

April

Let's begin with the shape of a woman. So much of human experience begins there. The shape lay on a squeaky roll-away bed in the spare room of a seaside cottage in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on sheets which had wrapped occasional guests through the terms of seven presidents. End to end, the woman was 158 centimeters in length, or five feet and two inches in the English measurements still in use in the twentieth century. Her head, sporting hair in an unquestioning shade of dark brown, was a near-perfect sphere, but with a pronouncedly jutting chin; large, curious, green eyes; a small, sharp nose; a mouth that seemed poised to spit fire, even in sleep. Her shoulders were broad and powerful, like a swimmer's; her arms seemed shorter than average; her breasts, disproportionately small, but near-perfectly circular; her abdomen, flat and well toned; her hips, well, they were bounteous where her breasts were short-changed; her legs, long, narrow, tapered, well defined; her feet, long for her height, size 9, but with short, blunt toes.

The naked, unadorned shape sat up and rose from the bed, as if commanded by transmissions from outer space, at exactly 6 a.m. The stubby fingers groped and grabbed for the clean running togs that they had placed on the valet the night before, and pulled them over the shape in the appropriate places. Once dressed in running bra, panties, shorts, socks, and running shoes, Andromeda Sichler wiped the sleepers from her eyes, exited from her grandfather's seaside cottage, and aimed south on the Virginia Dare Trail toward Kill Devil Hills.

To watch Andi Sichler running was to watch a body that the gods had designed for just that purpose. She had run for enjoyment since she was three years old, had developed amazing endurance, though never tremendous speed. She had never attached any special significance to her ability, except what was represented by all the ribbons and trophies

she had collected through middle school, high school, and college; most of the awards bore the legend, *2nd place*. (The 1980s had been good to her, but the competitive atmosphere of that entire decade was palpable and sometimes merciless.) She rarely ran to or from anything, but on this particular morning, she had a goal: to the Wright Brothers Monument and back, a good eight miles altogether, in an hour if she could, an hour and a half if she couldn't.

She passed other runners, some obviously in shape, some apparently running for the first time since their last vacation in the Outer Banks. She even outran some people who were riding bicycles, perhaps riding for the first time since childhood. Of course she passed every boutique and eatery on the Trail without giving any of them a second thought, mindful only of her goal.

Andi arrived at the Monument park, which was still closed at such an early hour, to find exactly what she did not want to find. A man of 88 years stood by the gate, pillar-straight, a pillar supporting nothing in particular. She had never seen this man, but she knew exactly who he was and what he represented. He spoke, she turned, he shouted, she ran, terror-stricken, praying to Mercury to let her borrow his winged sandals, up Highway 12, past the fast-food eateries and gas stations, back to the cottage.

Her shoulders and pectorals moved up and down in a regular rhythm as she sucked in each massive breath of stale salt air. Each inhale-exhale seemed to exchange a body-volume of gases and for this young woman, that was not much volume. Her mouth hung anxiously opened, poised to deliver some news when the body could hold onto enough wind to fill its sails.

"Grampa," she huffed to the benevolent, elderly gent on the porch. The accent was distinctly from New Jersey. She puffed through the same motionless embouchure, "I saw old Hank! He's so creepy! He was askin' me all these personal questions

he was down at the monument, like he was waitin for me, to meet me!"

Her grandfather, Terrell Daniel, an Outer Banks native with molasses-mouth drawl to spare, just chuckled. "Here, child, set down 'n' catch ya breath." She sat; he wandered into the kitchen to retrieve a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice, then returned. "You know ol' Hank is harmless. I shoulda warned ya that he was spendin' his mornin's down there."

Andi was not convinced by his tone that the legendary old coot was harmless. She knew of his reputation for bringing up people's painful memories, some of which they themselves had blocked out or stored in the sub-basement of their mental archives. During her entire retreat from the Monument, Andi could remember nothing of her brief encounter except the very palpable feeling that Hank's narrow, grey eyes were roaming randomly through her consciousness. But as she sat and sipped her juice, the details caught up with her.

"Grampa, he *knew* stuff about me: my boyfriend—*ex*—my miscarriage, my train set said something like, You like N-gauge, huh? Wanna get N-gauged? and laughed, like he was makin' some sort of totally original pun " Big sigh. "Some other creepy shit, too. And I've never seen a really old man standing so straight; they re usually bent over in at least a coupla places."

Terrell plopped his bathrobed, 250-pound frame into a deck chair and shook his crew-cut head. "Hank, all right. Reads people like traffic signs," he sing-songed. "I used to avoid him like the clap when he shouted stuff at me about Grandma, after she passed on, but then one day I shouted back at the ol' bag o' wind. We got in a conversation about death and taxes and such; next thing ya know, I'm the closest thing he's got to a friend in this town."

Andi loved her grandfather, but she knew from an early age that he had odd taste in friends. She said nothing, trying simultaneously to remember exactly what she had heard there

at the gate of the Monument and to forget it all. She had run the eight miles in almost exactly one hour, but felt that she had gone beyond the eight linear miles, too far, penetrating into some dimension not of her own, a dimension which would buy her soul at 100 percent down and convert it to condo. She felt like a sperm that another sperm had pushed into the ovum's personal space, saying, "*Après vous, mon frère!*" and now, like the seed of destiny, was to have its universe irreparably altered. Perhaps such thoughts resulted from her line of work: high school health instructor and cross-country coach.

In truth, Andi thought, she felt more like the ovum: violated, never able to stand alone again, with the voice and eyes of Hank clanking around her cranium. In a more private moment she would curse herself for leaving her diary in New Jersey, unable to scribble down her insight about the original Andromeda, the Ethiopian princess, chained to a crag, on display for all divinity, awaiting the ravishing tongue of the monster from the deep (a sperm whale, perhaps?). "What bee-you-tiful bullshit!" she would emit in her late mother's watered-down Carolina drone.

An hour later Andi found herself seated in the breakfast nook with a carbo-loader's delight spread out before her: pancakes the size of LP records, grits on the side, sliced Virginia ham (which she declined), and another glass of fresh-squeezed juice. Terrell's second wife, Natalie Haymarket Daniel, had not lost the art of the home-cooked repast, even though she didn't get around the kitchen the way she formerly had. At 50, Natalie was a good fifteen years younger than Terrell, but seemed a solid 60 in the serenity with which she endured life's aches and pains. Her hair was still apple blonde, but with the slightest hints of grey, and she was much too thin to have borne children which, indeed, she never had.

The pancakes and grits disappeared in two shakes of a Cessna's tailflaps. Andi was hungrier than she thought; she barely tasted the breakfast as it went from table to tummy. "I haven't even had a *satisfactory* meal since the last time I

visited you guys," she caught herself by the scruff of her Teaneck idiom, "I mean, *y'all*. But this is outstanding."

"Grampa says, now that I only do this once a week, it's that much more special," beamed Natalie. "Thank you for bein' our customer again."

"Thank *you* for remindin' me that food is still somethin' to live or die for," said the young coach. "Dad always said, Grandma Natalie's suppers are not just better than sex, but better than money and power, too. Or somethin' like that."

"Tell ya somethin', sweetie," Terrell broke in. "Sex is only as good as the love that's in the recipe and I mean pure, true, unadulterated love. That's what you taste and feel in that-there breakfast." Natalie blushed and p'shaved the proper amount.

They took a day trip to Cape Hatteras, which Andi had not visited since she was ten, only to find it just as commercialized as Kitty Hawk, which is to say, an appropriately genteel atmosphere for persuading tourists to part with their hard-earned currency. They returned home after dark, worn out as much from the sleepy air as the traveling. But Andi could not fall asleep, even after drinking the dreaded warm milk, even after watching David Letterman's monolog, even after attempting self-hypnosis. Terrell and Natalie were soundly, profoundly in snore school, and they never heard the squeaking of stairs, the turning of locks, the involuntary slam of the screen door to the porch.

A walk on the shore, with the regular and reassuring rhythms of the waves, might just do the trick, Andi hoped. But on this night turning into morning, the rhythms were not regular, not reassuring. There was a malicious rip-current, and the waves broke without warning, wherever and whenever they damn well pleased. This is particularly disturbing on the Outer Banks, where the shore is lit only by occasional porch lights of the nearby cottages, most of which are vacant on weeknights in April like this one. So Andi curtailed her stroll, made her way

up the dunes, across the Virginia Dare Trail, and back to the Daniel residence.

Arriving on the porch, feeling disquieted but sleepier, she bent over to stretch her back muscles, spreading her fingers on the powder blue 2-by-4's, her broad tush reaching for the stars—

"Damnation!"

She sprang from all fours like a Halloween cat and landed on the aforementioned tush. "Jesus fucking Christ! You scared me shitless!" She stood up and focused on the source of the interjection. "Hey, you re the scuzzbunny who was yellin' at me by the Monument!"

"I only yell so I can hear myself talk," he whispered more loudly than she'd ever heard anyone whisper. "And don't think you're special, 'cause I do that for everybody—tell 'em the truth about themselves. The truth they don't wanna hear. Normally, though, it's just a nine-to-five job, but I felt like puttin' in some overtime today."

Andi could not hide, but she could run. She did not feel like having a deep conversation on any topic with anyone, especially old Hank. She took off and ran as far as the causeway before she turned back, thinking that the sinister presence must have departed. Wrong! When she arrived at her grandparents place around dawn, the old bastard was in the breakfast nook, not eating, just shootin' the breeze with Grampa Terrell and enjoying a cupful of coffee from one of the original Grandma Daniel's fine bone china cups. He was talking about football, but not the way most Carolina gentlemen talk about the game. She listened from the living room.

"They should just get it the hell outta the high schools and the colleges, play it in clubs the way they play soccer in Europe. Those kinda distractions they don't need in the schools. It's only since they started makin' such a big deal about sports in high schools that the whole damn system has gone to Hoboken in a handbasket."

Andi's brain itched: She liked Hoboken and felt that it had just been insulted. But she said nothing.

"That's your opinion, is it?" Terrell arched one eyebrow.

"Opinion, hell, it's the truth. Just that nobody admits it who knows it." Hank eyed Andi, who was simultaneously shivering and perspiring from her run in the cool, moist air. "There's our girl."

Andi pistoned up the stairs, away from the old goat and his co-conspirator her grandfather. She was not about to stop until she reached the shower in the guest bathroom.

She heard Terrell behind her, shouting softly, "Hey there, Andi, set a spell with us. I finally got ol' Hank to talk rationally for a whole thirty minutes, though it was kind o' one-way "

"Grampa," she moaned through the stairway slats, "shut up a minute. Do you know what this guy did to me in the middle of the night?"

"I caught ya moonin' the stars," Hank answered for him. "You ought not show so much disrespect for the celestial bodies."

"I'm going to take a shower and then I m going to read the latest issue of *Health & Fitness* in my room...very...slowly."

OK, so she left out the part about munching a half-dozen cinnamon rolls, the ones she had snagged on Highway 12 returning from her extended, early-morning run, but shower and read she did indeed.

And then she thought. She cruised the boulevard of her memory, where every intersection seemed to have pedestrians crossing—always the same pedestrians. She saw in the crosswalks her ex-boyfriend, her gynecologist, and the embryo that would have been her son.

The boyfriend and the miscarriage about which Hank knew so much had both happened two years before, during her fourth

year at Fairleigh-Dickinson, while she was rearranging her life toward a career in secondary education, specifically health and phys. ed. Andi was relationshiping—please don't call it dating—with an affluent young gent named Ashr, who preferred to be called "Jim," from some southwest Asian country. What Andi never saw, as they jumped each other's bones night after night with great abandon, talking dirty in French and Farsi, was that the condoms he was using were manufactured in Indonesia: good latex, lousy quality control. Eventually one of Jim's polliwogs found the awaiting arms of Madame Ova, resulting in the kind of microscopic chaos that eventually looks like one of us.

Andi's morning sickness had not been severe, but bothersome enough that she was never 100% in her job interviews with high schools all over northern New Jersey, where she had resided most of her life. Combined with the interview jitters, however, and the poor nutritional habits of a senior trying to scrape term papers together, morning sickness is a bitch and a half. When she vomited on an assistant superintendent's desk, she knew that something was not quite right, and she was knowledgeable enough about her body to deduce what it was.

Did Andi want a child at that point in her life? "Hellll, no," she would say. But she gave it some time to develop into a viable abortion and a little more in case she should change her mind and just marry Jim, who had a large enough trust fund to start a good business in the states. Well, Jim was happy enough to go along with such a plan, as long as he didn't become anyone's exclusive property. There were no clear answers in this situation. Andi would later confide to some friends and total strangers that her three-month embryo died of confusion.

Confusing a small child is hard work; confusing an embryo is nothing short of miraculous. When it happens, it can be very stressful to the embryo, eventually destroying the will to live. Official diagnosis: miscarriage.

The required D & C operation did not provide a suitable resolution to the crisis. Nor did any resolution follow her fifth

year at FDU, where she took a few Masters courses and worked part-time as a Rent-a-Prep domestic. She remained confused about life, birth, death, her role in the universe. The perplexities of her 13th year stuck to her deep into her 23rd, like the Curse of Perpetual Puberty. As she wolfed down her sixth and final cinnamon roll in the guest room in Kitty Hawk, however, she did understand:

A. why she had pitched herself headlong into her work, as the only health teacher she knew with an ambition to be the best damned health teacher in New Jersey, and

B. that she needed someone or something to straighten out her bepretzeled psyche, and that that someone was probably not to be found in Kitty Hawk.

On the following Sunday afternoon, in a storefront studio flat overlooking Washington Square, downtown Manhattan, NYCULater, sat the Collective, an organization that served no purpose for anyone outside its charter membership. In defiance of or perhaps with the help of the laws of social entropy, the same humans who had assembled irregularly for love-in study breaks in 1967 were now carrying on weekly gatherings in 1992. There were fourteen greying hipsters who were earning their livings as freelance writers, stockbrokers, nurses, academics, and all points around and between all lotusing on threadbare pillows and creating kilojoules of psychic energy, as they had routinely done every Sunday morning without a single absence since 1979. It had become their religion, and they practiced it fervently, for this they knew:

Their acceptance of mainstream jobs after graduating (or not) from NYU had been a kind of death for each of them. (It took until 1979 for the lot of them to achieve such a group satori, that a living is not necessarily a life, and that stepping into the working world is the beginning of another phase of existence. Actually, the center of their circle, writer and cult figure Wilf Adamante, had figured this out way back in the '60s, but he

never told anyone.) When they found out that they had all come to the same conclusion, they began the weekly gatherings at Wilf's place, each pitching in \$200 a month to help Wilf pay the rent when the royalty wells ran dry. Having "died" so young, these former hippies maintained that their weekly gatherings represented the one day of each week that they returned to life.

So live they did. There were no rules of order except that each should participate in the 30 minutes of group meditation, and that they should take turns selecting the music for the stereo. Wilf had one material possession to which he clung: a totally bitchin' stereo set-up. It was the altar and tabernacle for the Collective. Whenever Wilf sold a story for \$100 or more, half the money went into the music fund for compact discs and stereo components. Aside from the music, the Collective enjoyed gourmet hashish and, if the mood was right, gourmet carnalities on the pillows.

Most of these fourteen people had relationships and marriages outside the Collective, but they were smart enough to marry only those who had no objection to the group or its activities, those who understood the importance of that safety valve, as one could imagine Thomas Jefferson's wife or Benjamin Franklin's wife not just tolerating those men's dalliances, but encouraging them in order to keep those towering intellects human and sane. The spouses of the Collectivists, the lovers, the children were never allowed even to visit the flat, though Wilf had met them all, and most could see why the Collectivists lived in awe of Wilf and his wisdom.

Wilf was wise in 1992, far wiser than he had been in 1967, when even his professors respected his clarity of perception. In 1967 Wilf had been frustrated because, at 21, he knew how much he had yet to learn, and he wanted it all right then: instant omniscience. In 1992 he still looked forward to getting older and wiser, to sharing his gift with anyone of succeeding generations still capable of reading. In the interim, Wilf's frustration led him down a path similar to his idol Jack

Kerouac's: an on-again-off-again love affair with alcohol in all its demonic forms. On this cool, gentle, vernal Sunday, Wilf could say that he had been sober for twelve solid months, and that he had lived longer than Kerouac's 46 years.

For the first time since October of 1991, the Collective collectively shucked its clothing to worship all-nature as the Spirit intended. Keep in mind that this group appreciated the difference between nudity and sex; the latter was not on the menu that day.

Cynthia Louise Hu took the talking-stick first and asked the Collective's membership to bow its collective head. She led the opening prayer and benediction, improvising on a prepared text, as it had been done since the beginning:

"Gods and goddesses who dwell within us and lead us into the twisting path of life, when we begin to believe that we are in command of our lives, humor us and humble us; when we fancy ourselves masters of our environment, let the environment show us the whip; when we have self-doubt, however, let us remember that we are beautiful, and remember where true beauty lies; and for oneness' sake use us for goodness and light in this darkened world." She then recited the first names of the 14 members and spoke the necessary Sanskrit for "You are what you eat; reverse what you are; reverse what you eat," to which all said, "So be it."

Wilf motioned for the stick, grabbed it from Cindy Lou's outstretched left hand, and began the visualization for the 30 minutes of meditation. "Your eyes are closed. You feel a warm, humid breeze rolling and twisting around your bare nipples. You hear tropical birds calling and responding in rhythms. The rhythms establish themselves in cycles that change ever so subtly over immeasurable increments of time. Time is now measured in birdcalls instead of minutes and seconds."

The group sat lotusized, eyes closed, with intensely blissful non-expressions on their slowly mesmerized visages. It was such a pure surrender: All 13 of Wilf's disciples were giving him

their bare minds as his personal playthings for just the half-hour, utterly without reservation. He continued.

"You're walking across the sticky mud of the forest floor, naked and unafraid. The tree snakes tip their caps to you, the venomous caterpillars sidle out of your path. Those calling birds begin to harmonize and counterpoint, to improvise new divisions of time, to trade solos and fly loop-the-loop around the churning rhythmic vamping all to honor your arrival in their home. You stop and stand, transfixed, unable to proceed, and one of two events occurs:

"If a particular goddess is with you, the mud beneath your feet relaxes, allowing you inch by inch to sink into it, to reach the enlightenment that no teacher, no lama, no brahman has ever dared request: to merge with the mother of all life, to return to the womb from which all sprang, and discover the unknowable simplicity of the union with the cosmic belly."

He paused to assure himself that the entire group was under his peculiar spell, all bearing knowingly idiotic smiles, letting the feeling sink in. Then—

"If the goddess is not with you, the Marines come in with hundreds of napalm shells and blow the whole scene to glowing, smoking bits of cinder and flesh, and each of your eyeballs' last vision as they roll on the mud is your large intestine draped across a flying tree-limb."

The scream that the 13 retired hippies emitted could have been heard from Battery Park to Madison Square, if it were a quiet night with all the windows open. One member, Delano Sharpe, the pony-tailed actuary, actually piddled on the hardwood floor. Wilf tossed him a Handi-Wipe.

Delano hastily patted the puddle as dry as he could, recovered his senses, and shouted, "Motherfuckin' shit, Wilfredo! You haven't mindfucked us like that since fuckin' Watergate!"

Karla Darman was just as miffed. "What the fuck did ya go an do *that* for, you—I can't think of a strong enough word!" And Karla worked as an editor for Karyotid Publishing. Words were her life.

"Calm down, children, and I'll explain." With his remote control, he brought his bitchin' stereo system to life with a Steve Halpern CD. "It's like this. You in your civilized New York and New Jersey existence with the relatively secure, stable jobs, houses, cars, families—you don't know fear. I'm talkin' real fear. Not the slasher-movie, pre-packaged imitation fear, not the fear that you'll miss a deadline or forget to call an important client, but the fear that somethin' is gonna either eat you alive or dismember you loudly without an excuse-me. You're so far removed from nature—natural nature and human nature—you've forgotten how dark and twisted nature can be (man, it ain't no Hallmark card), and you've never experienced a real adrenaline rush since your worst nightmares of childhood. We all had those nightmares, didn't we?" The group nodded. "Has any of you ever taken a camping trip without modern conveniences? or walked unarmed through the war zone, alone at night? I don't think so."

The room grew silent, except for Halpern's churning, synthetic avian rhythms and soaring guitar melodies. Wilf spoke again, hesitantly, as if treasuring the silence and not wanting to disrupt it.

"I just got a helluva royalty check last month. Didn't want to brag about it, but it seems my early stuff is being discovered in Eastern Europe, mostly by university kids like us. I didn't know what to do with the money, after I paid some bills—I'd love to divide it amongst this group, but I might as well flush it, y'know? Since I've been thinking about nature a lot lately, what with mortality pokin' me in the ass—my ever-widening glutes—it's led me to kind of a novel concept: the Primal Man Triathlon."

This announcement drew some knowing chuckles from the Ironman wannabes in the Collective, those who not only had

92nd St. YMHA memberships, but actually used the facilities there.

"Well, truth to tell," Wilf continued, "I've only thought of one event: the Rainforest Ramble. You get dropped off in an unannounced location in the jungles of Zaire with *nothing*: no clothes, no weapons, no Sony Walkman, no trail mix, no port-a-potty. You conquer the elements with your wits and imagination, using what you find, and if you survive for one lunar month, you're a winner—*big bucks*. I haven't worked out all the details, but I'd like to provide the seed money. It could be one way to make my name a household word outside of Romania, don't you think?" He chuckled, since everyone present knew how little importance Wilf placed on fame and riches.

Cindy Lou Hu almost forgot to take the stick. "It would be worth it just to see a lot of the macho turds who would compete in such a contest get eaten by big snakes and leopards. I'd chip in some money, too, if I had any."

Chuck Arnstein, a staffer for a City Councilmember from Canarsie, beckoned for the stick. "I'd serve on the committee to work on the logistics—this will take more than your talents, Wilf-man—if, uh, if I wasn't already on the New York Marathon committee." The Marathon demands eleven months of planning just for a half-day event, and Chuck never let the Collective forget this fact. It made some of them wonder how much time and effort a Primal Man Triathlon would require to put together. It made them ponder whether the families of those who were eaten by big snakes and leopards would ignore the inevitable release forms and sue the organizers for gobs of money.

The assembled members agreed that the idea for the Rainforest Ramble was romantic to the utmost, damn near impossible to pull off, and possibly worth thinking about in moments of downtime; also, they agreed that the discussion had hit a dead end. Finally, Trudy Markowicz, the performance artist/housewife in the group, sans talking-stick, leaned over,

grabbed her ankles, and grimaced, "Can we talk about something else now?"

Lester DeWitt and Chub Martell arrived at their favorite watering hole early that evening, when the promise of spring had turned to a North Atlantic monsoon—one of those days when the ocean reminds you that it has a very difficult job and that it can't be bothered to warm up New England just because folks are wearing shorts in Carolina.

New London, Chub's heaven and Lester's purgatory, is a small city that, like Peleus in the myth, was granted long life but not eternal youth. The besotted ghost of its native genius, Eugene O'Neill, hangs over the seven square miles of the old whaling capital like last week's linens. Its tallest buildings are high-rise last resorts for the elderly and indigent. In the 1980s it had unwillingly donated its lifeblood to the new mall in nearby Waterford and the prepie mecca of Mystic. Its liveliest culture in the 1990s could be found astride the Harley Davidson bikes that gargled chainsaw melodies into the purple of evening, convening at any of several notorious taverns. At these watering holes, one could usually soak in the Working Person's Music—blues in liberal doses, straight up or R & B mix—played by middle-aged, overweight, invariably mustachioed men who had consumed their share of beer and cocaine in half a hard lifetime.

In the cruelest month of 1992, when the weather was appalling even by New England standards, Rusty the 1979 Ford F150 conveyed Chub and Lester to the curbside parking space on Pequot Avenue nearest the Pickle Pub. Under more favorable skies, Chub would be driving his Harley, but the sticker on Rusty's rear cab window made Chub's two-wheeled sentiments knowable to all:

"I'd rather see my sister in a whorehouse than on the back of a Honda."

Nobody ever asked Chub what he felt about his sister *operating* a Honda, but then, he didn't have any sisters.

"Fuck-kin' rain!" Lester said, slamming the passenger door in the space between *fuck-* and *-kin'*. "Soon's I get enough money together—" he opened his black umbrella, "—gonna go back to fuck-kin' San Diego." As if in answer, a gust off the Thames River blew a seltzer-bottleful of brackish water under the umbrella into Lester's face.

The two made an interesting sight: Lester was tall, thin, muscular, a bit hyperactive, resembling a meerkat in a Members Only leather jacket; Chub was short, rotund, laid-back, with walrus-like whiskers that obscured his lips and not much more hair atop his head, braving the elements in a piratical red and white striped turtle-neck. The weather did not bother him at all, as long as it didn't stand between him and his beer.

Chub and Lester were small fish in the big General Dynamics/Electric Boat pond, but big fish at the Pickle Pub, into which they splashed at exactly 5:15 p.m. The Pickle was not at all busy, since there was no band gingerly placing amps against the back wall, no tagalongs running cables to and from the mixing board, no musical girlfriends who normally wouldn't be caught sober in this room trying to ward off the well-established bacteria. In fact, Chet Huntley and the Brinktones were not due to arrive for several hours.

Alysse LeComte O'Donoghue Schmidt, the only woman in the place, was wiping the bar when she spotted Chub in the pub mirror. She picked up three darts that were within reach, turned and flung them one at a time. "You shit!" (*fling*)

"Yes, I do. Don't we all?" Chub coolly lit a Merit Ultra.

"You fuckin' shit!" (*fling*) "How'd you know the (*fling*) fuckin' Timberwolves would...would—"

"—beat the Bucks?" Chub was able to duck all three darts, though one almost found a pore in his nose. "Revenge, pure and simple. Last time, Milwaukee puréed 'em at home, so Minnesota just took it very...personally."

Alysse muttered some Québécois street slang and pulled two mugs of some vile excuse for beer that the patrons of the Pickle favored because it tasted so good coming back up. (And it really was less filling.) Chub, having bet on the Wolves, didn't have to pay for them, or for any other beer for his next three visits.

Lester's mind was still packing for his pilgrimage to San Diego. Without thinking, he pulled a Merit Ultra out of Chub's breast pocket and lit it with his own Bic. "Fuck-kin' San Diego's got livable weather, the most gorgeous women of all colors—"

"Heard that."

"—real Mexican food—not this watered-down Tex-Mex shit—and—"

"—thouthandth of thailor boyth pranthing on the dockthide!" Chub was in a mode to finish other people's sentences and take them where they'd rather not go. "God-da-amn, you ex-Navy clowns rupture me! 'S your whole fuckin' problem: never satisfied with where you are, always gotta be somewheres else—I bet when you was in San D., you got all homesick for Yokohama or some shit."

Chub and Lester just eyeballed each other for a few seconds, then turned toward the door through which a tall, clean-cut Trinidaddy in full raingear was striding. Trailing him was his blonde, petite "old lady," a gum-chomping 19 from "Nawth Geawgeaw." He was Horace Foxe, and no one called him anything but Horace; she was Cherise, who was often called "Horace's old lady," "the real white chick," or "Cerise" behind both their backs. (The nickname Cerise, "cherry," was only partly ironic and used mostly by Alysse, who considered her

something of a babe in the woods. Cherise was definitely a babe, in the guys' eyes.)

"Horace, yo, ev'rytin' irie?" That was Alysse, not even looking up from the mugs she was washing.

"Semi-irie, child," Horace grinned. "But dis weader makin' me homesick."

Lester piped up, "It rained every fuck-kin' day when I was in Trinidad."

"It's not de rain, mon, it's de cold." Cherise harmonized the last part with Horace's incredibly melodious voice, but her voice sounded as if someone had put her larynx on the rack: a painful, low, nicotine-drenched drawl.

At the time, Chub was unaware that charming Horace had been carrying on with his (Chub's) significant other, which would have discomfited him a bit, easy-going philanderer that he himself was. And, of course, he could never have predicted that the fruit of that union between Horace Foxe and Carolyn Olin would some day be an unsuccessful candidate for the U.S. Presidency. But that is another whole book.

The time that Horace had spent in Kingston had allowed him to absorb the Jamaican patois and the attitude that made him popular wherever he went. It didn't hurt that he always seemed to have a few joints to lend or sell, or, sometimes, a portion of cocaine. In the process of ordering beers for himself and Cherise, he slipped six joints into Lester's jacket pocket, as they had previously arranged.

Scant blocks away as the crow flies, and about a mile away by New London's perverse one-way streets, Carolyn Olin brushed the loose hairs off her last customer of the day. Real stylists call their customers "clients," but Carolyn didn't feel that she fit the part of a professional stylist. The local TV news from New Haven bade her good night and stay tuned for the network news from Washington. She liked to improve her mind by

watching news programs, and could discourse on the difference between news and "info-tainment" like a media pro. It was a talent that her Chub and his comrades never fully appreciated.

Carolyn was a compact woman of 35 years, with a tight, frosted perm, dark complexion (from her Sicilian grandmother), a bulby nose, deep laughlines, and a body with no outstanding features that was usually wrapped in turtle-necks and poly-cotton slacks. She often wore flares, insisting for years that they would eventually become fashionable again which, in 1992, they did.

"All right, ma'am," her nicotine-weary voice chimed sweet and low, "that'll be \$27.50."

"When I was your age," her customer observed, "that would cost me \$1.75."

"Last month you said two dollars." Carolyn tried not to make her remark too condescending to the sweet, elderly head she had just beautified.

"Oh, that's because you look so much younger this month," the sweet one tittered. "Here's three tens—you keep the change for baby."

"Mrs. Howland!"

"Oh, don't think I haven't noticed, Carolyn, that you're positively beaming with maternity!"

"I don't feel quite so luminous, ma'am, but you're right." She pointed to her uterus and quoted a spaghetti sauce commercial: "It's in there." *Mental note: Make gyno appointment.* This encounter really brought it all home to Carolyn that she was finally, at age 35, preggers; someone else noticed, and so far she had told *nobody*, not even her dear sister Marilyn.

Mrs. Howland's Purple Cab arrived—number 36, driven by its owner Tommy Luczinski—and Carolyn was able to direct her attention to the network newscast while sweeping up. The news was the usual volley of man's inhumanity to man, planet, and self. Carolyn sat in the chair recently warmed by Mrs. Howland's aged buns and inhaled a few mentholated friends, smoking her way through Yugoslavia, the Middle East, China, a teen Satanist coven in Chicago-land, and the chamber of horrors on Wall Street, New York City. She stubbed out each cigarette about half-way through, as if silently instructed by some voice within, "Stoppit, already! There's no ventilation in here!" Five minutes later, the craving would overcome the silent voice, and she would light up again.

Marilyn Olin entered the tiny shop on Colman Street, her hair a disaster, her umbrella a shell of its former self, her damp clothes and long, stringy, bleach-blonde hair clinging to her 300-plus-pound frame. She swallowed the obscenities that the rain and wind of April in Connecticut tempted her to utter and would utter if God weren't listening.

"Hi, Sis," Marilyn whined. "Six to six."

"The Sox game doesn't start till 7:30."

"No, I mean my *shift*. I've been slingin' doughnuts for twelve hours."

"You're the manager, chick! Why do you have to pull a twelve?"

"These fu—These kids I hire, Car, they don't show up, so somebody's gotta fill in for 'em." Marilyn had just got used to her employees showing up high on pot, crack, or speed, even tripping on mescaline, but the latest trend was a more difficult cactus button to crack. Kids with no ability to derive consequences from their actions had no concept of what their work habits might do to their future employability. All cause and effect was rendered null and void by the assumption of these kids that they would not live to see their 21st birthday.

Fortunately, Marilyn had some employees well beyond 21 who were delighted to secure any kind of job in Connecticut in 1992, when the national and regional economies had gone quite to shit.

"I told you, Mar: Fire 'em. Maybe they'll understand that."

"Nooo. You remember what happened last time I fired what's-his—mustard—DeJon. He slashed my tires and broke my windshield, got off for first offense. Nice kid, drank too much, prone to rare acts of violence when frustrated. The kids I got now make him look like a refugee from Barney's Back Yard Gang."

"No shit?"

"If these kids, y'know, runnin' loose in the streets like they do with no parental control, ever figure out what to do with all that *hate*, all that *rage*, they'll overthrow the government with their Uzis and sheer rudeness," Marilyn predicted with wild and random gesticulations.

Carolyn lit another Newport, pointed at the TV. "If they *did* take over," *exhale*, "would things get any worse?"

After six quick rounds of beer at the Pickle, the rain had let up, and Lester DeWitt was feeling better about New London, where he had made such excellent friends. Chub never lost affection for the city of his birth, his schooling, his first pot parties as a teenager in the wild '60s, and where he had accumulated his premature beer gut. Chub had seen New York, Boston, Montréal, having left all three great cities unimpressed (the feeling was probably mutual). The two submarine welders retired to the dubious comforts of Chez Chub, Chub and Carolyn's upstairs apartment on Lincoln Avenue, to smoke some skunkweed and play video games.

Super Mario Brothers didn't cut the mustard any more. Tonight's video fare was *Saint George's Adventures*, wherein a beefed-up George Bush likeness battled android thugs in the

shape of Saddam Hussein, Moammar Qaddafi, Manuel Antonio Noriega, and a host of homeless veterans to establish his New World Order and rescue Queen Barbara. At the end of each wave, certain political goals were achieved, to great electronic fanfare and a profusion of points: a capital gains tax cut, a repeal of the 15th and 19th Amendments, and other redneck fantasies. The game was difficult enough under sober conditions, but after six beers in two hours, reaction time was longer, thumb speed slower. A flurry of naughty words filled the room, collecting like cum spots on the worn-out shag carpet.

"Eat my crusty shit, you motherfuckin' cocksucker!" Chub growled as his second-to-last George was vaporized by a Scud missile. Saddam turned his malevolent face toward the living room and filled the screen with his paternal (yet pernicious) grin.

Lester took the controls for his turn. "Dude, light up another."

"I won't have time to light it, the way you're goin'."

"Yeah, ya will, just watch me."

Lester's SuperGeorge was wiped out by pineapple-shaped grenades in 15 seconds.

"Who got you?"

"Japs!" Lester howled. "Motherfuckin' Japs! I'm gonna ride a Harley up your tiny, inscrutable asses, you yellow dogshits!"

"Les, when you get in trouble with the Japs, go to the top, hit A & B, and you can puke on 'em." Chub knew that the real purpose of this game was therapeutic: Take out your frustrations on foreigners, crack dealers, and liberals without actually having to kill any. The irony of zapping the coke lords while they, the players, were smoking weed was never brought up; the video-game character of the real-life campaign against Saddam Hussein, and the media's coverage thereof, never entered Chub's or Lester's mind.

Carolyn and Marilyn brought bags full of groceries in, trusting that the guys would not eat everything before Carolyn had a chance to put it all away. She tossed them a pre-emptive jumbo bag of corn chips to counter the munchies. She declined a hit off the latest joint.

"Why not?" Chub was suddenly bewildered, a rare condition for him.

"Just don't feel like it," she mumbled from the pantry.

"Lester, did you hear that? She *just don't feel like it*."

"It won't spoil, Chub," Carolyn insisted. "Maybe I'll have some later."

Marilyn nearly volunteered to take a few tokes in her sister's behalf, but remembered that she'd vowed to abstain. She also remembered that she did not enjoy the guys' company enough to risk joining them on a higher pharmacological plain—which probably would have taken some fast inhaling on her part.

"Chub," Chub finally hit the pause button and declared, "is not stupid. Chub thinks there's somethin' his lady isn't tellin' him. Chub would very much like to know."

"Carolyn folded a paper bag and said, "Let me give you a hint, sweetie: How many times have I told you not to buy generic rubbers?"

Gulp. Like draperies parting, Chub turned from ruddy to ashen from his bald pate to his scruffy neck as the realization trickled across his mind. Lester didn't look up from his new game as he let out a whoop and a guffaw. "Hot damn, buddy! Con-gratu-fuck-kin'-lations!"

Chub didn't know whether to puke or punch, so he did neither, just flopping into the convertible sofa and sighing a sigh as deep as a cruising sub.

Carolyn was indifferent to the whole situation. Marilyn was as shocked as her sister expected she would be. At least Lester was happy.

Evenings in April were pleasant enough in Atlanta, Freddie Balaguer thought, but not like Arecíbo, or even San Juan. There was no mountain breeze, no Caribbean stillness punctuated by playful gusts, but just a heart-landish calm as the night life prepared to take over. He had experienced three previous Aprils in Atlanta during his first three years at Georgia Tech, those happy years which made him feel he was earning his engineering scholarship. This April should have been marked by the listless procrastination of cramming for his last undergraduate exams, but his father's unexpected death in January led to his taking a leave of absence in February, deferring mortarboard and sheepskin until at least 1993.

Freddie, a darkly handsome but slightly nerdy young man with blue tinted contacts that accentuated his far-away look, worked evenings at that hellacious airport in Atlanta, pending more lucrative employment, for Air Grace. He worked the ramp for a minuscule wage and tremendous benefits including, of course, free travel. Air Grace was a peculiarly Southern corporate success story, having begun as a low-cost specialty line shuttling between New York and Atlanta with connections to puddle-jumper flights all over Georgia. Its logo, a streamlined dove, never let one forget the company's initial PR blitz in the early 1980s: "Christian-owned, Christian-flown." The campaign dove-tailed well with the sentiments of the Reagan-Bush-Falwell revolution, but it ended abruptly after a few Jewish pilots threatened to sue for discrimination. Of course, by then its niche was secured, and the airline would cater to hard-shell Christians and those who didn't mind sitting amongst them.

When Freddie was hired, Grace had two dozen 737s flying to and from five regular destinations: New York, Washington, Miami, Nashville, and Memphis. (There were also the puddle-jumpers to downstate destinations in Georgia, but they were

the concern of another division of the company.) At Memphis, gate agents in full Elvis regalia greeted arriving passengers and entertained those waiting to depart. Freddie was amused by the whole approach, and while his lukewarm Catholic upbringing in the Bronx never prepared him for such, he didn't feel too out-of-place at Grace. At Grace's three (pearly) gates at Airport Hell, Freddie was the resident intellectual, but he had no trouble relating to the kindly working stiffs around him. Okay, a little trouble. He was pretty fed up in the early going with dialog along these lines:

"See that there 737-300?"

"Yeah."

"Watch out ya don't get too close to that engine when it's spoolin'. It'll suck ya right in 'n' turn yo ass to hamburger meat lickety-split."

"So I've heard."—*about a dozen times.*

"Heard about a fella up in Charlotte got sucked in last year."

"I heard it was Greensboro."

"Maybe yo right, but it don't matter much to him, does it?"

Freddie felt it was his duty to pass on the 737 warning to anyone hired after him. He practiced his Georgia cracker dialect for full effect. He practiced the warning in his uptown Latino palaver: "Man, dat chingón will turn your sorry ass to hamburguesa rapidamente, homes! You go in Carlos, you come out ground Chuck, ése!"

The work was part-time, except when Freddie was needed full-time—filling in for another ramp agent was one way to get extra hours. The spiritual aching in Freddie, however, was full-time every week. Losing his father left him something of an orphan, since his always-distant mother had hidden herself away in Arecibo when he was eleven and made contact only

through Christmas cards with no return address. Her last card contained the longest spiel of non-information Freddie had ever read: superficial *¿cómo estás?* followed by a spate of mostly negative commentary about everything from that Clinton guy to the federal Food and Drug Administration to Puerto Rican soccer players jumping to the European leagues. How was she faring in her hometown for which she had pined so bitterly in Nueva York? She was either incapable of self-reference or too humiliated to tell anyone.

Cast adrift as he was, Freddie still went to mass each weekend when he could, offering prayers for both his parents; sometimes he ducked into the airport chapel during breaks. To him it was a reflex, not so much a ritual, especially since he had trouble fathoming the concept of an all-powerful being. Simply put, he was one of those agnostic science/engineering types who would love to hook up a potentiometer to God if the astronomers could ever find Him. Maybe enough hours at Air Grace would solve the whole Supreme-Being puzzle for him. Maybe Air Grace would initiate shuttle service to heaven, and he could fly there for nothing.

After throwing two tons of bags off a New York shuttle on this Sunday evening, Freddie was ready to head back to his duplex, to shower, to redress, to leap into his Mazda Miata (it had been Dad's) and drive into town to haunt Peachtree Center. Instead, his supervisor told him that it would be *real nice* if he could help out on one last special plane from Nashville, since Jerry Ware had messed up his ankle jumping out of a compartment too incautiously. Freddie was *real happy* to stay an extra hour or so, especially since his friend Holly was the lead agent on that gate.

Freddie sauntered over to Gate 57. "Whassup, Your Majesty?"

"Can it, bitch. I'm so pissed about this flight, I could just scream!" Ezekiel C. "Holly" Halden was the first overtly gay ramp agent at Air Grace. He survived on this predominantly redneck turf because he knew aikido and because the old Georgia rednecks on the ramp were too easy-going to get worked up

over him, too messed up in their own lives to point denouncing fingers, too amused by his antics.

"Is this plane runnin' late?" Freddie loved feeding Holly straight lines.

"Late? If it was any later it would be at the gyno office for a rabbit test. This big *penis* is forty fucking minutes behind schedule!"

"That's not too bad, Zeke."

"Call me Zeke again and I'll bust *both* your cherries. I'm going to miss Dead or Alive at the Billy Club—I've got tickets, dammit; hurry up, you flying dildo!"

"Holly, don't get too close to the engines while they're spooling—might be the last blow job you ever get!"

"Might be the first, too; I'm strictly a back-door man."

"That's not what your mama said."

"Oh, you leave that whore out of this—oop, here comes our bird. Yessss!"

Along with two co-workers, Freddie and Holly parked the plane, chocked it, hooked up air and electrical power, opened the compartments. They were all happy that they had to deal with just the bags, not the planeload of preternaturally cheerful square-dancers in town for a convention. Holly glanced into the Jetway and saw more checkered slacks and June Cleaver skirts than had ever been seen on one 737, even in Georgia. And the amount of cross and fish appliqués on those bags, more than on an average Grace special flight, could always be passed off as mere mute symbols of affiliation—relatively inoffensive even to Freddie the brooding agnostic.

It was a quick, intense offload. Holly was a competent leader on any gate, and he made his teams run like a Tom Landry offense, for which reason he was one of the highest-paid ramp

agents in Atlanta. It didn't bother anyone that he sent planes off to the taxiway by blowing big, two-handed kisses with his wands instead of giving the standard military salute. Like the Elvises in Memphis, he brought a bit of show-biz to air travel.

From deep left field, when they arrived back in the air-conditioned break room, Freddie asked Holly, "What's taking God so long?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"Almost two thousand years, no sign of Jesus except the occasional tortilla; what's takin' so damn long? Why doesn't God just end this shit NOW?"

Holly blinked and swallowed. "Haven't you read *Revelation*?"

"Not since I was a kid."

"Armageddon is one helluva production number! Big cast, props, costumes, *endless* rehearsals, budget hassles, finding the right Whore of Babylon—I'd play her, but I've already got a good job"

Freddie was in stitches—rare. "Tell me—ha!—the truth, sister. Do you believe?"

"In God?" Holly nodded. "Of course I do! What is life without Him? If I wasn't absolutely sure He was watching over me—"

"God is a voyeur?"

"Fuck you! Seriously, I don't have a church, cause there isn't a Baptist church in town that wants me, but I do have God, and that keeps me from, well, killing myself. He's stopped me more than once."

This time Freddie blinked and swallowed. "You're yankin' my chain, right?"

"No, Fred, God made me as I am, and if he fucked up, that's the whole world's problem, isn't it?"

"I don't think you're a fuck-up, Zeke."

"Ooh, wait till I get you in the aft compartment, you piece of Caribbean ass!"

Freddie clocked out and drove his Miata into the deepening purple horizon, up I-85 toward Peachtree, circled around the district once, and headed for his small apartment near the GT campus, feeling like a Ramblin' Wreck himself. His powerful but undeveloped mind rambled from one topic to another: mother, father, school, work, travel, football, isolation, love, lust, friendship, the tune-up he needed to give his car, the money for the parts, money in general, and being the only Puerto Rican in every one of his classes after growing up surrounded by his cultural familiars. Hell, there were plenty of Latinos at Georgia Tech, and he had joined the Hispanic Student Union in his freshman year, only to discover that he couldn't get along with the majority of the members (why? Who knew?). Friends, he concluded, were where you found them, and he found them everywhere, on campus and off—truth to tell, they usually found him. The young women flocked to him as their favorite confidant, since he listened so well, since his advice usually was on target, since he hid his own feelings so thoroughly even before his father's first coronary and his own first car wreck, and since he was perceived as such a non-threatening sexual cipher. What a way to spend your undergraduate years and no degree to show for it, not even a Bachelor of Virginité.

But who was waiting in the apartment complex's parking lot when the Miata finally slid in around 12:30 a.m.? Suspend disbelief, if you will.

The figure was distinctive even in the half-light: This clearly female figure was designed about as sinuously as the Divine Architect could shape her. If the shortest distance between two points is indeed a straight line, she was a long-distance call

from end to end, from her frizzy permanent to the vaulted arches of her feet. Five-foot-six, 140, honey-blonde, freckled, tank-topped, sun-toned, barefoot Corinne McCray, erstwhile Yellowjacket cheerleader, now temporary dropout, occasional unannounced nocturnal visitor, had not materialized at Freddie's parking spot since St. Patrick's Day, when she was upchucking green beer on an innocent mimosa tree. This time she was as sober as three ayatollahs.

"Hey, Fred."

"Hey, Cori."

"You got a long minute?"

"You got a long kiss for me?"

She gave him a half-hearted, but sincere, medium-tongue kiss. Something was up. They climbed the flight of concrete stairs and went inside. Freddie opened windows and poured two Cokes with lots of ice.

"What's on your little blonde mind, *amiguita*?"

"My sister. Did you ever meet Cherise?"

"The biker? Uh-uh."

"Well—This is hard, Fred."

"Yeah?—well, I'm easy."

"Freddie, this is serious. She's always been wild, especially by Franklin County standards. You know, she's livin' with this guy she met in Miami, we've never even seen pictures of him, but now they're up in Connecticut where he's makin' a livin' buildin' boats, and she's just, y'know, his old lady. Well, wild as she is, we always knew we couldn't stop her; she'd just have to do the Prodigal Daughter thing until she got in deep enough to realize that's no way to live."

"Maybe it's *her* way to live," Freddie counseled.

"I know my sister! Her last phone call, she said she was worried about her man, that he might be steppin' out on her, that the chick he's messin' with may be pregnant by him—who knows what she *didn't* tell me. Freddie, she's gonna wind up gettin' hurt real bad, I just *know* it."

"Cori, it sounds to me like there's nothin' you can say or do to stop that from happenin'—and isn't that what you want to happen anyway?"

"Yes, and yes," Corinne cast her eyes down and steeled herself. "She'll have to get hurt before she comes to her senses. But, **A.** I want to be there when it happens to keep her from doin' anythin' rash, and **B.** even though my mind is tellin' me to stay the fuck out of it, my heart won't let me."

"Did you practice that speech leavin' your *g's* off the ends of words and everything? I'm impressed! Now don't answer that—just tell me, what's my role in this?" Freddie was still a little pissed that Corinne had even shown up on a night when he felt the need to be alone and introspective.

"You'll come with me." It sounded like a statement of fact, not an invitation.

"Shit! In case you forgot, I have this thing called a *job*, which requires me to be at Atlanta International at certain *hours*, on certain *days*—" He was as volatile as he'd been in months as he paced the main room of the apartment, stepping over furnishings that had not yet been deployed in permanent spots. "Get fuckin' real! I mean—I guess I'm mad because I'd love to help you any way I can, but *you* know, I *know* you know that I can't just up and quit!"

"Fred, you just have to come up on your days off and get back in time for work again. Every week I'll pick you up at LaGuardia, and—"

"Cori, just give me some time to think about it, all right?"

She looked him up and down, left and right, and her face brightened a tad. "Get your butt in the shower and start thinkin', all right?"

He didn't argue, but got the shower warmed up and peeled off his uniform grey workshirt and red polyester slacks. She didn't give him much time to think. Within three minutes she was in the shower with him, scrubbing every pore on his bronze exterior, paying a little extra attention to scrubbing the muscle least involved in loading aircraft. When he came in her soapy hands, the ejaculation seemed to drain every festering wound on his psyche, including the one inflicted by the loss of his father. The water in the shower managed to stay warm long enough to carry Freddie off to Blissville, and Corinne practically carried him to his bed, where she dried him, tucked him in, climbed in beside him, and prepared to wait until morning for his answer and for a ride on the aforementioned muscle.