?"

"Dad, what the hell are you babbling about now?" The Galaxy 500 had slowed to a more reasonable rate of speed. They were almost home now. Rodney shook like a leaf for he possessed no

driver's license.

"Son, you look a bit nervous. Is something the matter?"

"Dad, what the hell were you doing in that library? I mean, I thought we were going to be arrested for sure. What the hell were you saying? It sounded awful strange."

"Fear not, son. I am confident that we are beyond harm's reach now. I was just calling on an old relative of ours is all."

"In the library? A relative?" Rodney realized that he must play along if he were ever to get close to his father. "Ah, a relative. I see what you're driving at."

"Good. You've come a long way. I'm glad to see you're finally growing up. Abitar Kasham's his name. Was a very prominent man. A wealthy land owner in Wales or some such place. Lived in the time of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. I think he was even a knight himself if I'm not mistaken."

"And you were calling on him in the library? A Knight of the Round Table?"

"That's it. Exactly. But I'm not sure if it worked or not. You hustled me out of there before I was able to get a response. For all I know old Uncle Abitar is back there with that librarian guy thinking that little oily bastard's related to him. Abitar," he shouted from the window. "Abitar, are you there?"

"Dad, for chrissakes shut up. You might attract attention we don't want."

"You're right. I was honest with that fellow at the library and you know the bastard tried to foil my plan to save your uncle. You got to watch who you tell things to, Rodney. You can

never be too careful."

They turned into the driveway. Ulna obscured the doorway. "Where the hell have you two been? I'm worried sick, Floyd. Mr. Gammon wants to know if you will be kind enough to come to work tomorrow. He says you've had a few days off and they need you back at the Department."

"The bastard will get his." Floyd plopped his frame down in his favorite seat, flicked on the TV and snatched a magazine from the table next to him. Ulna, completely frustrated with trying to discuss anything with her husband, stormed into the kitchen. Upstairs the toilet flushed.

"The defecator has struck again," Nana cried. "Someone has shit on the floor beside the toilet."

"It was probably you, you old bat," Rodney shouted.

"Don't talk to your grandmother that way, young man." Ulna, removing her apron, dashed up the stairs. It seemed that in these troubled times she was always dashing or storming or stalking about. She moved low to the ground, like a cat pursued, suspicious of everyone and everything. She had recently written a list containing all of the odd occurrences at the Patterson household. The situation did not look very attractive. She was sleeping very poorly if at all at night. She had of late taken to catching cat naps in the daytime to supplement her evenings' unrest.

Rodney slunk to the telephone and called Mario. Floyd said "push" and suddenly all about him was an ad for men's cigarettes which showed a man smoking while water skiing. Floyd reclined in



the boat. Beautiful women squealed about him. Everyone was having a pretty fine time.

"Mario? It's me. Yeah, he's here and he really needs it now. You're not going to believe what happened. Don't worry, I'll be gone when you get here."

Floyd propositioned one of the women.

"Dad, I'm going down the street for a while. I'll be back in time for supper." Floyd returned in a twinkling, upset that the sweet young thing had not had time to respond. It had appeared promising. The television asked him if he smelled like a man. He was not sure.

Some time later the doorbell rang. Floyd had been herding cattle in Marlboro country. A tall, strapping lad entered, five eleven, about one hundred and sixty-five pounds. Floyd did not recognize him at first.

"Mario. Mario Moyo. My god. You know me. Rodney and I are like this." Mario's fingers crossed. Floyd wondered if, somewhere, people were suffocating.

"Why hell, yes. I remember now. Mario. I must be losing my mind. Have you been lifting weights or something? I didn't even recognize you."

"Well, a little, yes. But Mr. Patterson, I came here to talk about something more important today. To talk about Rodney. Not myself."

"Sure, do you want a beer?"

"No thank you sir. Mr. Patterson, could we talk somewheres alone?"

"Sure, what the hell. Right here. The wife's upstairs taking care of her mother. She won't bother us." Floyd began to flip through the magazine once again.

"Well sir. I've come to tell you that I think Rodney's got some problems and I just wanted you to know about them." Floyd said nothing. He was scrutinizing the personals. "What I mean is that I think he might be having some psychological problems. Something wrong up here." The urchin indicated his head. "And I just wanted you to be aware of it is all sir. I mean he's been acting real strange lately. Doin' some odd things around school. He claims he's fine. Says he's never been saner. But I wasn't so sure so I thought maybe I'd come by and talk it over with you."

"Seems fine to me. Been spendin' a lot of time at the library lately. Maybe he's been studying too much?"

"Naw, I don't think that's it. I think he may be a psychotic and you should talk to him about it." Floyd read Sherman Weatherbee's ad in the magazine. A germ of a thought began to form in his mind. A curious thought and maybe something else. Maybe, just maybe a way out of some of the problems he'd been having. Some seven-year-old problems.

"Mario. Do you happen to have a picture of yourself with you?" Being the egomaniac he was, Mario always had several current photographs of himself handy just in case some admirer professed an interest in possessing a likeness of this demigod.

"Well, yes, Mr. Patterson, as a matter of fact I do." Mario displayed three different photographs for Floyd to choose from.

"I like the middle one. Would you mind if I kept it. I like to know who my son is associating with."

"What about the psychosis?"

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. You seem like a healthy lad to me. No problems that I can see."

Mario hovered for a moment, dumbfounded by what he heard. His mouth moved to form a rebuttal but nothing came out. He simply shook his head a few times before leaving. Ulna caught him by the door.

"Mario, are you leaving without saying goodbye to me?"

"Sorry, Mrs. P. Just dropped by to talk to Mr. P. Nothing important. I should be running along now I think."

"Nonsense, where's Rodney? He must be hiding up in his room. I'll go look for him."

"No he's not home. He's over at my house. Oh, I mean. I don't think he's here. I'm not sure. I just came to see Mr. P is all. I got to go now."

Ulna watched him dash down the front walk to the large orange sports car which he parked in the street facing in the wrong direction. The license plate said AVENGERS. For the first time she wondered if there were not things happening of which she was totally unaware.

\*

The reality was Chaos. Twisting, swirling, flowing, blowing darkness raged about. Noone was not even born yet. Something, something, anything had to be found. Some guide had to be discovered. Some light had to be located to shine the way through the melee. But there was not even Nothing. For only Chaos reigned. With an iron fist askew in the void. And to this land Floyd could not come. For all was simply falling and one could never arrive from the midst of a boundless black hole. Madness had been warm compared to this.

## Chapter VI

Rodney Allucida studied his father's dark complexion from across the room. Floyd had been chanting continually now for precisely one hour.

"Abitar. If you can hear anything that I say please respond for we must battle Death together. I know I can't do it alone."

"Dad? Do you really think that you can call this Abitar character back from the dead? I mean, after all, it seems pretty far fetched."

"Unbeliever! You obviously don't know the power of this magic I'm tapped into. I'm absolutely convinced that it will work."

"Well, then maybe I can help. Maybe we could conjure together. Yes, together. Two heads are better than one. Isn't that what you've always said?"

"I've always said a lot of things Rodney, but that's beside the point now. If you want to help, get over here and repeat what I say. Abitar, oh Abitar. Descend upon us and aid us in our work. Say it like that."

"Do I have to use that queer voice?"

"That's the way they always do it in the movies. Now together."

Pushing in from the kitchen, Ulna nearly fainted at the sight of father and son chanting away to resurrect some ancient relative from the Renaissance. Her eyes grew wide in horror as thoughts of Rodney's kitchen urination flooded her limited psyche. Nana, intrigued by the chanting, began to call out from the easy chair by the television, for her dead husband. Even Ulna knew that the situation was out of control and she should seek out some help. The fact that they all needed assistance descended upon her more slowly, like gentle snow flakes falling to Earth. She telephoned Mario's mother inspirationally.

"Verena. This is Ulna Patterson. We've got to talk right away. The whole family has flipped. I think that some dreadful disease might be sweeping through our home at this very minute. There are bad smells all over the place. I've made a list of all the things I've noticed. I've got to get some help before it gets to me."

"This sort a thing wasa predicted in a last weeks Enquirer," Verena commented knowingly. "There was a whole article on the army's new a biological weapons. Maybe youra family is a testa case for these things. You besta get out of there in a hurry befora it geta you too."

"I've written it all down. What they need is a...a doctor. But where am I going to find one? I can't stand all those specialists that Rodney sees. I need a head doctor. Oh, we've got

eye doctors up to our...but that isn't any good for this."

"Leta your fingers do the walkin. That's what a the television told me to do. Today, the doctors, theya advertise. I see all about it on a the Phil Donahue show. He's a marvelous man, no?"

Quickly returning the receiver to its cradle, Ulna telephoned the first psychiatrist she could locate in the Yellow pages. His name was of course, Fillippidakis, Edward Fillipidakis, and Ulna chose him because his name was the most prominent and the strangest in the book. The greedy dog had placed his signature in twelve point capital letters drowning out the efforts of his colleagues who had meekly scratched their names in microprint in the directory in case of emergency.

"Hello, is Dr Fillippidakis in? Yes, my name is Mrs Patterson. Ulna Patterson. Yes, well I think that my husband and my son are going crazy and I thought that you might be the one to take a look at them. But why do you have to see me first? Oh, so I can tell you why I want you to see them. Tomorrow at two will be fine, I think. Thank you, doctor."

\*

"push."

The Campbell's soup label proved not very interesting.

"Pop."

Back out, Floyd continued down the aisle past the rest of the horrendous canned goods, or I guess I should say bads, being pushed on a great number of unsuspecting consumers. Gammon had given our hero an ultimatum: either get back to work or be fired.

Floyd had considered murdering his illustrious boss on the spot but opted instead to do battle another day. He was confident that some other means of revenge would present itself before the moon had cycled back to its present half crescent.

But Gammon had continued his witch hunt, condemning Floyd to the supermarketeters for, as he had so snidely put it, an unspecified amount of time. The word "unspecified" provoked in Floyd a feeling that he had been committed to an insane asylum. In a sense, he mused, he had. For the past four days he had been surviving next to the employees' lavatory. Ha! That was a joke. This pen was not fit for a pestilence to inhabit. Why even the flies had deserted in search of more promising fodder. Each department had contributed its scale to the torture and seeing as Floyd had been assigned to all twelve stores in the chain, he would probably be finished scaling "Onestop" foodmarts sometime around retirement.

Floyd found himself increasingly distracted of late. He had attempted to push into a scale recently, but since he did not serve very well as a cog, he had abandoned that scheme for diversion immediately. No, Floyd had ventured forth from his cell at the rear of the prison to explore the infinite worlds of produce labels and promotional displays. This took him from his work, but the fact was that the scales had begun to lose their luster. He no longer cared to check the margin of error or worry about parallax. he had even stopped wearing his Dallas Cowboys parallax proof belt buckle. If the scale read zero, it got its proper certification. All it had to do was possess that magic



number to become a happy scale, as our gallant hero termed it.

The Muzak, covering subliminal messages which Floyd was sure were there, was suddenly interrupted by a message for the mindless shoppers to "check out that day's meat specials." Floyd recalled the men at the meat market and the scale. It had read four hundred pounds, or was it simply four? Floyd dispelled the feeling of dread which poured over him. He convinced himself that this was in fact a Soviet code for agents of the USSR to meet before the week was through. There seemed to be a message behind or beneath everything about him. Even the ads he pushed into had the word "sex" floating about in great numbers. They travelled as ghosts through a world of ghosts.

"Push," Floyd said. A mother and ex-porn star, pasted to the cover of a box of soap flakes, suckled her new born female infant.

"Pop," Floyd said quickly. "Too many bad memories to stay in that one." The combination of mother, child and sex made him shudder in a most violent way. He allowed his glance to travel over the aisles. The supermarket was alive with customers struggling at each others' carts, running down each others' children, snapping at each others' faces for the last of that extra-special sale product. A tall woman with two children wailed by him. He could not hear one word she said, but from the sounds she made he knew that she was one of the many cardboard people walking about the Earth, searching for real human beings to transform into cardboard bodies. The sight of all these cardboard people prancing about under fluorescent brush-drummed sax threw

Floyd into a frenzy. He contemplated mass murder. He had realized several days before that his wife and her mother were made of cardboard. In eighteen years of marriage she had made it quite clear on many occasions. But because of Weights and Measures filters which he had just recently removed, he had been unable to see the Truth about his wife. His son appeared a strange hybrid creature and could end up either way. Especially if he hung around with troubled psychotics like that friend of his, Mario.

Floyd stood planted, considering whether to enter the cigarette ad near the front of this premier establishment in order to proposition the voluptuous model, or to buy a chain saw and rid the world of some excess paper products. He was about to opt for the latter when out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a woman with a low cut dress, tinted stockings, high heels, and a touch too much make up entering the store and browsing leisurely about. Why, of course it was none other than our own Miss Worth out for a bit of supper shopping on her lunch break.

Floyd grew immediately terrified, forgot his chain saw, and began to turn Lilliputian, but decided at the last moment that he simply must follow her, although lacking a disguise he was not sure quite how to go about it.

"Abitar? Abitar, are you there? Come on now. I need you. I did just like the book said. I conjured three times in the best chanting voice I could come up with." Floyd pushed into the ad directly in front of Janet so that he could gain a better perspective. She of course, being a self-possessed cardboard

creature, did not notice the Polyester John hiding behind the speed boat.

"Abitar? I cannot keep pushing from ad to ad. I'll get caught, I tell you." Floyd hid in the foliage of an orange tree while, below, a golfer attempted to convince people how good the juice was.

"Abitar?!" Floyd bobbed into a Wonder truck to watch a friendly looking man in a white suit deliver that day's baking.

"Abitar?!!! That was a close one. Did you see her face? She knew that something wasn't right about that ad. She knew I'm telling you." Floyd held his breath beside "Charlie Tuna" who urged that tuna packed in water tasted good.

"Abiiitaaaar!" Floyd nearly drowned. He crouched beside the Pillsbury Dough boy.

"Abitar!!!!!! I'm ordering you to help me. Now! She looks so good today. Doesn't she just look like the most beautiful thing you've seen?"

My dear inspector Patterson, I would never go that far. I've seen a fair number of beautiful things in my day you see. That doesn't include several other peoples' days as well, I said.

"So you are there. Sonofabitch! I knew that I could get you to come back from Hungary or wherever if I conjured hard enough."

Good lord, I've never been to Hungary in this life or any other that I can recall, and I have no intention of going. Bohemian types are not my idea of a good time. Now, what is it that you insist you need help on. Pray tell, what is the earth shattering dilemma which threatens to destroy the entire Cosmic

Order surrounding your tiny sphere of influence? This common trollop on whom you have fixated your attentions hardly requires my intercession. After all, you have had her already, have you not? Of course I knew quite well what he wanted, but I felt that some of my subtler powers should remain a mystery to Mr. Patterson, at least for the time being. Floyd knew much of problems and their solutions but little of mysteries. It was one of the many things about which he required an education, but having some experience as a tutor, I felt that it was wisest to take it slowly at first, to work as sort of a genie, assisting Floyd in the minor trials and tribulations he encountered.

"Yes but that's beside the point. I want you to fly around the store with me inside your head so that I can watch her from the air like a bird."

Like a bird? Fly around the store? My good inspector, you have much to learn when it comes to the area of resurrected ancestors. I do not fly around the store, and you do not get inside my head. Ever! We are autonomous, sovereign from each other. I am here because it amuses me to be here. For no other reason. Can your petit mind understand that?

"Does all that mean that you're not gonna help me?"

No. It means, my good man, that I shall assist you if and when I feel like it, and if I believe that I can be of some service to you, rather, that we can be of some service to each other. However, I have no intention of granting you three wishes or anything so absurd as that. Do I make myself clear? By the by, why are you that ridiculous size? If you insist on remaining

merely six inches tall, I must tell you that I seriously doubt that there is much that I can do for you. After all, a man of my stature, my background, my history, can hardly be expected to assist a man who can only muster himself up to six inches.

"Oh Jesus! She's coming this way." This shrunken fool began to scale some soup cans in order to escape detection.

You bloody idiot! Push into that beach party ad for some sickly sweet diet soda. Our unimaginative weights and measures inspector, realizing that my suggestion was far superior to his own first initiative, quickly complied. There he squatted beside some nearly naked lovelies, with his too wide ears and his growing pot belly, darting here, then there, to avoid the volleyball which seemed doomed to devastate him. Miss Worth, of course, so engrossed in her own petty problems, did not notice our rather unlikely hero trying hard to make it with the Malibu crowd. You're making a spectacle of yourself, Patterson, what with your hiding in advertisements, shrinking to a mere shadow of your former self, doing your best to blend in so that she won't see you. What kind of man are you anyway? A Moving Man Emeritus! In my own day, a man was a man, Patterson. But I suppose that you don't know what that means anymore. Why, I used to charge forth on my mighty steed, raping and pillaging at will. None of this cowering crap for me. No sir! You ought to be ashamed of yourself pushing and popping about like some sort of school boy.

His small mind was unable to comprehend the powerful insights I had just given him. The idiot simply stood nodding his head, impotent to action. Soon his common trollop had completed

assembling whatever gross and vulgar items she needed to sustain her pitiful existence. No doubt several strawberry douching devices or even some prophylactic for her lover A.M. were included in this ensemble simply to shock the poor teenage sales clerk whose existence was equally wretched.

Floyd stood planted, some distance off, regrown, now dwarfing the produce he had earlier taken cover behind. Suddenly, as if from a dream, several youths who comprised the bulk of the Catholic Prep Chess Team gang burst most offensively through the entrance to this particular branch of the "Onestop" Foodmart Corporation, threatening both employees and patrons alike with weapons not quite as primitive as those used by Floyd in his earlier battle with Crumpers. They declared to one and all that they had come to rob the store. Immediately, the entire institution was thrown into a tumult. Women fainted. Men urinated. All about them Chaos spun her vicious web without a care for what innocent prey might be captured in it. Gang members, with their close-cropped hair, white buttoned-down shirts and club ties, began to empty the cash registers, purses and wallets of unsuspecting patrons. Floyd stood, struck stock still until he witnessed the brutal and totally uncalled for accosting of Miss Worth. One of the young barbarians tore her dress open and dashed her to the ground.

Our brave hero started forward but I quickly cautioned him against any foolhardy action, taking stock of the discrepancy in armament between the hoodlums and ourselves. Fortunately for the trollop, before her makeup could smear, a tall uncoordinated boy

with bright red hair which he insisted was auburn stepped boldly forward and helping her to her feet comforted her sobs in his neat white shirt which was part of his bag boy ensemble. She wept and wept, smearing that over-abundance of makeup all over his neat white uniform, but the adolescent did not appear to mind. The urchin stroked her hair with obvious enthusiasm, sheltering her, protecting her from the bandits at hand.

Floyd felt the sickening hand of cowardice overcome him, forcing his visage away from the scene unfolding. He knew that he should be comforting Miss Worth, that he should take command as he had in the Crumper's affair, overcome the Chess Team and save the not-so-fair maiden from distress. Instead he stood in the wings, again, another Moving Man Emeritus, struck stock still from action.

Outside, as Chance would have it, two of Floyd's bustling metropolis' famous law enforcement officials happened by, and seeing our hero's weights and measures van with an almost unmentionable obscenity smeared on its side, decided to take time out from their busy schedules to stop and discuss that little incident earlier at the local lending library. Peering through the Onestop's large front window they immediately noticed that the Catholic Prep Chess Team gang was robbing the supermarket with a weights and measures van parked in front of it. The Rookie immediately urinated all over the front of his newly pressed uniform. The Veteran, wise in the ways of the world, always strapped a rubber bottle to his calf with a snakey hose attached to his mantool in an effort to prevent embarrassment in just such

an occasion.

"Ho...ly shit!" commented the Rookie. "Those Chess Players are robbing the Onestop. What the hell are we going to do?"

"Get back to the car you damn fool and radio for some help." The innocent complied and soon the Onestop was completely surrounded by other officers of justice, sent to frustrate the famed gang once and for all.

"Come out with you hands held high," the urinating Veteran called through his megaphone. "You are completely surrounded." Of course, it never dawned on the cad that the innocent folk shopping beneath subliminal suggestion would make tantalizing hostages, insuring the escape of the hoodlums.

"Forget it, copper. We've got all sorts of pretty people in here and we'll start killing them one at a time if you pigs don't get out of sight in five minutes. Leave a car by the front door so that we can make our getaway."

A well worn sergeant, who had not yet urinated in his plastic bottle, gritted his false teeth and shouted back that they would not be intimidated and that there was no way out. Back and forth. Back and forth. The negotiations continued for some time during which Floyd had several erotic and indescribable sex fantasies concerning the object of his lust, Miss Worth. He had somehow gone unnoticed by the Chess Players, attributing this to the fact that he could become invisible at will by pushing into advertisements. The other hostages were all lying face down in the aisle behind the cash registers, Howard's arm quietly alternating between stroking Miss Worth's hair and massaging the



small of her back. I was forced to stop Inspector Patterson several times from venturing forth like some knight in shining armor to confront the innocent but stupid looking red haired boy who Floyd felt was simply a little too comforting.

Outside, a Special Officer from some Special Office which only Noone could remember the name of, had arrived with a special plan to bring the hoodlums to justice.

"Hello? Yes this is Special Officer. Patch me into subliminal control. Yes, we have a hostage situation down here at the midtown Onestop Supermarket and I wonder if I could get those special tapes played below the brush-drummed sax player, instructing the hoodlums to come out at once with their hands held high. All right I'll wait." Brush-drummed Muzak filled the line while underneath a pretty voice instructed the Special Officer to buy United States savings bonds.

Back inside, where Chaos and Fear continued to reign, Floyd felt the anatomy of a plan begin to take shape. He would distract the red-haired boy for a moment by pushing into an advertisement, then once the fool had abandoned his prize, Floyd would replace him as the fair maiden's comforter. Our fine fellow had not a care for disarming the hoodlums utilizing the new powers he possessed; all his petty mind could see was this woman.

Mr. Patterson, I don't mean to interrupt your little day dream, but may I point out to you that in the larger Cosmic Order there are more important things for you to do here than usurp the position of this rather uncoordinated-looking adolescent.

"Stay out of this Abitar or I'll stick you back in the bottle."

I must once again remind you kind sir that I am not, as you persist in describing me, a genie, nor do I reside in a bottle. My name is Abitar Kasham and I am an Avatara. A resurrected deity. One privileged above many others in the Cosmic Order. You would do well to remember this the next time you mention a bottle. After all, my dear Inspector, the magic you are dealing with is part of one of the greater mysteries of the universe. Mysteries, my dear Floyd, mysteries. All you can comprehend are problems. You believe in your naive way that you have discovered the solution to your problems and this is precisely where you have failed, from the beginning I might add. Some of your so-called problems are not at all what you think, but are the greatest mysteries that this insignificant galaxy has to offer. Can you ever understand anything I am saying to you? After all, in the larger Cosmic Order there is so little time.

"What the hell are you babbling about now? Soon this freak will be squeezing her ass. Are you going to help me or not?"

Feeling a bit sorry for our good inspector I merely replied "at your service kind sir." Before all, here was one soul amongst the millions and billions of others that could possibly be saved. It seemed to myself and my superiors that betting on Mr. Floyd Patterson, as unlikely a prospect as he may appear to you now, was a very fine wager indeed.

Meanwhile back outside, most of the law enforcement officials had "pulled back," out of sight, to change their trousers and convince the hoodlums that they were attempting to comply with their outrageous demands. Special Officer from the Special Office, convinced that he did not, in fact, own enough Saving Bonds, resolved to purchase more and ordered the special message transmitted into the store beneath some snappy Paul Anka. Special Officer, having been specially trained, knew in his heart of hearts that there was a problem with the plan. The hostages would be affected too. He ordered a team of crack snipers to take up their positions and "gun down" the Chess Players as soon as they appeared. "Shoot to kill," he said.

Inside the song changed. Paul Anka sang, "Inside outside, leave me alone." As One, the hostages stood. Floyd of course was unaffected, relying yet again on the subliminal filters which were stuck in his ears.

"Inside outside, Nowhere is home." The brush-drummed chant continued. How Mr. Anka knew the whereabouts of Noone is difficult to say. The thieves now mere shadows of their former selves fell in with their former hostages, unable to resist the Special Officer's sirens beckoning them out from the Onestop.

"Inside, outside, where have I been? Out of my brain..." The Catholic Prep Chess Team gang was cut to ribbons by the Special Officers, special sharp shooters. Inside Floyd tackled Janet Worth to the linoleum before she could get outside.

"Don't go," he cried. "You'll be cut down like a doggie, like a little fucking doggie, by the police. It's a trap!" Janet stared at him with dull yet heavily painted eyes, not at first recognizing our hero.

"Floyd?" She finally crooned through imprecise teeth. "What the hell is going on here? Get your hand off my ass before I call a cop." The shots could be heard ringing out over the neighborhood like short pops.

"Pop," Floyd said. Nothing happened.

"Floyd. What's all the shooting anyway." The impetuous trollop craned her head over the check-out counter to get a better look. Outside, very neat boys in Chess Team jackets were dropping like flies. Paul Anka finished his number. The spell was broken.

"Howard!" she screamed. Dashing through the doorway she found the tall uncoordinated boy crouching beside a brown weights and measures van with unmentionable obscenities smeared on its side. "Are you all right?" she crooned. She stroked his auburn hair most suggestively.

"Yes," he replied with as much passion as his cracking voice could muster.

"Thank you for consoling me in there," she continued. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't protected me. Why I might have lost my head or something and started screaming and then they would have shot me with their big guns for sure." She went on stroking his face. "How can I ever repay you?"

"Oh. It was nothing. I only did what anyone would have done in my situation."

"Oh no. That's not true at all. Many others did nothing I assure you. It was wonderful what you did in there. So brave. What's your name anyway?"

"Howard. I mean Hemberger. Howard Hemberger. Most people just call me Howie though."

"All right, Howie. My name is Janet Worth and I would be most honored if you would come over for dinner some time so that I could show you how appreciative I am."

Poor Howard, the innocent, simply gulped, unable to answer. Finally he nodded. "All right," he said.

"Fine. Here is my card. There is my address and phone number. Call me tomorrow and we'll set the date." The police, working diligently to clear the mess they had made of the Chess Team asked everyone who was not hurt to move along.

"The whore," Floyd kept repeating. "Can you believe that she's going to rape that child, that boy, when she could have me. I'll fix her. I'll get pictures of her with this kid and then what will she do. Ha! That will fix her all right."

If you are so angry with your boss, why don't you figure out some way to reek revenge upon both their miserable heads simultaneously? If you simply do as you have said you'll destroy her little arrangement but you won't hurt Gammon one bit. No, you need a more sophisticated plan if you really want your revenge on both of them.

"I already have one for him," Floyd said. "But first we'll get her."

\*

The reality was trinity. In every quadrant and at every turn, everything had three sides. In fact, every building, every room had three sides, but not every side was equivalent. Some sides were more equivalent than others. There was always a greater and two lesser. The creatures that inhabited this world did everything in threes. The spoke in threes, they walked together in threes, they even mated in threes. There were after all, three kinds of them and sometimes they could even connect themselves physically to each other. This was a much easier book to read and to push into than that first one about Chaos. That entire story had made no sense. This one made a great deal of a certain kind of sense although the creatures always walked about with guilty expressions on their faces and were very sorry after they mated, unless of course a new creature was born in which case they would appear ecstatic until it got old enough to realize just how guilty it was, then the poor thing seemed just as sad as the rest of them and walked around looking for two other unhappy creatures to mate with and feel guilty about. The more Floyd dwelled in the land of Trinity, the more Floyd came to dislike it. Everyone thought he was very strange because he was always alone and never had two companions with him. They felt that he was incomplete and they came to dislike him because he was always curious and never looked guilty at all. They often told him how guilty he should feel. One day he got to meet their

leaders at around page one hundred and fifty. The cheap science fiction paper back was drawing to a close. There was of course three of them, a father, a son, and a strange elusive creature. You couldn't see the third one but he would often speak up especially to tell you how guilty you were. Even the new born creatures were guilty. Floyd asked of what and was nearly laughed out of the presence of the three great leaders of the land of Trinity. Why, just of being Creatures they finally blurted out through puffy red half-strangled faces. With the three of us you'll get someplace. Alone you are nothing, Nowhere, Noone. With us you are Everything, Everywhere, Everyone. You can do many pirouettes on many well-formed grids. La de da, Floyd said. La de da.

## Chapter VII

Yes dear readers of this contemporary fairy tale, of this modern myth, of this ironic tragedy, ironic comedy, and ironic fable, gather round, for difficult as it may be to believe, the very next day was a rather important one for our friend Mr. Patterson. He had arrived at a point, you see, a point on yet another well-formed grid. He was, as it were, about to venture into a life of crime. He was, you might say, a pilgrim on a journey, a questor on a quest, and his opponent was no less formidable than Death herself. For you see, Death was coming the very next day for Benny. Floyd, now in touch with the workings of other superluminal realities, perceived this as truth.

He found Rodney climbing the walls before breakfast.

"I'm a cockroach, dad. I just went and turned into one overnight. Can you believe this happened to me? First the eye thing and now insectinitis. What am I going to do?"

"Stay out of roach motels." And later during the evening meal, with old Sam smiling his canine smile from the corner.



"Dad, have you ever felt that people were following you and that you may be on Trial for your life. I feel that I've done serious wrong somewhere along the way and that now people are going to put me on Trial and the lawyers are corrupt and there is nothing that anyone can do to save me."

"Do you think that you're guilty?" Inspector Patterson asked with genuine concern.

"I don't know. I suppose that I am."

"Well, then have I got the book for you. It's science fiction by this fellow Kilgore Trout. It's about this land where everybody is guilty of something and these three judges sit in judgement of everybody no matter how innocent they really are. In fact, on this planet, you're guilty if you don't think you're guilty, and of course you're guilty if you do."

"You know dad, I think I think I read this book too, but it was about airplane Pilates." He was guilty as well but managed one way or the other to wash his hands of the entire affair.

"Dad. Do you ever feel like our home is a castle on a hill? But that we don't really dwell in it?"

Each and every one of Rodney's literary attempts to make contact with his father's psychosis failed miserably. The poor lad, with no further plan in mind, vowed to continue his crusade even if all he could do was shadow his papa and try to keep our fine friend out of trouble.

After breakfast, as I knew he would, Floyd searched me out to assist him in planning what was to be the culminating moment of a life's work.

"Abitar. We've got to rob the art museum today. Now don't ask too many questions. This is why I brought you back in the first place. To come up with some plan so that we can save my brother from dying. You see, tomorrow is his day to die and Death will make her appearance at the hospital where all the good people sit around on couches waiting for their turn to go. Passively they sit, while the beast bursts through the large steel door of their lives and devours them whole. And do you know what everybody else does? They just sit there, calmly waiting for their turn to be eaten by this monster. But Benny won't be there. Oh no. Nosireebob. He was always a fighter and now I'm going to be a fighter for him. A fighter, Abitar. He will have bugged out, as they say in the army. Gone. Woosh. Out of this world and into another and it won't be to the land of shadows where Death lives. Uh, uh. He'll be off in some beautiful land where Death cannot find him. And you my dear Abitar the Avatara are going to figure out how we are going to get away with it all."

Well, I replied. I hope that you won't mind but I've taken the liberty of anticipating you a bit, my young fighter, and I've drawn up some modes of operation for retrieving the portrait of your choice from that quaint little gallery. I feel I should warn you however that there are no guarantees, even from an Avatar. We, rather you, may well be caught or shot dead in the street. Gunned down as it were, like a dog before your peers, disgracing your family and getting yourself packed off to that land of shadows you dread so much, giving Death a sort of two for one. I sincerely hope that you are prepared to incur this sort of risk.

"Look Abe, this is the kid who battled the famed Crumpers on the field of Pinebrook Lane. They'll write songs about me someday. About the warrior who saved his homeland from a near-mythical beast who had come to destroy all that he had worked so hard to build and so hard to protect."

Yes, well I can't wait to see the movie or hear the Ode To Floyd Patterson or the Ballad of Pinebrook lane. My God man, will you realize that that was, as you say, small potatoes compared to this! This is something truly Heroic, not some parochial fantasy that you seem to be having much of the time. If you wish to do battle with the Ancients, you must look a bit further than this miserable housing complex you profess to love so much. Believe me, out there are evils far beyond your wildest imagination. Why, your species is only one of thousands of rational beings in this Universe. And many exist in more than three dimensions, experience a superluminal reality beyond space-time. Some even have supre-rational powers. Beings which are well equipped to fathom the mysteries which your petit mind insists on reducing to problems. The sad truth Floyd is that you were probably always meant to be what you call a Moving Man Emeritus. You were born a Moving Man Emeritus. It will be nearly impossible for you to escape this destiny. Your World Line is headed straight for the Emeriti junkheap. And even if you do escape this fate, you may lose touch entirely with the world you are trying to change.

"Superlawhat reality!? Other worlds? What the hell are you babbling about now?"

Three space. You experience reality in three space, do you not?

"What!?"

It's hopeless. On with the plan.

"No, no, no. You're always coming on with this wizard talk shit. Talking like you were Merlin-the-know-it-all or something. Well, I'm no dummy. I got brains, too you know. Go on, explain away, but speak English for chrissakes."

Merlin? A wizard. I thought I was a genie?

"That too. Now what about this three place stuff?"

Three space. Three space. Not three place. I mean length, width and height.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place? Or is it space?"

These, my fine fellow, are the three dimensions you have known. But there is a fourth, time, which you both experience and don't experience.

"Time? Like what my watch says?"

Yes. But more the notion of how fast other events seem to you. You look confused. Einstein would be the man to start with although others have explained it better.

"I hope somebody's explained it better than you."

Nevertheless, reality is four dimensional, at least. It may well have a fifth dimension or a sixth or even an infinite number.

"Fifth dimension huh? Like the band?"

God!!!?

"I suppose he lives in the fifth dimension as well."

He, my fine Inspector, is the dimensions.

"What?"

Forget it. Suffice it to say that you may well come to realize that there is a perspective from which all of this is clear. That place is Nowhere, the superluminal reality where Noone lives.

"Superwhat?"

Superluminal. Faster than light. The place where opposites meet and the One emerges from the many. That place where causality and the time barrier are no more.

"You're right. This shit's way over my head. Babble on no more."

I was just a-babbling of green fields I guess. Well, there is my Merlin speech for today. Now, a plan you said. To "rip off" a tenth-rate art gallery in an eleventh-rate city on a third-rate planet. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Where are the challenges of old? The Blabblidons of Oralonia. The Shmelters of Weldon. The fields of Troy. Roland's beloved song or the quest for the Grail.."

"Yah. Just have the Swelters of the subliminal reality spit out the plan."

As I was saying, we shall need a diversion to distract the two or three geriatric guards who infest that pitiful place. Then, utilizing my ability to peek around corners, to peer as it

were into other rooms, you shall simply make your selection and off we will go.

"That's it then."

Yes, I should think that will do.

"And I'll just walk out with this thing under my arm."

Well, I suppose you could put it in some sort of container, stuff it into an art sack so that you won't be too conspicuous.

"Uh, huh. And where my dear Abitar do we get this diversion?"

That, my fine fellow, is up to you. The Avatara cannot do everything. If you really want to escape the fate of Moving Men Emeriti, then you must start thinking for yourself. You cannot ingest everything on that silver spoon you have grown so accustomed to.

"Well, look, I don't want to hurt your feelings or anything but I think that you came up with a pretty shitty plan. After all, we could just bop in there in the middle of the night and with all this powerful magic you keep talking about, we could just bop out again once we got what we wanted. Or how about traveling back in time through some subliminal whatever to when the painting was just finished and taking it then. It would probably be very easy to get it out of some unsuspecting artist's house. You know how they are?"

Floyd, Floyd, Floyd. You have understood nothing. We cannot change the past. It is one of the first things you learn in this Avatara business. Even the slightest change, no matter how insignificant it may seem at the time, could change history so

that you could never return to the present. I suppose you are not acquainted with the Many Worlds Theory of quantum mechanics. If you fool with the past, you could be transported into another universe which exists parallel to ours. Into one where what you have changed here was actually changed there. You see, one of the fundamental rules of time travel is that you cannot return to your own time if you've altered things so that your personal history did not remain exactly the same after the change. Even if a magazine article were changed, some snippet that you'd read. Can you possibly understand anything that I am saying to you?

"Sure. I got this many universe theory. It makes a lot more sense than that subliminal stuff. If I change things so that my life was different, then I, me in the past, can't return to the present because there would be a different me waiting here. So I might have to go to some other universe where everything is different right?"

Exactly. There is hope for you yet. You would be somewhere else since two different bodies cannot, unfortunately, occupy the same space at the same time. That is simply one of nature's ground rules which we must live by. Nature can be so difficult sometimes. Certain basic regulations even I cannot violate. Of course it has different faces in different galaxies and some of the minor rules change a little depending on where you are, but a ground rule like that, never. Why, even the idea is absurd. Can you imagine the universe if different rules applied in different places? Why, it would be simply impossible for one to keep track of what was going on. No, I'm afraid that unless you want to

steal some artwork from a different galaxy, you'll simply have to content yourself with the basic, yet perfectly acceptable plan I've devised.

"Floyd. Floyd, is that you in there? Who are you talking to? Floyd. The principal of Lakeshore is on the phone and he says that he would like to meet with us to discuss Rodney. Floyd, who are you talking to in there?"

Your wife, strong arm that she is, must not know about me. Our entire plan will be ruined if she discovers the truth concerning you and me and Benny and Death and the museum. Some people are simply unsympathetic to Avataras. They refuse to believe that we exist. Why, knowing dear Ulna, she's probably kept a list of all the things you've done which she considers odd and she would probably show it to some "doctor" who would say that you were crazy or something and then they would place you in a nice comfortable cell for rehabilitation or some ghastly brain wash. No. Tell her that you think you might go into public speaking and you were simply practicing your delivery.

"Get lost. I felt like reading out loud to keep myself company."

"What about the principal?"

"You go and see him. I've got nothing to say to the old bastard. I haven't been to school in years."

"No. It's not about you. It's about Rodney. Here, I made a list of what he said. Acts strange. Doesn't seem to care about his work anymore. Skips whole days. The principal said that it was really becoming a problem and that he would like to meet with



us before, I have it here, the situation de-ter-ior-ated any further."

"What do you say, Mr. Kasham? Want to go and badger a high school principal?"

I am afraid my fine fellow that we have significantly more important things to attend to. If you insist on playing Faustus, try not to turn me into Mephistopheles.

"What?"

"Floyd. Who are you talking to?" Ulna asked.

"You go and see him yourself, Ulna. I've got some significantly more important things to attend to."

"Well, I've got things to do too, you know. I have an appointment to keep with a doctor. And not one of Rodney's either. So I'll tell the principal that you'll be in touch."

"Tell him anything you like."

Floyd, would you please flush that thing. The aroma in this water closet is rather overpowering.

"As you wish, O Merlin Mephiwhatever."

Mephistopheles. His name was Mephistopheles. I knew him well.

"So what? You want a medal?"

I'll ignore that. Now what do you propose we do about the diversion. I must attend you constantly so that you are not attacked and overcome by some wheel chair ridden attendant. We need some accomplices to assist in that aspect of the plan. They should be folks of a type far more conspicuous than we are. Certainly in your Odyssey about this town you must have made

contact with the type to which I refer.

"I've got just the people you're looking for."

\*

Howard was simply goggle-eyed at the thought, his adolescent mouth twitching, bits of saliva gathering in great bunches at the corners. His head appeared to bob continually from side to side whilst his hands darted into and out of his pockets in rapid succession.

Mario Moyo, the first of the new world lovers, was unimpressed. "And your gonna sit there and try and tell me that she invited you to dinner. What?! And I suppose she kept telling you how much she wanted to show her appreciation. Yuh! You? It's just too much for me, can I tell you that?"

"Well, Mario. You're the one who said that I couldn't get laid in a whore house with hundred dollar bills sticking out of my pockets. What have you got to say now?"

"Have you called her yet?"

"Well, no. I was sort of waiting to talk to you first. You're always telling us the best way to handle women so I thought I'd come to the expert before I went ahead on my own and fucked it up."

"The first thing you have to do is call her. Right now. It's Saturday so she'll probably be home."

"Mario, I just don't think I can do it. My voice will crack. I know it. I'll be a fag. You've got to call her for me and make the date. As long as I know she really wants me to come I'll be all right. But if she says no, then what am I going to do?"

"Uh, uh! No way. Just fuck off. Right now. Howie, if you can't even call her, how do you expect to be able to do anything after this dinner you keep talking about? You sound like some guy who just wants to stand around watching her all day."

"Well, I figure I'll just worry about that then."

"And what about my voice? Don't you think she'll be able to tell the difference between you and me? I mean after all, if she can't make that simple dis-tinc-tion, then she's probably not worth it anyway."

"That's funny. Worth it. Ha! That's her name. Janet Worth."

"Jesus Howard, are you sure you want to go through with this? Something tells me you're just not ready."

"Please?"

"All right. Put in a call to this old broad and I'll talk to her. But don't be surprised if she can tell the difference and starts coming on to me instead."

"And Mario, please just do it like I would. Don't make any of your noises or call her baby or anything like that. Please?"

"Not to worry, Howie. I'll try and be a big enough fag to get you the date with this old chick." Howard handed Mario the phone. "Hello?" His voice cracked artificially as his eyes rolled tauntingly at Howard. "Hello, Miss Worth? Yes, this is Howard Hemberger. You remember. The nice boy at the Onestop. Well, you see, I was just calling about that dinner date you wanted to make." He moved the receiver a bit so that Howard could hear.

"What!" Mario, the first of the new world lovers could not believe what he was hearing. He stammered a yes, this time not having to pretend that his voice was cracking. They hung up.

"Yahooo!" Howard danced about the telephone. His obvious arousal and good fortune made Mario's face screw up in rage. "Mario. One last thing. You got to do this for me. You've got to go to the drug store. Please?"

"What's the matter with the big man now? Can't you even go and buy your own rubbers? The phone call is one thing but that. Something else. No way!" The truth, of course, was that Mario had never had sexual intercourse with a woman. As a matter of fact, of the many girls he had dated only a few had let him anywhere near the dark secrets they possessed.

"You're always telling us how important it is to use protection. A shield in time saves nine. Isn't that what you always say? If I could see once how you went about buying the things, then the next time I could do it on my own, couldn't I? You push me on to do things I never thought I could."

"Fuck off. Right now. Cut the pansy shit would ya? Rubbers aren't the answer. People get pregnant using them all the time. You remember what Rodney said about that kid sister he almost had. A mistake, that's what she was. A latex error. And you remember what happened there."

"Yey, but what am I going to do?"

"If she's such a hot woman, then she'll be on the pill and won't need any rubbers will she?"

"I got to have them just in case. I can't take the chance of getting her into bed and then being unprepared. You know something. I think you're as afraid as I am, and that's why you won't buy them for me."

"All right. That's it. You think you're so smart, I'll get them."

\*

As I knew she would, Martha, the tainted flower lady of Cheltnum Street awaited most graciously our arrival at her "shop." Setting eyes on young Inspector Patterson, Martha began crawling all over him in an attempt to seduce him into his own car. And that rather disgusting man-woman Genette, with her coarse brown hair and the dirt pressed most grossly beneath her fingernails, continually darted hither and yon proclaiming just how disgusting Martha had become. Genette had, on several occasions, proclaimed herself asexual, and the fact that she dressed as a woman when in fact she was a man (making her one of the ugliest women about) was merely a disguise to fend off any advances flung her way. Floyd, in fine form, left the Galaxy 500 throbbing by the curb as he explained what he had in mind for a little afternoon entertainment. Martha, with her tainted blond hair and murky blue eyes, grew quite excited at the thought of entering into a life of crime with the man she knew and loved more than any other, Inspector Floyd Patterson.

She past her tongue several times back and forth across cracked lips above generously spaced teeth. Sure they would help and she knew just the person to assist. One Kathleen

Knightlinger, a local bag lady who appeared forty-five when in fact she was a mere child of twenty two. Her father, an alcoholic dentist and sometime barber, had died without a penny of his own, after which her mother picked up the family trade of full-time alcoholic. Her sister Norine, a tall gangly girl with long red hair (of course, she was the long-lost sister of Howard Hemberger), prostituted herself in a nearby apartment to support a video game habit which grew more carnivorous at every turn. Kathleen was found on her familiar bench sleeping off a night of garbage scavenging.

"Honey, why you do this for?" Martha would continually ask her. "That insurance your mother took out before your father fell down that flight of stairs breaking his neck, poor soul," she spit "keeps the roof over her head and food in her belly. Get on home! Don't be wandering about the street looking for something to eat."

"Oh," Kathlenn would draw a deep breath. "I always go home to eat. I just like to wander around the streets looking for things to draw."

It was, of course, the truth. What was even more the truth was that Kathleen Knightlinger was probably the greatest artist of her time. But equally of course she would remain entirely destitute until after her death when her entire oeuvre would be discovered by yet another whim of the Fates and her name would live forever as a fascinating fin de siecle artist whose unique technique and eye for the suffering of urban affluence would gain her eternal fame. She had no idea that the curator of the

Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994 would say: "This stuff is the best I've ever seen." In one of those odd twists of Fate, her assistance of the Patterson gang this very day would be what brought her fame. Kathleen awoke from dreams of maddened scale inspectors.

"So, Mister Patterson," big breath, "you want to steal a painting from the art gallery to save your brother from death, eh?" She sighed heavily. "I just dreamed it was so. Funny you showing up here. I can help you. If you show me first the painting you like, I can make a copy of it and then," she let out a long loving breath, "you can have the original without anyone knowing that you stole it."

"There isn't time for all that. You see, Death is going to come for him tomorrow so I must get the painting today so that I can beat her to the punch."

May I suggest, old man, that you might describe the one you want to her. She's already been thrown out of the gallery several times, knows all the works and has a marvelous memory. If you tell her the one you want she may be able to do it without seeing it again. Someday, she'll be quite famous, you know.

"Do you know that one land-scape?" Floyd asked. "The one with the castle on the hill and the knights in the valley watering their horses beside a sparkling stream around sunset. I dreamed about it the other night. Didn't remember seeing it in the gallery. I'm not even sure if it's there."

Big breath. "The Bartollini. Valley at Dusk. Yes, I know it well. It's there. In fact, as Chance would have it, I have already attempted such a work. Mine is slightly different, but those experts at the gallery will never know the difference."

But of course the copy in the museum was eventually examined by another team of experts flown in especially from New York. They discovered the painting in the gallery was not a Bartollini at all but the work of some unknown but extremely talented artist. The hunt began, a hunt which would last many years after our story is through, would span three continents (including Antartica), and would eventually be written into a best selling novel and a made-for-television block buster movie. The story would climax with a forced entry and the midnight discovery of the long dead Knightliger's work. La de da.

\*

"Look you guys, I tell you, I've tried everything. This morning I even told him I thought I was a cockroach for chrissake. I'm tellin' ya, the only answer left is to shadow him and make sure that he doesn't get into any trouble. This feigning madness crap has had it. Look what it did for Hamlet. Made a bigger mess of things than there already was. Dad mumbled something about the art museum, of all places, if you can believe it. I thought that we'd go and look for him there."

"What about the drug store? Mario, you promised."

"Rodney, can you believe that little Howie Hemberger has actually got a date with an older woman and wants me to buy him some rubbers so that he won't get caught short Monday night."



"I'll tell you Howie. Rubbers aren't going to help you with that problem. They don't make them that small anyway, unless you're going all the way to Japan for the goddam things. Who is this hot woman anyway?" Rodney asked.

"Her name is Janet Worth and I met her at the hold up I told you about yesterday. I didn't tell everyone about her because I think someone's sex life is their own damn business."

"Janet Worth? Janet Worth? I know that I've heard that name before but I can't for the life of me remember where."

\*

The gallery's paraplegic guardian angel sat on a cracked wooden stool, nodding off in front of a small black and white portable television set. Saturday, traditionally the gallery's best day, had brought only three patrons to view the various treasures which generous donors had deposited in this repository of obscure artifacts. The guard, whose scruffy white face was tanned enough to make him almost attractive, nearly jumped out of his recliner when Floyd inquired in the haughtiest voice he could muster about the cost of weekend admission. The guard blinked several times at the ill-at-ease figure before him. The guardian angel's eyes drifted to the large satchel which the man clutched beneath his arm.

"It's a dollar fifty. For non-members. But you'll have to leave that package at the door. Sir." The guard smiled.

Floyd Patterson, International Diamond Thief turned Art Connoisseur, swallowed a bit.

Go ahead you idiot, just as we rehearsed. Tell him, of course, how silly of me.

"Of course," Diamond thief Patterson said, "how silly of me." Now pay the guardian and put the package down on the counter. There. That's good. Try not to look so bloody nervous would you? My god, the polyester suit is bad enough. And the fact that you wanted to retain your "nerd-pac" wouldn't have helped matters either. Can you even imagine how conspicuous that would have made you look. This way, you're only one of the gentry, out and about on a Saturday afternoon to view some of your metropolis' marvelous art treasures.

"You know, I'm just one of the gentry out on a"--shut up you idiot! You're going to ruin everything.

"Pardon me sir?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I was just saying. Oh never mind."

My god, he's going to remember us forever. He'll go home and tell his wife about this guy in a polyester suit who looked very nervous.

Now. Simply browse about the gallery as I told you to. Try to appear as natural as possible. Do it just as I instructed you before. I'll let you know what is transpiring about the rest of this quaint museum and I'll say when you are to, how do you say? make your move. Fortunately for us, there are only several other people in the gallery this afternoon. Three to be precise, besides the two guards of course. I must tell you Floyd that I have my reservations about the rest of the gang, as you termed them. Two women and a man who thinks he's a woman. Not exactly

what I call promising. Then again, I suppose that for this particular operation, this odd lot was precisely what we required. To draw off the attention of this vicious looking corps de force.

Why that reprint of Dali is rather bizarre, wouldn't you agree? Why don't you steal that one for your brother. I'm sure the world of the last supper would suit him perfectly. All that wine and everything. Why, he would even meet the man who could turn his tap into a spigot.

"Put a lid on it Kasham before I stick you back in the bottle."

How many times do I have to tell you...

"And cut the bottle shit. I conjured ya and I can get rid of ya too. And not another word against my brother. You understand?"

Quite testy today are we not, Inspector Patterson? Or, should I say, Diamond Thief Patterson or Art Connoisseur Patterson? I really cannot keep abreast of your disguises. How many shall I be burdened with today?

"Are they here yet?"

Yes, they're just coming in now. It won't be long. Good lord what a ragtag crew. Down they place their money. You should see the face of the guard. He would like to throw them out, but they look so reverent. And that horrid Knightlinger woman is babbling on about art whilst the other two misfits simply stare on with open mouths. Why, I even detect a bit of saliva forming around the edges of Genette's most used orifice. They're, as you say, off and running and there's our guard friend on the phone to this

other geriatric colleague. Good heavens! This one actually is in a wheel chair. What a coincidence. My prediction actually came true. No doubt, a simple twist of fate. He's rolling furiously in pursuit, but keeping his distance so as not to give himself away. That poor Knightlinger's comments all wasted on those barbarians. It is so difficult for that guard to peak around corners whilst strapped to that chair. His wheels keep poking out.

"This is the one. The landscape for my brother. Valley at Dusk. Whatd'ya think?"

Yes, well, charming. I'm sure he'll love it. As long as those knights don't squire him soon after arrival. Although they are white knights so I doubt that they would ever do anything as unchivalrous as that. What about that strange symbol on their shields. Don't look like they would offer much protection do they? I know I've seen that symbol before but... Oh! It's starting. Genette is arguing with Kathleen over her rather astute interpretation of that obscure Wyeth, "Traps." How appropriate! Our friend in the wheel chair is in a real quandary. After all, the argument actually sounds legitimate, yet he simply cannot coordinate what he hears with what he sees. It's terrible when the senses deceive you. Oh, and Knightlinger has just punched Genette in the jaw. And the old Transvestite is down. But Martha has leapt onto Kathleen's back and this action seems to have spurred our Hephaistian guard into action. Yes, he's rolling full tilt to retrieve his companion at the desk. Guardian angel reached for the phone, but his male ego once again triumphed and prevented him from doing the sensible thing and calling the

police. No, he reasons that it is only three women and even if Monte is a bit gimped, we can still handle them. All right, my fine fellow, my international diamond thief turned purloiner of obscure art treasures such as Bartollini's Valley at Dusk. As you Americans say, hit it.

In all fairness, one could tell that his destiny as Moving Man Emeritus was beginning to molt away like reptilian skin, for our unlikely hero darted off for his checked sack without a single thought for life or limb. His earlier impotence turned complete abandon, he snatched the satchel from its temporary resting place and dashed back to his brother's Bartollini nearly running down some poor chap headed to see what all the disturbance was. Would you believe this man was none other than Sherman Wetherbee? Small world. La de da. Valley at Dusk in hand, Inspector Patterson flew from the museum as the phoenix rising from the ashes. Fifteen years of checking scales were shed in a moment of excruciating sunlight. He was Blue Beard on the main, no longer a thief but a romantic pirate, a man of more service to his downtrodden fellows than all the law abiders groveling about him. No longer would he have to face his brother with only "inspected by three" or tainted flowers or quiet impotence to combat death. No. He was on a mission of utmost importance to humanity and possibly to his galaxy as he understood it. He brought with him to Mt. St. Mary's true salvation and magic more powerful than any technology could conjure.

Tossing Valley at Dusk into the back of his Galaxy 500, Floyd screamed off to meet his destiny. Possibly, he would push into the painting with his brother. Together, they would ride for a new future, on horse back, on for a new quest. Oh, Floyd thought. To journey with a purpose. To quest. Not simply to muddle through but to live, no, to soar, to dance, and for a purpose, not for Gammon or Worth. It would be as when they were children again. He would make a new family, a new wife and maybe a new son, have a beginner's mind. And maybe this time his daughter would live to bear his grandchild.

## Chapter VIII

Sherman Weatherbee was absolutely delighted. His ad had received, as he said, a bite. And not simply any old bite. No. This was a young demi-god, an Adonis, more than Sherman could have possibly hoped for. His name was the absolutely scintillating Floyd Patterson. He was eighteen, oh what a sweet age, sensitive, articulate. Verily, he seemed to possess wisdom well beyond his years. And best of all, he was interested. Oh how interested! Simply oozing with desire to meet this young god, Sherman sat at his oaken desk to pen a letter of response to his young Floyd Patterson.

Max, his white long-haired cat, purred lovingly and soon Sherman passed into a kind of trance, the correspondence flowing with a certain juicy aplomb from his antique quill.

"And, how are you today?" he began.

"Oh not bad, a bit nervous I guess. I've never been to a psychiatrist before." Ulna wobbled nervously towards the couch. "Should I lie there? I've never been to a, oh I said that already. I'm sorry. You probably don't get many patients as stupid as I am."

"Oh I don't think you're stupid at all, Mrs. Patterson. How long have you felt that you are very stupid?"

"Oh, not very long. But my husband Floyd, thinks that I'm very stupid because I write everything down on lists and I suppose that's a symptom of something or other."

"And how long have you been making lists?"

"Well. For quite a while now. Let me see, I've listed here when I started. Ever since my mother moved in with us. Floyd isn't very happy that she lives with us. I wrote that down too. She's sort of odd, you understand. Nothing really bad. Well, she wets herself occasionally and she picks her nose at the supper table and oh my goodness, I shouldn't have said picks her nose, should I? It wasn't very polite of me. My son Rodney would be very upset if he heard me being so stupid in front of a doctor like yourself. He has this eye disease you see, and, well that's the point, sometimes he can't and he's very nervous and worried about that and the doctors don't seem to know what's wrong with him. They say all sorts of things I don't understand. How about you? Are you ever confused?"

"I'm not confused anymore," Floyd said. "I know precisely what I am doing. I set out today with determination. I was determined to steal that painting from the art gallery and I did it. It was something very important, and I didn't just sit around in front of the television thinking about it, I did it. I didn't freeze back there at the gallery, did I?"



No, you were really quite extraordinary, dashing back and forth, exchanging the copy for the original, caring not an ounce for life or limb. You were quite gallant actually streaking away from the museum, not even a thought for the consequences.

"Not a thought for the consequences. But it's all going to be worth it. Benny will love it. He'll go ape shit when he sees the knights with their shields and the castle. You lived in a castle didn't you?"

Why yes, for a while.

"I hate that Pinebriar box they stuck me in. What would you say? It has, it just has got no soul, no history. It's not a home. It's a house. I never felt at the end of a day that I'd gone home. I often felt that I had no home to go to? Have you ever been homeless? Where the hell is your home anyway?"

My home? I have no home, not any more. Sometimes, my dear Inspector, I wonder how much of this universe hopping is worth it. I know, the last thing you want is a misty-eyed Merlin the Avatara. But I simply cannot tell where I am going anymore. Do you, my fine fellow, have any idea where you are going?

"I don't know where the hell he's going now," Rodney said. "Jesus. He came flyin' out of that museum. Mario! This isn't Starsky and Hutch. Don't follow so close. He'll notice us. What happened back in that drug store anyway, Mario? You looked like a ghost when you came out of there."

"Nothing. Just pipe down. I'm drivin'."

"Oh no Mario," Howard chimed in. "Tell Rodney about the lady and her kids who thought that the rubbers were candy. They wanted their mom to buy them some. Mario turned red as a beat."

"You got a big fuckin' mouth, Hemberger. How'da like to eat those rubbers?"

"Jesus, Rodney," Howard continued undaunted. "It looks like your father's singing in there or something. What the hell do you think he's doing?"

"Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing any more," Floyd said. "All those years with the scales and all the time it was the words under the music telling us what to do. Everything from the time I got up in the morning till the time I went to bed at night. Never a break from it. Always the same old sax player with his brother on brush drums and always that same dull voice underneath everything, droning on and on about what I was supposed to do. But never enough what I was supposed to do. No wonder they like us to listen to that radio all the time."

Who is this "they" you're always talking about Floyd?

"I know that I spend a lot of time watching television and that they say on the TV that I shouldn't, but lately the rest of my family has been going crazy," Ulna continued. "I'm sure that it's all my fault, but I can't see how. Floyd has been such a good provider. He checks the scales you know. Not exactly an unimportant job. I mean, after all, if somebody didn't make sure that the scales were right, then where would we be?"

"I don't know where the hell we are! Are you sure this is the way to the hospital," Floyd said.

Good lord, Floyd, I hope you don't expect me to know the way around your pitiful city. What sort of Crusader are you? You don't even know the way to the front lines of this battle against Death you've set out for yourself.

"I know the way. This is the way. The hospital's down in the valley. It only looks like we're lost."

So you know the way. Into the valley. And guess what time it is? I don't suppose you knew that Zen is the spirit of the valley, do you?

"What? Look, shut up or I'll lose my way."

"Where the hell is the old bastard going, Rodney?" Mario asked. "You're father just got on the expressway in the exact opposite direction that he had been driving for the last ten minutes."

"I don't know where he's going. I thought we might be going to the zoo. But now that he turned around I have no idea which direction this crazy odyssey may take us."

"I just haven't any idea, my dear Max, if this letter is going to do the trick. I want it to be suggestive but not too suggestive. It is just so difficult to achieve a kind of balance these days. I'm just not sure if that has the proper ring to it. Maybe I should begin with, 'greetings!,' or something like that. But of course you couldn't care less. No. You sweet cats just purr your way through life without a single thought of what you're all about. Oh, my dear. I'd better check myself lest I be

waxing philosophical soon and then who knows what I might do to this darling Mr. Patterson. I wonder what the young devil is doing this very minute?"

"We're here. Do we take the Mount by the front or is a rear assault in order?" Floyd said.

How about a frontal sneak attack? We'll go in by the front but without our colours showing.

"Jesus, you guys. I think he's goin' to see his brother. This could be trouble. That crazy Abitar shit had something to do with Uncle Ben. I heard him talkin' about it in the bathroom the other day."

"Well, what's he going to do?" Mario asked. "What the hell could he want with a painting? Is he going to show some art shit to his brother? From what you've said I doubt that Benny's the type who's waitin' to see some painting that your dad got to show him."

"Look, Howard. You stay in the car and keep a lookout. Mario and I will go up and make sure that nothing weird happens. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I'm ready for just about anything, doctor," Ulna said. "The whole family is in an absolute uproar. My entire household is topsy-turvy. Has everyone gone completely crazy?"

Yes, my dear Floyd Patterson. I do believe that you have gone right out of your mind. Pushing into a painting. Escaping death. Noone to my knowledge is the only person in this universe to have done this. Well, of course, popular myth would have it that there was another but...this is the twentieth century and who these

days believes in myths.

I do believe that your son has followed you here with the intention of keeping you out of trouble. Everyone is finding you quite strange these days. Even your wife. The loving Ulna. She has gone so far as to visit a healer of minds, a psychiatrist, to see if he can figure out what is wrong with you.

Do you think that there is anything wrong with you? And what about the nurses? The fake and smiling faces. What is that package that you have today, Mr. Patterson? Inspector Patterson. Come to measure our scales today have you? Just another petty trip to the local hospital? Some trivial function which thousands upon millions of others could do with equal ease and probably a good deal more precision. Or is it accuracy? As I said from the outset, I could never keep those two concepts clear.

Must you stare at the floor continually? You look like a teenager stalking a drug store for condoms. People will think that you've come to steal something, won't they? But then you have. You've come to steal away one of their patients. They won't appreciate you very much.

Precision. Accuracy. One simply compares results among themselves. The other is used to compare your results with some "more objective" standard. I for one could never decide where they expected to find this objective standard that they talked about all the time.

No. No. No. Don't take the stairs. No one takes the stairs in a hospital. Take the elevator. But where will they find this standard? What will they base this act of humanity against. Where

in the larger Cosmic Order will they find the order that they want?

Benny? Benny, Benny, Benny, Benny, are you in? Quickly. The painting. Get the painting out of the sack. I fear that we have miscalculated and that Death, wily opponent she is, has nearly beaten us to the punch. I fear, my fine fellow that we have arrived not one micro-millisecond too soon.

"Shut up!"

Well if you choose to be that way about it. If you feel that you can go it alone, that you can face such a challenging opponent by yourself, if you feel, my fine Inspector of the Scales Floyd Patterson, that you are ready for the big leagues then by all means

"Shut up! Benny? Benny, I've come with the way out. I'm here with the way out for both of us."

He's fading fast, Mr. Patterson. Look. Look to the corner of the room. The bathroom door. It bulges. There is so little time to do what you have come to do.

"Benny?"

The door. The door is bulging, flexing forth like some half-remembered dream. Benny, can't hear what you say! He's gone catatonic. Deja vu, my fine friend, Floyd Patterson.

"Shut up. Stop it. We're are not too late. Benny? Can you hear me? I've gone and stolen this painting from the art gallery. Valley at Dusk. There's horses there and knights and maybe we can get a nice Castle like the one on the hill."

The door is bulging.

"And all you have to do is say "push" and then believe. That's all. It's not complicated. It's not scientific. Just believe. And push. I'm going with you, Ben. On this trip we go together. All the way. Together. You don't have to go it alone. We can go to the Valley, to the Valley, Ben, and we can beat death at her own game."

The door.

"Benny!!! Wake up! The time is now. This is the way out. The way out of the maze. I told you I'd find it. I have seen. I have seen the way out."

His eyes. They're opening.

"You did it! Here's the painting. This is what I've waited my entire life to show you. Say it with me. Push. That's all you have to do."

Bulging.

"Now say it with me. Push. It's as simple as that."

Fading.

"Not that door. That's not the way. That is not the way you want to go. This is the way. Say it. Push."

"Floyd?"

Half-whispered groan from the grave. We are too late. The wily creature has cheated us again. Benny smacks back the spittle. He wants to say something else. His throat, so dry now. Can barely speak. A little water maybe.

"Floyd. It's all right. Turn off the light and get some sleep."

Buzzing abounds. Monitors insane with voice bellow their song to deaf ears. Sirens wail beneath the Muzak which is always theirs.

"Puuuuush!"

The door bursts. And like some half-remembered dream, a big ugly reptile emerges.

"You. And what are you doing here? But of course I know what you are here for. A thief and a prophet. But he will not believe you." She gobbles Benny whole but he does not notice. There is no screaming except from the monitors which wail on, oblivious to futility. In white coats, the cavalry arrives. Precisely a moment too late. Accurately, it does not matter. As Death and Benny become One, Floyd smashes Valley at Dusk about their new head, shouts "Pop," and disappears.

The reality was One. Not two and not three. It lives not in simple harmonic motion between two opposing amplitudes, nor does it reside in the land of triangles where scalene breeds with isosceles to bring forth deceptive equilateral; this world of straight circles, of deception and lies and half truths where trinity masquerades as a perversion for the One. No, reality dwells in the land of O. And it was to Noone's cave that Floyd came. On his door in bas relief he found this written.

All who come here  
Be called someone.  
Take this name as substitute  
For your own.



And come alone  
Leave Discrimination and Reason  
And their thriving abortion Technology  
Behind.  
You will need them no more.  
For this is the land where  
opposites shall meet.  
Someone shall be called Noone.

### Part III

Most of all I am dipped in the spillway of variables beyond space-time, on the brink of revelation. All comes to mean One and yet the many is retained. Opposites are transcended for the quality experience, the way to do and be at the same time, to understand the coin without seeing the sides.

from In Search of a Paradigm:  
A Study of Post-Structuralism  
by Floyd A. Patterson

I came to Scotland finally, to escape the madness of my own time. I had lived for most of my life in the place you would now call Hungary, or maybe Czechoslovakia--I can't be sure; and one day a kind of insanity seemed to set up shop, determined to overrun the place. Rape, murder, violence of every kind--what is today's word?--a crisis, pervaded the air.

I grew up in this place, descended from a very old line, the roots of which no one really knew. My father and his father before him, a string running back far enough for Noone really to care.

I lived quite well actually, much better than most of humanity at that time. I suppose that was my greatest sin. The house, or would you say castle, stood apart from the other meager dwellings, on a hill. But this was not the castle of old. This was no Camelot, though it suited me and my family well enough.

I had a wife, children. They filled me with a joy I would never know again. Unrest has ruled ever since the plague. It came to dominate the Cosmic Order of my day.

Oh yes, we were a part of some vast empire but those were not the swiftest of times, you understand. There was more, isolation. That's it actually. We became isolated; I became isolated, cut off from the rest. In the village, when the crops failed, the madness came. Or maybe it was the madness that came first. I don't know. Anyway, it polluted the air, turned the fields foul, corrupted the very water we drank. At first it was simply the minds and bodies of a few. Then whole families were killed.

So we hid. Cloaked ourselves behind thick walls to escape the plague which grew from the madness. At first, we did well. My success as a land owner stood me in good stead for a time. We had food and some water and the animals were not affected. But as the death toll mounted, the stench from the town wafted over the walls seeking us out in our very beds. My daughter died first, and then her mother. I held my son in my arms through the night--but then even he passed away.

There was simply nothing to be done. You cannot imagine the strangeness of spiralling from the heights of owner, ruler of all that land, of the lives of all those people, to the nadir of your own family's death with absolutely nothing to be done.

And when they were all dead, I wasn't. All that was solid in my world had melted into thin air except for me. That was my joy, my only joy, my greatest joy. To live forever! For some reason, which in all these centuries I have never discovered, I was allowed to continue while they were all sent on to the world of shadows.

I left my tiny village after only burying a few on a morning as bright and alive as any a man could ask for. The light was so exciting it made my head reel even to think of it. But there was a calmness to the valley. Everything was incredibly quiet. The only flutter came from the birds which circled silently above. Hundreds of them, spiralling upward for eternity before plummeting to Earth.

One other thing I remember about leaving that god forsaken place. A dead cat. Its death was not surprising, although most animals had been spared the sickness. But this cat had fallen prey to another kind of evil--its head chopped off by a rather vicious-looking contraption my son had built for killing rats. Made of wood, the device would literally chop the rodent in two if it disturbed a bit of cheese left out for it.

But the rats had been strangely absent during the sickness and this cat, lacking its usual supply of food, had fallen victim to its own curiosity. Its head lay nearby, eyes dull but--and this was the strange thing--wildly alive, as if...as if the bait had been worth it.

10

Floyd Patterson, formerly of the Department of Weights and Measures, presently employed by the Secret Agents of America--the S.A.A., lowered the binoculars from his eyes. The situation was desperate. Dressed in black turtleneck with black trousers from his only good suit and his only good pair of black shoes, Floyd appeared quite the apt employee. He sat perched in a rather unimpressive tree across from the abode of that known seducer of

boys, Miss Janet Worth. A black watch cap was stretched tightly over his too-wide ears.

"The slut," he moaned. "Dressed like a harlot with a mere child come over for supper. A woman her age. And him, with bright red hair and a tall uncoordinated style. I can't stand his corduroy pants and charming green tie. I have travelled. I have seen. I have gone to Nowhere and yet here I now sit, watching, outside, once again a Moving Man Emeritus."

Oh, shut up! So what if you've travelled or you've seen. Do you suppose you're the only one? Can you really expect these people to understand, to believe the truth you possess. Of course not. And that ridiculous outfit. I liked you better when you wore that Dallas Cowboys belt-buckle for parallax prevention.

"But now, now they will pay. For my White Quest may have failed; my brother is dead and today they put him into the ground with very little to say. But now I have returned and so let the Black Quest begin. May Gammon and Worth be warned: their days are numbered.

You've really lost your mind this time. Soon you'll be foaming at the mouth like some rabid cat.

"Gammon must pay for ruining my life with that worthless job, for telling me again and again just how important it was to protect the consumer from unscrupulous vendors."

He didn't ruin your life. Everyone's job is worthless, ultimately. So what?

"No one cares. And Worth. Slut. Harlot. She must pay most of all for giving me so much hope, for making me think that there might be a chance, that there might...and then tossing me aside as if I were no more than a tissue, a snot-filled tissue or a come-filled condom. That tissue of lies you told me. But now, pay she shall."

You stay in that tree much longer and you'll curse her from the lunatic asylum. Good lord, do you ever take yourself seriously since you were fired! Your life story is starting to read, my fine friend, like some cheap novel.

"Wait until they see these pictures."

And who is this mysterious they, Floyd?

"Shut up, or I'll stick you back in the bottle."

Snatching his pocket instamatic from his trousers, Floyd flicked the lens to telephoto and after allowing suitable time for the built-in Readyflash feature to warm up, began to snap photos of woman and child together.

Not twenty yards away, Rodney Allucida and Mario Moyo kept watch from the AVENGER bomb car over Miss Worth's quaint apartment. Rodney, astute lad that he was, was the first to notice the brilliant flashes of light being emanated at regular intervals from a nearby tree.

"Mario, what the hell is that?"

"Looks like a flash bulb going off." Bright, dark. Bright, dark. Rodney sat mesmerized by the absolute brilliance followed by total darkness. Over time, but what was for most of us only a few seconds, some chemical reaction occurred inside his head.

Suddenly, all was day, brilliant white day about him and the flashes from the tree were great globs of darkness spilling out into the branches of the tree. a little while later the flashes ceased and the white prevailed. No black globs. And then it was night again and Mario was asking if the shouldn't take a closer look at things.

"Sure," Rodney responded but he knew that the tingling which had begun in his feet meant bouts with persistinitis were not far off.

11

Secret agent Floyd Patterson gazed with maddened eyes as the object of his lust slow-danced about the room with Harold Hemberger.

"Two steps left. Two steps right," Floyd mimicked their movement. "Just wait till I get this film developed. Won't Mrs. Gammon be surprised?"

As a matter of fact, Floyd, not only is that camera worthless at this distance, but Mrs. Clytemnestra Gammon has a lover of her own, thank you, and is perfectly aware of her husband's fooling around. They have what you might call a "modern marriage."

"It doesn't matter. I'll put them up on the bulletin board at work."

The film, my fine secret agent. What about the...

"Dad?," Rodney called up from the sidewalk. "What the hell are you doing up there?" Good shoes first, our secret agent dropped to the pavement. He realized that he had made a tactical



error. 007 scrounged about in his polyester slacks for his radio watch with which he might contact H.Q. for further instructions. Rodney and Mario stood stunned at the vision that confronted them. The totally black ensemble interrupted only by the growing pot belly made Rodney's knees quite weak.

"Mr. P?" Mario swallowed a few times. This was simply "too weird" as he would say later.

I don't know double O whatever. Your own son has nabbed you. What is it? He's "blown your cover" at the "scene of the crime." What are you going to say to him now?

"Son, I can explain. It's not as bad as it looks. You must realize that the woman you see in that apartment is the incarnation of evil. The actual incarnation. That's what she is. She is not the mild-mannered receptionist she appears to be. Oh no. You cannot judge her the way you would other human beings. I came here tonight to save a young bag-boy from a fate worse than death."

"Dad?" Rodney blinks several times, a vicious spell beginning to take hold of his perception. "Mario, let's get out of here. I can't handle any of this anymore."

Oh, oh secret agent. I guess your son has somehow failed to see the truth of the matter, the necessity for this Black Quest on which you have embarked.

Floyd leapt atop the hood of Janet's new Pontiac. He shouted:

"My son, my son. The evil is all about us. The big ugly reptile lurks beneath these very streets. We're all living in a big painting. There's not much time."

Floyd. Dogs are barking. Lights are going on. The police are being called. Are you happy now?

"Look," Rodney grabbed his father by the pant leg, "all I know is that first you're talking to yourself around the house and no one can get anywhere near you. You're in some little world of your own. And then that day at the library, when you went out of your mind and made that scene. Like now. And then that shit at the hospital when we almost got arrested. You went berserk. We couldn't even talk to you. Your own brother dead and you didn't even say anything. Not one fucking word. Just some painting smashed to bits all over the room. We took you home. The doctors said that you must be very upset but you weren't upset. You weren't even there. I saw your eyes. Your eyes, dad! There was nothing there. What the fuck is going on?"

You've enraged this child to the point of frenzy. Satisfied? At least his friend is showing some sense pulling him away before his shouting brings this entire operation of yours to a crashing halt.

"No, Mario. Get your hands off me. I've had enough of this shit."

Good lord! He struck you. Civilization is at an end. The son has struck his father.

"What is the matter with you?" Rodney screamed, his pimpled face inches from Floyd's.

"Pop," Floyd said. Suddenly all was swirling white and then colors and then dark for a time. Floyd was reminded of that cheap sci-fi novel he had read. The one where all the people kept oscillating back and forth between matter and energy. They all lived in the fourth dimension, as pure energy and could choose to appear to us in three space if they wished. Floyd spun down an infinite four-dimensional tunnel. It took no time at all. Finally Noone appeared.

"So what did you expect?" Noone began sounding like nothing so much as a stereotyped Jewish mother, "a ticker-tape parade and reception at the White House? Floyd. Floyd. Floyd. How many times must I tell you, if you want to fool around in other dimensions, there are consequences. These 3D lovers get pissed off. For them, there are opposites. Space and time. Matter and energy. And then you show up with some new perspective. Will you never learn? Four does not equal three plus one. You were born in three dimensions. You're gonna die there. What?! You expect them to be glad they've been wrong all this time. Listen, your son needs you. Get out of here."

"But what about the door? The sacred door with the sacred writing?"

"That! That graffiti. Left by some kids from another universe. Now get out of here."

"Push," Floyd said. Rodney's hands clawed at his eyes.

"Mario. Mario. I can't see. I tell you I can't see." And then he could see and then he couldn't. First light. Then not. Now he saw it. Now he didn't. Faster and faster the cycle churned until all appeared as what it was, discontinuous, like a silent movie running too slowly. People moved for Rodney as if they were under a strobe light, their movements jerky and almost uncoordinated.

"Dad?" Floyd pranced Chaplin-like about his son. The world broke down for Rodney. Things began to come apart as the discontinuity grew. The tree behind his father became a swirling mass of creation and annihilation. His father transformed as well. Nothing was anywhere. Everything looked made of some strange fluid substance. But then not. Things were hard to define when you perceived them in four dimensions. Nothing could be said to be anywhere. Or was it that everything was everywhere?

12

Edward Fillipidakis and Sherman Weatherbee both had developed serious problems. They were in love, although not, as Chance would have it, with each other. Edward had fallen quite passionately, as far as a Freudian was concerned, for Ulna, while Sherman had succumbed to Floyd, a.k.a. Mario.

What had begun as a rather innocent little meeting with a new client had developed rather rapidly into a bit of the old chasing about the office for our friend, dearest Edward, known to his colleagues as the physician with the funny name.

"And these lists that I have been making for a while now--my husband says that I'm the sick one. And I realize that he is probably right. But for the life of me I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You have wonderful eyes." And so it went that this most innocent of all possible encounters, the sanctum of the examining couch turned into quite the bawdy scene, culminating in, well, no doubt the sophisticated reader can well imagine. Together, as Chance would have it, they plotted their rendezvous in Niagara Falls.

Sherman Weatherbee was no better off although as usual his lust remained caged within his own psyche. He had not the flesh and blood of his desired Adonis but merely a photograph with which to amuse himself. "Will be in touch," was all the note said. Sherm, large white cat in hand, spent most of his afternoons these days penning notes to this so far unencountered youth. Mr. Gammon had been an absolute bore, forcing work upon him in such quantity that it was impossible to concentrate on what could well be the turning point of his lonely life. How dare Gammon think that this miserable little job, meshed in the grid of the bureaucracy could even begin to compare to the richness that Floyd Patterson would bring him!

Floyd Patterson. He allowed the richness of the name to roll off his tongue like so much freshly captured honey. Flllloooyd. He definitely did not look like a Floyd. And Patterson, that horrid last name contained none of the mediterranean flavor which he felt the photo suggested.

"Weatherbee! Would you stop staring at that picture and do a little work around here. Start with this." Papers were thrown most offensively upon Sherman's impeccably neat desk. "Patterson's been fired. The lunatic. I gave him the cushiest job going around here. Months worth of Onestops. And do you think he appreciated it for a moment. No way. The bastard bungled even a Onestop. No one could believe it. Worked half a day and then disappeared. My ulcer's flared up with a vengeance because of this. Just prepare his last check and get it out to him as soon as possible. If I never see that weirdo again, it will be too soon.

"You know," Gammon continued after turning away for a moment. (It was obvious to Sherman that Mr. A.M. Gammon was the lunatic.) "I gave him every break and all he could do was laugh at me. I knew it was all over for him from that day on." Stuffing a cigar back into his mouth he winked at Worth telling her to "come on and take in some dictation."

Sherman sat motionless, all his dreams crashing about him. Patterson had been fired. Patterson who? Floyd Patterson. Could it really be the same person? Was he the victim of some horrible prank on the part of the inspectors? No, he mused so loudly that Janet raised her eyebrow in his direction as she adjusted her skirt on the way into the dictation couch. It just could not be. His Adonis looked so very happy in the picture. This could never be some sort of joke. And the bio. So perfectly put. These rude mechanicals would never possess the kind of charm embodied here.

Just some twist of Fate no doubt.

13

Somewhere another canine announced his presence to the night air. There seemed an abundance of these about. The wind responded as father and son, the former guiding the latter, attempted to find their way home. Rodney, poor lad. His vision had still not returned to anything even resembling normal. Characters and objects blended in such a way as to make matter and energy indistinguishable from one another. Trees, houses, cars--everything was a dance of annihilation and creation. Rodney's eyes hovered in four dimensions, yet his mind longed for three. Cats meowed and it was only an occasional car which, blinding for a moment, floated past.

Arms pressed closely about his son, Floyd fought back tears of remorse. In his efforts to complete a life's work he had neglected so serious a problem as his son's health and had even, it would appear, precipitated some sort of reaction in the poor lad.

Too much time spent in the libraries? Floyd felt sure that this was close to the problem. Together they ambled for a time, neither saying much, Rodney holding fast for fear that he might fall, Floyd quiet, lost as usual in his own thoughts. Rodney could not be sure that it was he and his father who were moving. The world, to which he now felt connected, rushed up to meet him. Each encounter was an event. It was as if they were locked in one spot and the entire universe danced about them.

"Dad?"

"Yes." Floyd returned from some non-euclidean variation on the land of trinity. It had been quite the interesting place. There were triangles there, but they were triangles on a sphere so that each could contain three ninety degree angles. Floyd's common sense had been violated so often by this point that now he simply reveled in these experiences.

"There's no such thing as a straight line," the leaders told him.

"Go on," Floyd countered. "I can draw one anytime."

"We're not kidding. Lines drawn on spheres are curves, not lines. They only appear as lines."

"La de da," Floyd said. La de da.

"Is everything going to be all right for me?" Rodney asked.

"Of course. This is just some sort of passing phase. You only appear sick. In fact, from the books I've been reading, it looks like nothing is what it appears to be. Your problem is nothing that won't disappear when the time to pass on to some other universe rolls around. Wouldn't you agree, Abitar?"

"Who's this Abitar character you keep talking to?"

I don't think it would be such a good idea to include your son in our little secret any further than he all ready is.

"He's a very old ancestor of yours and a great help and comfort to me. On occasion. He was the one who planned the heist at the art museum in order to save your uncle from..."



"Oh. And you hear everything this fellow says?"

Floyd, if you will tear yourself away from this conversation for just a moment you will undoubtedly notice that two adolescents of a rather unsavory character are moving in our direction from across the way.

"Can you make them out?"

"Dad?"

The remnants of the Catholic Prep Chess Team gang. Two who were not eliminated in last week's hold up. I should suggest that you avail yourself of that rather large stone by the side of the road, just as a precaution.

"Rodney. You couldn't hear it but Abitar just told me that there could be trouble. Couple of hoodlums coming our way. Be ready."

The youths, although appearing on a collision course for some time, moved off at the last moment, undoubtedly unwilling to confront two males while much easier prey was probably near by.

"And does he know everything?"

"Yes, I think so."

Suddenly, much to my chagrin, Crumpers, the evil demon of chapter three sprang from behind a low stone fence our hero was passing along and without so much as a single bark began to tear the soft flesh from Floyd's arm. Half falling to one side, Floyd pushed Rodney into the road where he stood, stunned, trying to focus on a world which now appeared infra-red. Crumpers had wrapped his jaws about a good bit of Floyd's forearm, drawing blood and forcing Inspector Patterson to contemplate the

liquidity of his own mortality.

Yet in a moment and completely without my assistance, Floyd brought the stone more suited for adolescent gangs down hard against the side of Crumper's cranium, forcing his jaws to surrender their prize.

"Run, Rodney! Run for it. We've been set upon by a murderous evil. This is worse than Worth. I've faced this demon before. You must fly or surrender your life." With that our fine fellow Floyd Patterson set off at a gallop in the direction of his castle.

To Rodney, the world appeared as if made only of sounds. He could see no lights, but anything that made noise registered as a blurred disruption in what was otherwise a bland continuum. Crumper's panting and growling made him easy to follow. Unfortunately, Floyd had not progressed half a block before middle age overcame him allowing his worthy opponent to overtake and begin to maul him in what can only be described as a rather hideous manner.

Fortunately for Floyd, the two bungling police officers who appear at first glance to be shadowing our story, happened by, (probably due to the rich widow who lived below Janet Worth) shouting most unspeakable obscenities. They were able without too much ado to force Crumpers from the scene. Floyd lay on the pavement appearing much worse off than in fact he actually was.

Rodney could see blotches of visible light again. "Dad. Are you all right?"

"Is this your father?" the rookie and the veteran asked as one. Floyd struggled to his feet.

"Knew everything. I thought for sure that he knew everything. Genies and Merlins aren't supposed to let this sort of thing happen."

"Dad, what the hell are you babbling about?"

As one. "We're calling for an ambulance."

"No. My father's all right. I'll take him home. These cuts look much worse than they actually are." The urchin spoke the truth, for his eyes could suddenly perceive depths with amazing accuracy (or was it precision) making him a good judge of just how severe his father's wounds were."

"We cannot allow that. My experience," said the veteran, "and my innocence," said the rookie, "have proven that when all else fails, procedure must be followed," chimed both together. Rodney looked right through them. They were made of cardboard. Rodney saw them as two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional representations of a four-dimensional reality. They had no depth. He looked again and this time could see both men's pasts and their futures. He saw what they did not. Stuck in some plane on some well-formed grid, innocence and experience amounted to the same thing. Rodney knew how they would die and the good and the evil they had done. He spoke of whips and chains and money long spent. They went away, collapsing to a singularity, a one-dimensional representation of a two--and so on.

Now, leading his father, Rodney saw very clearly now what was to become of Floyd, the places he was destined to go. In the end these places would be very lonely. To prevent his own shivering Rodney flung his arms across Floyd's injured, bent, back.

14

All right, so I'm not infallible.

"You didn't know that dog was there. I thought you knew everything!"

There are limits.

"You're a second-rate genie. And not much of a Merlin either."

I wait.

"Well? What have you got to say for yourself?"

I must say my fine ex-Inspector that you have grown quite disagreeable since your White Quest failed. And now you want to embark on a Black Quest, to reek revenge on some invisible enemies.

"They're not invisible. You're invisible. I can see Gammon and Worth just fine."

That's not the point.

"Then what is? Listen, do you know how much it meant to me to sleep with her? And my job? What a guy does is everything these days."

You're acting like a child.

"Bug off or I'll stick you back in the bottle."

This is no time for all this bottle talk. So you were fired. Did you honestly expect them to keep you on at that silly Department when you never went to work and didn't even attempt to devise reasonable excuses?

"Gammon is a dead man. His life is at an end. Simple. And that slut? She's going with him. There must be a way. Rodney, who the hell are you talking to? Get off the phone, your father needs to use it."

"Just a sec. Yeah, and then she did what? No way. What about another time? Not this weekend but the next! Other obligations. Who's the other juvenile? No way. Are you kidding? Her boss! And you actually heard that from the other room. She called him with you there. I don't think you'd call it love. They're not going there?!"

"Rodney, who are you talking to?"

"I've got to go. Look, this coincidence is incredible. I'll talk to you later."

"And who was that?"

"Howard Hemberger. The person you were in that tree to take pictures of. How are those cuts this morning anyway?"

"Don't back talk me. What's all this stuff that he heard on the phone last night?"

"Nothing. Just that his older woman friend is meeting her boss this weekend for a little get away in Niagara Falls. Howard heard all about it. You'll never believe the name of the place. The Notel Motel. Have you ever heard of anything so tacky in your

entire life? Could you imagine actually taking somebody to such a place?"

"You mother and I honeymooned there."

"Oh. Well, no doubt it's degenerated over the last seventeen years."

I know what you're thinking. Just put it out of your mind. Simply forget it. What are you going to do? Return to your honeymoon hideaway to take more pictures of your ex-boss and his secretary. The entire notion is absurd. You're completely missing the true nature of the mysteries being opened out to you.

"I'm not going to fail again."

Of course you're not. But you didn't fail last night. You got the pictures you wanted. This is insane! I cannot go on like this. What are you going to tell Ulna you are doing this weekend? Going fishing?

"Floyd? Would you mind terribly if I went to visit my sister this weekend?" Ulna said. "She called last night and said that she wasn't feeling well and that she would really appreciate it if I could come out and see her. I made a list of everything I have to do and I can get it all done without too much trouble and there's plenty of food in the fridge so you and Rodney certainly won't starve for one weekend."

"I'm going to look at colleges with Mario," Rodney said. I won't even be here so you don't have to worry about me."

"Go and see your sister."

Floyd, even with Ulna out of the picture, what you're going to do is not right.

"We need a plan."

No way. You're not getting one this time. I think it's time for me to think about moseying along to some alternate universe. I've done just about all the genie-Merlin work I can do here. You obviously don't need me anymore.

"You go nowhere unless I say you go."

Floyd, I don't think that you fully appreciate the kinematics of our relationship. I have told you before...

"You go nowhere!"

Floyd. I've opened myself out to you now and in a way I've even grown to like you to some extent, but this sort of talk simply will not be tolerated. Why, I can be gone in a moment, you toad. You only think you conjured me but I have known that our World Lines would cross for some time now, much longer than you've strutted around on this little dust ball you call a planet. I am only responsible to forces which you with your petit mind, cannot even begin to comprehend. I have a good mind to leave you now at the height of your troubles as payment for the way you have treated me.

"You go nowhere. Your story is incomplete. Your guilt makes me sick."

And what does that mean? Let's not start pointing guilty fingers. You've got at least seven of them.

"Nowhere."

That finishes it. I'm going. Good day to you my fine friend,  
Floyd Patterson.

"Nowhere."

15

And this letter, my fine ex-Inspector, is to some aging homosexual with whom you have taken it upon yourself to correspond. And you desire his presence at this fiasco we are attending this weekend.

I quote. Dearest Sherman, if there truly is some justice in the craziest of universes then you will meet me at this delightful hideaway this weekend. I trust that you've awaited our meeting with the same anticipation as I.

My lord, if that is not the poorest excuse for prose I have ever seen! And you actually want to have an affair with this man? I don't understand. I thought that it was the opposite sex which kept you perched in trees well into the night, howling, as it were, at the moon. Does this change in taste have anything to do with your troubles, your guilt about which I am not unaware? Think that possibly seeing how the other half lives is better than not living at all?

"It's only curiosity."

Yes, and that is what killed my cat, my friend. That is precisely what has killed countless cats throughout the ages.

"Well, I'm not a cat. I'm a man."



Are you, now?

"Anyway, it was worth it."

Speak to the nice gentleman Floyd.

"Yes. I'm going to need a camera and a drill and a rather special lens."

"Do you know what your shooting conditions will be, sir?" the owner of the photo specialty shop said.

"It may well be dark. And the lens should be wide angle so that I can see a lot of a room from a narrow..."

Point of view.

"Point of view."

"How about this?" the man asked.

"Yes, well, I think that this will do nicely. And I'll need a chainsaw."

16

There are, I suppose, many paths by which one might arrive at that wonder of the world known as Niagara Falls. It divides two countries, allowing only mist to travel where it might. Once an attraction of rather romantic stature, it now sits in the shadow of the crumbling metropolis of Buffalo, a place inured to hard times and depression. By far the Canadian side is the more attractive, what with the flower gardens and wax museums, but even these can acquire a nightmarish quality if one were to stray from the well-groomed tourist paths.

Floyd's Galaxy 500 moved along Route 104 west, through the farm country of western New York at a rate which suggested the leisurely saunter of a well-bred cat. His posture behind the

wheel was one of ease, as if the Fates which had brought him to this place were kind enough to give his mind the rest it sorely needed. Country and western music set the tone for his Odyssey, dispelling completely the notion that Floyd was a secret agent, 007 on a mission to save her majesty's government from the clutches of SPECTRE. No, Ex-Inspector Patterson might well have been some local farmer making his way back home from the trip to the market which had occupied the planning box of his mind throughout the past week.

Of course, this was precisely the impression which Black Knight Patterson wished to give. He was taking no chances with this operation. His equipment of doom was all neatly buried in his socks and shirts, which were all quite unobtrusively packed in the most inconspicuous luggage Floyd could locate. He had in fact, simply to complete the circle, put everything in the same suitcase he had used on his honeymoon, the last vacation Floyd had taken.

In a sense, this journey was a bit of a homecoming. It amazed him that the old Motel was still in operation after all these years. No doubt under new management but that seemed quite beside the point. The manic afternoon heat seemed subdued by the country and western singer who assured his love that all would work out for the best. Actually, the music had such a calming effect because of the subliminal messages asking all simply to relax in the heat and not to provoke any civil disturbance which might threaten the very texture of this great free land.

Floyd would normally have been quite tuned in to the messages which no one else could detect, but on this particular day he cared for only one thing: his revenge on that dismemberer of men, the one and only Janet Worth.

\*

The AVENGER bomb car had of course taken the Thruway.

"These chicks are the mintest. SUNY girls, at Buffalo, no less. I'm telling you this is one of the best things we could have done. They weren't crazy about the motel you suggested but...a motel is a motel even if it's a Notel."

Mario had droned on continuously since they had set off, filling Rodney's head with a jumble of what they were going to do first and then next and then after that. But Rodney had entered the infra-red mode quite a while back and could see practically whatever he wanted in the cars passing by. He deliberated a moment, then switched to X-rays. It seemed that as of late he had gained a sort of control over what form of electromagnetic radiation he wished to perceive at any given time. Anything from Gamma rays to Maritime Communication was possible. After his father's bout with the dog, coupled with his ability to see much more than the "light" people always talked about, Rodney had come to see the persistinitis as a gift rather than a curse. To see all that he wanted to, to detect any portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, was not to see things broken up as he had thought in the beginning but to see the real continuum that existed below the distinction rather than some little piece of things called visible light.

"And I'd probably rather have the blonde but, if you really want her, then that's all right with me." Rodney wondered how much of reality he could see through or around. And his latest thoughts, were of getting beyond this radiation all together to perceive things in a totally new dimension, or maybe to perceive the dimension which he knew lay underneath everything else. He wondered if the one beneath and the one beyond might not be the same.

"We'll be there soon. I'm so glad that Hemberger fag didn't come along talkin' about that woman. Janet this, Janet that. That's all we're going to hear about until he gets laid by someone else." Rodney knew that his father was moving at this very moment towards the Motel. He felt it. But there were things he could not see. And there was that other voice, which could be heard only if it chose to be. If not, it was only white noise, scrambled, and on purpose.

"The girls said they'd be at the motel by seven."

"The Motel Motel. A place that dreams are made of." Rodney was back in visible light.

"What? I never know what the hell you're thinkin' of. Did you hear a word I said about the girls and what I want to do first?"

"They're not going to come, Mario, so if you want to turn around and go home now you would probably have a better weekend."

"What the hell are you talkin' about? Of course they're coming. I just talked to them last night. Everything is mint! If this is one of your jokes, Patterson, it sucks."

"On second thought I think we should go anyway. I think you're going to find the whole experience rather interesting."

\*

Edward Fillipidakis was already at the Notel and was so nervous that he had drunk himself into oblivion by two o'clock. Hence, it was only a matter of Chance that he awoke in time to pick up the object of his desire at the bus station at four o'clock. Psychologically he knew quite well the causes and underlying motives for what he was doing. There were in fact fifteen different theories to explain the workings of a man at this particular place under these particular set of cultural influences.

Not one of them was even close to the truth. In actuality, his answer would be found on the cutting edge of modern physics in something called Bell's Theorem and the breakdown of local causality which showed that all things were really connected and the idea that people and things were separate was false. Most people ignored this notion for their own good. Edward would go merrily to his grave only dimly aware that none of his theories seemed to account for what was going to happen to him and the rest.

Sherman Weatherbee, man about town, was much, much less concerned about the reasons behind his actions. Copy of GQ planted squarely in front of him on the same Greyhound bus which housed Ulna Patterson, he could think of nothing but Floyd Patterson and how thrilling a weekend it was actually going to be. Muzak, brush-drummed, swung low, told the passengers that

they would arrive on time and that they shouldn't pester the poor driver about anything so trivial as a bathroom that would not work.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I sit here?" Ulna asked. The bus was mostly filled and what with the bathroom inoperable it was quite impossible for anyone to sit within three seats of it.

Sherman quickly closed his magazine, keeping it so positioned as to cover his bulging erection. "No, I guess not. Why, of course not! By all means, my dear woman, sit yourself right down here next to me. It would make this trip much, much more delightful. My name is Sherman Weatherbee."

"Ulna Patterson." Sherman, as you might expect, stopped the very breath which was exiting his mouth. Patterson, he mused. This must be a much more popular name in these parts than he had at first imagined.

"And what a fine name it is, too. No relation to Floyd Patterson by any chance?"

Ulna was immediately thrown into a near faint. Her first impulse was to dash from the seat with all possible haste. She fought this back immediately. Instead she did the next best thing, reaching inside her purse for the small notebook on which she made lists of things and events. "Floyd Patterson. Why no. Well, yes. That's my husband's name as a matter of fact."

"Your husband's??!! Are you kidding?"

"Kidding? No. That's my husband's name. Floyd Patterson. I'm Ulna Patterson. We have a son, Rodney Patterson. We would have had a daughter but...I've got it all written down here somewhere.

I'm going to visit my sister."

Sherman fought hard to recover. Good lord, could it be that his Adonis, his demigod, could actually be married to this woman? Never! It was beyond the realm of conceivable possibility. The two passengers said nothing to each other for several minutes, both trying to decide what in God's name to do next. Finally, Sherman was struck by a Chance brain storm.

"If you don't mind my asking, my good woman, how old is your husband?"

"Well, I've got his birthday written here. Yes, October tenth."

Sherman waited. A Libra. Somehow he knew. He must be delicate. After all, if it was her husband? The shock of discovering after all these years. Then again, why had she become so nervous?

Ulna went on smiling.

Sherman said, "Yes, I see that that is his birthday, but how old is he?" The woman was beyond any rational person's attempt to communicate with her.

"Oh. Forty-two."

"Thank god." Sherman, clutching the photo of his beloved, breathed sigh upon wonderful sigh of relief. "And your son. There is no Floyd Junior?"

"No, his name is Rodney." Ulna relaxed. So did Sherman. It was obvious that this gentleman's Floyd Patterson and her Floyd Patterson were not the same person. Fumbling about inside her purse, Ulna removed her photo wallet with a list of everyone

whose picture was inside on the cover. "Would you like to see my family?"

"No doubt the highpoint of my day."

"This is Floyd and this is my son with our dog Sam. And this is my mother. And here we are with some friends at a picnic. And this is Rodney again on the hood of his friend's orange sports car. That's his friend Mario in the background but his face is blurred so you can't see him very well."

"What a delightful family. Would you care to see the person with whom I am acquainted who is lucky enough to carry your fine family name." Without awaiting a response he proudly presented Mario's picture to Ulna. "This is my friend, Floyd Patterson."

Ulna's eyes grew wide for a moment and then she smiled. She had no idea that Mario had a long lost twin brother. And with Floyd Patterson for a name. She opened her mouth to speak but Chance had deemed otherwise. She closed her mouth again. Finally, "What a lovely young man."

"Yesssss. He's my nephew."

\*

A.M. Gammon zippered his leather coat to the neck and adjusting his full Bell (no relation to the theorem) helmet for maximal comfort, smiled sweetly behind his visor.

"Climb on, honey. I know how much you like something hot and throbbing between your legs." Miss Worth had not yet finished reapplying her makeup.



"If you expect me to go all the way to Niagara Falls on that thing, you must be out of your mind. I just do not do motorcycles."

"Aw, come on pumpkin." You can well imagine the saccharine conversation which ensued with A.M. pleading and cooing, finally becoming angry and telling her to "get her ass on that motorcycle."

A.M.'s new toy had become the symbol of his masculinity, a sign from God that his mid-life crisis was finally over and that he was a new man, reborn, no longer an M.M.E., ready to face the world with renewed vigor. After all, he was quite the successful manager of quite an important branch of the all-encompassing federal bureaucracy. He ran a tight ship, although not too tight: and he had, when you came right down to it, applied the latest in psychomanagerial techniques to his men, combining sympathy for their situation with firm discipline when necessary, to make the Department of Weights and Measures one of the most cost-efficient and contented Departments in the entire federal structure.

Priming the motor, he pretended to kick-start the 750 to life. Actually he simultaneously pushed the button for electric start but the vision of his physical thrust bringing the machine to life did not go unnoticed by the object of his lust, Janet Worth. She cooed. Off they streaked, Janet leaning the wrong way on several occasions, nearly bringing their little weekend away to a premature climax.

Two hours later, after the roaring had subsided, Janet stared dumbfounded at the Notel Motel. "This is it?" was all that she could say. She began to powder her nose furtively, stepping from side to side and back and forth like a chicken which had lost its head.

Inside, as Chance would have it, rocking from foot to foot behind the counter, stood the brother of Martha (the tainted flower lady of Cheltnum Street). He had left home at the delicate age of fifteen and after serving as a prostitute in nearby Lackawanna for several years had been fortunate enough to land the job as day clerk at the Notel Motel. He had not seen his sister in ages. Someday he would marry Katheleen Knightlinger.

"Do you have a reservation for Smith?"

"Smith, huh? Are you kidding? Sixteen bucks for five hours. In advance."

A.M. blinked several times. "I'm sure that we can come to some sort of equitable agreement about these matters. Something bureaucratic I'm interested in the entire weekend. Two nights. How does twenty-five a night sound?"

"I've had better offers. All right, that sounds fine as long as there's an extra twenty for me. Some of the rooms ain't workin' so you'll have to take two-o-eight." Janet had regained her composure and was beginning to make her way on six-inch spikes towards the office.

"Is this the lobby? Where's the bellman to fetch my bags? Say boy. Send up a bottle of champagne." A.M. hustled her back outside. Edward Fillipidakis was just leaving to gather Ulᅇa from

the bus station. He wondered if Janet was a prostitute and felt tingly all over thinking of the adventure he was about to embark upon. Floyd's Galaxy 500 stood watch from the Big Boy restaurant across the street, whose Big Boy statue, with its inviting smile and puffy pederast-ripe cheeks, kept watch over the Notel. As soon as they disappeared into 208, he made his move.

"Well, the Ritz it ain't," Janet said.

"I'd like room 207, please. Is it occupied? The name's Smith." Floyd was saying downstairs.

"Smith again, huh? Nope. You can have 207." Floyd set up shop.

Meanwhile, back at the bus station, Ulna was trying to decide how to get rid of this Sherman character before she was picked up by Edward. She made a list of the various possibilities but Sherman made it incredibly easy by hailing a cab the second he stepped off the bus without so much as a word to Ulna. He seemed to her to be quite nervous.

"Geronimo," he shouted most recklessly from the window of his Niagara taxi.

"Hello," Edward said.

"Oh my goodness. Yes, you're here, aren't you? I can't believe you've come. I mean I never thought you would actually. I mean, here you are. Oh, I guess you know very well what I mean."

"Shall we go to the motel? I've picked a little out of the way place. Nothing fancy. I thought that, well, I thought that you wouldn't want anything too intimidating. Just someplace where we would be left alone."

"I've been to Niagara Falls before," Ulna said.

Meanwhile, back at the motel, the AVENGER bomb car stood planted behind the Motel's dumpster. "The chicks will find us. You never know who might happen by. I don't want this damn car sticking out there like a sore thumb." Rodney watched the Motel with X-rays. His father was talking incessantly. Next door Janet was having a drink with some man whom Rodney vaguely remembered from somewhere, although for the life of him he could not decide where.

"The mintest. I guarantee it. They are."

"Mario, let's get the room."

"The room. Right. Why don't you take care of that while I think about the game plan for the girls? Remember, we need two double beds."

"309," Rodney said. "I gave him your name. Mario Smith. Will that do?"

Mario displayed a box of thirty-six contraceptives.

"You bet. Will these do?" A Niagara taxi with a rather subdued looking comptroller in the back seat pulled into the parking lot.

"Floyd," Sherman cried, but the boys were already in the stairwell. Sherman traced their ascent, his eyes not believing what he saw. A second boy? Certainly an unexpected wrinkle but, nothing that could not be taken care of. After all, there was only one Sherman Weatherbee and he considered himself quite the cosmo kid. If this Floyd Patterson character was into menage a trois, well then that was just fine with him. As long as they

didn't want to get into anything too kinky. S&M was out of the question. And Sherman certainly had not come simply to watch.

"Is the room adjacent to 309 taken?" Sherman asked.

"Another one. What are all you people coming in pairs today? I suppose your name is Smith too?"

"No. Jones. C.H. Jones."

Edward said, "I hope you don't mind the ground floor. I remembered that you said something about heights. Some variant of classical acrophobia no doubt."

"My God. My honeymoon suite. I can't believe we're doing this. And here of all places!" Edward closed the door behind Ulna. The stage was finally set.

## 17

Let's begin with a question since as the physicist Werner Heisenberg discerned, the questions we ask will determine the reality we perceive.

"Do you think that slut actually will do all those things that he says he wants her to do?" Floyd stormed back and forth across the room thrusting the glass he had borrowed from the washroom against the wall in question to catch hushed bits of conversation emanating from 208.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. I knew that she was dirty. Oh yes, I knew she was crude, but to actually say those words, to go on and on about what she wants done is just too much. Make her stop. I want you to go over there and make her

stop saying those things to him."

You're beyond my help. I can see that now. I'll have to name you Lunatic Patterson if you keep this up.

"Where's the drill? I must see with my own eyes exactly what she's doing to him. I must."

Black Knight Lunatic Patterson dashed for his drill, but upon removing it from its polystyrene case stood transfixed in the middle of the room, struck stock still unable to unplant himself. On the opposite wall, as Chance would have it, around the very spot that Floyd wished to penetrate the wall, hung a copy of Valley at Dusk. Our white knight-gone-sour could not believe that the Fates were actually as cruel as this painting made them appear to be.

"My God. How did that get here," he said.

"Don't worry, it's only a cockroach, Mario. For god sakes," Rodney said. "You make such a big deal out of nothing."

"I do not. But what are the chicks gonna think when they go to the bathroom and see cockroaches crawling around?"

"Let's just see if they come first. What time are they supposed to show up?"

"Seven," Sherman Weatherbee said. Seven different outfits and I can't decide for the life of me what to wear. I know this must sound ridiculous but I simply cannot decide between the red and the pink. Oh God, what shall I do?"

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to," Edward said. "If you'd just like to sit for a while that's all right, too. Or we can go out for some supper or a drink or anything your

little heart desires." He kissed Ulna's cheek but she pulled away, turning her head must abruptly from his advance.

"My honeymoon suite!" Ulna began to cry.

"Oh, come on, honey. Don't cry."

"How can I not? Look where you've brought me. How could I not think of Floyd and," she screamed, "Rodney!"

"Cuddlebuns."

"I shouldn't have come. And what about you? Your wife and children?"

"Why in God's name would you bring them up?" A.M. Gammon said. "If you're determined to ruin our weekend you're doing a pretty good job by talking about my wife and kids."

"I just love to see you squirm, is all," Janet responded, tugging the cords of her robe away from one another. "It's about the only thing I have to hang over your little head these days, and once in a while I simply can't resist. My God, what a dreadful place this is."

"Well, I don't like it. Not a damned bit."

"Do you think you might like this?"

"I guess that if we put the painting in the closet it won't bother me, but what is it doing here?" Floyd said.

Floyd, this is a very common landscape. I would be willing to wager that the Japanese even draw these. Knights, sunset, castle. My god it's cliched. You can't possibly be upset by its presence here.

"Put it away. Get the goddam painting of my sight. I can't bear to look at it."

I have no powers to move things around. If you don't want to look at it, then you'll just have to do something about it. Ex-Inspector Patterson, no longer the Moving Man Emeritus he once was, crossed the room without hesitation and grasping the frame firmly in both hands brought it down with such force over the colour television set that both were smashed to pieces, the TV erupting with such furor that Floyd leapt back in fear for his life.

"What the hell was that?" Janet shouted her teeth nearly severing her tongue.

"Ahhhh!" A.M. screamed. "Jesus Christ, would you be careful. One more like that and I'll really need that motorcycle."

"Aw poopsie, I'm sorry. Let mommy make everything all better."

Yet, this was not the end of this sordid story. The destruction of the television sent shock waves reverberating throughout the entire Notel establishment. The Big Boy statue, if one were inclined to observe such things, even winced a bit at the sound of the explosion. Only the day clerk, the person most responsible for what went on at the motel, heard nothing. You can probably guess why this was so. Subliminal messages kept him from hearing the evidence that there was scandal a-foot at the Notel.

Even Sherman Weatherbee, lost in the beauty of pink chiffon, heard the television go where all good televisions go when they die. The Black Knight crouched by the smoldering shards of the



mangled television.

Sherman is here, Floyd. But you know that already, don't you?

"Yes, of course I do. I invited him here, didn't I? I thought I might drop up there later and inter-view him."

Floyd began to drill a small hole in the now pictureless wall. His hand turned slowly but surely, never letting the pressure decline. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven turns and that should do it." Through the wall he inserted his periscope equipped with infrared for night viewing.

"Now I can see it all," he sighed.

"What did you say, Rodney my man?"

"I said that at times I can see it all. The entire spectrum. Scary. I used to think I was sick but I guess that in a sense it is sort of a gift."

"Man. Most of the time I don't have the slightest idea what the hell you're talking about."

There came the slightest knocking upon their door. Rap, rap, rap it said.

Edward was just about to enter Ulna. They were seeing eye to eye.

"May I come in," he cooed.

Mario answered the door. "It must be the chicks. Mint. They're finally here." Opening the portal he was confronted by a rather dumpy, but not at all oily looking man in a bright pink shirt and red polka-dotted pants.

"Floyd Patterson, I presume?" Sherman Weatherbee said.

"Yes of course I'm Floyd Patterson. I've known that I was Floyd Patterson for long time," Black Knight Patterson said.

"What's all this Black Knight shit anyway, Abitar? You haven't been keen on this next project from the start, and now all you do is bitch at me. What the hell did I do with the camera?"

Your camera? Hopeless. I suppose you are going to attach that tree-bound instamatic of yours to that periscope.

"Get lost!"

Make sure you have some film in the camera.

"The harlot will pay."

Pay for what? You were with her once. Don't blame her for your problems. For you, she is just one of billions of cardboard people. She has no idea that you ever had a daughter.

"Don't you dare mention my daughter again! You've got no right."

And what is that supposed to mean?

"Never mind. I don't want to go into it. Just don't you mention my daughter again or I'll stick you back in the bottle. Merlin. Where's the hell's my camera attachment?"

Look Floyd, I like you. I've developed a fondness for you. But there is so little time. Let's begin by going back to the time of your daughter's conception and then to her birth and death. And then let's go to that Christmas party; the night you were with Janet Worth. It's the only way to work through the guilt.

"Who's the guilty one, Abitar?"

Floyd?

"Onetwothreefourfivesixseven. All good children go to heaven."

That mantra won't save you now.

"Ometwothreefourfivesixseven. All god's children go to heaven. They go to heaven, Abitar. That's where your children are."

Floyd. What are you going to do with that chainsaw? Floyd Patterson?

"No. There's no Floyd Patterson here," Mario said. "What do you want him for anyway?"

"Playing hard to get, aeh? I like that." Rodney stood off in the background unable to stop any of the events which were about to happen. "You sexy hunk. I just have been dying to get near you." Sherman Weatherbee, cosmopolitan man of upstate New York, reached out to touch Mario's chest. Mario hit him so hard that he tumbled off the third floor balcony without so much as a thought for life or limb. His pink chiffon fluttered in the breeze all the way into the small, built-in pool which, as Chance would have it, sat directly beneath his fall. His overweight frame sent up quite a splash. His scream could be heard by all except the day clerk subject to subliminal suggestion.

Ulna heard it. And so did Janet. Edward ejaculated and so did A.M.

Floyd, against my best advice, activated the chain saw which squealed horrendously and cut his first hole in the first wall. The roaring in Gammon's ears did not subside but simply transformed to a nightmare as he realized someone was actually slicing a rather nasty gash in his motel wall. He realized then that he should have stayed at the Ritz.

That's it Black Knight, Secret Agent, Diamond Thief, Ex-Inspector Patterson. You go the rest of this alone. I can do nothing but narrate anymore.

Our fine friend ex-inspector Floyd Patterson sliced a big enough hole in that Motel wall to drive a truck through. Miss Worth, now filled with the seed of her lover A.M. Gammon (and pregnant no less) screamed at the sight of some man from her dim past bursting most abruptly through her motel wall wielding a chainsaw. You can well imagine, dear reader, the horrid sight he presented, with nerd-pac, pot belly, and too-wide ears, fleshing out his spinning blade.

"You slut," Floyd shouted. "Now the world shall know the truth about you." Rodney saw infra-red and then ultraviolet. His vision oscillated between one spectral extreme and another. Ulna shoved Edward to one side and threw her clothes onto her body. Two floors below, she distinctly heard the voice of her husband above the din of what sounded like a chainsaw.

Floyd cut a hole large enough for a man to fall through in the floor and proceeded to fall through it. He was confronted by none other than his wife and some naked man whom he did not know but who looked for anything like a psychiatrist who might just

have a funny name. Both men blinked several times.

"Ulna?" he said. "What are you doing here?" When she didn't answer, Floyd assumed that she must be a copy of his wife from another universe who had somehow found her way into this one.

"I shall save you, my love," Edward shouted and grabbing an ideal chair from an ideal universe, flung it at Floyd who neatly sawed it into two ideal halves.

Edward fainted.

Outside Floyd could see a man that he assumed was Sherman Weatherbee crawling out of the Notel's rather insignificant pool, rubbing the side of his face. Chance and Fate had deemed that he should survive the fall to fight another day. Floyd cut through Ulna's plywood door and emerged into the sunlight. The chainsaw throbbed on at his side.

"Sherman Weatherbee, I presume." Floyd offered his free hand. "I've waited a long time for this."

Well, it certainly does not take the most imaginative reader in the universe (this or any other) to realize that poor Sherman was simply dumbfounded to see what looked for anything like some psychotic with a chainsaw from a B movie calling his name. Neurotransmitters all throughout his body dumped huge quantities of adrenalin into his system. He flew as the wind up the stairs towards his room. Floyd gave pursuit shouting something about his not having to be afraid; that he'd already scared the people he wanted to scare.

Mario remained on the balcony, unable to believe his good fortune in not having murdered the fruit in the pink shirt. He watched in horror the events unfold below. He knew he had taken no drugs and yet...this was all too weird. Run his legs told him. Get out while you still can.

"Run for your life, you gorgeous hunk!" Sherman shouted to Mario. "There's some madman with a chainsaw."

"That's Floyd Patterson," Rodney said emerging onto the balcony. He saw in visible light now.

"Mr. P?" Mario queried rather timidly. Floyd dashed up the stairs in hot pursuit of Sherman who had not bothered to converse with Mario about the true identity of ex-inspector Floyd Patterson. Mario, finally regained some sanity, darted into his own room without a thought for whether or not that madman was actually Floyd Patterson, father of Rodney Allucida Patterson.

Floyd began to coo through Sherman's door. "Come out, come out wherever you are. I know that you're in there, you cute little man. I just love pink and I think that we should get to know one another if we could."

"Dad?" Rodney said.

"Not going to open up? Well then, I'll just have to use my little friend here to help us get better acquainted."

"Dad? Let's go home now."

Floyd waved his arm at his son. "You get on home now, boy. I've got things to do here. This is no place for kids." He pushed the tip of the chainsaw into the center of Sherman's door.

"Dad? Things can still work out if we go home now."

"Just get along, boy. Your old man will be home when he's finished." Through the door, Floyd proceeded to chase Sherman about the room.

"Come on, my little friend. I'm willing to give you a whirl."

"You maniac!" They attempted to out maneuver each other from across the bed. Floyd began to saw it in two. Sherman backed up into a mirror, beginning to babble.

"You can rest assured that I shall never again engage the services of that magazine."

"Dad!" Rodney shouted at the top of his lungs. "Let's go home!" Beneath the wail of the chainsaw, he sounded very far away. Floyd spit some feathers from his mouth and coughing faced the wall which separated Sherman's room from Mario and Rodney's. On it hung another copy of Valley at Dusk. Floyd pirouetted around and around, the chainsaw wailing mindlessly above his head. Due to some carefully placed sex mirrors, a Valley at Dusk appeared to be on every wall.

"You shall hear from my attorneys," Sherman shouted, slamming the bathroom door.

Floyd was now alone. From where he stood, at just the critical angle, just the right point of view, there appeared an infinity of Valleys caught forever in an infinity of Dusks. The new gods had not yet come. Bringing the saw to fever pitch, Floyd charged, cutting the copy to shreds. He burst through the wall to the other side. Mario stood petrified in the bathroom.

"Come out now, Mr. Moyo, you psychotic. I want you to meet Mr. Weatherbee."

Floyd glanced up and because of his point of view, caught a glimpse of Valley at Dusk in the ceiling mirror. He cut a hole in the floor, and dropped down a level to find Mr. Gammon on the phone to the police. He began to have trouble with the outside line when Floyd cut the cord to shreds.

"And you Gammon. You pig. Now you will pay with your life." At that moment, Rodney hit his father low and hard, driving him off his feet towards the bathroom, the chainsaw sputtering harmlessly to the floor. Spent, it lay there, out of gas.

As Chance would have it, our two friends from a bit earlier in this fairy tale, the rookie and the veteran happened to be out sight seeing in Niagara Falls on their day off. Spotting the Galaxy 500 which they knew to be owned by a suspected criminal, they decided to investigate. The rest is history. They did the only thing any well defined person would do. They took our fine friend ex-inspector, diamond thief and purloiner of fine art treasures, secret agent, i.e., Black Knight Patterson away, locked him up and threw away the key.

18

The dream is your reality and the reality is your dream.

"Pop," Floyd said. Noone emerged from white sound.

"What? You're back? Up to no good I suppose."

"I'm here to stay," Floyd said. "I've come to go on a third quest, the one that should have come before the others. I'm here to find my daughter."



"Your daughter? You're here for your daughter? We got daughters, we got sons. Whatever you want. Take your pick."

"There's nothing funny here," Floyd said, a grimace overcoming his face.

Noone laughed. "All right already. By the way. I noticed that you always 'pop' when you come to visit. What?! You got something against 'pushing?'"

"Pushing?" Floyd blinked. "Why I never realized you could push into Nowhere. I thought that the only way in was to pop out of my world into yours."

Noone laughed again. "Oi vey! Have you not yet even realized that to push and to pop are merely two sides of the same coin?" Floyd blinked several times. He did not understand. "The coin. You must see the coin. And you must see the sides and you must not see the sides. Coins. Sides. It's all very simple."

Floyd fumbled with his hands for a moment. "My daughter. All I know is that I've come to find my daughter."

"All right already. So forget the coin. You want the daughter? We got the daughter. She's through that door from chapter VIII. The one with the graffiti on it. All you got to do is walk through that door to find her. As easy as the coin."

Floyd, ex-Moving Man Emeritus that he was, stepped off in the direction of the portal then stopped struck-still in his tracks. It had begun to bulge, swelling forth first at the center then flowing out to the sides.

"Benny?" Floyd said. He pirouetted several times. "I can't go in there. You see what it does."

"So, the carpenter wasn't the greatest. Shoot me. You're not afraid of a big ugly reptile, are you?"

"Is there another way?"

"What! This kid? Another way? Never satisfied, this generation."

"I'm not fooling around."

"Very intimidating. Too bad you couldn't push the reptile around like that. What?! Don't lose your shirt already. By the way, I like the nerd-pac. Very becoming. All right. Another way? that's what you said. There's always another way. This door is merely the shortest from where you're standing. Straight lines and all. But there's no need to do what I say. Set off towards the East. Go ahead! And you might as well travel both day and night for here there is no difference. In fact, go all the four seasons for here there are none."

"May my Abitar come along as guide?"

"And now you want a guide. What next? All right, but if he does you will not like what you find."

Floyd stood, struck stock still for a moment. He knew, or rather he went to sleep and dreamed, that he would see all that was to become of him. He awoke. Suddenly, as if it were reality itself, Rodney appeared out of Somewhere moving as a ghost towards the three of us. He acted as if he were lost in a fog, or blind or both or neither, stumbling and then not calling out for his father.

"La de da," Floyd said. La de da.

19

For a long time, the land was incredibly flat. It appeared to Floyd that he had made no progress since setting out towards the East some years ago. And yet he actually had no idea how long he had been questing for there were no days and no nights. There was only the land and the sky and the hint of mountains very far off.

The plain was more like a desert than anything else although an oasis always seemed to appear whenever Floyd thought that it would be nice if one did.

One day he thought that it would be interesting to read the footnote that had accompanied the conjuring instructions in the library. Suddenly, as if out of Somewhere the library appeared with the small oily bugger still, after all these years, behind the counter, singing sweet love songs about the Royal British Navy.

"Hello, I'd like a book on conjuring please. You see..." The man appeared not to hear what Floyd said.

I'm afraid that he might be ignoring you, my fine friend. I think that you had better take more drastic action if you hope to get some service around here.

Floyd began to shake the man quite violently but after a while he simply dissolved into the book Floyd had come to see.

Floyd, I think that I should warn you that not all that you read is true. Then again, not all that is true can be read. The note said:

Note: The following statement is true.  
The avatar you shall conjure will be a liar.  
The preceding statement is false.

Floyd closed the book. His head was caught in a loop.  
"Abitar? Are you a liar?"

And what are lies and what is the truth. Do you still pretend to know after all you've experienced? You desire opposites but there are none here. You must see the coin.

20

Sometime before this Floyd was in a rain forest. All was wet and drippy, liquid everywhere at once. Large trees thrust up from the soggy floor while others, bent to one side, hung limply nearby. It seemed strange that there were no insects.

Floyd believed that only a series of Chance events had brought him to this place. He had made free independent decisions about which way to turn. Yes, that was true, that was a fact. Floyd's life had been full of facts. But they had been simply probable sorts of decisions. Floyd might well have flipped a coin. One appeared. Floyd flipped it. Heads it said. He did it again. Heads it said. Three thousand more times Floyd repeated the same experiment for after all he was in no hurry. Each and every time, much to his amazement, the coin said heads.

Floyd crouched in the center of this mildewed rain forest and flipped the coin an infinite number of times. An infinite number of monkeys appeared each flipping the coin an infinite number of times. Heads they all said.

Floyd pushed the coin back into his pocket. He did not have enough for a soda. Better not to drink so early in the morning anyway he mused. It had killed his father. Suddenly, he noticed that a bed had appeared in the center of the forest. On it lay his then still faithful wife, Ulna. She was smearing cold cream onto her face and her hair was a mass of rollers. She looked for anything like the Medusa.

Floyd put on his pajamas and crawled into bed. He had travelled. He was weary.

"Not tonight," Ulna said. "It's not safe. I have a temperature."

"Not to worry. I went to the drug store today. But you're never going to believe what happened. I was standing in line and this woman with these kids was behind me and the kids thought that the rubbers were candy. My lord, was I ever embarrassed. It was incredible. Some young mother. And then the check-out girl you wouldn't believe how embarrassed she was, but, I must say, in the end she went on admirably. Procedure prevailed once again."

"Floyd you know I don't like those things. They're so slimy. And they're not safe either. There's a chance they won't work, you know."

"One in a million. One in a million, honey. I bought the good ones. Lambskins. They're guaranteed."

"Or what happens? They pay for the baby?"

"Come on."

"Floyd, it's not right. What's meant to be is meant to be. We can't interrupt the natural order of things. If God will that a child come from our love-making, then so be it. We shouldn't interfere."

"You mean to tell me that you think that one stinkin' sperm amongst the millions and billions I've got is destined to make you pregnant? Well, if that's the case, then this won't do any good, will it? So we might as well go ahead since we're somehow destined to have the child."

"Floyd, I just don't..."

As Chance would have it, the rubber broke. The baby was made. In the superluminal reality beyond space-time, the place Floyd called Nowhere, there was no such thing as chance. There was a person called Chance. And this person, in conjunction with his half brother Fate, determined what was to happen on the Somewhere grid which had nurtured Floyd for so long.

Floyd flipped a coin. It disappeared. No heads. No tails.

21

A little after that, the cocktail party was a gas. It was Christmas time and everyone was laughing and joking. The good lord Jesus would soon be born and it was a time for peace and harmony in the world; the season of good cheer and good fellowship with all men.

Floyd wandered among the ruins of a canyon when he came upon that particular office party. In his polyester suit, nerd pac, growing pot belly and too-wide ears, he felt right at home for the occasion. Someone handed him a drink. It tasted good.

Everyone laughed. Even Gammon the pig seemed to be having a good time.

Janet Worth was just about the most beautiful thing Floyd had ever seen, what with her low cut dress, tint stockings, high heels, and a dash too much make up. He smiled. She laughed. Their eyes met in that instant which was destined from time in memorial to become an eternity. Introductions, introductions, introductions. And our fine ex-Inspector felt a bit foolish. He didn't know quite what to say.

"Well, yes, I've been with the Department for fifteen years now," he began.

"Oh, yes I've noticed you around, Miss Worth. It would be tough not to."

She smiles. She's drunk. Why not?

And they talk and they laugh and someone says something about another drink and oh why not and life seems to be such a cocktail party for a change.

"My car? Oh, my car! Yes, well I've just gotten a new one. A big beautiful Galaxy 500. A family, oh I mean kind of a sporty little thing. Well, not that small actually. See it? Sure. Why not. You'd like to see it?"

And then they put the stereo up kind of loud. Brush drummed, swung low. Her lips searched out his because she can see that our Moving Man Emeritus was simply not going to make the first move. Her hot breath came fast against his neck and her tongue searched for and found a bit of the ear she wished to devour. Floyd looked down and her breasts were full and bulging in the tight cocktail

dress she wore and he began to, but no it was impossible, it didn't work anymore. But then she moaned and her fingers were so well painted and those rings and she's ran the tips along his fly and looked up and smiled, passing her fat, pink tongue along her teeth, slowly. Floyd saw it forever, the pink slinking across the tinted off whites. And then she laughed a little and smiling one final time began to unzip ever so delicately.

Zzzzzzzziiipppppppppppp, it said. It took an eternity. But that was all right. He had one. Floyd's rested his head back against the seat, legs tensing. She struggled his manhood out of his polyester trousers. He fought back the fear. It doesn't work. Then. Surprise! Guess what? It worked.

"Ever again?" Floyd asked.

22

No. It was sometime before that that he was in the mountains. Gone up very high where there was nothing. Barren, smooth. One big swollen mountain with no trees and no teeming life of its own. Nothing on the surface, but maybe underneath, maybe something down there under this barren soil, something waiting, growing, not ready yet to reveal itself.

And Ulna, out of somewhere. "It's true. They know for sure now."

Floyd says nothing. He had hoped beyond all hope. He didn't like Rodney, that was the whole problem, just had not been what he had expected. And Ulna. Ulna always falling all over the boy. Never a moment for her husband. What would it be like with two?



Finally. "Well. What about what we talked about?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Just no. That's all. There's nothing else to say."

"What the fuck do you mean there's nothing else to say? Nothing else to say. Is that it?"

"No."

"Ulna, we've got to talk about this. I just don't want to have another child right now. This would be the best for all concerned."

"And what about the baby? And what about me?"

And then that time on the swings at the park. Had he wished she'd fall? Six months then.

And then in the pool. Had he really intended to trip her? Or at that dinner party with her friends. On the stairs. He hadn't pushed. But he had thought about it. Accidents happen all of the time. Noone would be the wiser, but then who cares.

Our gallant Moving Man Emeritus had not made it exactly easy for his loved one during those nine months. But then, it hadn't been nine. No, nine lives for this cat which curiosity decided to get rid of. No, the pains had come around the seventh month. Onetwothreebut by then it was far too late.

A moment later Floyd crested a ridge, his breath coming in short gasps, his legs filled up to the hips with ache. Stopping for a moment he smeared the sweat from his brow and planting himself on a nearby smooth stone, attempted to repair his now

damaged clip-on tie. He had been walking for what seemed like an eternity. Replacing his tie, he gazed out over the valley he seemed to have happened upon. No doubt simply another Chance event had brought him to this place.

He blinked several times for a feeling of complete and irrevocable disorientation came over him. He was staring at a valley at dusk. At the Valley at Dusk. The scene before his eyes was that of the painting which he apparently could not escape.

Below him a stream snaked its way through the valley's lowest part. Nearby some knights in what was now rather tarnished armor watered their horses. Their shields still wore that same strange symbol. And on the hill stood a castle; no Camelot, mind you, but something sufficient for an insignificant Duke or Squire to control a small town from. Floyd studied the knights silently for a few moments. There was something unreal about their movements, almost as if they were in a silent movie playing at the wrong speed.

Floyd knew he was being stared at. He whipped around. There was nothing there. And then, almost as if it had shouted up at him to make its presence felt, Floyd took note of a small pool in which was reflected the whole of the vista poured out before him. A sense of dread about the Valley descended on Floyd. He knew that he must never enter this place; that the pain contained here would probably be too great for him to bear. And yet, he knew as well that he must.

"Push," Floyd said. Suddenly everything was exactly the same as it had been except that it was all backwards. It took Floyd some time to notice this. It was mostly the light that gave the change away. The shadows all blew in from the wrong direction and the trees themselves seemed to flutter backwards as if they were in some movie running in reverse.

Floyd noticed a small collection of poems by William Blake lying nearby. He opened it at random. As Chance would have it, the poem was "Auguries of Innocence." Floyd read these four lines:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

"Push," Floyd said.

Suddenly, the entire universe he had existed in for so long was contained in one small grain of sand. There was no time here. Five seconds later, Floyd snatched a handful of sand from a nearby castle and said push. Suddenly, all was white about him. The matter from a hundred universes such as his own spilled into this place.

He noticed a chair floating nearby. It was the essence of chairness. It was the ideal chair from the Ideal Universe. This is where it lived. Floyd began to say push again and again, over and over ad infinitum, until finally he was one with a quark lattice.

This was it, Floyd thought to himself. The smallest, lowest level. Nothing is beneath this.

These are quark lattices, my fine friend. The ground in which the figure of fundamental particles is embedded. And yet, even your notion of this as foundation is illusory. Go ahead Floyd, shake off your "bedrock" preconceptions of reality and dare to see what lies beyond. This fundamental stuff of nature. Take a look beyond this "ultimate meaning." You'll be surprised.

"Push," Floyd said. The Valley at Dusk stretched out before him to infinity.

"Pop," he said. The Valley at Dusk stretched out before him to infinity.

Floyd shrugged the shrug of a billion modern men and began to clamber down the incline towards the stream. Fundamental foundations? Ultimate meaning? All Floyd needed was to drink some of that crystalline water he had seen so often. The knights, Sir Vladimiroff and Sir Estragonoff, spoke between themselves. There was something important they were going to do as soon as they had enough to drink. They did not move and Floyd realized that they never would.

Floyd sunk his head into the cool, quickly flowing water. He felt refreshed. He wiped the last drops from his eyes, Rodney appeared out of Somewhere. He kept repeating the same thing over and over again. The phrase began with "Dad?" but Floyd could not make it out. He gazed about him. Suddenly all was quiet. The very birds ceased their noise.

Floyd took a final drink and began his climb towards the castle. He felt giddy, excited. He had an erection. He found me there in my usual room, in the tower with animals of exotic sorts all about, squacking irreverently at a life's work. Superstitious fools. Sorcerer is what they called me. Devil worshipper and hater of all that was true and light. Floyd was closer than he knew, calling me Merlin all the time.

But this was so untrue. I loved the light and the good. I was a scientist.

Floyd sauntered into the room. "Abitar? You. Here. But I didn't expect..."

Of course not, my Moving Man Emeritus, my simple friend. You did not expect this, did you? But yes, I am what you have come to confront, your own guilt personified. Here in this vial is the plague which killed them all. My entire family and all my subjects, my entire world.

Don't look so stunned. You, in your space-time have much, much more powerful ones, ones you will use as surely as I used this. Because once you possess the knowledge, the temptation is simply too great. Sit down, sit down, have some tea. We can at least be civilized about all this can we not?

Ex-inspector Patterson took a long slow sip from his cup. He gazed at the door at the rear of my laboratory. On it, in bas relief, were written the same words as those on the door Floyd had set out to avoid. It was, in fact, the same door. It was the portal Floyd was destined to meet until he passed through it.

There is no running away. There is no-place to hide. This is Nowhere and even here all loops. All things and all thoughts return you to where you began. Yet I didn't say cycled because when you loop, you never intended to return. You believed in the linearity of time and events. But loop reality does, secretly twisting back on itself, as surely as that footnote twisted back on you--as surely as your whole life has snuck up and twisted back on you.

As if from some long-forgotten dream, the door begins to bulge. Floyd crashes backwards, knocking a lifetime's work to the floor. The deadly vapors are liberated as they have always been liberated and as they always will be liberated. I reach once again for the antidote which will save me for another eternity until Floyd's Universe has expanded and shrunk and exploded again; until it has looped. To my chagrin and surprise there are no more pills.

I smile a thousand smiles. Floyd climbs most gallantly to his feet. The door swells to bursting. I shrink to the floor, darkness, sweet blessed darkness clawing in from all sides. I see, as if through a tunnel, Floyd step up to the dear door which has nearly burst and with only a moment's hesitation insert a key which he has always kept in his trouser pocket and open it.

"Her water's burst, doctor," a pretty young nurse said. Ulna cried and cried. It was two months too early. Something, somewhere, out of Nowhere, must have gone wrong. We were both in the delivery room.

"Push," the doctor said. "Floyd, count with her. Count to seven and push for everything you're worth."

"Onetwothreefourfivesixseven and pushhhh." I shouted.

"Floyd?!" Ulna cried.

"It's all right." I said.

The baby was born. It was slimy and quiet and cold. They weighed it. Everything checked out. They wrote down some numbers. Everything was going to be all right they said. I shook my head. Never, never again. I threw away my key and stepped out into the Valley. It was almost dark now. Soon it would be night. I smiled at the brilliance of Modern Men Emeriti and set off along the river, in the opposite direction from the way I came, knowing all the time that I would return.