

May

Clifton, Clifton, Clifton, Andi Sichler hummed in her head, *is there a single word in English that rhymes with Clifton?* She waited at a traffic light, before sunrise, en route to her Paterson place of employment, and stared at one of those helpful signs found at most major intersections in Northern New Jersey, a sign which pointed the way to each neighboring township. Andi had performed this wake-up exercise before: *Lots of words rhyme with Passaic, for example, uh, archaic, mosaic, prosaic, piece-o-caik or with Paterson lots of phrases like* What's the matter, son? The word *Clifton*, the town which she currently claimed as her address, had to be rhymed with a series of participles: *siftin', shiftin', driftin', liftin'*...green light, honked at from behind, fuck-you-buddy, hit the gas, go, go, go....

The radio in Andi's Honda Civic was probably the most reliable part of that particular auto, which had never been the same after its rear-ending several years before, when Andi was driving her prom dress to a seamstress to fix the hemming job that she had so drastically screwed up. The radio was picking up the non-commercial student station from the University of the Turnpike, an accredited institution that had begun as a trucking school in the 1970s and become a highly competitive system of community colleges stretching from Fort Lee to Cherry Hill. The station blasted out some 3000 attitude-laden watts of cognitive dissonance 18 hours a day, and the attitude that came through Andi's speakers was sympathetic to her own. At the moment, a Philadelphia quartet called the Blubbermunchers was singing:

*"I don't wanna be up at 6:30 a.m.,
But I gotta job I gotta get to
That's bendin' me over and rammin' it home,
So don't let these words upset you:
CHORUS: "Fuck this shit, I'm goin' back to bed;
Fuck this shit, I'm goin' home,*

Home to play dead."

Andi's usual parking spot was waiting for her that Monday morning, a steamy, gloomy Monday when even the sun had trouble getting out of bed. The refineries at the Rahway oil port must have chosen the weather for that morning: 50% chance of industrial-nightmare skies, possible Oobleck by afternoon. After-school cross-country practice would probably be indoors again.

First period was athletics, specifically Andi's varsity cross-country group: 16 young women not much younger than she, ranging from "most likely to succeed" to "most likely to suck seed." What did Andi expect would greet her, first thing Monday morning? The usual chaos, the usual neurotic behavior from the children of Dysfunctionland. What did greet her?

"Ms. Sichler, can you get pregnant when you're taking the pill?" It was not one of her Honor Roll girls who asked.

"Um, it's possible, but rare. Why?"

"Just curious." Lashondra Turner, a junior with a determined but vacant expression, did not have enough "feminine wiles" to get by with such a response.

"Bullshit," Ms. Sichler grunted through her teeth. "You know I know you better than that. What's up?"

"Well..." (pregnant pause?) "You know about me and Kenny, right? Well, his sister got married 'n' went off the pill, so she gave her last three packages to me, y'know? Well, I've been takin' 'em, Ms. Sichler..."

"Every day?"

Lashondra's face turned to mocha marble as she whispered, "Every day?! I thought you just took 'em when you..."

Andi very nearly punched the nearest locker door. "Have you seen a doctor lately? I mean, what you're taking isn't your prescription, could mess you up, might not be strong enough..."

"No, Ms. Sichler. We can't afford trips to the doctor; we're just gettin' by on what my mom and sister make." Her face slowly resumed its normal shade of dark brown.

"You don't have Medicaid?" Lashondra shook her head; Andi pressed on. "Have you told your mom anything about this?" More shakes. Andi fished her mind for the amount of discretionary income she could expect for the next two weeks, while giving Lashondra a penetrating sisterly glare. "If you tell anyone what I'm about to do, I'll personally wring your neck...two times!...but I will pay for one visit to a doctor in Hoboken, not around here. I will drive you there the first time; after that, if you can't get there on your own, take a bus (I'll show you how). But for good sense's sake, get there and get yourself looked after. You won't have to pay for it all at once, and you'll have all the medical advice you can possibly handle." She fished through her wallet for the business card of the reproductive clinic which she herself had visited in her own pregnancy crisis. "Make the appointment by tomorrow, tell me when it is, we'll go. Any questions?"

"No, Ms. Sichler."

"Now, here's the other part of the deal. Cross-country conditioning and carrying a kid don't mix...believe me, first-hand experience talking...so as long as that blob of jelly is in your belly, no more running. None. Just stick to high-protein, low-fat eating, do some light exercise, like I hope you've been doing all along."

"All right, but people gonna wonder what happened, why I ain't on the team no more."

"If it comes down to it, tell them the truth. That's what they'll most likely believe, especially with half the junior girls getting knocked up at one time or another this year."

"You got that right."

"Between you and me, make your mistakes early in life, get them outta the way, and whatever you do, learn from them. Don't repeat them." Andi wanted to end with a warm, reassuring smile, but her smile account was overdrawn that morning.

During her preparation period that morning, she was still wound up tight with her trackster's little secret. She nearly threw every mug in the cabinet of the teacher's lounge trying to get to her mug, which was hiding in the back as if it had developed coffee-phobia. She filled her mug with steaming java, then filled her hands with her head as she sat down to wait for the cooling. The aromatherapy of fairly fresh Café Nica stilled her rattling nerves.

In walked her favorite co-worker and mentor, with whom she often traded sympathies and jokes during prep period, whenever both teachers had their preparations well in place. The mentor was none other than Cynthia Louise Hu, M.C. (Member of the Collective), who had taught various social studies curricula in her nine years at Paterson South. Cindy Lou was usually brimming with professional advice or a relevant anecdote for any quandary in which Andi found herself. Classroom anecdotes are essential in reassuring teachers that someone else has made the same boo-boo or a much more embarrassing boo-boo.

"Sup, homegirl?" Cindy Lou poked Andi's shoulder blade.
"Scam any dope G action?"

"Been knockin' da boots all weekend, ho'," Andi peeked out of the foxhole of her funk and strung together some hip-hop verbiage into something that just about made sense. "Cindy, I managed to go all year without a pregnancy until now..."

"You're pregnant?"

"N...*no!* It's one of my runners. Between you and me, I'm surprised she took this long."

"Oh. Lashondra."

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

"Maybe you could have given me a bigger hint than that; I know which of your girls are active and which are stupid...and the one who happens to be both."

"Then tell me this, Ms. Hu: Have you ever been the one teacher a kid comes to, in confidence, to spill the embryonic beans?"

"Uh-huh, half-dozen times, but not lately, 'cause they know I'll tell 'em what they don't wanna hear: Scrape it. "

"You give 'em that advice? And you're still allowed to teach in this state?" Progressive as New Jersey might be, Andi was surprised that any teacher was so unapologetically, on record, pro-abortion.

"Only because I fought for my job the first time. I was able to convince the Board that physically ready to reproduce does not mean financially or mentally ready. For all the tongue-clucking that goes on about kids having kids, they haven't done a helluva lot to give kids something to do that's more productive than screwing. That's the fact that I waved in the Board of Ed's face, and they actually saw their own hypocrisy."

"Meanwhile, Hu, I just want you to know that I think I have this scene under control," Andi said with a quiver in her voice. "If the doctor I fixed her up with says to terminate, she'll probably go right along with it, because at least Lashondra is smart enough to know she's not ready to be a mom. I just want her to have a choice, right?"

"Right," said Cindy Lou. (Subtext: Don't talk as if I'm disagreeing with you.)

"All right. Meanwhile, I need your support, especially if I do something stupid."

"You're planning on doing something stupid?"

"I'm too disorganized to plan anything," Andi put her head back in her hands. "Meals, budgets, relationships, lessons...that's why I just copy Maribel Cortez's lesson plans."

"Hey, speaking of plans, plan on going to a happy hour with me Friday...Midtown Personhattan. There's a couple of guys you won't want to miss. It's not what you think!" She blocked Andi objections to being fixed up. "I gave up toying with other people's love lives years ago, when I realized how screwed-up my own was. This is an intellectual encounter we're setting up here."

"Great," Andi sighed. "I could use a good mind-fuck." They froze, their eyes met, and simultaneously, spontaneously, the giggles poured out, setting a much-improved tone for the rest of Andi's Monday.

That evening Cindy Lou resisted thumbing her nose at all the thousands of motorists heading home to New Jersey via the Holland Tunnel, as she conducted her Toyota Camry back to Chinatown. Twenty-five years before, Cindy Lou had been the first hippie in Chinatown...many longhairs and freaks had passed through, but she was the first home-grown, Chinese-American hippie to grace Canal Street. Never quite sure what had so attracted her to the music of the Jimi Hendrix Experience, she eventually required a complete play-through of *Are You Experienced?* each day lest she endure terrible pangs of withdrawal. Before, she had been only dimly aware of rock 'n' roll, knowing that a friend of a friend was treasurer of the Manhattan chapter of the Young Rascals Fan Club. With her portable phonograph cranked up, her third-floor window flung open, and Cantonese fishmongers shaking their heads as they scurried past her building, Cynthia staged her own miniature Cultural Revolution, complete with mini-skirt, as she

pinballed about the room in time to "Purple Haze" and the other mind-blowing musical tapestries that Jimi wove.

Flash forward: The apartment in which she had grown up and first been Experienced was now her own, surrounded by rent-controlled stalks of wheat that covered before the Manhattan Real Estate Combine harvester that gobbled up buildings in fashionable TriBeCa's back yard.

Agenda: undress, check answering machine, ignore messages, shower, dry, collapse briefly, reflect on eternal baby-boomer youth enhanced by never having married or reproduced, arise, dress casually, check hair (keep it short, and it's always perfect), open door, remember clutch-purse, reset answering machine, exit, descend stairs half-running, hail cab, take four-dollar ride to Washington Square, give cabbie a fiver, climb out, stride into coffee house just before the evening rain begins. There's Wilf, already two coffees and an order of potato skins ahead of you, C.L.

She walked past the cashier and hostess, half-way back through the long, narrow coffee bar and grill called Capo-Chino, on Positively Fourth Street, serving Italian espresso, teas of the Orient, and American diner favorites. Indeed, there was Wilf.

"Hello, Primal Man," the 45-but-looks-25 social studies teacher chimed.

"Hello, Connie Chung's evil twin," the overweight Sterling Morrison-cum-Ché Guevara part-time writing instructor chimed back, a couple of octaves lower.

She sat down next to him, put one hand on each of his thighs and her tongue into his mouth. He wasn't supposed to be surprised or shocked, since enlightened people expect everything, so he tried to conceal his confusion and delight.

"So, suddenly," he scratched his incipient bald spot, "you're in deep lust with me, now that I have a dependable income for the first time?"

"Nothing to do with that. It's tidal. The moon is telling me, 'Go get laid,' and my brain, affected by gravitational forces, says, 'Not just anybody; be choosy, and let him buy you dinner first.'"

"I suppose you'll be having the vegetable quiche?" They had an inside joke about the aphrodisiac qualities of quiche.

"Am I that predictable in my old age? Shit. You have the quiche, and I'll just have a rhino-horn milk-shake."

"You hardly need it, wench."

Dinner was overpriced and long in coming. The coffee, as always, was superb. The walk to Wilf's place was shortened by the cool wind that freight-trained down West Fourth from behind them. The furnace in that coveted Washington Square flat was working...actually working!...almost as well as the stereo set, which sat ready to play a virgin vinyl LP of *Are You Experienced?* Wilfredo must have known that Cindy Lou was dropping in on him for a little friction, a little time travel back to their care-free college days.

Having a working heater made it easier to shake off the frost from the walk and shuck their yuppie-casual dining duds. There was the birthmark on Cindy that Wilfredo knew so well, ventrally located just east of her right hip. His tongue began there, made eccentric orbits around her triangle; she stood on two pillows like the Colossus at Rhodes, grinding from the waist up, between the blasting Klipsch Heresy speakers. One more orbit, and he was ready for splashdown. He slid his tongue in an arc right to where it needed to splash...but the mission was far from over, with so much exploration yet to be done.

As his tongue explored her secret world, she was transported to the planet from which Jimi Hendrix's orgasmic, cathartic

music must have originated. She wiggled like a jelly-blob alien to the polyrhythms of the Experience combined with Wilf's flutter-tonguing. When she could wiggle and grind no more, she collapsed into the pillows and let her enlightened lover do all the work.

By that time, however, Wilf was reaching behind the CD rack for a box of latex wonders, unwrapping and rolling. His abnormally pointy member, once armored for battle, charged into the battlefield, retreated, charged, retreated, charged...

Enough of that. Cut to the post-coital cuddling and rolling of joints.

"There's someone I want you to meet. She's coming with me to the happy hour Friday."

"That, uh, happy hour is more of a literary event, a reception. And you were supposed to be my..." he cringed at the word that he was about to utter, "...date."

"So you'll have two dates. Is that so novel? Is that not fitting with your image?"

"It'll feel a little asymmetrical with one of you a 25-year acquaintance and one a complete unknown."

"Live dangerously, Wilf! Besides, if you have your pre-game warm-ups, you'll be as asymmetrical as anything in the room." She was referring to the New York literati's habit of getting toasted on expensive booze before the ceremonies begin.

"You've touched a raw nerve, Ms. Hu. You know I've been a good boy."

"Yes, Wilfy-Wilf, you have been a very good boy, staying sober for a whole year! Now. Let's talk about Andi. That A-N-D-I, and it's short for Andromeda. She's more your type than little ol' me."

"What type is that?"

"Young. Biologically young, not pathetically trying to hang onto lost youth, like most people we know. And, uh, she may have a good story to tell after the reception." Cindy Lou had a unique talent for bringing out the mere mortal in her old friend, an acumen for keeping his yins and yangs out of balance. She used that talent whenever she needed or wanted something from Wilf. She piqued his curiosity and his desire, jabbing at his desires, the roots of all suffering.

Across the Hudson at that moment, the details of the story were being ironed out. Andi was on the phone to Kitty Hawk, and Terrell was his usual, phlegmatic, retired self on the other end of the line, while Andi felt a chill in the living room...a chill not caused by the late spring wind, but by mere mention of the name "Hank."

"What is this, Grampa? I don't want it! I have done absolutely nothing to deserve this! I mean, out of all the people that old toad harasses there, he has to pick your granddaughter.... Come to think of it, it sounds like you volunteered me."

"Andi, I'll confess that if he asked me whether you wanted to hear his story, I woulda said, 'You bet,'...but he didn't ask. He told me, 'Terrell, that little girl is the right...'"

"'Little girl'?! I'm gonna come down this weekend to strangle him!"

Terrell was unfazed. "Andi, you're tagged, you're it. He's gonna tell it to you, one way or another..."

"He can write me a letter."

"His hands are full of arthritis, and he can barely see with his glasses on."

"He can dictate it to a cassette and send it to me. I don't want to see him."

"Listen, hon, I think he's gonna wait around, sittin' on that story until your curiosity boils over and you run down here to hear it." He whispered to Natalie something about how he wanted his spaghetti. "Andi, that man is 88, and he's ready to go see the man upstairs...ready and willin', in fact...but he'll stick around as long as necessary until he can tell it to the right person."

"Bob Woodward is still working."

"It's you...you're his Bob Woodward."

Long pause from New Jersey. "Why?" Andi whined.

Terrell took a sip from his nightly bottle of Bud Light, then sighed heavily. "He won't tell me. He won't tell you until his story is completely transferred to your ears the old-fashioned way. Even then, he might say you'll have to figure it out yourself."

Andi sank deep into her sofa, the second-hand Ethan Allen. "I'm not comfortable with this...being chosen. I'm not even the type; there's nothing exceptional about me."

Chuckles and coughs from the Kitty Hawk end. "Hank would disagree, hon. He thinks you're...*huh-huh*...really somethin' else again. Wait a minute. I remember somethin' he said to me that might be a hint as to why he's chosen you. He said that you'd dropped the ball."

"Huh?"

"He said, 'That little girl fumbled the ball, so now she's gotta take a lap.' I never got to ask him what that meant."

Andi thought she knew, at least partly, what Hank meant by his football reference. If only she could be certain. Those narrow, grey eyes flashed into her consciousness again.

Marilyn Olin shoved the book into her sister's hands. The book, fancy soft-cover, black and white graphic jacket design, bore the title *Uh, Teacher, My Cot's on Fire* and the author's name Craig "Curly" Corcoran, S.J. Marilyn's hands were shaking from the still-fresh experience of having read it. When one has not read an entire book in three years, one gets that much more excited when one realizes that the book is worth what one paid for it and more.

"The chapter about his wife's pregnancy is just the BEST!" Marilyn bubbled.

"Um, I thought this guy was a priest, Mar."

"Ex-priest. He insists on using the S.J. title, cause it shows how Jesuit training sticks with ya."

It was a slow Wednesday at Hair on Wheels, Carolyn's newly-christened salon. No appointments were scheduled until 4 p.m.; Carolyn had nearly three hours to get sucked into this bestseller if no walk-ins walked in.

Well, of course, the book did not live up to the hype. It was common sense tinged with spirituality, designed to make the abstractions of spirituality reducible to gut level in an age of no common sense. *Exempli gratia*, "See, just because we Americans, living in a secular society, are not so hot at comprehending the insensible, at believing the incredible, that doesn't mean that we cannot feel the presence of the divine in our humdrum existence." She burned through four chapters in an hour and a half, then had to put it aside.

Carolyn got through all four chapters without smoking a single cigarette. Indeed, so far she had gone without cigarettes, beer, coffee, even doughnuts for most of May. She had also managed to go without sex, since Chub had been making himself scarce, and Horace had devoted all his attention to Cherise mainly to avert suspicion. (*It's a damn soap opera*, Carolyn thought, *except none of us is beautiful or rich. Hell, none of us is even attractive except for Horace. And maybe*

Cherise.) At any rate, Carolyn was determined that if her last best chance to bear a healthy child had arrived, her child was gonna be 1-A healthy; moreover, if post-partum she found her desire for all her old vices returning, she'd pick them up again carefully. It was bloody difficult to run with her pack without indulging in a few legal and illegal chemical "lifestyle choices."

A big surprise peeked in through the plate glass doors: the globular, mostly hairless head of Charles Aloysius "Chub" Martell.

"Chub, what the fuck—"

"—am I doin' here? Watch your language in front of the kid," he admonished, swinging open one door and striding in purposefully.

"I'm *behind* the kid. Now what's up?"

"Just had to tell you something—a few things. This, uh, isn't easy, so, uh, I'm gonna put on this shirt and tie, so it'll, uh, feel like I'm making a big speech or something."

"So far," chuckled Carolyn, "you're about at George Bush's level, public speaking-wise."

Chub wagged his finger, then donned a pressed, clean, white, long-sleeve, athletic-fit Arrow shirt that was a little snug around the middle. He effortfully looped a silk, paisley cravat around his ample neck. He borrowed a comb from Carolyn's drawer and straightened the few hundred hairs that had stayed loyal. Meanwhile, Carolyn's anticipation rose, though her face refused to admit as much. With a mixture of dread and terror, her mind scrolled through the possible statements or questions that could be so momentous as to merit Chub's change of dress code.

He was finally ready.

"Carolyn Olin: We share an opinion that marriage is a loser's game, and divorce turns people into vindictive slimeballs, so don't go thinking that I'm changing my mind on that subject. On the short subject—by now at least a few inches—" he condescendingly patted her belly—"it's taken me a good long time to, uh, come to the realization that I'd be happy to be the daddy to the little guy or girl who currently occupies your baby compartment."

Carolyn's face did the splits between exultant relief and woeful disappointment. "Time out!" she gasped with her hands in a T. "Uh, Chub "

"There are no time-outs in public speaking, Carolyn! Remember, I spent nine weeks in speech and debate in high school."

"And you flunked and transferred to auto body, and the rest is history. But I'm ready for my rebuttal. Chub," she said his name like the stomp of a wet boot, "you would be an excellent daddy for what's-its-name here. But do you know what kind of changes you would have to make before I'd let you breathe the same air as my kid?"

"Don't you mean *our* kid?"

"That's not the point. You are goin' to have to clean up your act, Martell. Number one, you will come home right after work, sober. Two, quit smoking, or at least keep the smoke on the porch until you can quit. Three, I don't know if you've ever dealt with a pregnant woman, or a woman who's just popped a puppy, but you'll have to deal with the nastiest mood swings you've ever seen, *without* running off to the bar—stay and take it like a real man. In other words, you will be everything my dad and your dad were not, is that crystal-fucking clear?"

"Uh—" Chub's mustache hairs lost their natural wave all of a sudden. "Look, I'm not totally stupid. Do you think I woulda gone through all this if I didn't know there was some sacrifices involved? I told you I wanna be Daddy, not just the sperm

bank. Whatever it takes, Carolyn. It may not happen all at once, but I got a few months to practice, right?"

"Yeah. Now. I got somethin' to say to you, and I hope to hell you're ready for it."

Chub steeled himself for what might be devastating news.

She whispered, "*You might not even be the sperm bank.*"

"?"

"Back in February we had a fight, remember? I shot out, went to the Pickle, got a little pickled, and went home with—"

"—Horace?"

She nodded, then held her head high, as if to say, *I defy you to accuse me of anything, roly-poly boy.*

He cleared the frogs from his larynx. "I knew that."

It was her turn to say "?" with her eyes.

Chub coughed some more. "Look, Car, this is a small fuckin' town. Secrets are very hard to keep. I've known for a few weeks now that you went home with Horace. It bothered me for about a week, and I went all silent on you, remember? And then I got over it. But if you think Horace is gonna take a dime's worth of responsibility for that kid, be prepared to wait a while for that dime; he's all tied up with his Cherry-Chick, and if he leaves her, well she's got some connections."

"I don't care whether he takes any—What kind of connections?"

Chub wiped the sweat from his eyes with a freshly pressed sleeve. "She's got her femme fatale sister in town keepin' both eyes on things with that Puerto Rican mobster—you know, the guy in the silk suits?"

Carolyn made a Herculean effort to keep from breaking into hysterics. "They—ha!—they had just come from a costume party that night when you saw them! They were supposed to be characters from a Raymond Chandler novel, he rented that suit, and it *wasn't* real silk!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, she's a mystery buff, and they went on one of those mystery-night excursions on the Valley Railroad, then went to the Pickle for a nightcap and to catch Gemini Slim and the Schizoids' last set. And, of course, to check in with Cherise."

Chub was only half convinced. "Yeah, well, that sister is not all what she seems, I'll tell ya that much. She wears the same perfume as every lyin' bitch I've ever known. Is there a perfume called 'Deception'?"

"Am I one of those lyin' bitches?" Carolyn inquired.

"Uh—you don't always tell the truth right away, and sometimes you're a bitch, but that's just a hormone thing. No, I wouldn't put you in the lyin' bitch category, 'cause, like, you don't *enjoy* lyin' and deceivin' like so many women do."

"Thanks, I guess. You're really not upset that I fucked Horace?"

"Carolyn, 'fucked' is such a strong word."

If "fucked" is a strong word, then over at the Bergamotel on the Groton side of the Thames River, Freddie and Corinne were having a very stern conversation. It was desperation fucking, even more so than usual for them. It was more a release of tension than an expression of affection, more jitterbug than tango, more need-satisfying than pleasure-taking, wolfing down a three-course French dinner without actually tasting it.

When they reached a stopping place, when Freddie's kielbasa turned to boudain, Cori kept him from falling asleep by gently

tonguing his left ear. "Don't go to sleep yet, Fred. Gotta give you the schedule for tonight."

"Cori, anything you tell me now will just go in one ear—that tickles!—and out the other. I'm so tired, I could sleep on a 737 engine—while it's running."

"Better on it than in it. Listen: I'll write it all down for you; you just set your alarm for 8 p.m., get up then, and look at this piece of paper before you shower. I have to scoot."

She took some motel stationery and her imitation Mont Blanc ball-point, jotted down the following:

9:00 meet me at Pizza Pit on Broad (call Purple Cab at 8:30)

9:45 we meet Cherise at Sea Monkey by Ocean Beach

12:00 she gets off, we all go to Pickle (no band)

After that, who knows?

"So where are you goin' in the meantime?" Freddie mumbled as she scribbled.

"To get my hair cut." She showered quickly and donned a form-flattering Limited dress.

Cori rolled up to Hair on Wheels in her rented Mercury Lynx, not at all surprised to see a shop with a ramshackle exterior, the fatigued façade that characterizes most of the buildings north of Bank Street, New London. She was surprised, however, to see a large, balding worker-bee-type leaving the building in his best white Arrow shirt and perhaps his only necktie. More surprises awaited inside: one lone, apparently pregnant stylist watching *Oprah!* and looking on the verge of tears. The stylist's melancholy vanished, however, as she laid into the task of shampooing Corinne's silky, blonde tresses.

Patting the hair dry, Carolyn declared, "Half the women in this town could kill for hair like yours. The other half are black and Hispanic, and it wouldn't suit them at all."

"Well, maybe you can save what you cut, and divide it up among all the white women," Cori giggled.

"You sound like you're from peach country—have that look about you—in fact, you're Cherise's sister, aren't you?!" In her excitement, Carolyn's voice reached its highest pitch in years, above the nicotine fog that had imprisoned it in the contralto dungeon.

"Yes, ma'am." No more giggles. "Corinne McCray." She sat down for the cutting.

"I think Cherise is a very nice girl. Maybe too nice. But to be honest, she's dangerously stupid."

"Just naïve."

"I'll buy that. But she does some stupid things like leaving behind a nice, stable family, which *at least* half the people in this town would kill for."

"Some people find that stability a little boring, I guess," Cori sighed. "Me, I stay close to my family, but I could never be like Mom and Daddy. Tried to live up to their standards, though; Cherise never even went that far. Like, I'm still kinda engaged to this quarterback I went to high school with, but that's just to please Mom and Daddy. I haven't seen the guy in over a year."

"Cherise told me you were a homecoming queen."

"Just a duchess, really. Runner-up. I was also runner-up for Miss Franklin County—to a different girl."

"Personally," Carolyn paused in her snipping, "I think beauty contests suck, but you'd win Miss New London County like Secretariat won the Belmont."

"Belmont—is that a horse race?"

"Yeah. Secretariat was the greatest. The myth about him was that his heart was twice the size of the average race horse's heart; he won the Belmont by 23 lengths. No horse could touch him. And he was beautiful, too."

Carolyn very quickly fashioned a kind of asymmetrical page-boy do on Corinne's confused, post-adolescent head. The effect was striking: such a drastic change, one half expected a different personality to emerge from that chair—a lighter, quirkiest personality. Corinne forced a smile that would have charmed a Nor'easter right out of its cloudy shoes. She was impressed with Carolyn's artistry and said so.

"Wish my old man coulda heard you say that," Carolyn confided.

"Was that him leavin' as I pulled up?"

"Believe it or not. Some day soon, a little someone's gonna call him 'Daddy'."

"Ah, so I figured right: You're starting to show."

"Yeah."

"Y'all gonna get married?"

"Nah. We both agree that marriage is two-way slavery."

"But it helps on taxes and insurance and stuff like that, doesn't it?"

"All the benefits of marriage are gone to shit when you get divorced, though. We'd rather keep bein' free agents, individuals. I don't know about Georgia, but in this town, livin' in sin is practically the norm."

"I see," said Cori, digging through her oversized purse for a twenty. She had seen all kinds of familial arrangements in

Atlanta, was shocked by none of them. She just thought people of Carolyn's age should behave like grown-ups and get monogamous, especially with a kid in the picture. "If you don't mind my askin', ma'am—"

"Carolyn."

"—Carolyn, is that child your old man's?"

"I do mind your askin', but since just about everyone in town seems to know, well, it might not be his. It could be Horace's."

Corinne turned the color of the twenty-dollar bill that she handed to Carolyn. A "thank you" hurdled a lump in her throat. Through the plate-glass exit she slunk, bye-bye.

Freddie slept fitfully, dreaming about work on the ramp. A recurring theme was the pneumatic hose that supplies aircraft engines and cabins with air at the gate, a hose with a heavy chromium nozzle that agents attach to the belly of the fuselage like an umbilicus. In the dreams, Freddie could not attach the nozzle to the receptacle and spent seemingly endless minutes trying, on his knees, holding the damn thing up until his biceps and pectorals ached and his other ramp duties were neglected. Can't get it up, can't get it on, can't get on with it. He cursed and wailed until the dream's setting mercifully shifted.

He woke to the electronic chirp of his tiny digital alarm clock, opening his eyes to the now-familiar Bergamotel blue/green/violet interior color scheme. The colors were very '90s, an evolutionary reaction to the polyester, hot-color '70s, but Carlotta Bergamo, the Massachusetts Lotto millionairess and CEO of this new chain of deep-discount motels, didn't adopt the color scheme out of any sense of trendiness or market research; she just *liked* blue, green, and violet.

Pelvic muscles still throbbing, dehydration cramping his other muscles from the expenditure of bodily fluids, Freddie zigzagged into the shower, asking the God he didn't believe in to keep him awake. The absent God directed Freddie's hand to

turn the water to COLD and his feet to step in. That jump-started our Bronx Boy *tout de suite*.

Once awake, washed, and dried, he read and digested Corinne's game plan. He sorted through the cast of characters whom he had met in this New England crucible of a town, mentally matching up names with faces: Cherise, Horace, Alysse the bartender, Chub, Lester, Carolyn with a sister named Marilyn, and the guy who never talked but belched a lot what the fuck was his name? Ah—Earl, they called him, though someone said his real name was Duke, or was it the other way round? Shit. Almost everybody in this scene had a nickname or petname, and two distinct personalities from what he could tell especially Cori/Corinne. His night-angel was the bittersweet Corinne, pregnant with the sorrows of the world; to most people, however, she was the happy-go-lucky cheerleading belle called Cori. Freddie was, by comparison, a full-time brooder, but vacillated between his roles of scrappy street-rat Freddie and slick sliderule-jockey Federico.

Cherise/Cherry had a different kind of split in her personhood: prim and proper by day, Harley purring under her loins by night, with her long, peachskin legs wrapped around Horace Foxe's midsection as they cometed down and around Bank Street. Freddie suspected that most of the human race was like that, some combination of lamb and lion, muse and satyr, Rolls-Royce and Harley-Davidson. A friend back at Tech who was into Jung insisted that it was the very core of human nature to be bifurcated into Celestial and Mundane.

At that phase of his life, Freddie was out of touch with his inner Harley, but he knew that it was there.

Just about the time Freddie was wishing for a TV in his room to distract him from his thoughts, he noticed that it was time to call Purple Cab. "I need a cab at the Bergamotel, Room Q, going to oh, shit! here it is Pizza Pit on Broad Street. Yeah, New London. Did you say twenty minutes? That'll—that's fine. Thanks."

The cab that arrived exactly twenty minutes later was number 36, Tommy Luczinski's. The AM-only radio in it was tuned to the Red Sox game. His beloved Sox were hosting the Toronto Blue Jays at the beloved Fenway.

"You like baseball?" Tommy asked in his friendly, professional tone. He was a professional, actually: an engineer/draftsman on temporary layoff from Electric Boat.

"Yeah, but there aren't enough Puerto Ricans in the Majors—just those Alomar brothers. Baseball needs an affirmative action program."

"Maybe then they'd have more Jews and Orientals, too. I mean, 'Asians' ya gotta call 'em now. I love baseball. When I was a kid, our annual trip to Fenway Park was a big event, bigger than Christmas. There's just something so American and innocent about it; even with all those money-grubbers, even with all the corporate invasions and the scandals and the strikes, there's just the pure essence of the game: pitch, hit, run, catch, throw—I get a little misty just thinkin' about the day Ted Williams retired—"

"Hey, driver?"

"Tommy."

"Hey, Tommy, please shut up. Or at least talk about somethin' else."

From the apex of the Gold Star Bridge, Freddie saw the Groton Submarine Base lit up like 24 Fenway Parks. *This is a place*, he thought, *where you can actually take a girl to watch the submarine races*. On the New London side, the Coast Guard Academy campus was a virtual ghost town, devoid of cadets and all the other people who kept the school ship shape. But Bank Street, even on a Wednesday, would be glowing, incandescent with the high spirits of Eugene O'Neill's bastard children.

"You're from New York, right?"

Freddie was startled out of mid-brood. "Yeah, Bronx, but I'm not a Yankees fan. I fuckin' hate that Steinbrenner asshole."

"You a student?"

"Yes and no. I'm on leave from Georgia Tech."

Tommy's eyes lit up like another Fenway Park. "We played Georgia Tech in 1970—football, I mean. I went to Boston College—third-string in football, but a starter on the—Can I say 'baseball team'?"

Freddie just chuckled. Tommy continued.

"Yeah, as I recall, they kicked our ass in a big way. The Ramblin' Wreck from Georgia Tech."

"With a helluvan engineer," Freddie added, thinking, *I could have been a helluvan engineer, myself.*

When the Purple Impala pulled up to the Pizza Pit parking lot, driver and passenger could see that something was not right. For example, why were the only visible heads in the place covered by nylon stockings?

Tommy was on the two-way radio in a trice. "Purple 36, the Pizza Pit on Broad has an armed robbery in progress; call NLPD."

"Clear, 36," the dispatcher replied.

Freddie scanned the lot, found the white Lynx that Cori was renting, breathed an "Oh, shit!" or two, tapped Tommy's shoulder. "Hey, Tommy, you wouldn't have a baseball bat or something, would you?"

He did: a 34-inch Hillerich-Bradsby Louisville Slugger, vintage 1970, to be precise. He handed it to Freddie, reluctantly, with an eye contact that said, "Be careful, Matt." It was Freddie's

night to metamorphose from a thinker to a doer, and Tommy felt it.

Quickly, before the three armed hoseheads could run out the front of the Pit, Freddie crouched below an adjacent window, bat slung over his left shoulder, thinking how he had been a switch hitter way back in Pony League. He used the darkness to his advantage and moved into position undetected.

Semi-automatic pistol shots and shattering glass broke the calm on Broad Street. There were screams from within, but no wails and moans from lead biting into flesh. Three wiry young men dressed in black T-shirts and black jeans hurtled through the doors, each to be greeted by a cylinder of ash to the guts or the nuts. With a fourth swing Freddie knocked the 9mm pistol out of its user's right hand toward Tommy, who scrambled to scoop it up—useless now except as a blunt instrument since its clip had been emptied.

The young *nylonistas* had just enough time to writhe on the concrete as two squad cars arrived with lights ablaze. "Hey, Tommy!" one officer sang as he hustled toward Freddie to cuff him.

"Not him, Randy! The guys in black, on the ground!"

The removal of the stockings revealed three Latino faces fronting identical close-cropped hair with braided rat-tails and identical tattoos on the necks: scorpions wielding pitchforks. When they were all cuffed and stuffed, Officer Randy McNally commented somewhat indiscreetly, "Those guys aren't local. They came up from Nueva York to pull this job."

"South Bronx and Washington Heights," Freddie noted for precision's sake. He was from Riverdell, near the Yonkers line, but even there Los Escorpiónes del Infierno were legendary annoyances whose signs and symbols graced almost every paintable panel truck and blank wall.

"I'll have to ask you to come down and make a statement, sir," Officer Daryl Hearn said to Freddie, as Jack Webbish as you please.

Freddie suppressed his response, *Jou want dat in English or Espanich, señor?* and just nodded.

"Freddie!" That was Corinne, who had just surfaced from under her table and spotted her friend through the paneless window. "Freddie, are you all right?"

He was bleeding a bit from the glass fragments that had grazed his scalp and embedded themselves in his hair and shirt. "I think so," he said as he patted his head and felt something warm and sticky there. "Guys, two conditions," he said to the cops. "First, get me cleaned up, and second, let me get a large pie to go."

Freddie looked at his reddened hand and passed out. Corinne's elaborately planned evening was shot to hell.

Once revived, he went and made his statement, got the glass carefully tweezed from his scalp, ate three fourths of the pizza, thought, *Who told these Greeks they could make pizza? This stuff is merely edible.* When he emerged, Corinne was there, still a bit shaky from the ordeal. She didn't have to make a statement, as there were plenty of customers willing to depose on what had transpired.

"You were very brave," she said. "I feel like Sweet Polly, and you're my Underdog."

"Brave? It was stupid. A very stupid move. I was just lucky as Plucky Duck that I didn't get killed, Cori; those were Escorpíones, man; they hunt for sport. They're kinda stupid, but they're vicious. I'm just really surprised they weren't better armed."

"All right, believe what you want—stupid or brave—but believe this too." She batted her eyes and focused tight on him. "You

may think I just use you for kicks, but I really do care about you."

"You must. I bet your quarterback is better in bed than I am, but you keep coming back to me. And you believe this: I wouldn't be doin' this shit if I didn't care about you."

"Coming from you, Freddie, that's very sweet." They locked lips for an eternal minute in the police headquarters, then jumped in the Lynx to motor back across the bridge. Scrub the trip to the Sea Monkey; they wanted no more trouble that night. "I found out something this afternoon," she suddenly remembered. "That woman I told you Cherise suspected Horace was seein' on the side? She cut my hair. Carolyn's her name. She says Horace might be—y'know, the father."

"Are you gonna tell Cherise?"

"Nnnnnnot tonight. It can wait. I'm not sure she'd think it's that big a deal."

"Hey, by the way, your hair—?"

"What about it?"

Freddie swallowed hard. "Looks like shit."

Over in Paterson on Friday morning it was bullshit as usual. A parent had already called the principal's office accusing Ms. Cynthia Hu of racism because an otherwise high-achieving African-American student had received a "C" on a term project, while the three European-Americans in the class had walked off with "A's." The principal told the parent, "If Cynthia Hu is a racist, then Jesse Jackson is the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan!" Cindy Lou was in the office to hear her reputation defended, and it put a smile on her whole Friday. The simple facts were that those students had known what was expected of them and earned their grades fairly and squarely, while the

kid with the "C" had turned in something that was not quite what had been assigned; furthermore, Cindy Lou had dated this principal when he was an assistant principal at a middle school in Elizabeth, the first black A.P. at that particular school. This guy knew that, whatever else Chinatown's first hippie was, racist she was not.

First period settled in, and attendance was taken. The review for the following Monday's test commenced immediately thereafter.

"For ten points, who can tell me where and when the Weimar Republic was around?"

No hands went up. Lots of half-masted eyes told each other, "You take it."

Finally, "Go for it, Kenny."

Kenny, the father of Lashondra Turner's embryo, sporting a fade haircut that was shaping into a fez, wearing his collectible L.A. Raiders parka even in May, tried to make it look easy, "Man, that was Hitler's thang, Germany in the 1930s." He put out his right hand for his next-desk neighbor to slide-five.

"You're partly right," said Cindy Lou. "I'll give you five on that. The other five goes to whoever can straighten that out for us....Jheri?"

Jheri knew the answer, but hadn't the guts to raise her hand. "It was before Hitler, and, uh, after World War One," she replied just loud enough to be heard.

"Good; five for you. Did you catch that, Kenny?"

"Word up."

"I'll give ya word up," Cindy Lou was only marginally ticked off. "Kenneth, when you're in class, you will speak and behave as a student. Remember, that's the one major rule and the one thing that keeps us all equal in here: Everyone's a student."

Kenny wanted to do right by Ms. Hu, but in a way that would maintain his homeboys' respect. Today he was just in a chillin' mood. *Sigh*.

"Yes, Ms. Hu."

"And, uh, remove your jacket. It's baseball season, for cryin' out loud."

He did.

"Ten points," the teacher continued: "What happened in the Weimar economy after World War One?"

A Dominican girl named Yolanda dared to raise her hand. "Um, it was in that movie we saw, wasn't it? Everything costed a lot of money."

"And what's that called, Yolanda?"

"In—infl—inflatulation?"

Scattered giggles, one guffaw. Ms. Hu put a mark on Yolanda's line in the grade book. "Close enough, sweetie. Inflation, just like with a balloon, remember? When you inflate a balloon, you—" she gestured for a completion.

"Blow it up," half the class finished.

"And when you blow up a balloon, what happens?"

Almost all the students said, "It gets bigger."

Kenny waited half a beat and said, "It gets excited."

Ms. Hu's benevolent Friday countenance turned instantly to cast iron. "Kenneth Farrish, you're not making this day any easier for me. I've already been called a racist once today. That hurts worse than a lot of things I've been called. Now, I could toss you out of class, and you'd call me some other mean and nasty names for doing so, but I won't give you that

opportunity just yet. Instead, I'll give you a chance to show that you can be a responsible parent—uh, student—and not blow your chance at passing this quarter because of that turbocharged mouth of yours. RU down wit that, homey?" She gave him a googy-eyed look that he would remember the remainder of the year, a look which encoded, "Don't fuck wit me, or I'll make this life hell on earth for you."

By the way, Cindy Lou s saying "parent" instead of "student" was no goof, as almost everyone present knew.

"I'm down," Kenny mumbled, eyes downcast.

"Look directly at me and say it with conviction."

"I'll be a good boy, Ms. Hu, I promise."

Cindy Lou allowed the class to applaud Kenny's gutsy promise. The rest of first period and all of second went smoothly; she felt great joy at her accomplishment, having actually got through to the kiddoes on a Friday morning—but would the knowledge stick to them long enough for Monday's test?

At third period she made a beeline for the lounge, where Andi was already sitting in full mope, as she had on Monday. "You look beat up," Cindy Lou observed.

Andi was on very dull pins and needles. "Didn't sleep much. Anticipation."

"My fault, kid. I shouldn't have hyped this event so much. You somehow look excited and exhausted at the same time."

"That's the coffee. I woke up at 6:48, couldn't fix my hair—not that it matters much with cross-country first thing—but I left all my hairtools at home. Drank three quick cups to give me that Walking Dead look."

"Hair tools'?" Cindy Lou scrunched up her face. "Sounds like you'd be giving yourself a perm with socket wrenches."

"Cindy Lou—I've been all around lower Manhattan, mostly at the Bottom Line and CBGB, friends' place in TriBeCa, getting stoned in Battery Park in the bad old days, but I've never had any contact with the literary crowd, y'know, the elbow-patch set. It's a little scary."

"Well, they're a bunch of monsters, really, but they're Sesame Street monsters. Think of Wilf as just another teacher. He's a roshi without portfolio. He's taught our group some meditation tricks that he hasn't made public knowledge yet. Plans to put them in a book in time for the 21st century, when the world will really need them and be ready for them. And think of everyone else at the event as the fuzzy, bloodsucking scumbunnies they are. The elbow-patch set cares primarily about money, secondarily about how best to milk their writers for the maximum. What they don't ever learn about Wilf is, with him they're milking a bull."

"Hey, don't knock it till you've tried it," Andi said in her mother's Carolina drawl. Giggles ensued. "Seriously! As my uncle Nick the farmer says, 'Bovine jizz is big bizz!'"

More giggles.

Andi barely remembered to ask, "What time does it start?"

Cindy Lou suppressed her giggles long enough to drain her coffee mug. "Be at my pad at six straight up. Parking by Canal Street is tricky, but possible. We'll take the subway to midtown, and we'll look fabulous."

"Cool."

"What's new with Lashondra?"

Andi sank back to mope mode. "My doctor told her she's in for some big problems if she carries the kid to term. The little nudnik wants to have it, though. Can you imagine being so desperate, so in-a-hurry, to have a kid?"

"At 44, with a bare cupboard of my own, I can imagine it, but I sure don't share her predilection. My dharma does not include making little Hus. Gotta run, homegirl," she glanced at her watch. "I have a different kind of reproducing to do."

"Hot date with Mr. Xerox?"

"Uh-huh. See you at six o' clock, babe. Ciao."

That evening, Wilfredo Adamante was sampling single-malt scotches at the pre-reception gathering. They all tasted about the same to him, except one had a smoky overtone, like his favorite brand of lapsang souchong tea, and one had a creamy texture like a White Russian.

The milieu was the lounge of a former Helmsley hotel on West 55th, now called Hotel Midí—as in noontime, or the French Mediterranean coast, or the skirt length—located in the heart of the American Media Empire's capital.

Two members of the publishing Mafia who actually liked Wilfredo Adamante's reality-bending works of fiction and poetry were participating alongside him in the test-snorting. The gentleman to his right, an editor with an impressive list of pulp sci-fi titles attached to him, was moved to say, "Firewater, like fire itself, can be the greatest gift to mankind or the worst bane. It sure is great to taste a well-controlled burn once in a while, even at \$6 a glass."

The woman to Wilf's left, a former flower-child turned media-establishment lackey whose current job was writing promo copy for MTV, rejoined, "This stuff is the drug of the white, male aristocracy, and free spirits like us should leave it the fuck alone." Pause. "But it's *so delicious*."

Wilf, who was partial to tequila and stout ales, had something typically unpredictable to contribute to the discussion. "Seems to me a case of the taste driven by the price, instead of the other way round. When you pay this much for a bottle of booze, you want it to sing and dance on the way down. So you

imagine that it does, like when you pay \$7.50 for a second-rate movie and wind up having to rationalize spending that much: You say shit like, Oh, the sets alone were worth the admission price. Give me somethin' I can get plastered on, and dis-pense with the pre-tense!"

The woman smiled through the sheen of her track-lit angora blouse. "As always, Wilf, you're right. You always have to be running against the grain, and you always have to be right. You're more of a typical male than anyone gives you credit for."

"Rachel, ol' buddy!" Wilf feigned shock. "Are you saying that I drink too much, I'm perpetually horny, I can't communicate with a woman in a meaningful way, and that I'm afraid to stop off the highway to ask for directions?"

She nodded. "And, to boot, you have an inflated, very fragile ego, Wilf, ol' buddy."

Wilf gasped his sternum. "Oh, oh, oh, thou hast cut me to the quick! I'm gonna have to cry now. Someone fetch me a drum!"

Rachel Sublette laid off a bit. "So, Mr. Man, any sneak previews on the big announcement your publisher is supposed to make tonight?"

"Probably that he's gonna trade me to Random House for some minor-league writers and cash. Or that he's gonna sponsor the Primal Man Triathlon and he'll need some volunteers to get it rolling."

Before Wilf's companions could say, "The *what?*" Karla Darman walked over to join them, vermouth on the rocks in hand. "Wilf! Long time, no see!"

"What's it been, four? five days?"

"You know each other?" asked Rachel.

"Frequently!" Karla and Wilf leered, embracing suggestively. Rachel knew that Karla was happily married, but in her conversations with Karla the subject of the Collective had never come up. Karla winked at Rachel. "Call me tomorrow; I'll explain."

Wilf looked at his 1967 Timex wristwatch. "Karla, have you seen Cindy Lou yet?"

"You're the enlightened one. You tell me."

"Even enlightened beings have trouble understanding women. Cindy's especially good at keeping me off-balance and annoying me by being late."

As if the word *balance* were a cue, Cindy and Andi showed up, both wearing slate-gray blouses and figure-flattering scarlet tulip-skirts, their heads decked with matching brunette wigs like from an Andy Warhol garage sale, and wearing for the first time since New Year's Eve more than a hint of cosmetics. The only obvious difference between them was Cindy Lou's wily, confident smile versus Andi's pop-eyed, "Give me a drink, NOW!" forced smile. Andi looked and felt like a rabbit inexplicably invited into the carrot patch and suspecting a trap.

As if wearing a "Born to Raise Hell" bumper sticker on her butt, Cindy Lou picked up two of the glasses containing remnants of single-malt scotch, handed one to Andi, and half-shouted: "To the unequalled excellence of the public educational system of the Great State of New Joisey!"

Andi returned with a toast of her own: "And to the knowledgeable, compassionate, hard-drinking educators thereof. And to New Jersey's unique view of the newly restored gleam of the Statue of Liberty's ass." Down went the expensive brew. It made their eyes water, but the burning sensation did not overwhelm them. The elbow-patchers around them were visibly amazed.

Cindy Lou caught her breath by the tail and opened introductions. "Wilfredo, Karla, *et al.*, may I present Ms. Andromeda Sichler, health ed., cross-country coach, the woman who usually saves the last cup of coffee in the pot for me, an all-around peach."

Andi gave a diffident wave; Wilf stood to greet her. "Everything Cindy Lou said about you is true," the moderately renowned author purred in his sonorous baritone.

"What did she say?"

"That you're young and that you would have a story to tell. Your youth is obvious; your story I can see in your eyes. It's a scary story, isn't it?"

The room seemed to disappear as Andi looked into Wilf's aquamarine irises. She saw the Mediterranean Sea in his left eye, the Caribbean in his right: his Tuscan paternal ancestry and his mother's long-suffering Cuban family. The room was replaced by a wide-screen view of those eyes that held stories of their own—great, fantastic lies that contained nuggets of universal truth.

"Just the beginning." Andi had taken so long to answer the question, everyone had forgotten the question. She shook herself back to reality. "All I have is the beginning of the story and yes, it's kind of scary. It'll keep until after, uh, whatever is happening tonight." If only she knew what was to happen that night.

There were more cocktails and mocktails—remember how fattening alcohol can be, especially to those who didn't metabolize the way they had in their youth!—a less-than-sumptuous *nouvelle*-vegan buffet, a few bullshit introductions and recognitions of visiting poobahs of publishing; and then THE MAN, Alfred Spitzenberg, publisher-in-chief of Plaid Flamingo Books and Music, Inc., appeared unbidden at the lectern in his modified Mao suit and bolo tie, greeted by rapturous applause—some of it genuine. Spitz would have

made a very tall Mao: At six-foot-six he was already the tallest Jewish man that the Midtown publishing Mafia had ever seen.

The boss began his memorized spiel:

"Most of you know tonight's guest of honor better than the world at large knows him. You know that he's smug, egocentric, brutally honest, calculatedly non-mainstream, very reluctant to step one foot north of 14th Street—the kind of guy that most of us would love to be, but are prevented from being by our civilized politeness and habitual ass-kissing. You know that he appeals mostly to that college-age demographic that scares the living shit out of our marketing divisions—am I right? In spite of certain people's best efforts to get the whole world addicted to the familiar, valium-esque prose of the Top 10 writers, for some reason our boy *is* the literary establishment in the newly liberated nations of Eastern Europe. With the new-found freedom to choose what they read, the youth and middle-agers of Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Ukraine have chosen NOT Kerouac and the Beats, NOT Wolfe and his Boho crowd, NOT P.J. O'Rourke and that asshole-libertarian bunch, not even the Ayn Rand axis, but the cerebroadelic meanderings of our Boomer auteur, Mr.—uh, what was your name again? Just kidding. Mr. Wilfredo Adamante the Second. Bring your sorry ass up here, Wilf!"

Wilf carried a glass of the creamy scotch to the lectern, shook Spitzzy's sweaty hand quite firmly, and kicked off his impromptu address.

He had thought that his friend would say all the important things, but now the ball was in Wilf's own court.

"I have ten things to say, and I'll make it as quick as I can. One: Tip your waitrons, you cheap bastards.

"Two: When I grow up, I want to be Oliver Stone—without having fought in a jungle in Southeast Asia.

"Three: and something Alfred was afraid to tell you, Paramount Communications is considering buying the Plaid Flamingo. Alfred, scumdog of the universe that he is, is considering accepting their offer. Wow, from the basement of the dorm at NYU to the basement of the Paramount Building in 25 years—that's progress.

"Four: I might be lying about number three, so don't go running to your brokers yet. But even if I am lying, the notion fits in with this disturbing trend: The Alternative is becoming Mainstream. *Da-amn.*

"Five, and now begins the serious part: Three of Alfred's underlings have secured funding for the Primal Man Triathlon. The top contributors will be Paramount (of course, since they get the film and TV rights), Harley-Davidson, Phillip Morris (cough, cough), Timberland, and a tire company or two, I'm not sure which ones. This event will consist of three parts: survival in the wilderness without modern technologies, creating technologies for survival out of available natural resources, and outlining a belief-system based on their immediate environment—all over a period of one month. So far the only people to express any interest in participating are some bikers from Connecticut and a few transients from southern Florida who claim that the jungles of Zaire wouldn't be much different from what they endure everyday. The prize for successful completion, by the way, is a million bucks, to be divided within each surviving team. Pretty cool, huh?

"Six: I'm getting into a new line of work, one which I have avoided like rabies up to now. That would be the lecture circuit. Amid speculation that I'm afraid to leave Manhattan, or that I just don't like talking to a large number of unenlightened beings, I'm going on a nationwide campaign. The aim of this campaign—which is the first time since I first set out to change the world that I've had any clear idea of what to do in this life—is to improve the daily lives of people like me, who come from a working-class or welfare-class background. Only my closest friends know that my father worked in a shoe factory from the

time he arrived in New York in 1938 to the day he died in 1966, and that my mother was a fourth-generation tobacco picker in Cuba who fled to the States to get away from Batista's regime, not knowing that this nation had put Batista and his pals in power in the first place. But I digress. I've simply had enough of people grousing about bum schooling and a welfare system that encourages dependence on the Big, Bad Gubmint. I want people at the short end of the American stick to take control of their lives and to improve themselves for their own sake, and I think that I know how to help them.

"Which brings me to Seven: The Plaid Flaming O is one month away from distributing its first work of nonfiction since 1983, the book nobody knows about except the editors and me: Wilf Adamante's *Self, Incorporated*. Now, some skeptics on the editorial board actually said to me, Wilf, those people don't read books! And they were, by and large, correct. That's why the tour is so important, and it's also why....

"Eight: We have a plan whereby the book will also be marketed as a series of video cassettes which can be kept in union halls and lunchrooms, checked out by the workers and the community at their leisure—and, if we become part of the Paramount family (which otherwise I'm not too wild about), then the Paramount people can discuss with the video chains about stocking the tapes for free or cheap checkouts like they did with that AIDS tape. Take note that this is a very long shot we're betting on: raising class consciousness, providing an alternative to the corporate bullshit that passes for information and culture in this society. But we owe it to the people to make up for the failures of the 1960s revolutionary movements and put something real on the table—i.e., demonstrate that we're not just a bunch of Yuppie sell-outs."

There were cheers from some tables, disbelieving stares from others, shoe-top-gazing among the Yuppie sell-outs in the room.

"Nine, the sum and substance of the book and video series: We not only tell working people and the underclass what they

already know—i.e., that they've been sodomized by management and government—but also provide them with a few things they can do to make them feel better about themselves. They can realize that tobacco and liquor companies have them by the nuts coming and going—does this sound a bit like Malcolm X? I hope so—and that these corporate drug pushers are continually working to keep people around the world poor, ignorant, and hooked. As a borderline alcoholic myself, I can identify with at least the hooked part. People can realize that their lack of quality schooling or their lack of attention in school must not keep them from educating themselves in whatever way possible, even reading my books, ha-ha. They can gradually change their priorities so that every action is motivated, every decision made in light of the question, 'Is this going to help my offspring, my loved ones, myself?' I don't have kids or a spouse, but as an observer of the life around me, I conclude that America is only a fair-to-middlin' place for children to grow up—and affluent, white America, where children are treated as some kind of commodity, sets a poor example for our less fortunate cousins across the tracks.

"And ten, the most difficult of all to say—say it anyway, Wilf. OK, I will. For 13 years now, some old NYU-mates and I have been getting together without fail every Sunday to have these, uh, group-meditations-slash-Algonquin Round Table bull sessions. We call the group the Collective, harking back to our radical-pinko youth. It's been a kind of religion for the 14 of us, with me as chief temple-whore, and our dutiful observance of the rituals is the chief reason that I haven't been outside metro NYC since 1979. I've turned a studio flat on West 4th Street into a one-man monastery. Well, since that is obviously about to change, what with my traveling-guru act about to hit the trail, the Collective may have to carry on without me for a while, or go on hiatus. There are two members in the room tonight, and I would like to have told them directly, but as I've been told this very evening, I'm a typical male who has trouble dealing with emotional issues and communicating with women. So, Karla, Cindy Lou, there it is."

Karla fought back the tears of a senior at the last football game of the season, relieved but saddened that another phase of her life might be coming to an end. Cindy Lou took another hit of scotch and, expressionless, strode to the women's lounge, clutching her clutch purse to her abdomen.

Andi sat motionless for a deep minute as Wilf took questions from the floor. Her female instincts guided her cautiously to the powder room into which her twin-for-the-night had just disappeared. Cindy Lou was sniffing there and blotting tears with tissues from the dispenser. There were enough moistened tissues on the basin counter to fill a 46D cup to capacity, which neither Andi nor Cindy Lou could do with what the mammary goddess had given them.

"I feel betrayed!" Cindy Lou struggled to say. "First time I put on mascara in five years, and now look at me!"

"I don't think that's what's bothering you." Andi kept her distance, debating whether the situation warranted a hug or a modicum of personal space. Her hands, indecisive as to what to do, began removing the wig from her head.

"No shit!" It was a shout in whisper's clothing. "Understand: This is a big part of my life coming to an end—and that self-absorbed fuck didn't have the balls to tell me, person-to-person? Christ, I spent the night with him just four days ago; he couldn't tell me then?"

Andi opted for the hugging approach. Cindy Lou sank into her embrace and let the lachrymose glands take over. She wailed and blubbered as if in deep mourning, and Andi, not having a clue what for, soon found herself joining in harmony. Andi herself had not allowed herself a good cry since just after her parents' funeral two years before, and now she was involved in a sympathy cry when nobody near her had even died—

"Hey!" she snapped right out of it. "Hu, what the fuck are you blubbering about? You're acting like your best friend died and went to hell! I mean, Jesus, this is 1992, we're always goin' on

about change—vote for Clinton, vote for change—well, now you've got change, and you're upset over it? Embrace it!"

"Betrayal is not the kind of change we want; we've had enough of being betrayed by every fucking president since Truman, every older person we've ever known, right? This is closer to home, homegirl." She sniffled. "That man is my teacher, my friend, my lover, my priest, and now he's going to chuck all that without giving notice and become some fucking Leo Buscaglia for working stiffs and welfare moms? Well, bully for him!" She searched through her purse for loose bills and change. "It's not safe for either of us to ride the subway now. Here's two fives—that should get you back to where you parked if you can catch a cab. I gotta go home. Thanks for trying to cheer me up, but it's gonna take the whole weekend just to stop wanting to kill somebody."

"Then I'll stay with you all weekend, Hu! Let me ride home with you."

"Nope! I promised Wilf you'd tell him your story tonight, and unlike a certain writer I could name, I have a sense of honor and obligation." Cindy Lou blotted one last tear and kissed Andi on the cheek. "Later, dude."

As Cindy left, a light bulb clicked on in the bladder-control section of Andi's brain: Thanks to the scotch that she had gulped, she now had to pee somethin' fierce.

When Andi was safely seated in the stall, Karla Darman burst in. "Cindy Lou, are you still here?"

"She's going home."

"Zat you, Andromeda?" Karla took a hair brush from her purse, began brushing her frosted locks back into place.

"Call me Andi, please."

"What happened?"

"She got righteously pissed, we cried over it together, and then she split."

"Did she say anything?"

Pause. "Yeah. She felt betrayed."

Karla stopped brushing and stared into the mirror. Then, through her sadness and confusion, she giggled, then chuckled, then laughed long and loud. "Betrayed? Come on, that's silly. I mean, our little group can go on without Wilf and frankly, I'll probably use his departure as an excuse to take a break from it myself, maybe even quit altogether. It's time to move on and do something else. Even the Beatles had to end—"

Andi flushed and emerged from the stall. "She had an emotional response to the end of something she considered very precious, and you think that's silly?"

"Well, yes! I've known that woman for longer than you've been alive, and I would never expect her to fly off the handle like that. Of course, she is Chinese, and the Chinese in her still clings to a lot of traditions, modernized and westernized as she is."

Andi's bullshit detector was on full alert. "And I guess we Europeans—we northern Europeans—don't have emotional responses like that and don't cling to traditions, right? Lady, you're so full of shit, you could fertilize the Sahara! Now, I'm supposed to have dinner with Wilf tonight, and I'd appreciate it if you just stay the fuck away from both of us. Then I can find out why Wilf decided to do this and why our Chinese friend got so upset, since neither of them wants to tell you anything. Excuse me." She fixed her skirt and exited.

The guests continued to munch at the *nouvelle*-vegan buffet, eventually attacking the huge carrot cake set out for dessert and taking the alcoholic edge off the evening with some of the finest herbal teas served in Manhattan. Andi was impressed by

the repast, as she had been a part-time vegetarian for five years—vegan at home, full-bore carnivore when dining out, since restaurants outside of Greenwich Village did not understand the words *meatless* and *non-dairy*. Her favorite Chinese take-out place even served its Vegetarian Delight with pork-fried rice.

To Andi, it seemed odd that the hoity-toity, tuxedoed waiters of the Hotel Midí were dishing out the buffet selections. The hotel should have hired art students in black turtlenecks, black jeans, and black Converse high-tops, with screwed-up hair, multi-pierced ears and lips, and tiny tattoos on their ankles, to serve tofu-spinach omelets and kasha/kidney bean tabbouleh salad. But she never got a chance to say so aloud.

Wilf was apparently unconcerned about Cindy Lou's hasty departure. He assured Andi that everything would be fine once a weekend of meditation and grieving had passed. He was even confident that Ms. Hu would show up at that Sunday's scheduled Collective session in her usual sunny persona.

"Cindy Lou is keenly aware of something that many people take for granted, or only realize when it's brought to their attention," Wilf observed, "and it informs her whole existence. Namely, as shitty as life can get sometimes, living is a divine joy. Just having the opportunity to live is a gift that you never asked for, but it keeps on giving. And it's a helluva lot better than the alternative. When I first knew her, she was a freshman at NYU, a rebel who had been kicked out of her home twice for possessing love beads—"

"You're kidding!"

"No joke! There was a miscommunication involved. She translated love beads into Chinese using the word for carnal love when she told her parents what these strange plastic necklaces were all about. They were mortified. Anyhow, at NYU she was full of angst and just pissed off at everything from Mao to LBJ to her English professor to the fare increases on the subway. Then she discovered zazen, and she learned

the pleasure that just filling your lungs with air can bring, even in New York. She discovered the Tao, and practiced it so intensely that she virtually *became* the Tao. She discovered tantra, and now she makes every sexual experience a trip to the foothills of nirvana. So many of us walk around with the ghosts of our ancestors sitting on our heads; she has exorcised her ghosts, which is something I've never been able to do." His omelet was stone cold when he finally paused to take a bite.

"My ancestors have a question," Andi tried to remove a fiber of spinach from between her upper incisors with her tongue. "How come neither of you has ever had, you know, a long-term relationship?"

"You mean, like a marriage? That's easy. Neither of us is capable of it. We'd both feel suffocated in two shakes of a tofu-lamb's tail. We like to think that it's because we have enough yin and yang in us that we don't need anyone to supplement what we're missing—I mean, so many women have been reared to develop yin at the expense of yang, and vice-versa with men, and these people need the other sex to make them whole. I gather that you don't have that problem, Andi."

She lifted a forkful of tabbouleh to her lips, where it stopped short. "What makes you say that?"

"That's what Cindy Lou told me."

"She did, huh?"

"Not in so many words, but she says you never fret about men, not being a big part of your life."

"I'm a teacher," she reminded him. "I don't have time. And I do have groups of friends I get together with once in a while—males and females—and we have fun, but we don't mess around within the group. The friendship is very satisfying to me. Besides that, I'm still getting over the wounds from my last relationship."

"How long since that ended?"

"Eighteen months."

"Eighteen months!" Wilf stifled a laugh. "Ooh, he must have been—it was a he, right?"

"Yeah! I'm unfashionably hetero, I'm afraid."

"He must have been very special to you."

"He was a bum—a very wealthy bum. He's, like, a Persian, born in Pakistan, whose family fled to the Maldives after Zia came to power. None of the other American girls at FDU would go anywhere near him, and I went to bed with him. We made a baby that miscarried—probably someone told it who its father was, and it couldn't deal with that." She wondered why she was telling him all this over dinner.

This time Wilf laughed aloud. "You know, even though I was on the ground floor of the sexual revolution, I never made a baby? Never. It would have been a hideous, mutated acid casualty if I had fathered one, though." It was definitely time for a change in subject. All he could come up with was, "So, any plans for summer?"

Andi finally swallowed that bite of salad. "Thinkin' about spendin' some time in Kitty Hawk—my grandfather lives there."

"Kitty Hawk? My parents took my sisters and me to Kitty Hawk twice! I loved it when I was a kid." Wilf's eyes opened wider than they had in years, as if possessed by the eleven-year-old who was touring the Wright Brothers Monument for the first time, the one who just *knew* he'd grow up to fly jets for TWA.

"Well, I'm a little less enthusiastic about the place, since last visit—I was harassed by this old geezer who knew some things about me that I rarely tell anyone. I mean, I'd never met this guy, but he knows I'm a teacher, that I went to FDU, I've smoked hash, I've had a miscarriage, blah-blah. He's like a

one-man CIA, 'cause he does that to just about everybody who crosses his shadow. I felt violated. That's the beginning of the story."

Wilf nodded with recognition. Through a mouthful of tofu and spinach, he said one word: "Hank."

"Yeah! You know about him!"

"And I bet he has some information to pass on to you that he can't tell anyone else."

All eating and conversation stopped at their table—it seemed to Andi that the whole room stopped to listen, as in an old E.F. Hutton commercial. For the first time since she sat down with her vegan buffet dinner, Andi allowed her eyes to meet Wilf's head-on. The same sensation of room-filling eyes took over as before, as though nothing existed or happened at that moment outside of Wilfredo's orbs. Bloodshots turned to lightning bolts. Moisture on the rims of those eyes turned to droplets of rain on the skylight of a bedroom of a cottage in Bermuda. Andi felt drawn to him, into him, as if positively-charged yang particles were streaming from deep within him, knocking at the gates of her soul pagoda and entreating the negatively-charged yin particles to come out and play.

Somehow she kept her head swimming and didn't let it drown in the sensation. It's so easy for small celestial bodies to get caught in the gravitational pull of larger ones, winding up either orbiting or colliding. Andi was determined at that moment not to become anyone's satellite, much less a meteor—and later she would figure out that her friend Cindy Lou was a satellite whose planet was about to leave her to drift through space; that's why the otherwise fiercely independent Ms. Hu felt so betrayed.

Dinner finished, the shmoozing and gladhanding went on for a lengthy two hours, during which Andi actually met some writers whose works she had read for freshman English, back when any work containing a message about the human condition

was embraceable as a fragment of The Truth. Additionally, two Vonnegut children were there. Andi managed to keep her head up, though her brain kept looking at its watch, saying, "I'm tired, and I wanna go home!" to which her heart would add, "—with Wilf!"

Finally, it was a suitable time to move the party downtown. The hippest of the bunch slowly bailed out of the rarefied Midí atmosphere and into cabs, limos, Japanese luxury cars, and subway holes. Wilf guided Andi, yawning with giddiness and aching from wearing her long-neglected fuck-me pumps, into the limousine that Alfred had hired above Wilf's objections. "What is this, Alfie? Get-used-to-the-idea-of-being-a-Paramount-property Day?" The limo was New York's only stretch Corvette: the back of a Suburban spliced to a Corvette's front end and engine. The drivers often complained about the vehicle's multiple-personality problems.

"Take me to my car, please. It's parked on—oh, shit, I can't remember the street!" She scratched her head, and her hair fell back into its normal shape. "Shit, shit, and shit! OK. It's a block north of Canal, two blocks east of Mulberry."

"Are you sure you don't wanta to see the Collective's sanctum sanctorum?" Wilf's line had worked before, with many NYU women whom he had met in coffeehouses around Washington Square. But Andi was a Jersey girl who had never been in awe of his peculiar genius, was starstruck by Wilf the man, not Wilf the underground celebrity. She was nobody's groupie.

"Some other night, perhaps. Tonight, after what happened with Cindy Lou, well, y'know. Besides, teaching wears me out. I'm useless after 10 p.m. on Fridays."

Wilf tried to conceal the feeling of rejection that fluttered across his face. Andi didn't miss it.

"But I have to tell you something, Mr. Adamante: I know you believe in complete honesty, so I'll be completely honest. I've never felt so drawn to a man—especially an older man in my

whole life. I mean, you've got forever in your eyes. I have to work out whether or not it's just a severe crush."

"I've always given in to crushes, no matter how severe, no matter how temporary."

"Yeah, but remember two things: I'm still a little burned from before and, well, it's not the '60s. The Wild Thing can be a Scary Thing."

"Tell me about it."

They were silent all the rest of the way to Canal Street. Just before they arrived, Andi shut her eyes for a minute just to clear her mind and wound up snoozing. Wilf had difficulty waking her and directing her into the cockpit of her Civic.

Andi took a few minutes to wake up enough to gallop back to the Jersey side; she gave her new acquaintance a two-cheek kiss of gratitude and semi-consciously aimed her wheels toward the Tunnel. Wilf put her gratitude into his jacket pocket and commanded his driver to set a course for Clubland.

In Kitty Hawk, an elderly man in a green flannel shirt and khaki slacks was busy with scissors, a glue stick, and a large scrapbook. He was cutting and pasting the efforts of the day: photocopies of microfiches of every article on aviation and the aerospace industry that he had found from 1990-91 sources in the Dare County Public Library. The mounting of the *Business Week* profile of a young, go-getter executive from Boeing who had been appointed to the Board of Directors at Air Grace took some doing because of its unconventional layout, but mount it he did, arthritic fingers and all. Noting the late hour, the flannel man put away his tools, closed the scrapbook, and placed it at the far-right end of a long shelf full of 46 identical white, vinyl-bound volumes. The far left end contained a book labeled **Aviation 1900-01**. Every book in between chronicled two years in the history of powered flight as completely as possible. His

arthritic fingers flicked off the desk lamp and took a well-deserved rest with their owner, Heinrich "Hank" Truber. For the first time since the previous Friday, Hank surrendered himself to sleep, a sleep as deep as the death for which he longed and which had so bitterly spurned him.