

August

A sociologist would have had a field day at the El & Gee Café, if one had been in attendance that Saturday night, August the first, 1992. Subcultures, subcultures, subcultures! Bikers, bookworms, punkers, potheads, skinheads, skate-rats, regular guys and gals, Lesbians, muscleheads, and earth-muffins, and who knows how many representatives of more than one category, plus the biggest subculture in the Groton-New London area, the *sub* culture, consisting of those who built nuclear submarines and those who occasionally found themselves imprisoned in nuclear submarines for months at a time. All these various types assembled on Golden Street that night from as far away as Colchester and Narragansett because on that particular night, in that particular part of New England, it was the Thing To Do:

Take a break from Seawolf; See Wilf.

No other stop on the Adamante itinerary would produce a crowd as large and diverse as New London, Connecticut. It was as if no other working-class community felt so acutely the need, the desire to grab a seed of enlightenment from the fertile tongue of the "Talk to Your Yogurt" man. In truth, a few locals had managed to talk up this show so enthusiastically that their friends' friends' friends' friends' cousins came to see what the hype was all about. The PSAs on college radio and the notice on the union bulletin boards didn't hurt attendance, either.

Three people from the Atlanta area also were in the crowd, if Cherise were included with her sister and her sister's escort as a visiting dignitary from the Peach State. Cherise now had a Connecticut driver's license and voter registration receipt as of the week before—not that she considered voting all that important, but since Horace was not yet a citizen, he wanted someone through whom he could express his political

leanings. (Horace leaned pretty far to the right on some issues, such as foreign policy and social programs; he also sought to maintain an anti-drug presence in the seats of power, the better to keep the price of his leafy contraband elevated.) Cherise was at the El & Gee because Horace was there to be toasted for his and Lester's decision to spend a month as a pair of Paleolithics in the wilds of Zaire. Corinne was at the El & Gee because her sister was; Freddie, because Corinne was. Freddie consequently felt lost, confused, as if in a dream wherein "his" house looked more like Great Aunt Nora's house in Baltimore, but with different wallpaper, and all the stranger because Freddie never *had* a Great Aunt Nora.

Freddie had been paying closer and closer attention to his dreams lately: Some were HDTV-clear, others Vaseline-on-the-lens fuzzy, and many of them involved his own penis or some symbolic representation thereof. At least once a night, along came a dream of a missing dick, an extra-long dick, a dick in pain, a dick dipped in white chocolate, a dick that peed blood, a talking dick, a detachable dick kept under his pillow, a dick that kept missing its target on the archery range. He often wanted to approach Holly to ask his opinion on these dreams, but Holly would probably just laugh and say something about protracted puberty. Freddie didn't put much stock in Freud or any other system of dream divination, but he reckoned that **A.** these dreams were more likely to occur to a kid of twelve years than a man of 22, and **B.** they were trying to tell him *something*.

Just before leaving his apartment for the airport the previous day, Freddie had received a call from the family practitioner about the visit back in June. Freddie had dropped by the clinic for two reasons that day: to get a mild pain-killer of some kind for his ever-aching muscles (prescription denied as incompatible with his job) and to find out why he was more torpid than he ever remembered being, even compared to the weeks following his father's sudden passing. Doctor Wilfred Chang ordered the lab to check for a variety of maladies, since Air Grace was paying the tab: anemia, low blood sugar,

mononucleosis, the usual suspects. The lab staff found nothing for which it was instructed to test; however—

"There is one item for which we did test, and we'll need another blood sample from you, because the test was unintended and, huh, inconclusive." As the juke box at the El & Gee blared Squeaky Wheel's "Internet Blues," the physician's voice echoed soap-opera-flashback-style in Freddie's cranium. "One of the techs thought she saw the signs of antibodies for the human immunodeficiency virus, but when she did a second test to confirm the first, she didn't get the same result, as if she had a different batch of blood. This kind of thing doesn't happen often, I assure you. I'd like you to come in on your next day off; we'll take a little more blood and have another look at it."

Well, this very Saturday, the first of August, was Freddie's next day off. He would have to wait until the next week, but would probably chicken out as long as his curiosity would allow. As he ruminated on the phrase *human immunodeficiency virus*, he glared across a booth table in the corner of the club, stage left, behind the main PA speakers, at Corinne, who was already approaching her limit of Heineken drafts. This night was shaping up to be one of *those* nights: Corinne was acting uncharacteristically festive, suspiciously giddy. He'd seen her in an inebriated state, but only *post factum*; he'd never actually witnessed her while she got tanked, and it was a terrible sight to behold. She finally stopped giggling for a moment long enough to notice Freddie's ice-pick stare. Cherise noticed it as well.

"Fred, wipe those clouds offa your brow this *iuhnstant*," Cori drawled, "or you'll get no dessert, young man!" The sisters recommenced their giggle-fest.

"Aren't I entitled to my moods?" Freddie tried to make it a light and airy retort, but it came out heavy and bitter, like bad hollandaise sauce. "Maybe it's my time o' the month."

The sisters gaped at each other, wide-eyed with incredulity, and sing-songed in unison, "Freddie's on the ra-ag! Freddie's on the ra-ag!"

"What brand?" Cori poked.

"Tampons or pads?" Cherise jabbed.

"Mini or maxi?" they both nudged.

"I just roll up the editorial pages of the *Atlanta Journal*," he finally bleated.

"Oh, now, don't show no disrespect' for Grandpa's paper," Cori rolled her eyes. "You may not know this, but Mama's Daddy was an executive editor o' the *Journal* back in the days till he was caught doin' the nasty with a colored charwoman in the gentlemen's lounge. He claimed she seduced him, but the rest o' the board kinda saw through that. They gave him a nice early retirement."

"She gave him crabs," Cherise tacked on, screwing up her face in disgust.

"Cherise gets all her wildness from that side o' the family."

Freddie couldn't resist. "Including jungle fever?"

"Aw, man!" Cherise gaped, hoping the right words would fly into her mouth. "I—I don't even think o' Horace as black. He's not like your typical American black guy. He's also a quarter Irish and a quarter somethin' else. And he acts like a human bein', y'know?"

"That's very sweet." Freddie's eyes ping-ponged between the two dizzyingly gorgeous blonde sisters as the juke box gurgled some Nine Inch Nails-esque musical atrocity, and he felt his contempt wax while his inhibitions waned. "Corinne, do you think of me as a human bein' who happens to be Latin, or just a city-boy Spic that you can bang until the right man comes to his senses and sweeps you off your dainty little feet?"

A vacuum of astonishment sucked breath, word, and thought from Corinne's perfect mouth; then came forth an emotionally indecisive "Freddie—!"

"I want you and your yo-yo sister here to know something: I got a little concerned about our sexual practices, y'know, a few months too late, after I just assumed that a nice, rich girl like you wouldn't be carryin' nothin' contagious. So finally I got a physical and some bloodwork done. I think you can guess what Doctor Doctor found—you miserable cunt."

Corinne reacted to the epithet as if Freddie had jabbed her with a bayonet; she turned a little green as she clutched her abdomen and hobbled into the women's restroom heaving with sobs that emerged from a place in her spiritual core that no metaphorical bayonet had ever scratched. Cherise instinctively trailed her, not without shooting Freddie a dumfounded glare. He didn't see either of them emerge from the restroom, so he was content to wait for Corinne to explain, some other time, preferably in a penitent kneel. He figured that the girls must have headed back to Horace's flat.

Freddie also had some information that he intended to spill to his part-time angel/succubus at an appropriate moment: He knew that Shane McEnery, her quarterback fiancé, had opted to transfer to Valdosta State for his fifth and final undergraduate year—not because of grades, not because he couldn't make the team at Athens, and certainly not because he longed for the bright lights of Valdosta—because, football being the blood sport that it is, he might contaminate other flowers of American youth should they somehow come in contact with his blood.

The QB had HIV and was SOL at UGA.

One of Freddie's co-workers, Mike, to whom life was college football and hunting interrupted by work and sleep, had told him the whole sad story the very day that Freddie's inconclusive test results were returned.

The juke box was abruptly silenced as local musical sensations Provolone Pudding mounted the legendary black plywood stage. They performed an abbreviated set of their usual fare: classic baby-boom rock tunes in a schmaltzy, Jimmy Roselli style, complete with pointed references to the sensuality of Neapolitan cuisine in the spaces between lyric lines, as well as the most heart-clenching accordion solo passages ever to wash down a New Haven-style pizza.

Freddie was transported by the sheer ridiculousness combined with the humid sincerity of the sentimentality in the music; he forgot for a while that he'd verbally stabbed his onliest babe for possibly passing him a deadly virus and not having the grace to tell him that she was infected.

Immediately after a rip-snortin' rendition of Bruno Sprintini's "Born to Run," the Pudding boys yielded the spotlight to a short, brawny Neapolitan-looking gent in a blue suit—some union officer, it turned out—who introduced the main attraction at painful length. He pointed out some other union officers in the crowd who had helped make the evening possible, brought Horace and Lester up to the stage like conquering quarterbacks at a high school pep rally to receive applause and accolades for their courage and determination, and finally got down to the main purpose of his presence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, one thing that has kept me sane in my 16 years at the Boat is the exercise that I give my mind when I'm not busy with a torch or goin' to bat for my union brothers. I'm a reader. I've loved to read since my first encounter with *The Cat in the Hat*, way too many years ago. I worry that too many people deny themselves the pleasure of a good book, the satisfaction of reaching the last page and finding the universe restored to its proper balance. I worry that too many people go around quoting the *Bible* and other influential books without actually having sat down and read them. I worry that people in this country will lose all their interest in *ideas* and become enslaved by their attachment to *things*. For example, as long as they have certain things, Americans don't concern

themselves with ideas such as improving the quality of life of workers and the quality of the working environment.

"Our guest tonight, so he tells me, feels the same way I do. Like most writers, professional or amateur, he's an avid reader. Unlike most professional writers, he challenges us to accept and embrace new definitions of ourselves and new heights to our potential. He also challenges us to talk to yogurt and make sex the national sport." (Enthusiastic cheers.) "I present to you, good people of Greater New London Groton Norwich, Wilf Adamante."

Wilf was not hitting on all cylinders as he stepped to the mike stand. Not everyone caught the clues that he was less than 100 percent, but his entourage knew that he was catching a summer cold, had guzzled a few imported beers that evening, had had more time to drink and get nervous than at any previous stop, since the crowd did not settle in until after 10 p.m. His voice seemed lower and slower than it had in previous appearances—not slurred or somnolent, but less facile in establishing cadences and less syntactically sure-footed. After ten minutes, though, he seemed to be warming up, but steered in a dangerous direction.

"Americans are more interested in ideas than they give themselves credit for. We revere ideas and the people who advance them: ideas such as elective democracy, equal rights, electric lighting, motorized transportation, an end to the making of war, and—dare I say it in this town—an end to the making of weapons." Some of the crowd found this notion discomfiting, aimed directly at their livelihood as it was, but they continued to listen.

Wilf paused, deciding whether to pounce on the opportunity to speak his mind, whatever credibility the speaking of it might risk, whatever thunderbolts the radio pseudo-pundits might hurl from their lofty thrones. "It's no secret, folks, that my friends and I were active opponents of U.S. involvement in Vietnam—not because we wanted the Commies to win, but because we

wanted the U.S. to set a better example for the world by promoting peace.

"A lot of us also opposed U.S. involvement in last year's Persian Gulf fiasco, which became a mega-hit mini-series on CNN, and we're scared shitless that our nation will get up to its chinstraps in Yugoslavia and who-knows-where-else. We're scared for one basic reason: War creates a demand for human remains pouches, body bags; i.e., war results in DEATH, death in bigger numbers than ever before. Most of those dead are under 25 years of age, and far too many of those are children too small to wear a uniform or carry a rifle. We might as well just get our guns and start randomly shooting kids, because the governments of the world seem to hate kids enough to want them all killed or maimed by land mines."

He would have continued by way of urging these good workers to pressure their employers to build something other than war machinery, but one beer-bellied, whisker-faced pipe-fitter in a Desert Storm camouflage cap and a Patriot missile tour shirt had already consumed enough of Wilf's liberal spew. The pipe-fitter nimbly crawled over a pool table and plowed through the throng on the concrete-slab dance floor toward the stage before anyone could shake the shock of it and hold him back. He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work, grabbing Wilf by the belt-buckle with one meaty hand and yanking him off the stage, knocking the mike stand onto the skull of a young Connecticut College woman, pounding Wilf's head and neck and chest for a few seconds with the other hand before a dozen indignant attendees pulled the hot-headed hard-hat off the unresisting scrivener.

Bouncers and bartenders sat on the assailant while waiting for the off-duty cops to escort him away. Alf, Nigel, and Delano shouldered Wilf backstage, leaving a crimson trail of droplets from Wilf's lips and brow.

"That redneck fuckhead!" Delano Sharpe was livid. "God-damn! No wonder people think hard-hat labor is stupid and violent, man! Assholes like him keep tryin to prove it."

Alf's focus was on his golden goose's welfare. "Wilf-man, you all right? Can you breathe, can you see, can you talk?" They plopped Wilf onto a tattered naugahyde sofa in the dressing room.

"I fink I godda loose toof," Wilf struggled to reply. "But I can see OK outta one eye." The other eye was swollen shut; the dude in the camo-cap had been swift and thorough.

The main room of the club was abuzz with adrenaline-fired conversation over what had just taken place. "Damn, that was one supreme ass-kickin'," said one flannel-shirted (in August?) trucker. His buddy was less impressed: "But the guy didn't even fight back! What kinda shit is that?" In another corner a woman welder from the Boat confided to her girlfriend, "A case of testosterone poisoning if I ever saw one."

No one knew what could be done to make the evening's events complete after the main attraction's early departure, so they gradually buzzed back into the downtown streets and homeward, leaving the regulars, the hardcore Adamantines, and Chub Martell and Freddie Balaguer scratching their heads in wonderment or playing perfunctory pool.

Chub sat erect, bewildered, his head a globe full of cephalo-geothermal activity, with the hot rush of new ideas and feelings mottling his pale Irish/French brow with irregular pink splotches. Much as he respected a good ass-kicking, he deplored the idea of destroying someone's face just because that person might see the world a little differently. The thrashing was undeserved.

The word *denial* was one that Chub had heard used by many an A.A. counselor and alumnus. *Denial*. This pipe-fitter, who could have been mistaken for Chub in a darker room, was acting out of denial. The sumbitch just didn't want to hear another version of the truth, that war kills people, kills the young disproportionately—so he tried to kill the messenger.

If Chub had possessed less of a brain and less of a heart than he had, he would not have made the leap of kindness that he proceeded to make. He pried his buns from the vinyl of the barstool and hesitantly padded toward the backstage area, giving the swinging door a few tentative knocks.

Nigel "Turpentine" Taft pulled open the door with a curt "Yeah?"

"My name's Chub Martell. That guy who, well, y'know, I work with him, and, uh, he's a real flamin' asshole."

"*We noticed*," Delano sharply informed him. "If I was the type given to stereotypes, I'd probably assume you were one, too—one o' those hard-hat motherfuckers that Nixon used for bustin' up demonstrations durin' Vietnam."

"Why? 'Cause I look like him? Thanks a lot. I admit I'm an asshole, too, but I would never attack anyone for expressin' his political views like that. That's obscene...inexcusable...un-American."

"Damn straight," said Alf as he applied the entire contents of a first-aid kit to Wilf's now-colorful visage.

Cindy and Andi burst in, having heard the news from some college kids buzzing past the bus, where they had been trying to grab a nap prior to some serious bar-hopping on Bank Street. Shortly after the two teachers came two paramedics from the fire department, who began doing paramedical things and placing Wilf's limp frame on a gurney. As they wheeled Wilf to the ambulance, another stranger joined them.

"Is he gonna be all right?" said a voice with Bronxian overtones. Freddie worried that his presence was starting to cause all kinds of traumatic shit to happen—and this time he had missed his chance to be a hero.

"He's had worse," Alf assured him. "He'll recover."

"Yeah, we all have," Delano added. "But he's 47 and a little outta shape, so he won't recover as fast as he used to. What's your name, son?" Delano rarely called anyone "son" except the junior actuaries who worked under him, and only when he was pissed at them. He blushed a little.

"Freddie Balaguer," the young man replied. "I, uh, didn't plan to come here tonight, but since I'm here, I thought maybe I could help you out some way."

Outside the ambulance, which the paramedics were preparing to navigate the corkscrew path from downtown to the Lawrence and Memorial Hospital complex, there were introductions all around, mostly cordial, detailing each one's relationship to the patient. Nigel just half-smiled, "Nigel," pantomiming a tip of an absent cap.

Alf suggested a trip to the hospital by bus, but the only two people in the room who knew the way were Chub (born at L&M) and Freddie (who had passed it a few times en route to Ocean Beach). Chub gave directions, repeated apologies on behalf of industrial laborers everywhere, and excused himself. Freddie agreed to navigate the bus—a noble deed, Andi thought, as the gum-chomping teeny-bopper in her (whom she had never completely killed off) whispered *He's kinda cute, isn't he?*

At L&M there were already two small vigils in progress: well-read boomers hogging seats in the main lobby, while earnest college-age Deadheads and punkers hung around the emergency entrance. The boomers chatted and read stale lobby magazines; the Generation Xers chatted, smoked, sang, and played with Hacky-Sacks in the limited light of the parking lot. The bus pulled in on the emergency side, since the main entrance had just been closed for the night.

"Dude, it's the Dharma Bus!" a redheaded Deadheadette said.

Finding a parking spot for the bus was tricky, but the driver of the week eventually brought it to rest across six spaces at the

remotest corner of the lot. The whole entourage emerged slowly—some were still half-asleep—and six of the bolder youths strode over to meet them half-way. The redhead whispered to her companions, "The tall guy is Alf Spitzenberg, the publisher; that frosty-haired mom is Trudy Markowicz, the performance artist. Nobody else's famous."

"Shit," a blond skate-punk said wise-assedly. "I left my autograph book on my dresser." The other four giggled and gave him noogies on the noggin.

Alf was gratified that people of any age turned out to show that they gave a flying fig about his friend, but annoyed that the event had attracted so much curiosity. Before a question or a simple greeting could reach his ears, he told the thronglet of post-teens, "He'll be OK. You can all go home. Thank you for showing your concern, but I don't think the hospital needs you here. Send Wilf a card, or something, but well, please, for now, just piss off, OK?"

The entourage from the bus was too large for the emergency room lobby to accommodate comfortably. The group decided that only Alf, Tater, and Cindy Lou should stay while the M.D. on duty sewed Wilf's face back together. Andi invited Freddie (*Thank the gods, she thought, here's someone my age who appears to have a working brain!*) to stroll to the nearest tavern with her for beer and conversation. Bank Street would have to wait, as Andi was uncertain whether she could survive that experience without her fellow bookend leading the way.

They found Queequeg's Tavern, located next to Queequeg's Tattoo Parlor, a few blocks down Ocean Avenue. It was the only place in New England that served Primo on tap, a brand that neither of them had tried. They sat at a faux mahogany table and ordered two frosty mugs of the Hawaiian brew.

"I'm so fucking pissed!" Andi squealed when they received their mugs. "If I'd seen it happen, I can't imagine how pissed I'd feel. How do people like that asshole get to live so long without somebody just killing them?"

"I dunno. But there have always been people like that, and probably always will be. They've kept society from advancing and humanity from evolving as fast as would otherwise be possible. Some day they'll probably discover the asshole gene, and it'll become illegal to discriminate on the grounds of assholiness, under the Americans with Their Heads in Dark Places Act."

Andi's whirling mind and sipping lips came to a dead halt. She put down her mug, batted her eyes at Freddie, and spoke with a slight quiver, "You're a thinker, aren't you? You actually sit and think about the world, probably in your room, with no music on, blinds closed, uh, uh, half-read newspapers piled up in the corner—"

"Yeah, that's me exactly," he deadpanned, though it was a bit of an exaggerated profile.

"And a Scorpio, I bet."

"Libra, with a *moon* in Scorpio. So my mother told me, when I was little." He got a wistful flash across his face like a visible sigh, to which Andi was all-too-hip.

"Your parents are gone?" It was more statement than question.

"One dead, one missing/presumed nuts. My Dad died this past January."

"*Lo siento*. Mine are two years gone. They rammed a semi from behind. It was *not* an open-casket funeral for them." A lump the size of a tangerine formed in her throat as she unsuccessfully fought the tears. "I'm sorry," she dabbed her eyes with a bar napkin. "If I weren't already hopped up from seeing Wilf all bashed up—"

"It's all right, I can handle tears," Freddie assured her, grabbing her left hand with his right. "I've done my share o' cryin'—now I think I'm all cried out."

"I hope you don't talk like a country song all the time," Andi chuckled through her snuffling.

He decided that the dialog was due for a jump-shift. "How'd you meet Adamante?"

"I teach school with Cindy Lou, who's an old NYU friend of his. They invited me on the tour—I guess because they like me, and they think I'm like them."

"Are you?"

"A little—I mean, I'm still tryin' to figure out who and what I am. I'm idealistic, but skeptical—I feel the same way they do about politics and war and peace but I have a pretty clear idea on how their generation fucked up, and why ours isn't out there making the same mistakes, taking the same risks theirs did."

"Tell me." Freddie put his chin in both palms, elbows on the hardwood.

A few gulps of brew helped Andi collect the words. "Basically, they thought they had nothing to lose. They acted on their beliefs, which society preached to them but didn't practice. We, on the other hand, have everything to lose, and thanks to our parents' battles in the '60s, and the way so many of them went all middle-class-establishment in the '80s, we don't fuckin' *know* what to believe. Rather than try to figure it out, we put our trust in the stuff we can buy—mostly high-tech gizmos. You don't carry a pager, do you?"

"Fuck, no! I hate those things."

"My students, and half the college dudes I know, wouldn't be caught dead without their pagers. The pager is just a symbol of all the material shit that we're so attached to. It makes them feel important to have a pager. That's what their parents are supposed to do, make them feel worthwhile, feel needed."

"And do you feel needed?"

She sucked down the rest of her beer. Without looking up, she wiped her mouth and replied, "Why? Do you need me?"

Freddie had a witty reply on his tongue, but he had to swallow it as a familiar hand patted him on the shoulder—the spidery left hand of Tommy Luczinski, who had decided to knock off early on this abysmally slow weeknight. "Freddie, partner in crimebusting! ¿*Qué pasó, hermanito?*"

"Man, you don't wanna know. How 'bout you?"

"SOS, man—same ol' shit. But I may be getting a job in your neck o' the woods. Well, Charleston anyway. Martin Marietta needs me, or a reasonable fax of me."

"That's cool. Tommy, this is Andi. She came to town with Adamante."

Tommy's face betrayed that he couldn't place the name, that he was gravely concerned that the name might be connected with organized crime in some way. "I, uh, didn't know Adamante was in town. Did he just arrive?" He sat down to Freddie's right.

Andi piped up. "Yesterday. We just came from the El & Gee by way of L&M. How do you guys know each other?"

She ordered another round, listening raptly as Tommy and Freddie told, tag-team-style, the whole story of breaking up the Pizza Pit robbery, then as Freddie related to Tommy his odd encounter with the bedeviled New London stockbroker on the freeway in Atlanta, the telling of which saw them through another round of Primos for which Tommy happily sprang.

When they had finished their narratives, Andi mumbled something about leading a comparatively boring life, though she did mention the excitement of meeting two older men during the previous few months: one clairvoyant gadfly and one minor Manhattan *litteratus* who astrally projected but had yet to figure out how to control the wheres and whens of his

projections. So much had transpired in the four months since she ran into Hank at Kill Devil Hills that it resembled an echo of memory from childhood in a previous incarnation.

"Then my grandfather calls up and tells me that Hank says that I'd dropped the ball, whatever the fuck *that's* supposed to mean."

"Kinda like Bill Buckner in '86," Tommy recalled. "Only he didn't so much drop the ball as let it go through his legs, which no one will ever let him forget, blowing the World Series like that."

"More like Jackie Smith in that Super Bowl, then," Freddie suggested.

"Pah, football! Not nearly as fertile a sport for metaphors as the National Pastime. I mean, when you get laid, it's not a touchdown; it's a home run. When you don't close a deal, it's not an incomplete pass; you strike out. When I was playin' high school ball, my friends and I counted up all the baseball metaphors we knew—about 120—and added some of our own; then we got to meet Luis Aparicio, and he told us some in Spanish that very few Americans knew about. Aparicio was the god of shortstops, man. A short god, but man, what fire in those eyes. It wasn't like meeting Yaz, but—"

Andi's cold left hand grabbed his wistfully gesticulating right. "Tommy," she locked eyes with him, "shut the fuck up."

When they left a few rounds later, the easterly breeze that often shuffled through town on summer evenings had become a stiff, moist semi-gale. Tommy drove them to the bus so that Andi could check in with whoever was still awake—just Nigel, it turned out—then down toward Ocean Beach, where the nondescript, two-family house that Tommy called home was buzzing as usual. At least until his prospects might brighten, the erstwhile cabbie/engineer was sharing quarters with three other chronically divorced males who had done time at the Boat and whose employment status was best described as *unsteady*. On any given night, anywhere from zero to four of

the residents might be there, but some girlfriends, co-workers, or hangers-on would be there partying until everyone would crash some time before dawn. Tommy usually escaped the madness by driving all night, considering himself too old for such entertainments. The residents were known as the Stray Dogs; the edifice itself, Chez Stray.

In the downstairs portion, Andi found herself in stranger company than she'd ever seen in her wildest days of primal independence at FDU. All the Stray Dogs sat at a huge double-leaf dinette, girlfriends (or recent pick-ups) on their laps, with a pair of brothers who were temporarily out of favor with their wives and who kept croaking, "I really oughta get off to bed so I can get up early tomorrow. Anybody wanna join me?" every 20 minutes, then staying up for another beer and a cigarette. Andi feared that the brothers were aiming the question at her, and neither of these part-time Strays appealed to her. She was able to relax a bit when she'd had a few hits of some surprisingly good pot, of which Freddie did not partake. Freddie, in fact, spent a lot of time going to and from the bathroom, since his six beers had turned to a miniature flash-flood in his bladder. At any rate, Freddie was scheduled to be back at work in Atlanta the next afternoon, and he recognized the stupidity of trying to park aircraft with unknown amounts of THC in one's system.

"So the zigs are on me like flies on shit, right?" a peroxide blonde related, her butt as well padded and rounded as the barstools it called home. "The sergeant says, 'Laurie, this time you are spiked dead to rights, babe. Let's see the cake.' I says, 'What cake? I don't got no cake on me.' He says, 'We gotta jacker here sez you offered him a good time, he gave you fifty.' I says, 'A massage, Jerry, I offered him a freakin rub. Besides, fifty ain't cake, fifty is a cookie, a doughnut. Now a hundred, *that's* 'cake.'"

"So what's the story, Laurie?" one of the Dogs asked, not the one in whose lap she was perched, but Nat the Black Dog, the largest of the crew, who functioned as luxuriant lap-space for a

college-age leatherette with silver rings in her nose and lower lip. "Were you jackin'?"

"Strictly rub-a-dub, that's all he was allegedly payin' for, but if it should turn into a jack, that's up to me, not part of the transaction.

Anyway, he was married, and I didn't want to cause his wife any unnecessary pain."

Andi just had to ask, "Why? Why do you subject yourself to this, why take these risks, especially in such a small place where every cop knows you?"

"Number one, I've jacked half the zigs in the county, includin' the stateys, and **B.**, a girl has to work her way through college, right?" Laurie adopted a more academic demeanor. "I'm a sophomore at the Groton extension of the University of New Haven, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in marine zoology, hoping to specialize in cetaceans," she informed her new acquaintance from New Jersey.

Cole, the long-haired Dog beneath Laurie's buns, extinguished a roach and finally spoke: "Dude, she wants to jack whales!"

Nat added, "And all this time I thought you were just pursuing bachelors."

Two throaty Harley-Davidson engines growled to a stop outside Chez Stray just after three o'clock. Freddie peering through the yellowing sheer draperies on the front windows as he returned from the bathroom, recognized Lester and Horace, the Primal Triathletes. For no reason he could fathom, the temperature of the room suddenly felt ten degrees cooler, the coolness of dread. Horace's passenger removed her helmet, and the fear had a name: Cherise.

Freddie could not hide in the bathroom all night. If he had to confront the sister of the woman whom he had just labeled a "miserable cunt," then confront her he would. Meanwhile, he

fled to a back room, where an antiquated 19-inch Sylvania tuned to some cable network or other was playing colorized MGM semi-classics.

Lester's passenger was too short and wiry to be Corinne; she doffed her helmet to reveal the face of Alysse, the Pickle Pub's incendiary pint-puller. Freddie was amazed that she even wore a helmet to ride. She and Cherise, it turned out, were looking for a party, not a fight. Alysse usually needed a better reason to use her martial arts training, and the Triathletes were so geared up for Zaire that they didn't want to mess up their glorious, finely-tuned bodies in any way, not through Saturday-night fisticuffs, not even with ganja smoke. (Selling the stuff, though an occasionally stressful pursuit, took less of a toll on the central nervous system than smoking it.)

All four of the new arrivals bore convivial grins; Horace also bore a basket of goodies: wheat crackers and vegetable spread, a variety of mushrooms, peyote buttons, and a half-pound sample of the finest crop of Grenadian sinsemilla since the '83 invasion, all in a standard wicker picnic basket covered by a standard red-and-white-checked tablecloth.

Cole, the laconic long-hair still supporting Laurie's ample cheeks, eyed the basket hungrily. "Irie feelin's, mon!" he said in a smoke-ring voice. "Hope you're takin' VISA tonight."

"Your account is—fuckit, we'll talk later," Horace was in no mood to postpone the party he'd been waiting for all week, especially after the El & Gee event had come to such an abrupt, percussive dénouement.

Cherise watched her friends grab spots on chairs, laps, the floor, and then noticed a new face in their midst. Tommy piped up, "Guys, that's uh, Andi from New *Joisey*. Horace, Cherise, Lester, Alysse."

"You were at the El & Gee, right?" Lester surmised.

"Sort of," Andi creaked after sucking a spliff. "Never went inside once things got rolling. I'm with the Adamante bus."

"You don't look like a groupie," Lester chuckled. Alysse elbowed him in the ribs.

"Thank you. But I kinda feel like one. I've, well—"

"Been jackin' him," Cole finished.

Andi colored in the picture in spite of herself. "It's not just a jack, you vulgar little hop-head! It's more mutual, uh, gratification than I've ever experienced, and probably more than any of you have. There's equal amounts of give and take, push and pull—"

"Yin and yang," Laurie added.

"Six and nine," Cole added with a chuckle.

The remaining Dog, Bernard "Toejam" Wilcox added, too, though he was half asleep beneath his squeeze of the month. "Six and nine—that's 15."

"On a scale of ten?" Alysse suggested.

"Yeah, on a one-to-ten scale," Andi nodded, giggling, "together we're at least a 15, especially when Cindy joins in."

The girlfriends on laps all felt something stiffen beneath them. The Dogs started howling, one by one, which Tommy interpreted for

Andi: "They'd like to hear more about this, I think."

Freddie was missing all this, curled up on a salvaged sofa bed covered in Salvation Army second-hand linens in front of the Sylvania, the volume knob turned all the way down. On the edge of sleep, he was imagining the dialog translated into Spanish, then began dreaming of something new and different: vaginas.

Andi, who stood at the half-way milestone of her summer vacation, felt her teacherly inhibitions spiraling down the drain around her as the room began to spin ever so gently. "Mainly, Wilf just instinctively knows where to touch me, and how: the right spots, the right amount of pressure, the right tongue speed—especially on my nipples, and *especially* especially this spot on the palm of my left hand. And Cindy Lou is just so perfectly carnal that she raises the sexual temperature of any situation. They both are so free, they liberate everything in the room that might be repressed. That's about as well as I can describe it." She intercepted a wicked thought that passed through the room like a beta particle. She extended her left hand toward Laurie, who was seated directly across the table. "Here, lick my palm."

"Scuse me?"

"Pretend you're a dog for a minute, and lick my hand, right there."

"I'm not yer fuckin' dog—"

"How about if I put some veggie dip on it?"

All the guys were ready to volunteer their canine tongues; Andi noticed them squirming in their seats, and she savored the moment. "These motherfuckers aren't worthy. You, you're a temple whore, you have the knowledge of feminine pleasure; only you can do it right."

The Dogs howled some more. They were quite ready to see the show, though they would have all paid for the privilege of licking this sassy broadlet wherever she requested.

No veggie dip required. Laurie silently accepted the challenge, beginning with slow and gentle strokes, working up to the quick and intense. Andi's right hand autonomically slid into her shorts as the licking approached the correct tempo—she wanted an orgasm that would flood the room with erotic energy. Sitting down, she was barely able to reach through her waistband to

her very alert clitoris—alert compared to the rest of her body, certainly, which was narcotized with beer and weed and road fatigue. So she stood, pushing the table forward ten inches with her tummy, though it looked to those present as if it had moved by psychokinesis.

Andi certainly made no secret that she was masturbating—though she never told them that only the mental image of Wilf on her tightly shut eyelids was getting her so triple-h hot. She squirmed, jiggled, rubbed her left breast on her left arm, clenched her jaws and breathed through her teeth. Laurie felt Cole coming in his BVDs, but she kept focused on her task as if she had something to prove. She found herself enjoying her part in the show, wondering if Andi had any ideas of reciprocation.

Toejam's broadlet, Beverly something, caught the bug, deciding to rub against the spot where Toejam was bulging at the zipper-line, grabbing his meaty hands and guiding them under her shirt. This kind of quasi-public display of affection was catching on faster than the Twist. Cherise reached behind her to unbutton Horace's shirt, warming up her tongue to lick his hairless torso. Alysse raised her petite frame off the yellowed linoleum floor, muttering, "I'm too fuckin' old for this shit," and lighting a Vantage Ultra. She wandered into the TV room.

While Alysse had visited Chez Stray on numerous occasions, and while she was quite accustomed to seeing men passed out on the sofa bed, solo and accompanied, she sure as shit wasn't prepared to see Freddie there. Yet there was his face, far from serene even in slumber. She didn't hear Andi's climactic moans by the dinette table, moaning herself, "*Sacre fuckin' bleu!* What're you doin' here, Superican?" She prodded the back of his neck with a bony index finger while drawing a lungful of smoke. He flinched, barely conscious—and muttered Corinne's name.

"Not now, *please*," Freddie whined.

"Wake up, lover boy," Alysse whispered. He turned completely onto his back, popped his eyes open twice, three times, focused on Alysse's face, her features softer than he'd ever seen them—

"*¡Ay, Dios mio!*" He snapped his eyes shut again.

"What? You think you wound up in bed with me or somethin'? You should be so lucky, punk. Listen. Cherry's sister, your broadlet, what's-er-name

"Corinne."

"Pretty name. She wants to see you *tout de suite*, won't wait till morning."

That woke Freddie like a shower of iced Gatorade. "You are double-plus un-fuckin'-serious," he sputtered in engineer/sci-fi jargon.

"No, she is double-plus un-fuckin'-hinged, and if she doesn't get to explain everything to you, she *will* do somethin' drastic. Come with me; there's a cab outside."

"That's Tommy's."

"Even better. He can drive us."

They managed to pull Tommy away, literally, by the belt, from the first safer-sex orgy he'd ever witnessed in his kitchen. Everyone else was occupied with somebody's anatomy, but there was no actual coitus. At that moment, Tommy had no one to eroticize, though a turn with Laurie later seemed a sure bet. Behind the wheel of his Purple Cab, suddenly Tommy was all business and baseball, responding to the crisis in *l'affaire Corinne et Freddie* with pluck and zeal as he conducted the bartender and the bagbuster toward Horace's place on Truman Street.

"So Tommy, did the Sox win tonight?" Alysse already knew the answer, but she couldn't help asking.

"Rained out in Cleveland again," was all he said.

"Tommy, shut the fuck up," Alysse and Freddie harmonized.

At Horace and Cherise's second-storey garage apartment, Corinne had taken some Valium and fallen asleep on the forbidden-by-lease waterbed. Whatever Corinne wanted to say would, like so many words and deeds that night, be deferred.

No Valium, or any other agent of relaxation, coursed through the veins of Chub Martell that night. He lay on his right side, facing away from his beloved Carolyn, his large head a veritable cauldron of roiling thoughts. Carolyn was wide awake, too, but for a different reason. A little somebody was asserting his personhood-to-be by punching and kicking at her abdomen.

Having grown accustomed to accusations that he was selfish, even self-absorbed, Chub took in stride that he could practically ignore the *oofs* and *aahs* from the other side of the bed. He could hardly enjoy the simple pleasure of the his-hand-on-her-belly ritual of the third trimester when something just as life-changing was punching and kicking at his conscience.

"Maybe it's this process of becomin' a dad. A few years ago, y'know, I mighta got a big bang outta punchin' some self-righteous New York pinko intellectual; I mighta even beat that other guy to it. Now I'm ashamed o' the whole damn workin' class because o' some jerk—"

"Oof!"

"—who did what I woulda done. Hard to explain, I know. But when Adamante started talkin' about how war—"

"Aah!"

"—is a way o' gettin' ridda the excess young people, he made a connection with me. I turned 18 two weeks after Nixon ended the draft—"

"Yeah, ya told me that before. Owv!"

"I never told ya 'bout my stepbrother, though. He went to 'Nam in '68, just after my Dad remarried. I hardly got to know him, 'cause Dad moved down to Baltimore to be with Kit, who had a nice little house in what was then a real spiffy white neighborhood. I didn't go to the wedding, 'cause I was sore about Dad gettin' hitched so soon after Mom passed. Anyway, Wayne, my stepbro, he got his shit blown away by a land mine three months into his tour, came home in a box. It didn't mean much to me then, 'cause I was 12 and pre-occupied, learnin' from my grandpa how to fix cars and plumbin'. But when I was 17 I sure as hell didn't wanna go to 'Nam, leave behind the auto shop, the girlfriend, my grandparents, all that. I graduated, barely, then started work at the Boat. I did what I do best, I built stuff, never gettin' to see the consequences o' my work."

"Is there a point to all this, or are you just trying to write songs for Bruce Springsteen?"

Chub rolled over to face Carolyn, spinning the wheels in his head, hoping the right words would appear when they stopped spinning. "Point: I'm changin' from a wage-earnin' slob who cares only about beer, broads, and point-spreads, to—shit, I don't know what. Some kind o' sensitive male creature from the Donahue Lagoon. I want my kid to grow up in a better world that won't send him (or her?) to play with bombs in some jungle or desert. Plus, I'm—well, I gotta admire Adamante 'cause o' what he's done for Lester. It's like Lester finally has a purpose to his life. He's been bummin' around for years, first on the Navy's nickel, then as a civilian, virtually no life, doin' all kinds o' drugs, a lot o' misdirected anger—"

"He's reading books now, too."

"That, too. And I've picked up a little o' that: I wanna get a good pair o' glasses 'n' start readin' a little every day."

"Do yourself a—yow!—favor, Chub: Don't start with Adamante's stories. Build up to them. Or build down to them, I guess; they're just not my thing. Marilyn, though, she would write more of them just so she'd have more to read, know what I'm sayin'?"

"I'm gonna read his new book, the one for workers. Maybe it'll explain why I feel so embarrassed to be a working-class bozo in a working-class bozo town, especially after my fellow bozo punched out that New York intellectual bozo."

From each utterance of the word *bozo* Chub took the letter *z* and started sawing wood with it. Carolyn finally communicated to her tummy-tenant that she'd had enough of his/her kodo drumming for one night, and followed her man to Slumberland, only to be awakened three hours later by Chub's alarm clock radio. Some demonic, lizard-headed rock jock in New Haven was playing Guns 'n' Roses at 6 a.m. August 2 was gonna be a helluva day.

How Andi got back to the bus was never revealed to her. Some kind-hearted soul at Chez Stray must have driven the placidly unconscious teacher-on-holiday back to L&M. She would likely never see the Stray Dogs and their auxiliaries again, which was precisely why she had allowed her inner slut out to play there at the Doghouse. She awoke with only echoes of the early morning's activities in her head and a wad of undigested snack foods in her stomach.

After crawling back to the biffy to spew a few cheese puffs, with no one else on the bus, she had time for some more sorting out of recent events, a conscious version of what the subconscious mind does in dreams. It was strange enough that she should, at rather random intervals, be boinking a minor celebrity twice her age, even a minor celebrity of whom she

was quite enamored. Galloping Jesus on a mechanical bull, lots of young women had fallen for his timeless charm!—but Andi knew that she was different from those espresso-sucking NYU babes, and that his feelings (yeah, a guy with actual *feelings*) for her were different as well.

It was even stranger that occasionally her friend and guiding light, the enviably self-actualized history teacher whose name seemed copped from (but actually predated) a Dr. Seuss character, joined with them. In this trio there was no awkwardness or hesitation, even on Andi's part; there were no inner dialogs that began, "Am I a Lesbian?" Andi did not feel sexually drawn to Cindy Lou, who mostly provided—think chemistry—a *catalyst* effect, enabling two chemicals to react with each other more quickly but emerging from the reaction unchanged. *Whoa*, she thought, *what if I'm the catalyst between them?*

Stranger still than how unstrange all that felt was how naturally she'd stepped out of her inhibitive suit of armor to give some strangers an odd lesson in pleasure, in the sexual unreal estate that women control, in how many ways women can develop that property with a small emotional investment. If this knowledge was the key to the sexual revolution, no wonder the revolution never really took hold, because the world was still so trapped in the formidable citadel of ignorance. Ignorance, of course, is different from stupidity in that ignorance is more easily cured, but the citadel was apparently reinforced with stupidity six feet thick, considering how long it has taken Western humankind to emerge from the Middle Ages.

But strangest of all was the impression, here we go again, of not knowing whether each of those acts she faintly remembered from Chez Stray were hers or those of others. The feeling was eerily similar to what she had felt at the hotel in Waterbury a week before. Where did she end and others begin? Is this the pinnacle of sexual experience—even if it's all hands and tongues—the melding of personalities, a spiritual intersection above and reflecting the physical, an intersection

which eventually becomes a true union? If so, would reaching the pinnacle at age 23 mean maintaining her enjoyment, or would it be downhill henceforth? Scary thought.

As the sun reached the top step of the water slide and began its too-rapid descent, and as the cirro-stratus clouds darkened over the Thames Valley foreordaining a summer shower, Trudy Markowicz crept onto the bus to catch a nap. The rest of the complement was still holding a tag-team vigil, which had moved to Wilf's non-descript, semi-private room on the third floor of the hospital. Trudy could not sleep inside a hospital, even as a patient the few times she'd been admitted (two births and an appendectomy), so the bus was her choice. She hoped to get away with violating the no-smoking-on-the-bus rule, but discovered Andi conscious and miserably non-motile on a bunk not her own.

"Oh, hi! Um, after all that's happened, I've just gotta smoke a little of this stuff that I brought for emergencies. You won't tell anybody?"

With great effort Andi whispered, "Not if you're willing to share some."

Trudy got a longer look at her young comrade, supine with formaldehyded veins. "You poor dear! You look like shit!"

"I got shitfaced."

"Not by yourself, I hope."

"Uh-uh. Had help."

"Don't talk. Aunt Trudy will roll a fat one for us, and you'll feel 50% in no time."

Trudy rolled joints with the care, precision, and love with which Betty Crocker might roll a pie crust. When she lit it, however, she looked more like Betty (Lauren) Bacall in the old movies—feminine, but by no means domesticated. No one can look like

an archetypal homemaker while lighting a cigarette, much less a hand-rolled spliff.

Trudy felt it her duty to fill up the space in the conversation with some sage advice. "You must know a few things about Wilf by now. For example—uh, how to put it—he doesn't adapt very well to captivity, never has. Lots of women have tried to snare him, and without any apparent effort he frees himself just by *being* himself. And one other place he feels captive, oddly enough, is out here in the real world. His apartment is his *space*, meaning outer space, where his consciousness is free to roam the galaxy, without distractions—and only a select few people have ever joined him in that space." She handed Andi the freshly lit joint.

"He invited me." *Puff, puff.*

"Say what?"

Exhale. "The first time we met, back in May, he asked if I wanted to see the *sanctum sanctorum*—the stereo, right? It was a Friday night, and I'm always too tired after a week of teaching to go home with anybody, so I declined. He hasn't invited me again. But besides, Cindy Lou told me he gets NYU girls in there all the time."

Trudy took a pensive drag. "That's true. Well, shit, your position is better than I thought. Don't talk—what this means is that he thought about it and realized you weren't just another NYU girl he could take home for kicks, you know, engrave 'Wilf Adamante slept here' on your thighs after a one-nighter. He feels differently towards you. Consider yourself lucky."

So I was right, Andi thought, and maybe I'd better get used to it, to being right. But why me? There's nothing so damn special about me, physical, spiritual, intellectual—

Trudy still didn't have the grace to shut up, but at least her voice was pleasant. She shifted into her stage voice, a radio-quality tone and timbre that was always the last refuge of

beauty when her performances reached the peak of uglification. "You're probably thinking that there's nothing special that should attract him to you, but you're wrong there. If it's anything, it's that you're the most unvarnished specimen he's ever encountered, yet you have a healthy beauty that's not artificial in any way; uh, you've got a crucial balance of neurosis and stability; and, oh, you're physically gifted in ways he wishes he were, without being big-headed about it. I could tell all that about you the first time we met."

Andi finally ventured to speak again. "So what you're saying is, I'm the woman of the Golden Mean."

"Something like that. Yet you also see your own potential for self-improvement, which is what Wilf is all about. You don't try to fit some artificial mold that your environment forces on you. You look to your own potential—and it usually takes years of meditation and practice to determine just what that is—and then grow toward that potential. Wilf told me that you're one of the few people he's ever met who does that without even thinking about it. Cindy Lou is another. You know all this internally, without even knowing that you know it."

That rang a bell. Andi remembered being told in an inservice that the brain contains more knowledge than it is conscious of. There are things that we know that we know, and things that we know but don't *know* that we know.

Feeling just centered enough to prop herself on her left elbow, Andi winced, "Did you ever try to capture him?"

"Against my better judgment, yeah. Oh, yeah. I spent too much time trying to snare him with my snatch, developing my muscles down there for optimal sexual whatever. Anyway, my grades suffered, I missed classes, and one day Wilf said—of all people to say this—'Trudy, your problem is that you're too obsessed with sex.' Can you fuckin' believe that? It was true, but it's kinda like telling a football player just as he's reaching the peak of his potential, that he's too obsessed with sports, y'know? Besides, I found myself sharing him with my best

friends, so rather than lose them *and* Wilf, I just went with the flow. I redirected my brimming sexuality into my art, and that was the beginning of my long, satisfying career."

"Did you really put six bayonets in your cunt?"

Trudy laughed and coughed up a mushroom cloud of hemp smoke. "No! Fuck, no! That's an urban legend. Just *one* bayonet." It was Andi's turn to choke on an oversize laugh. "That was for a piece inspired by Kent State in which I pantomimed fucking that idiot National Guardsman who fired the first shot. Since then I've stuck with plain-ol' flatware."

Back inside the hospital, the whole entourage gathered in Wilf's semi-private room for what they had begun calling "Two Hours Hate," the stomach-turning Reed Bamberger broadcast. They had to get a special dispensation from the hospital board to have more than three visitors in the room, but for Alf, who knew whom to stroke and how hard, that was easy.

Bill Milliken of Rensselaer, New York, no longer had to fax his communications to Reed; the usually taciturn upstate redneck banker had his own phone line to the Supreme Radio Network, installed at the network's expense. Bill was giving the lowdown on the mini-melée in New London to a transfixed nation of Reedheads. The guy had been fast asleep next to his professorial ex-hippie spouse by the time Wilf's speech was underway, but apparently—how devious and sinister!—he had *agents* in Connecticut who could show up at Wilf's speech stops as silently, anonymously, as Bill himself had in Schenectady.

As matter-of-factly as Walter Cronkite, letting the events speak for themselves, Bill related what Wilf had said to the large and diverse EI& Gee audience, what sorts of sub-life the audience had comprised, and how Wilf had managed to get himself decked by a middle-aged, Caucasian, male American worker. Then Bill offered speculation that the Plaid Flamingo Gang had secretly hired the worker to punch Wilf, the better to generate publicity and broader sympathy. Of course, Bill said all this

before any major newspaper had a chance to pick up the story, which *The Day* of New London placed below the fold on the front of the City/Region section, squeezing the story in just after deadline the night before. More people heard the story than would read it in the *New York Times* the next day.

Wilf, all patched up and, despite his objections, under the influence of painkillers, laughed aloud, and it hurt. He could barely open his eyes, but what his ears took in was so absurd that it tickled him in places that had not been tickled since he'd first heard the classic Firesign Theatre LPs 20-plus years before. It struck him as pathetic: so similar to the U.S. government's insistence that the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua had planted mines in its own harbors and staged raids on villages disguised as Contra troops. The lies, those *credo quia absurdum* lies that get repeated and elaborated until they are believed by a majority of the mainstream, oh, those delightful lies!

The TV networks' news departments, still and ever with an ear on Reed and his tribe, scrambled to get the first satellite truck to New London to procure at least a soundbite from the Adamante camp. Wilf either would not or could not speak to the cameras, so it fell to Alf Spitzenberg, who did not have Wilf's facility with clever wordplay and turning smart-ass questions upside-down, yet had an unfortunate knack for improvising on heroic themes.

"Look," Alf commanded NBC and its audience, "what the Limberger Cheeseheads forget is that America includes us, too. Look at who's riding this bus: Jewish-Americans. African-Americans. Hispanic-Americans. Asian-Americans. Young and old Americans, dope-smoking and straight Americans, liberated and relatively repressed Americans of both sexes—in other words, the America that Bill, Hillary, Al, and Tipper would not invite on *their* bus, but whom they at least recognize and shake hands with. All different kinds of Americans came together at the club last night to hear how each of us might improve ourselves and our nation, and they were a bit

disappointed that one American who disagreed with Wilf wouldn't let him finish."

The Nightly News didn't have time for all that rhetoric, though, and it was shortened to an ambiguous observation: "All different kinds of Americans came together at the club last night to hear how each of us might improve ourselves and our nation, and they were a bit disappointed." Alf inadvertently dissed Wilf on national TV. At least National Public Radio later restored the quote to its entirety, but Bamberger now had a little more ammunition than before.

The story as aired painted a portrait of a Connecticut that was mostly apathetic or hostile to Adamante and his ideas. There was no time to agonize over it, though, and even if Wilf called the networks on the carpet for distorting the events, who would cover his rebuttal? Wilf had plenty to worry about without trying to charm the mainstream media into his camp: There were Warwick, Brockton, Boston, Manchester, Portland, and then the southeastern leg of the tour yet ahead, once Wilf was ready to walk and command the lectern again.

The bagels were pale imitations of what he had consumed in his youth in the Bronx, but orders of magnitude better than any he had experienced in Atlanta, where generations of Jewry had so assimilated into the rhythms of Southern life that the deli/bakery culture had all but disappeared. Still, Freddie had consumed three egg bagels *mit shmeer* and three mugs of mediocre coffee that afternoon at the Bank Street Bagelry without giving half a thought to how many grams of fat all that cream cheese might leave in his bloodstream. His thoughts were on weightier matters, such as his suddenly imminent mortality.

Corinne had been unable and unwilling to talk to Freddie while trying to shake the cobwebs from her mind. She'd insisted on having a chance to shower and dress to meet him in a public place where Freddie would be less inclined to respond

physically. As she was still quite afraid to confront him there in Horace's apartment, she'd had to relay these conditions through Cherise. Freddie had agreed, though his patience was nearly exhausted, and before leaving for the Bagelry he'd called Air Grace Terminal Operations to plead indisposition due to illness, his first absence from work in all the weeks that he had been yo-yoing to and from New London.

Well, he did have a virus, right?

Freddie had certainly not intended to gulp three bagels, but, as he put it to himself, *Trust a woman to keep ya waitin'*. When she finally did push open the plate-glass door and slither into the Bagelry, she was not the knockout whom the camera operators at the Georgia Tech football games nearly killed each other to frame in close-up for testosterone-drenched viewers, but even in sweats, with her face unmade and her hair a pile of damp straw, she brightened the shop just by being in it.

"Come on," she panted, having walked a whole half-mile at a brisk, determined pace. "We're going to the waterfront."

"Excuse me? You think you have the right, the power, to determine when and where you explain yourself to me?"

Apparently she did. "The waterfront," she repeated. "It's a gorgeous day—well, semi—and we're going to take a little walk to the city pier."

They strode past the shops, galleries, taverns, and empty office space along Bank Street, all the way to State Street and Union Station, silent until Freddie motioned toward the railroad depot itself: "I gotta duck in here and use the john." He took his time, making Corinne wait anxiously in the main room. He hated this sort of game-playing, but it had a purpose: *Her* turn to wait. He emerged, visibly relieved, grinning wickedly, "Ready to take a long walk on a short pier?"

Across the rails, past the bronze of young Gene O' Neill, around the island ferry ticket booth, past the docked pleasure boats that barcarolled in the glinting August sunlight, the two dropouts now strolled, letting the bridled beauty of the riverside setting calm their internal storming. Sitting on a picnic bench next to an 18-footer named *Sex Frog II*, Freddie indicated with his eyes that he was more than ready for Corinne to speak her piece.

"Look, Fred. You must think I'm a horrible person. But I'm not. I admit it: I've used you in some horrible ways. And—goddammit!" she felt the tears building up, which she knew would make her explanation more difficult, so she cursed her tears, "I'm sorry for that. It was too easy to—to come to you for sex and solace, 'cuz I knew you'd be eager to provide both. Then, after—*months* after—I'd been sleeping with both you and Shane, we found out he's...positive—" she sobbed and choked on the word *positive*. She leaned her head toward Freddie's unoccupied left shoulder, and he clutched it as if by reflex, unable to provide the comfort that she needed. He couldn't have been very sincere in patting the back of her head; there was no "There, there" there.

Cori sniffle-snuffled, trying to compose herself. "It was so hard to tell you—the damage was already done (snorf). And I needed to keep you around, 'cuz I needed you to be there 'cuz God knows Shane wasn't. He wanted to blame me for giving him HIV—" she was reduced to a whisper "—and I know I didn't!"

Freddie could almost make sense of all that. He felt a nudge in the back of his conscience as his sympathy valves tried to creak open. Sure, he felt for Corinne, but it was the feeling he had for victims of earthquakes or floods in distant lands. Even to that feeling there was a numbness, as if it were an embarrassingly involuntary response, something to be overcome.

Corinne forged on. "All these trips up here—all that was on false pretenses, too. My goal was to tell my sister that I—the

nice girl—had this disease, so she'd better watch herself. In four months I couldn't bring myself to say, 'Cherise, I'm HIV-positive.' Just like I couldn't tell you. I don't think she's figured it out even yet, even after what you said last night. But ya know what's weird?"

"Damn near everything."

"I don't think it's a big deal to her. If she turned up positive herself, she'd still live hard and fast, she'd still ride on Horace's Harley, and she wouldn't feel too bad about *never getting old*. She's watched our Mom and Dad and their parents grow old, and that's what she wants to avoid. She's got no fear of death. But old age scares her shitless. Anyway, I still haven't been able to tell her about Horace and Carolyn makin' a baby; can you believe that?"

Freddie kept his lips tightly together, with everything to say and no good way to say it, as he watched a distant ferry approaching and gaining a recognizable shape at the mouth of the Thames. He finally replied to Cori's long speech, wiping the last of her tears away with an indifferent hand.

"I appreciate this. Big-time. You finally did the right thing after keepin' this terrible secret for so long. You fessed up. And if I thought it would do any good, I'd ask you to come home with me tonight, move in with me, plan the rest of our life together however short that might be. But life ain't like that. *I'm* not like that. I can forgive you for usin' me, but I can never forgive you for...for hidin' the truth from me, or for hidin' *from* the truth. Now I know this virus isn't a death sentence, but I have lost a life, the one I'm used to, 'cuz now I've gotta take much better care of myself. You haven't killed me, Shane hasn't killed me, but this whole fuckin' situation has killed what little joy I get outta livin' since Mom disappeared and Dad bit the big one. And to be honest, it's better for both of us if we don't see each other again for a long, long time. Understand?"

He could not have made it much clearer, Cori seemed to think as she nodded, clutching the bridge of her nose to stem the

lacrimose tide. He squeezed her right hand as if to say, "*Buena suerte, vaya con Dios, amiga.*" As he stood to leave, she grabbed and embraced him, more for closure than to display affection. He returned the embrace, but without much emotion, and walked toward the station house to purchase a ticket for the next train to New York.

By late afternoon Andi felt good enough to take a short run, a mere seven miles from the hospital up to Connecticut College via Williams Street and back. She had mostly neglected her physical regimen during the past month, depending on sex to get her fix of endorphins and her aerobic workout. Quaker Hill, the mound on which the college perches with its fabulous view of Long Island Sound, was a nightmare to ascend, merely treacherous on the way down. Still, it felt good to conquer gravity for that protracted moment of her youth. There was so much gravity within her that refused to be beaten even temporarily. She wondered, for example, just what kind of creature she was turning into, never having been so clitorally fixated before this summer, certainly never having masturbated in the ogling presence of strangers before the previous night-bleeding-into-morning.

The first time she had ever given herself a real humdinger of an orgasm, in her dorm room during her first month at FDU, the phone had rung mere seconds after she caught her breath. She had answered the phone out of sheer politeness, and there was her mother on the other end. Ever since that time, Andi connected orgasms with the telephone. It made her think of calling her grandfather in Kitty Hawk, since no matter what number she dialed, her mother would never answer.

Using her phone card from whatever long distance company considered her a worthy customer that year, Andi punched Terrell and Natalie's number on one of the pay phones in the lobby of L&M. Terrell was always good for a few words of encouragement, the right words, even if he had no idea what was ailing Andi's psyche. He had encouraged her to stay on

the track team back in her days of constant self-doubt in middle school, saying what a winner he knew she was, and she went on to win a record number of second-place ribbons and trophies. The sound of his voice always provided extra comfort, that voice which moved up-around-down-around like a perfect sine wave with no sharp edges or abrupt modulations.

"How's my little sweet potato?"

"Um, OK. I'm in New London, Connecticut, where my friend Wilf got the stuffing beat out o' him and wound up in the hospital. He's recovering."

"What'd he do, wander into the wrong bar?"

"Sort of. He was giving a speech, and he said some things that somebody didn't like, some hard-hat—" she stopped short of saying *redneck*. "Uh, how are you and Natalie?"

"Oh, you know, steady as she goes. Nothin' changes here. Except ol' Hank is in a hospital now, too. Checked in last night."

Andi feigned a deep concern, but was genuinely curious. "Gee, that's too bad. What happened?"

"He predicted he was gonna have a coronary. So he took a cab all the way to Elizabeth City doesn't like the local hospitals, I guess. While he was waitin' for his cab, he called me up, though and said—damn, now, how'd he put it?"

Terrell sputtered a few sports metaphors before he finally lit on the correct one:

"Fumble recovered."

"Say what?"

"Remember how he said you'd dropped the ball? Well, someone has recovered the fumble. And he says it's been

recovered by someone on your team. Then his cab pulled up, and he had to go."

Andi heard the *clunk-click* of call-waiting from the other end of the line. Terrell excused himself and answered, putting Andi on hold for a few minutes, giving her time to ponder in agony what the "fumble" reference meant. Then he returned.

"That was a doctor at E.C. Hospital. Sure 'nough, Hank had his coronary. He's stable and conscious, refuses to be sedated cause he might not wake up again."

"I don't think he'd sleep even if they *did* sedate him," Andi sighed. "Don't think this means I'm gonna drop everything and come down to visit him. He can wait. We're gonna be in Newport News next month, and he can come and see us there, if he still wants to tell his story."

"I'm not a bettin' man, but it's better th'n even money he will. Oh, the other thing: He said he wants to give you his archives."

"His archives."

"Yeah."

"I don't have room in my apartment for the books I already own, Grampa."

"I'm just tellin' ya what he said. I don't explain 'em, I just repeat 'em."

"Yeah, but this is bizarre."

It certainly wasn't the only rain to pelt her picnic that day, and like the other strange events and thoughts, it had an entirely rational explanation. Andi knew not whether she wanted to hear the reasons behind Heinrich Truber's mystical pronouncements, nor the reasons for keeping them so cryptic, nor to know the contents of the archives (90 years' worth of clippings on the evolution of aviation, as it turned out). She did know that these mysteries were not going to interfere with her

enjoyment of the next 35 days before she would return to her comparatively dull existence in North Jersey.

And no matter how hard she may have fallen for Wilf, she had a contract with Paterson Public Schools, and she would return to teach in that slice of the all-too-real world, continue striving to be New Jersey's best damn high school health teacher.