

## June

As it was becoming all too evident that the voters of the United States of America would soon get to choose from a moderately conservative Republican, a moderately liberal Democrat, and a collection of cranks, kooks, and Libertarians to fill its highest governmental office, the first wave of unceasing, unbearable heat *not* caused by politicians hit the southern regions. In Georgia, the trees were reminded again why they did not dare grow tall: The sun punishes such ambitions, such arboreal hubris. Only the pines seemed fit to challenge the lofty sun god, but even they looked a tad worn by the competition.

On a Friday afternoon, Freddie Balaguer stared out at acres of concrete, a playing surface for jets, gently sloped for drainage, not at all good soil for trees of any species. He wished for a tree: a big elm with wide-open, welcoming limbs, to break up the monotony and provide a little desperately needed shade. But trees attract birds, and, sadly, so do jet engines. Environmentally sensitive airports, he decided, were not yet feasible, but he looked forward to the day when the massively screwed-up airport where he parked 737s for God's Favorite Airline would be abandoned to Mother Nature. It was a great Southern institution: Nature tends to reclaim the efforts of civilization in the South, especially where the water table is high; e.g., New Orleans.

Air Grace, being a niche airline flying to a select set of cities, had fairly simple ramp work compared to bigger lines. Grace at the time had no air freight contracts. Grace did not carry priority mail to serve the mighty and socialistic United States Postal Service as other lines did. Grace did not have to transfer passengers' possessions from flight to flight nearly as often as the bigger lines, though they did often transfer bags to other lines that did reach other cities, and such transfers were rare. Almost every plane was loaded with exclusively baggage, baggage, baggage—quite a bit of which sported stickers with

church advertisements and corny pro-Christian slogans: "I BRAKE FOR DISCIPLES"; "HONK IF YOU'RE WISCONSIN SYNOD"; "JIM BAKKER IS INNOCENT"; "LAMB TOUGH"; "MARY WAS PRO-LIFE, THANK GOD" and others. Even to a believer like Holly Halden, it was a nauseating display of dogma. Freddie, the doubter, taught himself to ignore it all and wasted no energy castigating the dogmatists *in absentia*.

The two gents aforementioned were urgently tossing bags onto a beltloader parked hard against a 737-300 bound for Miami, where it was even hotter than Atlanta. Holly kept remarking that 140 straight, white, non-Jews had no good reason to fly to Miami in June, but this flight was filled to capacity, as every other flight on their gate had been that day.

Freddie had an idea. "Maybe they re goin' to convert everybody down there to hard-shell Baptists: all those heathen Cubans, Haitians, Jews, girls in thong bikinis "

"Shut up and help me with this white-trash carpet bag. The shit's fallin' apart."

The four-foot tweed bag with at least 90 pounds of personal possessions within had an incipient rip on top near the handles and on the bottom by the flimsy, plastic wheelbase. They managed to place it carefully on the belt, only to watch it get snagged at the top of the belt and torn completely down the wide side. With a plop that was audible over the whine of the auxiliary power unit, a mass of women's undies (size 36-38) tumbled to the greasy concrete ramp just as a gust of hot Piedmont wind blew through and threatened to scatter the panties of many colors all over the taxiway. There was very little else in the tattered carpet bag, apart from a few bottles of George Dickel Tennessee sippin' whiskey.

Freddie's first response was to stop the belt, point to Chuck and Carl in the cargo bin, signal them to hop down and sit on the unmentionables for a minute while he grabbed some trash bags from the women who cleaned the interior cabins between

flights. Holly's first response was to double over in fits of uncontrollable laughter.

When the panties had been stuffed into trash bags and back into their original container, Freddie and Holly resumed their task. Well, Freddie did; Holly needed a moment to compose himself.

"Come on, Holly, it's funny ha-ha, but not *that* funny."

"But it is!"

"How so?"

"The ID tag said—*HOO-HOO!*—said, 'Rev. Arthur Hill!'"

"Well," said Freddie with a smirk, "I'm sure God loves him, too."

Bag after bag after bag went up that belt into Chuck and Carl's capable hands, which stacked altogether 163 hard-sides, soft-sides, garment bags, gym bags, make-up cases, cardboard boxes, and a few strollers. The stacking job was pure architecture; those guys could build a replica of the Coca-Cola Tower out of luggage with their eyes closed.

Freddie and Holly pushed the plane off the gate with the pushback tractor, guiding it to the taxiway with Holly's customary show-biz kiss-off. For the first time in his memory, the first officer, a cutie with *that* kind of mustache, opened his window, leaned out, and blew a kiss right back.

In the break room Holly poked Freddie's ribs. "Oh my Gawd! Did you see that, Fred? He looks like Christopher Reeve with a mustache! When did that guy start working here?"

"I have no idea; never seen him before. You like him?"

"Federico, he's a Michelangelo!"

"Ninja Turtle?"

"He's a fucking Renaissance sculpture come to *life!* Oww! He's an angel in the cockpit, bay-bee!"

Freddie, who still had a lot to learn about man-to-man attraction in general, and about Holly in particular, was perplexed. "Do all you queers fall in lust like this?"

"Just the Aquarians. Libras—ha!—like you! sweat a little, sigh a lot, deny their feelings, and go on about their bidness. Have you ever been attracted to anyone like this—seen someone and said, 'Gotta have it'?"

Freddie had to think about that question. He couldn't remember a time that a particular person had made his heart play a percussion concerto from 50 feet away. "Does Cindy Crawford count?" he finally replied.

"Hey, speaking of Cindy Crawford, how's that cheerleader friend of yours?"

"Corinne? It's getting really weird, man."

"Why? What's she into?"

"Hyperactive imagination. She thinks I'm a hero of some kind, y'know, 'cause o' what went down at the Pizza Pit. She thinks she's like a mini-CIA trying to make her sister defect from Bikerland or turn double agent, I dunno. The way I see it, I'm just an ordinary guy who did an extra-ordinary thing, and her sister was born to ride Hogs, and Cori is living in a paranoid fantasy world."

"Aren't we all?" Holly half-seriously spewed.

"What's that s'posed to mean?"

"It means, sometimes I think we're acting out little dramas in someone's paranoid mind. The big question is, whose?" He blew his nose into a used paper towel that he rescued from the trash bin. "Maybe God's mind."

"Are you trying to say that God is a paranoid fanatic?" Freddie savored metaphysical discussions such as this. At Georgia Tech, he and some dorm-mates would stay up till the wee hours talking oddball metaphysics, high on caffeine, turning a stream of consciousness into a dam-bursting torrent.

"I dunno," Holly admitted. "But *I'm* a paranoid fanatic, and since God created us in his own image—"

"Now you're tellin' me God is queer!"

"Oh sure! That thing with the Virgin is just a cover-up."

"Fuuuuuck you! Hey, the next plane's comin' in early," Freddie noticed on the monitor.

"Shit, I thought I was gonna have time to do my nails. Let's go, Federico Chico!"

The plane from New York was another SRO affair. There were more bags than even Chuck and Carl could have fit in the belly of a 737-300. Freddie recognized the first one to tumble out of the forward compartment when the door was opened: a cherry red, hard-side Samsonite with the initials *CHM* emblazoned on the top, bearing a pink late-baggage destination tag.

"Cori's back!" he breathed to himself, unable to conceal his astonishment from Holly as he climbed into the compartment.

"Put your eyebrows back on your face, get in the bin, and unload this bitch!" Holly tried to sound like a lead agent as he shouted.

"My paranoid fantasy girl is back in town," Freddie protested.

Holly climbed into the compartment as soon as there was room for two. "Good for you."

"Naw, bad for me. If she wanted me to know that she was comin' back, she woulda called me. She's good at showin' up

unexpected, but she said she'd call and have me come and get her. Up in New York or Connecticut. This is—"

"—Weird."

"—weird."

Maybe Corinne was just dropping in on her parents, either to give them the details of her mission or to ask for more money, or both. Maybe she was abandoning the whole shebang. Maybe she forgot that she had signed up for summer courses, then suddenly remembered. Maybe she was homesick.

"You want the truth?" Corinne was cranky from the flight and her last visit with Cherise. "I got tired of hanging out with bikers," she told Freddie on the telephone that night. "And that grimy little city gets under my skin. And, shit, every time the Electric Boat whistle blew, at night and early in the morning, it would wake me up and send me into a panic, like there's an air raid or something. I had to get home. Now I've gotta gird my loins so I can go back and lay it on the line for Cherise."

Freddie was not satisfied with the explanation, rational and credible as it sounded. He was New Londoned out, himself—the little whaling city tends to repeat itself quickly, even when combined with all the neighboring towns and cities. He would ride around with Corinne, commenting, "There's the train station for the fourth time today; and sure 'nuff, there's the housing projects, right where they were this morning." And bikerdom wasn't his scene, either, though he had met some interesting, very real characters. One of the guys had bought Freddie a few beers the previous weekend after he recognized him as the dude who had foiled the Pizza Pit robbery.

Wasn't he Lester DeWitt, the guy who was training for some off-the-wall contest in Africa? Unfortunately, Lester had a friend who had tried to turn Freddie on to some powder cocaine, and that's when Freddie left the Pickle Pub and walked the mile or so to Union Station, undecided whether to hire a cab or board an Amtrak to New York, winding up taking a Purple Cab across

the bridge to the Bergamotel, finding himself a dollar short of the fare, and mumbling, "Tommy Luczinski knows I'm good for it." The driver, a Somebody Something-owicz, made the connection instantly: "You re the dude who fucked up those G-boys at the Pizza Pit! Fuckin' A! Ride's on me, chief."

Those G-boys were one reason Freddie could never safely return to the Bronx. Fortunately, he had no foreseeable reason to return there. He was certain that Los Escorpiónes del Infierno would be after his ass, and a phone call to an old schoolmate from Bronx Science confirmed his suspicions. Rogelio Barron was genuinely concerned. "Escorpiónes didn't plan no trip to New London just to knock over some pizza joint; man, they're expandin' operations. If their boys get hurt, they start puttin' the word out, and there's vengeance in the air, man. Trouble for them is, those boys are so stupid, they're always getting' hurt, and sometimes, like, they trip over their own big feet, know what I'm sayin'? Anyway, you're safe in Atlanta, 'cause, like, they got no connections there, but if you was to go to Miami? Shit, I couldn't guarantee nothin'. In New London, you just better watch your back."

All that replayed through Freddie's mind as he hung up on Corinne. Things were so much simpler when all they did together was fuck, sleep, and go out for breakfast at Waffle House or Lulabell's Hominy Hut. But Corinne needed this Puerto Rican guardian angel to help rescue her wayward sister, and nobody could think of the right words to tell Cherise, "Be a good little girl and come back to Georgia, pick peaches for the rest of your life, and marry a quarterback and do the happily-ever-after bit."

Freddie's next conscious thoughts came about ten hours later. Only a dream in which Cherise, naked, straddling his prone body, was unable to unbuckle his belt and was cursing in perfect puertorriqueño dialect, woke him just before 9 a.m. He had 45 minutes to shower, dress, and get to his medical appointment.

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Virginia Dare, so goes the legend, was the first English child born in North America. In 1587, when the conspicuously all-male Spanish hordettes had already raped and pillaged Mexico and Peru, the contrastingly co-ed English settlement at Roanoke Island gave birth to a purely European child and a purely insoluble mystery: The entire colony vanished.

Were the Roanoke settlers killed by Natives? by Spaniards en route from Florida? by mosquitoes? Did they go native themselves? Who stole Sir Walter Raleigh's beloved colony?

"There's a simple explanation," Paige Fencik Travertino assured her audience as she plied her summer job as an Outer Banks New Age tour guide. Paige, a tall, greying, freckle-faced, irascible associate professor of physics at Coastal Carolina University, claimed to be a medium for Virginia Dare and thus a conduit of "evidence" that infant souls mature in the afterworld. When she lectured—indeed, whenever she had control of the direction of a conversation—she spoke in cautious, measured tones, with a voice and cadence that either hypnotized or annoyed the listener.

"It's the magic of the Outer Banks. The Roanoke colonists enϕountered the magic, and, being good Protestants, refused to recognize an earthly metaphysical force. They could have followed the wisdom of the Natives and ridden the wave, but *no*, they had to deny their senses and defend their monotheistic worldview. Probably just to demonstrate their power to the incredulous English, the spirits brought forth a great wave and wiped out everything and everyone in one long, horrible moment. This explanation, which I received from Virginia Dare, matches one that the Natives have handed down through the generations, a story which white historians have never bothered to consign to print because, well, they're white historians.

"By the way, Wright Brothers fans, it seems that the brothers made a careful study of places whose wind currents might be favorable to powered flight. There were many places in North America that they could have chosen, but only one had the

significant advantage of this, well, for lack of a better term, magic. They could have stayed in Dayton, Ohio, and got their plane off the ground eventually, but the elements were right for them here. What the Wright Brothers knew—and this is the incredible part—is that the Powhatan tribe had a kind of shaman who would go into deep trances that allowed them to fly like gulls. We're not talking levitation or astral projection now, we're talking actual soaring. The shaman would pass the secret on to his successor—a proven, worthy successor—generation after generation. This successor is the true original meaning of the mystery word *Croatoan*, discovered carved into a fence post in the ruins of the colony."

Pseudo-science? New Age fluff? Maybe. The whole scenario could have been easily dismissed as so much speculation if Dr. Travertino did not have such impressive academic credentials: M.S. degrees in both physics and chemistry from Duke and Johns Hopkins, respectively; Ph.D. in physics from Johns Hopkins; assistant professorship at age 30 after two years of post-doctoral travails at Coastal Carolina, during which she had begun channeling various ordinary people from the past and eventually a celebrity, Virginia Dare. Earlier in her life Paige had giggled that "Virginia Dare" was a code-name for what probably killed off the colonists, which happens to share Virginia Dare's initials.

What complicated matters, however, was that another woman without such impressive credentials had claimed to be channeling Virginia for 20 years, since Paige had first moved to Ocracoke Island with her husband Nick, a semi-retired economics professor; the Ocracoke channeler's obvious eccentricity did not make Nick look credible by comparison, since he was easily and frequently lumped into the same loony camp by outside observers unfamiliar with the work of both Travertinos.

What Paige advanced to the scientific community as an explanation for her odd notions was the oft-proposed theory that metaphysics should be treated with more respect than the

post-enlightenment world had afforded it, as just another branch of science, even if it could never get the required funding from skeptical trustees. The human race might be able to learn some amazing information from defunct ancestors, she insisted; the information could supply some missing jigsaw pieces in the scientific explanations of many phenomena. Why not?

Paige continued her Saturday afternoon pre-tour lecture to the assembled tourists at the Kill Devil Hills Community Center. A few local residents sat in, as well.

"Needless to say, most people in America with any education beyond, oh, sixth grade dispute my methods, my findings, my explanations of my findings. But how are so many of those same people able to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the product of a quickie between the Holy Spirit and a teenage Virgin, and that he healed blindness and leprosy where physicians had failed, and that he walked on the surface of a body of water—not the Dead Sea, with its well-known buoyancy—? I could go on and on. My view of these people is that they are afflicted with something even Jesus couldn't cure: the same narrow-mindedness that wound up destroying the Roanoke Party. Chances are extremely slim that the same fate awaits these Doubting Thomases who still don't follow the magic; however, as little Virginia understands the magic, the people of this nation who are willing to overcome their cultural biases toward what I call monotheopantodynamism—that's the belief in only one God, who is all-powerful—will eventually be lifted to a very exalted position and may be the ones who save America from the cesspool of history. In other words, broad-minded people like you will survive and eventually rule what is left of the world.

"We have time for a few questions..."

Twenty hands shot up. The questioners were full of enthusiasm, but either hyper-intellectual or meta-Shirley MacLaine. Hank Truber, who had sat through the proceedings stock-still and silent, stood up with great effort after the tenth

question and spoke out before Paige could point and call his name.

"Mrs. Travertino just gave a clear, concise speech, and y'all had to muck it up with all this hogwash—I told you, Paige, that I'd be polite as I could—have you people no sense of decorum? Some people, I swear, would put lava lamps on the Sistine Chapel. I just want all of you tourists to know that the magic of the Outer Banks is real, and that it affects different people in different ways, to different degrees, and ain't none o' you folks equipped to explain it. Example: It makes me clairvoyant, a gift that I would be happier without, believe you me. People who have lived or visited here for any length o' time are familiar with my gift, and how it dissipates the farther I get from the Wright Brothers Monument. I get up to about the Virginia border, and I'm no more clear about things than any o' you folks. Well, I've spoken my piece, and now I'll depart." He tried to scoot out from his position in the middle of a row.

"Mr. Truber!" a local teenage Deadhead boy arrayed in full-frontal tie-dye piped up. "My friend from out of town would like a demonstration of your clairvoyance, sir."

"I don't take requests," Hank snapped. "Besides, how do all these people know that I don't already know you and your friend intimately? A stunt like that is too easy to set up in advance. So, friend, just get in your Camaro and go back to Baltimore."

The friend was genuinely stunned, but he had the presence of mind to say, "Uh, actually, I live in Towson—"

"Yep, in a two-story brick Georgian about a mile and a quarter from the Towson State campus," Hank finished, unable to help himself. "And since you won't leave when you're asked to, I guess I'll have to shove off. There's somethin' about you that I thoroughly dislike." No one ever found out what that something was.

Paige cleared her throat in an annoyed, but ladylike fashion. "Are there any more questions?"

Her husband Nick ran his fingers through his thinning, sandy hair, then stood up in the third row, stage right. "Paige, the Orioles game is starting soon. Can I just go home now?"

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As she suspected, Andi could find none of Wilf Adamante's published works in the library of any high school in Passaic County. The city library of Paterson had no copies. The library in Elizabeth had two obscure titles from the late '70s on the shelves, several others in the catalog listed as lost or stolen. Bearded Rainbow Books in Hoboken had several used editions, though, and Andi, loath to pay full price for anything, hustled to Hoboken.

The clerk at Bearded Rainbow insisted that everyone in her English class thought Adamante wrote proto-hippie trash, the kind of meandering gobbledy-gook that anyone who wasn't there at the birth of the Flower Child movement simply didn't get. No one in her class would explore beyond the assigned story "Talk to Your Yogurt" on a double dare. This clerk was a sophomore at Morristown who was considering transferring to Fairleigh Dickinson. Andi stuffed the paperbound volumes into her purse, threw the receipt on the floor, and dispensed the advice: "Don't go to FDU. Trust me, you'll hate it. They make you think there."

On this particular Tuesday evening, Andi had time for a little reading. Cross-country practice had shut down to give the athletes a chance to prepare for exams, which Andi knew even the best of her girls would fail because they hadn't a clue how to study for big tests. She would have to provide those clues in special study sessions for which she would not get paid extra. Since her health exams were already written and xeroographed, she had little left to do, schoolwise, making her the envy of her co-workers.

One of the three collections of Adamante's short stories, the one whose cover claimed that the pages were bleached with a lysergic acid solution, contained a preface that Wilf had written in 1984, assessing the evolution of his ideas since the wild '60s. She was struck by a series of "I Believe"s which every critic who ever sniffed at the Adamante oeuvre seemed to have conveniently ignored:

*I believe that these stories have no lasting literary value. I believe that their only value lies in conveying to future generations the mindset of the first generation of Americans coming of age in the shadow of the Almighty Atom. I believe that God's real name is Atom, meaning "That Which Cannot Be Divided," but now that man has divided the atom the way man has been dividing up God for centuries...*

*I believe it's time we recognize where true power resides: in everyone and everything.*

*I believe that conquest and oppression do not represent exercises of true power. I believe that women, the oppressed half of the human race, hold power over men because the oppressors act out of fear; the subconscious and universally understood male motto is "Dominate the Other, lest she dominate you." The same is true of whites' oppression of people of color in America and Africa. I believe that the failure of black humanity to get its shit together after emancipation stems from the loss of that power held by the oppressed.*

*Mostly, I believe that the more distance we put between ourselves and Nature, the less firm our connection with Nature's true power becomes, and the less actualized our grip on that power, and the more we will continue to oppress and squander the human and natural resources which Mother Earth provides, for we will know only fear, unable to act on anything else.*

*The root of hatred is fear, and the root of fear is ignorance, and the root of ignorance is often unwillingness to learn, which is often rooted in the inability to love unconditionally the*

*unfamiliar, the Other, and this inability is often rooted in the inability to love oneself. If you can learn to love yourself, then see a tiny bit of yourself in the Other, you can love, and you can break the vicious cycle.*

*If my words have any message deeper than "Eat magic mushrooms and be a flower child like me," this is it (all credit to the Buddha): "ἀγαπή γινώσιστε," love and knowledge, especially of the self. That is where it all begins.*

So obvious, thought Andi, and yet so difficult for the average person in 20th-century America. No wonder the '60s revolution failed to take hold: It was based on love, and to love is so terribly difficult. Six thousand years of civilization, and we still haven't got it right. The Church says, "All your worldly plans are superseded by one divine plan, you puny, insignificant Fig Newton of Jehovah's imagination!" The State says, "Let us take care of you—prevention of crime and defense of the realm are jobs too big for ordinary citizens like you. Trust your elected representatives to gauge the general will and make the decisions." The Corporation says, "We know what you need to lead a healthy, productive life; here it is, now buy it before somebody else does. Have some sugar with that." And the Church, the State, and the Corporation speak with eerily similar voices!

Here was the point that kept Andi from carrying out terrible acts of existentialist violence: *Church/State/Corporation must respond to my needs in order to survive. If Wilf is right, I, the conquered, have the power, much as Greece had power over its Roman conquerors in the days of the Caesars.*

Was this the Tao that lurked behind Cindy Lou Hu's crocodilian smile? Was this the self-knowledge that upheld the seemingly eternal patience of, say, Tibet under Chinese occupation? Was this the reason humans had subjected themselves to the whims of a faceless Deity for so many generations?

*I am the oppressed. I have true power.*

*Shit. If I can figure it out that easily, it must not be correct.*

*But I didn't figure it out; it's here in this book.*

*Then it's definitely not correct. Books lie. But it's worth thinking about.*

Almost without thinking about it, Andi punched up Cindy Lou's number on her cordless phone. Over in Chinatown, an answering machine was holding down the fort; it spoke with Cindy's voice:

"Shalom. This is Ms. Hu's personal receptionist. I'm unable to take your call because I'm having my nails done. Please leave your message on the tape, and I will call back and probably leave a return message on your machine as soon as my nails are dry or hell freezes over, whichever comes first. Don't forget to include your name, astrological sign, phone number, savings account number, favorite dessert, and the names of any eligible men whom Ms. Hu can, uh, *elig.*" *Beep.*

"Beep, yourself. This is Andi, Gemini, 201-817-9057, account number 3—very old money, don'tcha know—my favorite dessert is head cheese *flambé*, and if I knew any eligible men, I would've eliged them by know. Cindy Lou, I think I'm on the path to enlightenment. Not ready to shave my head, but maybe you and I can go check out the selection of saffron robes at Bloomie's. Call me! Luego, dude."

As soon as she re-cradled the receiver, her telephone bleeped, like a wake-up call from Prince Siddharta himself, sending sparks to every extremity of Andi's slender bod and back to converge on her fourth chakra. "Hello?"

*Pause, exhale.* "You sound perky this evening." It was Prince Siddharta—the Italo-Cuban-American version.

"Wilf? Hey, I've just been book-shopping, and guess what I found?"

"I know you've been book-shopping. I saw you."

"You were in Hoboken today?"

The scratching of his scalp came over the line. "Sort of. Not physically. I used to laugh at people who talked about astral projection, out-of-body this and that, but now I've projected. I meditated on your face—I mean, I th—er, concentrated on it, you know, and then when I hit theta-stage consciousness, *badda-bing!* I was on Church Street in Hoboken; there was Andromeda, wearing a white work shirt, black stirrup pants, and black L.A. Gear cross-trainers with purple accent stripes."

Andi examined herself to see whether she matched the description. Everything but the shoes, which she had removed when she got home, was correct. "That's amazing. A little scary, though, that anyone would wind up astrally projecting to Hoboken—ooh, I'm dyyyyyy-in'!" She was quoting Bugs Bunny. "But amazing, nonetheless."

"Andi, come over ASAP."

"I don't have any money for the toll; spent what I had on books."

"Then I'm coming to see you. How do I get there?"

"Uh, astrally project yourself onto I-80 West—Wilf, you don't have a car!"

"*Taxi!* There. He actually stopped. Now I have a car." He got the directions via his cellular phone while riding toward the Westside Highway in the back of a gypsy cab.

Meanwhile, Andi made a half-hearted attempt at making her apartment somewhere between "livable" and "lived-in," mainly by picking up sweats, stockings, and earrings that were strewn about the place. Her task was made easier by the compactness of the floor plan. She opened a bottle of red wine which someone had given her last Christmas and which she

had never had a special occasion to open—testament to a celibate six months. Andi tried to shelve any expectation that the involuntary celibacy would soon end, for fear of the imminent disappointment that follows high expectations, but those expectations kept tumbling back off the shelf.

If only Andi could unclutter her mind as easily as her apartment! She tried a few tricks to make the whole question of boinking Wilf irrelevant and even distasteful, saying aloud, "This man is old enough to be my *dad*," though thinking that he'd make a very poor replacement for the late Mr. Sichler, who had always seemed a good ten years older than his chronological age, while Wilf seemed a decade younger than his. She recalled squirming at the reggae dance-hall hit "I'm in Love with a Girl Who Is Half My Age" when she was 20; 40-year-old men sag, wear bad clothes, have that paternal smell like Dad—

The young cross-country coach found herself sitting motionless with a taupe stocking in her left hand, an ivory in her right, her muscular ass parked between her full-size bed and a plywood wall, on the well-worn carpet that remembered the height of the disco years. Dad. Mom. She'd spent so much time not thinking about them, the accident, the funeral, and the most painful part of all, probate court. She'd wanted all the money. If she couldn't have her parents, she'd take the cash. That way, whenever the spirits moved her, she could have a drink or three in their honor. She'd given away all the furnishings—their extensive collection of American kitsch and international tchotchkes which Mom had bought for shock value, and poor old Dad had bought because he genuinely liked the stuff. She'd sold the house, a Levittown-style crackerbox on a quarter-acre of Jersey clover. Amazingly, all her uncles and aunts had conspired to fuck up this three-car funeral by making claims on the estate, especially Uncle Bill Daniel, the one with no agricultural acumen, whose income consisted of Social Security, \$300 a month from his siblings, and his skill at poker. Uncle Bill was not even mentioned in the will, so he received

nothing; the lawyers on both sides, however, made out quite well.

*Buzz.* The doorbell caught Andi in mid-brood. She stuffed the stockings under the bed and checked her cheeks for tears (there were none; she could not afford them). Despite her lightest barefoot treading, every stair squeaked on the way down. *Gotta oil them stairs.*

She pulled the door open practically without touching the knob, like an Old Western gunfighter who fires a six-shooter before he touches it, turning a simple mechanical act into a zipless fuck.

No roshi-robe, no tweed, not an elbow-patch for miles, and no Manhattan affectations of Euro-chic: Wilf wore a simple, blue, short-sleeve work-shirt and a broken-in pair of jeans that extended to his ankle bones, with white athletic socks and Reeboks that still smelled new. Regular-guy Wilf? Was he trying to blend into these suburban environs, or was this just the Wilf that appears when the elbow-patch crowd dissipates?

"Ciao, Andromeda."

"Nobody ever calls me that. Ciao, Wilfredo. Did your cabbie find that shortcut I told you about?"

"He said he knew a better one. The ride only cost 26 bucks."

"Used to get a fancy dinner for that much. Uh, are you coming in?"

"I'd like that." Andi led the way, every stair squeaking beneath her feet; he followed, squeakless.

She was suddenly, visibly irked and mystified. "Hey—the stairs don't squeak when you step on 'em! You're heavier than I am, you're wearing shoes, and no squeaks!"

"Maybe it's karma. Is yours heavy lately?"

"Shit, I don't think so. Haven't weighed it lately. Why might yours be any lighter?"

"Shit, I don't know." They paused at the top of the stairs before entering, looked directly at each other, and giggled the way Andi and Cindy Lou often did in the teachers' work room. She said nothing, though it bothered her, and motioned him in, closing and deadbolting the door.

"Now you can explain what brings you out to Joisey, Mr. Never Leaves the Island."

He reached into his left breast pocket, pulled out an elegantly rolled Thai stick. "First, uh, I'm a little nervous, so, uh, is this the smoking section?"

"I opened a bottle of wine. Do you serve red or white with that stuff?"

"Doesn't matter. Do I smell patchouli?" He made the face of a guest about to be subjected to two hours of vacation slides. "Is that stuff really coming back into style?"

Andi lit a vanilla candle which would mask both the patchouli odor and the odor of the contraband that Wilf had brought. He lit the stick in the flame of the candle and took a healthy lungful of the sublime cannabinoid fume while Andi poured the Beaujolais. Andi was not nearly as familiar with the Thai stuff, but knew enough to suck less fervently than she would regular street dope. She still nearly coughed herself across the room after taking half a hit, at the same time feeling essences of hot colors rising from her lungs and diaphragm to her cerebrum like half a rainbow giving her a sucker punch that penetrated her flesh and bone and kept going in search of the other half. When she finally caught her breath, she said the most profound thing she could: "Wow!"

"OK, here's how you breathe for maximum effect: You—"

"I'm not sure I want maximum effect," Andi wheezed. "I have to teach in the morning!"

"Trust me. First get in the lotus. Good. Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes, took a sip of wine. She saw the red, yellow, and orange streaks figure-eighting across her eyelids.

He continued. "Now put your mouth in an O-shape, take three quick inhales, hold, and a long exhale." He demonstrated, she repeated. The colors fell through the ice as it melted into a tropical lagoon, and a few of the colors went swimming. Andi kept up the breathing routine, then the both of them breathed in synch as they relaxed and prepared for another hit.

"Wait," she said in her back-to-earth voice, keeping her eyes shut. "What does the dharma say about this stuff? Does it approve?"

"The dharma is interested in balance," he explained. "Drugs are not evil, they just have to be offset with something equal and opposite."

"Okay, roshi, what's the opposite of marijuana?"

"I think you can figure that out for yourself. Are you ready for some more?"

Andi took three more pufflets; Wilf took a drag that would kick the Jolly Green Giant's ass and nearly finished the stick right then. He guided Andi through the respiratory regimen again, once-twice-thrice, and she began giggling uncontrollably. "What year is it?" she managed to ask through the bubbles of laughter.

"It's 1968," Wilf replied. "There's a Presidential election coming up between a hate-monger, a red-baiter, and LBJ's running dog; two guys who might have saved the nation from itself have been wasted by FBI-paid assassins, and I'm having

meaningful conversations with a *Ficus benjamina*. Oh yeah, Judy Garland is about to O.D. on some prescription downers."

The giggling ceased abruptly, and Andi opened her eyes—she was not high, not entirely sober, but in a state of heightened awareness, like a kid who has figured out that Santa Claus is imaginary but a very beneficial fantasy and IT'S OK that Santa doesn't exist, REALLY!

Wilf had come to make a simple request, but at this point he felt compelled to turn it into an oration, a sermon. "Andi, dig this scene: The world of 1992 is considerably less fucked up than the world of 1968 in some ways. In other ways, it's worse. In '68 we tried to improve things, but the revolution was bought, like every other attempt to change the way USA, Incorporated, does business, going back to the Whisky Rebellion. First, you beat down the rebels, you justify it in the name of defending democracy, you beat them down some more, find the weak links in the rebellion, and buy them out, sometimes with cash, sometimes with bread and circuses. Do you know anything about Woodstock?"

She nodded. "My parents wouldn't let me go to concerts until I was at least in training pants, though."

"Woodstock was just bread and circuses, a new twist on the oldest way of pacifying the masses. It wound up pacifying this generation of freaks that threatened to swallow the nation whole with its sheer numbers. It was a way of making us feel good about living in a nation where such an event was possible, even while the nation was raping and murdering in Southeast Asia. It made us feel empowered, some of us enough to grow up and run for public office, or go into the corporate merry-go-round thinking we could control the horses and ride them in whole new directions. So what happened? Those damned horses kept going up, down, and around in circles. The revolution petered out and could never get its shit together again. Now every social movement has some event that makes everybody feel like, 'All right, we've licked that little crisis, and it's time to move on to something else,' but the crisis

is still there—just in a different shape." Wilf was sweating profusely by this time, only partly from the heat and humidity of the evening in the second-floor apartment with no air conditioning.

Andi was terribly bummed out by the sermon, but she tried not to let it show. With typical Generation-X detachment, she blinked, "Yeah, so what's your point?"

"Pointlessness, like my prose," he huffed. "Revolution is futile, but change is inevitable. I want a new American Evolution. I want the average Joe and Josie to be as ready for the new age as any crystal-wearing, George Winston-listening, Sri Chimnoy-following, Woodstock-pilgrimage Yupster. I want to be the American Lenin, dammit, giving out the message that what people think, produce, and consume, truly matters. And that individual people matter, and especially that children matter. Fuck, if people took care of their kids half as well as they take care of their cars, man, just think about it!"

Andi could relate to that: She thought about the kids at Paterson South. She also remembered how immaculate her father's 1978 New Yorker had been when it plowed into that 18-wheeler in 1990.

Wilf went on. "But no Lenin can work alone. I think you should join me on my tour this summer and help me spread the message—be part of my revolution."

"Whoa! I think you should smoke some more of this!" Andi never liked being told what she *should* do. "I need to *work* this summer to help *pay* for some more *schooling*, so I can *earn* more for what I *do*, which is *teach children*."

"I promise you," Wilf pointed right at Andi's heart, "that nothing in any graduate curriculum will be more educational or more valuable than a spin around the country with the Plaid Flamingo road show and Yours Truly. You can go to grad school any other year; this may be your only chance to hitch a ride on the Flamingo."

"Look, Wilf," Andi protested, "you've only met me once, so how do you know I'm qualified for this gig? What makes you think I can contribute anything?"

"Two sources of information: Cindy Lou Hu and my heart's intuition," he said slowly and emphatically, pointing to his own heart. "Both of them will be on this tour."

"Cindy's going, too? Excellent!"

"In fact, she's going with some reluctance, but she said your presence would make it easier for her."

Andi was still not completely sold on the proposal. She grabbed her cross-training shoes, put them on, said, "Walkies! I need a little fresh air to help me make up my mind."

"Can you walk straight?"

"I can walk straight, stoned, in-between, yeah, no worries."

"It's dark out."

"But the neighborhood's a little nicer than yours. Come on, old man."

They walked to a nearby branch of a park that follows the Passaic River, through the mostly deserted playground, around the pond, occasionally glancing up toward the moon, which ached to be full, but was at least a day away from circularity. The moon reflected what Andi felt through the course of her life: the near-completeness of experience, but with no satisfactory *dénuement*, ever defined by things she almost did, always running a good race and finishing second.

"The moon is a virgin," she said from left field. "Artemis the huntress—back at FDU the Lesbians called themselves Sisters of Artemis. Corny!"

"I always thought it was odd," Wilf added, "that she was also the patroness of childbirth. But it's all bullshit. The moon is a

big rock littered with little rocks, not even ripe for tourism. That was one of the hardest lessons my generation ever learned."

"I thought *my* generation was unromantic!"

"Your generation is utterly hopeless."

"Shut up," she said.

"Make me," he said.

She did. She grabbed him by the collar of his working-class shirt and wrestled him to the ground near the end of a playground slide, where the dirt was still muddy from three days of intermittent rains. She had both of his shoulders pinned to the ground in seconds, her right arm barring down his torso, her left hand grasping his lips and clamping them together. He had forgotten in what shape she was and he wasn't.

But his tongue was able to emerge through the clamped lips and lick her palm—not with the defiance of an immobilized prey, but with the forgiveness of a loving god, indeed, with a dash of eroticism. He tongued a certain nerve ending, which sent a shudder through Andi's system and set all her neurons to gossiping. She forgot what she was doing and commanded, "Do that again!"

In that same pose, he licked at that same spot on her palm for a minute that seemed like a two-week vacation in Jamaica—i.e., long enough to relax but over much too soon. It was as if her clitoris had gone for a walk and got lost in the neighborhood of her metacarpals. She began breathing harder, deeper, in triplicate as with the Thai stick, with little shivers and moans. Fortunately, no one was around to witness it but the ducks by the pond, who were just a little annoyed at having their sleep interrupted, but not enough to say anything about it.

"I could fuck you right here and now," she whispered, withdrawing her moistened hand, "but I think I can wait till we get back to the apartment."

"Wanna race?"

"How 'bout we just walk fast?"

They walked back very quickly without speaking a word, were up the stairs, out of their clothes, and prophylacticized in an imperceptibly short moment by THC time, and back in the playground position, scrumping away before Andi even had a chance to think about it. She rode his latex-clad cock like a bronco-buster, with one hand raised, the other on the reins of his tongue. In 23 years she never knew about that one spot on her palm, or she would have made a habit of licking it herself long before; Wilf found it by instinct in their second evening together. When she climaxed, the hot colors turned to incandescent white before her eyes, then resolved to green pond, blue stream, violet sky.

"Yes!"

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"No."

"I'm afraid so."

"Why?"

The obstetrician, Dr. Nancy P. Glancy, took off her spectacles the way doctors do on television when about to administer hard-to-swallow explanations. She put her right hand on Carolyn Olin's left shoulder and looked directly into her puffy eyes. "It's very common in women who are overweight, even as little as 20 pounds. I'll make it easy for you though—well, easier—and give you a list of things you can't eat. You'd be surprised where sugar and salt pop up in the American diet. Oh, and if you really need salt, get some sea salt at the health food store, or at that Asian market on Williams Street."

"Will I go back to normal after I have the baby?"

"I give you a pretty good chance. If you watch your diet and don't have any complications, you'll be okay."

"Great. Avoid complications. I like that." Carolyn grabbed a tissue from the dispenser and blew her nose. She was exactly half-way through her 272-day act of creation, and the belly was already fit to burst. "Doctor, I have to know: What does your P stand for?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your middle initial. I trust that Glancy is your married name, 'cause you don't look very Irish."

The doctor almost blushed. "My maiden name is Phuc. My parents and my brothers and I came here from Da Nang." She spoke as if it were the millionth time she'd covered this territory. "I was Huyen Phuc, changed to Nancy when we immigrated, eventually I married Tim Glancy, who is a redheaded Irish devil."

"My old man is a *bald*-headed Irish devil—well, a little Froggy on his father's side."

"Is your Irish Froggy behaving himself?" Dr. Glancy inquired. "Didn't you insist that he lose a few bad habits on the way to fatherhood?"

"He's doing it the only way he knows how: He works overtime, double shifts some days. Fine by me, y'know, 'cause it makes the home front less stressful, and he brings home twice as much. If I didn't see every paycheck myself, I wouldn't believe it; somehow we're keepin' up with the bills."

"Excellent. Now. Let's go through the no-no's quickly, because I have another patient to pester."

They recited the no-no's together, along with some new ones to accommodate gestational diabetes: cigarettes, alcohol, pot,

other drugs, coffee, soft drinks, fast food, sugar, salt, aspirin, standing in front of the microwave while it's running—

Carolyn was about ready to enter a convent. As long as one is abstaining from all worldly pleasures, one might as well get to know God a little better, right? Nah, leave that to Marilyn, since she's the self-appointed family spiritual guide. Marilyn was getting weird lately, first having read the entirety of Father Corcoran's published pabulum, which had turned her into a walking New Age friendship card, and then having latched onto the available works of an author whom Corcoran cited in a footnote as the person "whose works contain more truth per square paragraph than any other 20th-century American writer's." Some ex-hippie-type named, uh, Wilf.

At Joe's Health Food and Pasta Emporium, Carolyn ran into none other than Lester DeWitt, whom she hadn't seen since the end of April. Lester had bulked up an amazing amount in a month and a half; she knew that he enjoyed a good workout and was always strong enough to lift and toss a full tank of oxy-acetylene, but now whoa! he'd had an apparent Schwarzenegger-oplasty.

"This fuck-kin' protein powder, man!" He held up a can of high-energy stuff that looked like every other can of high-energy stuff in the store, complete with some superhuman's bare torso. "The first one I've found that does the miracles it claims to do. I was maxin' out at 420 on the bench, 30 reps, and now I do 510! The shit *works!*"

"Why? I mean, what's this extra muscle for?"

Chub had not told her about Lester and Horace's entry in the Primal Man Triathlon. Lester gave her the short version of what the Triathlon was all about.

"Are you out of your fuckin' gourd, Lester?" she grimaced.

"You know I am. Besides, I'm sick o' workin' for somebody else. I worked for the government, I worked for the Boat, now

I'm gonna be workin' for me. And Horace. But I see more than that, y'know. I see a chance to prove what human beings can do, facin' nature without all the modern tools 'n' shit. It's been good for me, 'cause, y'know, you don't just prepare physically. Ya gotta know what to do about little things that come along. Mosquitoes! Think of all the diseases mosquitoes in Africa might carry. Ya gotta find out what stuff already exists in the jungle to keep mosquitoes away. So whaddya do?"

"Um, go to the library and read up on it?"

"BINGO!" Lester was thrilled. "When I was a kid, five or six, I'd go to the library, like, every fuck-kin' week. Then all this peer pressure got a-hold o' me: 'Hey, DeWitt, come play some football; DeWitt, let's go sneak into an R-rated movie; libraries are for pussies, DeWitt.' Eventually I forgot how much fun it was just learnin' about the world at your own speed—like, at seven I knew more about sex than most teenagers, 'cause I'd *read* about it. Now it's like I'm gettin' my childhood back. D'you know I haven't been inside a bar in almost a month?"

"Look, Les, my plain yogurt is gettin' warm; it has to get home. But I think this library thing is great. Give us a call some time, eh?"

Lester promised that he would, finished his shopping, and motored the half-mile to Jim Bob's Gym, the athletic club on the rough side of town, with no carpeting, no aerobics classes, no racquetball courts—just lots and lots of free weights and Nautilus devices. Horace was already there, warmed up and ready, amongst the bikers and rough trade and scrappy women like Alysse LeComte O'Donoghue Schmidt of the Pickle Pub. Alysse was on the pull-down machine, moving what seemed a fearsome amount of weight even to Lester; she finished a set, stood up, walked over to Lester, and sucker-punched him in the gut. "If I don't already owe you that, I'm sure you'll earn it later, you sorry fuck," she rasped, grabbing her bag to head outside for a nicotine break. Lester realized that he needed to add a few more sit-ups to his regimen to toughen his abdominals. *Youch!*

Horace and Lester took turns lifting and spotting for an hour and a half, till just about the time Cherise crept in, stubbing out her Camel Light just outside the entrance. She had never actually been inside this gym, and the sheer amount of pulsating testosterone was uncomfortable to anyone not accustomed to it. Cherise, looking suitably anxious, dressed in cocktail waitress attire complete with stiletto heels, walked as if the ground might give way with one injudicious step. Half-way to her destination, she caught Horace's eye, halted, stood on her toes, and waved with a half-smile, then resumed her cautious gait.

"Wassup, child?" Horace put on the full force of his island charm.

"I'm goin' to work—guess y'all could see that, huh? And, I, uh, need some—"

"—money?"

"—blow, Horace!" she finished, careful not to be audible over the clanking weights. "There's a regular at the Sea Monkey who's lookin' to buy a *quarter of an ounce*, and there's a big tip in it for me."

Horace looked blankly at Lester, who had paused with 510 pounds on his chest. They collaborated in re-racking the barbell, and Lester sat up on the bench.

"I wish we didn't have to talk about dis here," Lester was visibly annoyed. He sold coke, yes, but didn't enjoy selling it, and he liked to keep his healthy side separate from his less salubrious side. "But since you're here, I've got three grams in my bag. How 'bout you, Horace?"

"Four, babe. Together that'll make a short quarter, but I'm sure dis man will be satisfied." Horace would normally grin the happy-salesman grin, but he didn't, because he smelled trouble. Specifically, he smelled Vice Squad. "If you don't bring home at least a couple t'ousand, well, we been ripped off,

child. And if dis guy is Vice and he bust you, call da lawyer-mon from da police house—don' call me."

"Sure thang, sweetie." They tried to look ultra-casual as they pulled little bags of no-one-knew-what from their gym bags and invisibly handed them over to Cherise, who would probably snort a line or two in the ladies room at the Sea Monkey before making her first Big Sell.

Cocaine in its several forms was a low-viscosity social lubricant in New London—and Groton to a lesser extent—during the Reagan-Bush years. It was traded across lines of race and class, it fueled the night club/after hours party scene. Dealers were busted and bailed out routinely; violence over turf and business practices was sporadic and seldom deadly. The substance usually arrived on Amtrak trains from New York or in Euro-sedans with tinted windows and gold trim and asphalt-rattling sub-woofers belting out the latest phat sounds. As with alcohol, there were casual/social users and hardcore/problem users, and it was a way to make other business deals progress toward finalization.

Cherise McCray had first tasted powdered cocaine on her first solo trip to Miami, where she had later met Horace, the first male who didn't get snoozy-woozy after ejaculating inside her (just hitting his stride after three rounds of the ol' in-out-in-out). When Cherise's body learned to equate coke with orgasm with Horace's talented love-missile, she decided to ignore the Surgeon General's warning: "Girl, cocaine can fuck yo' ass up big-time."

As she stilettoed toward the exit, Lester called after her, "When ya gonna get a membership here, Cherise?"

Cherise feigned shock and indignation. "Why, sir! *Geawgeaw* girls are not allowed to sweat!"

Lester had never heard her say anything intelligent, let alone witty (or even semi-witty). He suddenly had a whole new image

of Horace's blonde bike-saddle ornament. "You're a lucky man, Horace."

"Yah, mon. Can find a four-leaf clover in the desert, but can't lose one useless bitch." The ever-present smile was gone, replaced by a tight-lipped security fence. Lester had never heard Horace say anything spiteful, let alone behind someone's back. Cherise was restricting Horace's freedom of movement, perhaps? especially *in re* the child that Horace may have sired with another woman, Chub Martell's significant other? Lester mused in silence over a subject that Horace had no inclination to discuss further when there was iron to be pumped.

Multiple Choice: Cherise went to work at the Sea Monkey and

- A.** sold the coke as she had described to a man who was exactly what he claimed to be;
- B.** sold the coke to an undercover agent, who later busted her;
- C.** sold the coke to a pimp who insisted that she should "come and party" with him after work, leading to sex, a business deal, and a period of indentured servitude; or
- D.** kept the coke for herself and cashed a check against her mutual fund account to give Horace the money that he expected, then got on the first bus to Nova Scotia.

Choices **C** and **D** might make for a more lurid account (what some would call "more interesting"). Choice **B** would have made Cherise a damsel in distress to be rescued from the law-enforcement dragon by a lawyer in a shiny, silken, pinstriped suit of armor. But Cherise had not learned the arts of deception the way her older sister had—and Corinne spent a lot of time and energy deceiving herself.

The customer at the Sea Monkey was a middle-aged divorcee with a second-hand Eldorado that bore four sparkly, diffraction-gradient bumper stickers from Alcoholics Anonymous, one

sticker for each visit to the Yale-New Haven detox unit. The detox never took hold, and each A.A. group that the man encountered had provided anecdotes about mixing booze with drugs that he had not experienced, leading him not toward abstinence from chemical indulgence, but toward experimentation. His id was firmly in the driver's seat as he went from one nasty incident to another. He was Myron Rosenbaum, president of the brokerage firm Rosenbaum, Rosenberg, and Rosenblum, brokers to the Connecticut Shoreline's élite, and nearly every night he walked from his ancestral mansion on Lower Boulevard to join the crass crowd at the Sea Monkey.

Myron showed up about ten o'clock, his Polo windbreaker moistened by a late spring rain that had sneaked in from Long Island Sound. His hair was greased up with some old-fashioned tonic; his tinted bifocals hung low on the bridge of his distinguished, quadrangular nose. Cherise had an amaretto sour on the table for him before he even sat down to order it. Ivan the bartender made amaretto sours that could make your tongue speak fluent Italian, but Myron was the only regular who drank anything so exotic.

"How's my sweet peach tonight?" Myron half-smiled.

Cherise did look sweet, maintaining a Girl Scoutish charm even in her whorish outfit, which was basically a long, white shirt from a big-and-tall men's shop in Mystic, a lascivious red bow tie, panty hose and stilettos. She didn't have a frizzy perm or a mousse-head, as seemingly every drink-slinger in the county had: just scads of elegant, natural blondeness. Myron, on the other hand, looked like the upper-crust sleazoid devolution of an upstanding Jewish family that he was, in his 1974 wide-collar shirt and Sans-a-Belt slacks, bad comb-over, and Mystic Yacht Club cap.

"Just peachy," she replied, "but a little bruised. I'm not used to workin' this hard."

"I'm always hard when I work," Myron winked and nudged. "Especially when T-bills take a jump like they did today—oy, I almost creamed in my pinstripes!" He placed a Gauloise between his lips, which Cherise lit, and sucked on it three times as it crackled to life. Myron blew smoke rings that were always a little flat on the bottom.

"I brought the stuff you asked for," she intoned, pianissimo, too soft for other patrons to hear. "A quarter-ounce of Bolivian snow."

"Can I sample it in the gents' room?"

"I didn't have time to make any samplers. Just be assured, though: Horace's customers are never dissatisfied with the quality of his stuff. Ask any of 'em."

He stared a hole right through her face over his bifocals. "Will two and a half cover it?"

"Easily. I'll be back."

Cherise worked her section a few circuits and fed the juke box a few dollars, keeping everybody's spirits up, then returned with a lunch bag rolled up to the dimensions of the seven grams of nose candy within, sat down opposite Myron, replenished his sour, shoved the bag to him under the table as he laid three bills on the top which no one could see had Woodrow Wilson's picture on them. "Can you make change for that?" Myron had the brass balls to ask seriously.

"Uhhh, tomorrow, maybe."

"What if I don't wanna wait that long?"

"My momma says, 'Good things come to those who wait.'"

"My momma says, 'Waiting is for saps; you could be dead before you get what you want.' How about we forget this deal?"

"How about I take two thousand?" Cherise was more than a little nervous by now.

"Hmmm. How about you come live in my big house, sweet peach?"

"That's very kind o' you, but I live with Horace already."

"What does Horace have that I don't?"

Cherise thought of all the things that attracted her to her man.

"Uh, a terrific bod, a Harley, great connections, that Trinidad accent and did you know he's gonna be in the Primitive Triathlon?"

Myron's face betrayed a very sudden awakening. His eyes, normally brown slits, opened their widest. "My girl in commodities told me about that, that competition. She said Wilf Adamante, the hippie writer, dreamed it up. 'Dyou ever read Adamante?"

She shook her head. She never read anything more complex than the photo captions in *Glamour* and *Bikers World*.

"I went to NYU with that useless prick. When we were freshmen, we joined SDS together—Students for a Democratic Society. I liked him then. But he called my father an exploiter of the workers. My father, who came here to New London with just his good name, wound up in charge of a textile mill that employed a thousand people; the man who built public housing, endowed a school here, gave kids rides on his boat—that's an exploiter of workers? I told Adamante to go fuck himself and his movement. I have him to thank that I became a finance major and a coke-snorting drunk." He stared at his full glass of amaretto sour as if it were an unwelcome in-law asking to crash on his couch. He drained it, handed Cherise the full three thousand, and rose to leave. "This should make up for every time I've ever stiffed a waitress: a \$500 tip for you, sweet peach. I don't wanna stick around here if I'm gonna be a one-man pity-party. Ciao."

Momentarily stunned, Cherise returned to her duties, deciding she would save her pity for Myron until closing time, when she could think more clearly. Her job required a lot of extra effort, since Cherise was not used to matching up faces with orders, especially when most orders were for the three major American beer labels on tap, and the beers looked identical in their mugs. Come to think of it, she could probably serve Coors to a Bud drinker, or Miller to a Coors drinker, and no one would be the wiser.

Somehow the name *Wilf* stuck in her memory through the shift. She'd never met anybody with that name, though she'd gone to school with a Beauregard, a Bethune, a Chadwell, an Elrod, and two girls named Idaleanna who were second cousins. Was *Wilf* short for something? Did Myron actually say *Wolf*, as in Wolf Blitzer the reporter? Her bartender Ivan was a reader; he even read big books. Maybe Ivan knew the name.

"Adamante? The dude is totally tripped out," Ivan said with a wry smile as he placed freshly washed and wiped mugs on shelves. Ivan had graduated from Connecticut College three years before, and though he was going to business school in Rhode Island, he remained in New London because he had just grown to love the place. He lit a Camel Light for each of them between washing and wiping a glass. "My English prof told me that, like, *Adamante* in Vulgar Latin means *diamond*, which is appropriate, cause, like, he's such a multi-faceted writer, and, like, he looks at the world like he's looking *through* a diamond, y'know, kinda like through the eyes of an insect. He's got this one story about becoming a flea that passes through a tape worm, and—"

"Eeeeeuuu, stop!" Cherise protested.

"No, really! But the story has a message: It gives you a respect for life, no matter how small, insignificant, or disgusting it is. At least ten of my classmates stopped swatting flies and mosquitoes after they read it, cause, like, any mosquito could be a reincarnation of someone you know and love who's dead."

"And I could be a reincarnation of a *bug*?"

"Sure."

Cherise took a long drag on her cigarette and thought, *Oh, shit. More to think about.*