

September

Pandering just wasn't in Wilf Adamante's bag of clubs. The minor media circus that followed the Dharma Bus was clearly waiting for Wilf to stick more death-defying feats in his mouth. When would another offended audience member take a swing at him? When would he explicitly advocate armed rebellion against The System? When would one of his entourage say or do something outrageous or incriminating? The answer: If Wilf could control events around him, never; the Almighty Press could go scratch.

In Boston a reporter from a UHF station had cornered Andi with questions about her relationship with the author. "Use your imagination," she'd said, "if you have any left. Even if I denied a relationship with the man, you'd tawdrify me like you do everybody else. The only relationship that matters is our friendship. The End." She'd shoved her way past the reporter and back to the bus. The reporter had to be content with what her cousin the Stray Dog back in New London had told her, and the Dog in question was known to stretch the truth like taffy.

But after four uneventful weeks, the bus arrived in another metropolitan area known for its servitude to the Pentagon Mob: Hampton Roads, the Tidewater, the Seven Cities. Andi had already announced her plan to jump ship for a few days to visit her kinfolk in Kitty Hawk, but the ship was to jump that way with her, as it turned out. A most insistent bit of electronic mail had arrived at Plaid Flamingo HQ, from which the message was passed to Alf during his weekly telephonic check-in with his secretary. The message was Dr. Paige F. Travertino's invitation to Ocracoke Island:

Dear Wilf and Company:

I see that you've left a couple of days open in your itinerary. How divinely provident! If you have any interest in the Outer Banks Magic and its potential to help all mankind to cast aside the Sears-Roebuck drapes of misery, you must come visit me—I'd say us, but husband Nick :(doesn't give a shit—at the Scooter Blenny Chalet, Ocracoke. Even if your imagination doesn't get a jump-start from a conversation with the spirit of Virginia Dare, the time spent in these heaven-blessed environs will allow your travel-weary nerves to knit, and I'll stuff you to the gills with home-baked goodies.

Meet me backstage after the Newport News gig and please respond to my invitation by e-mail at vdchan@coastal.edu before you get down this way. Surprises await you.

On the off-chance that you haven't heard of me, I'm Paige Travertino, professor of physics at Coastal Carolina, not some random flake as you might imagine. Actually, I'm a flake of quite some notoriety around here, giddy enough at the prospect of meeting you that I'm writing this bass-ackwards and introducing myself in the third paragraph. My perceived flakiness is a source of amusement for me, since some of the same people who claim channeling to be a crock o' shit have been known to surreptitiously consult channelers and trance mediums, like some Jimmy Swaggart railing against sexual excesses and then getting caught with his praying hands in the nookie jar. But I ramble.

Well, put it this way: You absolutely must come visit here, for your own sakes, and for Virginia Dare's benefit, because she's anxious to speak with you. Sorry this message is such a mess, but I composed it in a hurry.

Paige

vdchan@coastal.edu

Wilf and Alf got into a minor hassle over the question of going out of their way to visit Ocracoke, especially since they were scheduled to appear in Greensboro next, quite the other end of

North Carolina. Wilf insisted that Kitty Hawk was not to be missed, although it was just another seaside tourist pit to Alf's more mundane mind. Almost everyone else on the bus thought the invitation a bit creepy, yet they agreed that the offer of anyone's home cooking was too tempting to pass up. Especially baked goods—most of the company had been filling their carbo-gaps in their souls with doughnuts, those 50-cent mass-produced toroids baked without the most essential ingredient: love.

Nigel Taft had no opinion on the question. "Whatever. It's cool with me either way." Ol' Turpentine really did have a good mind; he was just too lazy to use it most of the time, just as with his good heart he knew how to do the right thing but needed the right reason.

Trudy's was the most enthusiastic yes vote in the discussion, loath as she was to miss an opportunity to compare someone else's baking with her own.

September was the ax that split Andi's thoughts: Half of her mind was on preparing for the next stop(s) on the tour, half on returning to Paterson to start another year of the Public Education Racket. The education-oriented half of her mind also remembered things like the summer direct-deposit paychecks that had lain relatively untapped in her checking account, automatically deducted for rent and minimal utilities. A back-to-school shopping whirlwind was planned for Labor Day weekend, which was coming up *much too quickly*.

Cindy Lou, professional that she was, had her September preparations finished in June. Her mind was not so easily cleft in twain. Though everyone knew she would return to her post, she talked as if she would stay on the bus even beyond the planned itinerary, metamorphosing into a 21st-century bar-hopping, free-loving version of Charles Kuralt, an old hero of hers who had just retired from CBS News. She had never spent much time out of greater NYC: one quick visit to cousins in San Francisco in her pre-Hendrix teens, one abortive hitchhike to the Farm in Tennessee, and one NEA national

convention in Florida, plus an impromptu Caribbean Cruise, had been the limit of her travels. At 44, she was discovering the Romance of the American Road, which superseded the less romantic digestive turmoil of road food.

Alf, Tater, and Delano were seasoned touring veterans, but even for them, this trip had begun to exact its toll by mid-August. This was not a few care-free weeks of following the Grateful Dead around the Northeast, and they were no longer so youthful, no longer able to ride through the diesel-perfumed night on a few tabs of good, clean acid. Trudy consistently remembered her meditation, though, and thus her equanimity remained the most intact. The others found meditation caused them to miss certain pleasant distractions along the highways they were navigating.

Most noticeably of all, Wilf was not his usual, centered self. He would complain sardonically about how such an ugly society had been allowed to take root in such a beautiful country. When Cindy started throwing the wit around, Wilf moodily refrained from taking up his own verbal épée. He found himself tempted to eat hamburgers to supplement his intake of protein, weary of cheese sandwiches and omelets. (Every stop on the tour had at least one healthy place to eat, but as the distance between stops increased after leaving behind the compact Northeast, some mid-leg diner stops became inevitable.) Wilf expressed a degree of revulsion at the "Diner Creatures," the three-pack-a-day smokers who waited on and at tables in the diners and truck stops—those death's-head caricatures of humanity for whom nicotine, caffeine, and grill grease constituted nutrition. At one point he repeated, with an air of resignation, his views on the failure of the movements of the 1960s but with an accusatory twist:

"If you blame anybody, blame the little brothers and sisters. The ones who were in high school or just entering college in the late '60s. They thought they were jumping on the free-sex-and-drugs bandwagon. The older brothers and sisters at the front of the wagon knew something about responsibility: that

sex isn't free, drugs aren't free, riding on the damn wagon sure as hell isn't free, and mostly that freedom isn't free. The first wave knew that the first priority was to re-create society to make this big party of ours possible. The first wave saw the Civil Rights marches and knew what the fuck it all meant. The second wave of baby-boomers, man, they had all the diseases from their random fucking, and they thought that if acid's OK, cocaine and heroin must be cool, too—after all, the Beatles and Stones were into that shit. Those of us in the first wave had a legitimate agenda, to make a world where killing Kennedys and Kings was not business as usual, but we got painted as a bunch of mindless libertines because of the actions of a few incompetent young hippies.

"Most of the burn-out cases you see these days: Are they over 40? Uh-uh, unless they went to 'Nam. They're in their 20s and 30s, or the teenage children of the second-wavers, all the people who forgot that there were three *R*'s to the movement: Rock, Rebellion, and Responsibility. That third *R* is always the most important. I'm not gonna say we've got our shit together any better, on average, but we're getting through life OK, we're not wrapping Corvettes around streetlights and trees, we're not getting the mental disability checks from Washington."

The others in the entourage sat or lay in incredulous silence. It was rare for Wilf to get so worked up about anything, much less the revolution that he had long since buried. They did not want this side of Wilf showing up on stage in Newport News or anywhere else. Cindy Lou had her suspicions that some chemical other than protein was responsible for his attitudinal shift, as she had seen Wilf in a similar mode before. But she said nothing aloud.

Signs for the Williamsburg exits said howdy and zipped out of sight, indicating that the bright red skies ahead hovered over the Tidewater cities and just maybe over a fork in some spiritual paths where decisions would be made without maps or other informative tools.

Union Station in New London put on its best face for the mayor and council, the dignitaries from General Dynamics, and a few thousand well-wishers who took the afternoon of September 1 off to see Lester DeWitt and Horace Foxe board the New York-bound Yankee Clipper. A reporter from the *Day*, the same one who wrote the piece on Freddie Balaguer's Pizza Pit heroics, would accompany the two men to JFK, then on to Brussels, Cairo, and Kinshasa, where a small group of wilderness guides would lead all the contestants into the rainforest preserve where they would spend September 15 to October 15 doing what their remotest ancestors spent their lives doing: survival.

Tributes to the men's courage and determination were perfunctory, but sincerely delivered. A parade was announced for their triumphal return in October, with the hope expressed that a crisp New England autumn day would embrace them when they arrived in the Whaling City. A city that had seen its share of heroes and losers doffed its collective hat to these two, who seemed to embody the hero and the loser so well.

"So who's this guy we're s'posed to meet in N' York?" Lester asked the reporter.

"Chuck Arnstein—an old friend of Adamante's who also sits on the standing committee for the NY Marathon. You'll probably hate him: He's a smug Yuppie bastard, never gets tired of remindin' ya how important his work is. For a living, he's a liaison to the council for the Department of Sanitation—a bureaucrat. But, uh, don't let anything I say prejudice you, right?"

The Clipper stopped only in New Haven and Stamford before hustling into Penn Station. From there, the New London contingent took a taxi to the Marathon Committee's offices near Union Square, the reporter toting more luggage than the two Primal Triathletes combined. Arnstein would brief them and the other competitors before joining them on the journey to Kinshasa.

"This was Wilf Adamante's idea," Chuck grinned, paused, "but I've been doing all the work to get this puppy into shape, dammit. He's shovelin' nineteen kinds o' manure out on the road to push his book, and he left me holding *this* bag o' manure. But don't get me wrong: I've loved every bit of it." He introduced all of his associates who had been coaxed into volunteering their time and effort. He introduced the people who would read and evaluate the written and manufactured portions of the Primal Man Triathlon. He introduced his fiancée, who had almost left him for spending too much time with the P.M.T.

Finally Chuck introduced all the competitors, the seven groups and ten lone individuals who were vying for the cool million plus potential endorsement contracts. (He mispronounced a lot of their last names, but *DeWitt* and *Foxe* were easy enough for his white-bread tongue.) Some of these folks, including the Lesbian mini-tribe from Texas, had muscles (and egos) that made Horace's and Lester's look downright scrawny.

"This is your last opportunity to back out," Chuck concluded the briefing. No one backed out. "OK, let's go to the airport!"

There was one bus for the athletes, one for officials and journalists; all would sit together on the same Sabena DC-10s, getting tired of the same questions repeated relentlessly. Horace was not prepared for microphones and cameras, and he allowed the voluble Lester to speak for them both. Lester was annoyingly prepared for it all, and irritatingly candid with each reporter from every medium-market newspaper and cable TV channel represented on the flight over the Atlantic.

"Me, I've never been into competitive sports just liftin' weights n' sh—er, stuff. Got started in the Navy, y'know, the same job where I learned how to party. Oh, sure, I was a big-time party animal even before, y'know, high school, but the Navy teaches ya how to party responsibly. Not that everybody in uniform does, y'know, they get snockered off their ass same's anybody, but if you're caught, uh, misbehavin' there's, like, some serious consequences. Those guys at the Tailhook Convention in

Vegas are more the exception than the rule, I think. Anyways, life for me was work/party/work/party/work/party; I uh, and, it, uh, was startin' to feel a little hollow. Then this Triathlon thing came along, and, like, it was perfect. Perfect. My kind o' competition, testin' your limits against nature. I told Horace, who's a real party animal also, and he's like, 'Hey, why not?'"

Horace would feign sleep while wearing a severely put-out expression. He didn't care for air travel under normal circumstances; this was too much.

Back in New London, Cherise had no Horace, no Lester, no Corinne for a few weeks. She hurled herself into her work at the Sea Monkey, earning some piddly tips for her efforts as the snowbirds and summer weekenders departed for warmer shores. Local regulars were too much like friends to tip big.

Once in a while, however, came Myron Rosenbaum or some analog thereof, too chemically dependent for Respectable Street, too respectable for Bank Street. The night of the Calends of September, Myron waddled in, stitched together like a crazy quilt, addicted to pain-killers which, combined with alcohol, would render him comatose or dead. Still, he made his best attempt at the old, familiar Yacht-Club look.

"Cheri baby!" he rasped as he sat at a corner booth where the light was lowest. "Ginger ale, neat, please, and how ya doin'?"

"My man took off today, so I'm a little blue."

"For good?"

"For money. Him 'n' Lester went to Africa for the Primitive Triathlon."

Myron chuckled. "Oh yeah. Adamante's thing. I wish him 'n' Lester all the luck in the universe." He waited as she left and returned with a pitcher of ginger ale and a glass with some ice. "If ya ever get lonely, call me any time," he winked.

"Sure thang," she replied, meaning just the opposite. He wanted to give his poor, neglected dick—about the only part of him that hadn't been stitched—a chance to swim a few laps in her pool, she was sure. She was also quite sure that she'd rather have a meaningful relationship with a fire hydrant. But she remained ultra-polite to the biggest tipper in her life.

"How's your sister?" as if he really cared.

"She went back t' 'Lanta last week. She's a little blue, too, 'cause she lost *two* boyfriends, includin' the one she was s'posed to marry."

"Izzat a fact?"

"Yeah, and the other guy, the one who came up here with her? He was the one I wanted her to stick with, but he blew her off."

"What was he, a doctor? a lawyer?"

"Nooooo, he works for Air Grace, parkin' planes, throwin' bags. Not rich, but very smart, kind, considerate—"

"Puerto Rican boy?"

"How'd you know?"

"This Puerto Rican kid saved my life when I had an accident down in Atlanta, said he worked for Air Grace and visited New London on his off days. He was seein' your sister?"

"Yeah, it started out as a just-for-fun thing," Cheri recalled, "—cause her fiancé was up in Athens havin' a good-ol' time, and Cori just wanted a good-ol' time o' her own, with someone who'd be quiet about it. Since Freddie didn't have a lot o' friends, he was perfect. Then she actually started carin' about him. I thought he was a loser at first, but once I got to know him, I decided he was a good catch."

Myron chuckled again, barely restraining a mouthful of ginger ale from escaping through his nostrils. "A good catch'? You

young people still use that phrase? Look, that makes a man out to be like a fish. You catch a fish, what happens? He's dead! He's not goin' anywhere. You catch a man, you can scale, gut, fillet, fry and eat the sumbitch, what happens? He still gets away. You can't keep a man over your fireplace like some trout."

"I thought it meant like in baseball. You make a good catch, you can throw it back when you're tired o' holdin' it."

Myron stared, stultified, as Cheri's metaphor flopped to the floor; he was on the wrong side of either a generation gap or an intelligence gap to appreciate her comparison.

"Or football," she continued. "You make a good catch, you run with it, gain some yardage, maybe even score a touchdown, but you still have to give it back to the referee. Whatever, for me, men are just a good time, and Horace is the best time I've ever had."

Fortunately for Myron, Cheri had more pitchers to deliver elsewhere. He thought about Freddie, about all that he had revealed to Freddie after that rainy night in Georgia. As far as Myron knew, no action had been taken to stop Hezekiah Hamilton from carrying out his apocalyptic fantasy, or even to inquire whether any of it was true. He was curious whether young Mr. Balaguer had tried to approach Hamilton, been rebuffed, fired, bribed, blackmailed, blacklisted but he was *merely* curious, not concerned enough to investigate. Yet.

"Look, Ms. Langenham, as far as I know, here's the situation." Freddie told the consumer affairs reporter at a major network's Atlanta affiliate. "A guy who's working with Hamilton—no names yet—tells me that the Jerusalem flights on the Triple 7 are gonna carry weapons—"

"What sorts o' weapons, dahlin'?"

"Not big stuff, just personal weapons: rifles, automatics. They're gonna be sold to some, uh, extremists."

"On which side?"

"Israelis."

"When did he tell you all this?"

Freddie scratched under the waistband of his athletic shorts, then between his bare shoulder blades. "Mid-July. If I think long enough, I can probably remember the exact date."

"You waited a month and a half then?"

"Yeah, 'cause like, I wanted some time to decide who to tell first, and to figure out whether the story was believable. Whether I believed it."

Alysha Langenham took a lipsticky drag on her More menthol 120-millimeter cancer stick. She was accustomed to sources who gave her oddball scenarios involving everything from the Marietta sewage system to the Kennedy assassinations. "I hope you re not trying to conceal your identity, because if you are, calling from a home phone is a really stupid move, sweetie." Her accent was straight out of South Philadelphia, but her big hair, mannerisms, and idioms were as Dixified as a Moon Pie and R.C. with peanuts.

Freddie explained more deeply. "Originally I wanted to look into this myself, but I just don't have the same investigative tools that you might. For one thing, I don't have access to the big offices in my own company."

"What reason might you have for comin' forward with this?"
Puff. "Has the company done you wrong?"

"Nnnnnnaw. In fact, I think I have the company's best interests at heart here. If they're caught, they're busted, they get a big fine, a bunch of us employees lose our jobs. If you pin this on Hamilton before he gets caught, maybe just Hamilton

and his buddies are out on their ass, and someone who doesn't think he's Jesus gets to take his place. Good for the company, good for the employees."

"Aren't you afraid," *puff*, "that your source might be endangered if Hamilton finds out the beans were spilled, hon?"

"No problem. My source seems to have a death wish. You know the type: lives recklessly, drinks too much, just doesn't have enough guts to off himself."

The reporter extinguished her cigarette in a cup of cold, stale coffee left on her desk from the previous day. The same color raspberry lipstick was all around the lip of the cup. "Look, dahlin', I'm gonna check on this as much as I have time to today, which ain't much, 'cause I'm workin' on a construction fraud story with some major names attached, and I do mean *major*. Meanwhile, you see if there's anythin' more you can scrape together and get back to me same time tomorrow. OK, sugar?"

Scrape together? Freddie thought as he put down the receiver of his old phone, the one that required a cord, as he was avoiding using the eavesdroppable cordless. *Scrape together? I can barely scrape myself together.*

Freddie had undergone a frightening transition in the space of a month. He had seen *Taxi Driver* once, years earlier, and its effect on him at the time had been negligible. Just a movie, dude. Now he was living his own version of the movie, working long hours when possible, pumping iron and gulping vitamins and swigging protein powder solutions in his downtime. He joked with himself that he was gonna buy a leotard and a cape, mutate into Positive Man, the first HIV superhero. He reminded himself soberly that superheroes are either born powerful or achieve their powers by accident, not by will. But he had that innate tragicness that all those comic-book good guys possess.

The workouts and the work helped keep Freddie sane. After donning his uniform, off he drove to the airport for a few hours of necessary distraction. With nearly seven months of experience at Air Grace, he was receiving not just the privileges and benefits of full tenure, but also the physical and mental self-assurance that came with all that routine. His mind and body *knew* the job. If he wanted to, he could work for a larger airline that flew larger planes to more destinations, possibly earn a larger wage; unfortunately, the larger airlines were all losing megabucks and laying off employees as fast as they hired. So Grace was the place. The little dove that could was adding flights every month, adding employees in all departments, ready soon to announce added destinations.

Too bad Freddie had such political differences with his company's CEO. Freddie imagined what political differences he might have with ol' Sam McCray, Cori's daddy, whom he had never had the pleasure of meeting. ("*So, you're the little spic nerd who's fucking my little girl, eh?*")

Grace did not have in its handbook an official policy regarding HIV-positive employees. The hierarchy refused to acknowledge that their good people would get themselves into such a pickle. By this time even the Republican President had recognized that good people can catch the bug and even die from it, often through no indiscretion of their own. Not willing to risk his position, Freddie had told nobody, not even Holly Halden, that he might have antibodies for HIV.

But apparently, when he arrived at terminal operations that day, *somebody* had the inside skinny. The old hands looked up from their card and domino games in the break room, or diverted their gaze from the TV or the *Journal-Constitution*, to glance at Freddie, Air Grace's answer to Travis Bickle, the Puerto-Rican kid all pumped up and a little scary in his new-wave Ray-Bans. It took Freddie three planeloads the third interrupted by a sudden downpour to get around to asking Holly as they sat in the aft compartment of a 737:

"Uh, why's everybody givin' me the hairy eyeball today, Holl?"

"Is that some Yankee expression? *Hairy eyeball?*"

"I thought it was a white-trash dessert. *You* know what I mean. They look at me like I'm wearin' a shit necklace and don't have the heart to tell me."

"Well, Fred, there's this little-bitty rumor flyin' around, I don't know where it started. They say you got AIDS."

"Oh, that's it? What a relief. I thought for a while I really *was* wearin' a shit necklace. Thank you." Freddie restrained himself, barely, from lashing out at the messenger, the one co-worker kind enough to tell him what the dumb stares were all about. "How do they say I got it? from, uh, shooting dope with Hezekiah Hamilton?"

"No, that would be a plausible explanation. What they're sayin' is more like, you were doin' the nasty with the UGA quarterback's fiancée. Now, that wouldn't happen to be possible, would it?"

"Well, since you ask, that cheerleader of mine is (or was) engaged to that quarterback who is now a BMOC at Valdosta State. But does that mean I got AIDS?"

"All it means, sweetie, is that you did something stupid, and people under 25 are supposed to do stupid things to keep the rest of us amused. They shouldn't have to die from their stupidity, though. How long were you boinking that cheerleader?"

"About since I started workin' here."

"And was she your first boink-ee?"

Freddie just nodded. There was no shame in admitting to Holly that one lost one's cherry relatively late in life.

"Then if you got the virus from her, it's pretty damn unlikely it'd show up now. It takes about a year for the virus to become

active, a lot longer to get AIDS. Most of the time, that is. Didn't your doctor tell you this?"

"All he said was I got antibodies. There's no tellin' with this bug. I don't know what strain Shane has. It coulda mutated into somethin' that works faster than average."

"Well, let's not take any chances, boo," Holly began to bubble. "I'm gonna lock you up in this bin—don't you dare try to get out."

"What the fuck—?"

"So that the strain of Shane stays mainly in the plane! HA-HA-HA!!" Holly leapt out onto the soaked concrete, pulled the release cord on the door, and quickly pulled the door shut before Freddie could scramble to his feet. Holly cackled in the sheets of warm rain, splashing about in shoe-lace-deep water, feeling rejuvenated, reborn, singing the refrain of "The Strain of Shane" to whatever humor gods were listening. Meanwhile, Freddie banged and cursed in the belly of the 737 like a fetus who can't find the exit to the birth canal.

Watching the celebrity levels of Wilf Adamante over the preceding eight weeks had been like watching the price of a share of stock. It went up, it went down, it went static, it did the whole dance again. The mainstream media lost interest, the radio blowhards were more concerned about the big election, but the Adamante story kept generating a buzz with the inevitable features in the local papers at each stop, and Wilf remained a symbol of '60s radicals who still *just don't get it* i.e., a *threat* who had the solid brass temerity to talk of class consciousness in the '90s.

Class consciousness? Didn't that die with Lenin? Wilf thought it odd, however, that Reed Bamberger and his ilk had declared America to be classless, or one big middle-class society, whenever it was convenient for them to say so, while isolating

the poor and indigent into one massive *them* and blaming *them* for everything from the federal budget deficit to the heartbreak of psoriasis.

When the Dharma Bus arrived in Hampton Roads, it was met with a fairly loud buzz. Wilf's stock was up, if you consider any publicity to be good publicity. An interview, published in the *Norfolk Gazette* just a few days before Wilf's scheduled appearance in Newport News, got tongues and pens wagging in Pat Robertson country. Wilf made a remark which managed to slag both organized religion and the military/industrial complex in one sentence. The remark would have attracted no undue attention in the alternative magazines that Wilf habitually devoured in moments of downtime, but in the *Gazette* such sentiments were fringy.

Wrote one avid reader and contributor of letters to the editor: "If treasonous reprobates like Adamante had volunteered to serve in Vietnam, on either side, they would perhaps have been killed, thus sparing themselves the humiliating burden of their own stupidity."

Another reader was less polite: "Adamante is God's reminder to us that there are always serpents in the garden. Of course, when I was growing up, if we saw a snake in the garden we'd shoot it or stomp it to death." (This reader must have forgotten that snakes keep rodents to a minimum and have yet to develop a taste for Swiss chard.)

If your stock is doing well, it's because people are willing to invest in it, even if the money invested was obtained in unsavory ways by unsavory people. Wilf saw parallels between the kind of publicity he had received and the Paramount/Plaid Flamingo merger, which was still in negotiation. The prospective buyer might do wonderful things for the old bird, but at the end of each business day the bird might have to spread her haunches and take a corporate appendage in the orifice where tropical birds are unaccustomed to getting it. On the other hand, Paramount might eat the flamingo for dinner, bones, beak and all.

As usual, the Wilf-man requested two hours of solo preparation time, and his companions were only too happy to oblige him. They decided that a walking tour of the historic district of Newport News might be just the ticket for their bus-weary minds and underutilized legs. When the group was satisfactorily gone, Wilf found his bottle of preparation: a 750-milliliter bottle of rather fine tequila.

Oh, no, it isn't stage fright—never! Wilf would insist, though in the back of his mind a contrary voice would shout, *It certainly fucking is, you asshole—i.e., the fear of being yanked off a stage and having some pipe-fitter tenderize your face.* But the prospect of being pummeled into Swiss steak merely contributed to his yen for intoxicating spirits. Even the best-intentioned Buddhist has his weaknesses. The root cause of Wilf's return to the bottle after a good year and a half of sobriety was his coming face to fist with the real world and its ugliness after 28 years in a miniature world of his own making.

For too long, far too long, Wilfredo Adamante's world had been NYU and Washington Square, the turbulent isolation of lower Manhattan, good legal and illegal drugs, terrific friends, the alternate universes to which his typewriter routinely gave birth and which he briefly inhabited, and, most of all, at least the illusion of control of his own life. On the road, none of the elements of his micro-microcosm were present. The farther he ranged from that studio flat, the less firm his grip on his circumstances, and thus the firmer his grip on that bottle.

His companions never suspected. He left no physical evidence. All they had was a sense that the miles were getting to him and affecting his generally genial, Bodhisattva-esque disposition.

This time, however, he managed to swig about 300 of the 750 milliliters, not having eaten much substantial food during the day. Cindy Lou noticed first, when the Dharma Crew returned, that her old boy had been communing with Poe, O'Neill, Faulkner, Bierce, Chuck Bukowski, and his other sloshed heroes at the bottom of the little brown jug. She was not a

happy camper; she took him aside and asked, "Ummm, Wilf, are you gonna address the masses in this condition?"

"I'll address them in whatever condition they happen to be in," he half-belched. Wilf was never a sloppy drunk, but he could be a very mean drunk, prone especially to abuse his intimate friends with words he might never otherwise apply to them. The abuse was usually interpreted as constructive criticism, and thus all was forgiven.

Cindy tried to inject some caution. "If you hit that lectern in classic Howlin' Wilf mode," she whispered and turned pale pink, "the press will crucify your ass. They'll say that a guy with your chemical tendencies has no business giving the advice you're giving to the people you're giving it to."

"Oh, yeah? This from a schoolteacher who smokes hash and gives blow-jobs on balconies? Gimme a fuckin' break."

Andi tried to play peacemaker, having overheard just enough of their conversation. "Hey, guys, this little dialog isn't doing anybody much good. Cindy, let him go on. I'm sure he'll be fine. And you, Wilf—"

"Keep it to yourself, pup," Wilf warned her. "I need absolutely nothing from your upper mouth at this time. Unless you wanna crouch behind the lectern and—"

Alf boarded the bus, calling out, "Wilf, it's time!" before Wilf could finish his thought and get slapped for expressing it. Wilf grabbed his notes and followed Alf into the John Tyler Auditorium.

With looks, not words, Cindy Lou Hu communicated her exasperation, and Andi Sichler communicated her sympathy. Cindy had helped lick Wilf's drinking problem three times, and just when she thought it would stay licked, he'd begun afresh. His father had been fond of red wine, but he hadn't passed on the habit to Wilf until the elder Adamante died around 1970, after Wilf had his M.A. and his first publishing contracts, and

after the Collective had begun its long period of dormancy. The booze bug bit Wilf as if it had jumped out of Papa's last will and testament. Cindy had always seen fermented beverages as a gift from the gods, as if Prometheus had brought to man the divine art of zymurgy and Jove had not objected, but she always took care to show reverence for the power of divine gifts.

Inside the auditorium, Wilf began immediately by abusing his particular gift for articulating his views with a loosened tongue. "We've been on the road about two months," he calculated, "and I've made these presentations in twelve states now. The whole experience has led me to conclude that America is a beautiful lady indeed. I use the term 'lady' cautiously here. But she's a beautiful lady whose heart is so diseased that a hungry dingo wouldn't eat it. In other words, our society is pretty fuckin' sick, folks. Let's mince no words. *Pretty fuckin' sick.*

"Now, as I comprehend it, there are several ways to deal with a sick society. You can become a part of the disease itself. You can participate in the society and absorb whatever toxins it dishes out. You can run away from it. You can try to improve it from within. Or you can try to destroy it. Please let me know if there are other options I've forgotten.

"Where do I stand on this question? That's a good question. I've been waffling for many years between options 3 and 4, running away and trying to play doctor with it. When I tried to change society with my classmates at NYU in the '60s, using the tools a democracy is supposed to provide, we were met with some very undemocratic resistance, a backlash from a well-armed, monied establishment.

"So for a while I went to option 3, withdrawing, attempting to, uh, sanitize myself. I got a lot of writing done, but it was so, so, so solipsistic, so much like trying to write about the moon when you've never even seen it, let alone traveled to it. Eventually I decided that Jean-Paul Sartre was correct, that hell is other people, but maybe hell wasn't so bad. It took a few years to figure out what option was best for me: aggressive non-action.

"Don't get the idea that everybody can or should follow my path. It's not for everybody, but some of you may find it suitable. Aggressive non-action means discovering your own essence, magnifying it into an exaggeration of that essence, and just being yourself at such high volume that you set an example for others. It's 'living out loud.' The reason this works at all is that people who have the guts to be themselves, out loud, are at peace with themselves and have no unnecessary burden of proof. Folks who aren't at peace with themselves can't be at peace with the world, and thus they have to prove to the world how fuckin' badass they are. The Pentagon is top-heavy with people like that, and the company you work for probably is, too. That, of course, is part of the reason the world is so incredibly *fucked up*, and, short of putting all these millions of overbearing badasses in therapy, there ain't a helluva lot we can do about it in our lifetime.

"So if you must be part of this society, take only the good that it offers, that which contributes to the greater common good, which truly enhances life, and please have nothing to do with what is wasteful, what is violent, what is stress-inducing, what is the product of those fucking pricks who continue to play and prey on your fears. Will one more nuclear submarine make the world a less fearful place? No, because for all the jaw-flapping about how the defense industry provides jobs, what is forgotten is that it keeps even more people out of work, because it doesn't produce things that people need, which also contributes to that dreaded monster *inflation*. We don't need it, that extra submarine, but we pay for it anyway. If you pay \$5,000 in income taxes, \$1,000 goes to the Defense Department, and I can think of better ways to spend that thousand than limos for generals and death rays in space."

Just at the point when he should have reached stratospheric heights in his ad libbing, his speech actually began to lose what coherency it had, and he rambled and inveighed for another 20 minutes to a shellshocked audience that expected anything but a tipsy Wilf tripping over his rhetorical shoelaces.

The message was powerful, but the presentation lacked focus, and thus lacked impact.

Blessed relief arrived when Wilf stopped to drain his glass of water and wipe his brow with his sleeve. "Questions? Fire away." Not even a thank you.

A short, middle-aged, aggressively Afrocentric gent in a jumpsuit picked up the cue without hesitation and arose. "Mr. Adamante, I'm a union organizer who has spent so many years beatin' my head against the wall that I'm convinced only the threat of violence can make management do anything constructive. Please set the record straight for us: Do you advocate armed rebellion against the System?"

"I think if you'd been listening to what I've been saying, you'd know that I don't."

"Why not?"

Pause, swallow. "Excuse me?"

"Why the fuck *don't* you support armed rebellion against this oppressive, repressive System that keeps capital in power and money out of our hands?"

Wilf paused and swallowed again, not because he lacked an answer, but because he wanted to put all his answers into the best order and express them in the best possible way.

"Primarily because it's suicidal. The System is better armed than the people at large, and certain elected officials will not hesitate to use those arms against any perceived threat. They have a history of using military force against even *unarmed* rebellions. Look at the Haymarket Revolt. Look at Kent State. Secondly, even when armed rebellion succeeds, it tends to become the institution that it sought to replace, sometimes even more repressive than before. We have to learn from Eastern Europe, learn that endurance and patience work better than force against a corrupt system. If an armed uprising succeeds, it's likely to become just as corrupt because it's pre-

occupied with defending itself against a counter-insurgency— e.g., the USSR, may it rest in peace. When the people get together in big, scary numbers and demand better, they usually get what they demand. Finally, reason number three, I don't like guns. I live in lower Manhattan, been there 47 years, and I've never owned a weapon, except for the switchblade I carried in junior high school because all my friends did, and I threw that sumbitch away after my first attempt at cleaning my fingernails with it, just tryin' to look tough. Youch!"

The questioner persisted. "But what about that story you wrote about the sniper who threatens to gun down anyone wearin' a suit on Wall Street?"

"That, comrade, is a work of fiction, and it would only work if, say, every unemployed American were as clever and as well armed as that character. Eventually, of course, in that story everyone on Wall Street is going to work butt-naked and enjoying it, but capitalism continues and no shots are fired except the one that Mr. Sniper fires up his own ass. That's not reflective of anything I would advocate or carry out. Basically, though, if you change the way things look, it doesn't necessarily change *the way things are*. I hope that clears things up for you, and for all the Cheeseheads who think I'm Ché Güevara with a word processor."

"But excuse me," the man would not shut up, "it's my perception that if there's to be any kind of overturning the System in this country, the worker will not have the patience for any kind of velvet revolution like in Czechoslovakia; they want a movement that *kicks ass*! The reason so many people got behind the Desert Storm thang was that from the start it was a decisive kind o' war where good guys stomp bad guys, not like Vietnam."

Wilf did not pause this time. "But just like Vietnam, it was wrong, man, *wrong*, and I'm sure you know that. Average Joe American doesn't really have the ethical compass to figure out right and wrong and understand it deeply. What he has is a set of rules that he can choose to follow or not, usually basing his

decision on convenience or what feels good. Speeding, smoking dope, answering a draft notice, or not answering a draft notice. Yes or no? Black or white? What's not written down for them is the rules of capitalism: *Capital exploits labor*. That's not in any book of laws, but it's part of our social structure, right next to the *bread and circuses* provisions. The modern equivalent of *bread and circuses*, of course, is *pizza and football*. In my ethical judgment, that exploitation is wrong, and the System that allows it to happen is wrong. But the System is just a symptom. If you remove that, you haven't removed the cause of the misery. Once workers apply the rights and wrongs to bigger questions, like 'Why is my life so fucked up?' then they can go about deciding how best to improve the situation. We had that in the days of the Wobblies, that knowledge that capital exploits labor, but now, in the age of television and endless amusements, that knowledge—that powerful knowledge—is gone."

Any fears that Wilf would ruin the entire night by letting the alcohol speak for him were now also gone. Cindy Lou knew that the power of ideas could cut through the haze that enshrouded her dear friend's cerebrum. From her seat in the front row, stage right, she whispered a minute prayer of gratitude to whichever deity might be listening.

Wilf continued. "I've taken it upon myself to instruct Average Joe and Josie that our corporate culture is responsible for stunting their growth in a variety of ways: in the workplace, in the toxic environment, in advertising, in the programs that fill the space between ads, and worst of all, sending out stormtroopers into this or that hellhole to represent American so-called interests, not the interests of freedom and human rights, but the interests of those corporations. This is how people's destinies are tied to that of corporations, and the picture is so big, most people can't see it all, and very few people can understand why I seem to jump from subject to subject in the middle of a sentence. It's because the main subject here is huge. We're talking about improving the condition of an entire world, in a country where the government

can't even improve the condition of a neighborhood a mile from the White House.

"Some people say, hey, at least things are better now than before, better than during the industrial revolution. In America, yes, perhaps, but Corporate Joe has just shipped the misery to other countries: misery like unregulated pollution, shitty wages, unsafe working conditions, and pretty soon, your job, where someone will do it for five bucks a week instead of ten an hour. I don't know about you, but even though I'm not in danger of having my job farmed out to Indonesia I've got a problem with that."

The resulting laughter and applause provided a cue for Wilf to vacate the stage, although there were probably several questions from the audience that he had not answered. Wilf had said all he needed to say.

Hezekiah Hamilton's office screamed *Nouveau Riche!* Its walls were teak—at least, they *looked* like teak. Its rugs were Turkish and crafted by experts. Its desk was Brazilian rosewood. Its paintings were originals ranging from Renaissance Venetian to late Impressionist. Its other appointments were mostly expensive tchotchkes garnered from extensive travels abroad, such as the solid gold paperweight in the shape of St. Peter's Basilica. Freddie reasoned that Hamilton could be forgiven for having such eclectic taste. Perhaps the CEO had hired a decorator who decided to play an expensive joke.

The crowning touch, however, was the fish. Not a mounted marlin or barracuda, but your basic line-drawing Jesus-fish, positioned directly over the picture window of the tenth-floor office, right over Hamilton's head. The fish was also of solid gold, with precious stones spelling out ICQUS in two-inch letters. Freddie had seen tacky Christian *objets d'art* before, but *jay, caramba!*

"Do you know why you're here, Freddie?" spake not Hamilton, but Joshua Terry, chief of terminal operations, from behind Freddie's right shoulder.

The young bag-basher rocked once in the functional leather/stainless chair. "Hm. Is it that promotion I've been prayin' for?" He didn't mean to be flip, but it just slipped out.

Though the office was still screaming, the atmosphere was whispering quite audibly, *Freddie, you're in deep, deep shit.*

Hamilton, a short, average-looking man of 45 with a full head of all his own hair and penetrating brown eyes, suppressed a chuckle and stared a hole through his young employee from behind that half-acre of rosewood desktop. "These meetings are never pleasant for me, and, fortunately, they're infrequent." His voice wore an Ivy League sweater over bib overalls; the Cracker in him still showed in his vowels, especially e's and o's. "Josh tells me you're a fine employee, but there's a lot about you that needs fixing."

"I haven't driven over any bags since June, sir."

"Not *that!*" the salaried guys said simultaneously.

"It's not your performance driving tugs that concerns me," Hamilton assured him. "Let me spell it out for you. Your sins are a bit graver than bad navigation. First, your last physical shows that you have HIV. Second, you managed to pass on this virus to the daughter of a major shareholder in this corporation—a guy with whom I've played a little golf—tried to pin the blame on her and called her a foul name which I won't repeat."

"Sir, that's a crock o'—"

"You may respond when I'm finished, Freddie." Hamilton raised his voice only a little, looking Freddie straight in the eye the whole time, choosing his words as Sandy Koufax might choose his pitches. "Third, you have been complicit in an affair

between two employees, both of whom happen to be male, which is a violation of company policy (though not a firing offense—they'd sue us for discrimination) as well as a big blot on our image. Fourth, you have contacted a journalist with wild, slanderous accusations about a plan for a jumbo jet that we haven't even officially purchased yet. Don't even ask how I got Alysha Langenham to reveal your name. Let's just say she owed me a favor, and let's just say Atlanta is a pretty small town for its size. Now. Your turn."

"First, Mr. Hamilton," the words clogged in his throat, "My HIV test was *inconclusive* no sign of the virus itself, for what that's worth. Second, Corinne admitted to me that she had the virus, said she got it from her fiancé the quarterback, who got it—who even *knows* where he got it?"

"Can you prove this?"

Open-mouthed silence, as "Hell, yes!" battled with "Uh—no."

Freddie licked his lips. "All I can say is, Corinne is the only human being I've—"

"Can you prove *that*?"

"Uh, my logic professor told us that you can't prove a negative."

"Couldn't you have acquired the virus some other way?"

"Then I'd have to prove that I've never shot up or had a bad transfusion, now, wouldn't I? Well, you'll just have to take my word for it."

The patented Hamilton stare grew in intensity, if that were possible. "You know, my family and the McCray family go back a long way. Samuel J. McCray told me he wants you dead. I told him he just had to wait about ten years, and he will wait that long, if necessary. He won't have to see you rot in hell, 'cause he can see you rot on earth, while you're still alive.

Didn't you think about that before you started fooling around, Freddie?"

"Mr. McCray thinks I must have given his little girl the bug because I'm a Porto-Rican from New York. When in doubt, blame the minority." Freddie swallowed all the scatology he wanted to utter in both his languages. The whole situation stank to high heaven, and he felt set up.

Hamilton had more questions. "Now about your co-workers Halden and, uh—"

"Merrill," Terry supplied the other name. Freddie had forgotten that the chief of terminal ops was still in the room.

"Why didn't you approach one of your supervisors and tell him about their Sodomite behavior?"

It amazed and amused Freddie that the question was even formed in Hamilton's mind. He hesitated twice before saying, "The company hired them both, probably with the knowledge that they were both gay. I didn't think it mattered to the company what those guys did on their own time, or that it was anyone's business but their own."

"Freddie, there are a lot of things that we don't put in the employee handbook, but the employees must uphold the corporate image. I wouldn't want male rampers fornicating with female flight attendants, either, but at least God meant for men and women to couple together for procreation. These two men carryin' on like that, well, obviously it does not fit our image, never mind that it undermines morale among the workers if they find out such goings-on are going on. Halden and Merrill have received a warning—that's all we can do at this point."

"All right, what about my fourth offense?" Freddie rolled his eyes, hoping to get this interview over with soon.

"Alysha squelched the story, so no harm was done. Besides, yes, I did meet with your friend Myron Rosenbaum, who told

you all that stuff, and I can assure you, the man is a known cokehead and pathological liar—though an excellent financier whose reputation in the market is well regarded."

"Hold it!" Freddie felt like a kid in the principal's office who finally has the principal up against the logical ropes. "You know that Myron Rosenbaum is my source, but I never told Alysha Langenham that I talked to Myron. The only way you could know that I talked to Myron is either you had me followed at the hospital, which is not good employee relations—or you really did tell Myron all that stuff, Myron being the only person outside the board of directors who knows. So which is it?"

If Freddie were waiting to see Hamilton crack and confess, he would have waited at least the life cycle of the HIV. The cracker did not crack. After a good ten-second stare, H.H., composure unabated, replied:

"Remember that nurse, Crabbe, the black fella? He's actually an M.D. Fooled Rosenbaum into thinking he was just a country Negro. I sometimes play golf with him, too. He heard your whole conversation. That's how I know you talked to Rosenbaum, how I first found out what a weird story Rosenbaum was trying to spread. As you can imagine, we're no longer a client of his."

Freddie's mind was a Tilt-a-Whirl. What sort of paranoia was at work here? What sort of secrets did Air Grace have to protect that it surveiled employees and had operatives planted in the Medical Center? Why did one operative have to disguise himself as a nurse when he could have just manifested himself as the doctor that he was? What sort of course would Hamilton play on that allowed Colored Folk to play? And finally, why the fuck had Freddie applied at Grace in the first place?

Hamilton buzzed his secretary and asked her to bring him the correct form for Freddie to sign if he so desired. It was basically an "I dunnit and I'm sorry" form, indicating that the proper warning had been issued to the offending employee,

along with a reminder that Air Grace offered 24-hour psychological and spiritual counseling services.

"Now, Freddie, we who make the big decisions around here are ever mindful of the name of our company. We know the meaning of 'grace,' and we hope you'll come to appreciate that meaning as well. Our grace is not as infinite as God's, but at least we offer second chances. If you'll sign this form acknowledging that you've trespassed company policies, we'll let you continue here, full-time, full-pay, until you slip up again, which I trust won't happen. Would you like to read it through first?"

Freddie scanned and signed the form. Joshua Terry reappeared to detach Freddie's goldenrod copy of the quadruplicate form. "What Mr. Hamilton neglected to mention was that you're gonna be moved to the gates, uh, upstairs. You'll be trained on the ResoComp and the Jetway systems."

"Um, why?"

Terry sighed. "Less likely that you'll bleed on somebody. Training starts at 8:15 on Monday. We'd like you to stay away from the terminal till then. Fly somewhere if you want."

Hamilton thanked Freddie for his time and cooperation. Freddie mouthed his thanks to God as he removed his afflicted eyes from the visual holocaust of that office.

Dr. Nancy P. Glancy seemed guardedly optimistic, but perplexed. "Here's the situation, Carolyn: Your blood sugar is still up there, but overall you're doing a great job of taking care of yourself and the little one. Just wish you'd get a little more exercise other than that, you get an 'A.'"

"I try to exercise, but when I do, I have to stop and pee every five minutes."

Marilyn, taking her day off from doughnut hell, giggled like an innocent. This was her first time accompanying her sister to the gyno clinic.

"My biggest concern right now is that you've made a pretty big little one. At this rate, judging strictly by your weight-gain and the ultrasound, you could be popping out a ten-pounder. Is your pelvis up to that kind of workout?"

"I thought we'd planned a C-section anyway," Carolyn recalled with a small shiver.

"I avoid sectioning where possible. Lot o' Ob.'s promote them 'cause they make more money when they have to cut into the mama. Me, long as my bills are paid and my insurance company still likes me, I make plenty money. Anyway, I might not be the one to make the call, so be prepared for both the section and the vaginal."

Carolyn's eyes betrayed that, while she had adjusted well to carrying nearly 40 extra pounds and being beaten up internally every day, the climax of this nine-month experience gave her the willies, the heebie-jeebies, and the worry warts. "Sure," she said, self-assured as any Lauren Bacall character.

"Second major concern," the doctor continued, "uh, pardon my Français, but this is too fuckin' weird. I got a telegram yesterday. I've never received a telegram in my life." She left the exam room with a "just a minute" gesture, leaving the sisters to stare mystified at each other and at the Joan Miró wallpaper. Glancy returned, clutching the paper with the familiar Western Union logo, shaking it in her left hand just to hear the sound. "Some guy I've never met, who I guess isn't scoped on fax machines, sent me this. It says, Doctor Glancy: Important. Patient Olin must give birth on Outer Banks NC. Vital to America's future. Come to Kitty Hawk for explanation. Hank Truber. Do you know a Hank Truber? How does he know about you? Why'd he send this to me, and not you? And why a telegram?"

Carolyn and Marilyn took turns explaining to the young, Vietnamese-born M.D. that the telegram was once the fastest way to send a written message, but also because of its swiftness indicated urgency, even after the advent of easy, cheap long-distance telephonics. In the fax age, the sending of a telegram would mean either extreme urgency—you'll get a lot of faxes in an average day, but no more than one telegram!—or that the sender was old and out of touch with info-age high-tech gadgets like the facsimile machine.

Marilyn suddenly clenched her teeth on her right index finger's middle knuckle and stood in agonized silence, while Carolyn and her doctor tried to figure out the rest of the enigma. That one knuckle was a mouthful, her hands as fleshy as they were from the incessant kneading of dough and writing of daily reports and Marilyn's habit of scarfing a half-dozen while writing those reports. Carolyn finally turned to her sister, noticing Marilyn's non-contributive posture.

"Hungry, Marilyn?"

"Shut up. I mean, be quiet. I'm thinking."

The Olin sisters changed their morning agenda. Instead of driving directly from the Eugene O'Neill Professional Building on Broad Street to the Super Stop & Shop, they made a side trip to Marilyn's duplex apartment on Vauxhall Street. Carolyn had not seen the inside of that apartment in about 18 months. Marilyn's strangest quirk was her Jekyll/Hyde approach to tidiness. Her car was dust-free and new-smelling, her doughnut shop was a potential Spic 'n' Span commercial; but her apartment was the Clutter Capitol of Connecticut. The place was not unsanitary, just unsightly, and one stepped carefully to avoid damaging the Michael W. Smith and Amy Grant LPs that lurked beneath half-read *Day* papers and well-read church bulletins dating back to 1989.

Marilyn made her way to the bookcase in her bedroom, atop which lay all seven Wilf Adamante books in her possession. She thumbed her way to the dedication page of each volume;

finally, on the dedication page of a 1976 paperback collection of short stories, *25 Quick and Easy Napalm Barbecue Recipes*, Marilyn found the key to the puzzle:

To:

Hank Truber

the Clairvoyant of Kitty Hawk

who saw it all take shape in 1954

"I knew it, Car. I knew, as soon as she said that name that I had heard or seen it somewhere. It was in a book, one that I'd read in the last few months. This Truber guy predicted not only the Vietnamese uprising in 1954, but the U.S. getting involved, slowly at first, in a big way later, and that a lot of people in America would resist the draft. But mostly he predicted that the B-52 would play a big part in it—kind o' like the whole war was a test-run for the B-52. This guy, most of his predictions have to do with airplanes, but he never has predicted a crash, the way a lot o' people claim to have, y'know—premonitions. Oh! except the one his parents were in."

Carolyn's face wrinkled with suspicion. "Marilyn, where do you come up with all that?"

"The library, Car. I seen this dedication page, and I'm like, 'Who is this guy?'—so I check the *Readers Guide*, and in a 1988 *Anima* magazine there's an article on Hank Truber. *Anima's* like this magazine for exploring the paranormal and other metaphysical stuff. Anyway, Truber talks about the Outer Banks, where he lives, and how the next great American political leader will be born there to an unmarried mother from out of state. He didn't know who, or when, but he says, Some things ya just know. "

"So now you think he knows who and when? And who and when is me, in October?"

But answer came there none; Marilyn fished a cordless phone from a beneath pile of long-paid utility bills and placed a call to Dr. Glancy's office. She had to wait a solid ten minutes to

speak to the doctor herself and tell her the whole scoop. Glancy was not about to let a high-risk case travel in her eighth month of gestation.

"Just suppose you're on a plane," Glancy told Marilyn, "and your water breaks, and the plane hits a stretch of rough air. That's not good conditions for an emergency Cesarean."

Carolyn watched and listened, dumbstruck, as her sister sketched out her plans over the phone. "We could take the Amtrak down. That way we can get off at any stop along the way and get to a hospital. All those stops have hospitals close by."

"Lady, you're a few eggs shy of an Easter basket. Let me talk to Carolyn."

Carolyn agreed that there was no way in hell's hundred-acre wood that she would go to a strange state to give birth just because a strange man sent a bizarre telegram. Marilyn, upset and disappointed, understood. Carolyn had rarely taken her advice on important matters before ("I'm tellin' you, Car, that Chub is a bum and a half!") and probably would not begin taking it now. Perhaps Marilyn would resort to subterfuge, if only her conscious would allow it.

Meanwhile, Chub was counting the hours down till Labor Day weekend. He had not taken a three-day weekend since the official beginning of summer, Memorial Day weekend, the high point of biker culture in that region, during which thousands of bikes roar through the city, piloted by conspicuously helmetless operators to honor the man who had led the campaign to repeal the state's helmet law. During the summer, Chub had worked nearly every Saturday, earning enough overtime to push him dangerously close to the big tax-bracket quantum jump. This weekend he had plans to put some miles on his Harley, heading up to the Berkshires to do a little camping, a little fishing, a little serious thinking.

The changes that had begun with his resolution to act the part of the industrious, dependable, abstemious parent-to-be continued in Chub, though intensified by what he had witnessed a month earlier at the El & Gee. Big Questions orbited the nucleus of his mind: *What is my purpose on this planet? Does the world need another nuclear sub? Why does that guy Wilf still have all his hair at his age?*

He read each night, as promised, just an hour or so after second shift, a little more on evenings when he didn't stay for second shift. He started with an old favorite, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, then moved to some biographies of people he admired: Malcolm Forbes, Chuck Berry, Amelia Earhart. He told a co-worker at lunch, on that same September day when his significant other first heard the name of Hank Truber: "Man, the stuff you learn about these people. They never tell us in school that so many famous people are—well, Forbes, he was gay. Amelia, a Lesbian. Chuck, definitely not gay, but don't let your teenage daughter go anywhere near the guy, especially if there's a restroom around."

The co-worker snorted, "I kicked my son outta the house last month. He sez without even blinkin', 'Dad, I think I'm bi-sexual.' Point blank. Told me he was watching the fuckin' Olympics and had a crush on Greg Louganis *and* on Kim Zmeskal. Not in my house, ya don't!"

"Well, your son may be a little limp in the wrist, but don't you think he might turn out to be the next, say Malcolm Forbes? with a little determination? You'd never have to worry about your retirement."

"—or maybe the next Amelia Earhart? The kid couldn't even get a job at the Henny Penny. He's got no fuckin' talent that I can see, 'cept with the remote control."

"Bud, a lotta guys who got laid off at the Boat can't get hired at Henny Penny. The economy's gone to shit."

"Yeah, Chub, 'cause o' faggots like that Forbes guy screwin' up everythin'."

Yes, it would be good to get away for a long weekend. These people with whom Chub had grown up and felt comfortable all his life made less sense to him now. Their provincialism and prejudices, their fear of change, made no sense in a diversifying society and a globalizing economy. He could not verbalize his impressions, lacking as he did the necessary vocabulary, but he knew what he felt. He knew that small-town attitudes and big-town problems made a dangerous combination in increasingly dangerous New London and Groton.

It would be good to get away. *Away.*

Strawberry pancakes, pork sausage, veggie sausage, whipped cream, freshly squeezed orange and grapefruit juice, Kenyan and Javanese coffees, herbal teas—put them all together on a table for 14, they spell PIG OUT. Paige Travertino put all her culinary instruments to work and conducted a breakfast symphony composed by Epicurus himself. Her guests wondered aloud why she didn't turn her Scooter Blenny Chalet into a bed & breakfast to make a little extra summer money. Paige insisted that she still had too many books to write, and since she would insist on ministering to every meal, that would leave no time for writing. Besides, she pointed out, her husband, who was already back at work to prep for fall courses, made a piss-poor host.

After breakfast, conversation; after conversation, the beach. Nature had cooperated. When the sun shines on the Outer Banks, the weather is ideal for human habitation; when those wet gales arise from the temperamental Atlantic, humans get an awe-inspiring reminder of Nature's bitchy side.

There was a certain level of decorum in force for this expedition over the dunes to the strand: Nobody got nekkid,

which was unusual for an Adamante-centered group. Paige admonished them that the neighbors on this stretch of Ocracoke could be quite prudish, and that rangers patrolled the area to protect these litoral palaces from unwelcome presences and the threat of encroaching pudenda. So the New York troopers behaved themselves and had PG-rated fun, playing volleyball, tossing Frisbees, and floating on the waves until just after one o'clock, when a looming gray front drove them to the outdoor showers and back into the chalet.

"Anybody hungry yet?" the metaphysically gifted physicist asked her guests.

Gastrically, no, was the general consensus, but the taste buds were ready for any culinary artillery the prof could launch at them.

"I'd better beg off, Paige; haven't been able to keep nothin' down in two days."

It was a cobwebbed male voice emanating from the kitchen, one which Andi recognized instantly, but which took Wilf a tad longer to place. No one else from the bus had been treated to that voice's cacophonous overtones before.

Hank hobbled out into the sun room, not nearly as bolt upright as when Andi had last encountered him in April. The minor heart attack had left him physically weaker than before, as if his strong dorsal muscles had gone on strike against the heart and returned to work only under protest. A weaker octogenarian might have been bedridden or turned into a rollin' oldie, but Hank's mind was powerful and very much in authority. No griping sacro-iliac would slow him down, much less thwart his mission. Like FDR, he refused to be seen as a cripple.

Right behind Hank appeared Terrell and Natalie Daniel, in their roles as Hank's chauffeurs. Andi reluctantly crossed the room to hug her grand-father reluctantly because she saw Grampa as an accomplice in her torment. It would have been so easy

for Andi to forgive Hank for giving her a fright or two had she not felt so violated by his intrusion on her memory. She embraced Natalie, too, with less vigor.

"Got a hug for me?" Hank tossed out.

Andi ignored him and made introductions, leaving out Hank's name so that Paige might have the dubious honor of presenting him to the Dharma Crew.

"This one's much better for ya," Hank fixed his narrow gaze on Andi, the person with whom he had the strongest psychic link. "He's not the one that destiny has in mind for ya, but I expect you're learnin' a lot from each other." Of course he was referring to Wilf; Andi knew better than to ask how he knew all that.

Andi finally acknowledged Hank and spoke to him. "Look, this appearance by you has ruined a perfectly good day, ya old skeleton,"

Andi fumbled. "Just what are you doing here, anyway?"

"Well, since ya didn't get to see yer Grampa here, I thought I'd bring him down. Besides, I owe ya my life."

"Bullshit."

"My autobiography, that is. And you will accept it."

Paige interceded. "Please, folks! Lunch first, *then* story time."

Lunch went down quickly and quietly, for a large group of intelligent and opinionated diners. Hank spoke only to request second helpings of salad and sweet potato pie. Terrell held the group rapt with a review of Kitty Hawk's 1992 Stupid Tourist Tricks, such as the boater who tried to hop on the back of a freshly post-partum mother dolphin and had deep delphinic dental depression in his derrière to show for his derring-do. By 3:00, lunch was history, and that looming front had turned

decidedly westbound, bringing a lightning-laced downpour across the breakers. Great story-telling weather.

"I'll try to stick to important facts and leave out the borin' details," Hank told the assembled audience, all seated around an old-fashioned hearth that begged for a fire. Paige had excused herself to handle kitchen chores; Trudy would normally have felt compelled to assist in the kitchen, but Turpentine had volunteered in his acerbic way of showing gracious kindness. Hank cleared his throat and began in earnest, breathing deeply to project his voice and make it more listenable.

"First thing y'all should know is that I was born on December the 17th, 1903. I presume y'all know the historical significance o' that date, 'specially to folks in these parts. A couple o' bicycle salesmen from Ohio took a very famous 12-second ride that day. That's merely a meaningful coincidence, my bein' born that day. The really bitter irony of it is that my great uncle was Gustavus Weiskopf, known to the world as Gustav Whitehead, the guy who actually built the first practical aeroplane. He had to watch Orville and Wilbur grab all the credit. So for the Weiskopf side o' the family, my birth on the day o' the Wright flight was just salt in the wound.

"Gustavus became insufferable to his kinfolk—not because he got scooped on his invention as you might think, but because he'd been scooped by Americans, for cryin' out loud. Very proud German, Uncle Gus. I don't know how or why my parents moved here from New York before I was born, but I think it was to get as far from Uncle Gus as they could.

"When I hit nine years of age, I discovered I had the gift o' clairvoyancy, which I'd never asked for, combined with an unnatural interest in aeroplanes, even for a young boy growin' up in Kitty Hawk. Somehow my clearest predictions involved planes: where they'd fly, where they'd fail, and most importantly, how the Germans were plannin' to use 'em in the war that I knew was gonna start up before my eleventh birthday. Gus never mentioned aeroplanes in his letters, but he

did express a lot o' anti-American, anti-British, anti-Russian sentiments. It was pretty easy to figure out a good deal from his silence on the subject o' powered flight that big plans were in the works.

"Readin' up on aviation as I did, which wasn't easy in those days—not so many magazines on the shelves, y'know—I managed to deduce that the U.S. military was testin' applications o' the new device, which was a helluva lot more efficient at deliverin' bombs and such than the ol' Civil War balloons. Had no idea, though, that our planes and German planes would meet over Europe. See, I don't get everythin' right. If I did, I'd get rich playin' the stock market, wouldn't I?

"Any printed material I could get my hands on regardin' them planes I started a-clippin', savin', and studyin', and I still do to this day. Followed the motions of aviation the way an astrologer follows the stars and planets, and then kept makin' deductions based on all that had gone before. When I was accurate, I was dead accurate. I predicted Lindy's flight, Amelia's disappearance, the *Hindenburg* explosion—though I was fuzzy on the date o' the blast—details like that, and not even my parents believed me. They didn't believe me when I told 'em in 39 not to get on the DC3 that wound up crashin' in Chesapeake Bay. After that crash I gave up on planes for a while, started workin' on people. People are more challengin', anyway, 'n' I was ready for a challenge.

"Now, just as there's some people ya can fall in love with 'n' some ya can't, I can see into some people's minds like readin' this mornin's paper, from the headlines to the fine print in the classified ads, all at once. You, Andromeda Sichler, are one o' the latter type. This woman here, Trudy, well she ain't so easy. Trudy, God made you less vulnerable to mental invasions, which enhances your mystique, makes ya less predictable in yer performances, more interestin' that way. Wilfredo, I can read your future memory, just the way I did when you 'n' I first met, when I was about the age you are now, give or take. I knew when you was a skinny little stalk of asparagus that you

was gonna write stories. All your future, y'know, is somewhere in your brain where you can't access it except in dreams, but just like your mind can edit memories o' things past, you can change the course o' your destiny without even realizin'. That's what brings me to Andromeda here 'n' that baby that never was. The ball that you dropped, Miss Andi."

Andi, Terrell, and Natalie exchanged glances that combined *So that's what he meant!* with *Of course—I knew it all along!* Cindy Lou and Wilf had never known about Andi's brief pregnancy, and their eyes spoke of curiosity and surprise heated to boiling. The others tried not to appear to be staring at their youngest companion or the old clairvoyant seated near her. Hank resumed his explication. (If, Dear Reader, you guessed the identity of the dropped ball, reward yourself with an orgasm, my treat.)

"That child, born and reared in the proper environment, woulda become—and I do not exaggerate—a sort o' savior. I don't mean no second comin', no spiritual, other-worldly savior. Just a little more like a Jack or Bobby Kennedy coulda been if they'd lived to spell out their vision. I gotta digress a little here. This world is ready for another Jesus, another Gandhi, another Martin Luther King, another JFK or RFK, but there's always that element o' powerful folks who don't like what those revolutionary messiah-figures are sayin'. So what happens? What do all those guys have in common? Executed! Put to death for unnamed crimes against the powerful! But Andi, that son or daughter o' yours woulda been different. Woulda used his or her resources not only to stay alive, but to turn the movement into the *new* establishment. I'm talkin about the *Novus Ordo Seclorum* that Jefferson meant when he designed that pyramid seal on the back o' the dollar bill. I'm talkin' a time when power is used for the benefit o' the masses, not the money-men. I'm *not* talkin' 'bout some utopian Marxist bullshit, either. This is a time when necessity will bring about a common-sense approach to government, with economics based on abundance instead o' scarcity; on long-term survival, not short-term profit. Your kid woulda combined that vision with

the political skills to achieve power and stay there. But ya managed to will a miscarriage on yerself, and sorry, sweetheart there ain't no more offspring in your future."

Andi squinted at Hank. "I'll never have kids?"

"Well, ya got some Fallopian blockage, which can be fixed up, but never any little future revolutionaries. The good news, though, is that somebody will have that child. But it'll only grow up to be that savior character if it's born here, on the Outer Banks, where the Magic lives."

Magic. Andi had seen magicians in her childhood: at birthday parties, at circuses, at street fairs. Those tricks that her father did not explain to her, Andi had figured out on her own. *Magic.* Her cynical side was convinced that magic, if it ever existed, was now extinct; her romantic side longed for it.

Wilf and Cindy Lou had encountered magic of sorts, through meditation, through sexual intercourse so purely orgasmic that objects on shelves flew across the room and orbited the space over their bodies. But it had never come under their control, for the simple reason that these quintessential forces, as yet unquantifiable by scientific instruments, do not submit to human control. These forces may come when you call them, like most housecats, but they won't sit or shake on cue, and they may piss on your rug just out of spite.

"Do you know who that somebody is?" Wilf dared to ask.

"You'll have to ask Virginia. She's the one that told me."

Paige had returned from the kitchen, unbenknownst to the others, already inhabited by the spirit of Virginia Dare. Turpentine trailed her, gawking at the woman who moments ago had been singing suggestive Italian folk songs while washing cups and saucers, but then was overtaken by a visitor from the Spirit World. A childlike variation on Paige's voice emerged from her lips.

*"Good day. I am most pleased to meet you all.
 My host assureth me, and I believe,
 That ye are decent folk, though some are come
 Without the presence of the Blessed Spirit
 And follow alien gods and practices.
 No less, good day I bid you, and most welcome.
 I am the spirit of Virginia Dare,
 The infant carried off by demon seas
 Four centuries and little more ago.
 I have been summoned for to speak with you
 On matters of magnificent import,
 And speak I shall, if ye will but permit."*

Turpentine crossed to Alf and whispered, "This is bullshit. There's no echo, no reverb, no phase-shifting it can't be comin' from the Beyond, know what I'm sayin'?"

"But did you notice," Alf whispered back, "she's speaking not only in Renaissance English, but in iambic pentameter?"

"C'mon, any decent rapper in Brooklyn could do that."

The Spirit of Virginia Dare either did not hear Turpentine's suspicions or chose to ignore them. Wilf decided to grant Virginia the requested permission to speak her piece.

*"There is a woman in New London town
 Whom our young mistress indirectly met;
 She practices coiffure, to use the French,
 And did the formidable tresses of
 The lover of young Federico cut.
 Aye, Federico, whom Andromeda
 Did meet and drink with in that salt-sprayed burg.
 Her name is Carolyn, that happy lass
 Who bears her Afric erstwhile lover's seed,
 Yet sere devoted to another stays.
 Should Carolyn deliver on these shores,
 That seed a mighty stalk of power might grow,
 And Roanoke, that ill-conceivéd stead
 Shall not have vanished vainly long ago."*

"Fourteen lines," Alf observed. "Doest always prophesy in sonnet form?"

*"Only when 'tis of such import," Virginia replied. "Yet I would have thee know, sir, my foretelling is not yet complete:
"Andromeda doth know another maid
In Nova Cesarea's urban north,
A maid not yet of eighteen, not yet wed,
Who, like so many of her class and kind,
Conceived in first experiments of love
For lacking proper means of stopping such.
This fertile Atalanta hath a name
With meaning secondary to its sound:
Lashondra. Though of humble origin,
Yon swift young maid is destined, with great pain,
To bear two who, in that bright future, shall
Assist the child of Carolyn in—"*

The transmission from the Spirit World was disconnected as abruptly as it had begun. Paige's eyes remained 90 degrees north of normal as her lids fluttered and her breathing lost its regular rhythm. A look from Hank assured everyone that these disruptions of contact and the symptoms that Paige displayed were all business as usual.

"So all you have to do," Hank coughed, "is arrange to get two very pregnant women down to North Carolina to save the future from bein' shot to hell by a fascist, monopolistic oligarchy. Think you're up to it?—'cause lemme tell ya, boys and girls—" he glanced at Paige, whose respiration was back under her control and whose eyes could once again focus on the here and now, "if y'all think things are bad now, the information technology of the 21st century is gonna give a few well-placed folks some power like no Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, or Lyndon LaRouche ever imagined. Democracy in this nation will be about as meanin'ful as your damn high school cheerleader elections. And the whole shootin' match'll be triggered by a single jet aeroplane: an Air Grace Boein' Triple 7."

Andi instantly recalled that her recent acquaintance, Federico, was an Air Grace employee. He'd even mentioned something about some plans that Air Grace had for its 777. Was this all just a bad-ass coincidence, or what?

"This is like *Synchronicity!*" Andi bubbled and squeaked, as if answering on a pop music trivia show. "Freddie, the guy I met in New London, works for Air Grace! Could he have somethin' to do with the 777? Could he stop it from doing— Uh, what's it supposed to do, anyway?"

"It's supposed to fly from Atlanta to Jerusalem, with one re-fuelin' stop in the Azores," Hank replied. "But it's gonna be a secret, civilian transport plane—" he coughed again, "—for some real non-civilian hardware. The Triple 7, accordin' to the Christian fanatics who run that airline, is supposed to defeat the forces o' the Anti-Christ—Mr. Triple 6, like in the Book o' *Revelations*. O' course, none o' this comes on line until 1997, when the first Triple 7's come into service, and coincidentally, the year a lotta Armageddon-watchers are predictin' for a nuclear war in the Mid-East. Trouble is, the Air Grace people don't see it as a coincidence; they see it as an opportunity. And there's always that problem that the Anti-Christ is predicted to win this round."

Paige put a modern, psychological spin on the scenario. "Yes, darlin', it's synchronicity, if ya wanna call it that. It's a big, fat coincidence.

But what most people don't comprehend, or refuse to comprehend, or dismiss as mumbo-jumbo, is that Doctor Jung was right. Our unconscious minds *create* those coincidences. Hell, our unconscious minds do a lot that we never find out about until it's too late. Your unconscious knows things that your conscious mind those few megabytes of RAM in the front of your brainbox can barely contain, let alone process. Your unconscious mind knows all about your blocked Fallopian tubes. It just hasn't gone public to your conscious with the information. But there that information was, and that's how Hank could read it. I still haven't figured out all the

metaphysical nuts and bolts of it, but that's it in capsule form. Now, how it was that you met the one employee at Air Grace who has heard the whole story about the Triple 7, that's a coincidence that I can't explain, but a lotta unconscious minds must have conspired to make it possible."

Andi puffed, "Well, bury me in wombat shit and call me Paul Hogan!" She was stalled in the breakdown lane atop the causeway of credulity. "If I take that to its logical extension, my unconscious mind is responsible for all the weird and wonderful shit that's happened to me—or maybe it all happened in my unconscious, my conscious mind is out to brunch at Bloomie's, and I'm living out a dream sequence that's gone on for six months now, since I first bumped into the Grim Reaper's older brother here!"

"That about describes it," Hank assured her.

Wilf caught the wave: "Only we're all dreaming it together."

With a pout, Andi ricocheted her eyes at the compendium of faces around her. "If I click my heels together three times and say, 'There's no place like home,' can I go back to New Jersey?" Her eyes were knee-deep in moist confusion.

She left on the Wizard's balloon the next day, actually a Newark-bound MD80 out of Norfolk's wonderfully human-scaled airport, with co-worker Cindy Lou Hu in tow as Toto. Andi thought that her finally allowing an audience with Hank would provide answers, but the more answers she had, the more questions seemed to spring up. The main question was complex, and she expected no immediate answers to it: *How the fuck am I gonna sell a stranger in a strange town, and a minor student whose parents must grant written permission, on a third-trimester field trip to a place they've likely never seen, in order to give birth in a strange environment and fulfill a prophecy from Beyond which I'm not sure I believe and may not even come true despite our best efforts?* If she were to ask Cindy Lou that question, there would be no guarantee that

Cindy would stay awake long enough to hear it all and give an intelligent answer.

As it turned out, Cindy hated flying, so she usually arranged, by any means available, to be asleep prior to take-off. Andi spent the whole two hours silently but intensely working the crossword in the back of the in-flight puff-piece/tourist-trap monthly pictorial. Hunched over the tray table in front of her starboard aisle seat as if doing some serious work, she almost got the bloody thing finished by the time the flight attendant requested tray-table uprighting and seat-belt fastening.

As the descent began, however, she heard moaning from the window seat in which Cindy lay all curled up under an airline blanket. The moaning sounded animalistically pleased, not painful. Cindy wiggled slightly in her seat, then less slightly; then the heavy breathing began. Passengers assumed that somebody was enduring the popping of ears and a minor panic attack from the loss of equilibrium that a quick descent can engender; Andi knew better.

"Cindy. *Cindy*," Andi hissed, trying not to be heard by neighboring passengers. "Wake up, girl."

Cindy did not wake up. Beneath her blanket, her right hand was slipping under the waistband of her powder blue midi-skirt, creeping downward until—

"Aa-aa-aa-haai!"

—she rolled onto her knees, the top of her head pressing against the back of her seat. Cindy's unconscious mind had enlisted her hand in a very rich practical joke, saying, *Don't wait till you get to Newark to get off. Get off before you land!* Andi was more frightened by the apparent blurring of the line between dream and reality than she was embarrassed at having her traveling companion stuck in a vivid wet dream on a crowded flight.

A flight attendant named Steve stopped at Andi's row to see if all were well and ask gently whether the passenger in 19F might sit up and fasten her belt, per FAA regulations. Andi assured him that this was her friend's standard procedure, regulations be damned, and anyone who persisted in making her comply with that silly regulation risked having his trachea scratched out. Steve moved on. Cindy, still beneath the blanket, stuffed a corner of her pillow into her mouth and continued massaging between her legs, finally climaxing when the landing gear kissed the tarmac.

Am I dreaming all this, or is she dreaming all this, and am I in her dream, am I a conscious character in a dream she's having in which she's dreaming that's she's getting fucked from behind, or is she really getting fucked from behind because her dream is the real reality? Shit, my head is really swimming now.

Andi's head was swimming, she realized, because she had forgotten to breathe for two moments as she watched her friend come down from that dream. When she finally did breathe, she picked up a faint scent of *down there*.

Cindy's eyes opened bigger and rounder than ever. "Andi I'm wet," she whispered just above the whine of the starboard engine as she sat back up.

"No shit."

"Was I—?"

"Yes."

"Oh my *Gaw-awd*."

"Was it good for you?"

No hesitation: "Damn good."

"Who was it?"

Cindy turned shades of red she didn't know existed. She seemed on the verge of saying it three times, then backed off. Finally, as the plane headed up the J-line to be parked, she slapped her forehead with one hand, then the other, and squeaked:

"Hank."

"Get out!"

"But it's OK. As soon as he came, he died."

Having finally hugged everybody from the Dharma Bus and sent them with sack lunches on their way to Greensboro, Paige rose from her leather sofa and ventured up to the main guest suite, where Hank had spent the night. It was two in the afternoon, and Hank had made himself very scarce—hadn't come downstairs for breakfast or lunch, and he was normally fond of breakfast.

When she opened the door, she found Hank, quite naked, wearing only the most pacific expression ever seen on a dead man, and with a sticky patina of shpooze around the cumulus-white hairs on his abdomen, where his arthritis-stiffened right hand was resting. *What a way to go*, Paige thought.