

July

Thirteen years seems such a long interval of time when one is young. To the eternally youthful Collectivists, those years had passed far too quickly, from the initial convening in the oil crisis summer of '79 to the post-Desert-Storm-depression summer of '92, when the Collective was forced to undergo a metamorphosis. The group met on the 28th of June for the last time, and the ritual meditation was pre-empted by the sharing of feelings about the breakup.

Most members were accepting of the notion that all good things must end: childhood, college years, youth, their favorite restaurants, lives, even planets as beautiful as Earth. Most of the disciples trusted Wilf so completely that they agreed wholeheartedly with his new mission. Four agreed, their lifestyles being amenable to extended travel, to ride on the Dharma Bus to the working-class neighborhoods of the decadent American Empire.

Some of the Collectivists had the audacity to suggest that Wilf's tour had a direct influence on the Presidential candidate who admitted to having experimented with marijuana and radical politics in the 1960s, the candidate who crisscrossed the amber waves of grain and majestic purple mountains with his running mate and their families in a touring bus, like some resurgent, middle-aged rock band. The press never got around to asking the Clintons or the Gores if they had even heard of Wilf Adamante, his stories, or his mini-ashram overlooking Washington Square.

Cindy Lou Hu, though still bitter about losing the Collective, losing the most dependable aspect of her existence, decided to be part of the crew, sensing that she could help in improving some people's lives and keep Wilf's helium-filled ego tethered. Delano Sharpe left his cushy job with the Fuller Life Insurance Company to ride the bus, insisting, "Wilf, if you don't have at

least one African-American in this troop, you will regret it in more ways than one!" Trudy Markowicz, the performance artist/housewife who had come to NYU as a painfully shy country girl from "Cow Hampshire" back in 1966, decided she could join the junket now that her kids were old enough to look after themselves if necessary. Nigel Taft, who had never shaken the nickname "Turpentine" that dated back to his high school sniffing days, had been laid off by Pan Am shortly after it folded and never found any satisfactory middle-management job to replace that one, so he could afford to spend a summer on the road at Plaid Flamingo's expense.

The entire Collective took the subway over to the Flamingo Nest to see, touch, tour the Dharma Bus, which was a beauty. On the outer panels there was none of that typical tour bus Great Basin motif, but an easily recognizable shape of the peak of Everest, surrounding by lotusized, levitating monks in saffron robes. Actually, their robes were closer to Velveeta, since the painter never grasped the concept of saffron—close enough. Inside, the cabin was fitted with two lavatories, twelve beds, a capacious fridge, and a blank white wall full of autographs of the numerous rock and country bands that had leased it for North American tours. The crowning touch, at least for Wilf and Cindy, was the drop-dead gorgeous Nakamichi surround-sound system with CD and DAT players. Trudy, who had some radio experience, was appointed stereo dominatrix on the condition that she occasionally, if grudgingly, play requests.

The party also included Alfred Spitzenberg (the beak of the Flamingo), his common-law spouse Amy "Tater" Tottenham, and the token Generation Xer Andromeda Sichler. Total population: eight bodies, in addition to a series of drivers who would be hired for a week at a time off picket lines in front of Greyhound depots. The three extra bunks would be filled by additional bodies that might find themselves joining the tour: very brave journalists, for example.

On the Fourth of July, a Saturday that year, the Flamingo threw a vegetarian-BBQ bon voyage party on the roof of the Nest, the publishing offices on West Houston Street. The elbow-patch crowd wore T-shirts and shorts and the most comfortable footwear that their closets contained. They drank Evian water and draft beer instead of snooty liquors and liqueurs. The boogied to Big Chill music and had a grand time watching tourists getting stuck in traffic six stories below. Their pre-pubescent offspring played badminton, sending only one shuttlecock plummeting over the edge onto the roof of a parked taxicab.

Everyone on the roof waited interminably for darkness to arrive and the harbor fireworks to begin. When the pyrotechnic display reached its climax around 10 p.m., Andi found herself falling in love with Manhattan again, as she did nearly every time she visited the island. She crept up behind Wilf, as he munched a tofu-pup, and threw her arms around his mid-section, almost knocking the half-chewed hunk of tofu out of his mouth *à la* Heimlich.

When the fireworks were finished, Andi found herself a little weepy; it had been so beautiful, and now it was gone, filed away in the memory until the Grucci Brothers would emerge from their cellar the next summer. She found Cindy Lou and embraced her.

"Cindy," Andi stage-whispered, just audible above the excited throng on the roof, "this is like the biggest transition I've ever had to make—at least it feels that way. I mean, I had to adjust to being an orphan, to being a teacher, a professional, but my whole life is going to be turned inside-out now. Ever since I was twelve, I've been running my own race. Now I don't even know where the finish line is."

"It's not a race any more, kid. It's a fun run. It's riding the wave of madness just for the ride. Maybe, at the same time, that wave will run up America's ass and give it the enema that it needs."

They floated to the southwest corner of the roof to watch the night life take over SoHo. The gallery parties were shutting down, the cafés were lighting up, the skate-rats were riding waves of their own, and the occasional dope fiend was doing the Paranoid Shuffle in search of a sweet score. Cindy Lou thought how easy it was to pass judgment on the whole of humanity from six floors up, the way her mother had watched the world go by from their Chinatown walk-up and offered helpful hints on how everyone should live—vainly hoping that the wind might carry her suggestions through the earholes of this or that obvious loser waiting on a bench for a crosstown bus. Cindy also thought how she'd like to learn how to ride a skateboard some day, before this life ended.

Alf and Tater disrupted the teachers' reverie from behind, Alf holding out laser-printed itineraries and announcing, "Major excitement, man! Poughkeepsie, Schenectady, Waterbury, New Haven, New London, Warwick, Brockton, Boston—"

"Boston!" Cindy Lou *ahaed*. "I've *heard* of it. Quaint little mill town near Waltham."

"Must you always be the smart-ass? The idea here is to focus on these industrial towns with disaffected, blue-collar populations where the future is kinda grim. But there will be some actual cities with actual life in them—and some pretty little rural spots, like up in Vermont."

"Don't worry about it, Alfie," Cindy reassured the man who had hated being called "Alfie" ever since the movie hit the screens. "With this group, wherever we go, Manhattan is never too far away."

Andi started *sotto voce* singing Eva Gabor's lines from the *Green Acres* theme. Before long, 30 people, aged six to 60, were singing along:

Da-dat-da-dah-da...the chores!

Da-dat-da-dah-da...the stores!

Da-dat-da-dah-da...fresh air!

Da-dat-da-dah-da...Times Square!

"Carolyn, this is Chub. That writer that your sister's into, wuzzizname, Adam Ant? He's gonna be at the EI & Gee the first of August. The union bulletin board had a flyer up—admission free with any union card—plus the union'll knock ten bucks offa this month's dues for anyone who turns in a ticket stub. S'posed to be a workers' event o' some kind. Anyhow, see ya tonight, sweets. Luv ya."

As she counted the twelve grocery bags which she had shlepped up the stairs to her second-floor apartment, Carolyn Olin, now five and one-half months into her gestation, let Chub's recorded message sink in. The sound of his voice, which she heard less and less lately because of his relentlessly applied work ethic, briefly made her crave a cigarette. She fought the craving successfully. The message was a non-message, really: informative, but stopping short of saying, "I'd kinda like to go to this event; how about you?"

Marilyn would go, although her feelings about Wilf Adamante's works were mixed: From what she had already read, the guy was like five radios each simultaneously blaring different versions of the same song, a multi-ring psycho-circus with a serious message that sometimes wasn't clear until after a few hours of serious reflection, introspection, and moral calculation.

But Chub had an anti-literary pretension. God forbid he should ever be caught reading anything heavier than a racing form, but he secretly craved intellectual stimulation; for this Carolyn appreciated him, for she demanded more than earning potential of the men in her life. Twice she'd heard Chub say, "I read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* when I was seventeen, and since then no book has ever measured up. Since 1975, reading has been a major disappointment." So when he had time to relax, it was usually with his TV games and cheap marijuana.

Carolyn turned on the portable radio that perched on the kitchen windowsill and began putting her groceries away. It was Monday, July 6, the last day of the four-day weekend that she had granted herself, since there were no major holidays before the bambino/a's arrival. (Labor Day was already an off-day, since her salon was closed every Monday.) She had a little post-fireworks depression. Yes, ignoring Marilyn's advice that the noise would frighten the fetus, Carolyn had sat out on a vacant lot near Bank and Howard Streets to be dazzled by the high-decibel sky-painting, then basked in the afterglow all evening before succumbing to the inevitable letdown the next morning, same as every damn year. She tried to drown out the depression by watching as much baseball on TV as she could find, but the blues kept comin' back. She took her time with the groceries. *Ice cream? Let it melt. Soap? Wait till the next bathroom trip, which won't be too long from now—right, fetus-face?*

Marilyn rang her up between the Swanson dinners and frozen concentrated (sugarless) cranberry juice. "Carolyn, did you hear?"

"Yeah. The El & Gee."

"Isn't it great?"

"Geez, if you wanted to see him that bad, you coulda just gone to NYC and looked him up. How long since you've even *been* to the El & Gee? Do you know what satanic spawn hangs out there? These kids with pierced navels and privates and—*oooh!*—nipples?"

"Carolyn, you sound like Mom. You're not supposed to turn into Mother until *after* you've had the kid."

"O' course, I've been known to hang with people who can fart 'Yankee Doodle' on cue, so who am I to judge? But Marilyn, this really won't be up your street."

"Welllll...how do you know what's up my street?" Marilyn's wheels turned as she watched her employees restock the doughnut trays through the office window. "Anyway, I'm goin', and so are you, because...I don't wanna go alone. I'd take one o' my employees, but I think they're beyond redemption."

"Y'know Chub might be goin'. He's the one who told me about it. Called and left a message. It was weird—real-life weird, not short-fiction weird."

"Maybe he thinks he can learn somethin'," Marilyn guessed.

It turned out that Chub had different reasons for his curious enthusiasm over Wilf's unusual book tour's landing in New London. Lester and Horace knew that Wilf was the germinator of the triathlon for which they were training their bodies and minds, and though Chub was neither sufficiently physically fit nor mentally inclined toward such pursuits, he could truthfully call himself one of the first P.M.T. fans.

The three of them were lunching *al fresco* at the unofficial fishing spot by the Thames River that morning when Lester produced a copy of the bulletin. The sky was cloudless and a care-free shade of bright blue; the river rippled by in a hurry to reach the Atlantic and mix with its neighbors, the placid Pawcatuck and the frenetic Connecticut. The guys all had hefty sandwiches on whole wheat bread, washed down by Thermosfuls of protein powder solution (Chub reasoned that the stuff couldn't hurt, so he also indulged). Lester was so excited, he could barely keep the food in his mouth as he spoke.

"Fuck-kin' A! This is awesome, man! I don' know nothin' 'bout this guy as a writer, I don' know what he's gonna try to tell us worker bees, but I do wanna thank the dude in person for what he has done for me, y'know, personally."

Chub was already lost. "What's he done for you?"

"He fuck-kin' gave me an excuse to really get my body and mind in shape. I mean, like, remember the gladiators in ancient Rome, the Olympics in ancient Greece?"

"Geez, Les, I was just in diapers then," Chub rolled his rhetorical eyes.

"You're no fuck-kin' help." Les air-punched in Chub's direction. "It's, like, this ideal they had in Greece: sound mind in a sound body. If you could strike a balance between mind and body, you were the perfect human."

"Especially if you don't mind a perfect cock in your perfect ass," Chub added, shoving his right middle finger into his balled left fist. "I know about those old Greeks."

"Always ready with the smart-ass response, eh, Martell?" Horace piped up.

"If I didn't play smart-ass for you, you'd be makin' a dumb-ass o' yourselves a lot more—expecially this one," Chub indicated Lester.

"Yeah, man, I fuck-kin' love ya for it," Lester groaned.

"If ya don't mind me gettin' on a soapbox, chief, both o' ya's are gettin' a bad case o' musclehead. Even with all that talk about strikin' a balance, I've seen the way weight-trainin' turns you into a stuck-up asswipe who can only communicate with other muscleheads, 'cause nothing else means shit to ya 'cept perfectin' yer own sweet bod. I'm tellin' ya this as a friend, 'cause if ya get too damn muscleheaded in the jungle, ya start feelin' invincible, which is exactly the time ya meet a snake that's got your name tattooed on his fuckin' coils. You're most vulnerable when ya feel the most *invulnerable*."

Horace scratched his way back into the conversation. "How d'ya know so much about weight-trainin', Chub-mon?"

"Used to be into it, bigtime. Also used to be the most obnoxious fuckin' musclehead that ever held a weldin' torch. When a guy gets to the advanced stages o' muscleheadedness, he gets this teenage notion that he can drink more, smoke more, snort more than mere mortals, and then live to brag about it. The results are pretty fuckin' ugly: Just look at me. It's even uglier in women: Just look at Alysse whenever she stands still long enough to get a good look, or if ya happen to wake up one mornin' with her on yer arm. Scary."

Lester and Horace stared at Chub, then at each other, superimposing Chub's damage on their younger faces. Then Horace remembered the key word. "Balance, bay-bee. Balance is the key. If you keep developin' yah mind, then yah body won' start to think he's in chahge, Lestahhh!"

"Exactly," Chub nodded.

"Fuck-kin' A!" Les pumped his fist in the air just as the whistle blew to call the workers back from lunch.

The same Monday found Freddie on the shoulder of I-85, hastening to put the rag-top of his Miata back up after having stowed it mere hours before. The afternoon shower caught even the local meteorologists by surprise, and it intensified to a downpour just as Freddie fastened the last corner and signaled his re-entry to the flow of traffic toward Hartsfield Atlanta Airport. If there were lightning, and by all rights there ought to have been, the ramp would be shut down until the storm passed. But alas, the flying public had to be served, even if it meant soaked suitcases coming off the belt in baggage claim.

Freddie was scheduled to work with Holly Halden that day, and he found his outrageous, neurotically-charged friend in the Jetway of Gate 58. Holly was having an extreeeeemely businesslike conversation with the ultra-cute first officer whom he had spied a few weeks before, the one who returned his show-biz kiss through the cockpit window. The two were trying

so hard to act like a pair of straight-arrow Steves that to anyone who knew them better it was pathetically humorous. The gate agent, a naïve howdy-doer who was waiting to guide the Jetway to the 737 due to arrive any minute, neither detected nor suspected anything out of place in their hypermanly dialog.

"So I am in bed with this blonde F.A.," the pilot was relating, laying on the swagger with a spatula, "and she's on all fours, sayin', 'Do me, you bad dog!' So while I'm givin' her the bone, I'm reachin' around and squeezin' her nipples, I mean *hard*, and she starts to howlin' until she comes, and it turns into screamin'. It's one o' those airport hotels with good sound-proofin', so nobody's gonna hear.

Anyways, she says, 'I can't just keep an experience like that to myself.' So without even puttin' anythin' on, she goes out into the hall and knocks on a door where two friends o' hers are stayin', wakes 'em up, tells 'em they just *gotta* come down the hall."

"Did you pork 'em all?" Holly nudge-nudge-wink-winked.

"Oh, you bet your ass! And then came the tongue session. Blonde F.A. licks my cock and balls, redhead F.A. licks my ass, black F.A. licks my nipples, I'm just on my hands and knees eatin' it up. If I'd had any cum left in me, I'd've shot a hole right through the floor with it. Then, about 5 a.m., we order up some room service, this Latino kid straight from Latino-land brings it up, and the girls and I are still buck naked; the girls start doin' this three-way lesbo act, grabbin' fruit off the tray and eatin' it from between each other's thighs. That poor kid just stood there and watched, eyes bigger than fuckin' tennis balls. He sure didn't ask for a fuckin' tip after that!"

Holly started to make up a similar story, when he noticed that the gate agent was trying desperately to hide the bulge in his crotch that wasn't quite so bulgy a few minutes before. "It's OK, son; you can choke your chicken here if ya need to," Holly

assured him. "Ain't nobody here but us menfolk; we understand your pre-dick-ament!"

The kid grabbed the pilot's cap and held it over his bulge, making his way up the Jetway toward the nearest men's room. "Excuse me, gen'lemen," he sighed, with a Chattanooga drawl and a polite nod. Apparently the chicken had already clucked without being choked.

Laughter had to wait until the door to the Jetway door was shut. Through his guffaws, the pilot commented, "Aren't Christians a hoot?"

Holly changed that subject in a hurry. "Freddie, this is Cody. Cody Merrill, Freddie Balaguer—da guy from da Bronx I told you about."

"¿*Qué tal?*?" Cody shook his hand warmly.

"*Bien, gracias,*" Freddie looked him straight in the eye, as his father had taught him to do.

"Cody and I went out to Peachtree Center last night for dinner and a stroll, but we didn't see you."

"Christ, I haven't been there in weeks. Nowadays after work I just go home to sleep. It's all I can afford any more."

"I keep tellin' him," Holly told Cody, "he'd make more money as a male escort, but does he listen to Aunt Holly? No, sir!" He grabbed Freddie's cheeks and pinched them good and hard.

Before anyone knew it, the Miami flight was rolling up to the gate. Holly and Freddie scrambled down the stairs to park it, chock it, hook up the power and air, put the beltloaders in place, *et cetera*, while Cody waited to take his place in the cockpit.

Between offloading and onloading, Holly did a little jig in the sloshing rain, shouting, "Thank you, God, I love this job! Thank you, God, I love this job!" Freddie just sat in the aft

compartment, soaked to the skin even in his raingear, muttering all the profanities he knew in two languages.

As the rain was slackening, after Holly had finally kissed off the plane back to Miami, waving to Cody a special extra wave, he met Freddie in the break room. "He's like you, y'know," Holly said softly—and he rarely spoke softly. "He's a doubter. That could get to botherin' me after a while."

"But is he good in bed?" Freddie half-kidded.

"You act like that's important or somethin'. Yeah, he's good but...cold, mechanical."

"So you have—?"

"Yeah, we *have*! What ya want, Balaguer—details?"

"Why not? Why the fuck not?"

"Fine. You're curious, I can understand that. Well, after our stroll through Peachtree, we went back over here to my place. We spent about a half-hour just talking, kissing, listening to Kenny G—the closeness thing, which I like as much as the other part. Then, kinda like it was the next step in a computer program, he started tonguing my ear, which gets me hot every time, especially with whiskers like his. So we kept this up, slowly undressing each other. When I got totally naked, he licked me all over, as if he had to have every square inch equally attended to. He wound up licking my ass, which was still clean at that point, fortunately. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out some overpriced lube that smelled kinda like poppers, rubbed it very clinically around my anus, then on his dick—about seven inches long, if you're keeping score—poked his way in, then in kind of a marching-band rhythm, or a disco beat, 120 to the minute, he just thrust in, out, in, out, till he came a few minutes into it. Except for the licking, which seemed very sincere, he was robotic about it all. Then I—"

"That's plenty. My curiosity is more than satisfied."

"Are ya hard, like that kid upstairs?" Holly teased him.

"No, thank Gawd." But Freddie, already soaked from the rain, was now perspiring. "I don't think I could even go up Corinne's ass like that."

"I don't think a *straw* could go up her ass without a hammer behind it. But ya never know until ya try: She might decide she *likes* it in the aft compartment."

Freddie used his most penetrating Latino stare on his buddy. "Did I tell you lately, you're disgusting?"

"Freddie, darlin', in my dictionary, by the definition of disgusting, there's a picture of a vagina. Don't get me near one o' those, or I *will* puke on it. It's all a matter of taste, and if the Lord didn't give us a big variety of tastes, this planet would bore the quills off a porcupine's ass. No lie."

Toward the end of the evening shift, Freddie noticed that the last flight from New York was running two hours late, estimated to arrive at 11:22 p.m. He stayed late to unload it with a few of the old veterans. He didn't leave Airport Purgatory until nearly midnight, when, on a typical weeknight, metro-Atlantan bar-hoppers began to motor home; it was a good time to be riding a bus or a MARTA train, but Freddie had to be behind the wheel of his own tiny vehicle. Near the junction of I-85 and I-75 he got behind a rented Chevy Lumina with its lights off in the far left lane, fluctuating between 45 and 52 mph. The driver saw the sign for his downtown exit when he was just about to pass it; the Lumina swerved through four lanes and hit a New Jersey barrier just beyond the exit ramp with a stomach-turning *crunch*.

Freddie slammed his brakes and did an action-movie-style 180 right in the fast lane, finding his wits and the clutch just in time to zip across the four lanes to the right shoulder before a bank of headlights zoomed by. He nudged the Miata right behind the Lumina's rear bumper, which was bent away from the body at a 60-degree angle. Leaving the engine running, Freddie got

out, waddled as fast as his drenched clothing would allow, and arrived at the driver's door, where a middle-aged man sat bleeding from the head on his Brooks Brothers suit. He was not a happy camper.

"Fuck it! Fuck this whole fuckin' state!" It was a shout without precious little wind behind it that emerged from the bleeding man's lips. "Fuck this car, fuck this highway, fuck the sorry fuckers who built this fuckin' highway, goddammit—" He would have burst into tears if he hadn't suddenly blacked out. Freddie tore his poly-cotton workshirt off, dirty as it was, to apply pressure to the driver's head wound and slow the bleeding. He tried to wake the man up, but the effort was futile. Then, wonder of wonders, was that a mobile phone on the passenger-side floor board? *9-1-1, bay-bee.*

"9-1-1 Emergency."

"Uh, I'm on I-85 at, uh, the Stadium exit, with an unconscious one-car accident, uh, victim; he's bleedin' from the head, and his neck is stuck...got his ear on his shoulder blade."

"Thank you, sir. We'll have police, fire, and ambulance there in five minutes. Have you checked his pulse?"

"What am I, Squad 51? Hold on." He tried both wrists and listened for breathing. Pulse and respiration were slow and faint, getting slower and fainter. The blood flow from his gash had slowed as well, but not for the right reason. "This guy is dyin' on me—but I don't know from what."

"Do you know CPR, sir?"

"Uh, sort of, but I had that class five years ago."

The 911 operator guided him through the steps to help jump-start the dying man's heart, which was difficult, since Freddie had never practiced on a large, well-dressed man in the driver's seat of a mid-size sedan, and pulling him out of the car was best left to the professionals with the proper tools.

So anyone who slowed down enough to rubberneck at the scene was treated to the sight of a young man straddling an older man's lap, rhythmically pressing on the older man's chest with enormous force, his head bobbing up and down as if a slow heavy-metal anthem were serenading him on an invisible Walkman.

About the tenth time he rechecked pulse and respiration, some encouraging noises began to emanate from the man's nose and mouth: strong, irregular breaths, slow in, fast out. Either Freddie's efforts were fruitful, or the son-of-a-bitch had decided he wanted to live after all, even if it meant waking up still in Georgia. Right about then, more flashing lights than Freddie had ever seen in one place (even in the Bronx) arrived on the scene. Freddie tumbled out of the car to clear a path for the uniformed life-savers. It took 20 minutes to pack the motorist into the back of an ambulance—one of the three—which was more time than Freddie would have liked if he were trying to hang onto life by his toenails.

One of the seven wreckers hooked up the Lumina to haul it to a yard in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. The fire trucks—four? five?—just showed up for another drill. The APD officers invited Freddie to accompany them, this time to the medical center to write out a report. Freddie knocked off a two-page report in less than an hour, his adrenaline still pumping, all the images still fresh in his mind.

After a night of merely flirting with sleep, Freddie wound his way from his apartment to the medical center, walking and riding buses, since parking near the hospitals is always "a bitch from hell," to quote Corinne. Just after noon, through a series of inquiries, he found the room to which the resurrected and stabilized motorist had been transferred from ER. The older gent was conscious, but straddling the border with dreamland. Freddie checked the man's chart and admission bracelet.

"Um...hello, Mr. Rosenbaum."

Mr. Rosenbaum felt as if he had full suitcases for eyelids; they just wouldn't open. In truth, his right eye was completely covered by the bandage that held his forehead together. "Who the fuck are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm Freddie Balaguer," the lad replied, just above a whisper, the way he'd learned to speak in hospitals and funeral chapels. "I...I gave you CPR in your car."

"Balaguer? Isn't there a ballplayer by that name?"

"Think so."

"Mr. Balaguer, next time you have the opportunity to save my life, do me a favor." Long pause. "Don't."

Freddie thought of ten ways to reply to that request, all of them impolitic; he said nothing, and Mr. Myron Rosenbaum of the BaumBergBlum brokerage filled the dead air.

"I'm too much of a coward to kill myself the quick way, so I've been doing it slowly for years. I've fucked up my internal chemistry so badly, the nurse told me it's taking a triple dose of Demerol to keep my pain under control. He also told me what the cops found in the glove box of my rent-a-car, but that's the least of my worries right now. Do you know any good lawyers in this so-called city?"

Freddie just gave him a vocalized shrug, having dealt only with the lawyers in his native New York. He knew a few Tech graduates who were headed for law school, but that wouldn't do.

"I'm from outta town. New London, Connecticut."

"I go there a lot," Freddie finally broke the hospital-whisper barrier.

"Yeah? What business are you in?"

"I work for Air Grace—on the ramp."

Rosenbaum's face, the half that remained visible, twitched with the look of a boy served raw irony for breakfast. "Saving Grace, huh? A young fella from Amazing Grace saves my life when I least want it saved. That's rich. I'd like to tell you a little story about your employer, Freddie. Do you have a few minutes to spare?"

With every milligram of effort that he could expend, and with Freddie's patience and indulgence, the New London broker related first his own sad story of chemical dependency, then the story of his recent connection with Air Grace. The CEO of the airline, one Noah Hezekiah Hamilton, was trying to persuade Rosenbaum to work some Market Magic to enable the company to purchase a Boeing 777, the first such aircraft to be pressed into commercial service. The announced purpose of the plane would be to provide one-stop flights from Atlanta to Jerusalem and back. The unannounced purposes would be a tad less savory.

"I'm asking this guy, this hyper-Christian, good-looking baby-boomer CEO," Rosenbaum's tempo was increasing gradually, "why he wants to hire an old Jewish Yankee cokehead who hasn't pulled anything of this magnitude since Wall Street was a cattle trail? Hamilton says I'm exactly what he's looking for, because—get this—Hamilton is a heavy user himself! He thinks I won't tell anybody—but now I've told you, haven't I? Demerol—ain't it terrific? Acts like a truth serum on me.

"Anyway, he also wants a Jew, he says, who's less likely to tell the world that Air Grace is gonna smuggle weapons to the best-armed little country in the world, and those weapons will be distributed to a group of fanatical Ortho-Jews who will use these weapons to kill Arabs, non-Orthos, and all the mainstream politicians, to establish a new, ultra-pure Israel—all with the blessing of the White House and the money-men who pull the President's strings here." Myron swallowed hard and let the news sink in. "Do you still wanna work for Mr. Hamilton, Freddie?"

Freddie was skeptical, but not incredulous. There had been rumors in the company about Hamilton. There are always rumors about guys like him. "How do I know you're not makin' all this up, that I can believe anything you're tellin' me? I don't know you."

"All I can tell you," Myron replied, "is that it's too preposterous to be a lie. Who can really believe anything any more? The technology exists to bend facts any way we want them bent, to fabricate the other guy's misdeeds or cover up your own. The government could take the Kennedy assassination films and doctor them so that Marilyn Monroe comes back from the dead to pull the trigger—people buy it, mystery solved.

"Freddie, I have two pieces of evidence, and one has probably been destroyed by now. One is the document containing Hamilton's plans for the Triple Seven, with the signatures of the whole fuckin' board of directors, which I'm sure the cops found next to the eighth of coke in the glove box; the other is the fax of that document that I sent to my secretary in New London, which she is instructed to treat as Top Secret/Confidential, and she would take a bullet in the brain before she'd release it to anybody but me. You can't buy loyalty like that these days, and I sure as hell haven't earned it."

Nurse Leon Crabbe entered with another triple dose of Demerol. The nurse was a graying Georgia State alumnus who had been a triple letterman at his rural high school; barred from playing football at the segregated University of Georgia in the 1960s, he had said that he would not play anywhere else, and soon found himself approaching nursing, of all things, the way that Ty Cobb had approached baseball. "Myron, if you don't get a little sleep now, we gwyne hafta knock you upside yo head!"

"Don't give me that country nigger dialect, Leon; you're an educated man, so talk like one. This guy on the chair is Freddie Belanger—uh, Balaguer. He punched me back to life after the wreck." Gracious even under duress and pain killers—that was Myron Rosenbaum. "Freddie, you go home or to work now, and do some hard thinkin' about—ow! Leon that fuckin'

hurt!—about you-know-what." Myron's face lost all traces of tension; he nodded out.

"I wouldn't get too familiar wit' this fella," Nurse Crabbe whispered. "He seems like a nice enough ol' Yankee, but he ain't livin' right."

Freddie ran some equations through his engineer brain. Did this New Londonite, who seemed to be indulging heavily in the kind of coke for which Atlanta is not as well renowned, know or run with the cocaine/Harley crowd back in Connecticut—and, by extension, Cherise McCray? Would that hypothetical acquaintanceship have any repercussions, real or imagined, besides being just plain bizarre? The possibilities made his mind rotate like a well-thrown Frisbee, and he wondered if there were a hospital bed nearby for him to fall into for a quick nap.

"He's coming! He's coming to Norfolk!"

Paige Travertino was tickled to death, as they say in corners of the South. She got the word of Wilf Adamante's impending visit to the Hampton Roads area via the Academia Net, an electronic bulletin board system with hundreds of subscribers, all of whom were tenured at major and minor colleges and universities across North America. Her user-ID on the net was **vdchan**, and even though it was her husband who had insisted on subscribing, had insisted on buying the modem and software *ab initio*, she accounted for the majority of the online time at the Travertino households.

"Actually, he'll be appearing in Newport News." She tried banking the message off the Sunday Washington *Post* and into Nick's ears. Nick probably wouldn't give a flying wallenda about this hippie scrivener and his travelling feel-good show. Nick had troubles of his own:

For five years Dr. Nicholas Travertino had not only done zero research, he could not even find a satisfactory subsubtopic on which to write a satisfactory article. Oh, he was tracking state and local figures, providing predictions and trendoid analyses for the podunk media like a good econodrone, but the groundbreaking, prize-winning materials had all been sucked up by other tenured lampreys before he could crack a single *Acta Economica* index. It had embittered him enough that he wrote scathing critiques of work by professors whom he had always admired. On top of all that, Paige's lunacy had diminished his own credibility as it had hers. *Lunacy by association*, someone had called it.

Nick switched to the business section of the *Post* to check on his mutual funds, sneaking in a sardonic "That's nice, dear." As in, "I'm listening, but you know I'd rather be listening to a concerto for oboe and jackhammer."

"You know, I'm crazy about that old stuff—I mean, Adamante's a fascinating character himself. He made time to crank out some very surreal stuff between protest marches."

"I already saw that message on the Net, Paige. It's not for the academic crowd; it's for the workers."

"But I'd like to contact him and invite him down to the Outer Banks. He wrote a story about the Wright Brothers, I recall, that included the Outer Banks magic—and now that I think about it, Hank Truber was in that story, too. If we hadn't seen Hank at the tour seminar last month, I wouldn't have remembered—"

"Paige, go channel something. I'm trying to figure out a strategy for our investments, so that *just maybe* we'll have something for our retirement. You know, as long as our academic reputations are taking a piss-bath, you ought to think about helping out with the finances. You really ought to consider turning your 'talent' into something a little more lucrative."

"Nick, for all I care, you can wipe your ass with those mutual funds. You know I could never do this for anything but scientific interest. Didn't my royalties from the last book provide the capital for you to squander on those mutuals?"

"No, they allowed me to pay off the bloodsuckers that financed the so-called furnishings in that overgrown bungalow you insisted on buying in Myrtle Beach, so that we could save enough each month to invest a little in some bonds—which, by the way, are doing pretty well—and roll over the interest into the mutuals that your no-good nephew wrote the prospectus for."

"Shane is not a no-good nephew, ya putz! He worked his way through Wake Forest, and he volunteered to help us move into *this* place."

"He's with a bum firm with the ethics of a Komodo dragon—and since when do you use words like 'putz'?"

"It just popped into my mind."

They didn't really dislike each other, the Doctors Travertino. They stayed together, one might say, for the sake of argument. They enjoyed arguing immensely, admiring each other's prowess in all the fine points: logic, verbal expression, control of pitch and tempo, even hand gestures. Occasionally they would argue at a party and frighten any guests who didn't know their reputation for disputatiousness.

Nick let Paige's last line hang in the air, and with an incredulous glance went back to his strategy session with the *Post* business section. Paige stomped back to the computer to send an electronic message to a friend/colleague at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

To: milliken@phy.rpi.edu

Hey, Dot.

I want you to do me a huge favor. Go to see Wilf Adamante on the 13th in Schenectady, if you weren't already planning to do so, and send along a summary/review. Especially include any odd or novel ideas he may present. Mostly I want to know what to expect when he appears in Newport News. Now here's the huge favor part: Slip him an invitation to bring his busload to our beachhouse for some experimental, metaphysical fun. If he seeks me out, I'll know he's interested; if not, I'll understand he has a busy schedule.

Truth to tell, Dotty, there's still a 20-year-old revolutionary somewhere inside this expanded bod o' mine. She's really, truly awake for the first time since the Carter years, anticipating a reawakening of the Aquarian sensibility we used to think was the only way to save the world. Used to? Hell, I still believe it, but with a pragmatism that comes with age.

One great thing about e-mail: It lends itself to rambling, n'est-ce pas? I could go on for paragraphs and paragraphs, but I'll restrain myself, just as I restrain myself from using those annoying acronyms of which Netheads are so fond. Ciao for now.

:-) vdchan

Dorothy Milliken, Ph.D., was only too happy to accommodate her friend and colleague whom she had met at Johns Hopkins (where radicalism had mostly been an experimental phenomenon limited to bed racing and the occasional pot party in the Woolly Bully '60s). But Dotty made the mistake of enlisting the company of her husband Bill, a dyed-in-the-Will conservative who would insist to his grave and beyond that President Nixon had committed no impeachable offense, that Nixon's actions were aimed at defending the Constitution from a great internal threat. To wit, to ensure the re-election and check the influence of the dope-smoking, flag-burning, unsanitary, Commie-loving teenage rabble, who would destroy the nation through George McGovern and friends, Nixon had had to cheat in order to follow his Presidential Oath.

How did the Millikens ever get hooked up in the first place? It happened at a very unofficial fraternity pot party at the University of Maryland. Yes, Bill had once been a fledgeling SDS member and recreational dooper himself. People change. People who get jobs in the financial sector may change drastically. How many vice-presidents of banks do you know who still participate in protest marches?

Bill Milliken had a tremendously annoying habit or two. One was deliberately walking through non-smoking sections of restaurants with a lit cigar which he would wave around to offend as many patrons as possible. The other was recording his favorite afternoon radio call-in program, *The Reed Bamberger Show*, on his VCR so that he could play it back, commercials included, after dinner while fine-tooth-combing the *Journal*, *Barron's*, and other capitalist piggie publications. At least he was considerate enough to listen via headphones when Dotty was home, but then, that limited the possibility of any serious communication between them until right about bedtime.

On the 13th of July a veritable throng of Hudson Valley worker-bees DID NOT show up at the Railroad and Canal Workers United Local 693 to see the man who would save them from their oppressors (and possibly from themselves). Altogether there were 37 in attendance, most of them academics and retired people hungry for some intellectual stimulation. Poughkeepsie the previous night had been virtually the same scene: a bit of a let down after the orgasmic pyrotechnic display that had served as a launching pad for Wilf's tour. The good news was that the book *Self, Incorporated* was selling respectably and had garnered guarded praise from the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*.

This night of the 13th, without really knowing it, Bill Milliken would throw the switch that put the Adamante Limited on the Express Line to nationwide controversy. Bill carried a copy of Reed Bamberger's bestselling *Reed Between the Lines* to the event, which he kept raising and brandishing like Red Guards

with Mao's Little Red Book during the Cultural Revolution. Bill never spoke during Wilf's speech, just let Reed's stern, ruddy, Celtic face on the jacket express his disapproval. Bill asked no questions after the speech, much as he wanted to see if he could trap Wilf in a rhetorical box of his own making.

However, on Tuesday the 14th, Bill placed a call from his office to the Berger Line in Midtown Manhattan (212-CONSERV), dutifully charging the call to his home number. As usual, Chuck from Fort Wayne and Louise from Park City and Dick from Gulfport and their 10,000 closest friends were all bellying up to the soapbox to echo Reed's party line in their own fashions with varying degrees of articulacy, so Bill from Rensselaer could not break through to the air chain. Plan B: Send Reed a fax detailing what had transpired in Schenectady Monday night.

By Wednesday Reed was orating to his minions in his signature style, popping most of his voiceless stops, as well as some of the voiced consonants, filling offices and parlors with a voice that dripped with untethered ego.

"I have a faxed letter from...Bill Milliken of Rensselaer, New York...stating that he atTendeD...a Kind of leCture in nearby SchenecTady Monday night, featuring none other than Counter-Cultural iCon Wilf...Adamante. Now at this Point...a lotta upstanding middle-Americans are asking... 'Who the heCK is this Wilf guy?' Well, he's the PerPetrator of such...heart-warming Tales as 'Talk to Your YoGurt' and 'The Urinary TraCT of the Squirrel that Turns the Wheels of InjusTice'...also known for voicing his opPosition to U.S. involvement in IndoChina back in the Psycho Psixties...but now he seems to have a new mission in life...having emerged from his Lower Manhattan hidey-hole, he now wants to eduCaTe...working-class folk in ways to enrich their lives, I Guess, so thaT PerhaPs their Kids won't grow up to beCome working-Class and welfare-Class shlubs like themselves.

"Now just the premise of his mission is insultIng: What's so bad about being working-class? That's what I wanna know.

He's already maKIng these people feel bad about themselves and their position in life. Well, what else? Wilf says, 'Read some good books to your kids,' whatever *thaT* means; 'Put more emphasis on eduCaTIng yourself and your children; learning should never sToP. TaKe Pride in your worK...' Now all this sounds Perfectly harmless so far, But he Goes on to say, 'Demand more from your emPloyer, from your GovernmenT, from your insTiTuTions...' How much more...I ask you, how much more can these emPloyers, GovernmenT agencies, and insTiTuTions proviDe?? Companies are going BanKruPT...Uncle Sam is in debT, to the tune of four TrillIllion buCKs—that's a 4 with 12 zeroes after it—sChools, churches and charities are sTrrrrretched to the BreAKIng Point....

"But where the man crosses the Liberal Lunacy Line is his reCommendation—and I Quote: 'As a lasT resort, AmeriCa's downtrodden masses could organize a WorKers' Army and rise uP...against...the system that opPresses them.'

"Ladies and Gentlemen...Mister Adamante is fomenting an armed insurrection againsT...that which we Americans have sPent just over Two cenTuries Creating, the...most Powerful and ProsPerous DemoCracy on the Planet. So if any of the...millions of good worKing People who Tune in to The Reed Bamberger Show...if any of you are enterTaining any notions of aCTually aTTending one of these...Performances...Don't Take any ProTest PlaCards, 'cause you'll just look like one of the hippie/liberal crowd...my advice would Be to ask some good, hard, Questions—or just ignore him and maybe he'll go away. Just...mentioning the man's name on the air has Probably given him too much free Publicity already. We'll be back after these messages with more Bamberger on the Supreme Radio Network."

Reed's diatribe reached the ears of Wilf's traveling circus as the bus neared the next industrial has-been city of Waterbury, Connecticut. Good thing for Wilf that he actually heard Bamberger's rant in real time, that Trudy Markowicz had insisted on listening to the show, for it would make responding

to the accusations on several TV soundbite and interview programs (which at that moment were falling all over their phones to track down Wilf and dispatch the microwave trucks) that much easier. Trudy listened to Reed whenever she could, not because she enjoyed the show, but to remind herself of how detestable she found the Bamberger phenomenon.

Wilf's modesty, the product of so many years in the cult-figure bins of book stores, prevented him from even imagining that CNN would want him dressed for the cameras at 7:00 the next morning, when he fully intended to be in his robe for morning meditation. So at 7:00 Thursday morning Wilf stood outside the Dharma Bus in a pair of black Khmer Rouge-style pajamas borrowed from Turpentine Taft—who was a good four inches taller than Wilf but not as tall as Alf Spitzenberg—and his roshi robe. Wilf spent the first few minutes of the interview set-up just staring at all the high-tech gadgets that were poised to broadcast his morning musings all over the cable-ready world.

The hard-edged anchorwoman in Atlanta, who had clearly been mainlining coffee since 3:00, had a voice that nipped like the chilly Berkshire breeze that the Naugatuck Valley felt that morning. Wilf could not see her face on the monitor, but he imagined her to be pointy from tresses to toes. He had no idea who she was, since he had watched the Cable News Network maybe three times in his life, and not at all during Operation Desert Storm the previous year.

"Mr. Adamante, good morning!" he heard in his earpiece.

"Good morning, uh, Kate."

"Could you tell us a bit about your unusual book tour, please."

He proceeded to plug the book, the publisher, and locations of the stops on the tour, and then gave a summary of the purposes of his tour.

Kate, the cynical media pro, was not impressed. "That's all very admirable, Mr. Adamante; however, I gather that Monday

night in Schenectady you came out in favor of armed insurrection against the corporate/government establishment."

"I presume your source for that is Reed Limberger? He talks pretty loud for a man with his head between his fluffy, white buns. I never said 'armed' and I never said 'insurrection'—just wanted to remind the people what the Declaration of Independence says about a people's duty to dissolve the chains that bind them, by force if necessary. And there are lots of *forces* that have nothing to do with guns."

"Do you carry a weapon?"

"No, I'm proud to admit that I'm scared witless of guns, and that was my main motivation for opposing the Vietnam Conflict and the draft: Namely, I fear anything that goes *bang* or *boom* louder than a bass drum."

"Then why do you—"

"Kate, I don't know what history books you and Reed have read, but there's a long tradition in this country of workers standing up to take back what is rightfully theirs. They usually operated unarmed, but they were beaten and killed in great numbers by cops or private security agents. If the workers of today can find the same courage to—"

"Thank you, Wilf Adamante, author of *Self, Incorporated*. When we return, we'll examine the latest efforts to combat Lyme Disease—right after this."

Atlanta severed the connection, having already heard more than it wanted to hear, and having made Wilf look like a fanatic with no sense of the time constraints of network television—a fanatic who didn't have the good sense to be in a business suit by 7 a.m.

People all over Western Connecticut who had any curiosity about what Wilf had and hadn't said canceled their Thursday evening business and swarmed to an old foundry's fellowship

hall. The labor crowd was virtually unrepresented, since Greater Waterbury was a Veterans of Foreign Wars/International Brotherhood of Teamsters kind of place, where the stiff, blue collar rubbed the regional neck bright red. Local TV cameras showed up ahead of time to set up, in case anything newsworthy should happen, like an armed insurrection. Wilf went out of his way to say nothing that could be turned into a juicy soundbite, preparing to be surprised at what the media *could* turn into a juicy soundbite.

The speech began, "If I continue to use this script, I'll continue to be misinterpreted, so let me distill the message of the book to its essentials." Wilf wadded the script and tossed it toward the local ABC affiliate's crew. "In the recent past, working-class kids got handed a shitty education, good only for puttin' minimal minds in healthy bodies on the assembly lines. Those factory jobs were plentiful and bountiful—you could live on those wages as my family did. But it took a hundred years to make working conditions humane and wages reasonable, and the factory owners didn't make those changes out of sheer generosity. It took the commitment of workers willing to struggle, even die, to achieve those changes.

"Now those jobs have been exported out of the mighty Northeast to the South, then to Latin America, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe. Karl Marx was right about that, if nothing else: Jobs migrate to the lowest bidder, which is why Marx insisted on a *worldwide* revolution, which may yet happen but can be avoided.

"Meanwhile, the blue-collar and no-collar citizens of this nation have to kick themselves in the butt ASAP to acquire more marketable skills for the 21st century's economy. How can they do that? It's not easy to go to classes at some technical institute when you've got a family to care for and tuition eats up the milk money. One way they can start, though, is to shift their attention away from cigarettes, alcohol, and TV sports, toward educating themselves and their children—continuously. If our ancestors could work fourteen hours a day in factories, mines,

shipyards, we can spend time reading with our kids. Neglecting your kids' intellectual life, especially in early childhood, should be considered a form of abuse, since it robs them of innumerable possible futures.

"To develop our workforce to its full potential, we need the cooperation of employers, government, school, churches, and other institutions all working toward that shared goal. Employers focus too much on profits, government on fighting so-called communists, schools on justifying their funding to the taxpayers, churches on attracting tithing parishioners. If people cannot get what they need from their institutions, then they should go on strike, refuse to pay taxes, take their kids out of the school, take their own asses out of the pews—whatever it takes, whatever is necessary to bring about change *without violence*. And it should be an organized effort by people willing to risk going to jail in large numbers, not just two or three kooks like me. We haven't had democracy in action on such a scale since the 1960s, and I miss it. I miss it terribly. But then, the '60s youth wasn't exactly a majority of the population. The working-class and welfare-class population do constitute a majority, and if their voice is not heard because they're too lazy or ignorant to speak out, well, that has to change."

When Wilf finished with 20 minutes of explication, there was a silent concord in the un-air-conditioned fellowship hall. Everyone there could agree that all had forgotten to be discomfited by the stuffiness of the room, because a New York writer with a molasses-sweet voice, mesmerizing eyes, and a cheap haircut was making more sense than all the Presidential candidates of 1992 rolled together—and he wasn't even running for public office.

When asked about his political ambitions, Wilf replied cautiously, "No one who *admits* to being a pot-smoking, draft-dodging womanizer these days is a viable candidate for any important office. My record speaks for itself. Besides, candidates are very limited as to what they can say—and I'm not used to having anyone, let alone some money men, stifle

my freedom of expression. Politicians don't want to risk offending anybody; I want to offend some people who *richly* deserve it.

"Now go forth and deluge your newspapers with letters to the editor explaining what I *really* said. Nothing about invading people's houses, stealing their silver and slitting their throats in the middle of the night just because your boss doesn't pay for health insurance. When enough people start demanding that government pay attention to their basic needs, then any political party that wants votes will have to respond. Additionally, get people in your neighborhood to vote when the time comes. No state in which fewer than half the eligible voters vote deserves democracy. Thank you for coming."

Later, in Andi's room at the Waterbury Sheraton (did you really think they'd sleep on the bus?) Alf Spitzenberg was ecstatic. The papers, the networks, and Reed Bamberger were ignoring the Plaid Flamingo road show in their own special way, by mentioning that certain politicians were belittling Wilf with their steak-knife wit, translating into more free publicity than Alf ever anticipated. Alf foresaw increased sales of the new book, probably of the old titles as well, possibly of other authors' works from the Flamingo Corral, and conceivable increased interest in buying his company—a bidding war! Yes! Paramount *and* Time-Warner *and* Disney all competing for the plumpest publishing plum in Patchland!

But Wilf, whose eye had never been hung out on the bottom line, was more concerned about being misinterpreted, especially by Reed Bamberger and his Reedheads all across the AM nation. "Maybe I've been in my cave too long, Spitz, but the depth of the ignorance out here in the real world has grown to scary proportions. I can't believe that Bamberger gets the ratings he gets."

"Wilf, babe, all you have to do is peek at the bestseller lists—remember the bestseller lists? Once in a while, just take a glance at 'em, and then you'll discover how deep the bullshit runs, and how shallow America's tastes are."

Andi, who was finally finished examining all the neat stuff to which guests at the Waterbury Sheraton are entitled, joined the discussion. "Ignorance? Let a public school teacher give you a good sense of it. When I was in school, at least the parents had some common sense and knew how to use commas. Now I got students who don't know jack cheese about anything except football and gangsta' rap, and their parents make a mud puddle look like Einstein. All ya need is someone like Reed to come along, and suddenly the poorest white welfare mom thinks she oppressed by minorities and queers—'cause Reed puts ideas where there didn't used to be none."

"Thank God all the minorities and queers I know are too smart to swallow what he slings," Alf observed.

A gentle shave-and-a-haircut struck on Andi's door. The voice beyond the door sang out, "Room service!"

"Yea!" Andi yelped. "I thought I'd *never* get serviced in this joint." Andi opened the door and found Cindy Lou in her slate grey rayon pajamas, holding a jereboam of some obscure champagne and some cups. "What's the occasion, Hu?"

"Wilf didn't tell you? In about an hour and fifteen minutes he'll be exactly 47 years old."

"No way!"

"Way! But aside from that—" she put the bottle down on the octagonal table, "—ooh! That shit's heavy!—aside from that, I think I've officially gotten over myself, and I can forgive the old hippie for being such a turd and breaking up the Collective without giving two weeks' notice; Happy Birthday, you pudgy thing!" She stood on her toes, reached under his belt to squeeze both his buns, and gave him a long, deep-tongued kiss. "Now let's go out on the balcony and pop your cork."

Wilf took the huge bottle out to the fourth-floor balcony, where suddenly traffic noise from I-84 reminded them all quite audibly that the world continued to turn. As Wilf fumbled with the

wrapping, Cindy Lou unwrapped *his* jereboam, dropped to her knees, and began licking and stroking. He managed to launch the cork half-way across the parking lot before he was even fully erect, then began pouring the bubbly slowly onto his pointy member for Cindy Lou to slurp as she worked her lingual magic.

Alf, accustomed to this kind of decadence, just smiled and cooed, "Save some for me—champagne, that is." Andi stood, gawking, enduring pangs of jealousy that made her castigate herself for having such foolish feelings. The most decorous response to this tableau, she guessed, would be to join Cindy in a mouth-organ duet, but she'd never been a fan of fellatio, spectating or participating. So Andi strode into the bathroom, started the shower, removed her sundress and undies, and commenced cleaning. The image of Wilf's willie, which by this time was ready to spew over the side of the balcony, stuck in her mind, and the small bar of deodorant soap in her right hand lingered over her clitoris like a tourist at the Eiffel Tower. Round and round it went, back and forth, faster, faster—she barely noticed that two tongues were caressing her nipples, but her sub-conscious perceived what her closed eyes did not: Cindy and Wilf, having finished the balcony blow, had run back in to join her. (Alf, meanwhile had let himself out and headed back to his and Tater's room to field phone calls and formulate strategies.)

Licksuckstrokelicksuckstrokelicksuckstroke—Andi lost all sense of where her feet met the plastic floor of the tub, all sense of verticality, like a novice astronaut in orbit for the first time. She had to sit down as she huffed and moaned for five liquid minutes, dropping the soap and continuing with just her fingers, letting her showermates have some lathery fun.

Over the next few hours, Andi experienced her two experienced friends on the king-size bed, on the carpet, on the octagonal table. If anyone were to ask her to catalog which of their body parts had spent time in what others, or who drank how much champagne from what vessels, she would never be

able to compile the complete list. Suffice it to say, then, that three bodies and a lot of bubbles were united into a wet, sticky, pink and beige lump of chaos. The interjection *WOW* only began to describe Andi's amazement that she was participating in acts about which she had only read with a flashlight under the covers years before. For those few hours, she was not 20-something, they were not 40-something; all three were perpendicular to the time line.

Andi awoke on the bus, stark raving nude, hung over but grinning, as the bus pulled into a hotel parking lot in East Haven. Wilf and Cindy had actually carried her down to the bus under a blanket that morning. She reached up and tugged the tail of a sport jacket which happened to contain Wilf, and croaked, "Hey, is it my turn to be on CNN this morning? Just have 'em bring the camera onto the bus. I'm ready."

"Holly, god-damn, if there's one person on the line I can talk to about this, it's you, babe."

Freddie's thumb nervously shifted up and down the side of the receiver as he paced the modest perimeter of his cluttered living area. He had never called a co-worker from Air Grace on the phone for any reason, business or pleasure; once he left the airport for the night, by his own policy his work environment temporarily ceased to exist, like a file removed from the desktop of a PC and redeposited in its cyber-folder.

"Whatsamatta, Federico? Can't get it up?"

"Fuckin' Jesus, man, it's always about sex with you! One-track mind into a fuckin' fudge tunnel!"

"All right, I'll be serious for as long as I can stand it. What's the scoop?"

Holly's left ear was treated to the highly improbable story of Freddie's serendipitous encounter with Myron Rosenbaum.

When he decided that he couldn't believe that anyone would call him at 9:06 a.m. to tell him such a story, he switched to his right ear to hear how the CEO of Air Grace wanted to expand into the international arms business. The two parts of the story met in the middle and collided at high speed; Holly had difficulty making sense of it all and finding the right response, any response more sophisticated and witty than a prolonged groan. Even then he doubted whether anyone could reason out the whole scenario. It helped that he'd declared life not just unfair, but unreasonable, as early as junior high school.

"I got a few questions," Holly winced while scratching first his scalp, then his crotch. "Where do these alleged weapons come from, and why the fuck would he want to do this? Also, if he makes money on this, will he increase our pay?"

"I've only got a theory about the *why*. Don't know about the rest. If Hamilton is doing it for money, which I doubt, it's not a real Christian thing to do. If he's caught, not only does he lose the reins of this beautiful airline he's helped build, but his whole image goes down the toilet faster than you can say 'Jimmy Swaggart.' If my point of view is worth a shit, I'd say the mo-fo has a Jesus complex."

Holly chuckled through his nose. "Oh, you've just figured that out? Listen, I've never met the guy in person, but everyone I know who *has* met him says that Hamilton wants to pull loaves and fishes out of his ass. And everyone else's ass. I always suspected that he hired misfits to hire other misfits so he could have a troop of reprobates like the ones Jesus hung out with—all so he could be more like the Messiah."

Freddie processed Holly's notions for five silent seconds. "Are you saying that being a lapsed Catholic Porto-Rickian makes me a misfit-slash-reprobate?"

"In the eyes of Hamilton and half the tight-assed Atlanta Baptist establishment, yeah."

Grace had its share of recovering alcoholics and dopers among the ramp crews, a few notoriously promiscuous flight attendants and gate agents; the line had recently hired more "out" homosexuals to supplement Holly and his pilot friend Cody. Did this all transpire just to feed the Messianic ego of Hezekiah Hamilton and make the airline look more politically correct to outsiders and critics? If Freddie could believe his own theory about the 777 and the Jerusalem-bound guns, he could believe Holly's theory about the company's human resources department's practices and motives.

"Well, I'd love to meet the guy," Freddie announced. "I'll figure out a way to get into his office and have a deep, meaningful conversation. Buy him lunch, maybe. I'm curious now—don't know why, but I'm curious as hell."

"I think you *do* know why. If Hamilton thinks he's Jesus, he probably is lookin' for a kingdom. This li'l ol' airline ain't enough for him. He'll never be king of Israel, God/Nose, but maybe he'll find enough loyal Jews like your stockbroker friend to be his disciples and start a new movement. This time, there's no Roman Empire to get in his way. You, Fred, you wanna be the superhero that stops ol' Jesus o' Norcross from puttin' his Second Comin' Act on the road—y'know, make America safe for agnosticism and freedom of thought—go ahead."

"I'm no fuckin' superhero, and as far as we're concerned, there's nothin' to stop. I just wanna...investigate. Is that cool wit' you?"

Holly chuckled some more. "If it were me, Fred, I'd leave that kind o' investigation to the professionals, or else let Hamilton crash and burn in his own arrogance."

That remark pressed a button that Freddie didn't know he had. "That's just the problem wit' our whole fuckin' society, man! The do-it-yourself ethic is gone, Holly, *gone*. Nobody can be bothered to do any extracurricular work like fix their cars, cut their kids' hair, teach kids about the world—they let a fuckin' dinosaur educate and entertain their kids. Nobody sings,

dances, plays baseball, 'cause they can watch the pros do all that on TV. Nobody wants to be in politics, 'cause that's only for the politicians to mess around in. I'm twenty-two, and I'm disgusted with this society, prob'ly 'cause I caught a few bad breaks recently, but I wanna do somethin' wit' my life, unlike most people in this fucked-up country."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck Freddie. It's always about sex with you!"

Freddie took a few days to put all the pieces of his plan together. The objective would be to meet in a small group with Hamilton himself. The date of the meeting was unimportant. Freddie would exercise tremendous patience, curiosity be damned. The pretense of the meeting would be to compliment Hamilton on his foresight in selecting the bock-beer malt and hops of society to work in a pro-Christian environment so that they could come to know the love of a merciful God who always provides fresh wings for his fallen angels; then to bring up issues of concern to the customer service agents—who lacked union representation and any effective line of communication with headquarters—using (if necessary) the threat to run to the press with stories of an airline unresponsive to the workers' safety concerns blah, blah, blah. Toward the end of the meeting, Freddie would bring up the 777, which was supposed to be heap-big hush-hush, and watch Hamilton's reaction and see how much the CEO was ready to admit, how much he might be willing to pay Freddie to keep the powerful knowledge under his New York Mets cap.