# VOLUME I: A Proposal for Progress, in White

## Section I: The Patrimony of Our U.S. Governmental System

### A. Introduction

Two of the founding fathers of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, share the well-earned reputation of being models of passion and courage who did their utmost to propel the country further along the path of Progress. They were both political architects who, by sheer force of genius and will, mined and refined the raw materials of statesmanship and helped lay the cornerstone of this republic. But, although both are rightly considered to be among the greatest of statesmen, their visions of the nascent country's future could scarcely have been more different.

On the one hand, Jefferson believed in the virtues of the agrarian state, and that an adherence to an economy catering to capitalistic industry would seriously threaten the principles of democracy. His utopian America as a nation of small, interconnected but self-sufficient units of governance comprised of good-hearted and hardworking intelligent individuals was, and still is, a powerful cultural force promoting democratic virtues. To him, anything that worked to advance an individual's freedom and civil liberties was something to be encouraged. Conversely, anything that didn't serve to contribute to this goal should be discouraged.

Hamilton, on the other hand, could be described as a leader of the leaders of his party rather than of the general populace and the common man. In order to mitigate what he construed to be the negative effects of a "mobocracy," he proposed a centralized, or federal, system of government that exerts great power over the separate states and municipalities and, thus, individuals.

Also in Hamilton's opinion, man is inherently greedy, and each individual is driven by the need to maximize his own wealth by any and all means necessary, even at the expense of others. Upon such pessimistic reasoning, he wished to establish a

nationally administered economy founded upon investment, manufacturing and ever-expanding commerce, all of which was to be bolstered by a publicly funded debt. Although Jefferson's ideals had great influence in America's first one hundred and fifty some odd years of existence (up to the Civil War), needless to say it is Hamilton's ideology that is most directly tied to our country's current wealth - as well as its illth.

In this, the first of the two sections comprising this essay, I will strive to fully explain the concept of federalism as well as to contrast Hamilton's and Jefferson's visions of America's future. By elucidating the point that our current federalized system of governance was not preordained, but arrived at with a tremendous amount of uncertainty, debate and out-and-out acrimony, I intend to open my argument for instituting a regional system of governance.

Upon completing this task, this essay proceeds to propose that, based on the principles of correspondence and subsidiarity, a regional system of governance might be able to improve the dissemination and consumption of public goods and services than either of the existing levels of government. Also based on these two principles, regionalism also might very well be able to deal with the negative externalities of economic development in a manner more efficient than our contemporary governmental form. After outlining the theoretical role regionalism can play, this section concludes by suggesting that this system of governance is a logical compromise between the ideologies of Jefferson and Hamilton.

Although many arguments will be raised for and against this proposal, such controversy is part and parcel of the American experience, as evidenced by the Jefferson-Hamilton impasse. A compromise can, and must, be attained if our country is to truly Progress in every sense of that word.

## B. Federalism - What is it?

Federalism, which is said to be the "central characteristic of the American political system,"[1] is an arrangement of governmental structures and a mode of political activity that requires the extension of certain kinds of cooperative relationships throughout the political system in which it is inculcated. In the strict sense of the word, federalism describes the relationship between the national government and state governments rather than between the national government and distinct regions or individuals. A federation refers to the process by which a number of historically separate states unite to form one common state. The term also refers to the new political relationship thus established. [2]

In entering into a federation, the former independent, or sovereign, states surrender only specifically agreed upon parts of their governmental attributes to the central government while continuing to exercise their remaining powers as before. Thus, at least theoretically, local autonomy is reconciled with national strength. Just one example of this process should suffice. Eleven years after the colonies achieved their independence from Britain in 1776 the thirteen states then in existence surrendered their sovereignty to the foundling United States of America when they drafted the new Federal Constitution, thereby forming a federal state.

While the federal state is often contrasted with a unitary state, in which the regional or political units lack autonomy,[3] the former may sometimes be a stage in the growth of the latter. However, as Greaves observed, it also might be very well true that a unitary state is a stage in the evolution of a federal state, since that is what has historically occurred.

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[1] Daniel J. Elazar, American Federalism: A View From the States (3rd edition; New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984) 2.

[2] "Federalism," Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed., 1999.
"Federalism," The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd ed., 1990.
"Federalism," Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed., 1999.
Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, The Federalist Papers, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961).

There is one main distinction between the federal and unitary state. While the former allows the states to retain a certain amount power beyond its federal jurisdiction, a unitary state delegates power as an expedient for regional control and the administration of regional problems.[4] Another form of government is the confederation, which is a loose form of union into which political communities enter in order to form one state. These individual communities retain the largest possible measure of sovereignty, and the resulting nation only acts through the governments of the component states.

In a federation, the authority of the central government comes from the same source as that of the other levels of government - that is, ostensibly directly from the people. Furthermore, the central government is supposed to operate on the will, desires and needs of the citizens within its sphere of authority just as the states and municipalities (the U.S.' most obvious and prevalent sub-state level of government) are supposed to do within their respective spheres. This is termed the principle of correspondence and, as with most every other governmental system, the three predominant levels of government in the U.S. federal model target needs and then provide different types of services and functions due to some non-quantifiable combination of logic, history and tradition.[5]

Two basic examples of target effectiveness are street repairs and national defense. In theory, the benefits of street repair don't spill outside of the municipal or state jurisdiction, so it is logical for that municipality or state to pay for the repairs.[6] National defense (and such things as the provision of Social Security), on the other hand, is considered to be a federal responsibility because the externalities are not limited in scope to a specific state or municipality.

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[3] Although in practice they may have wide powers delegated to them.
[4] H. R. G. Greaves, Federal Union in Practice (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1940) 10.
[5] John Mikesell, Fiscal Administration: Analysis and Applications for the Public Sector (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999) 503-504.
[6] Below, we will see that this does not always hold true, which is one reason why a regional system might be more responsive and sensible than a federal system containing both municipalities and states.

Making the spillover area and the governmental unit's sphere coincide concentrates government attention on matters that further the public's general welfare. It also helps to mitigate the problems that occur when beneficiaries in one sphere, such as corporations, do not pay for negative externalities, like pollution, spilling over into neighboring spheres as a result of their actions.[7] However, the lines separating the spheres in the U.S. context have been blurred because of funding flows, in that federal money can now be used for more localized responses, allowing for more local discretion in the process. And local discretion that encompasses the *appropriate* sized sphere (either larger or smaller, depending upon the situation) should always be encouraged, no matter the situation.

Another principle that explains why different levels of government provide different types of services is subsidiarity. This essentially states that governmental responsibility for a function should be at the level of government that can deliver the function most effectively. It can serve to not only bring devolution of responsibility to lower levels of government (from, say, the federal to a regional level), but it also can evolve responsibility to a more appropriate level of government, too (from the municipality to the region). Below it will be argued that, in order to improve responsiveness to the populace within its sphere and mitigate the spillover effects of growth in a manner more comprehensive than the federal, state, or municipal levels of government, another system of sub-national or supra-municipal regional government needs to be formulated.

Also by following the principle of subsidiarity, a government can, in theory, increase efficiency by reducing costs and risks while increasing its ability to achieve sustainable economic development goals rather than those that polarize communities. In other words, the entire populace will benefit, and not just a select few. In Section II of this essay we will discuss in more detail how these goals can be better decided

[7] Mikesell 503.

by creating a regional system of government and then insinuating a more comprehensive evaluation of the economic development strategic process.[8]

One of the guiding principles of the U.S. federal state system is stated in the Tenth Amendment, which reads as follows: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states, or to the people."[9] In other words, the central government has only the powers expressly given to it while the states and municipalities - and the citizenry they represent -retain residual powers. There's obviously a lot of structural leeway in that wording.

As we will see next, the creation and institution of the U.S.' federal system of government was not without acrimony, and certainly its adoption was not some preordained conclusion as an inevitable effect of Progress.

## C. Hamilton, the Federalists, and the Constitution

After the Revolutionary War concluded in 1776, Alexander Hamilton, who described himself as a "Federalist," was a member of the Continental Congress (November 1782 to August 1783) and the Constitutional Convention, which was held in Philadelphia in 1787 in order to revise the Articles of Confederation. From an early date he saw what he considered to be an imperative need for a stronger central government and a powerful, centralized national banking system. Today, his influence in this regard is still unmistakably felt, not only in our daily lives but also through a series of essays he wrote along with James Madison and John Jay.

Appearing in *The Independent Journal of New York* between 27 October 1787 and 2 April 1788, these eighty-five essays had a wide circulation. And they were written in support of the adoption of the Federal Constitution they were proposing and against those whom they termed "Antifederalists," including first and foremost

[8] Mikesell 504-505.
[9] FindLaw. *U.S. Constitution: Tenth Amendment*. The Metacrawler search engine. http://caselaw.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment10/ 30 April 2002.

Thomas Jefferson, who wished to limit the powers and role of the central government. Later collected as The Federalist, these essays were the chief instrument in persuading the individual states of the federal concept, and are widely considered to be a brilliant and searching exposition of the Constitution up to this day.

Hamilton and his fellow Federalists stood for centralization, the nationalization of the Federal government, and for a broad construction of the Constitution. In their opinion, a democratic majority on the domestic front would inevitably turn into a tyranny far worse than the one Britain had been imposing on the colonies. Since a mobocracy would infringe on the sacred rights of life, liberty and property, the creation of such a tyrant should be avoided to the utmost extent possible. This is the reasoning underlying the Federalist desire for a strong and effective central authority. Here are Hamilton's own thoughts regarding a true majority rule:

> All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and, however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give, therefore, to the first class a distinct permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second; and, as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they therefore will ever maintain good government.[10]

In other words, since the status quo has been constructed to further their agenda, the elite will do anything to perpetuate it - and the body that governs it.

Furthermore, since the Federalists were of the opinion that the desire to abuse power for avaricious pecuniary gain is inherent to the common man, this central government must be composed of separate and concentrating forces, each able to check unlawful action by another. According to the Federalists, the existence of state governments distinct from the central authority would establish an additional check on such arbitrary or self-interested rule.

Besides winning the argument on the constitutionality of a federal government for the U.S. over the "Antifederalists," whose platform we will arrive at shortly, as a

member of Congress (1787-1788; 1789-1795) and the first treasury secretary, Hamilton devised many measures that established public credit on a firm foundation and served to counteract the individualistic tendencies among the states in order to consolidate the union. The most important of these measures were those for funding the public debt and establishing a national bank, both of which improved the country's "credit rating" on the world scene and thus led to an influx of foreign investment.

His report entitled On Public Credit is said to lay the cornerstone for the American financial system under the Constitution. Another, On Manufactures, has supplied many with arguments for artificially diversifying and strengthening industries via direct governmental aid and various protectionist measures, such as high tariffs, government subsidies, and government financed transportation improvements. The lasting effects of these proposals will reemerge later in American history during the so-called post-WWII Golden Age, during which the government was increasingly centralized at the expense of state and municipal powers. (This era will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this essay.)

In contending against Jefferson among many others for the constitutionality of a national bank, Hamilton was the first to make effective use of an argument of far reaching importance. That the Constitution, *by implication*, granted to the central government all powers which were not specifically prohibited and which a majority considered to be necessary for the discharge of those powers that were specifically granted. This is now termed the doctrine of "implied powers," and it received the sanction of the Supreme Court, led by the Federalist Chief Justice John Marshall, in the landmark decision of McCulloch versus Maryland (1819).

Although the Federalist ideology has had such a profound impact upon contemporary American society, the party itself failed to build up a large following, mainly because they had such little faith in the citizens they were elected to

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[10] Alexander Hamilton, Writings, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 2001) 1: 374.

represent.[11] After experiencing a wan in popularity commencing with the election of Jefferson to the presidency in 1800, they disappeared from national politics altogether during the presidential election of 1820, in which not a single Federalist vote was cast.

Now that we have been introduced to the concept of federalization and the principles of subsidiarity and correspondence as well as Hamilton's ideology and involvement in the machinations of creating of the Constitution, let us take a look at Jefferson's resistance to said efforts and his vision of America's future. After this discussion, this section of this essay concludes with an introduction to yet another political system of equal worth and, at the very least, well worth considering: Regional governance, which has the real potential to address illth, the opposite of wealth, better than both the municipal and federal levels of government.

## D. Jefferson, the "Antifederalists," and the Constitution

As alluded to above, Hamilton's proposals directly challenged Jefferson's ideal of an egalitarian nation of small yeoman farmers, craftsmen, and small manufacturers maintaining their personal freedom by the virtue of owning land. Jefferson fully understood his doppelganger's economic and political program, and was among the first to recognize how grievous its effect on America would be. That is, since man's selfish nature influenced the form that the system took, the potential for corruption was necessarily built into the model, thus allowing Power to be taken advantage of and concentrated in the hands of an elite few. [12] Jefferson's argument was that, if the system were constructed to be less centralized, it would be harder for such abuses to arise. He believed that, although man might not be inherently good, the system

[11] Gilder Lehrman History Online. *Alexander Hamilton's Financial Program*. The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.gliah.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=6 30 April 2002.
[12] Andrew Bard Schmookler, The Illusion of Choice: How the Market Economy Shapes Our Destiny (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993) 80.

should play to his higher more noble side by actually encouraging it. Through the character of Vautrin in his masterpiece Père Goriot, Balzac puts this tendency best:

> Do you know how a man makes his way here? By brilliant genius or by skillful corruption. You must either cut your way through the masses of men like a cannon ball or steal among them like a plague. Honesty is nothing to the purpose. Men bow before the power of genius. They hate it, and try to slander it, because genius does not divide the spoil; but if genius persists, they bow before it. To sum it all up in a phrase, if they fail to smother genius in the mud, they fall on their knees to worship it. Corruption is a great power in the world, and talent is scarce. So corruption is the weapon of superfluous mediocrity - you will be made to feel the point of it everywhere.[13]

As noted above, we will see in the next section of this essay how Jefferson's prediction would be borne out by focussing on America's post-WWII era.

In the second half of the twentieth century (and up till this day), corporations benefited - if not entirely orchestrated - from the "Golden Age's" federalization movement as well as the defederalization movement, which began in the early 1970s. The latter of which increased the ability of corporate entities to pit state against state in a zero-sum game in order to maximize their profits without having to take into account any of the costs, such as cleaning up their pollution and bolstering the communities their activities fracture.

But I digress.

While the Federalists proposed a plan for strengthening the central government, Jefferson and, loosely speaking, his fellow "Antifederalists" argued that, in fact, it was they who were the true federalists. Why? Because they were the ones founding their beliefs on the principles laid down in the Articles of Confederation. As such, not only did they accuse the Federalists of abandoning the principles of federalism and substituting for it a consolidated system that would fragment

[13] Honoré de Balzac, Père Goriot (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1965) 90.

American society, they emphasized the extent to which their opponents departed as well.[14]

There were two basic arguments the "Antifederalists" had with the Federal Constitution that are pertinent to our present discussion, the first being the mere idea of a strong central government itself. Since they believed a true community would develop if individuals were not encouraged by the system to maximize their wealth at the expense of the common good, they felt that this form of governance did not directly address the people's interests.

They furthered their argument by pointing out that the Federalist plan also bestowed great powers upon those chosen to represent the masses. Jefferson presciently asserted that this would manifest itself with the representatives becoming increasingly independent of, rather than dependent upon, the people. [15] The second argument pertinent to our discussion was that the actual framework of the Constitution as proposed by the Federalists catered to the greedy and self-interested nature of man, not his honesty and virtuous traits, thus encouraging the growth of an aristocracy.[16]

Jefferson and his compatriots sought to construct a progressive and enlightened political system for the new American nation that replied most directly to a locality's needs. As a consensual union of small, self-governing republics without a strong locus, liberty, in his opinion, would be best preserved and furthered because it could never be exploited by a corrupt ruling class.

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[14] W.B. Allen and Gordon Lloyd, eds., The Essential Antifederalist (London: University Press of America, 1985) viii.

[15] "The Constitution was framed for 3 million people in thirteen sovereign states. When the first Congress met in 1790, there was one representative for every 30,000. By 1910, the U.S. population was 90 million, and Congress capped representation in the House at 435, where it remains today. Now, however, there are 287 million Americans, yielding a ratio of one representative for every 655,000. If we apply this ratio to 1790, there would have been only five members in the House of Representatives. Or, to put it another way, if the ratio of the Framers existed today, there would be around 9,000 members in the House."
Donald Livingston, "Dismantling Leviathan," Harper's May 2002: 16.

[16] Allen and Lloyd, xi-xii.

This can be construed to be a rather naïve notion, because a consensual union of this kind could only arise if no such local elite class ever existed. But it should be noted that Jefferson's democracy was not so much a form or method of government as it was a political principle opposed to a strong and centralized government. It was a code of restraint upon atomistic and self-interested behavior at the expense of others as well as a system of limitations on the consolidation and use of power.[17]

To be brief, the theory of his ideal democracy was this: If the central government is weak and "poor," the people will be wealthy and strong. The government could neither possess nor own anything besides what it appropriated from its citizens (via such methods as taxation and eminent domain, etc.). Therefore, the less it possessed the more that was left for the populace to enjoy as they see fit. This preference for weak government opened Jefferson up to much criticism, especially and specifically from those Federalists, who fiercely assailed him for being an anarchist.

However, I for one choose to believe that the meaning of his declaration "All men are created equal" is that all men are equal in rights and should therefore have both equal privileges and opportunities. Furthermore, each individual has an equal partnership *in* the government. In other words, and to abuse a cliché, the voice of the few should not be heard over and above that of the many, a direct and profound contradiction of Hamilton's belief. Instead of being an anarchist, Jefferson trusted the people as virtuous, and merely sought a republic that would best cultivate those impulses.

The township form of government is the closest Jefferson's ideal democracy came to manifesting itself in America. Although it survives to this day in the Midwest and New England,

> [. . .] Its political powers were largely absorbed by the county after reapportionment in the 1960s, which based representation on population size.

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[17] The Fieldston School United States History. *Selected Arguments of the Antifederalists*. The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.pinzler.com/ushistory/argantfedsupp.html 30 April 2002.

> In rural areas, like most of Olmsted County, overshadowed by a single midsize city, the township remains the most intimate form of government. Apart from maintaining roads and levying property taxes, the township provides a sounding board that, in De Tocqueville's words, can still "excite the warmest of human affections without arousing the ambitious passions of the heart of man."[18]

Mainly due to the successful portrayal of Hamilton and the rest of his ilk as "elitist defenders of deferential social order and (admirers) of monarchical Britain, while picturing himself as an ardent proponent of republicanism, equality, and economic opportunity,"[19] Jefferson and his vision triumphed in the 1800 presidential election, although the federal system of government and the national bank remained intact. His goal as president was to resolve the mess the Federalists had made by levying oppressive taxes, stretching the Constitution via the "implied powers" doctrine, subverting civil liberties and extending special privilege by creating a national bank and increasing the strength of the central government at the expense of state powers.

As a result, prior to the Civil War, practically every section and every political group made threats of secession[20] at one time or another. Between 1790 and 1795, to give just one example, there was a separatist movement in the Old Southwest, especially Kentucky and Tennessee.[21] The onset of the Civil War in 1861 cast in high relief the tragic limitations of attempting to inculcate his values within Hamilton's system, wherein the accumulation of wealth rated above all other social ends.

After the Union victory in 1865, the nation developed into a world power over the course of the next thirty years as a direct result of the centralized bank, which placed the U.S. among the greatest investment risks in the world. Jefferson's dream

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[18] John Hildebrand, "The Appraisal: A Company Town Gives Its Farmers the Business," Harper's November 2001: 59.

[19] Gilder Lehrman History Online. *Alexander Hamilton's Financial Program*. The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.gliah.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=6 30 April 2002.

[20] Secession is the action of a state or group of states in withdrawing from a Confederation or Federation. The action is always taken by the weaker section when it feels its interests are seriously being affected by the central government, withdrawal being justified as necessary to protect its rights and based on the constitutional doctrine of state sovereignty, at least in the American context.

of a nation predicated upon the inherent goodness of mankind and peacefully coexisting yet sovereign localized governmental units was extinguished by a political economy based largely upon Hamilton's vision. And, just as Hamilton intended, the national state has been governed by and for the few so that they can accumulate great wealth at the expense of the public's interest, manifesting itself in such forms as pollution, sprawl and the polarization of American society.

Federal programs have long channeled government support and loans to the richest entrepreneurs. Benjamin Schwertz sums this up so neatly that it is worth quoting at length here:

> In opposing the growing power of a centralized government dominated by big capital, Jefferson anticipated much in our political and economic system that we now regret. Commentators are concerned today about a widening gap between rich and poor, and the concentration of political and corporate power; Jefferson and his supporters argued long ago that the national state was in danger of becoming the creature and servant of an emerging national economic elite. Pundits complain that the United States has become merely a 'procedural democracy'; Jefferson, understanding the difference between voters and citizens, feared a centralized government and economy exactly because they would deny citizens a rich political life. Whereas the left acquiesced to the wage system, confining its efforts to ensuring higher wages and generous social security, Jefferson insisted that the wage system itself was profoundly undemocratic and exploitative, by definition stripping workers of their economic independence. And whereas conservatives today simultaneously espouse the free market and "family" and "community" values, Jefferson dreaded capitalism precisely because it reduces individuals to abstractions - anonymous buyers and sellers whose claims on one another are determined solely by their capacity to pay.[22]

In summary, as evidenced by the differing opinions held by Jefferson and Hamilton, our current federal system of government has not been arrived at without a certain amount of dissent and compromise. Furthermore, the tight relationship that was fostered between the central government and the business elite was determined when

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[21] It is interesting to note that similar threats came from the Federalists after Jefferson was elected to the presidency in 1800. The strongest threat occurred at the Hartford Convention, which was held to protest the War of 1812 and the Louisiana Purchase among several other things.

[22] Benjamin Schwertz, "What Jefferson Helps to Explain." The Atlantic Monthly March 1997: 60-72.

this Constitutional argument was decided, a relationship that has continued to grow ever so closer with the passing of time, as we will discover in Section II of this essay.

Although both of their utopian visions have proven to be dysfunctional over the course of time, and although we have lost sight of the fundamental democratic process by pursuing the ideology elucidated by Hamilton with tunnel vision, all is not lost. Far from it in fact, because a path can indeed be found somewhere in the gray area between the two.

## E. Ameliorating Negative Externalities with Regional Governance

The federalization of the U.S. governmental system in 1787 was a necessary political expedient due to the existing state loyalties precluding the possibility of any other kind of union. But short-term political expediency is neither the best nor the most efficient method of governance.

Frederick Law Olmsted, who described himself as a "wholly unpractical man," for one believed that expedient political bureaucrats are entirely without a long-term vision, a tendency which constrains the generation of visionary ideas.

> In Olmsted's vocabulary, "practical" was an insult. The practical man was the expedient man, in the worst sense of the word. The practical man chose the quickest, easiest solution to any problem without reference to excellence. In Olmsted's experience, the self-interested politician was the prototype of the "practical" man [. . . and he] spent a good part of his career in conflict with "practical" men - grappling with the Establishment, so to speak.[23]

The experience of the practical side of government must be joined to an imaginative willingness to sacrifice immediate interests and long established customs and habits for greater, albeit more distant, ends. Above all, there must be a readiness to adventure along new paths, especially now that the lower levels of government are increasingly being forced to deal with the externalities of economic development that keep their constituencies from flourishing.

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[23] S.B. Sutton, ed., Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscapes, by Frederick Law Olmsted (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971) 7.

A positive externality occurs when an economic activity benefits you without your having to pay for it while a negative externality is something that imposes a cost on you without your consent. You will also not be compensated for the latter by the so-called free market. The enthusiastic free market cheerleader Milton Friedman calls these externalities "third party effects," the preponderance of which are negative. "Third party effects of private actions do occur that are sufficiently important to justify government action."[24]

One gargantuan example of a negative externality being produced by an economic activity that we are all unfortunately familiar with is the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. Although that was an accident that "cost" approximately $7.5 billion to clean up, that cost is considered solely as a $7.5 billion benefit to our GDP-driven economy. The costs we in this society who value the environment over pecuniary gain are forced to bear are entirely unaccounted for in the equation.[25] According to the eminent economist Andrew Bard Schmookler:

> Externalities are everywhere. They are like what physicists these days call the "dark matter," stuff in the universe that is invisible to us but nonetheless is believed to make up most of the mass of the universe. How much dark matter there is may spell the difference between our universe being one that expands forever and one that has sufficient gravity to stop the expansion and bring the universe collapsing back on itself. Likewise, the net magnitude of the impacts of "private" transactions on third parties, who are invisible to the market's calculations, may determine whether the market can be trusted to expand the universe of human satisfactions, or whether the gravity of the problem is sufficient to bring the free market ideology, or the society that has entrusted its fate to market forces, collapsing on itself.
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> Third parties are all over the place. For every transaction to which we are a party, there are a great many transactions to which we are third parties and which nonetheless affect us.[26]

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[24] Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, Free to Choose (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 32.
[25] Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" The Atlantic Monthly October 1995: http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/ecbig/gdp.htm 30 April 2002.
[26] Schmookler 56.

These negative externalities produced by the, ahem, unfettered capitalist market's force corrode community and the ability of governments to serve the demands of their entire constituency, consequently mitigating each government's ability to protect, if not increase, the common good. And unless there are some restraints and regulations imposed upon the market, society will remain hostage to the market. Along these lines, Karl Polanyi asserts in The Great Transformation that, "instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system."[27]

With the above in mind, as we previously discussed in Section IB, governments operate on the principle of correspondence, wherein they cater to the needs of the citizens within their sphere of authority, and the principle of subsidiarity, which states that different levels of government provide different types of services. In the former, making the spillover area and the governmental unit coincide concentrates government attention on matters important to the locality at large rather than just the elite class. Making them coincide also prevents the problems that occur when beneficiaries do not pay for negative externalities spilling over into neighboring spheres as a result of their actions, such as pollution, sprawl and crime, which is never solved but instead blown into someone else's backyard like so many leaves. The latter principle states that governmental responsibility for a function should be at the level of government that can deliver the function most efficiently so that the common good is furthered, not just the goals of a few.

Every government targets needs and then provides different types of services and functions due to a non-quantifiable combination of logic, history and tradition. And a system of governance that strives to follow these two principles as closely as possible is, by definition, seeking to improve responsiveness to its constituency's needs as well as the quality of the service that it is providing to them.[28] As such, the U.S.' political system must be predicated solely upon history and tradition, because

[27] Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation. (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944) 46.
[28] Mikesell 503-506.

logic dictates that each level's activities and, just as importantly, the size of its sphere should be based on, or targeted at, the spatial incidents of the externalities within that level's sphere.

The above assertion is true because, unfortunately, many negative externalities produced by corporate entities, like sprawl and air and water pollution, are not confined solely to the geographical entities designated either as a "state" or "municipality" in the contemporary governmental construct. Negative externalities tend to affect some confusing combination of many of these entities simultaneously. By eschewing the traditional, albeit antiquated, federal model and coordinating the actions of several states and/or municipalities in order to remedy corporate produced social ills, the problems can be addressed rather than merely shunted aside for someone else to deal with, much as they are today.

This phenomenon can be termed the "leaf blower effect" where, instead of picking up the leaves in your yard and getting rid of them once and for all yourself, you blow them onto the lawn of a neighbor, who then blows them onto another neighbor's lawn, *ad infinitum*.

The current federalized system of governance takes into account neither the unique patterns of spatial development of many metropolitan regions, which know no state-mandated boundaries any longer, nor the interconnectedness of each municipality and/or state, nor the spillover effects produced and distorted by, and then disseminated from, those geographic forms. In other words, target effectiveness of public policy is, at best, poor, because the jurisdictional grid is not cohesive, and the multi-various governmental efforts are either altogether disconcerted or not concerted enough.

Some form of regional governance can obviously be more responsive and sensible (depending, of course, on such crucial details as how boundaries are drawn and what responsibilities are delegated to these entities, etc.) than a centralized government is. But regional governments might also hold the real potential to address illth and meet the needs of its constituency better than municipalities, which

do not adequately take into consideration the principles of correspondence and subsidiarity, either. Besides negative externalities, there are many public goods and services that are no longer (if they ever were) constrained by the municipal sphere of government, among them being local labor markets and transportation networks, to give just two examples.

Most aspects of labor markets, including the workforce itself, tend to spill over into several municipalities. This leads to the fracturing and then artificial distribution of institutions that simultaneously address the workforce's needs and build social capital for businesses, such as educational, training and vocational facilities, throughout several adjoining but uncoordinated municipalities. Business leaders should be able to easily recognize the benefits of consolidating the labor market at a more regional level.

It is also presupposed that the benefits of infrastructure improvements, like street repair, do not spill outside of municipal jurisdictions, thus making it "logical" for that entity to pay for those improvements. But, as you surely know, many individuals work and shop in municipalities in which they do not reside. In other words, these commuters are essentially using that public service *gratis*. Therefore, someone else is being forced to bear the brunt of the cost. Which is decidedly an inequitable way of going about doing business, no?

Based on the above reasoning, it is evident that a higher level of government, the region, can better address many of the issues plaguing municipalities. By consolidating municipalities into this more sustainable and comprehensive system of governance, there is a very real possibility for bureaucratic waste to be reduced (including the number of politicians!). Furthermore, a regional entity would have greater resources, which would allow it to increase the supply of the services its constituency demands as well as remedy the negative externalities within its sphere in a more comprehensive manner.

A system of regionalism can help bring about either devolution or evolution of responsibility to a more appropriate level of government than what can be attained by

the current federal/state/municipal political model. Simply put: Some combination of inter-municipal and/or inter-state government is more likely and better able to deliver the services that local residents want than our current federal government's reliance on dividing power between one central bureaucracy, fifty state bureaucracies, and umpteen municipalities. It is also obvious that governments should exist by working together, not splitting apart. However, as we will discuss in more detail in Section II, municipalities (and states) are being encouraged by the U.S. federal government to sacrifice interconnectedness with other municipalities (and states) at the altar of corporate Growth. And how might this be solved? By moving toward a more regional system of governance.

To conclude this section, regional governance appears to be a logical compromise between the widely disparate visions of Hamilton and Jefferson. By better addressing the principles of subsidiarity and correspondence, it has the potential to improve the public sector's responsiveness to a constituency's demands while ameliorating the negative spillover effects of economic growth in a more comprehensive manner than either the federal, state, or municipal levels of government. But, as we will see next, the current political economy's status quo has been constructed to further the corporate elite's agenda at the expense of our common good. Thus, they strive to perpetuate it and the antiquated body that governs it - at the expense of the public's welfare and equity, which a truly responsive and compassionate government is supposed to protect at the expense of all else.

## Section II: Regional Governance and the Corporate Entity

### A. Introduction

Previously we discussed the creation of the U.S.' federal system of government by elucidating both the circumstances surrounding and subject of the Hamilton-Jefferson debate. Jefferson believed in the virtues of the agrarian state, and that an adherence to an economy catering to capitalistic industry at the expense of individuals would seriously threaten the principles of democracy and harm the public good.

Hamilton, on the other hand, feared and disdained the people. And, in order to mitigate what he construed to be the negative effects of a true democracy of the people, for the people and by the people, he proposed a centralized, or federal, system of government that exerts great power over the separate states and municipalities and, thus, individuals. Based upon his pessimistic belief that man is inherently greedy, and each individual is driven by the need to maximize his own wealth by any and all means necessary, even at the expense of others, he wished to establish a nationally administered economy founded upon investment, manufacturing and ever-expanding commerce.

Although Jefferson's ideals had great influence in America up to the Civil War, needless to say it is Hamilton's ideology that is most directly tied to our country's current wealth and its illth, which is less obvious but just as great, such as sprawl, pollution, and community polarization. After emphasizing the fact that the creation and institution of the U.S.' federal system of government was not without a certain amount of dissent, and certainly its adoption was not some preordained conclusion as an inevitable effect of Progress, the theoretical role a regional government can play was detailed.

Simply put, a regional system of government might be more likely and better able to solve problems and deliver the services the residents within its sphere want

than our current government's reliance on dividing power between one central bureaucracy and fifty state bureaucracies, which are then broken (prevalently) into municipalities. On top of that, regionalism has the potential to take into account the negative externalities of economic growth, which besides being widespread also tend to violate the principles of correspondence and subsidiarity, in a more comprehensive manner than the aforementioned three largely outmoded levels of government. By placing this discussion within a historical context, it is the hope that some type of this system of governance appears to be a logical compromise between the ideologies of Jefferson and Hamilton.

Because a compromise can, and must, be attained if the U.S. is to Progress, in every sense of that word, and not just in a material sense.

In this, the second section of this essay, we will discover that Jefferson's prediction of power and wealth being concentrated in the hands of an elite at the expense of democracy's principles and the public good is borne out over the course of time by focussing on America's post-WWII era. This is when a Keynesian version of Hamilton's political economy, which sought to diversify and strengthen industries via direct governmental aid, various protectionist measures, and government financed infrastructure improvements, dominated. Throughout much, if not all, of this period, corporations benefited (if not entirely orchestrated) from the so-called Golden Age's federalization movement as well as the defederalization movement, which began in the early 1970s and lasts till this day. It is the latter which allowed these corporate entities to increase their ability to pit state against state and municipality against municipality in a zero-sum game in order to maximize profits while passing on all of the costs to the general populace.

Alex Carey has termed this ongoing phenomenon "taking the risk out of democracy."

Although governments should obviously exist by working together, not splitting apart, municipalities and states are actually being encouraged by the U.S. federal government to compete, sacrificing much-needed interconnectedness with

other governmental entities at the altar of corporate Growth. This inculcates the tendency for these lower levels of government to do just about anything to expand their spheres of influence by promulgating policies that cater to corporate entities and encourage jurisdictional boundary jumping at the expense of the community's general welfare. To ameliorate the ramifications of this corporate-driven development strategy, which gets away with foisting negative externalities upon the general public while generating positive externalities solely for wealthy communities, in a more comprehensive manner than the other levels of government, some system of sub-national or supra-municipal government needs to be formulated. This is especially true now that amenities have been insinuated into the classic location decision paradigm for firms in those emerging sectors that are beginning to dominate the U.S. economy.

In other words, regionalism has the potential to mitigate the avaricious shortsightedness of corporations, which serves to detract from the public good, much better than either the federal, state or municipal levels of government.

## B. The Corporate Entity and the Fourteenth Amendment

A corporation is "an artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of law." [29] Any - to repeat: Any group of individuals that is capable of acting together as a single entity is, in a very real sense, a corporation. This corporation, for all intents and purposes, is an entity distinct from its stockholders, who are considered to be individual members of that corporation, so that it remains unaffected by changes in individual membership, which occurs whenever stock is sold.[30] Why? Because not only does the corporate charter remain the same but, by the very nature of a corporation, a corporation's assets (and debts) are vested in the corporation itself and not in the individual stockholders' names.

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[29] Nevada First Holdings Inc. *Corporations, Definitions, and Attributes*. The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.nevadafirst.com/Part1.html 30 April 2002.

[30] The effect on the stock's value as a result of a sale is irrelevant to our pursuant discussion.

In general, a corporation is classified as either public or private. Public corporations are created for public purposes and, as such, must be fully accountable to the government, which requires all of the corporation's financial records be made available to the general public on specified occasions. Private corporations are created for private purposes. Since their interests, franchises and subsidiaries are the exclusive property and domain of that private entity, they are not required to release any information. However, in both cases, a corporation can only be created and exist if it is organized and administered following the government's requirements and statutory provisions.

It was once necessary to have a special act passed by a state's legislature in order to create a corporation, which was rather difficult to obtain. But this rather (and appropriately) difficult and time-consuming process has been expediently obviated by the current powers that be. Today, all that one must do is find two other individuals who wish to incorporate in order to increase what they value in common, their purpose, their proposed place of business, the names of the officers and the corporation itself, the amount of capitalization, and fulfill the application requirements. And of course pay the requisite fees, all of the above which can be done online in most cases. In the first official meeting of that corporation, the attendees decide the laws under which it will be internally governed, and the officers begin functioning in order to maximize what they value most: Profit. [31]

However, the government, that is, the general public - which means you and I - always reserves the right to either amend or repeal entirely a corporation's charter if it is perceived that that corporation is creating greater costs to a community than it is generating benefits. If the corporation doesn't wish to reapply upon the expiration of its charter, it dissolves. And if it wishes to dissolve before the charter's expiration, all it has to do is apply to the governing state for a certificate of dissolution which, upon

[31] My Corporation.com. *Business Starts Here!* The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.mycorporation.com/ 30 April 2002.

being granted, leads to its assets being distributed amongst the stockholders after all its debts are paid. Otherwise, being a legal entity, the law grants it perpetual life.

Although a corporation in any sane individual's mind is an "artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of law," an 1886 Supreme Court ruling[32] decided that corporations were in fact persons, and that the equal protection provision of the Fourteenth Amendment should thus be extended to them. This is what Chief Justice Waite announced even before hearing any oral arguments:

> The court does not wish to hear argument on the question whether the provision in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids a State to deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws, applies to these corporations. We are all of the opinion that it does.[33]

So now that the Supreme Court, after neither public discussion nor debate whatsoever, has anointed corporate entities as individual persons, Corporations have gained a degree of immunity from government supervision.

By deciding in such a manner, the Supreme Court gave corporations the ability to use the "due process" clause of the Fourteenth Amendment in order to protect themselves from "regulatory action that might be proposed on behalf of the community or the work force. In effect, and in historical reality, corporations are no longer made to be socially accountable except under the most limited and circumscribed conditions."[34] According to Howard Zinn, although the Amendment "had been passed to protect Negro rights, of the Fourteenth Amendment cases brought before the Supreme Court between 1890 and 1910, 19 dealt with the Negro, 288 dealt with corporations."[35]

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[32] Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company
[33] Carl Manz, *What Is Wrong With Corporations?* The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.txgreens.org/news/oped_wrongcorporations.htm 30 April 2002.
[34] Herbert I. Schiller, Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 47.
[35] Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 255.

Herbert Schiller does a wonderful job of summarizing how the 1886 decision has led to what he terms this long-lasting era of "economic due process," which continues with increasing intensity up to this day. Here is what he has to say:

> Corporate property was protected against those social claims that would have required state intervention. The economic-due-process era prevailed until the outbreak of the profound economic crisis of the 1930s. Then the traumatic collapse of the American economic machine compelled the government to take actions, mandated by New Deal legislation, that frequently interfered with what had become corporate prerogatives over property [. . .] Measures of social control were acceptable because capitalism itself was on the defensive and hardly capable of asserting its immunity to public accountability [. . .] Corporate business, temporarily weakened in the pre-war decade, experienced formidable expansion [with the outbreak of the Second World War]. Additionally, fed on superprofits from the war and luxuriating in the physical destruction of overseas competition, the corporate sector helped bring into being and benefited further from the first consumer society [. . .]
>
> In general, control of the job market, ownership of machinery and material, and privileged access to government served more than adequately to maintain the corporate domination of the social realm.[36]

To pull a trick by summarizing the above while also paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson, wealth and power has been concentrated in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Adam Smith himself had to say in this regard (plus a little bit more):

> The masters, being fewer in number, can combine much more easily; and the law, besides, authorizes, or at least does not prohibit their combinations, while it prohibits those of the workmen. We have no acts of parliament against combining to lower the price of work; but many against combining to raise it [. . .] Masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate.[37]

If you will recall from the previous section, there is a lot of leeway granted in the original construction of the Tenth Amendment. That also holds true for all amendments, and not to mention the rest of the Constitution itself, as evidenced by

[36] Schiller 47-53.

the Hamilton-Jefferson debates and the shenanigans always going on in Congress up to this day. And if you have the most money as well as the most access to political power, your opinion on the matter will conquer all others.

This is a very sad but true reality and, unfortunately, in the contemporary corporate-driven governmental context, it is as simple as that. But with the above in mind, hope can be gleaned by better understanding the ramifications of extending the Fourteenth Amendment to corporations. Which, as we will see, would have profound effects on freedom of speech issues as well as our entire American understanding of quality of life. However, this is neither a preordained reality we had thus better get used to nor some sacrosanct conclusion that is beyond debate.

## C. The Corporate Propaganda Campaign

After the dawning of the twentieth century, being slapped by the market's "invisible hand" during the Depression, and the incredible concentration of corporate power and wealth, the federal government began increasing its role. This process played an important role in protecting the rights of those marginalized locally, including such important steps forward like civil rights for African-Americans as well as improving the living standards of many via public sector investments in education, transportation, and housing. Also, and I'd like to emphasize, at least in theory, it provided a means for the transfer of wealth between rich and poor regions to ensure that minimum standards are met and that basic needs are addressed no matter how poor the region. But, although the positive ramifications of many of these actions are still being reaped today, increasingly centralizing the government had the effect of blurring federal, state, and municipal interests and powers while simultaneously upsetting the balance between them.

In any case, there was subsequently a general, long-term shift toward emphasizing the federal government's interests at the expense of state government

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[37] Adam Smith, An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.

and municipal or regional issues. Following WWII, many factors beyond the purview of this essay coalesced to contribute to this shift in what is termed by many to be America's supposed Golden Age. (I won't, for example, even be mentioning the military industrial complex or the prison industrial complex.)

But the national government's responsibilities and the conscious political decisions of the nation's leaders, which as we will shortly see has been largely at the behest of corporate America, to make America a world leader over the course of the twentieth century has been a very major factor. And, beyond a shadow of any doubt, "great corporate networks (soon bestrode) the continent. They were too big for local communities or for states to be able to deal with effectively. With the emergence of a national market, a strong national government became indispensable to the health of society."[38]

On top of that, today, quaint factors once mitigating the potentiality of a corporation's move, like commitments to a locality and its dedicated employees, have been outweighed by business decisions. More and more corporations have come to realize that, in order to prosper in the current system they are operating within, they must always be willing to relocate to a site in another state or municipality, or even in another country. Furthermore, in an economy that is only increasingly depending on its information-based sector, corporate executives can now base location decisions on vague ideas rather than quantifiable financial data.

According to Robert Fitch, "best location is only a relative concept; it has never been exactly defined. The benefits of any relocation are expected to be produced as intangibles. As such, they cannot be measured directly against dollar costs that are therefore a relatively minor concern."[39] And "the locational forces

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http://www.adamsmith.org.uk/smith/won-b1-c8.htm 30 April 2002.

[38] Schmookler 275.
Also, in a footnote at the bottom of this page, Schmookler quotes Milbrath: "If a local or state government forbids (a) pollution discharge, another market comes into play, the competitive market among states to attract and retain industry. A local manufacturing plant can threaten to move or shut down if local and state governments propose to establish tight controls over pollution emissions."

[39] Robert Fitch, The Assassination of New York (New York: Verso, 1993) 35.

affecting (corporations) do not remain constant over time, but are strongly influenced by larger national trends."[40] But:

> It is perhaps unfair to hold corporate companies chasing maximum sales, bottom-line profits, and shareholder satisfaction to some vision of [. . .] diversity [. . .] justice [. . . or] democracy. Yet their strictly economic ambitions turn out to be anything but strictly neutral. As we have seen, they themselves wade into Big Social Issues, if only to stroke a new age middle class they want to target for the same old little economic reasons. And even where multinational companies claim to be interested exclusively in production and consumption figures, increasingly they can maximize those figures only by intervening actively in the very social, cultural and political domains about which they affect agnosticism. Their political ambitions may not be the product of cultural animus, but this only makes such ambitions the more irresponsive and culturally subversive.[41]

With the above in mind, take note that, according to Karl Marx, many of what a group calls "truths" may have very little or no basis in fact. Instead, the group's "truths" are often fabricated to favor that group's economic interests and further its economic aims. So while capitalists construct an ideology that serves capitalists, those with progressive tendencies construct ideologies that serve the greater good.

In other words, ideological debate is less an inquiry into facts than a battle for Power via what amounts to propaganda campaigns at the expense of democracy and the public good. And for those of you who are sniffling at my reference to Marx, here's another little something from Adam Smith for you to try on for size:

> The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order [the capitalist class], ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.[42]

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[40] Fitch 5.
[41] Benjamin R. Barber, Jihad Vs. McWorld (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996) 71.
[42] Adam Smith, An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. http://www.adamsmith.org.uk/smith/won-b1-c8.htm 30 April 2002.

Beginning well before the "Golden Age," all the way up to the early 1970s and through to today, corporate propaganda has successfully linked corporate economic interests with national interests so that now anything they do, *ipso facto,* is right and just and good for the country. (Remember, "What's good for GM . . .")

And with the extraordinary improvement of ever-new communication technologies and the growing interdependence of society, access to and control over the means of communication, mostly the mass media, has become more important than ever.

> Now enlisted in the frontline defense of corporate operations, the media serve as well in the strengthening of the system at large [. . .] What does this add up to? The expanding protection offered corporate commercial and political speech, fashioned in a series of court rulings since the mid-1960s and the early 1970s (culminating in landmark rulings in 1978 and 1980), can be understood best as the latest stage in the historical, judicial accommodation to and promotion of property rights in the U.S. [. . .] The Supreme Court's commercial and corporate speech decisions can be interpreted as the adaption of the law to the needs of an information using corporate economy [. . .] The outcome over the last sixty years - with few exceptions - has been the preemption of the new means of communication for corporate, commercial advantage.[43]

Corporations, with their maximization of profit mantra and activities of advertising devoted to the creation of manufactured desires, diversions and meaningless pursuits, have narrowed the public's mind of thinkable thought. Mass media has been used to make it taboo to criticize the corporate economy, and corporations have used the political system to make doing so unpatriotic. And, like Alexander Hamilton intended all along, and Adam Smith warned of in 1776,

> "The public mind" was recognized long ago by corporate leaders to be the "only serious danger confronting" their enterprises, and the major "hazard facing industrialists," along with the newly realized political power of the masses, which had to be beaten back.[44]

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[43] Schiller 49-51.

[44] Alex Carey, Taking The Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty, ed. Andrew Lohrey (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) xiii.

In Taking the Risk Out of Democracy, Alex Carey asserts that the twentieth century has been impacted by three major developments: The growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power and "the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy."[45] This propaganda campaign has linked business interests and the nation's interests to such an extent that both are now perceived as identical. By making this link, corporations can now espouse their agendas as being "patriotic" and serving both "freedom" and "democracy."

As such, anything that threatens to cut into the bottom line, like unions, increases in wages, welfare programs, environmental policies, the interconnectedness of governmental entities, and wealth redistribution from rich to poor communities in the form of progressive taxation, can be accused of being undemocratic. And furthermore:

> One effect of these propaganda programs has been to generate public cynicism in the capacity of governments to protect, represent and enhance the public interest [. . .] Not only does there seem to be widespread social fragmentation and disillusionment with democracy in the U.S., but the possibility of reversing their sense of alienation appears to many of us to be already lost.[46]

In conclusion, generations of Americans have been taught to express an all-encompassing and abiding respect for each and every corporate machination in the political, social, and environmental realm because they are some anointed inspiration of patriotic honesty, no matter how avaricious the action and no matter what the costs incurred. To disagree with their sacrosanct beliefs or question a corporation's political power and economic spirituality?

Subversive and unpatriotic.

The above undemocratic situation is only exacerbated by the corporations' standard practice of pitting state against state and municipality against municipality as well as their predilection for reaping all the rewards of growth while assigning the

[45] Carey 18.
[46] Carey 3.

responsibility to the general public to pay for the illth that that growth produces. While allowing this once quite promising country to disintegrate into a self-inflicted wound - a wound that we can, however, begin mending by instituting some regional form of governance that might address the principles of subsidiarity and correspondence in a more comprehensive manner than either of the pre-existing levels of government.

## D. Location Decision Theory, and the Era of Footloose Firms

The classic location decision theory is based on minimizing transportation costs as well as the costs of such factors as land, labor and capital. If the cost of transportation is the dominant factor in a firm's location decision-making process, that firm will choose the location that minimizes total transport costs. This is defined as the sum of the cost of transporting raw materials from the input source to the factory and the cost of transporting the firm's output, or product, to the market. A firm can also be resource-oriented, for example. Here, if the pull toward the input (raw material) is relatively strong, the firm locates near its raw material source. For a market-oriented firm, the pull toward the market is relatively strong, so the firm will locate near its marketplace in order to maximize its profits.

Ideal weights are used in order to evaluate the influence exerted on the location decision of firms by determining their need to have access to transportation networks, raw materials, markets, and strong labor pools. The ideal weight of an output is the cost of shipping one unit of output one mile, and the ideal weight of an input is the cost per mile of shipping enough of the input to produce one unit of output. A firm engages in a weight-gaining activity if the output it produces is more expensive to ship than the inputs, and a firm is engaging in a weight-losing activity if the cost of transporting the raw material to that firm is large relative to transporting the finished product.

Using this classic location decision model, firms will choose to locate at an endpoint location based on the fact that, one, a midpoint location entails the costs of loading and unloading the input and/or output and, two, the presence of long-haul economies of scale. In a situation where there are multiple inputs and one of the locational weights is greater than the other inputs combined, the optimum location will be at the site of the dominant input. If, on the other hand, neither input has dominant weight, the optimum place for that firm to locate would be where the weight of the inputs are in equilibrium. That is, some intermediate location between its input sources and its market. If a firm is not transfer-oriented, it bases its decision on minimizing its factor costs.

If a firm spends a large fraction of its total costs on a particular local input, it is essentially pulled toward locations where the price of the local input is relatively low. An energy-intensive firm, for example, is pulled toward a site with inexpensive energy, and will locate somewhere with cheap energy if the savings in energy costs are large relative to any extra costs for other inputs and transportation. A labor-intensive firm is pulled toward a site with inexpensive labor, and will locate at the low-wage site if the savings in labor costs are greater than any increases in other costs as a result of the move.

Another important factor in this location decision paradigm is the presence of agglomeration economies. When firms agglomerate, or locate in proximity to one another, they can exploit scale economies in the production process, thus enjoying many benefits they would miss if they located outside of the cluster. In other words, by locating close to one another, those firms can produce at a lower cost because of the positive externalities generated by the agglomerated production process.[47]

However, since roughly the 1970s, the technical competence and productivity of the labor force, the entrepreneurial behavior of the public sector, and the increasingly regional/global business climate itself, along with quality of life factors

[47] Arthur O'Sullivan, Urban Economics, 2nd ed. (Boston: Irwin, 1993) 43-76.

("amenities") that are very difficult to quantify, were insinuated into the above location decision equation.[48] This, in addition to the fact that transportation and communication costs have fallen dramatically and because of advances in product and process technologies, have made firms more "footloose." And owners of footloose firms, specifically those in the high-tech and information among other so-called New Economy sectors that emerged in the early 1990s, are quite obviously attracted by a wide array of amenities in a wide array of locations. Think of the range: Everything from skiing to sunbathing, hunting to bird watching, centers of music and scholarship to absolute peace and quiet in the middle of nowhere, just about any combination of which abound in every *natural* region in the U.S.

One sticking point to this new location decision paradigm being used by these emerging firms is that now they must compensate their skilled workers and management, who have a strong position in the labor market, for any undesirable features of the local environment in which they are located. As a result, sites that provide a high quality of life through amenities, like good schools, low crime, a clean environment and a "vibrant" culture, are attracting firms while those spheres that lag behind in providing such services and amenities are left farther and farther behind. In other words, because of this polarization process, only the richer communities, which drain wealth from the surrounding environs via the construction of tax bases that keep services high and taxes low, are fully able to participate in the way our contemporary game of growth is played.

Grasping the above concept is of utmost importance if we, as a country, are going to Progress. So I think I'm going to depart from our discussion on the amenity-based location decision making process for a page or so in order to elucidate how a more regional form of governance can ameliorate this polarization process and its detrimental effect on the common good via its virtual destruction of Community.

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[48] That is, if it provides a "business friendly" climate with its tax policies, the level of infrastructure it supports or subsidizes outright, and the paucity of its environmental regulations.

> The "law of competition" does not imply that many competitors will compete indefinitely. The law of competition is a simple paradox: Competition destroys competition. The law of competition implies that many competitors, competing without restraint, will ultimately and inevitably reduce the number of competitors to one. The law of competition, in short, is the law of war.[49]

Freedom for the common good always involves restraint. Freedom without restraint results in someone getting hurt; our society is being hurt by the corruption that is encouraged - no, better, saluted - by a few. Regionalism might very well provide a reasonable method for beginning to apply some restraint in this regard by reducing the number of players on the field for corporations to exploit.

Today, increasing polarization and competition between states and municipalities contributes to an increase in the concentration of poverty and disinvestment as well as middle-class flight and urban sprawl, which leads to an interregional transfer of the tax base from the poor communities to the rich. Therefore, this transfer is helping to expedite the decay of the American community at large. This spatial polarization is pushed by concentrated need and pulled by concentrated resources, and the poorer communities soon find themselves to be financially overextended. Which, in turn, reinforces social isolation and the concentration of illth while also further weakening the local population's skill and educational foundations, thus negatively impacting future generations.

This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that many of the newer and richer communities tend to build tax bases that keep services high and taxes low, which leads to a disproportionate share of infrastructure investment for those communities, draining wealth from the rest of the locality. All of the above leads to a growth in polarization, in that, the poorer the community is, the faster it will grow poorer, leading to human and government waste, an overtaxed and over-regulated business environment, and the balkanization of political life. It also leads to an

[49] Wendell Berry, "The Idea of a Local Economy," Harper's April 2002: 18.

abundance of land use patterns that are low density, economically inefficient, and environmentally dangerous. [50]

There is a very real potential for regional governance to lead to consolidated land planning, and growth and amenity management, as well as improvements in the delivery of services, including public work projects, transportation systems, and training and educational facilities, that bolster the viability of the locality's labor market. All of which helps to reinforce and ensure socioeconomic stability by deconcentrating poverty, supporting the physical infrastructure required for today's economy, and equitably sharing the property tax base. These elements increase the ability of the regional governing body to act efficiently and in the best interests of the entire community it is representing to further mitigate decline and sprawl and manage amenities so that the region as a whole thrives rather than just the most select communities. [51]

That was a long excursion from a small theme into a large one which I did not intend to make, so let me get back to what I was saying before about the amenity-based location decision making process. If you will recall, there has been a shift away from quantifiable location decision factors to more ephemeral ones, the importance of which vary from individual to individual just as they do between corporations. Again, this affinity for amenities is more important for firms in those emerging sectors beginning to dominate the U.S. economy, such as information, technology, and services, than for those firms in sectors that are in decline, like manufacturing and industry. And unfortunately, according to Fitch,

> Best location is only a relative concept; it has never been exactly defined. The benefits of any relocation are expected to be produced as intangibles. As such, they cannot be measured directly against dollar costs that are therefore a relatively minor concern [. . .] We are brought back to the problem of not being able to measure external economies. There is no way of determining

[50] Myron Orfield, Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997) 1-3.
[51] Timothy Beatley and Kristy Manning, The Ecology of Place (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997) 40-85.

> exactly how their value has changed over time. The best one can do, therefore, is to make rough estimates, and these must be very inexact indeed. This uncertainty poses a real problem if [governmental] policies need to be formulated that take into account the benefits of external economies as well as the diseconomies.[52]

All of this is important because, beginning with the presidency of Richard Nixon in the early 1970s, there has been a concentrated effort to decentralize the government's power in order to restore so-called proper balance to the federal system of government by returning some of that power to the states.

However, while a municipal or state government's artificial sphere of authority is limited by geographic boundaries, private firms are footloose and can locate wherever they deem to be most profitable to them, not to the community they are either currently in or relocating to. Furthermore, not only is the amenity-based location decision process well nigh impossible to quantify, thus hamstringing contemporary governmental entities in the zero-sum game of Growth before they even get onto the playing field, environmental, social and cultural amenities tend to be unconstrained by municipal or state spheres of governance. It is my assertion that the principles of correspondence and subsidiarity should be applied to amenities in order to improve the target effectiveness of government when it comes to addressing the needs of its populace, especially in terms of mitigating the negative externalities generated by jurisdictional boundary jumping and growth.

Because amenities tend not to be confined solely to individual states or municipalities, but tend to spillover into some combination of these entities simultaneously, these two fundamental principles are being violated. In other words, this is yet another way our current system of governance ill equips the lower levels of government to target the spatial incidences of economic development in order to further the common good of this country. Therefore, our governmental structure is once again not endeavoring to improve its responsiveness and the quality of services

[52] Fitch 35.

it is providing to those of us living within it, thus once again opening itself up to the accusation that it is operating solely by force of history and tradition, not logic.

In order to correct this illogical imbalance, the levels of government need to be adjusted so that amenities of similar attribute or demand fall within one sphere. Although to supply the answer to how all this can be done requires abilities far superior to the ones possessed by the writer of these pages, here is one suggestion for how we can begin:

> In a country as large as the United States there are many great contrasts in physical conditions, historical development, economic and cultural traditions, cutting across the artificial State boundaries. Such regions have already been the subject of much scientific investigation as ends in themselves and as a means to the solution of particular problems [. . .][53]
>
> A region for planning purposes within the framework of nation-wide planning in the United States, as stated in the report of a Special Committee to the National Resources Committee, should fulfill the following requirements: It should be characterized by compactness and contiguity, by homogeneity, by "unity, organic interrelationship and cohesion", by a major combination of resources (that is, it should be a natural economic unit), it should include whole problem areas and not partial areas, it should be a "total areal pattern of culture and works", it should not cut across such patterns, it should conform to existing regional consciousness and sentiments, it should possess regional identity as evidenced by popular usage and by a popular name (such as New England or the Middle West), and lastly, it should be of a fairly large size.[54]

At the MidWestern Governor's Conference, the bulk of regional issues they identified fell into five categories: Water resources, energy, agriculture, health care, and transportation.[55] This body went on to conclude that advantages on these issues could be obtained from the development of some form of regional government and planning.

> Regional planning is the conscious direction and collective integration of all those activities which rest upon the use of the earth as site, as resource, as

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[53] Robert E. Dickinson, City Region and Regionalism: A Geographical Contribution to Human Ecology (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., LTD., 1947) 298.
[54] Dickinson 305.
[55] MidWestern Governor's Conference, Regional Issue Identification Project, NSF Grant, 1978, CSG/C files.

> structure, as theater. To the extent that such activities are focused within definite regions, consciously delimited and utilized, the opportunities for effective coordination are increased. Hence regional planning is a further stage in the more specialized or isolated processes of agriculture planning, industry planning, or city planning.[56]

Coordinating the actions of naturally interconnected states and/or municipalities by creating some system consisting of regional spheres might very well allow each of these regions to increase its ability to manage its amenities and resources in a manner more equitable and efficient than the way we do today. By reducing the players on the field for the corporate community to exploit, which I consider to be just one step of many along the path of Progress, regionalism holds the potential to ameliorate the corporate community's predilection for jumping boundaries and, thus, the illth resulting from such behavior.

After applying the subsidiarity and correspondence principles to the amenity-based location decision making process, the regional system of governance will, by theoretical definition, be able to reduce a corporation's ability to play local governmental entities off of each other to avariciously consume amenities at the common good's expense. But, since private firms are indeed mobile and locate wherever they deem to be most profitable to them, and since our current system of government more than inadequately deals with the machinations of corporate America, the following has occurred:

> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, industrial recruitment strategies, born in the Depression and honed to cutthroat sharpness in two decades of bitter postwar interstate competition for footloose industry, gradually gave way to what has been called "state entrepreneurialism." Industrial recruitment was pursued on the supply-side through proferring public subsidies for private firms in the form of tax abatements, investment credits, low interest loans, land writedowns, and labor training grants. These subsidies, which reduced the costs of operating businesses in particular states, were designed to influence business location choices. Evidence began to mount not only that such

[56] Lewis Mumford, The Culture of Cities (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970) 374.

> incentives rarely influenced business investment decisions but also that they had no significant job-generating effects.[57]

And yet we insist on giving corporations more and more money at the expense of the public good. Why?

Because the corporate propaganda campaign has been so successful that politicians at all levels have no choice but to tie economic performance focussed solely on short-term and atomistic gain to their political prospects and their ability to expediently provide as many services they can at the lowest possible tax rates. So the economic performance of the jurisdiction each politician represents is held hostage to the mobility of footloose firms, which are constantly being encouraged to relocate by rival jurisdictions via such techniques as tax abatements and infrastructure subsidies that detract from the public good.[58]

Aren't we as a society collectively crazy to be participating so readily in this *ne plus ultra* of idiocy by throwing good money after bad? What the heck do we think we are doing anyway? This behavior makes no sense to me. It also appears that such behavior will continue to exist, no matter the governmental construct, as long as corporations are allowed to continue to run the country the way they do today. Below we will discover several recommendations that any level of government, and not just the regional, can follow in order to improve the target effectiveness of its economic development policies.

Not only are the lower levels of government now finding themselves being pitted against each other by footloose firms, they are simultaneously being encouraged to do so by federal programs. These programs manipulate the balance in the local struggle between use and exchange goals so that one locality underbids other

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[57] Peter Eisinger, "State Economic Development in the 1990s: Politics and Policy Learning," Approaches to Economic Development, eds. John P. Blair and Laura A. Reese (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 179.

[58] Harold Wolman with David Spitzley, "The Politics of Local Economic Development," Approaches to Economic Development, eds. John P. Blair and Laura A. Reese (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 257-258.

localities in what it will do to keep its workers functioning at the barest minimum while keeping its socioeconomic environment viable and attractive to firms. And

> This new generation of policy approaches is a legacy of diverse federal programs encouraging [. . .] investment orientations, and greater risk taking [. . .] of own source revenues and substantial opportunity costs. There [is a] concomitant shift in policy orientation: the ascendance of market feasibility over social criteria [. . .] Few current American political institutions are geared to the consensual, cooperative decision processes demanded by this approach.[59]

And on top of all *that*, many corporations view the government as nothing but a tool designed to help generate growth and help economies run efficiently. Some even profess the belief that government should be run exactly like a business!

But the financial resources of a state and municipality are extremely limited. Since people as well as corporations are guilty of demanding more and more public services while increasingly paying less and less for them, the gap between income and expenditures has increased almost geometrically, and many state and municipal governments can now provide nothing more than the most essential services. The highly decentralized U.S. federal system of government as it exists today only increases the number of players competing for economic growth and increases the intensity of the contest, exacerbating a problem that is close to reaching a critical mass.

> The real consequence of governmental fragmentation is, not the realization of place-based democracy, but the ability of self-interested elites (either business groups or affluent residents) to control governments in order to pursue their own goals [. . .] In the U.S. today, communities are encouraged, even by national policy, to compete like business enterprises, to attract business enterprises, and to externalize the costs of this success [. . . by displacing] other values and concerns, such as the role of the polity in helping people find greater satisfaction in life, the role of government in building a strong community, or the role of government in caring for the disadvantaged [. . .]

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[59] Susan E. Clarke and Gary L. Gaile, "The Next Wave: Postfederal Local Economic Development Strategies," Approaches to Economic Development, eds. John P. Blair and Laura A. Reese (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 168, 173-174.

> Not only are the poorer citizens out of sight and out of mind, they lack even legal standing to demand wealth and service redistribution.[60]

These self-interested elites, who hem and haw about "big government" until they want to use it to further their own agenda, consist of some confabulation of business groups, affluent residents and government officials. Amidst their attempts to attract private sector investment, they endeavor to - and quite successfully I might add - shift the illth of development from a visible to a less visible form as well as away from social groups capable of combating development's costs to groups with less money and thus less political clout.[61] And as we discovered above, although it is proclaimed that this growth strategy benefits the entire community, the fruits of such machinations only line the pockets of a select few.

"Most analysts argue that this is the result of the tandem influence of federalism and capitalism."[62]

State and municipal political strategies now reflect a shift away from conventional economic development orientations toward market-based or entrepreneurial approaches. These levels of government are also forced to make financial commitments to activities of self-promotion in order to improve their ability to attract investment. They do this rather than investing said money into activities that actually directly build social capital, like skill and educational resources and training and actually putting a roof over everyone's head who wants one.

> Because so much of the growth mobilization effort involves government, local growth elites play a major role in electing local politicians, "watchdogging" their activities, and scrutinizing administrative detail. Whether in generating infrastructural resources, keeping peace on the homefront, or using the [local politicians or ambassadors to industry], local government is primarily concerned with increasing growth.[63]

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[60] John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch, Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 180, 198-199.
[61] Eisinger 205
[62] Edward G. Goetz and Terrence Kayser, "Competition and Cooperation in Economic Development: A Study of the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area," Approaches to Economic Development, eds. John P. Blair and Laura A. Reese (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 191.
[63] Logan and Molotch 63.

Logan and Molotch also go on to offer the basic hypothesis that "all capitalist places are the creations of activists who push hard to alter how markets function, how prices are set, and how lives are affected."[64] And, to generalize,

> Markets systematically establish divergences between individual and societal well-being. They establish an incentive to pursue individual interest at the expense of social interest because they guarantee that the rest of society cannot be relied on to safeguard one's individual welfare.[65]

The growth lobby in each sphere has been primed by the federal government to compete with the elite of other spheres in order to attract the limited amount of mobile capital, and thus the local government is primarily mobilized to bolster growth goals at the expense of societal well-being.

There is an unrelenting search, even in already successful places, for more and more because "aggregate growth is portrayed as a public good; increases in economic activity are believed to help the whole community. Growth, according to this argument, brings jobs, expands the tax base, and pays for urban services."[66] Logon and Molotch conclude, however, that:

> In many cases, probably in most, additional local growth under current arrangement is a transfer of wealth and life chances from the general public to the rentier groups and their associates. Use values of a majority are sacrificed for the exchange gains of the few. To question the wisdom of growth for any specific locality is to threaten a benefit transfer and the interests of those who gain from it.[67]

This is just one instance of how corporate propaganda and their control of government policies work to stifle thinkable thought so that those niggling, "What are the negative externalities of growth?" questions never even arise in the minds of the general populace so that those benefit transfers keep occurring unimpeded.

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[64] Logan and Molotch 3.
[65] Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *A Quiet Revolution in Welfare Economics*. The Metacrawler search engine. http://www.zmag.org/books/7/7b.htm 30 April 2002
[66] Logan and Molotch 33.
[67] Logan and Molotch 98.

While corporations and individuals may indeed be driven by greed, that greed is predicated upon and furthered by a socioeconomic and political system that cultivates then exalts this sin at the expense of all else. It also concentrates wealth and power in the hands of an elite, just as Hamilton intended. As a result, Jefferson's vision of an American democracy in which all people have an equal voice has been further extinguished.

However, in this post-postwar period, the oh so sparkling image of economic progress this corporate political economy has so craftily constructed has been hard to sustain. The restructuring of the industrial process from rigid and relatively stationary to flexible, footloose, and amenity oriented for ever-greater profit has imposed much social cost and limited the opportunities of many.

> Fewer Americans can count on the high income, good skills, and steady work that traditional industry fostered. Regional cleavages - between Sunbelt and Frostbelt, city and suburb, "bicoastal economy" and heartland - are common. Moreover, the cultural understandings and social structures that constitute economic institutions are in disarray. These days, workers are important because they consume, not because they produce anything the culture values. Public arenas of work and community foster private pursuits. Like the "great transformation" that occurred in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, abstract market forces that detach people from social institutions have overpowered specific forces of attachment identified with place.[68]

Planning, virtually from its inception in the U.S., has been primarily used as a tool by the growth machine. The field has never been intended nor used to replace the operation of the property marketplace, only to smooth out its functioning, and zoning has served merely as a tool for safeguarding and increasing property values.[69]

After coming to an understanding of the rationality that has underpinned the tremendous "growth" of America over the course of the past two hundred some odd years, it is no surprise that there is a crisis looming. Distressing signs of overpopulation, desertification, deforestation, and environmental and social

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[68] Sharon Zukin, Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 4.
[69] Logan and Molotch 153-155.

breakdown as a consequence of corporate-driven sprawl, are unfortunate realities in the world today. What do we think we are doing anyway? And what kind of country do we want to be? Shouldn't we at least begin to take some steps that at least ameliorate this increasingly desperate situation?

Because the state of our collective society today is not much of a recommendation for following that much-traveled path of spending such obscene sums for such, at the very best, negligible returns from corporate entities. We can learn from our collective experience in order to overcome these obstacles and flourish. (In order to see how, given the structural roots, one could begin to commence along this glass-strewn path, please see the brief essay in Appendix I.) But, as we will discuss next, although it will take years to repair the damage done by such atomistic economic development strategies and corporate propaganda activities, I believe that we are only mired in a period of which only a few decades can possibly remain. All of us need to ask ourselves how we as a society wish to be judged by the future, a future in which all of us must work together for the good of all to a far greater extent than we are doing today.

A great society is judged not by its wealth, but by how it deals with its illth. And, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, those who disagree should never forget that one's worst possible nightmare is the realization of one's dreams.

## E. What Our Past Means For Our Future

Planning is a powerful force in America that has become dangerous because it has been twisted by the powers that be to pursue the "truth" objectively, deliberately stripping the field of moral values in the process. Anything is permitted as long as it "creates jobs." But, despite this tenuous reasoning, living, and thus planning, without a moral position is impossible.

It's absolutely unavoidable that everyone is a moralist. Because an objective individual is someone who looks at the world and the way it works, someone who

takes a close look at things everyday and then thinks about what he sees. Someone who represents the world, the event, for himself and not for others, without judging what he sees. Which, again, is impossible. There is no such thing as objectivity in experiencing or planning any event or in taking any action.

Us planners also often look backwards in order to predict our way forward, with the result that the field has, to a large extent, been a matter of extrapolating past trends into the future. Looking at our past to predict our future certainly seems a reasonable way to proceed.[70] But only on the most linear of surfaces, because this reductionist method works only if we look upon our country's incredibly rapid development over the course of the past two hundred some odd years as a preordained conclusion. This myth has been widely, if not altogether wildly, inculcated and then encouraged by the corporate propaganda campaign.

As evidenced by the Jefferson-Hamilton debate over the construction of the Constitution, this great country's development did not occur in a straight and inexorable line, as though our present lofty position in the world today was somehow inevitable from the start. The entire history of the world has been one of constant experimentation: New ideas and experiments have constantly been tossed into the public arena. Why should our nation's historical progress be any different?

The only reason why we think how we live today is the most natural way ever is because this is all that we know.

The real lesson we need to draw from the Constitutional debate of 1787 and our collective history is that significant change in the way we live has been quite rare and episodic. At no point along the way was it foreseeable that the next step would occur: Such developments only seem inevitable in retrospect. We cannot rely on either nature or the market's "invisible hand" to step in and improve our situation for us if we make a mess of things today.

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[70] Niles Eldredge, Dominion (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).

There needs to be some sort of a change in the ground rules by which we have been playing this Game. But it is acknowledged that, as Machiavelli pointed out, "There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things."

## F. Cultivating Progress With Regionalism

It is strongly suggested by this thesis that promulgating some system of regional governance would help mitigate the prospects of incurring a self-inflicted disaster. By following the principles of correspondence and subsidiarity, regionalism might very well be able to manage negative externalities and amenities better than our contemporary system of governance. Now I could say that the American system is cracking and disintegrating and nothing anyone can do can hold it together indefinitely. Nor should it be held together. It is doomed.

Although I won't even dare mention anything of the sort, we have indeed seen that the process of federal unification and its subsequent administration has taken place with an utter disregard for many geographic and economic realities.

> And the result is that political areas, economic areas, and cultural areas do not exist in concentric relationship: overlappings, duplications, conflicts, and blank spaces characterize our territorial relationships. Though the sovereignty of the state is supposed to polarize all these relationships it actually adds to the confusion, since it often attempts to displace in the interests of "unity" more natural allegiances. In general, political unification has meant deregionalization [. . .] Finally, each state has tended to reach the pathological condition wittily described by the French critic: apoplexy at the center and paralysis at the extremities.[71]

If you will recall, governments operate on the correspondence principle, wherein they cater to the needs of the citizens within their sphere of authority, and the subsidiarity principle, which states that government responsibility for a function should be at the level of government that can deliver that function most effectively. However, since neither negative externalities resulting from corporate activities, like sprawl and

pollution, nor amenities are confined to the geographical entity designated by the current powers that be as a "state" or "municipality" but tend to affect several of these entities simultaneously, the door is opened for interregional governance and planning. Lewis Mumford was most eloquent in this regard:

> To think of the region as a whole and the city merely as one of its parts - that may hold promise [. . .] Regional planning asks [. . .] how the population and civic facilities can be distributed so as to promote and stimulate a vivid, creative life throughout the whole region - a region being any geographic area that possesses a certain unity of climate, soil, vegetation, industry and culture. The regionalist attempts to plan such an area so that all its sites and resources, from forest to city, from highland to water level, may be soundly developed, and so that the population will be distributed so as to utilize, rather than to nullify or destroy, its natural advantages. It sees people, industry and the land as a single unit.[72]

By eschewing the traditional federal/state/model and allowing localities to coordinate their activities as a region in order to remedy what is perceived to be a social ill, that problem will most likely be addressed rather than shunted aside into another sphere as they are today. Furthermore, a more natural form of governance at the regional level has the potential to manage amenities in a more comprehensive manner than the current administration of our government.

Because, as we have seen, the American brand of Federalism® is a very complex and duplicative system of government that involves both intergovernmental cooperation and competition, illustrating both the weaknesses of the federal system and the means by which they are supposed to be overcome. Another obvious weakness is that constantly changing circumstances require a constant redistribution of power between the municipal, state and national governments. This readjustment inevitably involves considerable friction, and it also lags well behind the changing circumstances due to expediently driven pragmatic politics. Besides reducing the need for such readjustment, regional governments are more likely and better able to deliver the services that local residents want and manage illth than our current federal

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[71] Mumford 348-349.

government's sole reliance on dividing power between one central bureaucracy, fifty state bureaucracies, and umpteen municipalities.

Although regions do not presently have formal places in the political system, "regionalism has been a persistent if not always persuasive part of the American political tradition."[73] Furthermore, a new regionalism has emerged based on common geographical and governmental ties, as well as the common flow of business and political power. John Naisbitt characterizes this trend as a "tough new brand of economic regionalism, a geographic chauvinism that grows out of the unique problems and resources common to a group of states"[74] or localities.

> Many of the most vital problems of modern society find their common ground in the basic concept of the Region - what kind of area it shall be, what purpose it shall serve, how it should work. Regionalization as a fact, if not Regionalism as a movement [. . . ], is a fundamental feature of the organization of our national life. Business has long recognized its indispensability. From the standpoint of government, each of the countries of Western civilization is faced with two main problems of internal reconstruction and planning, alike centered in the problem of Regions: first, the need for a new hierarchy of local government areas; and secondly, the need for new areas for the planning of town and countryside, not as so many isolated fragments, but as parts of a complete nation-wide pattern, comprising a number of organized units [. . .]
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> All these varied problems have a common denominator, namely, the demand for a new unit in place of the existing local government unit, one which shall as far as possible have a social and economic foundation, with the contained settlements as nuclei of life and organization.[75]

However, as was discussed throughout this entire essay, regional governmental organizations clearly do not fit into the federal political system. Despite this glaring inadequacy on the part of our federal government,

> There is considerable consensus among the planning community that effective strategies for creating more sustainable growth and land use patterns will

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[72] Lewis Mumford, "Regions - To Live In," Survey Graphics May 1925: 151-152.
[73] United States, Superintendent of Documents, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, Multistate Regionalism (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972) 1.
[74] John Naisbitt, Megatrends (New York: Warner Books, 1982) 108-109.
[75] Dickinson 3-4.

> require regional perspectives and strategies. There are, however, many current obstacles working against a regional perspective. Local governments have significant economic and political incentives to act parochially [. . .] The creation of more compact and sustainable forms of development will require that these underlying disincentives to a regional perspective be addressed.[76]

As such, it must be realized that the creation of a regional system of planning and governance is, at the very least, a long-term project.

> The most important recommendations would include means of developing low and middle-income housing on a regional basis, plans for the development of transportation facilities linking the region's subcenters, and the development of overall regional zoning guidelines [. . .] The creation of such a plan, of course, would only touch the surface of the region's major problems. The task of controlling and directing the powerful underlying forces now shaping the region will be long and difficult.[77]

Robert Dickinson extends this argument further in his City Region and Regionalism.

> The solution to this vast problem lies not only in the reorganization of the system of local government, but also in carrying out research and working out principles for the redefinition of local government areas so that they shall conform to the optimum demands of social and economic needs of economy, and for efficiency of government.[78]

Nevertheless, some initial movement in proposing coordinated policies toward major regional problems should be undertaken as soon as possible. Here are several questions that immediately arise:

> What criteria should be used to delimit the boundaries of the new units? How may social considerations be given their proper weight along with those of efficiency, economy, or administrative convenience? For it must be emphasized that considerations for the reorganization of local government will need to go far beyond the immediate interests of economy or efficiency.[79]

However, as we will see, states are increasingly interacting, and regional organizations are also increasingly being accepted on a multistate basis. This new regionalism can be attributed to two distinct trends, which were elucidated throughout

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[76] Beatley and Manning 72.
[77] Fitch 161.
[78] Dickinson 63.
[79] Dickinson 63.

this section of this essay. The first was the expansion of the role of the federal government in the post-Depression period and the subsequent withdrawal of the national government from many programs, which began in the early 1970s. Second, a series of events including a decline in federal aid, lengthy periods of economic stagnation, and a readjustment of the regional power structure, as evidenced by the shift from the Snowbelt to the Sunbelt.

As we have seen, many amenities as well as the challenges facing many state and municipal jurisdictions transcend those spheres of governance and violate the principles of subsidiarity and correspondence, requiring, by definition, that there be a more cohesive response at a regional level. By applying these principles to the increasingly amenity-based location decision paradigm, a regional form of governance, by its theoretical nature, holds the real potential to reduce a corporation's ability to play local spheres of government off of each other by reducing the number of players on the field.

While political (and subsequently politicians) and taxation jurisdictions will unfortunately remain a reality, the region, just like the state or municipality, does not benefit from the pirating of business and industry from one community to the next. It is my suggestion that the resulting regions' economic development strategies need to further moderate the intensity of interregional competition, much like it theoretically exists to ameliorate the negative externalities of development and improve upon the public sector's ability to manage amenities. Along these lines, according to Timothy Bartik,

> The *national* efficiency of regional economic development policies would be improved by national policies that limit regional policies with large negative spillovers and that encourage regional policies with large positive spillovers. Such national policies seem unlikely in the U.S. in the immediate future. In the absence of federal government intervention, however, encouraging regional governments to pursue regionally efficient policies is likely, on

> average, to increase the efficiency of the national economy. In general, regional economic development is not a zero-sum game.[80]

However, it is conceded that, like political and taxation jurisdictions, the practice of luring corporations with policy tools that subsidize the risk of doing business, like abatements, investment credits, and land writedowns, will continue - at least as long as our corporate-driven political economy continues to exist as it does today. But these goals can be better decided by insinuating a more comprehensive evaluation of the target effectiveness of economic development strategies within a regional system of government.

## G. Improving the Target Effectiveness of Economic Development Policy

Governments employ a wide variety of policies to promote economic development. Kevin Leicht and J. Craig Jenkins have identified three distinct general strategies used by the state level of government. They are the entrepreneurial, the industrial recruitment, and a deregulation approach, neither of which are mutually exclusive. The major difference between them lies in the assumptions about the nature of economic development as well as the role of the local government in that process.

Based on the work of Logan and Molotch, Leon Taylor, [81] and Fitch[82], who discusses the role of the growth machine in New York City's development in his

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[80] Timothy J. Bartik, "The Market Failure Approach to Regional Economic Development Policy," Approaches to Economic Development, eds. John P. Blair and Laura A. Reese (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 21.

[81] Leon Taylor, "Can City Hall Create Private Jobs?" Dilemmas of Urban Economic Development: Issues in Theory and Practice, eds. Richard D. Bingham and Robert Mier (London: Sage Publications, 1997) 203.

[82] As well as the following resources:
Robert B. Reich, "Bidding Against the Future?" The Region: The Economic War Among the States June 1996: 26-30.
Joe Mattey and Mark Spiegel, "On the Efficiency Effects of Tax Competition For Firms," The Region: The Economic War Among the States June 1996: 50-51.
Thomas J. Holmes, "The Effects of Tax Discrimination When Local Governments Compete for a Tax Base," Working Paper 544 (Minneapolis: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis Research Department, 1995).

seminal work The Assassination of New York, it is my opinion that these strategies are being applied at all levels of government in our current political and economic form. The strategy of deregulation minimizes a localities ability to control the private sector.

> Past discussions have typically treated deregulation policies as another recruitment incentive. While they share the underlying focus on reducing production factor costs (especially labor costs), they embody a distinctive approach to the nature of the state. Instead of indirectly involving government in new investment through capital and tax subsidies and the allocation of public investments, deregulation policies attempt to reduce governmental regulation of private economic activity. In other words, the aim is to turn back the welfare state by weakening labor unions, reducing governmental regulation of employer/employee relations, and relaxing environmental and similar regulations that directly affect the production process. The state is seen as a negative force that should be limited by maintaining the legal and social environment for private economic activity.[83]

The entrepreneurial approach focuses on new firm and technology development, and is "based on the assumption that economic growth is a qualitative transformation toward higher value-added production."[84] The local government in question assumes an entrepreneurial function in order to facilitate the economic development process.

> Central to entrepreneurial strategy has been the development of new enterprises through public venture capital funds in which the state takes an equity or royalty position and business incubators and technology parks that provide technical assistance and subsidized rents for start-up enterprises. Some states have chartered privately operated and funded venture capital programs, offering a tax subsidy for assuming the risks of start-up ventures. A second aim has been the development of new technology through product development centers, technology research centers, special technology grants, and research and development (R&D) tax credits targeted on high technology.[85]

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[83] Kevin Leicht and Craig Jenkins, "Three Strategies of Economic Development: Entrepreneurial, Industrial Recruitment, and Deregulation Policies in the American States," Economic Development Quarterly, August 1994: 259-260.
[84] Leicht and Jenkins 258.
[85] Leicht and Jenkins 258.

On the other hand, the industrial recruitment strategy is based on "the quantitative increase of existing products by offering incentives for the relocation or expansion of existing enterprises."[86] This strategy is also predicated upon classic location decision theory, which does not adequately address the issue of amenities, in that firms choose to locate where production factor costs are lowest.

> The earliest recruitment programs were capital subsidy programs launched by southern states in the 1930s to encourage the relocation of northern industry. By the 1960s, industrial revenue bonds had been supplemented by a wide range of capital subsidies: direct state loans for building equipment purchase, and plant expansion; building and equipment loan guarantees; public chartered development credit corporations; and various types of revenue bond financing. States have also used an array of nondiscretionary tax policies for which investors can automatically qualify: property tax abatements on land and capital improvements; tax exemptions on manufacturers' inventories and equipment purchases; sales tax exemptions on equipment and raw materials; excise tax exemptions; accelerated depreciation tax credits; investment tax credits; job creation tax credits; tax credits for research and development; and tax credits for the purchase of state products.[87]

Deregulation, which allows corporations to make the rules and not just break them, is "the least desirable strategy of the three."[88] But it is the latter two strategies that particularly underscore the fact that local growth lobbyists will do just about anything to reduce factor costs and create a "favorable" business climate at the expense of the pubic good.

By acting like an entrepreneur, the public sector is impeded from helping many individuals improve their quality of life, building a strong community, and caring for the disadvantaged. And, with each strategic innovation by one locality's economic development cabal, other localities must match if not supercede their deals. In other words, the public sector diverts its tax revenue to the private sector so that it is no longer able to supply the same level of public goods and services as before. In fiscal 200, for example,

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[86] Leicht and Jenkins 258.
[87] Leicht and Jenkins 258-259.
[88] Leicht and Jenkins 267.

> The total cost of business tax preferences, including those that benefit business investors or subsidize business products, is estimated to be $195 billion - far, far larger than direct-spending business subsidies. One can easily calculate that personal and corporate tax rates are about 20 percent higher than they'd need to be if these tax preferences for business and investment did not exist. Or alternatively, the government could provide far more public services than it currently does at the same statutory tax rates that are now imposed. Citizens and companies that do not benefit from these tax preferences have a right to ask whether they are serving the public good. [. . .]
>
> Government must provide the legal system, the public infrastructure and the educational system. It must set the rules for commerce, deal with areas where markets do not work well, such as environmental protection and consumer protection, and smooth out the rough edges of capitalism to make sure that those who do not succeed are not left too far behind. It takes substantial public resources to build such a well-functioning economic and social framework, and it behooves the government not to waste its resources on usurping the role of markets where they do well on their own.
>
> "Corporate welfare" is a prime example of where government can undermine its ability to do its own job while simultaneously interfering with the private sector's ability to do what it does best. Curbing such unwarranted interference should be high on the list of those who want a more efficient government and a strong private economy.[89]

To conclude the above, the currently administrated public sector's expedient method of reducing taxes and granting business incentives in order to win the favor of the corporate elite destroys social capital and produces the opposite of the intended effect: The need to raise revenue via taxation in order to combat the illth resulting from corporate welfare. However, one question still remains. That is, "Do these strategies even contribute to economic growth, anyway?"

> Overall, economic development strategies have relatively little impact on economic growth. The only proactive efforts are for business incorporations and failures, suggesting that these largely affect the number of enterprises. None of the strategies created manufacturing jobs or growth in state product, which are more meaningful indicators of growth.[90]

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[89] Robert S. McIntyre, "Statement of Robert S. McIntyre Director, Citizens for Tax Justice Before the House Committee on the Budget Regarding Unnecessary Business Subsidies," Before the House Committee on the Budget, Washington D.C., 30 June 1999, http://www.ctj.org/html/corpwelf.htm

[90] Leitch and Jenkins 266.

It is becoming quite apparent that the business subsidies employed by these economic development strategies both spawn and then feed sprawl while also inciting war among neighboring localities fighting to, and I use the term loosely, "grow."

> Low-density development drives up infrastructure bills. Desperate for tax revenue because residential development doesn't pay for itself, politicians offer tax abatements and other inducements for footloose firms. Homeowner taxes soar to fill the gap - even while street repairs, schools, libraries and other services suffer. The inefficiencies of hundreds of splintered suburban governments - described by the Star as "mini-monuments to social and class division" - run up costs in ways the first home buyers never imagined.
>
> "Blame it on sprawl," writes Lest and Spivak. "It scattered us like ashes to the wind. A cacophony of separate, often competing governments provokes political polarization. When localities try to work together, they bump up against barriers that have dogged them for decades - parochialism, racism, animosity. Distrust dominates civic debates." The result? "An incoherent and dysfunctional region."[91]

For expedient and practical political reasons, governors and mayors use incentives and subsidies in an inefficient manner by not pursuing the general welfare of those of us living within their jurisdictions.

> If one assumes that each state or local government serves the interests of all its residents, and that these governments can use many tax instruments, economic development competition should be efficient. Competition should bid business taxes down to equal the marginal cost of providing businesses with public services, plus the marginal environmental and congestion costs created by the business, minus the marginal social benefit the business provides by creating jobs. Such a business tax system is economically efficient.
>
> One problem with this argument for the efficiency of economic development competition is that governors or mayors may not pursue the interests of all local residents. Governors or mayors in low-unemployment areas may offer large incentives, though the benefits for local residents are small, to help land developers. Governors or mayors may use long-term tax abatements to pass the costs of incentives on to their political successors. Governors or mayors

[91] Neal R. Peirce, *The Malady of Urban Sprawl*. http://www.mtn.org/bungalow/articles/gazette_96spring/page3_urbansprawl.html 30 April 2002.

> may favor the large branch plants that get media attention over helping smaller businesses.[92]

We need to begin remedying this abuse of business incentives, although reforming these practices will indeed take time. In any case, evidence abounds that local levels of government, including the theoretical region, must target their incentives in a more improved manner in order to illuminate the true costs of such policies and to encourage more cooperation among governmental entities. William Schweke, Carl Rist and Brian Dabson make these following recommendations:[93]

**Strengthen the strategic focus of development programs by:**

- Limiting development incentives to strategic uses
- Establishing a target rate of return for development incentives

**Increase accountability of public funds by:**

- Establishing mechanisms for enforcing accountability, such as legally binding performance contracts
    1. Recisions - Canceling a subsidy agreement;
    2. Clawbacks - Recovery of all or part of the subsidy costs;
    3. Penalties - Special charges for nonperformance or relocation; and
    4. Recalibrations - Subsidy adjustments to reflect changing business conditions
- Separating responsibility for marketing, negotiating and evaluating incentive deals
- Requiring "sunsetting" of all tax incentives
- Requiring "truth in financing" for tax incentives

**Consider litigation over tax incentives by:**

- Exploring the legality of state and local tax incentives
- Inserting legally binding performance language in incentive agreements

**Strengthen the disclosure of incentives by:**

- Creating stronger tax expenditure budgets and processes in all states

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[92] Timothy J. Bartik, *The Economic War Among the States: Eight Issues For Policy Toward Economic Development Incentives*. http://news.mpr.org/features/199605/01_wittl_econwar/studyguide/bartik.htm 30 April 2002.

[93] William Schweke, Carl Rist and Brian Dabson, "Bidding for Business: Are Cities and States Selling Themselves Short?" (Corporation For Enterprise Development, 1994).

- Disclosing the names of companies receiving a minimum amount in tax expenditures annually
- Disclosing results of all development agreements with companies

**Encourage regional collaboration by:**

- Signing compacts between states on fiscally responsible development competition
- Encouraging substate regions to collaborate on new development strategies and to rationalize their use of incentives

**Discourage the use of development incentives by local governments by:**

- Using state intergovernmental aid formulas to discourage the use of wasteful tax incentives by local governments
- Encouraging metropolitan tax base sharing within a state

For further reading on the subject of improving the target effectiveness of the entrepreneurial, industrial recruitment and deregulation economic development strategies at all levels of government, including the region, please be sure to refer to the work of Larry C. Ledebur and Douglas P. Woodward[94] as well as Keith R. Ihlanfeldt and Bartik.[95]

## H. Conclusion

Alexander Hamilton proposed a federal system of government that exerts great power in order to mitigate what he construed to be the negative effects of a true democracy of the people, for the people, and by the people. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson believed in the inherent honesty and virtue of each individual, and that an adherence to any system of political economy catering solely to industry would concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few at the great expense of the many.

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[94] Larry C. Ledebur and Douglas P. Woodward, "Adding a Stick to the Carrot: Location Incentives with Clawbacks, Rescissions, and Recalibrations," Approaches to Economic Development, eds. John P. Blair and Laura A. Reese (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 51.
[95] Ledebur and Woodward 68.

In this essay we have seen Jefferson's prediction borne out over the course of the twentieth century as Hamilton's political economy of capitalism, predicated upon his utter disdain of the body politic, dominated. And thus his ideology is most directly tied to both the tremendous wealth and, at the very least, just as tremendous illth of our country. We went on to see how the interests of a wealthy elite have indeed been exclusively catered to by a federal political system that serves as nothing but a profit generating machine by those countless corporations that abuse it at the expense of the public good and weal.

This systematic behavior symptomatic of avarice and a lust for Power has extinguished the fundamentals of American democracy - a democracy in which all people are only purported to have an equal voice - in the process. Also, since the modern corporation is incapable of commitment to community or any other social concern that might diminish its profitability, corporate loyalty in and to America is a fabricated myth perpetuated by a well-coordinated, well-funded, and immensely successful propaganda campaign. Friedman among countless other nattering nabobs of free market fundamentalism - a group that happens to exclude their own laissez faire icon Smith from its numbers, by the way - even go so far as to argue that pursuing any goal besides the maximization of profit is immoral!

A corporation is, at least in any sane individual's mind, "an artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of the law." But, in an 1886 ruling, the Supreme Court obviously thought otherwise and expressed an opinion that, in my opinion, went well beyond the separation of church and state by anointing the corporate entity as what amounts to a flesh and blood being. And, by extending the equal protection provision of the Fourteenth Amendment to corporations, these entities have gained a degree of immunity from government supervision, which is supposed to represent the interests of the public at large, that is, you and I.

Corporations have gained a degree of immunity from government supervision, in that now they can use the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause to claim an unfair application of the law whenever regulatory action is proposed on behalf of the

community or workforce. In other words, "rather than be granted their existence at the pleasure of the community (presumably because they benefit the community), they now stand as equals with the community, contesting community rules as any other member."[96] So, in effect and in historical reality, they are no longer made to be socially accountable except under the most limited, circumscribed conditions; they are exempt from any standards of individual responsibility; and they have no obligation to help solve the problems they themselves have created in any way whatsoever. Furthermore, the corporate propaganda campaign has led to the destruction of the basic tenets of democracy, allowing the corporate sector to usurp the mantle of patriotism in order to further their own pecuniary ends.

Just as Jefferson predicted and Hamilton desired over two hundred years ago.

Our current governmental construct takes into account neither the unique patterns of spatial development of amenities, which know neither state- nor municipal-mandated boundaries, nor the interconnectedness of each region, nor the spillover effects produced, distorted and then disseminated by the municipal or state geographic form. In other words, the target effectiveness of contemporary economic development policies are, at best, poor, because the jurisdictional grid is not cohesive, and the multi-various governmental efforts are either altogether disconcerted or not concerted enough. As a result, the common good is being winnowed away so that the corporate elite can continue to reap a risk-free profit.

On the other hand, after devolving or evolving responsibility to a more appropriate sphere of governance, the resulting regional form of government would, in theory, improve responsiveness and the quality of the public services being provided to the populace within each individual sphere. It is also argued that, since amenities are increasingly being insinuated into the corporate location decision process, and since these amenities tend not to be constrained by any of the pre-existing spheres of governance, these two principles should be applied to them. By

[96] Elizabeth J. Mueller, personal interview, 1 May 2002.

applying these principles in such a manner, a regional form of governance, by its very nature, holds the real potential to reduce a corporation's ability to play local spheres of government off of each other in the Growth game by reducing the number of players on the field. Furthermore, by using the recommendations on how to improve the target effectiveness of business incentives as a launching point in the quest to ameliorate the illth produced by jurisdictional boundary jumping, this corporate practice can be reigned in to a better extent than it is now.

> Sometimes it is in winter so bitingly cold that one says: It is too cold, what do I care if there is summer to follow, the evil surpasses by far the good. But with or without our permission there comes an end at last to the bitter frost, and on a certain morning the wind has turned and we have a thaw. Comparing the state of the weather to our own state of mind and our circumstances - like the weather subject to change and variety - I have still some hope left for a change for the better.[97]

We are clearly entering into a new reality that requires us to break many of the rationales we have used to solve problems in the past. It is important to accept our current situation and realize the dire need - no, better: The responsibility to act.

[97] Vincent Van Gogh

## Appendix I: Returning to Our Democratic Roots

### A. Introduction

Alexander Hamilton proposed a federal system of government that exerts great power in order to mitigate what he construed to be the negative effects of a true democracy of the people, for the people, and by the people. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson believed that government should encourage the honesty and virtue of each individual, and that an adherence to any system of political economy catering solely to industry would concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few at the great expense of the many.

Throughout this essay we have seen Jefferson's prediction borne out over the course of the twentieth century as Hamilton's political economy of capitalism, predicated upon his utter disdain of the body politic, dominated. And thus his ideology is most directly tied to both the tremendous wealth and, at the very least, just as tremendous illth of our country. We went on to see how the interests of a wealthy corporate elite have indeed been exclusively catered to by a federal political system that serves as nothing but a profit generating machine by those who abuse it at the expense of the public good and weal.

This systematic behavior symptomatic of avarice and a lust for power has extinguished the fundamentals of American democracy - a democracy in which all people are only purported to have an equal voice - in the process. Also, since the modern corporation is incapable of commitment to community or any other social concern that might diminish its profitability, corporate loyalty in and to America is a fabricated myth perpetuated by a well-coordinated, well-funded, and immensely successful propaganda campaign.

One negative externality produced by the zero-sum activities espoused by those benefiting the most from the status quo that is as impossible to quantify as it is beyond value has been the co-option and bastardization of democracy to suit their own ambitions. This fascist use of propaganda has led to the destruction of the basic

tenets of democracy, allowing the private sector to usurp the mantle of patriotism in order to further their own pecuniary ends.

Just as Jefferson predicted and Hamilton desired over two hundred years ago.

In order to Progress in every sense of that word, we must force a return to our true and enlightened democratic roots so that everyone who participates in our great society can have as equal a voice as they desire. A governmental structure needs to be formulated that represents a viable, pluralistic system of integrated democracies abounding in virtue, honor, and good sense while also representing a society that preserves the integrity and sanctity of each citizen. And his ability to think out loud unfettered.

Every sustainable and generative planning and governmental effort needs to be promulgated for the people and, more importantly, have direct input from, the people. A plan that is instituted without all the costs and benefits being weighed and discussed by all of the people whom the plan actually concerns and affects will only continue to serve a vocal, wealthy minority while negatively impacting our ability to attain our country's full potentiality. Pluralism and advocacy theory is necessary when planning for our future because the strict rationalist/pragmatic approach that has been adhered to up to this point in our collective history is too simplistic and exclusive since it considers knowledge to be value neutral. Since goals and values are not neutral, as wide an array of views as possible must be taken into account. None can be excluded; the individual and the long-term well being of society is of utmost importance, not just the bottom line or expedient and practical political decisions.

Cultural norms and values can be determined via a transactive communicative practice and behavioral approach linking knowledge to the interactive social processes of action and learning, which is important because strict rational scientific planning is shaped and distorted by those in power. It is also quite myopic, in that socially constructed theories and assumptions blind it. All decisions and the reasons leading up to them must be communicated to the populace, allowing for public

debate, true democratic control, and the eradication of the structural barriers of class and race to sustainable economic growth. This process, however, is seemingly incompatible with the current state of affairs.

Because the marriage between America's capitalist economy and its inflexible federal system of government does not serve freedom *per se* but tends to solely preserve the status quo by keeping people in their specialized places and protecting the position of corporations in the power structure. The people must be allowed to participate in government without restraint and despite all the confusion, or they will continue to be looked down upon with sovereign contempt as the most simple of subjects, if not insignificant flecks.

## B. Inculcating Democracy into Society

Although democracy is not one doctrine but many, here is a definition that I have cobbled together: Democracy, which serves to denounce coercion and injustice while extolling freedom, is the rule of the people based on the free and spontaneous cooperation among individuals, groups, regions and nations. It is a form of government with limited powers under which liberty is safeguarded for voluntary cooperation and individual action in which the ruling power of the State is legally vested in the members of a community as a whole - not in any particular class or classes.[98] And

> Where the people rule you cannot stifle independent views. You cannot presume on the ignorance of the people, nor on the appearance of apathy they may show, nor on the power party organization may acquire over them. If you can get at the people - for that is the difficulty - things will eventually go well. But the people must have time.[99]

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[98] J.S. Mill, Considerations on Representative Government (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1862). Alexander de Toqueville, Democracy in America, (New York: New American Library, 1956). Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, Industrial Democracy (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1965). John Dewey, Freedom and Culture (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939).

[99] James Bryce, Modern Democracies (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924) 150.

Community, and not the market, is an obvious necessity if democracy is to be given a proper role and place in the construction and management of that Community.

> Democracies prefer markets but markets don't prefer democracies. Having created the conditions that make markets possible, democracy must also do all the things that markets undo or cannot do. It must educate citizens so that they can use their markets wisely and contain market abuses well; [and] it must support values and a common culture in which the market has no interest and does not try to reward.[100]

The challenges to democracy are obviously often quite difficult to meet. The reasons for this difficulty are rooted in ignorance, indifference and lack of foresight as well as to a widespread and deliberate refusal to give up privileged positions and the outdated concepts that support them.

"Big business (has) been continually on the defensive against muckrakers, hostile public opinion and related efforts to check, through various forms of regulation, the worst abuses of financial and industrial power."[101] As a result, the implementation of democratic principles within all, and not just the very most select, communities, is one of the most vital hurdles standing before us.

Only simple minds believe that criticism and discussion will dissolve loyalty and undermine security because it is precisely criticism and discussion that has discovered new truths and established new forms of civilized life. People change their opinions all the time. "When I discover new facts, I change my mind. What do you do?" is Keynes' oft-quoted saying. To quote from Balzac's Père Goriot:

> A man who prides himself on going in a straight-line through life is an idiot who believes in infallibility. There are no such things as principles, there are only events, and there are no laws but those of expediency. A man of talent accepts the events and circumstances in which he finds himself, and turns everything to his own ends. If laws and principles were fixed and invariable, nations would not change them as readily as we change our shirts. The individual is not obliged to be more particular than the nation.[102]

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[100] Barber 243.
[101] Carey 61.
[102] Balzac 44.

Democracy is the ability to think out loud unfettered. Free criticism and open discussion will lead to a new sense of Community and of the common good to be shared by all. Sometimes this can and should take the form of civil disobedience and struggle.

Each individual act of civil disobedience is based upon nothing but the sum total wisdom gleaned from that individual's past mistakes and experiences in order to rectify laws or prescribed mores that that individual deems to be unfair or unjust or are being improperly used to accomplish untoward ends. Governor Rick Perry of Texas (Rep.) elucidated this mentality best when, after praying with students in an East Texas public school, he said: "It may be illegal, but it's needed . . . It's exactly what Texans need and want more of. Absolutely I'm sensing it, and I'm sensing it strongly."[103]

Dietrich Rueschemeyer furthers this concept of civil disobedience and places it within the context of democratic struggle:

> The arena of political debate - the public sphere in which the collective good is determined and public policy is formed - is inherently generalist in character. Yet its boundaries, whether narrow or wide, are well guarded and often sharply contested. The political essence of mobilization or, as Mannheim called this critical feature of the emerging modern political orders, of "fundamental democratization" is precisely that new, broad-based groups seek and gain entrance into this public arena. Even in the most open societies such entry has been the result of struggle, and in no society is the eventual outcome equal access and equal participation. Even the mere right of suffrage for workers, peasants, women, and minorities has been the outcome of organized struggle.[104]

Therefore, for a political process to be truly democratic, large-scale unrest must be creatively channeled so as to produce a more rational realignment of the formal legal structure and its administrative applications concerning real problems of social

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[103] Ken Herman, "Perry Praises School Prayer," Austin-American Statesman 20 October 2001, Metro Section: 1.
[104] Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Power and the Division of Labour (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986) 163.

change. Here is a great quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., who espoused channeling anger into nonviolent protest against racism and for civil rights:

> I explained [to my daughter] that because things are as they are, someone has to take a stand, that it is necessary for someone to go to jail, because many Southern officials seek to maintain the barriers that have historically been erected to exclude the colored people. I tried to make her understand that someone had to do this to make the world better - for *all* children.[105]

To really Progress, in every sense of that word and not just in its material, the underlying political and economic system must necessarily be broad-minded, open to progress, and tolerant of others with different views. This is a type of government that will, in other words, be acting like a democracy.

Needless to say, corporate propaganda has had a disastrous impact on critical thought and thus democracy itself throughout much of America's history. Although today the freedom to criticize is quite broad in expression, it is very limited as to scope.

> The economic oligarchy's control of the means of education and life represents a more indirect, more subtle, and more discrete method of containing the mass of the people. It has been employed on a large-scale. In it, constraint and persuasion meet.[106]

> In politics as well, large-scale use of the mass media has enabled the oligarchy to maintain an artificial consensus. Analysis of the television programs, radio broadcasts, and the press of the Western democracies shows how constantly the following themes are repeated: the superiority of capitalist production at the expense of all else, the dangers of socialism, the need for the concentration of firms, the skills of businessmen, the relative incompetence of politicians, the inefficiency and high cost of public services, the dangers of opposing ideologies (that is, of efforts to envisage a society that is different from the existing one), and the irresponsible character of the intellectuals, who are portrayed as capable only of criticizing the established order.[107]

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[105] Martin Luther King, Jr., interview, The Playboy Interview, by Alex Haley (New York: Playboy Press, 1981) 114.
[106] Maurice Duverger, Modern Democracies: Economic Power versus Political Power, trans. Charles L. Markman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) 86.
[107] Duverger 139.

One startling effect of this overwhelmingly successful propaganda campaign has been the erasure of the Truth that, although private enterprise cannot work without the public's support, the public can survive quite well without private enterprise, thank you very much.

> When we were told that by freedom we understood free enterprise, we did very little to dispel this monstrous falsehood, and all too often we have acted as though we too believed it was wealth and abundance that were at stake in the postwar conflict between the "revolutionary" countries in the East and West. Wealth and economic well-being, we have asserted, are the fruits of freedom, while we should have been the first to know that this kind of "happiness" was the blessing of this country prior to the Revolution, and that its cause was natural abundance [. . . not] the unchained, unbridled "private initiative" of capitalism, which in the absence of natural wealth has led everywhere to unhappiness and mass poverty [. . .]
>
> Economic growth may one day turn out to be a curse rather than a good, and under no conditions can it either lead into freedom or constitute proof of its existence.[108]

A nation constructed upon such a foundation of absolute value is always authoritarian in principle and in fact whenever any citizen disagrees with the absolute value structure of the state and lives his life in a way that does not conform to that value structure. "The Western system attempts to hide this contradiction behind the theory of the 'consumer society'."[109] And the modern American political and economic institutional structure - a compulsory association that organizes domination, as Max Weber would say - assures productivity, growth, innovation and, most importantly, consumption more efficiently than any other in history.

At the same time and, ironically enough, by the same process, it causes a great debasement in the quality of life. Because the fact of the matter is, as we have seen, that there are no such things as "free" choices. Every individual economic action not only is holistic by nature, its impact is inequitably and artificially bifurcated by the zero-sum game inherent in this system - one positive, and one negative.

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[108] Hannah Arnendt, On Revolution (London: Faber & Faber, 1963) 219-220.
[109] Duverger 191.

The best way to ameliorate if not overcome entirely this shortsighted and avaricious predilection is via education.

> The introduction of more active, expressive, and self-directing factors [are not] mere accidents, they are necessities of the larger social evolution [. . .] When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the interests of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious.[110]

Education can either serve to make a person fit for the world as it is or to help make him able to change it.

Although the latter is widely and publicly lauded as the most important, education in the American context has proven to be a stabilizing rather than a progressive element in society. As William Cobbett observed, community indoctrination in the guise of what passes for education only serves to keep conservative political values safe.

> They wish to make cheap the business of learning to read, if that business be performed in their schools; and thus inveigle the children of poor men into those schools; and there to teach those children, along with reading, all those notions which calculated to make them content in a state of slavery.[111]

The ideal aim of any true democracy's educational policy ought to be the deliberate function of a community of equals, each of whom enjoys all the luxuries of knowledge, skill and culture. That being the case, a Democracy does not impose the values of some one, or some few, or even the majority for that matter, on anyone else. Walt Whitman argued that it was the role of government to educate

> Not merely to rule [. . .] but to develop, to open up to cultivation, to encourage the possibilities of all beneficent and manly outcroppage, and of that aspiration for independence, and the pride and self-respect latent in all characters.

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[110] John Dewey, "The School and Social Progress," in The School and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 28-29.
[111] William Cobbett, as quoted by Leon Fink in: Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 243.

Whitman goes on to add that democratic civilization must not rely on "the rule of the best men, the born heroes and captains of the race (as if such ever, or one time out of a hundred, get into the big places, elective or dynastic)" but on the government's capacity "to train communities through all their grades . . . to rule themselves."[112]

The fundamental assumption of Democracy is that one wants to do what one ought to do, to help and not to hinder others, to make life better not for themselves alone, and that opinions are counted, not weighed. In conclusion, it is the advocates of so-called capitalistic freedom, who base their reasoning upon surplus and consumption (where food is to be sold, and not necessarily eaten) rather than upon want and production, that are guilty of intentionally breaking up any kind of natural socioeconomic Progress. No matter how vociferously they criticize those who criticize them for doing so.

Abraham Lincoln best summarized all of the above in his Second State of the Union Address: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew."

[112] Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1949) 17-20.

# Volume II: A Proposal for Progress, in Black

## *The Living Circus*

## 1

## The Ways of Men

**T**he two brothers had worked the land their whole lives, and so had their fathers, and their father's fathers. They only knew the tilling of soil and were not warlike. They only wanted to live in peace in their villages, cultivate their fields and support their families.

But then, one day, don Santiago came from Guadalajara, waving a piece of paper. It was embossed with all of the impressive stamps and seals that made it an official document.

He summoned the two men to the zocalo in Tlaquepaque and interpreted this document tailored to suit his own needs above all else to them. At his side were soldiers, which were the only things Eusebio and Cirilo could truly read and understand. The law proclaimed that their land, the only home they had ever known, was now, by all rights, don Santiago's. It also ordained that they must work for don Santiago, on his sugar finca, or never see their ancestral lands again.

Neither Eusebio nor Cirilo would ever conceive of packing up their families and leaving, nor could they question don Santiago's words. They had already learned from other Indians that they were always wrong, and the finqueros were always right. If they questioned any finquero's word, they would be thrown in jail. And that was far worse than the fires of hell their priest had promised them if they disobeyed the word of God.

*

Eusebio and Cirilo were farmers, but now, on the Finca de Don Santiago, they were burners. Instead of planting and cultivating and harvesting their cornfields, they now burned the old sugar fields. After a campo had been burned, it lay fallow for one season so that the soil could oxidize and refresh itself, allowing don Santiago to continually extract a profit from his land. So Eusebio and Cirilo burned and burned and burned, unable to even sow, nevermind reap. But this was not all they could not understand.

Before don Santiago had arrived in Tlaquepaque, the two men had produced enough food to satisfy their families needs. Now, however, they had to purchase everything from the mats on which they slept to the corn their women ground into tortillas from don Santiago, at exorbitant rates of course. As a result, they never saw a hint of the wages don Santiago had promised them. In fact, despite all of their hard toil, it was they who actually owed him money.

*

They bore their indentured servitude silently, as their nature dictated and the authorities demanded. All of their privileges were slowly but surely revoked, and they worked when don Santiago told them to work, which was morning, noon and night.

For Eusebio and Cirilo, the first year under don Santiago was particularly hard. After burning their last field of the season, they were more than ready for the relief don Santiago had promised them.

There is no softer pillow than a clean conscience, was all that Cirilo could remember of the priest's oily platitudes as he laid his head to rest.

That night, they slept like angels in heaven.

*

The very next day, Eusebio and Cirilo received orders from don Santiago to report to the main building. It was built of adobe, and a wide porch graced its front.

It was located on the highest point on the finca, even higher than the church, so that don Santiago could overlook the daily activities of his workers. He watched with his beady little eyes as his two peons came running.

Don Santiago only knew excess, not deprivation. His jowls had jowls, and if he wasn't eating he was drinking. All he ever spoke about was work, but none of the men had ever seen him bend his back or even make a move to lift a finger. Reclining in his hammock in the shadiest corner of the porch, stomach hanging, he received the two men. He grabbed the neck of a bottle of good brandy nestled in his crotch with his fat, greedy fingers. He bubbled a quarter of it back in one sloppy draught while they waited at his feet then said:

"Ahh, Eusebio and Cirilo. I have been waiting for you two. And, although I'm a very patient man, you know I don't like to wait. But today's your lucky day, don't you worry. What has taken you so long? Never mind. Here is some aguardiente. Take it and drink," he said as he reached down beneath his hammock and passed Eusebio the bottle of rotgut with a flick of his wrist. Then he fell back into his hammock with a great sigh, as if that had exhausted him. "I have purchased for us, as it is *our* finca, muchachos. I have purchased three oxen from the best stock in Mexico and a load of some of its finest mahogany. It is all with don Patricio, on his hacienda as we speak. And you two – you two – are to get it for me. Understand, muchachos?"

Eusebio and Cirilo looked at each other, surprised and confused, for hadn't don Santiago promised them some time with their women and families? And to allow them time to free themselves of the smoke, which had invaded their pores and corrupted their lungs? Their very beings? But don Santiago did not care if these two peasants ever saw their sows again, nor did he care if they died from inhaling too much smoke.

They can starve in the jungle for all I care, thought don Santiago as he watched them sitting on their stinking hams. He was ready for their reaction, and continued his well-oiled speech:

"What? Do you expect to rest while I - And your compadres remember - Must work ourselves to the very bone? Oh no. That does not seem fair to me. Does that seem fair to you? Do I not pay you good honest wages for an honest day's work? I work myself ragged while you two loaf around all day as it is, drinking yourselves silly on aguardiente, and now you want a vacation? Do you or your families want for anything on my finca?"

The two men worked their mouths and tried to answer, but could not. They dared not. Just one stray word would earn them a whipping – or worse. He silenced their thoughts with a simple wave of his hand and a disgusted look. He turned his head and spat.

"Now you two, listen sharply to me: I have bought those oxen, and I want them *yesterday*. Is that understood?"

They nodded solemnly. Not a muscle in their faces moved.

"You are to go to Melaque and drive my oxen back to me," ordered don Santiago, may he burn forever in hell. "I want them and the mahogany here - Right here - Within fourteen days, or I don't know what I will have happen to you. Is *that* understood?"

Eusebio and Cirilo rose from their haunches and, afraid that their tongues would betray their thoughts, again nodded.

"Good. The jungle route is the shortest. You are to take that. And I don't want to hear any complaints," he raised his voice when he saw his peons squirm at the mention of the word jungle. He knew how the stories of the jungle had been related to them for as long as their strongest memories. "The jungle route is the shortest," he repeated. "You are to leave tomorrow, before first light. That is all."

"Yes, don Santiago, at your word: At first light my brother and I will leave," Eusebio said. Although he had the sense to know that the shortest route is almost always the most difficult, he added: "Through the jungle, as you say."

Don Santiago held his head as if these simple words had pained him. He grabbed his bottle, put it to his craven maw and, as he drained it, kept his eyes

burning with hatred upon the peasants' faces. If one or both of them perished, they simply had no right to live, he thought before laughing, punctuating this obnoxious gesture of dismissal with a belch.

He didn't need to say anything more.

*

The church stood in the middle of the square. Its rough-hewn stone façade reflected the poverty of its parishioners. Inside, the one stained glass window gave little light and candles, which encircled the room, fought against the dimness. Eusebio and Cirilo had come to this place to pray the prayers they had been taught. They believed, not from the heart but from obedience, and the words they mumbled held no meaning. They were just words, and the two men could not understand why they said them at all.

A dark-clothed figure with a white Roman collar looked up with a fierce and disquieting gaze, as if he could not quite place the two stinking Indians. In His palace, even a man of God regarded them as little better than animals.

"Well? Well, what is it you have come for?" Father Rodrigo asked with asperity, leaving his lowly parishioners cold and uncomfortable. He closed his breviary and placed it beside his missal, doing it ever so carefully before continuing: "You must speak for me to know. Only our Father in heaven can hear unspoken words. Speak."

It was with trepidation that Eusebio and Cirilo spoke. A long, hard march through the jungle, they said, was the reason they have violated the good father's sanctuary. Neither one of them could pry their eyes away from the great pectoral cross that hung from a chain around his neck.

Nodding his head as they spoke, the priest looked more asleep than anything else. When the two Indians had finished, he prayed for their good deaths. Not the good death of a man, with its promise of eternity and life everlasting through a communion with God, but as in the case of a horse with a broken leg. He then used

the idea of hell to steal away the sanctuary of their dreams, guiding their faith by fear. Oblivious to everything except his own eloquence, Father Rodrigo concluded his prayer with a sign of the cross that swept the air in front of the men like a sword.

Eusebio and Cirilo handed him their humble pesos in payment, and he gave a sigh of satisfaction, his eyes finally bright.

*

They were both short women, with broad hips and thighs, their bellies of a real size. Both wore their hair in long, heavy braids. When Eusebio and Cirilo entered their wretched hut, they looked up from their work, already expecting the worst.

The brothers explained the situation in which they found themselves.

"But don Santiago said . . ." they cried in unison. "He cannot deny you a justly deserved and promised holiday!"

"His word *must* only be obeyed," said Cirilo. "If we do not obey, we will be thrown in jail, never to see the light of day again. A fate worse than death. We must go. There is no other way."

"There is no other way?"

"None," a defeated Eusebio replied.

The women hurried outside, as if to hide their sad eyes. They hastened to start a fire and, as shadows filled up this tiny patch of land, began to prepare the meager rations for their husband's march.

*

The two women wept silently throughout the night.

*

Eusebio and Cirilo hiked with their packs, leaving all that they have ever known behind. They only stopped when there was no more road. The jungle before them was like don Santiago's heart, and their eyes could not penetrate its darkness.

They squatted on their haunches, indecision permeating every gesture and word. The stories, opinions and good advice that had been related to them came flooding back, accompanied by thoughts of the many things that might happen to them. For the first time in their lives they were afraid.

In the jungle, horses and mules simply lie down, refuse to eat and die of despair. The vegetation grows so fast that there is no definite path, and everything is overgrown with vines. Distances are measured not in miles but by time. The threat of wild boar and jaguars is constant. Of the two men, Cirilo especially despised the ferocious red ants, which are a scourge in the hands of God, teaching them to endure pain for love of Him. But both were afraid of evil spirits, spirits that not even the devil himself would attempt to catch.

Large stretches of the jungle are so rocky that it is impossible to camp, while others are swampy and impassable. Just one step into the stinking ooze will leave you up to both knees and without hope. Struggling only makes your demise arrive all the more sooner while no struggle at all only postpones the inevitable. And if they failed, the buzzards would pick their bones while they were still alive. For these reasons and many, many more, Eusebio and Cirilo refused to enter where even the angels feared to tread.

Damn don Santiago and his orders, damn them to hell, they spat, surprised at the first taste of the rebellion coursing through their veins.

They hiked towards the mountain range along the jungle's outer fringes until it grew dark, which was when they stopped and made camp. After preparing their food, they ate around the fire in silence, their eyes jumping with each and every noise. Then they dropped into sleep, exhausted.

*

With the white moon still hanging in the morning air, the two men broke camp and loped along the high mountain path in a light trot, leaving the dark wall of the damned jungle behind. While the mountain route was less arduous than that of

the jungle, it was still no walk through the park. The sun's strength never faltered, and the altitude stole their breath.

It was a hard day.

Eusebio and Cirilo pitched camp after they had forded the most difficult river of their journey. After rolling themselves into their serapes, they slept. When they broke camp, it was still dark, but the reddening sky announced that dawn was approaching fast. The men fell into their regular marching gait.

Each day's march was more monotonous than the previous day's. In the morning, their packs weighed ten pounds. By early afternoon, they weighed forty. With every new evening, they dropped onto their woven paletas, dead tired. After each period of rest, the getting up and ready to go grew harder. They arrived at a state of mind where they marched for hours on end without realizing it.

They marched in single file. The path they chose permitted no other formation. It wove through the high, rocky mountains and was densely covered with trees and bushes, as if to separate the brothers even further from the remaining world until everything that they ever knew was erased from the face of this earth.

*

The sixth day of this was unusually hot. They sensed the first signs of the sea's salt water on the humid air well before reaching when palm trees began bordering the path.

Then Eusebio strode over a grassy hillock, followed by Cirilo. They stopped short when they glimpsed the glittering immensity of the sea. They stood as if tottering on the verge of a nightmare, staring into the blue distance for hours.

All of this for don Santiago and his cursed oxen, Eusebio then said to his brother, Cirilo.

## 2

# Moonlight on Marigolds

**A**ll stars were higher than one expected, and a sky otherwise silvered by moonlight was more than anything else was. But for the techno music echoing somewhere here and now there through air no longer crystal clear, the stillness was profound. It was almost as if now was a time before roses could bloom in December.

The fires of dawn began coloring the horizon, which soon became blue with rain. This lifted in time, leaving a haze to obscure the heavens, a color that could only be compared with itself.

Down, further down than that, beneath those wisps of cloud, lay a modest mountain range surrounded by a recently protected sea of verdant pine. Hills rolling away into the distance were enticing to those who could afford the luxury of seeking refuge from modernity. The most proximate city, whose projected streets, darting off at all angles, bore names of the trees they'd replaced, had developed by leaps and bounds and the oft-ruinous bust for all those near the bottom. It was a place where God and Country no longer rated over profit and greed, a place that had clearly lost its individuality, its own style, somewhere along the most expedient path to Progress. Connected by concrete ribbons of freeway to workplace destinations, not so chic subdivisions extended into a flat monotony in all directions. As the sun continued climbing, it cast its light through one of these here houses' second-floor windows.

Filtered by opaque curtains, the now rosy morning light made shadows stand out sharply before illuminating every object in this room: a large oak dresser, a dusty array of exercise machines, a writing table piled high with papers and books and an overflowing ashtray. And then, at last, a King-sized waterbed, upon which two lumps lay. For a very long while before the largest farted and emitted an array of snorts, tossing around from side to side. Part of a disarranged head of beautiful black hair,

part of a high pale forehead, and one slanted eye emerged from the covers. Uncommonly bright upon opening, it watched the neighboring lump with the suspicious intensity of a sparrow fixing on some shiny object.

"You stink like a goat," breathed a voice with startling clarity and a strange yet fascinating accent extremely pleasurable to listen to.

Everything lapsed into an increasingly white silence.

*

Everything appeared clean, at least to the immediate eye. A wide mirror was situated such to allow the late afternoon's light to twinkle on the delicate glass bric-a-brac gracing the shelves running along the far wall. But, at this early hour, the sun shone through the two windows unmolested, spreading lazy pools of light all the way across the floor. On the soundless miniature color television situated under one of the cupboards, a man with graying hair, sharply defined Roman features, and wire rimmed glasses could be glimpsed every so often between commercials. Under a row of skylights stood a formica-topped table. Oddly enough the kitchen, which had been designed to maximize a sense of space, had a wood beam ceiling. Under which this whirl of feminine matter in motion began each and every single goddamned day doing whatever she was doing now.

Graceful and strong, and clearly of an Asian lineage, the woman's face was a yellow-white ivory, an out of place cameo in such distinctly American confines, much like the tiled countertops she'd insisted upon. She was wearing an old quilted housecoat a couplathree sizes too big for her diminutive frame, and there was nothing wrong with her a few hundred dollars couldn't fix. Just by the way she padded around, you knew she would've looked good in a halter-top, even after two kids. And, if they hadn't been making such a racket, she would've made a light pattering sound while fluttering here and now there on feet as beautiful as they were bare. In her nervous fingers she held her only worrisome vice even when greasing the frying pan and making a pot of coffee, and the butts in the ashtray on the most convenient

countertop would soon grow into a, a mound similar to a cairn over a dead hero. A thousand other audacities and deftness' and skillful combinations dying at every moment could be glimpsed in her eyes more often than not. The harmonious charm of her entire being struck one immediately.

Her name was Juanita.

She exhaled a cumulous formation, turning her most respectful gaze upon her son. "That must be the fiftieth time you've asked me that this morning and it's not even eight. And if I were you, Adam - *Adam* - I wouldn't ask again," she warned, taking the spatula from a drawer and wagging it in his direction.

"But if you were me," he said after a moment, now struggling to keep the squealing dervish that was his sister away. "Then I'd be you and wouldn't even have to ask in the first place."

"Why you so and so," she playfully replied, whacking his behind with the spatula, which she then placed beside the frying pan on the stove. "Stop bothering your brother Laura and sit down. Why don't you play with your crayons while I get your cereal? Because I'm asking you nicely that's why." In a stronger voice: "Your father said no. Now sit down so I can fix his breakfast. He's going to be downstairs in no time and you know what that means. You too, missy . . . And that's the second time for you. See what kind of example you're setting for your sister? Sit right here just like a - Now see? That's a good girl. Why don't you draw me something special?" With one eye on the clock, she chased her son halfway around the table before giving up. "Adam Clayton Cooper! Be a good boy and - "

"But he's never gone camping with me and'll never take me either and I wanna go," he continued whining and stomping his feet.

"He said no. So that's that. How many times do we have to go over this? Your father's word is final. You know that as well as anyone. Now stop that and sit down and behave. Move it young man."

Laura began bouncing up and down where she sat laughing.

"Shush you," Juanita ordered to no effect while advancing on her son, hands on hips.

"But everybody's parents are letting them!" he cried, keeping the table between them.

"If everybody else's parents were letting them jump off a bridge would you want to do that too?" she wondered, throwing up her hands in largely feigned exasperation before heading to the refrigerator.

"No," mumbled Adam into the linoleum after several moments in which his sister continued making her presence known. "I guess not."

"See? Why didn't you think about that right from the start then?"

" . . . But Mommy I . . . I . . . " he whined with gusto, his mouth otherwise working futilely.

"You'd better turn that frown upside down Charlie Brown before I give you another whack on the butt," she teased although her heart wasn't in it and her mind was elsewhere.

In his dark blue eyes there burned a deep permanent excitement and, burly and bullnecked like his father, he was nearly a head taller than his round faced and apple cheeked sister. With wonderful white teeth and the innocent open manner already fading from her brother, she was currently preoccupied with drawing and chewing her fair, very fine hair - which held the aroma of crème de menthe parfait in a tall crystal glass. Juanita looked down at her hands and found them in the process of making pastrami on rye sandwiches instead of pouring cereal into two bowls.

" - Really wanna go bad!"

"It's want to, and sorry but no. Your father said no."

"But everyone's going to make fun of me though!"

"Stop that whining. If your fa - "

"Because he's a big fat stupid head!" Laura interjected, squirting out of her chair, Adam already in hot pursuit.

"You shut up!" they squealed at each other in the round until she heaved herself against her mother's legs. "Mommy Mommy," she squealed. "He's picking on me!"

"If your father hears you two that'll be it. For all of us. So stop that Laura - *Please* - I'm holding a knife - Adam! Don't do that to your sister," she scolded, an edge entering her voice while prying them apart. "And the same goes for you too young lady. Will you both just listen to me for once?" This plea was largely ignored and, raising her hands before letting them fall, she took some deep breaths.

As soon as Juanita opened her eyes, she began slathering on the honey mustard with a renewed sense of vigor, biting her lower lip. She heard her husband's heavy tread emanating from upstairs, and a long searching expression came into her lovely face. While swaying a little, this is what flashed through her mind: When he said she reminded him of "moonlight on marigolds" she saw something in him, felt something for him, acquiesced to all his wishes, began thinking she was in love. But upon entering into union - for better or for worse, in sickness and in health - almost immediately "Was he worth it?" was added to his name.

*

She recovered herself and said in a voice not much above a whisper, "Your father's coming."

But her kids were already hastening to the seats they'd been assigned.

Blinking back tears and shaking her head softly, she went to the stove and heated the frying pan before wrapping the sandwiches in plastic and putting them into a brown paper sack, which she placed by the backdoor. Then Juanita came to the middle of the kitchen, where she stood listening as he lumbered down the stairs, one hand resting on her cocked hip. First the legs and then the rest of this post-modern man in the age of self-absorption as well as any other species of obligatory narcissism she could've thought of if given more time wearing a severe blue uniform and carrying a belt on which his special hung holstered appeared. He was so tall and

broad-shouldered that he seemed to fill the entire well-polished hallway as he approached, grumbling a little while catching sight of her. Very dark he was, with peaked features, receding but curly black hair and a haggard face freshly washed. Although up to a few years ago his dedication to weightlifting had chiseled him into a six-foot-two inch, one hundred and eighty five-pound athletic specimen, his belly now bore evidence the many pleasures of a ravenous appetite perpetually sated. After just one look into his bloodshot eyes she expressed a flash of distaste before nodding mournfully for her condition. Showing him her back, she lay her fingertips against her lips, as if to button them shut. Once she'd raised her voice to him.

Once.

He smacked her tush when he went by. "Mornin'," he growled with rare tact.

Juanita peered beyond his back to watch her children smile and wave at their father in an oddly mechanical manner, as if they'd been instructed to do that and only that each and every morning. With heads now bowed, they drew closer together.

Upon reaching the table, Wes plopped onto his fat ass with a groan, letting everything he held fall to the floor. "What was that?"

"What was what?" she wondered, affecting wide-eyed surprise.

"That look."

She blew a thin stream of smoke into the air. "What look?" almost as an afterthought she added.

"You know what kind of look I mean," he grumbled at her, his mouth curling down at the corners.

Juanita just tossed her hair over a shoulder, exhaling yet another cloud of smoke. It grew so quiet that the frying pan could be heard whenever it began popping and hissing. After pouring cereal into two bowls, she brought them to the table.

"What are you drawing there Laura?"

"I dunno."

"Don't play with your cereal and make a mess like yesterday, okay honeybunch? Is that pretty little girl you?"

"Yes," she replied, all shy like.

"Where's the big mean ol' monster?"

Laura held out her arms and opened up her hands, shrugging.

"What do you think? Wouldn't you say that your Daddy looks real good this morning sitting there like that?" giving a quick darting look in his direction she observed.

"Cut the crap and get me my coffee already willya?"

"Everyone's got problems, kids. His is what's called by some the perpetual Irish flu."

He made an indirect but pointed reply.

She paused for an uncomfortable moment or two, measuring her words. "Taciturnity is just another word for selfishness," she told him. But, other than that, she surrendered without demure. Moving as though she knew anything, the slightest thing, could tip the balance of his household's harmony, she handed him his damn coffee, of which the instant draining seemed to have no effect.

Wes shoved the mug back at her, and she returned with it filled. He hunched over the table and pressed his hands against his temples, following his wife's movements through his coffee's steam as she attended to his breakfast. He opened his mouth to say something, but his brain seized up before charging around enough to make him dizzy. And the flowing supple motions of her torso, the delicate rhythm of all her steps, soon vanished.

*

Juanita, who knew quite well that to her husband she was oblivious to everything, lost in her own little lovey-dovey world, finished scrambling some seasoning into the eggs and poured her creation into the frying pan after moderating its temperature. Opening the cabinet under the sink to throw the eggshells among other hastily accumulated rubbish away she discovered an empty bottle buried under wad after wad after wad of paper towel. She placed the thing smack dab in the middle of the table before retreating to the stove, where she stood now burdened by the moody gravity of his unremitting vigilance, her hand wielding the spatula as if it had a mind of its own. While observing his attitude of dumb endurance, her eyes acquired the caressing fixity that made him inclined to turn aside his own.

Which is exactly what he did.

But other than that he betrayed no sentiment whatsoever and right then she remembered when Wes'd lost his irrepressible can-do writ large upon being discharged from the Marines for bum knees. After bringing her with him to the States, he became supercilious in the extreme, selfish and fickle, too. Although she found him an incalculable bore, she had fought hard for quite some time to appear that he was still a perpetual source of curiosity. She couldn't conceive the number of times she'd been regaled by yarns of how he had shown heart, he had shown moxie. How, playing with a tenacity and effectiveness not seen in these here parts before, his feet causing defenders to chase him and often only coming up with fistfuls of air, he had shown no fear. In order to retain any sense of sanity she had had no other choice *but* to put a stop to that horseshit.

She found herself laying several strips of bacon and a sausage patty beside the scrambled eggs, emitting a faint moan during an overwrought series of recollected instances as rapid as they were unexpected. Before returning her gaze to where he sat like a sack of potatoes, staring from between his hands at anything else but her. His recent thing was to pick up any one of her unfinished manuscripts and, to her agony

and shame, follow her all over the house, mangling her prose in falsetto - and that was bad enough. But once, in response to some trifle, she was forced to make a bonfire of all her material in the backyard, a dagger to the heart for someone who adored fluency and the sound of language pouring warmly and copiously over the printed page like she did. A cold finger ran down her spine and, although she felt a crazy impulse to cry, she didn't give him the pleasure. The rest of her recollections would have proved to you that she wasn't an isolated phenomenon that came out of nowhere, but here was the precise moment her dearly beloved spoke:

"What did I tell you about looking at me like that already? Huh?"

The ensuing silence lengthened.

From Wes' vantage his wife seemed farther from him, somehow beyond his reach, diminished by a slowly increasing distance. When he heaved a surreal sigh, Laura and Adam peered at him with something strange and timid in their eyes, half-ashamed, half-sorry, before reburying their faces in their cereal bowls. "I don't have all morning. Some people around here have to go to work you know."

Listening without hearing, burning down yet another cigarette with long quick puffs, Juanita lifted her eyes now focussing and gathering light, as if to a yawning canopy of boredom overhead, trying to summon Nothingness. She came out of this abstraction having decided upon a course of action that, while breathtaking in its audacity, may ultimately prove quixotic.

"There are buyers and there are those who are bought, and your inflexible principles clash with the bitterness of your shattered hopes," she replied as though she had an unlimited capacity for compliance. "And the irony is you don't even know what you're dealing with. One day I'll be gone and then what'll you do?"

Jerking himself erect, Wes shot her a blank look after giving up trying to figure out what the hell she meant. "Jesus," he groaned as the familiarity of affairs grabbed ahold of him. "Do you always have to?"

"Have to what?"

"To talk like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like that - That - "

"Well?" she challenged.

"You know what I mean."

"I'm just trying to be understood - "

"Then stop trying then."

" - Because otherwise there's nothing more to us than me and you." You self-centered idiot.

"See? Just get me my food already willya?"

She decided to prolong his moment of waiting by fiddling around with this, that, and the other thing within arm's reach. Taking her most recent cigarette from the ashtray, looking through the smoke at his face, drawing a single well-regulated breath, she began drifting rudderless through the contents of her conversation bag. Among the bits and pieces she offered nonstop, one non sequitur following another, as if she had evicted mind and spirit from her body, were:

"I saw a magazine at the supermarket checkout featuring a bacon bits diet."

"Bacon bits?" He displayed a tepid interest. "Those things you sprinkle on salads?"

Cracking a vague but mischievous smile, she nodded in a way that seemed to empty her face of expression. "Can I ask you a question, Wes?"

"You want to kill me with your nonsense is more like it. Because you're killing me." He paused, then made a lurid suggestion or two under his breath.

"Do you think we should upgrade the premium cable package during the limited time free installation offer?"

"You always want more. More and more and more and more. Isn't the sixty channels I'm paying through the nose for now enough or what?"

"But I need the full complement of channels so I can enrich my viewing experience," Juanita deadpanned.

Wes twisted around a bit and began waving an arm over his head. "There's not a money tree outside I just go and pick money off of you know." It took him a while to calm down.

"You know something Wes?" she trilled as soon as he did.

"Oh Christ," he uttered while allowing an exclamation of dismay to escape.

"They say that everytime you learn something new an hour's added to your life."

"Is that so. How fascinating. Why don't you write a book about it?"

She refilled the mug he proffered with coffee. "Another homily refuted by my reality . . .

"So. Your team must've took a real beating last night didn't they?"

Fetching the first deep sigh of many, Wes cast a wary glance her way. "Yeah."

"They probably stunk to high heaven and you've never seen them play worse." The stillness remained undisturbed, perfect and measureless but for the ticking of the now cooling stove interspersed by various clicks of her children's cutlery till Juanita observed: "Well that's such a shame. They were doing so great all year too. What's next? The end of the world?" And, in that inscrutable manner in which a bird flies away from a comfortable branch, she went to the table and set down his plate, then watched while he doused her creation with ketchup before shoveling a mouthful into his maw.

"I curse the man who invented fire," he declared through what appeared to be some bloody combination of egg and sausage, flourishing his fork.

She undulated from his side to the sink, bathing her head and shoulders in a pool of sunlight for a moment before embarking upon any number of tasks, keeping him in the corner of her gaze always.

"Life would be so much easier if it wasn't for relationships," she paused, and seemed surprised that something rude wasn't interjected. "We sort of recreate our

world. Our external world is based on our internal world. If an internal world is chaotic, our external world can appear that way too."

"What? No toast?" he grumbled over his shoulder.

Juanita put some bread in the toaster. "Keeping a clean house, an organized house - Much like I do, Wes," she continued in a tone of challenging politeness. "Reflects an overall ability and desire to maintain a sense of order in a wide range of activities. So if we - That's you and I, Wes - If we can create a basic environment around us it really facilitates being able to handle, hell, I don't know, stress. The way - Or boredom! - The way we organize a house, for example, is something we can have control over. We don't have much control over what happens Outside, but during certain periods of time - Say . . . Over breakfast or something," she breathed lightly down the back of his neck, handing him his toast on an unfolded wad of paper towel. "Or any other time families usually spend together - It's real important to focus on things we do have control over so you can begin making an imprint, not just an impression. That's what they say anyway. But I also heard - "

Looking at her with a faint grimace, Wes grunted then growled something that didn't reach her ears intelligibly before adding: "Willya just shut it for once and let me eat in peace?"

"What about happiness? Do I have a right to it?"

"Now don't start with that crap now."

"Or are you going to forbid me even that?" Coming to a halt, Juanita contemplated the back of his bent head, the workings of his jaw, almost without blinking, for one moment of indeterminable length only broken by "Just like you tried to make me not think for myself. Your problem is that . . . That - That you have a, a sublime contempt for truth."

"I said stifle yourself Nita."

"Ah, the lonely hellish life of a prisoner is slowly eating away my soul. Time inches by at a snail's pace as memories of the outside world fade and despair takes hold."

A certain dizziness Wes attributed to his wife's endless prattle interrupted his activity of eating. Raising his head, he stared at her like she'd just said "Put your left hand in, take your left hand out, do the Hokey Pokey, and turn yourself about." To his eyes she appeared to be everywhere at once, gesticulating more often than not. From here on in there was scarce a lull amongst his rumblings and grumblings.

"Existence has become meaningless. To retain some sense of sanity, I'm thinking of marking off the days with a piece of chalk on this, no, this wall over here."

"What the hell are you going on about now?" he groaned in a low exasperated tone of irritation rising.

"The lonely hellish life of a prisoner is slowly - "

"Look. I know what you're trying to do. And it's not going to work. Not today, not any day. So just quit it already. I wasn't born yesterday you know."

"Oh I know. I understand. You're the bigshot provider who does more for me than all the systems of philosophy combined."

"Jesus Christ are you even listening to me?"

"I am indeed."

"All right then."

"All right then."

"Well? . . . Don't tempt me Nita. Don't even think about tempting me." After a silence teeming with meaning, he went back to stuffing his face.

"How's your eggs?" Juanita, who was once again busy to the eyes, eventually asked.

They exchanged widely disparate looks.

"Warm."

"You don't have to always shout you know," she said in a saccharine voice. "The children are - "

"I don't care what they are. Let 'em see what an ass their mother is."

"I also heard from God knows where that some people can actually handle themselves with dignity and self-respect regardless of what the situation is." Not a ripple of emotion showed on her face. "That's always a choice a person has. I mean, you look at the situation, take a deep breath, and then you do the right thing instead of the wrong thing. Then you can look at yourself in the mirror the rest of your life.

"Because you are just performing a task. A job someone else wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. That's why what's behind the uniform is the only thing that matters, Wes, not the uniform itself."

"Do you even know that you're still talking or what?"

Juanita made a point of talking to the bottle he'd emptied of booze that now stood between them. "You have to take steps forward. And if you take a step backward, you can't take two steps backward."

"What the hell do you mean by that? Look at me. Look at me I said."

She burned her intelligent gaze into his bloodshot eyes now gone flat as nailheads, a finger curled around her chin.

"I'm gonna crap myself if you don't shut up. Now. Got me?"

"Charming," she pronounced at length, turning upon a heel and expressing her marked disdain as she went away. "So we see, time and again, that a man cannot escape his own nature, but instead must reconcile himself to that nature."

Outside nearby an impatient dog barked twice, and her husband snapped to attention, listening close. Then he emptied his mug, wiped his lips with a sleeve, checked the time, and beckoned for more coffee.

"See, we are what we pretend to be because we pretend to be what we really are. The act is not the act. Oh darn, I forgot. Not for you the psychological treatises so much in favor today."

How the following came about Wes could hardly guess:

"Sometime I think I'm just talking to myself. Do you think that cause for any concern Wes?"

"Well what the hell you want me to do about it?" he asked, banging down his utensils before opening his arms wide. "Only if you have to listen to yourself anyway! Haw haw! Look. Hell, I talk and no one listens."

Taking a breath and pausing a second "And yet life goes on," she breathed, her face clearing by degrees.

His laughter died all at once, and he leaned onto his elbows. "What's the matter *now*?"

"Oh nothing but - "

"Nothing!" snorted Wes with great dispatch. "I'd say that's about right. Nothing at all." He turned upon his kids, who were conversing with some, albeit muted, animation over their empty cereal bowls. "Be seen and not heard, dammit. Quit acting like your mother for crissakes." The girl made it so that only the top of her head and active eyes could be seen while the boy's hands clenched tightly around his sturdy little thighs he was getting so mad. All three avoided exchanging looks. "I'm getting it in both ends this morning," he concluded.

"Wes," began Juanita after a moment of reflection, a little flushed at the cheek but otherwise betraying no emotion whatsoever. "You really made me look bad in front of your fuh - "

"How many times do I have to tell you that *you* were the one trying to make *me* look bad?"

"I was only stating a simple fact concerning - "

"A simple fact!" he snarled at her.

"What's wrong with telling the truth?"

"Look at me. I said look at me! That's not the truth!"

"Should I genuflect and kiss your hand because you think you've done me some big favor by marrying me or buying me the occasional gift?" she asked, making the googly-eyed face of an adoring fan.

"If you ain't spewing crap out of your mouth you're just sitting there staring into space." When he spoke next, his voice was reeking with intense scorn: "Set an example for the kids why dontcha?"

"Why you never tell me how you're feeling! This is a first. Whatever did I do to deserve this?" she polished off her very best Scarlett O'Hara.

"Do you know what your problem is? Because I'll tell you what your problem is," he told her with a sustained gripping stare, very energetic and final-like.

"No. Why don't you tell me . . .

" . . . Come on, tell me . . . Go ahead . . . "

"Your problem is you're too insincere," he had the unmitigated gall to finally say.

"Insincere? Insincere?"

"Insincere."

"You wouldn't know sincerity if it hit you upside the head."

"What did you say?"

"I'm only saying what I think. And that's sincerity, by the way." You moron

Half getting to his feet, this horse's ass gave her a look of cold, dead fury, but Juanita held her ground. His face went blood red, and the rage in his eyes began purifying.

"I'm so used to being dumped on I just figured that's the way life was. Now I'm thinking love is when someone treats you the way you want to be treated. With respect. Like you actually mean something."

"I refuse to be disrespected in my house," he sputtered with a sort of feverish haste, his fists clenching and unclenching by his sides.

But still she refused to back down, and even inched slightly closer, lifting her chin. "The state I'm living in is - "

"I said - "

" - Indescribable."

" - For you to shut your goddamned mouth," he cried, his face distorting uncontrolled.

"You've stolen the truth of my life from me. What do I have to look forward to? What can I ever hope for again?"

Wes told her off in his own inimitable way.

"You talk so tough. But you're soft, like a wet noodle," she said replied very calm and deliberate, although she could scarce control her trembling legs.

And that's what did it.

"I'll give you a wet noodle!" he promised, his hand flashing out fast and mean as sin, sending the empty bourbon bottle spinning along the linoleum, seizing her forearm, knocking the cigarette from her mouth with his left.

She lifted one hand, as if to slap him across the face.

"You don't have it in you," he sneered.

"Yes I do. You put it there." Juanita glanced at her two terrified loves before looking back up into her husband's all-encompassing bestial fury. "You always go here and there doing something or other - And you don't say anything about where you've been and won't even let me ask anything about it either?" she quickly asked through teeth clenched in pain, her breath now coming in shuddering gasps. " - Some nerve. Some nerve to expect - To expect that I'm - I'm just going to roll over and let you - "

Squeezing until perspiration freckled his brow, he made it so that they were nose to nose. "Stop it," he ordered, his temples pulsating. "Got me?"

"Oh I got you all right even though I'm going to pieces I can still see right through you," she choked, trying to squirm away from the pain now rippling through her entire being.

"Then what do you see mouth?"

"You want me to tell you?"

"I'd love for you to tell me," he snarled at her, shaking her like so many rags.

"Okay okay . . . you win," she scarcely managed to whisper. "Please . . . Wes . . ."

"Damn straight I win. Because this is my house by God!" he declared with a distinctly American brand of patriotic madness. After lengthening a moment to his satisfaction, he spun her away, and she came up against the sink, hard.

Juanita turned toward her husband, one solitary tear coursing down each of the bright red blossoms that were now her cheeks. "Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. Martin Luther King Junior said that," she informed him before resuming any number of tasks, albeit in a stiffer, more formal manner.

Wes opened his uplifted hands and put on his special smile, sitting back down looking so goddamned smug and complacent. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy you something nice after work. There's nothing fairer than that, no?"

*

Right after these words ceased echoing time seemed out of joint. Flaring from this outbreak of silence Adam kicked back his chair and stormed away. Although disappearing from view, he could still he heard stomping down the hall.

Wes' head swiveled to attention in a way that was utterly predictable, and his eyes targeted the center of his son's receding back. Giving the table a smack of parental chastisement with his palm, followed by a harder one then a powerfully dull thud, his eyes now glowing like hot coals. "Where you think you're going?" he boomed, adding at once: "I said come back here boy." Using his opposable digits, he began popping each of his knuckles in turn.

His son came awkwardly back, his bottom lip lower than God knows what he was so filled by a rage as sullen as it was impotent. "What," he quavered in a voice on the verge of becoming deeper. They glared at each other in such a way that it was quite clear he had plenty more to say, his little fists clenching and unclenching by his sides. Soon, his father held up one of his own and cocked it slowly behind his ear,

holding it there, quivering with something akin to mirth at the mouth. "Wanna taste of one of mine boy?" he challenged, his other arm pressed flat against the table flexing. While staring down the little s.o.b. like that, he appeared to expand to the point of bursting. "Just a little reminder of what's what and whose house this is?" His rigidity became frightening, his knuckles white.

"No," the boy finally chuttered into the linoleum patch between his feet before casting an imploring look at his mother, who was clearly at a loss. She returned his gaze a lingering moment before using yet another of her endlessly mindless tasks as a pretense to avert her empty countenance.

"Look at me . . . I said look at *me*, boy." As soon as he did, Wes began deflating in measurable increments. "Look at you. Standing there. Holding your fists like a little girl. Keep your thumbs like this. Outside, see?" After shaking a fist to emphasize his instruction, he barked: "Who do you think you're anyway? Were you dismissed?"

A shrug was Adam's only reply as he stood there, glowering, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"I said who dismissed you boy."

"Nobody."

"That's right. Nobody. So sit your ass back down till I say so. And now. Hear me?"

He did indeed.

"Boy, now that we've come to a I dunno - Understanding you'd better wipe that damn smirk off your face too."

"I'm not smirking."

"If that's not a smirk I don't know what is but in any case whatever it is I don't like it. Not one bit. And don't sit there like that neither."

"Like what?" You could see the boy's whole body trembling.

"You been taking lessons from your Ma on insolence and disrespect and disobedience or what? Is that it? Because how many times do I have to tell you what I feel like doing whenever I come across attitudes like yours?"

"But I'm just sitting here," he pleaded all wild and agitated.

Just by using his hostile demeanor Wes pinned his son to his seat, making him squirm in excellent time.

"Quit squirmin' around boy. That does nothing but turn you pansy."

Although Juanita had tried detaching herself from these proceedings, she'd failed miserably. Making an extra-especial detour around the far end of the table, smoothing down his tussles and giving him a hasty buss, she scarcely slowed down. All her movements completely on automatic now but still full of her sly servile grace, even the smoldering glimpses she stole of her oh so dearly beloved every now and again. She blamed the smoke from her cigarette curling into her eyes for the moisture they contained.

Her husband caught her most recent glance withdrawing, and he stared right at her while pointing a cautionary finger at Adam, eschewing the usual half-baked remark by emitting a deep breath. Then, ignoring the rest of her bloodless form no longer fluttering here and there ceaselessly, he said straight into her eyes: "Drink your milk, boy . . . You wanna grow up big and strong like your old man? Well dontcha?" he wondered, his words slow and deliberate, tilting back in his chair now.

Again his son resolved to say and do nothing.

Wrapped tight in an array of disconcerting images, Juanita swallowed quickly and unconsciously, her eyes moist, until coming upon the realization that her aesthetic sensibilities simply hated the tone of his voice. Inclining her chin in scorn, she turned away before drying the perspiration beading along her brow with a fresh paper towel, subsequently balling it tight.

"I said drink your milk . . . Boy," Wes ordered low and level, almost sneering.

"But why when I'm not thirsty though?"

"Because. I. Said. So. That's why."

The boy drained his milk in one defiant gulp, dribbling much from his mouth, which he swiped away with a sleeve while clunking the empty glass onto the tabletop. His old man gave one perfunctory nod of satisfaction, then turned upon Laura, who had been gazing in wonderment at the innerworkings of the adult world like a spectator on the sidelines.

"Can you give your Daddy a big ol' smile?"

She peeked up at him with a great timidity that might have been enchanting in some other scene.

"Come on there little girly girl. Give Daddy a big ol' smile."

Upon complying she didn't even open her lips, and then she gazed into an immeasurable distance. Doubt clouded her entire being, and her legs no longer swung innocently under the table.

"That's a good girl."

Juanita wished, no, Juanita prayed that her daughter's attention was wandering anywhere but right here and now. When the lovely little girl's mouth moved, she imagined "Mommy" could be read loud and clear on her lips, so for her two most cherished ones' sakes she began humming something she knew wasn't a song to her sole provider's Westernized ears.

He immediately moaned and slapped his forehead with an open palm before letting it resound against the table. "Jesus Christ and the beheaded John the Baptist willya just give it a rest for once willya for crissakes woman?"

Drawn around the empty bottle lying on the linoleum and to the sink as if by electromagnetic force Juanita asked him something. When he didn't reply, she lifted her head so those eyes filled with any number of questions that had one answer only could peer out the window. Through her faded reflection, so busy burying everything deep inside she forgot her most recent cigarette, which dangled unlit from between her lips. And over the back deck at the shingled rooftops of the prefabricated neighborhood about a hundred feet down ringing a far from pastoral hollow where groundwater had seeped. Creating a stagnant pond that did nothing but reek in the

high days of summer that were looming. She observed that she'd been washing a glass out with soap. Keeping him just within the angle of her vision, she rinsed it, then washed it again. And again. And then again before putting it in the dishrack to dry.

I'd rather be anywhere but here, even squatting in a flat skiff casting nets for fish back home - Home. The funny thing is, she smiled while inhaling and exhaling in a steady stream, I can see into the pathos of my own predicament, and my dreary view as yet another reminder of the deplorable banality of my existence.

She shut her eyes to everything, all the unspoken words dissolving in her throat.

*

Later Wes was still reveling in the environment he dominated like some petty feudal lord, arms folded over the barrel that was his chest. After idly soddening a corner of toast with the ketchup remaining on his plate, he popped it into his mouth, brushing a perfect red swash across his chin. He tilted even further back in repose and continued studying the ceiling's wood beams for some time, even going so far as linking the fingers of both hands behind his head. Although seemingly deeply composed in thought, he didn't have the imagination to be aware of anything he inspired beyond sheer obedience.

Juanita couldn't describe his entire manner in words as the malingering silence already weighing beaucoup tons to the square inch grew heavier from moment to moment. She watched while her husband checked the time and arose with some amount of difficulty after gathering his possessions from the floor. Heaving his stomach over his belt, rearranging everything a bit down there before buckling up and hitching his pants. And then he tugged on his cap and caressed his revolver's rubberized grip like these mere acts alone raised him considerably from the ordinary condition of men.

Swinging all the way around now and looking up, up, up into the bastard's impassively all-encompassing face as if from the bottom of a pitch black well. Cowering against the sink as he brushed, ever so lightly, past her, accompanying the tip of his cap with a superior wink, leaving the air uneasy in his wake for seconds that seemed like minutes. She watching as, stomach hanging over his belt equally on each side, he went through curls of smoke floating in the pools of early morn's sunlight dappling the immense figure he cut swaggering across the linoleum away from her wide unbelieving eyes.

"Do you know what I think," she choked.

"If I said yes you'd still make me listen anyway so no."

She gave the bastard's receding back a mocking little bow and a scowl before shooting him the finger.

The last thing she saw of him that morning was the upper part of his body projecting backwards from the doorway while he reached for his lunchbag at the penultimate second, letting the screendoor slam shut on the presence he left behind. When it was no longer palpable she cast her gaze upon those two loving innocents who were hastening toward where she stood as if rooted until realizing her breath had been held for some time. They placed their hands in hers, their fingers tightening like they'd never let go ever again as she took them into the next space, which is where she preferred waiting for the mail and all the shadows to move from dawn to dusk. Waiting for the Nothingness of her husband's arrival alone in her waking hours spent recalling the past in a vain attempt to forget about the future.

Tired of it all, everything, Juanita slipped from view without our knowing it.

*

**O**fficer Wes Cooper exited his three bedroom two bath housing unit located toward the end of this ersatz country cul-de-sac. Where and how he lived and why made more sense to him than anything else did, and he never imagined his little world ending for the good reason he couldn't imagine it ever beginning. Sauntering across

his upward sloping lawn divided evenly by shadow and light while pondering the tips of his shoes, he went around the side of his house and, looking up breaking into a grin whistled.

Having an air at once noble, roguish and proud, Roy came leaping against the chain-linked dog run's gate, whimpering in anticipation of pleasure.

Upon being released the Belgian Malanoir rushed against his master's legs, almost knocking him off his feet. "Hey Roy that's a boy," "Whatchya tryin' to do," "Howsaboy take that" and "Oh so you think you're a tough guy huh doya" among several other things of equal sentiment followed each other in no particular order. As these two born and kenneled creatures wrestled to the ground intertwined, expelling their breaths with increasing force.

Finally Wes let go and, perhaps stumbling over the roots a sapling was stretching, chased Roy nonlinearly across the front lawn.

To the police cruiser, opening his door in such a way that infused even more excitement into the yipping flash of matter now chasing his tail in the backseat. He followed him in and, after pulling away from the curb, checked in with dispatch.

Partners since the dog joined the force three years ago, he was in exclusive charge of feeding and making sure he got proper exercise, and they formed a bond so strong that it was impossible to describe in words. Roy, who showed gratitude always and without reserve, licked away the ketchup lingering on his master's chin.

Eloquence appealing as much to the heart as the head was in his every gesture.

*

A while later: " - Don't even want to hear it. That nonsense. Because if there's one thing I'm sure about is that I don't snap. Never have and never will. So why does she always keep on wanting me to talk anyway? When she can't even keep her goddamn trap shut for five goddamn seconds? A man needs a time . . . A time to . . . "

Their class homogenous residential community disappearing in the rearview mirror, they soon encountered the fringes of a high-rise dystopia, where most everything was permitted and nothing at all matters much. Yet another landscape exemplifying the spatial and social incongruities created by policy upon expedient and practical policy promulgated to satiate the omnivorous appetite of corporate growth strategies. Now passing between buildings either standing derelict or shuttered interspersed by empty lots jumbled with junked cars and huge mounds of garbage, forlorn trees standing here and there. Even after a window was cracked open to dissipate the cigar reek thickening in the air, the traffic's sounds remained of the unusually pleasant white variety. And although his wife's constant nattering was largely replaced by the radio's squawk, at least Wes could turn its volume down to hear himself think.

" . . . She needs to understand me is what it comes down to. Dammit. And that most times the best talk of them all is when nobody says anything at all. So we can just sit around in peace enjoying ourselves. Like regular people do. A normal family like. Fars I know a little peace and quiet every once in awhile never killed anyone before. That's not too much to ask for I don't think." He paused, reached back, and knuckled his partner's ears. "Is it now boy?"

Roy didn't think it was either.

"Copy," he replied to the dispatcher.

Driving with exact deliberation wherever there was sufficient opening, reacting to sudden unplanned movements whenever they occurred, the cruiser headed north on MLK for some time, leaving defeated appearances in its wake. Before entering an area in abruptly discontinuous transition boasting an array of entertainments being well-indulged at this early hour by those with no hope but the release of death to escape the bitterly protracted and oft-bloody social unrest allowed to plague our once great land for avaricious pecuniary gain.

Wes rounded the next corner on a hunch and startled a cluster of potential perps conspiring and at once he slowed to a crawl and gave them the eye until they stood there squirming, not knowing whether to run, duck or what.

"See?" he asked Roy, glancing at every pedestrian as if they were subversive, catching almost every furtive look.

"Woof!"

"Just look at 'em. If it was up to me I'd take 'em all out, line 'em all up against the wall and then shoot 'em dead - " And so on, on and on, an anthology of ignorance rather than true bigotry and hate. " - Though I enforce the law fairly and fully. But nooo. That's not good enough for her. Oh no. Nothing's ever good enough for her. I can't even feel proud of doing that! And, uhm, and with her talking and, uhm, talking and talking like that all day every day? I mean, come on Roy. I don't have to tell you. She can - She can talk a, a one-eyed dog off a meatwagon for crissakes!" he cracked himself up to the utter delight of Roy, who began yipping excitedly while trying to lick his master's face. "Sit down. Seriously now Roy. I'm trying to drive here."

The dog obeyed without demure, still smiling like he always did, tongue lolling.

Inhaling the silence, Wes concentrated on navigating the traffic. He took his foot off the gas so he wouldn't have to stop for this red light, and lifted his hand to acknowledge his brethren in blue. Then, again thinking, he grunted and cussed.

"Smallest practicable effort. A strong reactionary ambition to relieve myself from dependence and duties to society in general," he recalled, mimicking his wife in falsetto, and badly at that. "All that dime store psychobabble is something I'm not going to live with much longer, tellya what!"

Gazing at his adamant master as if he understood the gravity of his words, Roy lay down and did nothing else, his nose on his paws.

"Because it's my way or the highway!"

The minutes grew comfortably longer as they drove in the kind of silence induced by innate camraderie. Then Wes' cellphone rang.

So he answered it. "Cooper here . . . Oh come on. What do you want from me now? A pound of flesh? . . . " He heaved a surreal sigh and stubbed out his cigar. "Hold on." He found a pen and notepad amongst the clutter on his dashboard. "Go ahead," he grunted before jotting down something and furiously hanging up without saying goodbye. As he fumed for the next few blocks, we were introduced to any number of idiots, three or four morons, two jerks, and one big fat tomato head.

Upon reaching West Broadway, he turned east, hiding his eyes from the sunlight now streaming so bright through the windshield behind his shades before giving Roy's neck a big ol' squeeze.

"That precinct shrink don't know her ass from her elbows. She says my main problem is, now get this, is that I need to like myself for myself who I am now more. Why are they always trying to change me huh? Because I was a damn good football player. Smart and instinctive. You couldn't say enough about me out there. That's why I'm the type of guy, when something is put in front of me out here I'm going to accept the challenge and get the job done. Until that damn . . . " His voice trailed off, and he shook the dog by the throat, getting slobber all over his hand, which he wiped clean on his pants.

Adding at a later point: "Let me put it this way. I don't see anyone else on the force covering my ass like I'm covering theirs. I mean, who can you trust if you can't trust your teammates?"

This blue wall of silence remained unbroken for several moments.

"An excessive suppression of individual rights and personal independence and inclination. Whatever the hell that means," he snorted, manhandling the wheel left on Alameda. "Sometimes extravagantly reckless. Separating myself - And this one is my favorite - Separating myself from everyone but those who treat me with deference. With all this crap I'm getting on all sides no wonder my instinct is so shot to hell. Right now I feel like I'm back at square one. And that's frustrating. What's

that boy? Yeah, I know," he gurgled in reply. "I'm overcompensating for my head. All I have to do is stop thinking about it and just keep doing my job as best I can. Because one thing you have to have as a cop is the confidence you can make that bust anytime. And one thing's for sure, and that's if it wasn't for those white-shirted pencil-pushing pansies downtown I'd be making busts left and right."

Roy listened without judgement.

But then he came alive, whirling around and growling deep in the back of his throat.

The instantly alert Wes decelerated and glanced in the rearview mirror at the bearded man wearing a hot pink jumpsuit and matching purple pumps. "Oh calm down Roy. That guy's doing nothing wrong but being queerer than a two-headed nail, haw, haw. Cooper," he answered his cellphone. "No, I'd leave that part alone. Doing anything with it could be incriminating . . . What?" he shouted. "Hello? Hello? Hello? - Yeah I'm still here . . . No I didn't . . . No . . . Nothing else no . . . Not like that, no . . . What? Do you really expect me to - " Taking the dead cellphone from his ear, he gave it a hard look before chucking it out the window. "I'm getting not to trust that guy Roy."

It appeared he didn't know what the hell he was going to do but fume until, accelerating rapidly, he one handed it through each of these ninety degree turns in a power slide, tires squealing, using the siren whenever necessary.

The cruiser came around this corner and screeched to a halt in front of a row of seedy establishments catering to those who had no choice but to violate middle-class proprieties, scattering pigeons every which way. Neon lights straining against the power of the sun.

Wes got out and then leaned back in the window. "I'll be right back. So stay right here and keep an eye on things 'kay?" he asked. After expropriating a steak for Roy's lunch from the C-Note, he vanished inside the ill-ventilated and noisome neighboring confines for a quick eye opener or two.

From one's vantage, the slow struggling process of a solitary drunk lining up his shots framed by the plate glass window emblazoned with Sully's Lounge and shamrocks could be glimpsed. When the fourteen he was using as the cue missed the six and caromed off the bank and into a sidepocket, the gloom of the bar swallowed him whole, leaving one all alone outside to dwell.

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It was later in the morning when everyone's favorite police officer wandered from the bar still chuckling about something or other, his eyes dilated by the same liquid courage distilling that certain grandiosity from his entire being. Peering out from under his cap, lighting the cigar stuck in his mouth, he observed the down and out street pageantry as if to extend the idleness of his day some more. Then he shook his head and spat in disdain at the variety of it all before joining the ever-attentive Roy in the cruiser, tossing him the steak summarily devoured. He pulled into traffic with a flourish and, after relating in a veritable blue streak how a funny thing had happened followed by a couple of amusing incidences and something absolutely downright hysterical, finally began heading toward the sector he'd been reassigned by the powers that be last month.

"Them sonsabitches," Wes muttered, putting on his shades with authority. But, since his partner sympathized so vehemently, he regained his quaffed buoyancy right quick and began rambulating. "At least I feel like I'm getting better and better all the time, like I'm coming back to life again. Like, you know, whenever we direct traffic after games and stuff like that? Well. I don't know if you've ever noticed this before but when we're clearing the parking lots they clear twice as fast than when anyone else does. And even though I still make a few mistakes here and there out here now and then that proves nothing. 'Cept maybe you never stop learning on this job. That's why I like it so much." Slowing and restoring order with one malingering look, he paused, resuming at another point: "When you're gonna take on the police head on you're only going to come out worse in the end. And that's a statistical fact

straight from the horse's mouth so to speak my friend. You can even look it up! Besides. I'd rather hang out with the guys. You know what I mean? Because all's I get from her is a never-ending song and dance.

"Ahhh, they're a great bunch of guys," he continue babbling into Roy's ear, one arm strung around the dog's neck. "A great squad to work with. We sure know how to have fun. Just shooting the breeze . . . - " Which is to say they make plenty of noise exaggerating past athletic feats and one gallant comeback after another while burying the nagging doubts about ability, gamemanship and vision not to mention those innumerable times they'd taken their eye off the ball. " - Remember that time when . . . "

Riveted as though he'd never heard this tale of valor before, Roy kept panting open mouthed throughout its entire relation.

All the surrounding spaces heretofore unfilled had given way to cheaply built but high-rent apartment complexes as well as the square squat shapes favored by the barons of commerce. A scarecrow celebrating some sale or other we absolutely positively shouldn't miss the only reminder that fields of grain used to dominate this landscape now bastardized by a modernity in which every limit must be reached once defined. The police cruiser emerged from this unsatisfying confusion and accelerated through a long spatial trend being held fallow by speculators until a higher use for this location can be imported rather than cultivated. After hanging a series of turns, it entered Community District 3 at its southeast corner.

Except for the occasional golf course and shopping plaza, thick woods held sway along this dipping curvaceous road. Signs began indicating an impending reduced speed zone. And soon blue hairs in golf carts were zipping all over this - This goddamn place where one lived in an apartness soft and lax, where you'd be reported and subsequently fined for putting the garbage out incorrectly or hanging the clothes to dry. Pink flamingo lawn ornaments?

Don't even think about them.

If it had been intended to forever alter the true meaning and nature of Community via exclusionary commodification, it couldn't have been better contrived. Everything from a Japanese tea garden and privatized clubs for partaking of the region's famed therapeutic waters expensively to la-de-da boutiques and splashes of spring's verdant leafage mingled together until they became as one before Wes' eyes. It was in this bliss only cold hard cash's sheer power can provide that he and his partner drove to a fraternal order of silence, during which nods and smiles passed between them like intoxicating refreshments.

"That's a nice pig you're walking lady," he told one elderly pedestrian under his breath. "It's not a pig it's a dog," he replied in falsetto. "But I was talking to the dog! To the dog! Haw, haw!"

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Around any of these traffic circles a golf cart customized into a Mercedes SL Series coup came screwing out of this unreality on its proverbial two wheels. Clipping the cruiser's front bumper, striking the adjacent curb and, after driving against it for about fifty yards, regaining control and racing away like a bat out of hell. "What tha Chris - "

Supine no longer Wes wheeling about and blue lighting the unyielding perp he pursued, overtook and forced over way beyond the dense shrubbery shielding a busy putting green from sight. And, at 11:38 a.m. on 22 April --, he called the incident as well as his intentions in to dispatch while warily observing the fat little man wearing garish finery denoting his obsession for golf. His blue-gray hair coifed in waves back from his temples, his skin tanned to a robust glow, he sat there in his symbol of moneyed ease, sublime in his selfishness.

"Stay here and keep an eye out," he told his partner before getting out and surveying the scratches on the bumper, shaking his head. He seemed enlarged ten times more than usual he was so officious advancing. Crouching a little low, one

hand held up, the other one hovering at the ready above his holster. "Keep your hands where I can see them! Now!"

"Ah!" the unflappable old man breathed of the air's rarified fragrance, closing his weak blue eyes, his equally weak chin now one. "What a glorious morning. Is there anything I can do for you ocifer - I mean officer!" he hooted, slapping his thigh.

Disarmed, Wes hesitated before making sure the vast shadow of his former self wasn't in the suspect's eyes, then he barked: "I said keep your hands where I can see 'em! And what do you mean can you do anything for me? You could've killed someone back there!"

"There's no need to be rude, young man. Are you trying to make a public spectacle of me? Is that it?" he queried, covering his well-pruned eyebrows with a hand, his omnipresent smile warm and reassuring. There was a youthful jocularity, largely feigned, inserted into his voice. "Be reasonable. Because it's usually such a pleasure to meet a member of the thin blue line's finest. Never seen you before, though. New to the force?"

After gazing up in time to catch an airplane's flash lighting the sky, he looked back down in this upturned face still retaining the flush of curiosity for delicious things that encroached like a cancer upon the status quo he otherwise vociferously defended with an unutterable sense of God-given pride. "Quit jerking me around. Sir. And for the last time keep your hands on the wheel where I can see 'em. Tell you what, sir. This is going to be your first warning. Now let me see your license and registration and proof of insurance."

The perp just kept looking up at him with that maddening little smirk. While calculating thus, a grotesque rage flashed through his face before being replaced by a glad-handing public façade.

"May I have them sir?"

"Oh I see now. It's all clear. Sorry about that little misunderstanding back there," he rejoined, fluttering his hand over his shoulder, glancing at his watch. "This

is all on account of the mitigating circumstances surrounding our, ah, little shall we say têt à têt, no?"

"If you mean by that that you hit me and then ran - That's a hit and run by the way, making this a potential felony stop - Endangering pedestrian's lives. Then yes."

"But there's clearly no damage," he observed, craning what remained of his neck around the law's imposing frame. "And nobody's been hurt. So if you'll excuse me, a good day to you sir."

"Hold it right there buddy boy," Wes intoned, stepping in front of the cart, where he made a slow show of unsnapping the button restraining his revolver. "Don't be getting froggy on me now, hear? Let's all remain calm."

"What is the meaning of this? I've a tee time you see. That I'm already late for I'll have you know. So if we can find some way - Heh, heh - To put this matter in so many words behind us - Man to man, citizen to good God fearing American citizen - Then both of us will come out ahead in the end if you catch my drift Officer." He squinted up at the badge.

"Officer Wes Cooper doesn't take any bribes, sir. So I hope that wasn't a bribe."

"Me? A bribe? Why that slander alone - "

"Look. I warned you once already about your conduct. Besides hit and run I could haul your ass into jail for oh, I don't know, let's see, failure to yield, reckless endangerment and being uncooperative. And that's just off the top of my head, too. Oh yeah, failure to identify yourself too."

"Whoa there friend. Let's not be hasty now and make mistakes that don't have to be made by the people such as yourself who tend to make them. Because if there's one thing I never forget it's when someone cast aspersions on my integrity," he declared, putting on airs two sizes too big for his short dumpy frame. "Are you casting aspersions on my integrity? Because if so I resent someone in your position questioning my integrity."

"If that means hauling your ass downtown for any number of things then that's exactly what I'm thinking of doing."

"Why are you even here anyway? Don't you have more important things to do over on the East Side?"

"Hit and run felonies are pretty important felonies - "

"Hit and run! Those people over there aren't even human. They're the laziest, most wasteful things there are. They're all out of work to boot! And you're over here bothering with me. A paradigm of this community no less!"

"You could've - "

" - Hit and run?"

" - Killed someone."

"Why I never - I'll have you know that - "

" - Please sir - "

" - Never before in my life have I ever - "

" - I said - "

" - Been so insulted."

" - Please sir. Show me some respect and I'll show you some respect. Let's remain calm here. Because arguing with me won't get you anywhere but up Shit Creek without a paddle. It's in your best interests to cooperate. That's my final warning, too. So let me see some identification. And now. No more screwing around."

The obnoxious little man patted his fat thighs and ass, then rummaged idly through the cart's storage compartment. Shrugging his shoulders, he opened his upraised hands. "Why oops. Looks like I've forgotten my wallet."

"Let me get this straight. You have nothing to identify yourself with?"

"Look friend. I'm calling you friend. Know why? Because I think all strangers are friends I haven't met yet. And friends understand when friends make a little itty-bitty mistake now and then, see? Like when a friend forgets, say - Oh, I don't know - Let's say his wallet."

"I suppose I'm to take that to mean you've no proof of insurance or registration neither?"

"But I only live up there," this undisputed player in the small, often mean, and always calculating world of local commerce and politics protested, gesturing toward the investments bastardizing that ridge, where they masqueraded as homes. In that bantering but insulting tone fools who never change their minds reserve for perceived inferiors, he impatiently added: "You see? I come this same exact way each and every day 'bout this here time and I've never had any problems with you people before until today. Why's that, huh? Because I'll have you know that I'm a well respected member of this community."

"Then you sound like someone who wouldn't be keeping me from doing my job. Sir. I'm beginning to lose my patience - "

"Proof of insurance?" he snorted. License and registration? For what exactly? This is a golf cart man! Who ever heard of such a thing? Are you trying to make a public spectacle of me or what?"

"An N.E.V. - As in Neighborhood Electrical Vehicle - Requires proper paperwork just like any other motor vehicle being used on public thoroughfares."

Leaning back and, as if he were settling down for a long comfortable evening of conversation in his parlor (perhaps chugging brandy straight from the bottle), he opened his pugnacious mug. "Oh now it's all clear! You like ol' Tabatha here. So that's what you're after is it now. She's loaded you know," he said in a confiding tone. "A CD-player with surround sound speakers, built in ice chest, customized steering wheel with scorecard holder, tinted windshield, chrome wire wheels - In other words, the works. I've even put in five thou to give the engine some get up and go."

"You've got to be kidding me," the officer muttered, biting his tongue. "Listen - "

"One of the boys downtown put you up to this didn't they? By God that's it isn't it?"

Wes came alive with a cry, stepping back, his revolver half-out the holster.

"Whoa there friend!" the perp explained, throwing his hands up in the air. "So let me get this straight right now, this instant as it were," he drawled, exhibiting the mannerisms of smallness of mind and the timorous parochialism of spirit in which his kind sought solace, crossing his arms over his man breasts. "You really have no idea whatsoever who I am, now do you son?"

"It doesn't really matter who you are right now because this is a simple process that isn't helped when that someone's uncooperative like yourself. Do I make myself clear?"

"Uncooperative!" he snorted after unleashing a couple of obscenities.

"If an officer stops you for any reason you have to identify yourself. That's the law, and I don't make the laws. Oddly enough, it's called being cited for failure to identify yourself," explained Wes, who was swallowing his raw emotions audibly. "Otherwise you'd only be enforcing laws against people who cooperate. So in that case why would anyone cooperate? An officer has to have the authority to do his job. Because without that authority he can't do his job. And you're keeping me from doing my job. Sir."

"What's with the lecture son? Who put you up to this? Really. Come on, you really don't know me? I'm not *that* over the hill am I? You don't even remember my commercials?"

"No. And I'm about all run out of patience - "

"No?" he wondered, absolutely incredulous.

" - Here with your bullshit."

"The tough smart Judge? The best Judge money can buy?"

"Nope. Doesn't ring any bells."

"Un-f'in'-believable . . . What's this world coming to in this day and age? You're quite serious aren't you? After all these years of dedicated service to my community and look where it gets me," he puffed himself up by inhaling lustily, kneading his unhealthy corpulence. "Because since you so stubbornly insist I'm Judge Roland Alfonse Ephraim Icard. And I'll have you know - "

"And you have nothing to identify yourself with?"

Shrugging, he opened his palms to the sun, staring with a strange fixity now at the cop stepping back and thinking through his problem right quick before taking out his notepad and a pen.

"Can you spell out your name for me?" Wes asked, jotting it down as this man giving off eye-watering waves of superiority obeyed for once, making it come across as an insult.

"And what's your social security number? . . . Thank you sir. That wasn't so bad was it? I'm going to call this in with my sergeant and then we'll see how to proceed. Don't go anywhere now, hear?"

Getting deeply preoccupied with the indignity of it all, Judge Icard watched the cop watching him from the cruiser until a motorist also blessed by a higher standard of material well being soughing electrically by tooted. Which is when he gave such an "I'm-a-famous-person" wave he should've patented it before preening himself in the rearview mirror. Once his cellphone summoned his attention.

"Judge Icard and Associates . . . Oh yes Millie. So glad you called. I'm so sorry to have heard of your loss . . . But I'm so glad that you turned to me in this time of need. My warmest empathy extends out to you and yours . . . Yes indeedy I do and will . . . Now I usually don't like to stand outside talking into the wind. But seeing as I am already under the naked eye of God I'm reminded of the axiom that Nature is divine and morally uplifting, and what better place to relate that sentiment than a decoration on a casket, hmmm?" He listened for a while, nodding his head. Then he raised a hand in mild rebuke and kept it up in the air like that. "But that's my point exactly Millie. Don't you think your Stan would want to go out of this world in some way related to the way he lived? It ought to be an important thing since we only do it once right? Didn't he like to go hunting? . . . Well then we have a "Memories of the Hunt" casket complete with forest green lid and a camouflage bottom. It even features deer, sheep and bears frolicking in their natural surroundings . . . It's a heard turning product I can assure you of that. You'll see . . . And if not that," he hastened

to add. "We've got over forty different theme based art caskets. They are themed for a reason. They have warmth and personality. In other words it's not blank. No one's life is blank and the casket provides a family with a way to celebrate the life of someone they were close to. All that for a very reasonable twenty seven hundred dollars retail . . . Okay, we'll talk later. And all my warmest regards to you and yours in this time of need . . . Buh-bye now."

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This time around Judge Roland Alfonse Ephraim Icard was a much more accessible if not likable character, the one highly regarded by those who highly regard political players astute at not only turning a profit hand over first but smashing any and all opponents standing in their way.

"Ah-ha! If it isn't the prodigal son returning chastised like Judas to the Garden of Gethsemane," he gloated, crossing his legs, grinning and grinning and grinning, every gesture arbitrary and abbreviated by his girth. "How 'bout them Ragin' Reaganites? Huh? We've been filling our spiffy new stadium up like it's no one's business. If we knock off LBJ and Carter like we did JFK we'll be in good position to go undefeated in our division. And this is only our third full year of a full-scale varsity schedule! Can you beat that my boy? Those schools used to be such powerhouses but they're losing students to us because of our savvy planning initiatives and small town spirit," he boasted with a missionary's zeal. "The band needs a fleet of seven buses and an eighteen-wheeler to haul all its crap for crissakes. And if that's not Progress right there in a nutshell son I don't know what is. Ahh," he inhaled, draping an arm over the back of the seat. "There's nothing more old timey than Friday night football under all those bright lights. It's becoming just like it was in my generation's heyday," he boasted, gesturing around at what his hand hath wrought. "When our values were simple and solid and unassailable. Football, football is the - The heart of this community by God. It's good because it builds

tradition and promotes good community spirit - Makes for a good environment you know."

Not even half-listening, Wes stopped nodding his head in agreement and made sure he'd filled everything out right before proffering the ticket. "If you'll just sign right there at the bottom sir you can hit the links."

"We've got a great booster club, and we've got strong parent backing in every sport," he went on as if he hadn't heard a thing. All our facilities are first-class and our weightrooms are outstanding. Sports play a very important part of life out here. I consider it like some people do the fine arts. You know what I'm saying. It teaches young people about real life and to be involved unlike all that other hokey stuff. It's weird how much respect stays with a man even when so little of his own past stays with him in his own mind. Because not much stays with you, I'll tell you. There are few moments from even his most memorable days that aren't entirely forgotten, and how few of those few moments are ever retained . . . What's this here?" he wondered, snatching the ticket away.

"Just a speeding ticket sir. Sarge said since you are who you are and there wasn't any damage and nobody was hurt that this was the way to go. So if you'll just sign - "

"Now hold your horses a minute there son," he interrupted as soon as he'd recovered his composure, that great big grin once again smeared all across his face. "I'm not going to admit guilt to anything until after I've consulted with my attorneys and nowhere else but in a court of law."

"But this is just a speeding ticket though. By signing your name you're just agreeing to comply with the court's requirements. That's it. Nothing more. And if I were you I'd count my blessings . . . Sir."

"Wonderful. Absolutely one hundred and ten f'in' percent wonderful. Just what I need."

"Look. This is just a summary offense costing three hundred dollars at the most. You could've been hauled into jail. Every reckless manslaughter is an accident, you know. That's five to fifteen right there."

"Do you really expect me to just sit here and be lectured about the law by some snot nosed punk just out of the academy?"

"Not if you just sign it," Wes hastened to insert.

"I don't think so."

"If you just sign then we both can go our separate ways just like two adults would."

After staring up at the cop for one prolonged moment, his nature fluctuated visibly, and then this plinth-like man heaved himself out of the cart and stood there as if perched upon some promontory. "Are you casting aspersions on my maturity now?" he snapped in a most unpleasant way, hustling his cojones like gravitas. "First my integrity and now my maturity?"

"I do not, sir, know what you mean by that."

"Figures."

"Look - "

"No you look. Am I some kind of bitch's puppy on a leash to you here? Is that it?" he gesticulated while stepping into uneasy proximity.

"Easy there buddy."

"Who are you calling buddy? Because I'm not your buddy. Know why? Because there's plenty of your type around here. The dumb silent type with no get up and go," he bellowed, rising on his toes and poking him in the chest. "And don't I know it."

"I wouldn't, if I were you, sir, do that again."

"What did you just say to me? Are you threatening me?"

Wes licked his lips, and only by the way he gripped his pen did he give any outward indication of what was scarcely restrained within. "Look. I'm an officer of the law so please step away before I - "

"Silence! I won't listen to this outrage anymore. Because if I told you that - Aww, oh hell. What's the point of debating with an idjit like you anyway?"

"There's no call for insults!"

"Don't you dare raise your voice to me!"

"But you were hollering at me!" They stood there staring each other down. Then Wes continued through teeth clenched so tight that his jaw hurt. "Look. This is absolutely ridiculous. I'm just trying to do my job here. So if you'll just sign the damn ticket you can be off to your little golf game and then you appear in court and protest it if you want. You're a judge. You should know. It's a simple process. Sir."

"Are you insinuating that I don't know my business? Do you know who I am?"

Puffing out his cheeks, he blew "Get out of my face and just sign the damn ticket."

Judge Icard's face suddenly contorted, and he began striding back and forth, three steps this way and three steps that way, waving his arms every which way, his patent leather shoes squeaking. Then, stepping back and extending his arms wide, he looked in wonderment at the vastness of the sky. "Let me tell you this young man. I absolutely refuse to be a victim of such an abuse of power. This is a charade. Nothing but a charade. Of which I expect an expedient denouement."

"What are you going on about now little man," the cop broke in, his muscles taught with pent-up physical remonstrations. Anywhere else, he thought, and he'd done already find himself hit. "Are you going to sign the ticket or what?"

He rushed forward and snatched the pen from Wes' hand. "What's your name and badge number? There needs to be some changes made around here starting with you Officer Wes Cooper. Because I'll have you know that I didn't spend all my blood sweat and tears helping make this city what it is today in order to be treated so shabbily. And who's your commanding officer? Don't talk back to me in that tone boy. I will simply not have it. Now you hear me because I'm the one who turned this backwood podunk black-eye of a place into what it is today. And I know you know

what I'm talking about because by the sound of your voice you aren't far removed from one of the long lines of white trash that used to work these here hills. Don't tell me no different neither. What did your old man do anyway? No wait, don't tell me. He was a bartender. Am I right or what?"

Shifting his weight, Wes bit down on his tongue so hard he drew blood. After a sudden coldness, a slight shudder, he regained his composure, folded his arms over his chest, and remained silent.

Malignant contempt blazed through Judge Icard's being as he went beside himself with rage, losing his last shred of dignity, his face flushing crimson, crumpling the ticket in his fist. Arrogant, self-righteous, and utterly sure of himself, he proceeded to spew everything he could possibly spew. And then he spewed the same thing over and over, over and over again before emitting an odd, high-pitched sound and, rearing back in outrage, spun leaping into his vehicle and sped away regardless of everything else.

Leaving the cop mired by dazed bewilderment, mouth agape. To watch the golf cart evading imaginary gunfire and feel a surge of electrified matter becoming Roy bolt past baring his yellow teeth in hot pursuit. And right when he began making a molasses slow move back toward the cruiser, an evasive maneuver sent the dog in a blood spattering arc that ended where the body landed twitching on the pavement, eyes already stilled by death no longer understanding.

Wes' instincts took over, and he found himself stomping his foot on the gas screaming "Officer down! Officer down!" While his throat constricted upon a bestial cry he kept coming and coming, sirens blazing and tires smoking, his knuckles whitening around the wheel before his fiercely distorted face was all consuming. Then, in between heartbeats, time unpredictable - crisp cool night, shades of black and white - limbs cold moving - absolute stillness reigned - everything now flat and burning under the western sun reducing to essence . . .

Soon all went darkness, untouchable and far away.

# 3

## The Nurturing Kind

**L**arry Snoad was a rather slightly built and button-down young man of about thirty-two. He had one of those prissy clean-shaven appearances that told you he was the kind who never ran with scissors, never swam after eating, and never played anywhere near a street. His hair was of a common brown color, his downcast eyes were narrowed by concentration, and his mouth was moving mostly soundlessly, as if he were rehearsing a well-reasoned argument. That idealistic spring to his step as he paced the vast width of this imposing empty corridor was diminishing daily. A radio could scarcely be discerned. Upon hearing the sound of footsteps coming ever closer, he paused and looked up from his faint reflection in the gleaming marble floor.

In the next moment Dr. Hayden Borger squeaked around the nearest corner. He was winded, and his face was so florid that he almost looked healthy and honest. He came to a halt two steps from Snoad and, after rubbing the sides of his head, he put his hands on his hips, exuding the confidence of a man who sees something others might not. There was no flexibility in his manner, and it was quite plain that, as both a personal and professional matter, he had no immediate use for the young man standing before him.

"What do you want from me now Snoad?" he asked in a huff of irritable exasperation, shooting a wrist out of his sleeve, making a show of glancing at his diamond-encrusted Rolex. "And make it snappy too. This'd better be worth my time this time because I'm running late as it is so chop chop," he ordered, his three martini lunch hot on his breath. "Spit it out and make it quick or - "

"Well," he began after taking a deep breath and swallowing, his eyes wide open and bright. "I don't think welfare reform has been such an - an unqualified success. Although it ended the federal entitlement to cash assistance and placed a

five year lifetime limit on the benefits and reduced welfare rolls by fifty percent - Which is as you've already made clear sir is the last decade's most exciting and positive reaction to a public policy change," he hastened to add, his brain going faster than his tongue, his gesticulations swift and eager. "Many states, though, are experiencing a slowing in and in some cases a reversal of this trend and also in an increase in poverty, too!"

"Is that so?"

"Emerging evidence is also indicating that the caseload declines have been concentrated mainly in urban areas - "

"You don't say now?"

" - Of already low poverty and unemployment, confirming - "

Groaning aloud with wretched exasperation, Borger raised his arms as if to ward off any impending nonsensical attacks. "Confirming nothing but the fact that there're lies, damn lies and statistics, Snoad, and that you're a horse's ass to boot." He shot a look at his Rolex and began to move away. "You people need to remember that you don't put a cart before the horse and that if you watch your pennies, your dollars'll take care of themselves," he remarked, giving yet another little gasp of annoyance. Then, as if to conceal the thin logic of the lonely premise on which he stood, he launched into a long-winded but pointed soliloquy studded with meaningless references to clergy, duty, humankind and various ethics boards he'd been a part of. "So now, if you'll excuse me . . . "

"But even some supporters, sir - Sir? - Of the law, some of our own colleagues here today even, acknowledge that its success has been largely confined to the easily employable recipients and that much of the reduction in caseloads is a result of this group profiting from the booming service sector's job market. So when the economy slows, caseloads are likely to surge again," all in one breath Snoad persisted after grasping Borger's forearm.

"And I've been telling you for weeks now that this matter's been reviewed by the various subcommittees comprising the Committee from every single angle

imaginable and its made its firm and final decision and that's that," he ejaculated across the startled air in an insufferable tone, jerking his arm free. His demeanor growing darker, he ogled this young man in one unrelenting moment of insulting wonder. "I refuse to hear any more of this nonsense because I simply refuse to stand for this this - Such a perversion of facts. What's more of a drain on our socio-economic well being? Productive members of society? Or welfare babies having generation after generation of welfare babies? I'll give you a hint, Snoad: If you start filling up one hand with shouldas and couldas and the other with crap, which would fill up first?"

The lineaments of hope and justice in his countenance fading, Snoad visibly became much less sure of himself. He felt his heart beating in his throat as his thoughts and feelings struggled for mastery. "But how can you say that when few former recipients are earning enough to support their families on wages alone?"

"You're either for or against us, Snoad. Must you always contradict your betters' wisdom?"

"It's just that the economic expansion of the past twenty some odd years is leaving millions of families behind! Who do you know who would take a twenty or thirty percent cut in their standard of living for the privilege of going to work?"

Not until the full measure of his contemptuous disapproval had been revealed clear as day did Borger deign to reply.

"So. Let me get this straight here. What you're actually telling me's that the overwhelming success of welfare reform's actually a failure? With the way rolls've dropped?"

"But poverty has been reduced only a little. Even in this economy, those who've left welfare are worse off because many people who lose jobs can't get welfare and the jobs they do get pay poorly!"

"Bosh! Quit being such a - A - A naïve stinkin' neophyte. Like I said this morning, this' the only country ever whose so-called poor people are all fat! What do you say to that?"

"What's needed," Snoad weakly asserted, staring down at the floor like a schoolboy, shifting from foot to foot, the tips of his ears burning brightly. "Is a reversal of those policies that have tightened the grip of the - Of the poverty trap by by, by turning the safety net of a moral society into an immoral labyrinth that uses poverty itself to trap the poor."

"I'll tell you your reasoning right now, *Mis*-ter Snoad," spat Borger from the inner recesses of his being, his eyes getting brighter and brighter as the scarlet darkness of his face deepened. "Your reasoning's misguided and misplaced and misinformed and runs along the lines that the world's flat. You know why? Because workers must become more productive. That's why we limit benefits. To emphasize and encourage work while promoting social responsibility, which's *exactly* what this law has done for this great country, *Mis*-ter Snoad. By penalizing irresponsible and and, well, immoral behavior and putting people to work. Work. For example, let's just say that I told you to jump off a bridge. Would you?"

" . . . No . . . "

Shaking his head, his shit-eating grin, if possible, growing even wider, Borger paused and, taking refuge behind a shameless piece of bluster, preened himself. "There you go again. Insubordination," he intoned. "I told you weeks ago that this matter has been carefully reviewed from every angle and everything points to the conclusion that the welfare reform law's an unparalleled success. And that's all that matters because I'm the one who does the hiring and firing around here so what I say goes, not what you say. Because I know what's right because I know exactly what I'm doing and it's exactly right. Is that clear? Do you understand me *now*?"

Snoad bowed his head and breathed the customary "Yes sir" while his oh so obvious superior made the swift dismissive gesture of a victor in heroic limelight.

"Welfare reform not a success? Well I say bosh to that!" he chuffed with a sort of crazed disdain. "And if I hear one more peep out of you come anywhere near running along these insubordinate and altogether unpatriotic lines again you're shit canned, got me now Snoad?" Leaving that as his parting injunction, he turned and

squeaked furiously away in a waddling cloud of self-conceived glory without once looking back.

With one hand partly raised in blank surprise, Snoad watched him disappear around the corner. He stood like this for some time, pale and blinking. He heard the doctor's fading footsteps become obfuscated by the rising murmur of different voices which was, in turn, replaced by the radio playing saccharine music somewhere above and beyond out of sight. For one long moment he could neither think nor feel and, although he abruptly came back into himself, he still felt like he was floundering through a great unseen, his heart heavy with incertitude if not fear. His steps made shaky by another series of conflicting emotions, he sat on the closest bench, where he proceeded to find those words one thinks too late for use in the scene itself, gazing at nothing.

*

As the heavy mahogany doors swung closed behind him, Borger paused and unwrapped a breath mint. It seemed like he'd been standing there the entire time.

He popped the mint into his craven maw and, while glancing at his Rolex, let the wrapper flutter from his fingers to the floor, where it lay unheeded. Straightening his tie and smoothing back his hair, he glanced about this carefully composed environment still stuffy with last night's cigars. Because of the low ceiling and deeply striated marble columns, the room appeared to be very spacious. Although furnished in a bland and impersonal style, the atmosphere was stifling with that rarified sense of opulence. The dusty red drapes along one wall were pulled as tightly together as possible. And the harsh fluorescent lighting immediately suffused any daylight that found its way through the arched windows. The walls an off-sepia hue, the deep carpet and polished surfaces, all conspired to mitigate one's senses into a quiet complacency. A long sigh of irritation solely meant to mask his own eagerness broke from his lips by habit's force.

All of the men presently assembled were either company directors who had once been in government or were in government and had once been company directors. Those with enough hair wore it impeccably coifed and, in their conforming suits of international design, you just knew that, deep down inside, every last one of them wanted Fred Astaire's chin. Their countenances were permanently set in the manner of avaricious pecuniary gain, and their corpulent postures suggested the kind of self-indulgent natures that embrace the volatile mixture of the puritan strain that wouldn't rest until the good ol' U.S. of A. was very much a country in their dour image.

You know the kind.

When the room grew aware of Borger's presence, he carved a broad smile into the flabby monolith that was his face. An unexpected dimple came into each cheek. Otherwise indistinguishable from his Distinguished Colleagues, he strode amongst them, putting his attributes of strength, determination and manhood on display, infecting them with his enthusiasm. "Doctor Borger!" more than several called out at any given instant. Distributing warm but meaningless greetings or cheerfully inscrutable admonishments, shaking hands and slapping backs with neither pause nor shame, it was as if he were aflame with a televangelic rapture. Grinning until his face hurt and then grinning some more, his chest rising with quickening breathing, he pressed through the multitudes before vanishing, as if into a viscous opaque liquid.

In a few minutes he emerged with a vehement effort near the head of the room and made his way up onto the stage. A handful of men were in various states of rising from behind the long table covered by star-spangled tablecloths that hung to the floor. After nodding his head in an executive mannerism of decision and firmness or, if the surrounding circumstances dictated, uttering a string of pleasant-sounding words to each in turn, he attained the soft leather chair awaiting his bulk. While two young women with sumptuous legs came from off-stage and began fastening tiny microphones to each man's lapel, Borger gazed upon the bobbing and milling heads of the conscripted enablers comprising the loud audience. His face wore an

expression only his closest acquaintances knew wasn't deep thought. Although some loud mouth made a lewd remark, which raised a titter of laughter, his eyes remained flat and emotionless.

*Harris*, he scribbled on a notepad without looking.

The old man doddering in the adjacent seat roused himself and looked startled for a moment. "We 'bout ready to get this here thingy started yet or what?" he gasped under the crowd's unremitting hot-winded palaver, his eyes growing larger before contracting.

"Of course."

"Because I've got me a sweet little thing lined up for this afternoon if you know what I mean," he pursued in a low tone, nudging him in the side, wink wink.

Borger made an effort to listen warmly, but the old man's slow and rather confused display of excitement didn't overwhelm his skepticism. "You don't say," he interposed in a constrained, exasperated voice as the old man fell back on his puzzled musings.

When the women so trim and fit returned to the wings, one had a smudge on her behind suspiciously similar to a grubby handprint.

Then the overhead lights called the proceedings to order by flashing thrice, and the metallic screeching of microphones rose over the dwindling babble of voices. Just as suddenly this din grew fainter then ceased while another woman hurried over carrying a tray of glasses and a pitcher of ice water, which she set upon the table and distributed before hurrying away. Borger cleared his throat in immediate successions as a subtle but commanding call to order. All their eyes came upon him and, after a wayward series of whispering moments, the rows upon rows of white faces transfigured into a pliant, homogenized mass utterly devoid of meaning.

The atmosphere was now one of expectancy while they awaited his words thus, and he plunged into a momentary reverie of fanatical self-absorption. He cleared his throat again, this time with intense emphasis, and drew a breath immense with the singleness of his idea.

*

In the very next instant, words began to pour out of this vainglorious man with an incomparably imperious ease: "I'll assume that the various accommodations provided over our break were more than adequate since events have - Ahem! - Have overtaken us this afternoon and we're running behind as it is. So if we all work together and keep our program accelerated and straightforward, we can get this over and done with quick." He looked at his pudgy fingers linked on the table until his audience's applause ceased. "As you know, I'm Doctor Hayden Borger. And as you can see, I'm joined again by the same panel as this morning's session. And, since we're all now friends here and such and these proceedings have no direct policy implications anyway but merely serves to provide the foundation for this great country's future, we can skip the formal introductions of my Distinguished Colleagues sitting beside me here today up on stage. Let's get started right away. But before I turn the floor over to my Distinguished Colleague, Doctor Willard Kulp," he continued, gesturing toward the pugnacious red-faced man, the kind who flies into an overriding passion over the difference of a few cents on any bill as if it were a double indemnity insurance claim. "Let me reiterate some of the points raised in this morning's session."

Gazing around, he paused as if to take a mental note then scanned the document in his hand. "Credentials and committees don't make you ethical. Principles do. And those principles have to make sense, which is why we're all convened here today. Because we wouldn't be convened here today if we didn't think welfare reform was such an overwhelming success of clear moral standards. Since this is not a technocratic conference, we are not here primarily to discuss the hows and whys and ifs of welfare, which has been successfully reformed. On these subjects, more powerful people than us'll have discussions on this. Instead, by discussing the successes of welfare reform in all of its . . . successes . . . in such an open forum as this we're forming the bedrock for the impending future based on our

time-tested conservative beliefs. Now, with that said, I yield the floor to my Distinguished Colleague, Doctor Willard Kulp, Chancellor of Kingsword College. Doctor Kulp?"

An upswell of polite applause soon faded away.

The now bespectacled Kulp struggled with his girth to gain his feet and, without raising his eyes from his prepared text, read: "It is so nice to see so many friendly God-fearing faces here today, praise the Lord. I'd like to thank you all for making me fell so at home."

During the subsequent polite round of applause, Borger poured himself a glass of ice water then looked away for a while.

"Thank you so much . . . Thank you . . .

"My policy research has found that the old welfare system promoted long-term dependency and harmed the interests of children. Welfare also increased social dependency and illegitimacy and destroyed work ethic and the family structure and the American Way of Life we all share, praise the Lord. Needless to say, this had a devastatingly negative effect on children's development. It is beyond a doubt that welfare dependency rather than poverty has the most negative effect on children. A form of social toxin, if you will. Each of the central tenets of the old welfare system was misleading and deeply flawed. Together they became a disastrous system of aid that harms rather than helps, aggressively crushing the hopes and futures of several generations of Americans." As if on cue Kulp gave a little twirl of his hand and, strong with an invincible certitude, continued reading in his humorless staccato:

"History and plain old common sense has statistically proven that values and abilities within families, not family income, that lead to children's success. Families with higher incomes have sound values concerning self-control, deferred gratification, productive initiative, education and marriage which they invariably pass on to their children. It's those values rather than family income that are the key to the children's attainment. So, by attempting to raise the family income artificially through welfare, it's our firm belief that it was welfare itself that was destroying the

very values which are key to a child's future. And if that wasn't bad enough, welfare also reduced work effort and promoted illegitimacy and poverty prone households. The only thing the old system of welfare was extremely efficient at was replacing good Christian self-sufficiency and industriousness with dependence."

This man in a clerical collar and natty sport jacket looked up and coughed against his hand. "This is all borne out by my policy research group's shall we say refined experimental evidence that has yet to be released." Then he went right back to his script. "So those of us who were truly concerned with the welfare of children like all of us here today sought a radical transformation of the system aimed at reducing dependency and illegitimacy and stop impeding the ability of children to become successful and productive members of mainstream society. Welfare reform has proven to do so. Thank you." He sat, took off his reading glasses, and then mopped his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"I'm sure Doctor Kulp appreciates such warm applause, especially after travelling all this way to be with us. Thank you, Doctor Kulp, thank *you*," said Borger, clapping too. "For such an informative presentation. Would anyone like to ask Doctor Kulp any questions?" There were no questions, and Borger took a careful sip of ice water before proceeding: "Well then, moving right along, let me see . . . The overwhelming success of welfare reform needs to be illuminated. So with that as our present line of inquiry, we come next to Mister Lyle Mitchell of Mitchell's Worldwide Mission Unlimited."

"Thank you Doctor Borger," Mitchell began, turning to the audience as if it were a close friend. "Because of Doctor Kulp's wonderful report, I don't need to say that welfare before reform was an outdated and burdensome program designed to remedy adverse economic conditions, not enhance personal responsibilities because I'm sure the importance of reform to our country's future is obvious to all of us." He appeared to be mulling over his thoughts for a moment. "But, to keep the record straight, I would like to say that there has been no legislative effort past or present in which is more successful than welfare reform!"

Applause intervened for some time.

"I therefore believe we can all feel proud as Americans that we have achieved as much as we have. But since there still are liberals persisting to shrilly argue that welfare reform has not been a success actually, we should not forget that it was *our* Principles guiding the faith-based activities reforming the system. Not theirs. They don't understand that Personal Responsibility and a Sense of Ownership must cross categorical lines," he said, waving his hands as though he were disregarding an entire crowd's protests. "I know, I know. And our initiatives are included in new legislation, budget adjustments and administrative changes and streamlining. We are even maintaining a safety net to catch those who truly need assistance and avoid across the board benefit reductions as the sole solution to welfare dependency by encouraging Family Self-Sufficiency, Stability, and Integrity that are the fundamentals to this great nation's Character. All families applying for welfare are now forced to complete self-sufficiency plans and are referred to work among many other spiritual activities so they can continue to take those steps. And I won't even mention that our measures assure that every child is supported by a traditional two-parent family. What more could our critics ask for? What do they propose instead?" he queried, uttering each word like a scholarly aside that didn't come close to masking his air of masculine distaste. "The answer to both those questions and many many more like them are nothing and nothing and more nothing!"

This propitious audience laughed as one, their heads bobbing back and forth or up and down or both.

Borger poured another glass of ice water as Mitchell drew himself to his fullest height and struck the table a terrible blow on the instant, his face growing hard during the sharp report. Then the following burst from him in a flood of speech: "Nothing but nothings! And the reason why is because their whole ideology is founded on collectivist principles. It's simple: There should be no important economic differences between people. No one should be too rich. No one should be too poor. In other words, they want to close the wealth gap, which is a very powerful

idea. A very common idea . . . " This exemplar nonparallel fighter for Progress, building to a climax, swallowed a mouthful of water. He slowly turned his head and glanced around in the other direction, his lips curling into a sneer. "But this is a very bad idea. Gaps, what us people in the real world call differences, are innate to mankind. Do we want to close the, say, I don't know, beauty gap and make everyone look like Margaret Thatcher?

"In a world without gaps, we'd all be the same, and the reason why the rhetoric regarding the closing of the so-called wealth gap is immoral because it entails using the lie that economic equality is based on a fixed amount of wealth. But Wealth is based on Productivity, and Productivity can be expanded indefinitely. Collectivism is silly, deceitful, a sin and on top of that cowardly because They fear the power We have over Them. Because if the world's wealth is not controlled by those with money, then the only alternative is to have wealth controlled by people with guns," he explained to them in rhythm, pounding the table with one fist before switching to the other. "And the government has plenty of guns. Which is why we must now galvanize our political bureaucracy Then he picked up a thick, official-looking report and thumbed through it. "But I digress . . .

" . . . Let me see here . . . The poor only serve as a rationale for increasing the political power of the left. Their goal is either a self-righteous sense of superiority or the political power with which to express their self-infatuation by imposing their utopian vision on others. The poor, in other words, are a means to justify the expansion of government programs by turning money and power over to leftists. To these liberals, the poor aren't people. They're brackets. By turning them into a commodity, they practice their brand of compassion by evoking various doom and gloom scenarios to route our money through Washington via confiscatory tax policies, recoupement litigation and unrealistic regulatory burdens. All of which constitutes nothing but strip mall socialism. Never before in the history of mankind have the moral restraints and aspirations necessary to the fullness of human nature and civilization itself been subjected to so ubiquitous and persistent an assault. Thank

you for having me here today . . . Thank you . . . " Mitchell sat down and leaned away as if he were abashed at such an exuberant response.

"I agree with Mister Mitchell that the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer is simply untrue," Borger said after most of the applause had died away. After another moment's pause, he continued: "Material conditions of lower income Americans have only improved dramatically over time. In fact, I'd go so far to say that living conditions in this nation as a whole have improved so much that society can no longer even remember what it even meant to be truly poor or even middle-class in earlier generations like ours. Does anyone have any questions they'd like ask Mister Mitchell before these proceedings, ah, proceed any further?"

Not more than a dozen men distinguished themselves from the audience by rising to their feet. "By every single objective," in unison they all tried to say over the others. "The new law has been if not *the* greatest public policy successes of modern times, at least a hands-down spectacular success. There is also vivid evidence that the past decade's gains in reducing crime and welfare dependency are not just temporary results of a good macroeconomy but are deeply rooted so that they'll stick. Welfare reform has secured this nation's Freedom and Prosperity. So spectacular has the success of reform been that it is easy to forget how bitterly and with what moral posturing it was opposed. The inevitable result, they insisted, would be more poverty and suffering, especially for children. Then how come rolls are falling at a rate of thousands per day?" the last one standing, the one with the loudest and most confident voice, asked, alone.

"Good question. A very good question," Mitchell replied from his seat. "Our critics were wrong because the welfare reform laws made it clear to Americans that the free ride would no longer be endless, forcing them to move to self-sufficiency. If poverty is defined generally as lacking adequate nutritious food and clothing for the entire family and a reasonably warm dry place to live, then there are few poor persons remaining in this country. Although real material hardship can indeed occur, my firm's research suggests that it's severely limited in extent and severity. Those who

are quote poor unquote today live in conditions that would have been judged luxurious just a few generations ago." He waved the thick, official-looking report over his head. "Did you know that forty one percent of so-called poor households own their own homes while seventy percent own a car? Did you know that poor people today are also more likely to be overweight than are middle-class persons? And that so-called poor children today are actually in fact and incontrovertibly super-nourished? It all says so right here in black and white," he expostulated, letting the report fall to the table with a bang. Crossing his arms, he gazed about with an air of regal satisfaction.

"Thank you, Mister Mitchell, for the enlightening remarks. Now if there aren't any more questions? . . . "

"A generation largely untouched by this infernal generation's entitlement mentality! I remember ration books!" the old man sitting next to Borger, Dr. Thurgood Willoughby the Third, declared in a supremely confident manner and Al Haig "I'm in charge here" tone, half-rising, trembling in every limb. "That grips us today! But the lib'ral press never wants to solve problems. So they won't let the truth be told! Because we didn't have air conditioning! An electric fan was good enough by God!" he continued to confide in the assembled company. "If problems were solved, their grievances would be put to rest and class warfare would end. A free economy is the only economy that gives individuals a chance to rise in the world. What I say is backed up by statistics, gentlemen. Cold hard statistics," he spat so especially virulently you wish he'd bite his tongue. His chest now heaving, he collapsed into his seat.

Borger bent his head toward this relic of a man. "We as Americans," he prompted out the side of his mouth.

Willoughby roared to life, both his arms extending, as if he were hurling lightning. "We as Americans are sick of such wanton laziness. What is going on is a criminal form of laziness, plain and simple. And we won't stand for this outrageous behavior! These people need to be made to learn that working hard is not a virtue.

It's a requirement. To work hard is the responsibility of every good American. Anything else is unsatisfactory. This is called Progress. Those kinds of people who have no ambition and no pride in their living in such a great, all-loving country like ours and spending our hard-earned money on drugs and God knows what else whatever surplus they can afford just over the bare necessities of a squalid life. Lib'rals care about the poor as much as Palestine's leaders care about Jews. In both cases, people are used as political tools to achieve their aspirations and enhance the power of their exploiters . . . "

By this time, his amplified voice had become a soughing, metallic whisper. Staring straight in front of him, his jaw slack, he seemed to crumple inwards.

"What Doctor Willoughby means," Borger hastily inserted into the resulting awkward silence. "Is that the debate about whether the decline in welfare caseloads has been the result of economic factors or welfare reform. His committee's findings show that - Beyond the shadow of any and every doubt - The economy has been neither a sufficient nor a primary factor in the reduction. Because the socialist War on Poverty created an extensive welfare system that encouraged dependence and penalized Work and Marriage among other American Values. So the rate of caseload decline cannot be attributed to differences in economic progress indicators. Policy reform, not economic growth, is the principle engine driving the decline in dependence."

"That's right!" Kulp chimed his two cents in without bothering to arise. "There has also been some misguided but widespread liberal concern that large declines in welfare dependence would lead to large increases in child poverty. Welfare artificially inflates household income and, in the reality defined by this committee's statistical findings that decreases in dependence have beneficial effects on children's long-term development. Even if these decreases are accompanied by decreasing family incomes, work requirements are very successful in reducing dependence. All of which shatters the shrill liberal brand of vainglorious nonsense and venomous grandstanding about the impossibility of reducing dependency. And it

needs to be focussed even more intensely on these three things: Encouraging marriage, requiring work, and further controlling costs."

At this Mitchell shot to his fee, waving his thick official looking report over his head again. "Government programs are designed to lift the burden of caring for the welfare wagon riders from ordinary people by allowing them to write a check to pay the professionals who would solve problems! It's high time for government to reassert a healthy pressure on the American people!" He paused to soak in their lusty approval and take a series of deep breaths. When he spoke next, his voice rose in syncopated cadences:

"Congress should phase out federal-assistance programs and push states to develop ways for individuals and community-based groups to take over poverty-fighting responsibilities immediately! Not now. Yesterday! If it was merely a question of wasted money, there would be cause for concern, but no crisis. After all, the four trillion the government's wasted on welfare pales in comparison to what it wastes on many other programs. The real crisis lies in what the system is doing to our society. There is in fact no evidence that any of these reforms have fixed the system's fundamental flaws. So Congress should concentrate on tearing down those regulatory and tax barriers that help trap people in poverty by reigning in the free market by focussing on ending welfare as we know it entirely. Until welfare is no longer a viable option, wagon riders will continue making bad choices and the country will continue to spend endless amounts of energy and taxpayer money trying to clean up the resulting dependency problem. But what is most destructive about this failed experiment is not the money it costs taxpayers but how it supplies an opportunity for people lacking American Initiative to damage their lives and the lives of the children who are born into the cycle of dependency and hopelessness. True compassion demands that government not establish policies that encourage such hardship!" Mitchell concluded to a thunderous ovation holding no regard for the future, a future full of ominous potentialities these expedient practical men couldn't even begin to imagine.

As the applause continued showering down, Borger rustled an impressive-sized sheaf of paper busily together. After glancing at his Rolex once twice, he cleared his throat until order was restored.

"Personal responsibility has become an anachronism in America today," he told them. "Even our elected representatives on the other side of the aisle take little responsibility in their personal behavior or political decisions. The future can only look bleak under these circumstances. Clearly our country has huge social problems due to the - The decay of Our Society's Ideals. Addressing the root causes for abuse and neglect like poverty, joblessness, poor education . . . poor parenting skills, are issues we as a society should address. As evidenced by all of my Distinguished Colleagues' presentations, welfare reform has been a tremendous step in this direction because it ends the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation." Borger, his face now a wrathful purplish hue, drew a deep shuddering breath. "Work and encourage the formation and maintenance of traditional two-parent families by requiring work. Far too much of America's so-called anti-poverty effort has been devoted to making poverty more comfortable and not enough to creating the conditions that make it possible to actually get out of poverty. While government can do little to actually create Prosperity, the sad fact is that government policies and programs are often the biggest barriers to getting out of poverty. Which is why more of our kind of statistical and policy research needs to be performed in order to develop more strategies that further control costs.

"So, on behalf of my Distinguished Colleagues joining me here today, we conclude that this entire body of gentlemen here today are indeed holding the line for Freedom. Without all of your support, we wouldn't be winning this war within our very own borders." He glanced at his Rolex and beamed at everyone before bringing this persistent repetitive orchestration to a close. "In record time too! Thank you all for coming."

The audience surged to its feet and roared its approval, their applause cascading upon Borger standing where he stood for one long moment, chin uplifted and eyes closed.

"Thank you. Thank you all so much . . . Well I . . . No please, I don't know what to say really . . . But thank you," he replied, growing even more erect during another prolonged instant, his head almost neckless on his shoulders. Now holding his arms as if he were going to embrace them all in one gigantic hug before striding off the stage, the hand not clutching his briefcase clenched into a fist he kept pumping over his head, and through the oscillating audience's standing ovation. Unchanging in tone but not intensity, it put a pompous bounce in his step and propelled him out the door.

They never saw him again.

*

As soon as he vanished from the room, it was like life was beginning again. The assembled company broke apart and came together in huddled, distinctly separate masses, where they fell into animated discussion of this, that or the other almighty goddamn important thing.

You weren't spared this sight until shadows were within shadows. And soon even their voices became unintelligible before losing your cycling interest altogether.

*

Appearing positively animated, Borger burst from the previous scene with a full head of steam. The doors swung shut on all the phenomena associated with his oh so dramatic exeunt and, as he came chugging over the polished surface's expanse, you could increasingly discern the desiccated happiness he expressed by whistling "Auld Lang Syne." Upon rounding a corner and seeing Snoad sitting there staring off into space on the most proximate bench, his demeanor darkened with the swiftness of magic and he ceased whistling. He remained unobserved by this - This disgraceful

and altogether impious little prick until he sailed on by, shielding his averted face with one pudgy hand.

After collecting two armfuls of reports together and several deliberations, Snoad hastened to catch up.

And, when he finally did, Borger shot him a withering look before shoving his briefcase into Snoad's already unruly burden without breaking stride. "I didn't mean to talk, I don't know, out of line earlier," came the crackling now unrecognizable sound of the young man's voice to his ears. There was a moment's hesitation, and his throat clicked when he made another effort for words. "It's just that I was trying to give you another point of view," he quavered. "Just to - " Again his throat clicked " - I guess just to add another perspective to your argument I guess . . . "

Besides the fact that his anger was clearly boiling up again, there was no recognition from Borger whatsoever.

" . . . So . . . What do you think we should do next?" Snoad ventured to query.

Pausing mid-stride and whirling around as if for some extreme provocation, Borger fixed him with those glistening ferocious eyes. "Snoad!" he exclaimed with the histrionic air of someone resisting an urge to throttle. Then he snorted with a little tremor and the sneer of relentless contempt he reserved for such stupidly insubordinate servants. "What do *I* think *we* oughta do next?" he added, puffing out his chest so he seemed even stouter, all his chins thrust forward.

Snoad betrayed his nervous tension by an involuntary movement. "I didn't mean to - "

"You never mean to do anything which is why you never do anything!"

"But I can assure you I - "

"I need another point of view like I need another hole in my head. Especially one from you, got me? So you need to start thinking before you speak," Borger told him, jabbing one pointed finger against the young man's temple before turning heel and chugging away. "Remember that if nothing else."

Even with his longer stride, Snoad struggled to keep up. There was a long silence but for their footsteps and the swishing sound effect of friction emanating from his superior's pants. They went up the stairs giving variety to this corridor's emptiness then came hurrying even more rapidly down the rest of it.

"All I want to know is - "

Borger held up both hands and threw them down without breaking stride. "I won't hear any more of it Snoad and that's that."

"But the supports that are part of the package overhauling the lives of families - Families, sir! - Are laughable at best!"

"Bosh! Do you really expect me to believe that nonsense?"

"And as federal assistance has been reduced the demand has increased for such things like emergency food distribution networks - "

"If you just listened to yourself for once you'd know how stupid you sound. Because then you'd hear what you're saying. Do you think it's because the presumed polarization of America's political issues that has been the object of a misguided and vain search for - For empirical and conceptual justification that diverting families from welfare to avoid long-term dependency and crime's wrong?"

"All's I'm trying to say is - "

"Now you look here I'm talking," he interrupted with the power of ineradicable delusion that one's affairs are infinitely superior that those of others. "Your reasoning's been the result of - Of special-interest politics. And I want no part of that tawdriness - "

"You see - "

"Because behind that rhetoric of economic justice and fairness lie purely self-serving political considerations and don't tell me any different - "

"I'm sure - "

" - That you and your kind throw numbers out till nobody can have faith in the numbers and then political considerations'll win. That's exactly how those people I want no part of whatsoever do it every time. Are you one of those people Snoad?"

"Well I think that - " Snoad began to reply, peering at this cocksure and bumptious man out the corner of his blinking, uncertain eyes.

"What'd I tell you about doing that?"

"About doing what? I just think that - "

"You can think all you want. But not on my dime," Borger ejaculated. After a series of ideographic utterances delivered in a furious tone, he spat: "You know why? I'll tell you why. The reason why's because while you're sitting around on your ass I'm up there in front of everybody bustin' *my* ass for *my* living! And that's all there's to it. And you have the gall to wonder why we aren't at all satisfied with your I don't know - Let me go out on a low limb here - Your recent behavior?"

"But you never said anything to me before about - "

"I don't know what's getting up your ass Snoad. I really don't! Now we're prepared to put up with a certain amount of your nonsense but the line must be drawn and I'm the one who's drawing it right now, got me?"

"I'd like to say - "

"The fact is you're becoming a liability to the Committee and as for all this . . . " Borger spread his arms and gesticulated wildly. He continued letting silence speak for itself like this while they hurried through several tastefully decorated rooms and so into the noblest if not most august corridor of them all. Along one wall's entire length hung both real and feigned nineteenth-century oil portraits of various but strikingly similar personages done in the Stolid Style. "You're nothing with a capital 'n' in this here town without me you'd better believe it Snoad. And I don't want to hear any more of your nonsense. So I suppose you won't deny that it depends entirely on you from here on in. I suppose you won't deny that!"

"What are you tal - "

"Because that's what I think oughta be determined sooner rather than later. And you can be sure that one way or the other it'll be determined my way, not yours. That's why I'm always so open and aboveboard," Borger managed to breathlessly splutter. Gesturing as if he were indicating that large sculpture over there's pure form

of America's brand of Justice gazing blindly into eternity, his impassioned haughtiness overwhelmed his reason. Now all bobbing head and wrathful motions, he lost a grip on his syntax and revealed his vast powers of sarcasm, invective and vituperation, which was received by Snoad like an apocalyptic roar.

They halted adjacent to the immense mahogany doors.

"Here," Borger snapped after asymmetrically buttoning his suitcoat. Snatching his briefcase away, knocking everything from Snoad's bewildered hands, he added: "Gimme that. And get all that picked up for crissakes!"

"Of course," he obeyed, his face showing the final contortions of that horrified incredulity forced to believe in utter devastation.

Borger showed his back and, with one lingering glance of prodigious triumph, went out into the blistering cruelty of the unconditioned eighty-two degree heat, its relentlessness and awfulness, all rushing upon him in one blazing streak of brightness.

*

"There he is!" exclaimed one of those pompous and overblown jackasses representing the various vertically integrated mass media conglomerates. And indeed there Borger was, standing there atop an immense swath of stairs framed by the Corinthian façade from which he'd just emerged. His eyes grew accustomed to the day's startling clarity and color, and he began distinguishing the press scurrying up the steps like so many blindly obedient mice from the surrounding built environment. Blood surged up his spine, making him feel if not invincible, at least a foot taller.

"Doctor Borger! Over here Doctor Borger! Over here!" they clamored for his undivided attention as one before shouting in a variety of forms "Is the success of welfare reform still such a great success?" over and over again, smiling with all their teeth.

Only when they had almost reached him did Borger deign to wade amongst their multitudes. Moving not precisely in a hurry but without wasting time either, he carried himself with a vainglorious sense of purpose down each and every step.

Finally he articulated, in no particular order, a few disconnected phrases into wherever the closest video camera's lense was: "Such a great success . . . A success overwhelming even our most impossible dreams." A pause for breath, wherein he added a beaming expression to his now all-encompassing gaze, the wind disarranging his hair. "My Distinguished Colleagues and Myself have taken such tremendous steps in helping America along the path of Progress and Prosperity . . . Welfare reform's such an overwhelming success for all the wonderful hardworking people of this great land . . . One of the greatest policy if not out and out moral achievements this country has ever experienced . . . "

He continued addressing these docile collaborators from the fourth estate in this grandiloquent vein until a comely woman with large brown eyes and thick blond curls flowing over her shoulders emerged from the scrum. Grinning incessantly, she backpedaled several steps in the path of this puffed-up posturing figure of a man. Then she came to an abrupt halt, impeding his progress down the remaining steps, her still indistinguishable colleagues now swarming all around, aiming their microphones and cameras at his fat old mug.

"Can you please explain why, although welfare rolls are dropping, so aren't standards of living for former recipients?" she wondered, assuming the posture of deep conversation.

"It would be impertinent of me to say anything in praise of welfare reform's deeply-rooted success without thanking all the wonderful hardworking men and women of America for all their support."

"But that's not what I asked."

"That's my answer. Next question."

Everyone resumed blathering at once, but her infuriatingly patient voice came loud and clear: "Is your statement 'America is the only country in history whose poor people are fat' indicative of your grasp of contemporary social interplay?"

"But it are well, you. You errr I you - Ahem!" this epitome of forthrightness vouchsafed explanation in a tone simply *reeking* of a pure visceral honesty. "I'm truly

sorry that when taken out of context my comments can be spun to be inappropriate. And I also apologize to everyone for my well-intentioned remarks being handled in such a manner, particularly to anyone who's offended by such partisan misuse."

"And what about your opinion that most poor people die and I quote 'only because of overindulgence?' Can you please defend that to the American public, sir?"

"That's what you infer may have happened to some degree. And again, I'm very sorry that my remarks are being abused in order to be construed in this way," he replied, shifting his bulk from foot to foot, glancing around for a friendly face.

"Do you still stand by the remarks you made this morning that there's no longer any poverty in America - "

"Please! Next question please!"

" - And that poor children are in fact super-nourished?" she persisted in an even louder voice, emphasizing and separating each word, her grin now one of sardonic humor.

"No comment."

"How can you have no comment on your own conclusions?"

"No comment," he muttered, trying to shoulder past her.

"What will happen to those who were formerly on welfare rolls and are still unable to make ends meet?"

The lines around his omnipresent smile tightening, an uneasy consternation surging across his flushing brow, Borger looked like this question had been composed in a foreign tongue. "Well I - You - Your questions are too - Are too broad so - So my answers won't make any sense in such a - "

"And what will happen to people formerly on welfare rolls once the economy begins to sour?"

"I'm sorry but I have nothing more to say except that I'm very sorry that the tremendously overwhelming success of welfare reform's being overshadowed by petty and malicious - "

Upon that word two beefy security guards appeared at each of his elbows. Slapping the most brazen microphones and cameras away, they extricated him from the fray with an efficient alacrity. Flanked in their company thus, Borger regained his hostile kind of haughtiness so that it once again seemed like he alone possessed all the power in the world.

"There'll be no more questions today about the overwhelming success of welfare reform," he thundered in reply to their cacophony of inquiries, his condescending grin again floating everywhere. "Thank you very much. But I have a very busy schedule and no more time for questions today . . . I said no more questions . . . " Glancing every which way with that inflated sense of bristling ego only a sidearm can provide, the security guards broke through the remainder of the fourth estate's habitually feeble resistance. " . . . Thank you." They escorted him across the sun-dazzled pavement and put him almost bodily into his black S-type 4.0 Jaguar sedan's special excluding intimacy.

Moments later Borger drove past the faceless clutch of reporters milling about where he'd left them, one hand veiling his face from further scrutiny. He proceeded through this hustling and bustling world measured solely by money before merging with all the other standard bearers of a modern life richly sufficient to itself and vanishing according to the laws of perspective.

Then that silent negation of individuality the sun made everything a sanguinary color that began sliding away into blank space, proving that God, although not entirely forgotten, is dead.

*

Through a decreasingly intervening distance we soon discern the vehicle Borger used to escape the grandiloquent banality of his everyday life emerging from that endless succession of solitary nobodies from nowhere going nowhere fast there was no choice but to mingle. With his confines adjusted to a much more reasonable temperature now, he lighted the cigar cocked at a jaunty angle in his mouth. And,

after drawing deep, exhaled while accelerating up a ramp and onto yet another multitiered ribbon of pavement engineered regardless of nature's proclivities.

Although his belly was so big that he had to impede his steering in order to reach the pedals, his otherwise undiluted command of the wheel pleased him, made him feel proud. The plush leather seats assuaged his ego by molding around his body's contours. Everywhere he went he knew where he was going, dammit. There came the canned voice of some bubbly "disc jockey," and then the sound of tepid swing music resumed all around. Cracking the window a bit to let the conditioned breeze ruffle his formerly well-coifed hair and dissipate the dark cumulus clouds accumulating over his head, he drove out of the high-rise skyline and into the rings of dystopia filling the vastness between work and home.

He lost himself in a moment of sublime exhaltation, but the dreadful stench of poverty and industrial exhalations he sniffed in the air inculcated even he with a vague sense of insecurity. His jaw clamped shut on the end of his ever-glowing cigar and, fastening his eyes between the white lines rather than the ravaged complexes of humanity caught in the vise of essential injustice multiplying as far as the eye could see, he uncracked the window and locked all the doors.

Twilight did little to soften these harsh and untamed environs where true despair never sleeps. About ten minutes later, traffic had slowed to a trickle. It soon became bumper-to-bumper.

> Stiffening in one great tense increment around the wheel he gripped until his knuckles went white,

Borger appeared to be moving a disquieting speed his face was so contorted. Muttering under his breath about, in so many increasingly vulgar words, the inconvenience of having to pause in his daily routine, his eyes bore through the skull of the driver ahead. They crawled along just like this for the next one point six miles. And he kept slamming his fists against the wheel even after some kind soul let him merge into the left-hand lane. Upon glimpsing the broken down car impeding his progress, he grew more and more furious. Grinding his teeth and spewing tobacco all

over the place, he uttered in a variety of ways "Someone oughta shoot that lazy bastard's fat black ass" even after the bottleneck opened. While weaving through the traffic's stream, the impotent but insatiable rage possessing him flooded over into the self-abandonment of vituperation, whereupon his torrent of vilest most blasphemous oaths thankfully dissolved into incoherence.

As soon as he achieved the head of the pack, he stomped his foot all the way to the floor, making the gas station/convenience store hybrids and big box retailers replacing our country's beauty unfurl outside. Glazed by his vision's red-tinged haze, this landscape of missed opportunity became flat and depthless, and he lost all sense of movement.

*

Right when night was sweeping the last of the implacable red sky of evening through all the satellite towers and away we find Borger in an exurban land of decreasing density. If he hadn't reached his gated community's comforting confines just then, he might've burst from the strain of his rage. He gave a prolonged but involuntary sigh while returning the armed guards' snappy salutes.

"Welcome home Doctor Borger sir," they all said in unison, standing at attention.

He replied with a rude grunt and, still in the process of cooling, accelerated through the gate's now fully opened rococo confusion and into this place where human pressure was relaxed. Everything was fresh and bright and well situated, infused by slices of overly tended nature and large patches of flowers an array of colors. Only the brute force of cold cash acquired this brand of Tranquility®.

Turning and moderating his speed, he joined the golf carts gliding back and forth on one of the shady avenues winding their way past the prerequisite sumptuous but uniform investments boasting broad expanses of verdant lawn. Two intersections after the second reduce speed sign he turned onto a quieter road. It ended in a cul-de-sac, and he coasted to a stop before the attached three-car garage's closed door.

Although fast asleep, his stubby li'l legs managed to bring him into the air-conditioned confines kept so neat and clean he called equity.

The décor reflected a distinctly feminine mania of owning, and the odors of cookery hung in the air. All the paintings on the surrounding walls appeared to be from various artists' Mediocre Period. A delicate creature with a willowy way of moving came out of an adjoining room and began crossing the carpeted floor to the next. When they noticed each other the sense of awkwardness was as immediate as it was acute and unwinking.

Although still more than ordinarily beautiful, she was getting thick in the waist, of which everything she wore conspired to de-emphasize. A persistent gossip with everyone but her husband, her face held that desperate expression of someone who had nothing else to do all day but shop, chat and eat. She would have a marvelous mane of blond locks if it hadn't been cut short in the fashion of the day. After exchanging not very loving physical affections they stepped back, glancing nervously everywhere except each other.

"So. How was your day?" asked Borger.

I am alive and well, her series of deep breaths replied, I am a self-actualizing individual and I can do this. "Bloated and hormonal," she breathed, covering those blue eyes active like a rabbit with an arm, her honeyed voice a startling contrast to his.

He shifted his weight and stirred himself to be sympathetic, genuinely it almost seemed. "Huh."

She thought with a concentrated effort that made her frown. "Other than that, fine I guess. The usual . . .

" . . . And yours?" she added.

"Me too." Then into the resulting length of silence he inserted: "Where's the baby?"

She made a vague gesture. "With Wanda."

"That new maid?"

"Yes."

As if she missed her cue by a moment or two, the mysterious beauty of a large woman so black her eyes stood boldly out entered at the foot of the room. A sniveling baby rested about where her hip used to be. Moving as if her arches weren't already fallen and she wasn't bone tired after all these long hours for such low pay, her carriage demanded attention.

"Dinner'll be ready in 'bout ten minutes," she informed her employers in a tone somehow retaining an innocent and jovial freshness.

"Okay thanks Wanda."

Now projecting a spinster-prim schoolmarm persona, Borger turned to his wife and said in a precisely worded complete sentence politicians like he were trained: "Will you at least have her knock from now on for God's sake?" His eyes rolling twenty feet up to the faux hand carved ceiling.

"Could you please knock before coming into a room from now on Wanda?"

"Yes Miss Maude."

"And don't drop my baby!" Maude gave a little laugh.

"Yes Miss Maude," this patient mother of four replied.

He dismissed her with a rude gesture. "That'll be all."

You could tell by their shared expressions and passionate scrutiny that neither Borger nor Maude would ever get used to those waves of flesh sashaying away through their house before disappearing.

"I simply refuse to stand for such - Such impudent bravado," he sputtered.

"That's nice dear," she said, smiling faintly while edging away. "Well . . . "

They made to step by each other but went in the same direction. Each hesitated before stepping in the same direction again. This little dance was repeated until Borger stood aside and pressed his back against the wall so she could flee.

*

Plummeting from a chill sky, the moon and stars now shining bright. And smack dab into a well-funded garden as immense as it was impressive, ornately spewing fountain and all. Teeming with luxurious and binding vegetation only of the most select and full of a sense of rapid growth. Its leafage groaning under a floodlit plethora of vitality, this triumph of artifice could never continue to thrive without an ampleness of something beyond money.

Then back up and up and across one of the three decks stretching across the back of this fifteen thousand square foot mansionette perched high atop a scenic bluff. Before sweeping through a huge picture window and into a room where nothing ever seemed touched or changed.

There was a sudden noise of activity.

Upon the very next instant Borger came waltzing in with the arrogance of a man ensconced by the smugness of knowing. Even before he sat adjacent to the mewling fruit of his labor high-chaired under an overstated crystal chandelier at the dining table, you just knew he and his dearly beloved wife were already one wrong glance away from an argument.

In the interval betwixt scenes, Maude had made herself appear several years younger by pulling her hair tight into a little ponytail. Sitting properly ladylike, knees together, legs slanted and crossed at the ankle. When the bastard opened his big fat maw, she rolled her eyes back, as if whatever he was going to emit she not only heard far more than once but knew would err on the side of excessive self-laudation too. She acquired the uppermost catalogue from the day's inevitably bountiful delivery stacked close at hand. And proceeded to hide her face behind it.

"You should've seen 'em today. And who do you think brought 'em to their feet?

"That's right. Me. Not only that but I had them eating right out of my hand. How about that?"

"How about that," she echoed.

"You know something, Maude?"

Thumbing through the pages with a seemingly innate skill, she scorned to reply in any way.

"Everyone else thinks a lot about me," he bloviated right into this short-lived breath of silence. "I'm one of those guys everyone looks at to get things done. It's that simple. And when they expect me to do something, I just can't go ahead and do that something any ol' way. I have to do something great if I'm going to do anything at all. One hundred and ten percent effort is my motto. Much like I did today. Great men like me, we know when to recognize opportunity and then seize it. It's as simple as that, too. Mark my words. Because I'm self-confident. Unafraid to tackle tough business challenges. And when I -"

"May I come in?" a muffled voice asked from behind the furthest door.

He ceased speaking and, with a startling abruptness, shifted gears. "Can't you people ever learn how to knock?" he roared, granting access to his illustrious personage by way of snapping fingers.

Here came Wanda advancing across the room carrying a tray laden abundantly, trailing aromatic steam in her wake. Placing her burden atop the sideboard, she hastened to serve her social betters, a silver chain with a little silver cross dangling above her generous bosom. Once she paused to caress the baby now clapping and babbling excitedly on pink cheeks glowing.

Borger winced and began studying all the maid's movements with a bellicose curiosity. "About time. I was wondering when my damn food would get to me."

"Good God Hayden. You can't even wait two minutes anymore?"

The maid dropped a fork and, after discretely picking it up off the Oriental rug, produced another from her apron's folds.

"You must I think Maude," he observed. "Please see she's more careful from now on for crissakes?" He took a tentative bite before dispensing more of his endless charm, looking every bit the twenty-first century Nero with his dour, purse-lipped

thumbs down gesture. "Ah. Yet another culinary delight excreted from the bowels of my kitchen. Into every life a little leftover meatloaf must fall. I know all about that. Huh Maude?"

Maude gave a start and threw her catalogue down as if that and only that could avenge upon him the harsh ennuis and indignities of her life. Her eyes seared into his profile, but she vouchsafed no other reply.

"What's your name again?"

"Wanda, sir."

"Wanda. Well howsabout I just call you maid for the time being instead?"

"If you'd like, sir."

"One thing I don't like is getting too familiar with my help. Listen. Do you even want to continue working here or what?"

"Yes, sir . . . I do, sir," she quavered.

"Because, well. With such a bad attitude I'm beginning to wonder. And that's only the tip of the iceberg, too, if you catch my drift. Got me?"

"Yes, sir."

Although you could see that fatigue bore heavily upon her from everywhere, Wanda continued using the space around the table sublimely. Her hustling and bustling activity, along with the baby's occasional high-throated gurgle, filled the lengthening silence.

Completing her various duties, she went to his elbow and stood in a subdued posture of expectancy.

"Maid!" He held his wineglass aloft after draining it and made a bemused show of glancing everywhere else but her way. "Maid! . . . Oh there you are. Finally. Fill it with some of that Chardonnay."

In one great increment, Maude seemed to compose herself with infinite precaution. "No. That'll be all. For now at least Wanda. Thanks," she said right into her husband's face, shaking her head, her lips a thin line.

"And I said fill it. Now."

"Yes I know sir. But Miss Mau -"

"No buts and no ands out of you. Nothing but more Chardonnay. Immediately. Do you understand English? Immediately means right now," he added slowly.

Eyes averted, Wanda obeyed. "Is there anything else you would like, sir?" stuck in this sad yet noble position she ventured to ask, genuflecting the tiniest bit.

Putting all the malignancy of his nature into the sidelong expression he shot her way, he waved an arm over his head in one curt gesture kitchenward.

"Will you just look at that now willya?" he said in his usual overfervid and irreverent way well before the maid disappeared through the swinging door. "Did you see that? I'm going to have to put my foot right down on her malingering malingering indolence once and for all. Mark my words, Maude, mark my words. If you don't reign her in. Because after that display of God knows what behavior there's only one thing I have to say and one thing only. About your most recent household acquisition that is. Although she doesn't hear plain ol' English too good, at least this one has a somewhat decent grasp of grammar. She does, however, I'd like to point out. Look like the kind you have to count for purloined spoons before she leaves. Or else weigh her. That'd work too."

For a full lingering moment husband and wife stared at each other with the dogged obstinacy of their hoitsy-toitsy la de da white bred race until Maude gave an eloquently nonplussed shrug and retreated behind the enticing covers of yet another consumer wishbook. Unveiling yet another array of irritating faults, Borger fell ravenously upon his plate, eating as if mastered by the verb while she occasionally nibbled at her blank salad as if it were an act of pure reason.

With each forkful, this leftover carnivorous sustenance heretofore scorned seemed to puff him up in size and importance. After cleaning the plate with his finger, he delivered himself thus: "You know, Maude. If I ever wanted to be president someday I could." Holding his autocratic chins high, he exhibited the extent of his bipartisanship by dribbling wine from both corners of his lips. "I really

could you know. Because these are perilous times, Maude. Perilous times. The moral tone of this country is very very low now and - "

"Am I in for yet another lecture?" she asked, tasting her lemon-sliced water.

"Hold the sarcasm for once Maude . . . For once."

"Why do you always try to make me feel like I'm sitting in the assistant principal's office?"

"Because I'm telling you what - "

"Telling telling telling. You're always telling someone something about something."

"Stop acting like your mother," he ordered, slamming down his fist in lieu of punctuation.

Rolling her eyes wide with feigned wonder, Maude shot him the finger.

"Nice Maude. That's real mature of you. And exactly what I mean right there. Good example you're setting for the baby too. And what do you know about anything anyway?" he flared, grunting deep in his throat while she symbolized infinity with a wave of her hand. A hot flash of anger swept over him. "See? What about *my* dignity? Huh your highness? Give me the respect I deserve. Everyone else did when I was seeing and being seen by the troops today."

"Look Hayden. I'm not I don't know. Going to be inspired by your warrior routine today. So please - "

He sat bolt upright and threw his arms into the air, marveling at her temerity mouth agape. "I'm not finished leadership is all about letting the troops see you so they gain confidence in the cause. Betcha never thought of that!"

"You're not all that difficult to figure out you know."

"Leadership is a role that's hard to maintain because it takes a lot of energy and passion. Leaders are hard to find. That's why people are so inspired by seeing them out in front. And since I'm a born leader I have to be at the head of the pack. Where I belong. Whose side are you on anyway?"

"You're just like I don't know . . . Hot dogs and sauerkraut."

"What the hell are you going on about now for crissakes?"

"Because you have a strong tendency to repeat yourself," she informed him, returning to the sanctuary of her catalogue.

"I see now. You're just like those jerks who just don't get it. Is that it? Huh? Have you gone ahead now and joined one of those small loud groups of naysayers? One of those nattering nabobs of negativity who really actually thinks if We build It they won't come? Huh? You need to become fungible, Maude. Fungible. Especially in this world's battlefield. Like me. You know fungible don't you Little Miss I Majored in Comparative Literature? It means interchangeable. Restricted to non-sentient beings. Those not capable of feeling."

At the opening this sheer and utter idiocy provided, she swiveled her head in his direction and plunged:

"Gee that does sound a lot like you doesn't it?"

"Oh give me an f'in' break," he roared, making several of his more melodramatic gesticulations.

"Because I feel that - "

Everything in his bearing now held a crushing effect as he smote the table with both fists. "I'll tell you what you can do with your - "

"So sorry Hayden," she strove to continue, stirring the embers while still very much pretending to be off-hand. "I forgot. According to you and your cockamamie opinion I feel nothing. Did I say feel? Well I didn't mean it. Me . . . Feel. Who'd ever think of the day when I'd be able to feel something without your permission . . . "

"Are you even listening to yourself? Because if you aren't I'll clue you in on something. It's not cute. Far from it. You give me no peace and I've had it up to here!" he exclaimed, leaving a red handprint on his forehead.

"Oh dear me Hayden. Although all this seems so dreadfully familiar, do tell."

"If you listened to me for once you'd learn something."

"Learn something from you?" she mocked his words curiously.

"Yes learn something from me dammit." Then he looked about for a bit, as if in sullen awe. "What was that again? What did you just say? That's what I thought. Nothing. Everything I'm interested in and many more things besides you choose to remain ignorant of. You live your days bopping around town on my dime with your gaggle of Chatty Cathies and Know Nothings. But the jokes on you. Because the reason why I'm such a great diplomat is when people say no no no to me I say yes yes yes. And when I know something I act on it. I'm going to give you some advice now take it or leave it."

"Are you actually giving me a choice? Can I really leave - "

"Give me a break for once you goddamned ninny."

"But I'm merely trying to be . . . Charming."

"That's neither here nor there, catch my drift you? Because I'm actually applying your imaginatively self-serving quote warrior unquote terminology. That's if warrior means working hard so I leave my legacy of vast new and bold private initiatives just like my Daddy did then damn straight I'm a warrior!"

"Please let that be all he has to say please God," she murmured to the lemon slice floating in her upraised glass.

"Know why Maude."

. . .

"Why?"

"You wonder why?" he thundered. "Why?"

"I don't know why," she freely confessed, to what she knew not.

He nodded his snarling face. "Why? Because I said so dammit. That's why I'm so different from all the rest. And *that's* why giving me the respect I deserve is the least you can do around here besides sitting around on your fat ass all day oh stop it. Saluting me is entirely unnecessary. Even though it's my quote warrior routine unquote providing everything you want and then some."

"Why how you take offence at something so triflingly innocuous. Using so many big damn words to say so damn little. Such heights of stupidity you reach!"

Maude replied without pausing for air. While her dearly beloved husband hemmed and hawed in sporadic mutterings, she tossed her head away like she had long flowing hair and closed her eyes to the ceiling for a certain length of time.

"I'm going to give you a piece of ad vice," still seething he began right when the baby reminded them of her presence by letting loose one prolonged caterwauling wail. "Maid! Where's that goddamn maid? Goddamnit maid!"

Wanda, a wearied expression puckering her brow and twisting her swollen fingers together, watched Libby throw mashed-up food to the floor in a display of unsparing audacity as she advanced through the room scarce daring to breathe. "Yes Mister Borger, sir?"

"That's Doctor Borger to you!"

Knowing that she knew nothing but a hope greater than knowledge and deeply religious, if she'd cursed Him, God would've understood. "Sorry. Doctor Borger. Sir," she replied as if afraid of her own voice, her great big black eyes fixed on the floor.

Borger gave a vicious snort of laughter. "Don't just stand there woman. Get that thing out of here this instant!"

"Yes Mister Buh - "

Although Maude had managed to restrain herself thus far, a world of reproach was in her eyes. "Will you please Hayden please," she intervened before he could commence crushing the help's aspirations once and for all with a crude burst of speech as strong as it was pointed. "Have you the kitchen all clean yet?"

"Yes Miss Maude."

"Then why don't you save clearing the table until after you take Libby upstairs and get her all cleaned up for bed?"

"Yes Miss Maude okay," Wanda replied. While extracting her charge from the high chair a splendid blaze of plastic colors and leaving the room, she moved very carefully, as though aware of the necessity for haste yet afraid to hasten. Despite the

fatigue of hopelessness in her face care forgot, she murmured a pure and generous love into the mirthful pink skinned being cradled in her arms.

Borger turned on his wife: "See that? Now isn't that more like it? When I'm in charge things get done my way chop chop or it's the highway. That maid can learn it so damn quick how come you haven't after all these years?"

"Quelque chose drôle."

"Put a cork in that bottle of frenchie crap Maude." After a bitter bout of silence, he went on in a way that was not good: "That nephew of yours you had me hire? That good for nothing Snoad? Well. Let me just say right now that the apples in your family don't fall too far from the tree."

"À bas, fils à papa," she laughed, replacing his irritating mug with pages of a catalogue now flipping.

"And what the hell did I just tell you about that?"

"You can't make me mad anymore, Hayden. I'm inured to your nonsense. So you might as well stop trying."

"Put that down. Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

She did just that, gazing into eyes smoldering a hatred as vehement as it was unwarranted.

"Indolence and bickering. Useless creatures. That's what you two God's gifts to the world have in common. And that's why he won't last more than a coupla more weeks . . . With that that that collectivist attitude - I don't care the least damn about anyone but me," he spat, rising to his feet, a slaver of Chardonnay dripping from his sneered lips. Now jabbing a finger at her face, Borger bent over the table and exploded into an increasingly unintelligible tirade so long as to perplex if not question his sanity outright. Arms lashing the startled air like whips, the effort of spewing his most blasphemous oaths contorting his sour cruel expression, this veritable conflagration went on and on and on like this.

Viewing her ass of a husband with those once vivacious eyes now cold, Maude sat thinking far far away to when she was regal with carefree happiness, a

source of unending delight to all. Although she no longer cowered before such profane invective, her life had lost its sunlight, love its passion, the world all its hopes. She took a series of deep breaths, all her movements tempered by regret and chagrin. Before proceeding to tell him, with renewed happiness and calm of life, how he had ruined her, then launching into a recitation of each and every character defect he ever exhibited, beginning with his small town ambitions, like they were so many items on a column longer than your arm. After choking back the rest of her words, she did some swift calculating and, laughing once, proudly, arose so abruptly she almost knocked over her chair and gave it to him with both barrels: "I used to even allow for your pathetically incredible lunacy seeing as you're so common. But I'm not going to anymore, Hayden. I'm simply not going to."

"How dare you and your damn nerve! . . . Where do you think you're going?"

"To church. I'd rather hear any other sermon but yours."

"Well I - If that's it then you won't get anywhere in life with that that vanity of yours . . . If you think - When the hell am I gonna get an ounce of respect out of you? Huh?" Borger snarled, sending his cruel voluntary laughter through the increasingly intervening distance.

He watched her recede through this feeble and truckling monument to his infallible impotence holding promise of an endless succession of rooms. And then he watched her shadow stretching all the way up to the ceiling before vanishing as if down a soft incline. "Damn shame waste of a good woman right there," among other things he muttered under his breath whenever a distant door slammed shut. Sulking and glaring, his hands soon unclenching now reaching for the bottle of Chardonnay, which he drained in a meditative manner, tilting way back until the very last drop disappeared.

*

Doctor Hayden Borger checked his personal projection of dominance and power for the time then got up and made his blind dreary dazed way to his study

veiled in moon-stained darkness, sitting behind his bare desk as though the weight he was bearing would scar him for life. Staring unblinking beyond the dead television at the unbroken wall for an indeterminable stretch of time, forgetting his wife reaching out empty arms in the dark ferment of sleep. Recognition overcame his face by sheer force of will and, after stepping lightly as one does in such a hallway at this hour, he crept into his daughter's room.

And, with the desperation of his own inadequacy, unbuttoning his shirt, cradling his gift to the world against his now bared breast, gave suck. Gazing with tear stained vision at stars distinguishing themselves from the pitch-black sky and the moon slipping over the garden. There was a sudden blinding flash and a snap, like something gave way, letting the images jostling past merge and become one so all was clear and plain and real. The house unheeding his actions and low reverberating keening slept on.

That was all.

Nothing else happened except night's pall rising shallow and lighter from this Great Land.

# 4

# Oh So Beautiful World

The blue and red sky was darkening. It was also a little on the warm side, and the sounds of a basketball bouncing on pavement and lawnmowers and backyard barbecues all wove together and meandered down the elm and oak-lined streets of this respectable park-dappled neighborhood. The Johnsons inhabited this familiar house, the one with a two-car garage instead of a front-porch. In the peaceful summer evening's shadows, it left a somber impression.

*

The long table inside had a series of several chairs down either side. At the foot two women born to wear clothes sat next to each other in the vacillating light under a ceiling fan. They were chattering about casual things with a childlike abandon over supper, sipping at their matching glasses of white zin in between bites. There was an aroma of chicken seasoned in the Southwestern style both mother and daughter adored, and the faint sound of a deep, off-key voice singing "The Way You Look Tonight" in the shower came from somewhere above.

Even if the mother had been unattractive, she would have looked radiant in the light yellow dress she wore. Her faded hair, which barely retained its reddish tint, was pulled back with a silk scarf that matched the color of her green eyes. There were the beginnings of wrinkles in her fair round face and, if that wasn't enough, her hands were acquiring liver spots, of which she was very self-conscious. Her name was Erica, but most everyone knew her only as Pepper. And in this life complicated largely by her husband, there weren't many consolations, but being alone with her daughter and the dreams still throbbing within her was one.

Pleased by her daughter's happiness, she leaned her elbows on the table in such a way that it was beautiful to watch. "Let me see?"

Debbie handed over the length of fabric to her and watched as she rubbed it between her fingers. "See? Feel that? We're going to make the second half of the show's outfits out of it."

Pepper caressed her cheek with the cloth. "Wow. I see what you mean. Y'all'll look fantastic in this color, too."

"And Tyus composed a song that goes like this." She began humming a melody for a stretch of time, slapping her strong thighs to indicate the beat.

"Well . . . That sounds interesting I'm sure. That'll be lovely when all is said and done," assured Pepper, making her daughter smile and lower her eyes. The shower and singing diminished then ceased altogether, and their conversation withered slowly on the vine.

Noticing at once that her mom was already nervous and growing increasingly agitated, Debbie remembered how she used to be so happy and vibrant. But now, now her days were split between the bad and the rotten.

They both began picking at their food and, for a few minutes, sat listening to the booming sound of his feet in the room directly above their heads.

"You know your father," began Pepper, pressing her hands against her temples. "I don't need to say anymore. When you avoid him like this, he'll just keep everything locked up inside until he bursts. He's been going through a lot - Please don't look at me like that, honey - Please understand what I'm saying - He's been very busy and this evening is very important to him so please try not to start arguing."

"Dear old dad," Debbie replied, forcing a laugh before downing the rest of her wine and pouring another.

Pepper grew even more serious. "I'm serious, honey. Not today. Please?"

"But he's always the one who starts it!"

"I know I know honey now shoosh," she said, holding one finger to her lips while patting Debbie's hand.

"He doesn't even listen to a word I say."

"I know honey," she sympathized. "But that's how your father . . . Is." Her eyes became lost, and a sad smile crossed her face as she put an arm around her daughter's shoulders and gently stroked her cheek. Then Pepper smoothed back the hair from her forehead and gave it a tender kiss. "That's just your father's way."

"I should be able to do what *I* want to do not what he wants be to do. I'm almost twenty! It's just not fair."

There was a lull in the air all around and they lapsed into a silence. Then they heard him coming heavily down the front stairs.

"Why do you submit yourself to his nonsense?" Debbie wondered in a loud ringing voice.

"I don't submit - " whispered Pepper.

"Pepper!"

Both women put down their knife and fork on their half-empty plate and looked toward the arched doorway as if one.

"Pepper!" he hollered again, making a circuitous route around the house to come ever closer.

"We're in here Henry!" she replied, eliciting a disapproving look from her daughter.

An unmistakably white man entered the dining room with his socks drawn on and carrying a pair of shoes in the hand he wasn't using to smoke. He was clearly the kind who, when eating, took generous mouthfuls, and the short walk from upstairs left him out of breath. Although his thick lips were puffing in and out, just by the way he carried himself you could tell he was firmly ensconced in power. He was perpetually full of impatience and wearing a well-cut smoky gray suit. His tie hung loose around his neck, his rimless glasses were tilted slightly on his nose, and his white hair was receding. With the avid eyes of a man of important affairs as well as the florid face and rounded features of a heavy drinker, you would also attribute to this paunched, clean-shaven man with an ugly demeanor each and every one of the sixty-four years he carried on his back.

Debbie and Pepper paled just at the sight of him.

Absolutely unaware he's destined to forever play the role of minor shit, Henry strode to the head of the table, pulled out a chair and dropped his shoes to the hardwood floor beside it. "How do I look Pepper?" he asked as though his own daughter didn't exist.

Erect, upright and proud, he stood there with his head thrown back in the posture of one who valued continuity and repetition above all else. Money was his greatest joy, plain and simple. That and accumulating more of it comprised his code entirely. He was implacable toward anyone who violated it and still couldn't believe that something he'd produced from his own loins had done something to disturb the foundation he had laid for her life brick by brick with sheer will and determination. "Let me get you another tie," she tsked while she went to him and took it from around his neck. "This one doesn't really match."

He watched as she left the room, trying to hurry and walk softly all at once. Then he shook his head, sat down and, like he did whenever finishing a cigarette, lit another. "Hurry up," he called after her, picking up a shoe. "They'll be here for me any minute."

A shadow crossed Debbie's face, and she twisted away and bent her head to her plate in disgust.

*

When Debbie informed her parents that she was going to dance instead of attending college, Henry had indulged her whim at first, although it had gnawed his innards to no end. But she persisted to be unpersuaded by his constant, wandering retrospection on his life and what he believed to be well-reasoned and thoughtful arguments. And it soon became apparent that her decision was intractable.

His very own daughter was now a mystery beyond his ken. He hadn't expected that and thus didn’t like it one bit. So he took away her car and, to teach her

the "full value of money," had stopped giving it to her and was even thinking about charging rent.

But if you do that, Debbie promised whenever he brought the subject up, I'll just move out. "And how'd he like that then?" Pepper wondered aloud as she went to his tie rack in the master bedroom's walk-in closet. All was quiet and still in the house while she spun it around with her thumb and quickly selected a blue tie and a matching silk handkerchief before hurrying back downstairs.

In this zero-sum world Henry had created for himself, there was simply no room for someone settling only for a sliver of the American pie. That, plus his daughter's maddening air of independence, served to ignite his already smoldering anger into flames. He began smoking twice as normal and fixing a drink right when he got home from the office. Furious about every single thing now, arguing all night with everyone, including himself, he would keep on drinking and raising holy hell until he passed out, usually on the floor.

The good thing, the only good thing, of all this was that, after all these years, Pepper was coming to understand that he had steered her astray from herself and most everything he held dear by sheer brute force of will. Their relationship, already tenuous at best, totally dissolved to where they were at needle's points. And if they weren't arguing about their daughter, they weren't talking at all. Since Pepper still didn't know what to do, didn't even know if she *could* do anything, she had begun to cross her fingers with the hope he'd take on a lover and stop coming home . . . Anything to keep him from coming home . . .

This woman, who was awake yet dreaming, came into the here and now with a sudden rush and, as soon as she stepped into the dining room, Debbie could tell she was on the verge of tears.

*

Done lacing his shoes, Henry was just sitting there, smoking and drumming his fingers against the table. At the other end Debbie was poking at her food with

downcast eyes, resting her head on a hand and slouching. It was obvious that neither had spoken.

"Let me help you with this," said Pepper.

"When she began tying it into a fashionable knot, Henry blinked and glared at Debbie as though he had forgotten all about a night in which applause would never cease. She used to be his little girl. But whenever he spoke to her now, she'd either sass or, worse, just smile, shrug and walk away, forcing him to give her a piece of his mind since she was too big for a good thrashing.

She sat like a pretty statue in jeans and a white blouse anything but plain on her. It was unbuttoned two from the top to fully expose the wonders of her throat. Although her slender and tall figure was built for a calendar, he abhorred her languorous posture. Her hair was loose, and it fell over one shoulder, partially obfuscating a turquoise and silver earring. The mere thought of someone possessing the beauty that had driven him to her mother drove him mad with rage and had led to many a sleepless night. And on top of that, at the thought of her useless future, he would start trembling as though beset by a horrid revelation.

Lighting another cigarette, Henry shifted his bulk around and cleared the phlegm from his throat lugubriously until his daughter looked up. Her eyes were large and soft and graced by long lashes, and he acquired the demeanor of a man who demanded answers to questions he didn't even know.

"Will you sit still?" Pepper scolded him. "Now I'm going to have to start all over. Sit still Henry!"

"What's your problem Debbie?" he started in, already frowning and shaking his head with displeasure.

"Stop doing that so I can finish already," said Pepper, putting one end of the tie between her teeth so she could hold onto his head.

Debbie's eyes dropped back to her plate and she didn't answer.

"I said so what's the matter with you missy."

"Nothing's the matter with me," she mumbled.

"So. Where are you going tonight then?"

"Out."

"Out. Do you hear that Pepper? Our daughter is going out. Out she says. Out."

Her eyes softening as she managed to finish her unnecessarily difficult task, Pepper smiled at Debbie and began edging away from her husband before responding: "She's going out with a couple of friends from her troupe."

"With her what?" Dragging on a cigarette, he pulled his lips into a smile clearly meant to goad.

"She said with a couple of friends!" Debbie hollered. "Quit playing your stupid games and listen to her for once!"

"Stupid?" he roared several times while getting to his feet and following his wife half-way down the table so that it almost seemed like he was chasing after her. "Who are you calling stupid young lady?"

Pepper reached her place and sat. "She's just - "

"Nobody asked you anything Pepper," he warned, holding up one finger.

She pushed her plate back as though she'd retch if she so much as looked at it.

"The only kind of friends you've ever had are no good ones," he told his daughter's impassive face. "No good! Do you hear me missy?"

Debbie flipped her fork onto her plate. "Okay. Why not, instead of throwing this so-called retirement slash campaign fundraising slash party thing slash whatever the hell it is, you and your buddies donate to some charity for kids or something?" she wanted to know all of a sudden, leaning toward him on her elbows.

He threw up his hands and rolled his eyes to the heavens before walking away with such vigor as to denote violent disgust.

"Debbie!" a wide-eyed Pepper gasped, holding the back of her hand to her mouth.

"But he started it Mom!"

"Look. I'm in no mood for you and your bullshit tonight, missy," he warned rapid-fire, pausing mid-pace to look her up and down where she sat, his neck and shoulders twitching.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know exactly what I mean." He put his fists down upon the table and leaned toward her.

"I'm just asking you a simple question to see if - "

"Oh Christ here we go. To see if what?"

"To see if you know - "

"The difference between right and wrong in this oh so beautiful world," he gushed, trying to mimic her tone.

Debbie opened her mouth to protest, but Henry held up one hand and, cigarette blazing from the corner of his mouth, shot her another look. "Don't you dare say anything missy. Because I've heard it all before. Last time I looked this was still my house and you're just living in it. And I'm going to finish this once and for all so lump it or leave it, got me? Because it's you who's the one who's wrong, absolutely wrong," he said in the confident manner of someone who had examined the issue extensively from one angle. "You don't know what's right that's one thing for sure."

"So you're going to start in on that now, huh? Because I've been thinking that - "

"Please let your daughter finish her supper in peace, okay? Henry?"

Henry came around the table and advanced in his dependents' direction. Debbie put an arm around her mother's shoulders.

"You finish *your* supper and leave *me* in peace! How about that for once?"

Debbie stared at her father with arched eyebrows and then glanced at her mother to see if she was all right.

"And don't think I'm forgetting about you either missy. So wipe that damn smirk off your face when I'm talking to your mother. Show us some respect for once because I'm not done with you yet. Far from it." He paused long enough to light

another cigarette. "Have you given everything I told you last week any thought yet or what?"

"Don't start up with that now, Henry. It's your big night tonight so just let it go and enjoy yourself for once. She's still your daughter you know!" Pepper laughed and tried to switch subjects while Debbie shook her head and looked away darkly. "Do you have any idea what they're planning or is it all a surprise?"

"You don't think I know she's my goddamned daughter? So don't you dare try to change the subject because I refuse, absolutely refuckingfuse to adjust to an, an, uh environment like this. Why do you think I worked hard all my life? So my daughter can become some career waitress who's married to Joe Q. White Trash ditch digger extraordinaire and my wife can fritter away all my money shopping? Over my goddamned body! Do you even realize the mistake you're allowing her to make? Do you? The answer is no."

Pepper winced and her head collapsed into both hands, too suddenly distraught to say more.

"Because raising her your half-assed way obviously hasn't worked has it Pepper. I work hard all my life and for what? This abuse? Under this roof I bought and paid for? Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable." He whirled on his daughter, opened his arms wide and snarled: "Do you have any pride in yourself? Failing your parents like this? Any character? Because you've never done a day's work in your - Look at me when I'm talking to you! - Your life that's why. Because if you did you'd know there's no such thing as right and wrong. You do what you have to do, plain and simple as that."

He thought he had wisdom, but actually he was just taken with himself and his belief that money makes the world go round. Everyone has his or her price, and he defied anyone to tell him otherwise. He proceeded to shout this at his daughter in so many words while striding up and down the floor, thumping his chest whenever appropriate, concluding with: "And being an unproductive member of society? That is definitely not right in any sense of the word. It's just that I want to *help* you

Debbie. But I can't until you stop going on about your beautiful heartfelt desires and all that shit and help yourself."

"Help me help myself," Debbie snorted in reply.

"I admire your talent," he continued. "It's just that dancers come a dime a dozen nowadays. Don't get me wrong though. There's nothing wrong with it. In - Its - Place."

"There's plenty of time for everything, though."

"In its place," he said in an even louder voice.

"Even college! So what's the rush. I just want to do something I love while I still can Daddy!"

"That's the sorriest thing I've ever heard in my life," he told her, acquiring a cruel tone. He began trembling from feeding on his own anger for so long. "If you keep this dancing crap up you're just going to fall right through the cracks and end up working at a place like Hooters. Or worse! With nothing to show for your life but sore feet."

After taking all this time to summon enough courage, Pepper blurted: "Take it easy now Henry - "

"You'd better believe it missy," he bristled right over his wife's quiet words. "Mark my words on that. Mark my words. I'm only trying to save you from all that because I care about you, that's all. Now do you understand me?"

Debbie didn't understand. "Growing up you always told me I can do whatever I set my mind to and - "

"But I meant something . . . something sensible. Not not this this this," he sputtered around a cigarette, coming right up behind the now shrunken Pepper. She choked up when he gripped the back of her chair with both hands and blew a cloud of smoke over her head. "This dancing bullshit!"

Debbie put her shoulders back and gave him a defiant look, smiling a smile meant to provoke. "Let me finish Daddy," she said too loudly and proudly for her own good.

Her father made an impatient gesture and started pacing in a tightly wound circle.

"Let her talk Henry. She's got a good free mind - "

Henry came storming right back and glared down at her upturned face, making her throat click then work up and down silently while she recoiled.

" - And a right to speak it. After all - "

"Don't give me that line of crap," he dismissed what she said out of hand. "Do you understand me?"

Dabbing furtively at her eyes was his dearly beloved's only reply.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Henry drained the white zin remaining in her glass and made a sour face before turning his back on his family and summarily leaving their proximity. He began taking measured paces of the width of the room for a while, pounding the table at times, his hands otherwise clenched together behind his back. His breath came out in large white puffs. One restive minute passed like this. Then another and another before he stopped short and said:

"One of the reasons I worked hard all my life was to send my child to a good school where she could begin to make something of herself. You know something Pepper? I think she's just doing this to get even with us for something. Maybe its because she grew up never wanting anything in this world. Maybe I've treated her so well she's turned selfish. When she wanted a car. Who got her one? Me. When she - "

"You're being a little too hard on her though."

He swung around and shot her a scalding look. "How many goddamned times do I have to tell you to stop interrupting? The only thing she's learned from you is thick headedness and a marked lack of respect. What do you think of that?"

"That's not even the - "

Although Henry's wild gesture was meant as a thundering command for silence, it only made him appear ridiculous. A wide-eyed Debbie pressed her hands to her mouth but couldn't keep from bursting into giggles.

Then she gave him a penitent expression. "Gee whiz I'm so sorry Daddy," she lisped, still giggling, her hands now clasped tight to her chest.

His knuckles went white around his lighter and, gesticulating wildly, spittle flying from his mouth, he almost ran to where his family sat.

"See? See what I mean now? She's rude and she's selfish is what she is and nothing but. She doesn't care about anyone but herself!"

"That's simply not - "

"Can it."

"I won't!"

"Can it Pepper."

"Because its simply not true!" she cried.

Henry stubbed out his cigarette on the nearest plate and lit another. Through a curling cloud of smoke he pointed at her and then the bar. "Go make yourself useful for once and fix me a drink," he ordered in an ominously level voice. The burning ember of his cigarette reflected in one narrowed eye before he sat down at the table.

Debbie put her hand on her mother's arm, trying in vain to keep her from going.

*

"I say this for the last, the very last time: Get. Me. A. Drink.

"Now."

With a tired gesture and lowered eyes, Pepper got up and went to the bar. She poured a highball and brought it to him.

Henry took a mouthful and scowled. "What the - This is too strong! You trying to kill me woman?"

When she found her voice, it was tragic and anguished. "I'm sorry," she breathed with one hand high on her throat.

"What did you say?"

Unable to meet his steady gaze, she became embarrassed and confused. "I'm sorry."

When his glass was empty, he held it out for more.

"But Henry," she said after hesitating a moment. "Dr. Wilder said only one a day max . . . If that even."

He hated to be reminded of his own morality, and a mean look came into his face. "But Dr. Wilder says this," he whined. "And Dr. Wilder says that. But no doctor I trust would ever begrudge a man a well-deserved drink on the day he retires and enters into the public arena."

"Aren't you overdoing it a bit though?" she managed to ask, her brow knitted by worry and doubt.

"I'm not overdoing a single damn thing Pepper. I've just had it with you and your damn lectures. I've had it up to here," he cried, lifting one hand and waving it around like a sultan before slapping it down on the table.

"I don't know why I even bother anymore," Pepper grew bold enough to say, taking away his glass. She was nearly crying now, and so ashamed that she didn't even so much as glance in her daughter's direction while fixing him another highball.

Henry snorted it down in a single gulp and then handed the empty glass back to her with no wasted motion. With just one look he told his wife that he wished it to be full again. She made it so and, after putting the drink before him on the table, stood behind him with downcast eyes, shifting her weight from foot to foot, clenching her arms to her chest.

Debbie was beyond sound, beyond even silence. Her head resting on one hand, she stared up into the ceiling for a while, thinking how pretty Pepper looked with tears in her eyes.

*

But when her mom gave a dull unseeing glance about, Debbie felt a stab of emotion so strong it made her tremble all over, and she abandoned herself to disgust.

An expression of inconsolable loathing froze on her face as she lost herself in her father's dark countenance. Then she lowered her head, clenching her fists under the table.

"Henry? Can I sit back down and finish my supper? Henry?"

Looking into his highball glass, her husband granted her wish with an executive gesticulation, and she came the long way around the table rather than crossing his line of sight. Licking her lips and staring straight ahead, she smoothed her dress beneath her before sitting down as though her life had just been consumed. Otherwise, she didn't so much as blink.

This unforgettable spectacle was entirely too much for Debbie. She arose and flared: "Why don't you just shut the hell up?"

Henry was not amused by her pugnacity. He purpled with a sputtering rage and stood with a jerk, almost toppling his chair. "What? What did you say?"

She told him, and he knocked back the rest of his drink, bringing a pleasured sorrow from his stomach to his mouth and back again.

"Who the hell do you think you are talking to me like that young lady?"

"Will you just stop it?" she screamed bodily.

Henry ceased perambulating long enough to whirl around and throw his empty glass into the library, where it shattered.

"Stop it you asshole! Stop it!"

"Listen here good now because I'm only going to say it once. It's none of your goddamned business what I do."

"How can you even think of acting like this to her? Especially in front of your own daughter," Debbie's tone went suddenly serene. "Remember Daddy, its already your day. So why don't you enjoy it?"

Henry cocked his head a bit at that, and a shadow of something akin to doubt passed across his face. Still pacing with his short hurried steps, he gave her a dismissive wave of disgust when his mind was made up twice as firmly as before.

"You just listen to me missy - "

"I've had no choice *but* to listen to you since the day I was born Daddy." Her father stalked into the library and out of the library and then around the room until he stopped behind his wife. "And you don't need to be so . . . So repugnantly distasteful and insulting all the time either," Debbie added.

"I only take care of - Don't you dare look away when I'm talking! - Of the people *I* care about and I'm starting not to care about you." At this Pepper inhaled sharply and sought her voice while Debbie placidly said nothing in reply. Only Henry's ragged breathing cut into the odd little silence that followed as he got himself all worked up with loathing. "You want people to just give you money for prancing around with a bunch of fags in tights, is that it?" He took out his thick wallet and rifled through its contents. "So. You want people to just come on up and hand you money? Here. Here's a twenty. Come and get it," he sneered, letting it flutter to the floor. "I'd give you away if I could." He dismissed them both with yet another disgusted gesture before storming out of the room.

When Pepper finally found her voice: "Henry!" She took her daughter's face in her palms and gave her a tender look. "Are you okay sweetie? Don't mind him. You know he never means what he says," she whispered under her husband's distant but intrusive mutterings.

"By submitting yourself you're only reinforcing his behavior," a much less subdued Debbie quickly replied while the low, all encompassing presence of Henry returned.

"I mean exactly what I mean because I know I said it Debbie. Don't listen to your nitwit mother tell you any different. Because if I wasn't around we'd see who'd be served a cold dish of reality. And I'll tell you one more thing and one thing only: It won't be me, that's for damn sure. Know why? I'll tell you why: Because I went to college, did some interning and went to law school." He took out a handkerchief and began mopping the sweat now oozing from his reddening face while Debbie rolled her eyes to her mother and finished her white zin. "That's good enough for me but not you? Come on."

"Calm yourself down," pleaded Pepper. "Because Dr. Wilder said - "

"Yeah yeah that quack - "

"Because the *doctors*, Henry, the *doctors* said you need to learn to relax or your next little episode could be your last."

"Next time I want your opinion I'll remember to ask. So either sit there and shut up or get the hell out of here so me and my daughter can talk," he ordered with all his strength, his hands scissoring the air as he strode about the room. His wife sank inwardly, and her only reply was a lost gaze and a sad, bewildered smile. "And you," he paused for a moment to give his daughter a withering look. "Have you given any thought to what I told you?"

Debbie smiled her sarcastic comment instead of verbalizing it, and he threw his hands at her in disgust and stomped away.

"You two are a barrel of chattering. Chattering monkeys when it comes to knowing anything about anything. You don't even think about things like that do you? Or how about the food you just ate? Bought and paid for by this guy right here," this bitterly raging man boasted, unclenching his thumbs from his fists and jabbing them into his chest. He heaved for breath and then went on and on like that until both women were hurt. "And don't you ever forget it," he added for good measure some time after losing his thread of reason.

"How could we - " Debbie began before cutting herself short, biting her lips in anger.

"A dancer is nothing but an out of work actor too lazy to wait tables for a living! How about that?"

"But I just want to be happy Daddy," she challenged him in a voice strung on little silver bells like serenity incarnate. "And when I dance I'm most happy."

That did it.

Henry's face erupted with rage and he stopped short, slamming both fists down on the table. "Happiness? Happiness. I'll give you happiness," he said, making a mockery of her voice. His knuckles were white as he resumed striding up

and down the floor. "Because happy doesn't put food on the table work does. Remember that missy. I can't fucking believe I have to tell somebody - My own daughter even! - That in this day and age. I've worked hard all my goddamned life to allow you to make something of yourself and now . . . And now you're pissing it all away."

"But you aren't happy Daddy. Just look at yourself right now. Nobody who acts like you do can ever be called happy," she defended herself in real earnest now.

Pepper's spine stiffened. "She's right about that Henry, you know," she said without heat.

A great fury entered him, and he lost himself in its turmoil. A red-tinged haze compressed the whole scene about him as, gesticulating wildly and still sputtering with rage, he came to the foot of the table, making his wife recoil when he shook his fist under her nose.

"This whole worlds gone crazy. And with clowns like you and your daughter in it its only gonna get worse too. Shut your mouth. Don't you even think of saying another word because I'm through with you as of now."

Pepper went gray with fright while dropping her tear-stained eyes into the darkest grains of the tabletop. She wanted to laugh and laugh and laugh and then run away, but she only shuddered once and covered her face with her hands. Although Debbie was being choked by the disgust high in her throat as well as her terrible hatred for this world of men, she seemed indifferent to everything. Henry's mouth was twisted when he turned his apoplectic wrath upon her.

"Something's wrong with you and I'm the only one to tell you what. You're a lazy and selfish bum and a waste of the air you breathe."

"I'm so sorry Daddy. I'll try to be less happy and make something of myself so I can do better," she promised ever so humbly, adding the lisp of a callow little girl.

Henry pulled out a chair and put one foot on its seat. "See these shoes? You like 'em? Do they make you happy? Look at me when I'm talking to you because

they cost $400," he roared, purple with rage as he turned the table's corner and went down its length. "See this here suit? Over $1500. If you want nice things all the time you're going to have sacrifice and work hard at something that pays and that something isn't dancing around on your toes with a bunch of panty waist petunias don't you ever dare look away when I'm - "

He came to an abrupt stop and clasped his chest. Staggering backwards and paling rapidly, his entire body throbbing with pain, he almost lost his balance and collapsed. Sweat ran freely down his contorted face as he fought against the tilting floor.

Debbie and Pepper exchanged looks comprised of both fear and concern. "Henry" and "Daddy" they cried and arose in unison while he drew one deep shuddering breath after another. His lips were moving silently, like a man trying a line of reasoning before arguing it in the greatest court of them all.

"Get away from me . . . Pepper I don't need any of . . . Help . . .

"I said get away," he told her, this time with more force. "You. Aren't. Needed . . .

"So leave me the hell. Alone . . . With my thoughts." Appearing to crumple in on himself, he grew still. Nobody spoke at all for several moments, and you could almost hear his ventricles swell and subside, swell and subside over and over again. After slowly coloring in increments, he came alive with a simmering roar: "I don't need any sympathy, Pepper. As a as a, parent concerned about the. The well being and future of his only daughter I'm looking for some empathy here Pepper. Empathy. Look it up. And if you were any kind of mother you could give it. Any kind of mother at all."

Pepper's heart panged with utter defeat and shame. With tears flooding her eyes, she was unable to look at anyone, so she got up and shrank away from the table. Biting a trembling frown into her lips, she slunk to the window, parted the curtains and peeked out.

"Oh quit being so moakish," he snapped at her shuddering back, lurching unsteadily to his feet, which then propelled him around the room at a redoubled pace.

"It's mawkish, Henry," she said in a voice dripping tears. "Mawkish."

"Well I know how to say annoying histrionic bitch," he informed her, brutally sober. "And spell it too so save it. I don't need you to say anything else. Is that clear?"

She nodded.

"Thank you."

*

A car roaring up a gravel driveway and honking.

"Whoa! I didn't excuse you! Where do you think you're going young lady?"

"Anyplace else but here," she answered politely as she moved with innate grace to her mother's side. She gave her a hug and, after whispering into her ear, brushed her cheek with a kiss.

Another honk, along with a racing engine's sound, raised his anger to an exalted pitch.

"Sit down until I say so, got it?" he said, his very tone stopping her. "And wipe that look off your damn face too before I wipe it off for you."

Although father and daughter were now on opposite sides of the table, both their eyes were wild, as though they were at each other's throats.

"You're going to have to shape up or ship out missy, mark my words. I simply refuse to have some freeloader living under my roof - "

"You know something *Daddy*," Debbie interrupted with a scornful gesture, laughing aloud. "I've had enough of this for one day already. So if you'll please excuse me . . . "

"I will not exc - You come back here this instant!"

"Don't you dare touch me! You're absolutely horrible! Horrible!" she screamed, knocking her father's hands away and fleeing the room.

He went into the kitchen after her but left his enormous shadow behind. "Why you stinkin' little bitch!" he screamed as she slammed through the back screen door. "Get the hell out of my house then! And I don't care if I see you again ever!

"Do you hear me!"

The car she slammed into squealed away in reply.

*

When Henry returned to the thrumming silence with a brand new kind of anger, his dearly beloved had largely recovered her composure, although her tears were still streaking down her cheeks.

"What's the matter with you now?"

"I'm just tired is all," she replied in a weary, almost pleading tone. Her hands were neatly folded on the table and she was trembling, too.

Henry pounded a fist onto the table. "From what? Sitting on your ass all day?"

"I'm finding it hard, Henry - Henry? - To - "

"Hard you say? Anything you want you just point. How hard can that be? Tell me Pepper. Tell me how hard it is to have everything you want served on silver fucking platters. Go ahead.

"Come on.

"I'm waiting." He shook his head incredulously and continued appraising her. Then he pulled the chair next to her and sat down, looming his body over her so that she felt trapped.

"See that? That's exactly what I mean. I expect your complete and unwavering cooperation in these matters from here on out. Is that understood?"

"Aren't you even the slightest ashamed of yourself? The way you treat your own daughter like that?"

"The way I treat - "

"Can't you just lay off her for once?"

"Lay off? You want me to lay off or just lay over and die? Which one Pepper? Because I don't see much difference."

"Your little girl has grown up if you haven't noticed Henry. And you've got to accept her - "

"Accept her counter-productive and idiotic ideas? You can't control the world with . . . With chaos and ineptitude."

"Then you're just going to have to learn to be patient with her."

"Patient? Patience doesn't get you anywhere. It's for the birds. You can't pay the bills daydreaming all day long like some people in my house seem to think. It's that simple. So how come you two birds can't figure it out?" he wondered. "Because they think they're hot house tomatoes that's why," he replied.

Pepper dabbed at her eyes with a napkin and sobbed: "But she's a little headstrong and stubborn, that's all. Just like you Henry, and you know it too."

"Bite your tongue woman," he warned, getting to his feet and giving her one prolonged sneer. "She's nothing like me at all. It's high time for her to grow up and assume some responsibility."

"She is though!"

"Haw haw! You call that responsible? Haw haw."

"Why don't you go see her dance some night. They're starting a new show next week . . . "

"Haw haw!"

"Just give her some support and you'll see how responsible your little girl is."

"Oh stop it. It wasn't that funny the first time. I've heard all your nonsense a thousand times already."

Pepper's head sank into her hands as she burst into tears. "Our marriage is - "

"Never forget that without me you're nothing," he reminded her. "Nothing. Who put this roof over your head?" he demanded yet again.

You're such an arrogant jerk, she thought, softly adding aloud: "You did."

"And who bought and paid for that tony Navigator you tool around in all day?"

"You . . . "

"And who's the one who pays all your bills when you go on one of your little shopping sprees at the mall?

"Pepper?"

She nodded her head in strengthless assent. "You."

It could go on and on like this for hours, but tonight he was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Mr. Johnson?" the tall strong-sounding man there asked.

"Who's the boss of this here house?"

"You're the boss, Henry."

"And don't you forget it either," he concluded his sermon as if she'd ever be able. Then he spun away and stormed away down the hall and out through the front door. "I don't know what you people are coming to, acting like a bunch of damn hippies with this load of happiness crap," were the words he left the woman standing where she stood, squeezing her shoulders in a hug.

*

Framed in the doorway now, Pepper was biting her quivering lower lip and crying silently. Across her face a long shadow lay.

She watched as her husband hastened down the walkway and got into the limousine, which pulled crisply away from the curb. And she kept watching while it turned the corner and dappled then disappeared altogether as the woods thickened. In a moment she seemed relieved, as if she could finally breathe. She stood still and quiet, pitying him more than herself.

But in the time it took an SUV or two and a minivan to pass, a fresh consternation had already creased her brow, and she shook herself once and patted the gray hair he gave her before locking the screen door. Although she was headed toward the kitchen for an iced tea or something, she only made it so far as the foot of

the stairs, where she lowered herself and sighed, just sighed. Everything became swathed in mist, and she wanted to bury her face and sob, but she simply couldn't let it all go and gave up trying. "This has got to stop," she said after a while. "It just has to somehow . . . "

Pepper sat there with her hands clasped tightly together while night came rolling in with the sound of cicadas. She entered into a state of utter confusion, where she then crossed herself and recited a half-forgotten prayer. Her eyes absorbed by something beyond the screen door window offering her no salvation, her thoughts conversing with the distant and lonely trains, she didn't even notice her cat rubbing against her legs before curling up on her lap.

Outside it was another summer night without moon or stars. Soon all that was left was the unbearable noise of cicadas. When something came near, they ceased altogether before starting again . . .

*

Wending through this placid summer evening on sylvan streets named for the trees they replaced. Past lawns manicured like graveyards and picture windows of monotonous repetitive mansionettes, each on one and a quarter to a half acre lots. Under the setting sun, everything seemed plated in bronze.

Then through tinted windows, veiling everything in a thin darkness.

*

A slight precise man in a well-tailored suit became bathed in the slanting cone of light emanating from a lamp set in the low ceiling. He was perched on the edge of his seat in such a way that you could tell he preferred a hard straight chair. His narrow and long face was highlighted by remarkably thick gray hair and reading glasses. His soft watery eyes belied the extent of his steely resolve. At this moment he was rifling through the veritable typhoon of paper somehow balancing on his knees. If he were home, say, watching the evening news with propped feet shod in

slippers, he'd pass for a kindly old man whose bland demeanor demanded propriety. He might even resemble your grandfather.

Every once in a while he let a piece of paper flutter to the carpeted floor, which was illuminated by a row of weak running lights all around. With just a glance two pairs of shoes and then two figures of widely disparate height and bulk could scarcely be discerned at the rear of this slender but comfortable confine. Since neither spoke, their presence was only betrayed by the nuances of their subtle movements. But if you peered deeper into the shadows, they became two distinctly glowering men.

The rest of the limousine was empty.

*

Whenever someone shifted their position, the Corinthian leather seats creaked.

A cellphone changed the mood.

The man with the papers shuffled them all together, adding a long impatient sigh to the steady trilling before answering one of the several idling at his side. "Ogden here what is it? . . . Hold on a sec." He found a fresh piece of paper among the unruly stack and set the rest down beside him. Then he uncapped a red fountain pen with his teeth. "Go ahead."

He listened carefully to what was being said, taking constant notes and nodding almost as often, replying in the affirmative whenever he replied. Otherwise there was an absolute silence but for the infrequent soughing of passing traffic and the occasional odd noise emitted by one of the other men. The limousine slowed and, as soon as it glided to a complete stop, Ogden took control of the conversation:

"Well okay then. We just arrived so we'll have to stop here for now . . . That cake stunt sounds fine. Put Tony on that and tell him to keep it quick and do it early though. I need you elsewhere . . . Because the later it gets, the more people have had to drink and that's when things tend to get out of hand fast. Trust me on this . . . Sure it could be spun as boys being boys but in light of recent events the last thing we need

right now is if something like that leaked. Especially after last week's gaffe . . . I know I know -

"It's too late for me to do anything about it if we're going to win this campaign . . . About six months too late wait. He's coming down the walk so let's wrap this up . . . " Although he looked increasingly disgusted now, he managed a laugh. "That's nothing. You wouldn't believe the things I've seen on the trail if I told you. We'll just have to worry about him after the election though . . . He's given us no other choice - "

The side door swung open.

" - We'll have to discuss this this ahem situation later how is that statement for the newspaper coming?"

Henry came beaming into the artificial darkness. "So what do you fellas want to do tonight? Raise some Cain or what?" he quipped while sliding along a deep leather bench. One of his knees banged against the lavish bar glowing dimly adjacent to Ogden, making several bottles clink together. "Hey Ogden?"

Holding up one finger, Ogden acknowledged this with the curt kind of not now air acquired at a place like Yale as he continued scribbling furiously. "Good got it. But read it again so I can check . . . "

"Money money money," Henry gurgled during the resulting silence, rubbing his hands together. As the limousine went back down the driveway and reentered the meandering street pattern of this very sensible slice of paradise, he made himself comfortable.

"Sounds good. I'll get in touch with The Herald in another five minutes or so. Put Tony on the phone . . . I don't care get him right now . . . What's the word Tony."

Henry made sure Ogden was watching him. Then, although he couldn't keep a little leer from creeping into his face, he cast a sidelong glance at the bar as if it were a cause worth shunning. "Is everything going as - "

"Will you please wait a minute Henry this is important," Ogden hastened to interrupt without slipping away from the other end of the conversation. "Clayton

backed out? When? . . . That sonofabitch . . . No no. As long as Rutherford still comes three out of four will be enough so let's forget about that asshole. What about tomorrow's event? . . . Is everyone still lined up for that?" Folding and tucking the paper into his breast pocket along with his reading glasses, he paused and looked right at Henry. "Right. But I haven't heard that . . . Well just tell me what you heard then," he replied, already communing with his suspicions.

After leaning forward and narrowing his eyes, he perceived sweat glistening on the little blossoms of liquor all over Henry's face. Although his gaze was straight, it was somewhat glazed, and Ogden wrinkled his nose in disgust when he realized the listless air of indifference coming off of him was just as strong as the odor of Scotch in his pores. He gave Henry's clothes the quick once over and then wordlessly thanked the Almighty Lord that at least Pepper hadn't allowed him to wear one of his louder ties.

"Any more stops before our final destination, sir?" came crackling over the intercom.

"No, that'll be all Steve. Sorry Tony . . . No no, I'm still listening . . . You can probably just imagine, but let me find out the extent. Hold on a minute." Putting little to no effort behind his smile, he covered the cellphone's mouthpiece. "Henry, you remember these boys, Fritz and Cornelius?" he asked with a jerking movement of his chin.

Henry, his face now graced by an ingratiating smile, extended his hand down the aisle to either of the two men, who were wearing matching sport jackets and turtlenecks. They inclined their heads in his general direction and Fritz - the one with a scar that rearranged his face - even went so far as to grunt.

Upon realizing he was being left hanging out to dry, Henry's breath caught sharply. He covered this thin noise with a cough while clumsily falling back into the shadows. As the limousine rounded a long but gentle corner, he tottered to the side before managing to straighten himself. Now letting his gaze wander around every which way, he began brushing back the hair on his balding head with both hands.

Ogden gave a prolonged sigh. His little mime of concern was a creased brow and pursed lips. "Henry," he began as though it was the last thing he wanted to do. "What's the matter this time?"

Rousing himself back to life, Henry raised his face and blurted: "It's my goddamned kid again. It's unfuckingbelievable. You wouldn't believe what I have to put up with day in and day out on a, well on a daily basis. She's gonna land me in the hospital one of these days with her foolishness and - And completely rebellious and irresponsible behavior. We're worried sick about her. Worried?" his voice rising higher and higher. "Did I say worried? I'm getting sick of her is more like it. You should've heard the line of bullshit she fed me tonight."

Holding a hand to his head, Ogden cinched his eyes closed. This man, he thought, can bore his way through a vault. Now opening his eyes: "Can you tell me later because - "

"My daughter," Henry went right on, waving his arms any which way. "She says to me, she says Daddy, I don't care about making a successful of of myself. I just want to be *happy*."

Ogden stared down his nose at this overweight and inebriated but somehow still electable buffoon in such a way that you knew he had standards to which Henry did not rise. He had initially wanted a venerable man with sterling character and good looks for his campaign. He intensified his search and then, swallowing his pride and common sense, lowered his sights before finally settling on Henry

Henry.

"Henry please. Not now. Get aho - "

"Happiness," he sneered a little louder before lowering his voice. "Can you believe that? She grew up never wanting for one damn thing in this world and now alls she wants is to be happy? Come on! Who's she fooling? She's happy because she's laying around the house all day on my dime while I'm the one who's footing all her bills and that's the bottom line. I work hard all my life and what do I get? A swift kick right in the nuts every night that's what."

Sometimes, at times just like these, Ogden wished he could replace him with a broom. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for a moment, summoning the brand of hard-nosed resilience that made him the envy of his political rivals. Increasingly adept at steering Henry's volatile and routinely misplaced indignation, Ogden then returned his stare in an equivocal manner.

"Who does she think she's fooling? Huh? And don't even get me started on my wife. Because she's been starting in on me about - "

"Quit being such an utterly self-absorbed churl. Focus on what we're here for tonight because there are far more important things to worry about right now than family," he continued in a low, urgent voice. "You've got to concentrate on both the Big Picture in general and tonight in particular so sit still and think about, hell I don't know, how about making a decent impression okay?"

Henry tried to say something.

"Will you shut up!" was the gesture Ogden used while saying into the cellphone: "It's nothing . . . Nothing. Nothing important. Just the same old song and dance . . . Nevermind that . . . It would be impossible for me to pursue that ahem line of reasoning at the moment so to speak . . . I'm trusting you to use your better judgement concerning the timing of tonight's entertainment, do you understand me? The earlier the better remember . . . Ask Jimmy. He'll tell you why. I've got to call Merriam at The Herald . . . We'll be there in about fifteen twenty minutes depending on traffic . . . Yeah, even at this hour . . . Okay."

He switched cellphones and pressed a button.

*

Crossing his arms over his chest, Henry drew back into the shadows, where he sat in a huff. He wanted to exchange puzzled glances with someone, but no one else would participate. So he scratched his head instead, moving his mouth as though he were chewing without tasting. Then he tugged and smoothed his clothes. As he hitched his pants, his belly did a slow roll one way and then the other.

"So. How are you two gentleman doing this evening?" he asked as if they were conspirators in a silly game.

Entirely devoid of bonhomie, neither Fritz nor Cornelius responded.

Henry cleared his throat. "Are we doing all right tonight or what?" he persisted.

Fritz uttered something in monosyllable while Cornelius shrugged and said "What."

Henry repeated himself, again to no avail.

"Quit fooling around Henry," Ogden snapped with a brusqueness that couldn't be avoided before reverting his entire attention back to the cellphone. "Pick up pick up damnit . . . "

After a moment Henry laughed. He tried to distract Ogden, who put the cellphone to his other ear and turned away. "Is this The Herald? . . . Then get me Merriam -

" - Just tell him Ogden's on the line and he sure as hell won't be busy . . . That's right Ogden . . . I will but if I have to wait for long honest ta God your head's gonna roll. Am I making myself clear?"

Henry reached across the aisle for the pile of papers, but Ogden slapped his hand away and gave him a ferocious look. "Okay okay, I get your drift Ogden. Sheesh." His fingers drummed where the ceiling lamp's light touched his thigh. And then they reached into his pocket and twined around a pack of cigarettes so naturally that he didn't even realize he was doing it. A searing thirst soon crept into his mouth, leaving him in an uncomfortable daze. Licking his lips, he squirmed around in his seat. "Well then. If there's nothing for me to do, I'll just help myself to a little drink," he declared, suiting action to words by pouring himself a stiff highball. "Anyone else want one while I'm at it? Ogden?"

Glancing at his watch every few seconds now, the cellphone still stuck to his ear, Ogden replied with an oddly ambiguous thing that could only be described as a wry grin while watching Henry take a slug off his drink.

"Ah! Now that hits the spot." Smacking his lips together in obvious content, he lolled back and, stretching out his legs, listened to the sound of the limousine flowing through the occupying force of dead forests woven with the rattle of ice cubes. This became unreal and remote in his mind, and a numbness came over him as he slipped into the serenity and assurance only a stiff drink and a sumptuous limousine's confines can provide. Although he was near, he felt far off, as if bereft of reason. He took another slug off his highball, acquiring a dreamy contemplative bearing.

Darkness deepened fast outside, and the tinted glass soon reflected Henry's face marked uncannily by the sky's crimson stain.

*

Henry changed the position of his drink, of his legs, and then he started squirming around again. He began tapping his toes against the carpeted floor. Every time he went back toward his pocket for cigarettes, he caught himself just short. But soon he reached the point where he could help himself no longer.

"Sorry Ogden," he puffed, inhaling smoke deeply and holding it in for the pure undiluted pleasure it brought. Right after exhaling he sipped at his drink.

Ogden muttered something with more roughness than you would have imagined. He grew calm all of a sudden. "Yes I'm still here waiting - Goddamnit!"

Guess who exclaimed, "Oh my virgin ears!"

Henry, that's who.

With a shit-eating grin plastered across his face like that, he uncovered his ears and gazed around. Both his eyes and howling guffaw came to an abrupt stop at the oppressive presence of Fritz, who sat in heavy rectilinear silence.

He was a short monolithic man whose main requirements seemed to be lots of space and lots of food. While one meaty hand kept time to some unheard tune on an armrest, he cleaned his teeth with a fingernail. Although his scar turned half his glower sardonic, it still said "I will break your teeth."

His eyes scurrying out the window, Henry emptied his glass and tucked it into his crotch.

They had left the suburban stuff of dreams and were now passing nothing but prime sites for the racially mixed pedestrian pockets of tomorrow. Soon they were accessing the vast system lacing this Great Country's urban masses together, heading north through a corridor of sterile shopping centers and corporate campuses interspersed with frequent slabs of pavement.

Since this scenery did not change for some time, Henry began inspecting his palms before peeking at Cornelius: His hair an explosion of red curls, he had a middleweight's build and the mashed up nose to prove it. On his thighs rested his hands, which were knotted and altogether misshapen.

While Fritz could clean a room with one glance, Cornelius' violence was more refined. With eyes hard as diamonds, he returned Henry's scrutiny with an impenetrable expression.

Henry glanced quickly away and around the rest of the limousine. He appeared to be meditating for a while, but a mischievous smile crept into his face and he began laughing.

Nobody asked him why, so he lapsed into a long bout of moody silence.

*

Ogden was evidently hissing and pissing from an impatient rage for everything now, and his cheeks were already flushed when he broke out into a series of violent gesticulations. "Of course I'm still here you tawdry and scurrilous no good jackass . . . Phil? Oh so sorry Phil. I thought it was your assistant . . . Fine fine. And you and yours? . . . Good to hear! Listen. I have a couple of more lines to add to tomorrow's article, if you don't mind that is . . . Ready now? . . . Okay. 'Henry L. Johnson, founding partner of Johnson, Southerland & Johnson, celebrated his retirement at an understated affair with loving friends and family last night. Despite all the rumors and speculation, Mr. Johnson's plans do not include running for

Lieutenant Governor.' Got that? . . . Read it back just in case though . . . Perfect. And just keep to the generalities of our political ideas in the article . . . I have no other choice in light of last week's fiasco . . . But you're absolutely right. Well, I've got to run . . . Thanks . . . You too. I owe you one."

The mere thought should have filled his cheeks with shame. But right at that moment Henry clinked more ice cubes into his glass before dousing them with Scotch, eliciting Ogden's most reproving look. When he took a slug and savored it like courage, swaying this way and that, Ogden turned away in obvious disgust and made a pretense of rearranging his papers. Since he wasn't at all given to brooding over things, he quickly addressed Henry in a tone that demanded exclusive attention.

"Are you - How many drinks does that make?"

"What the hells that supposed to mean?" Henry replied from his now supine position.

Wincing and squeezing his temples with one hand, his jaws tightening, Ogden continued looking at him full in the face. His mind was deeper than a well and narrow as a corridor, and when he realized he was living one of his absolute worst nightmares, he wanted to reach out and slap him across his fat quivering mouth. But after an instant's hesitation, he was able to smother that impulse.

"We - el. This makes my third if you're going to insist. Look Ogden, I'm a successful grown man who can take care of himself. And if I have another it'll be my business. Not yours." Henry raised the glass and observed his adviser over its rim. "You were going to say are you then what?" he asked before taking a brazen swallow.

"Don't give me any of that only three business. This is the biggest night of your career so you'd better get ahold of yourself fast." And then, after drawing closer to this drunken horse's ass, he proceeded to apprise him of tonight's agenda in a voice clear and low:

"Okay. You're sitting at table number one next to the Governor of course. So as soon as you enter the room keep walking toward the front. Don't let anyone stop you from moving because once you stop you'll never be able to get anywhere. Just

keep moving and smiling, moving and smiling. And act natural with everyone. You're good at that. Once you sit down everyone else will and then there'll be a little speech by the Governor about the importance of next year's election and how tonight's event is a commencement of that effort et cetera. Then salad and baked potatoes and what have you will be served. Now this is where it gets important, so listen up: The other people at your table are a Dr. John Hadley, Mr. Pierpont Stephenson and a Mr. Morgan B. Rutherford."

Ogden took the piece of paper from his breast pocket and unfolded it. Another one of Henry's patented blank expressions reciprocated his long gaze.

"Any questions so far?" he asked. "Henry?"

Henry had fallen into the increasing doubtfulness and frustration only endemic to the true heavy drinker. All this preparation seemed to him a bunch of nonsense, and in one breath he mumbled something to that effect.

"How's that you say? An utter waste of your time? Do you want to win this thing or what? Because I'm beginning to wonder. Before you do battle," he went on over Henry's weak protestations. "You must always set clear objectives, ensure unity of command, construct a simple plan and mass your forces so you can always stay on the offensive. That's the way you run a successful political campaign anyway, Henry. Although I'm not sure what you think we are doing here. Because like I've told you a thousand times already. If you want to handle a crowd no problem, you're going to have to listen to me and listen to me good. It's simple. You listen to everything they have to say and tell them everything they want to hear. If doesn't matter what they ask, it only matters what you tell 'em. Avoid all subjects you are uncomfortable with, don't allow anyone to open any prolonged lines - Let me finish! - Don't allow anyone to open any prolonged lines of inquiry, and never lie. There's always more than one way to tell the truth."

"We - el, perhaps you're right," Henry conceded after pondering a moment, his mind already wandering away. "But wouldn't it be better if - "

Ogden raised one hand. "I respect your opinion, Henry," he prevaricated without batting an eye. "You know that. It's just that, since you don't have much experience in this - Ahem! Shall we say field - I think we should stick to my plan. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'll drink to that!"

The quest for the public weal did not seem to Ogden absurd in the slightest. He made this point very, very clear before adding: "So shape up and listen or else we're through, got it?"

Appearing somewhat abashed, Henry smiled his curious sense of tipsy shame, blinking rapidly.

"Good. Now listen to me carefully then." He put on his glasses and began to read: "Hadley, he's looking for your support with a study on reducing the odor of swine manure he's working on - This is important because of the proposed development in the agricultural regions out east, remember? - He's also representing some pretty important people tonight, so listen close to what he has to say. Let me see now - Stephenson's a developer. He wants the state to expand the highway and utilities to the east as well as zoning and watershed easements where he's already invested millions in land and surveying fees."

"What part of the state did you say again?"

"The eastern part!" He smoothed the paper with one hand. When his gorge abated, he went on in a strong tone of reproof: "Come on now Henry. Get your head in the game. Rutherfords probably the most important man at this event, Henry. He's the Vice President of a High Powered National Real Estate Investment Firm interested in this area. He's looking for support, i.e. cash, for reinvigorating downtown - Maybe matching funds via bonds or something like that - To make it more quote consumer friendly unquote as well as legislation to keep out that homeless shelter idea being kicked around."

Henry's stomach was full of a gurgling gas that made him appear even more bloated. All he did during this was sit and listen, sit and listen, resting his chin first on one fist and then on the other.

"Are you with me so far?" Ogden asked, taking off his reading glasses.

"I'm following you," Henry tittered before stifling a burp. "If that's what you mean."

"You don't have any questions?"

"We - el. What then? I mean after the baked potato?"

"Southerland - He's sitting at your table too, by the way - He's going to illumine several what are sure to be hilarious and sentimental moments of your shared past before reminding everyone of the firm's great loss et cetera and that you're the representative of Americans who love God, honor and country and sing 'God Bless America' at the very least once a day holding hands with their neighbors and all that crap. And that's when you stride powerfully to the podium and do your thing - Briefly this time Henry, briefly - And then you'll be able to just relax and have a good time . . . You apparently don't need much of an excuse to do that to perfection anyway," he concluded with a polite but pointed note of dismissal, putting on his reading glasses and rifling through his papers.

Combing his fingers through his hand, Henry relapsed into a silence that almost passed for contemplative. He didn't know how much he didn't know and seemed to be in no rush to find out. "But what do I say to everyone else?" he wanted to know after a length of time.

With blank yet enquiring eyes, he looked over at Ogden, who gave a sigh as slow as it was long while putting his papers back down beside him and crossing his legs at the knee.

"The old psychology from last week is out the window. You have to face facts that most of that voting block doesn't even vote anyway. Eighty percent of them are so lazy they don't even know who the Lieutenant Governor is right now! Those are the kind of people who are more impressed with backbone and bluster than

anything else. So you can say just about anything to them and get away with it because their opinions simply don't count when all is said and done on Election Day. This crowd, on the other hand, is one hundred and eighty degrees different."

Traces of anxiety came into Henry's figure. "How come so different?"

"Well . . . Let's just say that they have taste and intelligence and and strong moral character. And it has already occurred to them that the government-led glad handing the poor brigade are the ones creating all the problems not us. So skip all the specifics we've been reviewing and stick to generalities. Better yet platitudes. Your safe harbor is discussing the high road to moral rot and how intellectual . . . Intellectual turpitude gives way to a mixed bag of Americans who are a slothful bunch of hopelessly unemployable louts. Either that or focus on the endless claims of social privilege that mark the underprivileged world. These people will lap that sort of thing right up . . .

"But don't go overboard, of course. We can hardly afford another gaffe like last week's now can we Henry?"

"About that - "

"Forget it. No more excuses from here on out, though, because we've got to play error free ball for the rest of this campaign. So we need to keep our message as simple and concerted as possible . . . Okay?"

A nodding Henry finished his drink. Although he appeared to be at his most thoughtful, Ogden knew better.

"I - I mean, we, that is, ahem, you, Henry, have a desperate purpose and it is well worth expending our efforts in an efficient and practical manner. But you are becoming a handicap instead of the thoroughbred I imagined and - And getting soused will not help you accomplish that turnaround so put that damn bottle down. Now. Don't even think about having another, understand? Good. Now listen then. I cannot impart to you - I cannot emphasize enough, Henry - How important this evening is to your political career. Do you understand the urgency?"

"Look uh Ogden - " He was interrupted by a sharp gesture and an accompanying look.

Just be emphatic that the marriage of Big Labor and Big Government is over. Over. So all's you really need to do is remind them of the pro-business values you champion."

In an otherwise stilled panic, Henry's fat cheeks were quivering, which made him look somewhat abashed. If they had been in front of anyone of any importance, Ogden would have taken him by the arm and moved him away, preferably around a corner and a ways down the hall.

"Come on Henry! You can't mean to tell me you've already forgotten the drill!" He slapped his forehead. "You know. I trust you more than government and I believe you know better than bureaucrats how to run your business and I believe those who are closest to the alleged problem know how to find the best solution after a rational cost benefit analysis. Remember now?"

Henry replied with many sputtering hesitations and then made a sweeping movement through the air and laughed. "Don't ever tell anyone else this," he finally began, surrendering all dignity. "My stomachs all balled up in cramps and I can't hardly breathe I'm so nervous. I'm starting to think I may be in this way over my head."

"What's all this nervousness business crap all about? Do you know how much we have invested in you? And you still want to throw it all right back into my face and give up now before we even officially start running? Is that it?"

"No, it's not that . . . "

"Awww. Listen to me: We're in a war, right? A war of values and efficient and practical business acumen? And are you not patriotic and honorable when all is said and done? Or are you going to betray everything and let everyone down including yourself? Courage, Henry. Courage in the face of adversity. We must fight or we'll be beaten. A coward is no better than a, well, than a homosexual in my book."

"Don't yell at me," Henry roared right back. "I'm not some child in need of a goddamned insulting lecture!"

"This is our chance to win, Henry. You have a duty to fulfill. A promise to keep, so to speak."

"I'm just a bit worried that - "

Ogden cut him off with an extraordinary conviction. "Worrying is an act of sublime ignorance. We won't get we can't get anywhere with that narrow-minded and defeatist thinking. If you express or even reflect any doubts it will only serve to reinforce any lingering doubts in the minds of your supporters - Your friends, Henry. You're a good man," he added with the straightest face. "And everyone knows that. So don't be nervous and stop worrying. You're getting to be worse than a woman for crissakes!"

Henry waited two, maybe three minutes. "What happens if someone starts heckling like last week? Or worse?" he asked with a palpable anxiety.

"We take care of it," Fritz replied, chuffing and popping his jaws while Cornelius looked placidly on. "Know what I mean?"

Ogden even went so far as to put a reassuring hand on Henry's shoulder before quickly taking it away. "See? Everything's all under control." He slumped with his head bowed a moment and took a deep breath. Then he straightened right up and, using his words like a weaver at the loom, exhibited the combination of fearless individualism, loathsome self-righteousness and cynical ignorance common to this species free from the business cycle: "You'll be alright, don't worry. These people tonight want to be led by you, Henry. Nobody else. For all intents and purposes, you can do no wrong. Your shit, in other words, doesn't stink. They just want to be reassured - Without you coming right out and saying it, of course - Is that you know all of these, shall we say between you and me, Niggers and Spics need to be trained in industry and obedience and morality and, if all else fails, we need to lock 'em up and throw away the key."

With a bleary devotion, Henry watched and listened from his comfortably recumbent perspective as though he only half understood. Heaving his shoulders in agreement every so often, he began wondering if he should venture to say something. Now and then he threw in an interjection while Ogden went on:

"I'm sick of all these sociological explanations. 'It's not my fault society has turned me out this way and all that rot'," he whined in falsetto. "Everybody doing everything our good clean God fearing country used to simply deem wrong plain and simple with a list of excuses a mile long to justify their disgusting perversities and unabashed priorities. All those ideologically homeless ex-communists and anti-American multiculturalists and and and anti-religious bigots doing as little as they can for as much as they can get while laughing at us, Henry. Laughing behind our backs for giving it to them."

And on and on: "The time will come when nobody will do any work but us and then where'll we be then, Henry? Up Shit's Creek, that's where. For that reason and that reason only we will refuse to accede to the consensus of the lowest and commonest denominator, who find . . . They find surcease from shame in self-congratulation and all sorts of other self-gratifying malarkey. Pride? These old sin New Age atheists have no sense of pride, Henry, no sense of social justice and equity, which sets us apart from them. And which is why we have to preserve our standards - "

Here he paused, his words hanging in the air and trembling.

" - Our standards of civilization, Henry. Not theirs. The greatest supporters of tyranny are, beyond even the shadow of a doubt, that gang of tax and spend lib'rals running around Washington hemming and hawing about the distresses of the poor being attributed to the evils of laissez faire capitalism all day long. Is that efficient or practical?

"The answer is no. You can't help people who don't give a shit, Henry. That's why free enterprise bounded by the iron rule of law produces the most for the most."

Henry pondered that as if he were a fighter caught in a neutral corner. "So we want to mix the unlimited economic power of an unregulated market with the infinite political power of an undemocratic state?" he stammered out, a slur creeping around in his voice.

"Exactly! This is indeed all about power. The power to change this country where it needs to be changed so that everything runs smoothly in this world. Now do you realize the importance of tonight?"

A staring Henry began nodding. Outside, the pure films of light rolling past were almost totally diluted by the long expanse of tinted glass beyond Ogden's head.

*

There was no particular emphasis to the resulting silence until it became tedious.

Henry peered into his empty glass, which looked so miserable and lonely, and ground a fist into his thigh. Ogden became thin and utterly indignant.

"Don't you dare even think of it. Now's the time to focus on - "

"I know. I didn't mean - "

"Our priorities and make rational - By this I mean sober - Decisions, not later."

"But I just thought - "

"Must you always go the extra mile, Henry?"

Again silence settled in.

"So . . . Ogden? Do you think that these guys tonight - "

"Let's just quit while we're ahead, okay? Why don't you sit back and relax and collect your thoughts. Or I know. Practice your little speech instead."

Stretching out his legs and tucking both hands under his belt, Henry made himself comfortable. When he began to rehearse his speech, chandeliers and cocktail glasses were already tinkling in his voice: "Unfortunately, those who have spent their lives making economic decisions in the real world, leading to productive

contributions to both the economy and society, are seldom as good at political spin as those who have contributed nothing to this world *but* spin - "

"Please - "

"That's why we need to - "

"Henry!"

" - Stop invidious legislation such as - "

"Silently Henry for crissakes! Please!"

Henry cleared his throat several times before his lips began moving soundlessly in time with the words reverberating through his mind while his head slowly reclined into an even deeper patch of shadow. Then it drooped and began lolling around on his breast.

Ogden could do nothing else but take off his reading glasses and shake his head once before rolling the kinks out of his neck. After uttering a sharp oath, he pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, brooding and disquieted.

Gliding along the highway through indistinguishable bedroom communities filled by the last to be hired and the first to be fired for a long stretch of moments before skirting the rows upon rows of slapdash tenements then factories standing dark against the overly restored downtown's argent glow. At exactly thirty-two minutes past eight by Ogden's watch "Two minutes sir" came crackling through the ether to his ears.

"Look snappy," he told Henry, reaching across the aisle and rapping his wrist with a thin, bony finger.

Henry arose with a start, thumping his head against the ceiling before dropping right back down on his ass. He glanced blearily about.

"I said we'll be there in two minutes so look snappy."

While rubbing the sleep from his face, Henry's eyes somehow acquired the gleam of glorious triumph after a prolonged battle, his countenance rosy from anticipation and booze. Soon he looked exactly like the kind of politician who

exhibits fanfare, self-delusion and good cheer while taking credit for something that had few foes and no political price tag. "Whelp. You know what the rabbi said."

"What rabbi?" a startled Ogden wondered.

"It won't be long now."

Nothing much happened until the limousine stopped under a ritzy new hotel's portico.

*

The chauffeur hurried around and swung open the nearest door. With eyes glancing everywhere, Fritz got out. Followed by the equally cautious Cornelius and then Ogden, who paused and peered back inside before putting both hands to his head and shaking it.

After a long moment of throat clearing and another of heavy gasping, Henry managed to extirpate himself from the darkness. He took the lead of the entourage more by protocol than by effort, and an obsequious black doorman tipped his cap and performed his duty well, enabling them to enter the hotel's marble grandeur without breaking stride. The lobby was so vast that it seemed empty, and they went across its mosaic-tiled floor until Henry hesitated by the ornately spuming fountain and its luxuriant vegetation.

"This place looks deader than shit," he observed with alarm after an interval of thought. "Where the hell is everyone anyway?"

"Come on. Quit screwing around. We're already running late as it is," Ogden replied, taking him by the elbow and propelling him toward the double doors under the magnificent sweeping staircase. He was still restless, still worried, and he glanced up at Henry with a certain amount of loathing for that. "This isn't the type of crowd that mills around chanting the ten cent slogans produced by five cent minds that you're so fond of, Henry. Do you have any last minute questions?"

"How could I?"

"I'm serious. So don't roll your eyes at me . . . "

"But we've gone over - "

"We've gone over everything a thousand times already because tonight is simply the most important night of your life, Henry, and we've all done our part and now is the time for you to do yours. It's ShowTime, Henry. Break a leg."

Although the expansive banquet room Henry came into was festooned with star spangled banners and bunting rippling in the air-conditioned breeze, it had as much ambience as a carport. Cobalt puffs of smoke drifted along with the Muzak before mixing with the clouds painted against the phony vaulted ceiling's light blue sky. Round tables were dispersed throughout, and behind the podium was a blown-up picture of his very own beaming face. From his vantage atop the low-set landing, he let his gaze wander through the crowd of professional boosters of business enterprise and the By God American Way of Life Damnit speckled here and there by the hotel's dark complected staff doing whatever they had to do and fast.

"Here's the man of the hour!" bellowed a resounding voice. Henry raised his arms in a fit of wide-eyed surprise and staggered back a few steps, where he completely dissolved in astonishment.

Of various heights but all with fat overflowing their belts, their fingers uncallused by hard work, this exclusive fraternity of the local Anglo-Saxon civilization's entire focus shifted in unison. Putting down their drinks, but still puffing away on the cigars clamped between their teeth, they gave him a rousing ovation.

Henry looked around with exaggerated movements of his head and torso and then pointed at himself before dropping all attitude of pretense. He drew himself up to his fullest height, his head now held regally aloft, a smile of benediction on his face. "Thank you. Thank you all so much," he soared his voice over the lusty adulation. "This is such a surprise!" Taking a deep breath, he outstretched and opened his arms wide, as if he were embracing the votes that would one day elect him King High and Mighty Big Shot Told You So Boss of the World.

He stood there like that for a moment longer before going down amongst these few who prey on the many flocking toward him as one.

*

Henry bloviated through the mass of smug homogeneity eddying about him, thrusting forth his hand in every which way, expressing his utmost thanks and gratitude in reply. More than one person clapped him on the back. Sometimes he paused, gripped someone by the elbow, and whispered some warm words, leaving gleaming avaricious eyes in his wake. Once, to the roaring delight of these expedient and practical men, he even broke into a vigorous shimmy. But after wading several more steps through this veritable tumult, his body began protesting all of his excesses from within. Paling in increments, he clenched his jaw against the sudden chattering of his teeth, thinning his heretofore-glorious smile. His feet then went numb and, wiping his brow with his sleeve whenever the cold sweat stung his eyes, he went through the crowd as if cast adrift. As he neared the front of the room, he glimpsed the Governor standing beside the table in front of the podium waving him over with both hands.

When Henry arrived out of breath, they embraced the way these kind of men embrace and then turned to face the crowd, each with one arm around the other's shoulder.

"Congratulations on, well, everything you've accomplished in your career," the Governor said in a voice meant to be overheard.

"I really truly appreciate that, Brian," Henry replied with vapid good cheer, mopping his ashen face with the handkerchief he had found in his breast pocket.

They shook hands and beamed as if there were cameras.

As soon as the applause died away and the crowd dissipated to find their assigned seats, the Governor turned toward the men wearing suits indicative of the status their wealth had acquired and neatly combed hair of differing shades of gray

standing around their table. They all looked about two three drinks behind the distinguished guest of honor but more than willing to catch up.

"Henry, let me introduce you to everyone. This here is Morgan Rutherford."

"Pleased to meet you Morgan. I've been hearing so much about you."

"All good things I hope!"

Everyone tittered.

"And this here sorry son-of-a-gun," the Governor chortled. "Is Pierpont Stephenson."

"I'm so happy that you could make it tonight, Pierpont."

"The pleasure is all mine. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

"And last but not least, I'd like you to meet Dr. John Hadley. He's our man at The University."

"Henry," he said from across the table, extending his hand.

"How do those So and Sos look this year John?"

"Division champs, God willing."

"May we be so lucky," the Governor added. "I think you've met this guy somewhere or other before, no?" he continued, nodding at Henry's law partner.

The two men awkwardly patted each other on the shoulder, as though they carried a long smoldering grudge, until Southerland forced a big happy smile.

"Henry," he mumbled while everyone else began to sit and attend to his drink.

The equally big happy smile Henry replied with was followed by an uncomfortable silence in which they both turned their heads to the side and coughed against their hands before taking their seats.

*

The creeping numbness soon reached Henry's chest. Chills ran up and down his spine followed by a surge of nausea, making it impossible for him to sit still. A hot sweat replaced the cold one covering his skin and, when he spoke, his face grew even paler. "Your best Scotch with a splash of soda for me and make it quick," he

told a passing waitress as though something had eluded him. After she gave a searching look into his upturned face and went away, he pressed his hands against his temples.

Chewing on his cigar, Rutherford sat back in his chair and spread his legs wide apart. "As I was saying. These liberal baby boomers as a class have put less emphasis on rules and more on self-esteem and are more permissive and non-judgmental whatever the hell that means. And now what do we have? I'll tell you what we have. The young work force of today is entirely disconnected, disaffected, materialistic, filled with a misplaced sense of entitlement and are flat-out spoiled."

Everyone uttered the contemptuous opinion of Today they'd been holding back in voices about twice the noise necessary:

"Order, exactitude and fairness is what we - "

"If you put me against the wall I'd say we are moving into a socialist concept where we tax the rich more than we do the poor!"

"Because what's equal to them is not equal to me I have to - "

"It's the bureaucratic system itself and how it is organized - Unions, boards, federal and state regulations, mandates, court orders. And these self-protective institutions - "

"We all have to be better than someone else. It's human nature. So why not us anyway?"

"All of these moral degenerates and their scandals are terribly fractious and turbulent for our society - "

"Where's my drink?" was Henry's belabored contribution. "Has anyone seen that damn waitress?"

"Ah gentlemen, gentlemen. The night's too young for this," the Governor intervened. Turning to Henry he said: "So how does it feel to be retired? - Though hopefully ever so briefly?"

"You wouldn't even believe what I had to put up with from my goddamned family today of all days," Henry poured forth. In the pause that ensued, he pushed his

glasses back up on his nose and fought to keep his big body from trembling then went on: "But enough of that. I'm probably just preaching to the choir anyway. I mean, you all must know how it is being married for over thirty years and have a teenage daughter, am I right or am I right or what?"

All of these narrow, isolated and elitist dirty rich sonsofbitches laughed along with Henry but Southerland, who shot him a quick dark look. Right then the waitress returned with Henry's highball.

"The only thing I know after forty-two years of marriage is that I'd like to have me some of that dark meat," Stephenson leered when she went away, eliciting another round of laughter.

Henry drank a mouthful of Scotch and lowered the glass before immediately taking another gulp. He felt better almost at once and, after coloring several shades and drying the perspiration lingering on his brow one more time, gazed at all his companions. By an effort of will he kept his attention focused, and it was as if he were seeing them with a fresh set of eyes.

They were loosening their dignified countenances by downing their drinks in good time.

"You know what happened yesterday?" asked Henry. "Some black woman slit the tires of sixteen police cruisers. And you know what for? Because she wanted to get - Now get this now! - Her G.E.D. Isn't that the damnedest thing you've ever heard or what?"

The Governor hastened to speak: "That behavior is endemic to those people and nothing they do ever surprises me. But seriously, though, Henry. Affirmative action is undemocratic. It's not very funny when you think about it."

"Indeed it's not," Hadley whined, wagging his finger so that it seemed like he wanted to get up and perambulate. "It's a euphemism for racial preferences and the classification of people into racial groups for the purpose of advantaging some and subsequently disadvantaging others on the basis of race. Granting preferences by race is inconsistent with the democratic principle that people are of equal worth and

should be treated as individuals, not as members of racial or ethnic groups. It's a misguided response to the fact - " There was no particular expression on his face until, after peering over and between everyone's head then over his own shoulders, he concluded with a grin of delight: " - To the fact that blacks and Hispanics are not as competitive as us whites. Affirmative action serves to deflect attention away from the fact that these people, as a group, are lazy. Less industrious, let's say."

The table lapsed into an impatient silence filled by coughing and rustling and surrounding conversations when a decidedly non-Caucasian waitress brought another round on a tray. She distributed them accordingly before going away.

"The most basic and incontrovertible objection to government distribution of advantage and disadvantage by race which is never heard in the liberal media is that it necessarily leads to the formation of racial and ethnic groups in legislatures and elsewhere for the purpose of seeking advantage over others," Stephenson said in a loud, fast voice full of emotion. Just the mere thought curled his upper lip in a fierce way. "In short, it's a prescription of racial consciousness, division and conflict. So now we, as a nation, are drifting toward mediocrity when we should be striving for greatness. Not only are they short-changing our future but they also seem to be abandoning hope for a viable multi-racial society which, I'm sure, everyone at this table desires!"

This was met by uproarious laughter.

After composing himself with a slug or three of booze, Henry spoke next: "I don't need to tell you all that I have a businessman's perspective and that my time in the private sector has taught me how important it is to make the most of our available resources. I think its necessary to bring this kind of common sense businessman's outlook to government, to make sure we spend taxpayer money responsibly and frugally." There was a significant pause, and then he opined: "It's these goddamned Democrats who represent the endless claims of social privilege that mark the underprivileged world. They are entirely to blame for the mess things are in now.

The way they go about business is entirely back assward. I think they think the poor have all the money and power, not the other way around."

"It's classic liberalism starting with an utter ignorance or total disregard of economics," Rutherford said with reflexive aversion, his unfounded self-righteousness turning his gravelly old man's voice shrill. He puffed on his cigar and, quick as a sigh, his expression vanished and his tone became solicitous. "You know, Henry. This makes me think about that Smart Growth fad kicking around. I believe urban policy should work to improve the efficiency of land markets and their ability to meet consumer demands. I have no idea what preserving the integrity of place and sense of community and all that crap means. But I do know that rather than demonizing land development, local efforts would be much more productive if turned to their own backyards."

"You said it," Henry agreed under the table's single appraising look, clenching his fingers around his glass so they wouldn't tremble.

"For example," Rutherford continued. "Zoning codes and infrastructure policies that would actually serve to mitigate the problems of urban sprawl instead of distorting the property markets and artificially encouraging development at the urban periphery. By preserving splotches of green space here and there, development will just leapfrog to other areas, placing even more strain on roads and infrastructure - "

"They call this Smart Growth?" Henry broke in. He and the Governor turned to each other and quipped in unison: "Sounds more like Dumb Growth to me!"

During this spate of whooping laughter, Henry and Southerland's eyes met over the table then gazed away fast. At that moment a waiter brought salads, which everyone eyed with grimaces of disgust before pushing away. Another waiter came bearing baked potatoes slathered with bacon and melted cheddar cheese. As soon as one was helped onto his plate, each of these cheerfully solemn men of affairs fell upon it like a half-starved child sucking bones.

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All the conversations swirling around were as predictable as the tides and limited to golf, women and cigars if they didn't concern politics and the perfidious threats to capitalism. Quite often there was an outburst of contempt for this piece of legislation or that judicial decision, obscuring the issue at hand in shades of gray catering to the few's palate. They were all old enough to have not only witnessed but had been in the right place at the right time during the past fifty some odd years of prosperity. And thus believed blindly in the heretofore irresistible force of today's so-called laissez faire world. Ah yes. These were the men who had no problem committing the same old sins of arrogance and excess handed down by their fathers and their fathers' fathers by guarding the invisible line to affluence the other two thirds was not allowed to cross. They knew with exactitude what suffering and sacrifice was all about, had a clear vision of opportunity, responsibility and community, and loved to hear their own views echoed back at them loudly and endlessly.

Yes indeed they did.

*

You can probably just imagine.

*

There was not a good inebriate amongst them and, about fifteen minutes of this droning twaddle later, their voices had risen to the point where they were shouting, although they were invariably in perfect agreement. Back at the table of honor, a glaze was now veiling Henry's eyes as he fought varying gradations of weariness and a rippling pain. Whatever was being said had become unreal and remote in his ears, and his expression began falling apart when a burning sensation filled his gut. Mired in this odd sort of detachment, sucking down air as if each breath were his last, his vision soon narrowed so that everything seemed like it were happening very far away. He managed to work up a listless smile and, although his

body shook of its own accord, shrug his shoulders in agreement every once in a while. His tongue felt thick, and he rolled it around in his mouth.

"Is it hot in here or what?" he quavered to no one in particular, loosening his collar and tie then mopping the sweat pouring freely down his face and neck.

"You don't look so good Henry. Are you all right?" someone out of his periphery murmured during another long-winded monologue. The question was repeated because it didn't look as if Henry understood.

"Oh . . . Just a little heartburn," he managed to gasp from the angle he was now cocked, thumping his chest and weakly coughing. "Must be something - Must be something I ate biting me on the ass." After laying his head on the back of his chair, he forced his attention to the task of listening, looking from speaker to speaker as if drawn by electromagnetic force. "That's right!" he exclaimed before joining in their laughter.

"I know that's funny but seriously though. Do you know how outrageous it is that the interests of millions of human beings are sacrificed for some allegedly endangered species? I mean, who the hell cares about a red-legged frog anyway?"

"I agree. It's incomprehensible to me that those shrill and self-righteous buffoons pushing that crap down our throats are portrayed as some kind of noble crusaders instead of the bullies and bigots they are."

"Bigots?" a clearly bewildered Henry asked, leaning his elbows onto the table and returning a faint semblance of the surrounding expressions.

"The essence of bigotry, Henry, is claiming for yourself rights that you would deny others. And that is exactly what those green bigots do all the time. People who don't give a shit, pardon my French, about - What was that thing you mentioned just now Pierpont?"

"Red-legged frog. It's holding up the development of much needed housing out east."

"These green bigots," continued Rutherford, turning back to Henry and opening his hands. "May be horrified that there are more than reasonable people who

don't give a shit pardon my French in the slightest about the red speckly legged branch mouse or anything else for that matter. But since us people are decidedly more American than those bigots, we deserve more protection under the Constitution."

"Green bigots. I like that. That's a good one," the Governor chimed in. "These green bigots claim to be speaking for future generations but they are only trying to make sure that future generations of green bigots will be able to override future generations of people who don't share their views."

Then Hadley added his two cents: "Fuzzy words and apocryphal visions are stock in trade for green bigots. They are always referring to fragile environments without any working definition of fragile much less any scientific evidence to buttress their claims. If I only were so lucky as that with my research. You wouldn't believe the amount of bureaucratic red tape I have to cut through every time I try to get funding and get something done right for once."

"I can just imagine."

"If you really could it would boggle your mind."

"Nothing in this country is like it used to be," said Henry in a very strained voice otherwise toneless. They all stared at him while he took off his glasses and wiped both eyes with the backs of his hands. He looked at everyone wildly and added: "Everything's gone rotten."

They stared at him a moment longer.

"What some consider idealism is more accurately self-exhaltation," Hadley said. "You cannot be a judge handing down edicts for others unless you are placing yourself above those others, especially when taking on the God-like role of adjudicating between animals and people. Who the heck do these green bigots think they are? God?"

"The time will come," Rutherford prophesied, leaning back and resting his hands on his belly, his whole posture suggesting satisfaction. "We'll be swamped by the lowest common denominator and where'll we be then? Huh?"

"I'd say that a new cult of pagan worship of nature has sprung up," Stephenson began. He had a certain flourish with words and clearly knew it. "And nature worship is fine for those who want it. Don't get me wrong. But a theocracy imposing its will on others is something else entirely, even when it is a theocracy of nature-worshippers, a.k.a. pony-tailed attitude problems!"

Everybody broke into laughter.

"These pinko environmental regulations are nothing but another form of wealth redistribution," Stephenson continued. "Don't you think Henry?"

Henry's head had drooped very far down, almost to the table, his hands now hanging between his knees. He jerked his bulk upright as if he'd been shot, blinking without pause. "I don't think that's quite right either," he heard himself say under their penetrating looks.

There was an astounded silence then, limbs akimbo, Stephenson leaned forward and, exhibiting a sharp attitude of arrogance, flared: "What? What do you mean not quite right? You either do or you don't. So let me get this straight. You think that preserving the environment rather than maximizing profit margins is actually a good thing?" Just the mere thought of this blasphemy almost raised him to his feet.

The air was heavy with reproof, and the entire table remained startled and angry. Several began to renounce him with acerbity until Henry gave a loud guffaw and roared: "Just kidding!"

They all laughed and laughed at this tremendous repartee but Southerland, who only ran his fingers through his hair, and the Governor, who rolled his eyes to the ceiling and heaved a sigh.

"I think that - " Henry's voice caught as the pain sunk its claws deeper into his chest and made its appearance in his face. And when he spoke next, he was largely incomprehensible. "Why . . . I would blindly support the Governor entirely in his veto of course. Those regulations do nothing but undo all of our . . . All of our hard work."

Visibly dazed with relief, the Governor squinted at the index card cupped in his hand before summoning a confident smile to his lips. "ShowTime," he said, arising. He beamed his most photogenic smile out to his audience and extended his arms wide, eliciting an adoring ovation.

Although he felt even worse than he looked, Henry had no choice whatsoever but to stand and clap with everyone else. His whole body heaving with the effort, he drew himself up straight by leaning heavily against the table. A searing pain shot up and down his legs with incredible quickness, intermingling with everything he saw and heard, making his fillings sing. Sweat began pouring freely down his face coloring in startling increments, darkening his jacket's armpits and back even more. Then a series of differing expressions coursed through his face, which had by now reached a deep purplish red.

When the Governor turned and, in all his pomp and glory, installed himself behind the podium just like it had been his comfortable and secluded exurban lifestyle, the applause showering all around redoubled in intensity. He made embarrassed gestures for order with both hands until it diminished then ceased and the entire crowd had retaken their seats. A murmuring, rustling silence assumed its control over the proceedings as he cleared his throat, gulped a mouthful of water, and then tapped the microphone.

"Thank you all for joining me in celebrating such a festive, well-deserved occasion. But while this is a time to commemorate our very own Henry Johnson - Whose work-ethic, dignity, integrity and simple values I admire - And his retirement from the private sector, it is also a time to discuss some of the harsh realities all of us must face on a day to day basis. Toward this end, we must expose the propaganda and one-dimensional perspective about the environment that would delight a teacher in a Communist classroom. These so-called environmentalists, green bigots if you will, are using rhetoric to cloak agendas like class warfare and anti-corporatism that, in fact, have nothing to do with ecology. No, these people aren't just environmentalists. At the core they are socialists and the general public needs to

wake up and realize that there is a hidden redistribution of wealth agenda behind their green cloak of environmentalism."

The audience greeted the summation of these words with an executive enthusiasm while Henry grit his teeth as an infernally rushing agony gripped his innards. He began trembling so violently he could hardly retain his seat, and his vision narrowed then widened before narrowing and widening over and over again. He forced himself to listen for a moment, but then his mind was simply picked up and carried away.

Lowering his voice a notch or two, the Governor went on, making firm and forthright gestures in the air if he wasn't pounding his hand against the podium:

"Interest groups pressure spineless politicians into voting for things that have little or no effect on the environment but only increase the fundraising capabilities of such groups. The environmental lobby controls almost all of the media, as do many other liberal perspectives - "

"Here here!" more than several in the peanut gallery exclaimed.

" - And it is a testimony to the power of our - Yours and mine! - Collective search for the truth that the most reliable estimates show that restrictions on greenhouse gases, for example, would prevent a rise in global temperature by only a fraction of a degree. Is this worth the potential high cost of trillions of dollars and a radically altered lifestyle?

"The answer is obvious, and it is going to take years of different educational and societal objectives to cleanse our systems of the intellectual and moral impurities that are now accepted as truth!" He took a step away from the podium, where he raised his hands and nodded until the adulation ceased washing over him. "This evening's truly august occasion marks the commencement of our effort to win this War of Morality - " Something in the Governor's face moved toward complete disgust. "What the hell is the meaning of this?" he wondered. "This is an absolute outrage!" At first the room grew deathly still, but then the Macarena loudly replaced

the uplifting melody of Muzak drifting about and all of these upstanding pillars of society broke into a lasciviously trembling noise all at once.

The pain's concentrated fury was now seething through Henry's body, swathing his vision in a burning red haze, leaving him hollowly agape. When he could finally pry his eyes away from the Governor and glance askew at all of the faces flowing together, a large star spangled cake was looming ever larger down the center aisle before stopping. Then the top of the cake popped off, and a shimmering sylphlike figure emerged with an alluringly possessable grace to a guttural cacophony of hooting and hollering.

Her generous mouth was frozen in an elaborate pout and, even under the harsh fluorescent lighting, her bare flesh seemed like sun-filled clouds. Raising her arms slowly to the heaven's above, she exposed the pliant roundness of her high-arched breasts dabbed by star spangled frosting. And then she began to sway and gyrate those marvelous hips.

Henry beheld his own daughter in a wild stupefaction that soon became an overwhelmingly fierce emotion. "Debbie!" he cried out twice, soundlessly. Choking, he lurched to his feet, which staggered him several steps onto the red carpet as if of their own volition. Pain zigzagged all the way up his legs and down his arms, searing into his heart. Everything around him dipped then fell a great distance away. He pitched forward, spinning around like a rudderless barge before landing heavily against the floor. Where he lay stretched out, unmoving except for one foot, which was twitching. His upturned eyes became two glassy black windows reflecting his daughter, her arms frozen akimbo over her head, her skin now puckered by the all encompassing chill.

Right when the Macarena ground to a halt, Debbie let out a deep shuddering gasp. And then, ripping her beauty to shreds with her fingernails, she shrieked so powerfully that the sound blurred for too many seconds to count, becoming nothing yet everything beyond far away and into some desolate place.

# 5

## Beyond the Lace Curtains

It had just stopped raining, and the smell of oily pavement drying mixed with the sodden fumes of exhaust was clinging to everything. The air itself, heavy and stale, like it had been breathed once too often. Fast dwindling clouds swept across the morning sun, sending diaphanous swirls of light through all these narrow concrete valleys. An old Italian woman leaned out a window and began shouting for someone name Vinnie, joining the other sounds of the awaking city wafting over the flat roofs of old warehouses converted into scores upon scores of apartments slapped together just good enough to house the other half. Inside a room in one of these apartments, you wouldn't have been able to tell if it was morning or night except for the dim glow of natural light emanating from the window set high up in the wall. This room is so small, so cramped, that it doesn't take long at all to find Sandra, who is scarcely distinguishable from the formless expanse of darkness:

Fast asleep on her disarranged futon in the far corner, every once in a while she twisted the thin white sheet up under her chin, exposing her long supple legs more and more. She was wearing a wrinkled T-shirt that clung to her hips, and her black lace panties were twined around the delicate curve of one ankle. Her hair was long and thick and raven black. Although her features can hardly be discerned in the gloom, she looked peaceful and relaxed. And, as an expression of bliss came into her face, her mouth fell open and softly she began to snore. After an indefinable length of time, an electric alarm clock began screeching from somewhere, incessantly and tonelessly. But Sandra remained motionless for many minutes.

Then, with a sudden start, she rolled over into a damp spot and began groping blearily through the tangled pile of clothes closest to the pillow. She fumbled around and, since she couldn’t figure its buttons out, she found its cord and disconnected it

from the wall with a couple of yanks, falling immediately back to sleep with a shuddering sigh of relief. A melancholy sunlight entered through the grimy windowpanes, dissolving the damp chill and throwing a strange shadow over the corner of the room she spent hours and hours lying in the same position.

She couldn't even afford the luxury of a frame for her comfortless futon mattress, so it was placed directly on the floor. There was no other furniture in the room except for a battered dresser and an ottoman. Between these two objects was a French door, which looked like it had been sawed vertically in half. The wall not covered by the replicas of ancient Indian-print tapestries was rotted and, as the room grew hotter, it also acquired a lingering soupcon of mildew. Books, clothes, loose-leaf paper covered by random, hastily jotted sentences and marked-up scripts were strewn all over the floor. At first you would think Sandra was desperately sad, but what delicate changes passed over her heart-shaped face as the sunlight crept steadily down the wall and across the floor, chasing away the shadows to the far corners of her room.

Her expressive blue eyes fluttered temporarily open, and she rolled over onto her stomach and let them fall closed, dreaming of fresh air and open spaces and charging down her childhood beach to the sea. Perspiration plastered her hair to her face and molded the white T-shirt to the contours of her back, and she began tossing and turning, from one side to another and then onto her side before extirpating herself entirely from the damp tangled sheet's languid sense of security. Still in the clutches of sleep however, she put her head between two pillows and rolled away until she came up against the wall. Now muttering incoherent sounds under her breath in an oddly persistent manner, she seemed immersed in something between deep thought and heavy slumber.

In vain Sandra pressed her eyelids tight and held her breath for what seemed like an eternity, but the combination of heat and light was far too intrusive. She sat up with a visible lack of enthusiasm and folded her thin arms around her knees, her hair still covering her face. As soon as she opened her eyes, kaleidoscope

hallucinations of light pierced her being and, wincing, she put her fingertips to her head. She emitted a feeble, helpless moan and began rubbing her temples and the bridge of her nose with a circular motion of her thumbs.

"I must've had a blast if I can't remember last night," she said, weakly but audibly, giving an abject little smile. After casting a searching gaze round the room, one could tell she was genuinely happy not only that the place night caught up with her happened to be her own but also that no one else was in it.

Sandra's pretty eyes and face were puffy and red from a pounding hangover, sharpening her prematurely cynical point of view. Her body felt dull and lifeless from fighting steady waves of nausea, and she became so faint that she needed another glimpse in the mirror to recognize herself. When she yawned, her face turned into something terrible. Twisting around on the futon, stretching the limits of her back and limbs, she practiced denying her existence, but quickly she found she couldn't concentrate and collapsed onto her back with a miserable groan. She reached for the package of cigarettes lying on a pile of books with unsteady hands, as though they were unused to tasks of any kind.

After shaking the dying fumes of a lighter several times, she managed to produce a flame and get her cigarette lit. Embracing her knees, she took several methodical drags while the expression on her face went from miserable to merely despairing as the smoke killed the taste of stale bourbon loitering in her mouth. She smoked it down to the filter, wet her fingers, and pinched it out before returning it to the package along with the lighter, all of which she crumpled into a ball and tossed under the antique ottoman her grandmother secretly left her. On her skin stood tiny beads of perspiration, and everywhere the smoke drifted, it mingled with humidity.

Dark and nubile, Sandra stumbled unsteadily to her feet, scratching at the hair sticking up on the back of her head, disappearing through the French door as if she were loath to leave the room. In a while, the sound of a toilet flushing came through the distance and, a few seconds later, she returned to her room in a hurry, looking back over her shoulder as though she were being followed. After shutting the door

silently behind her, she stood still a moment, listening very hard, and then her chest began heaving for breath.

Crossing the room now, she went to the window. The tall building across the way was built of weathered brick, concrete and steel. It made her view of the cloudless blue sky high and narrow. Stretching to her fullest, she opened the window as far as she could. Into the quietness of the room was woven the sound of all kinds of traffic soughing up First Avenue, reminding her of the press of everyday affairs, and she began biting her lower lip out of shape.

Although she was still a bit enervated by the traffic's rude intrusion, Sandra became almost happy, and she gave a soft sighing smile. After turning away from the window, she rummaged through her messy room without any apparent aim or object, her small round breasts swinging and swelling freely. Whenever she bent over to rifle through some clothes or well-thumbed scripts and paper strewn all over the floor, her T-shirt ascended to her waist, revealing the creamy flesh of the most upper reaches of her thighs. But if there were a camera, it would have been seduced by the slim width of her shoulders and the rhythmic sway of her hips.

The first thing she found was a plastic cup partly filled with the amber dregs of a day old drink, and then she found a bottle of aspirin. She squinted into the cup to make sure there was nothing else in it before popping four of them into her mouth. Making a face, she swallowed the little fuckers with the warm liquid, almost retching. Now frowning at her pale arms and legs, she made a little stack with three four books at the foot of her futon and put the cup down on it so she could tap her ashes into it while getting a little sun. After rummaging around the room some more, she found another package of cigarettes and a matchbook in her purse then flopped into a large rectangle of sunlight.

Half on the bed and half on the floor, she propped her feet up on the wall, stretched the exquisite perfection that were her legs all the way out and crossed them at the ankle. Her whole body soon became covered by a light sheen of moisture, and she idly picked at the down on her upper thighs where it began to accumulate.

It's only going to get warmer, Sandra thought and, although she wasn't looking at anything in particular, it appeared that she was listening unusually hard for something.

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Carrying her oversized purse in one hand and her ticket in the other, Marilyn was among the first passengers to come on board the plane. She made her way up the aisle, sideways when necessary, until she attained her seat. At once, the brilliant glare of the sun reflecting off the tarmac caught her vision in its fierce embrace. Even when squinting hard she could scarcely discern the unsettling level of activity under the wing. Whatever it was that this woman began thinking, it must have been unpleasant because she was now trembling, as though her entire body had gone cold. She used the hand still holding her purse to shield her eyes and, as soon as she could tell for sure that it was a crew of mechanics puttering around one of the engines, it looked like her worst fears were being realized, especially when both of her hands flew to her gasping mouth.

Recoiling from the window, she twisted around in her seat and grabbed the arm of a passing flight attendant. "What's wrong with the plane?"

The young girl paused in the middle of the aisle and looked down at the passenger holding onto her arm. "May I have that back, please?" she asked brightly but firmly, shaking her arm free and taking a step back.

"What's wrong with the plane?" asked Marilyn, this time with the wobbling lift of anxiety in her voice. "The plane?" When her eyes grew wide with terror, the flight attendant stepped back and braced herself for yet another delirious episode.

"They're fixing the engine now - "

"But we can't be late!" she interrupted, half-rising from her seat.

Another flight attendant materialized in the aisle. "Come on now, Jean. You know better than to dawdle on the job," she ordered in an officious manner, guiding her younger colleague toward the rear of the cabin. "We'll be up and running in no

time, ma'am, 'kay? So just sit back, buckle up and be patient now, 'kay?" she added over her shoulder.

At this pleasant little rebuke, Marilyn's mouth fell open, and her forehead wrinkled in a bewildered sort of way. Not one word occurred to her the entire time she watched the two flight attendants' movements as they obviously began conversing about her in hushed tones. Before long, she became aware of an uneasy pause in the surrounding passengers' low chatter, and then she realized that she was the reason for it. Her cheeks now flushing with a confused embarrassment, she tittered slightly from nervous reaction before dropping all the way back in her seat with a deep fluttering sigh. She slid the plastic shade down over most of the window's view after taking another look outside and then buckled up her seatbelt, watching as more passengers filed on board.

The entire cabin soon became awash in the noise of people settling down for a long flight, and she glanced nervously at her watch. A quarter to three. After resisting the urge to call off all her plans simple as that and get off the plane before it was too late by clenching the armrests tight, she apparently didn't know what else to do with her hands, so she took a compact out of her purse. And then, using its little oval looking glass, she scrutinized every one of the dark Mediterranean features of her face, which had once been so bright and full of happiness but was now only worn by age and blotchy from a chronic case of emotional distress.

She applied a dab of rouge to each cheek and began retouching her eyeliner and lipstick. With the bated breath of someone compelled by the overwhelming force of habit to wonder if the cute and employed single man of her dreams would occupy the empty seat beside her, she glanced from face to happy face every time someone came straggling on board.

Her always-startled blue eyes were as deep as the sea and her black shoulder length hair had been recently and expensively coifed. Despite the ongoing application of make-up, the wrinkled skin around her eyes still retained the dull undertones of defeat. Sighing long and loud, she fiddled around with her bangs for a

while before giving up and letting them fall where they may. Venting a strong air of distaste with another long sigh, she snapped her compact closed, putting it away in her purse, which she then tucked under the seat ahead of her like she never ever wanted to see her reflection again. Feeling as big as a hippo even though, in her heart of hearts, she knew that she still rested on the more pleasant side of plump, she sat back in her seat and began fidgeting around with the way her clothes fit.

Now wringing her pretty hands, she glanced at her watch five or six times in as many minutes before a rising sense of complete and utter futility intervened. While reveling in this unexpected flow of tranquility, there was a lull in her mind, a lull shattered by the observation that a passenger hadn't boarded in some time, and that the seat beside her was still empty. Although she seemed preoccupied by something else entirely, she just sat there, watching as the cute but, according to the man behind her, surely gay flight attendant minced his way past her row to the front of the cabin, where he busily began preparing for the impending flight. Before he could fully close the door, an untidy overweight man came huffing and puffing on board carrying a YMCA duffel bag over each shoulder.

As soon as Marilyn lay her shiny round eyes on him, a slight panic seized her limbs. She began to resign herself to the fact that this was the fat middle-aged man with a comb-over destined to fill today's empty seat beside her, and yet again she had to resist the temptation of grabbing her purse and fleeing. His jowly face was beaded with perspiration and almost purple with blood. His armpits and chest were dark with sweat, and when he turned to one of the flight attendants and apparently told her something meant to be funny, she could see that his back was, too. Stifling the groan rising in her throat as best she could, she shifted around in her seat and put up the plastic window shade.

Shielding her eyes against the bright glare, she saw that the number of mechanics milling about the engine had doubled in size. When she looked back toward the front of the cabin, he was still lumbering up the aisle. After looking at his ticket and then round all the anxious and impatient faces in the nearly full cabin, his

gaze zeroed in on the seat next to the one on which she sat. Referring quickly to his ticket again, he ascertained that it must be his, and then he regarded her for a timeless interval.

Under this increasing amount of interest beaming in her direction, a gloom descended on Marilyn and, staring at him hard, her face colored just before palling. The closer he got, the more the sloppy grin plastered across his face became picturesque. Her eyes darted around to and fro, and she pretended not to see him until he was quite close.

"Afternoonin'," this immense man cried out like he was entering a room full of friends, tipping an imaginary cap toward her and winking.

Very much taken aback, she bent her head and compressed her lips so that her face was unrecognizable. The "good afternoon" she mumbled was lost in a gale of screaming babies somewhere close by, and he cocked his head and gave her an oddly cheerful smile while stretching up and opening the overhead bin. The front of his shirt came untucked and, when she caught a glimpse of his immense hairy belly jiggling around like that, she adopted an expression of unmitigated horror. Repressing the momentary urge to vomit, she couldn't help but watch as he dropped a couple of pillows onto his seat and then jammed the other duffel bag into the almost full space with a considerable amount of time-consuming effort.

Breathing rather heavily now, he collapsed onto his seat and, lifting each ass cheek in turn, arranged the pillows so they supported the small of his back. While wrenching loose his tie and pulling his sweat-dampened shirt away from his heaving rotund torso, he reacquired his air of joviality and boldly examined her up and down before offering her his glistening hand. She flushed to her ears and pulled away in her seat with cold detestation.

"Luther," he informed her. Although right at this precise moment she looked exactly like someone engulfed by a torrent of rain, he didn't notice any alteration in her manner. Leaning closer and still extending his hand, he peered directly into her face while waiting for her reply. During the awkward silence that ensued, the tip of

his tongue poked out between his slightly parted teeth and licked his protruding upper lip. Then, since to Luther the woman sitting next to him only seemed confused, he shrugged and, giving her the benefit of the doubt, said in the same amiable fashion: "My name is Luther. Luther Wright. Pleasedtameetcha."

This time Marilyn managed to dodge his sweaty hand by giving him one of her patented curt smile and nod combinations and reaching under the seat for her purse. Clutching it to her chest, she settled back uncomfortably into her seat, where she pretended to carefully listen to the pre-flight instructions come crackling through the speakers by making sure her seat was all the way upright and that her seatbelt was properly buckled. When the flight attendant, who - the man behind her noted - spoke with a lisp, signed off, she was at a loss for things to do, so she began rummaging around in her purse.

From Luther's point of view, she only appeared more mystified than ever. About what, he had no idea. "Do you think they serve stuff on this flight?" he inquired with an exaggerated amount of feeling, giving her a sidelong glance.

Overcome by an irrational dread, here for Marilyn was a cold, dark place, and she hunched her shoulders before averting her full attention from the contents of her purse to the whirl of activity under the wing. With an increasingly agitated expression on her face, every couple of moments she would wonder what was taking them so damn long to takeoff and look at her watch. Soon she seemed near tears, as though all her hopes had been suddenly and profoundly dashed. The general hum of complaining all around her quickly grew into a babble of reproach, and when the captain informed everyone of the minor mechanical difficulty one of the engines was experiencing, he signed off to an angry chorus of disapproval.

"Them's the breaks," Luther told her, opening his hands and shrugging.

Marilyn took a rolled up magazine from her purse and, trying to keep custody of her eyes, began flipping idly through it.

Whenever he looked away, she looked at him, and whenever he looked at her, she looked someplace else. The preoccupied apathy on her face contrasted

disagreeably with the unmitigated joy on his. Twenty some odd minutes passed like this before their stolen glances finally met, and they gazed at each other in rising perplexity for a long moment.

She had never flown much in her life, never could afford to, really. But rumor had it that some people simply couldn't shut their mouths in situations like these and, although she hastily withdrew her eyes from his, she realized it was far too late to draw back entirely. Holding both her magazine and purse close to her, she watched as this man beside her became visibly excited by the hope that she was now showing real interest in him for the first time. What she expected the outcome of this to be she hardly knew.

"I wonder what they're gonna be servin' because I hope they're servin' somethin' soon because I'm starvin'," he told her, speaking with a great amount of gesticulation now at this, their moment of reconciliation. "How 'bout you? Hungry?"

Marilyn made a face. Rumor was right, she concluded, observing as he grasped a roll of belly in each hand and began kneading them together. Her anxiety began contending with a disgusted kind of anger, and she allowed his questions to pass unheeded by regarding him with what she hoped was her most disconcerting stare.

She refused to fall into any of the other lines of conversation he proposed and a silence fell between them, a silence only broken by the impatient cries of children of all ages. Her seatmate looked stubborn and embarrassed, but he finally took her hint and turned away, leaving her alone. Then he joined the general din by covering his nose with a handkerchief and loudly clearing his sinuses. As the plane started taxiing across the wide length of tarmac, he took out a little spiral notebook, clicked open a ballpoint pen against the side of his head and began doodling.

*

How lovely Marilyn looked when, pressing her forehead against the cool peaceful weariness of the plastic window, she watched as the earth dwindled then

disappeared under a thick layer of bright fluffy clouds. The whole blue vastness was clear and full of glorious sunlight, and her face held the expression of someone awash in the kind of thoughts that usually come when one is awaiting daylight but, as the years passed, they became more and more frequent.

She made a pretty picture.

*

The summer rains had just lifted, and the hot muggy days were beginning to cool. It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was no longer strong in the sky. The sound of roosting birds blew in on a soft breeze through a grove of trees and over a rolling expanse of lawn heavy from the morning's scattered showers to a grand nineteenth century mansion aspiring to be an Italianate villa. A man named William could be found in the last and largest of its bedrooms.

He was wearing nothing but black socks pulled up over his calves and a pair of white boxer shorts. One of those nattering cable news programs was on the television, and he watched it with an air of distaste as he lay on the rumpled bed covers with his back against the headboard like he hadn't moved from the spot in hours. He idly flipped through the financial overviews of German telecommunications companies his mutual fund manager had just purchased and, as the minutes passed, the discussion among the punditry made him increasingly agitated, and he began shaking his head and sputtering to himself aloud.

"Those goddamned Clintons," was one thing that could be clearly discerned. And "they should be shipped back to Arkansas and either be locked up or put down like dogs nevermind even thinking about running for another office. Senator. Thank the Almighty Lord at least that that dirty bitch's not my goddamned *president* anymore!" was another thing he snorted. His agitation became an apparent disgust and, at the very next commercial, he dropped the pile of company evaluations on his nightstand and turned off the television with the universal remote before getting out of bed and stretching.

William had done well under Reagan, thank you very much. Especially after his old man died, leaving his only son his entire estate. As far as he was concerned, the country had only gone to hell in a handbasket under that . . . nigger-loving sleazeball Clinton character. "Pardoning all those people like that then running off and hiding in Harlem of all the places. It's like, like kicking the country in the balls while it's down," he muttered to himself under his breath. "And now to top it all off they're practically my neighbors for God's sake!

"This country and its . . . its, sense of entitlement, prospering from the, the labor of others without culpability for their for their actions, its fucking unbelievable . . ."

When the faint sound of a distant television crept to his ears and disrupted his thoughts, he stopped stretching and cocked his head to the side. He took off his reading glasses and, now crossing the room to an open door, pinched the bridge of his nose until he reached the bathroom, which is when he looked up and into the mirror above the gleaming marble sink. His face was big and hard and square, and his thinning black hair was peppered with gray at the temples and freshly shaved at the back of his neck. He also had a hairy, well-developed chest, and his dark skin glowed with a ruddy good health, giving him the sporty yet relaxed look of a Dedicated Golfer. Although his stomach was becoming swollen by flab, he worked against the passage of time four mornings a week at the First Mercantile Bank's corporate gym downtown, so he still retained the outward appearance of a very handsome man.

Continuing to admire his own reflection, he turned on the faucet. And, while waiting for the water to get hot, he noticed that the individual rays of sun filtering through the opaque window were being brilliantly refracted by the edges of the mirror, so he flipped the switch for the overhead incandescent light, sucking the color of life out of everything. No matter how hard he tried to ignore the far-away droning of the television, it insisted on intruding itself into his awareness, and periodically he put his fingertips to his temples as though he had a nagging headache. Soon his jaws clenched together at the molars, turning his arrogant sneer into an angry frown.

He had long ago come to loathe the woman he had married, and he hated to be reminded of her existence.

The cords of muscle in his already thick neck bunched and, suddenly whirling around, he kicked the door shut and turned back to the mirror, all in one motion. He began running his hands through his hair, and then he played with each of his fingers until all of his knuckles popped like firecrackers and the water was steaming hot. He realized that his reflection was becoming increasingly clouded and distorted and, after splashing his face with water a few times, he cleared most of the moisture clinging to the mirror away with the edge of his hand before opening the medicine chest and taking out his leather shaving kit. He lathered some shaving cream onto his face and throat and started shaving his five o'clock shadow away with a disposable razor. Ever few moments, he tapped the razor against the side of the basin and then wiped away the steam that the mirror had accumulated.

As soon as he finished shaving, he shot the razor at a wicker garbage basket, missing badly. Although it looked like he was thinking of picking it up as he watched it skitter along the tiled floor before coming to a rest behind the toilet, the thought never even passed through his mind. Instead, he replaced the little shaving cream container and the remaining disposable razors where they belonged in his leather shaving kit. Zipping it closed, he put it down on the marble sink next to his reading glasses and tapped it three times, as though he were afraid of forgetting it. And then he reopened the medicine chest and rummaged around while thinking about the phone call he received a couple of weeks ago from the old flame he was meeting tonight.

William had been divorced twice, and he had drifted in and out of any number of relationships and love affairs and more than his fair share of one night stands, and these calls from the depths of his past occurred not too infrequently. Needless to say, he had grown quite fond of the torrid little trysts that almost invariably resulted. Tonight's name was Marilyn. He found the plastic prescription bottle labeled "Amoxicillin" he was looking for and snapped his fingers a few times. "Parsons? Parker? Parkinson?"

Marilyn, though, of that he was sure.

He put two little blue Viagras into his mouth and, with a grimace and a little effort, he swallowed them dry before sticking out his chest and thumping it with both fists. After a few moments he realized how ridiculous he looked all covered by little stray hairs and streaks of shaving cream, so he cupped his hands together and began splashing the steaming hot water all over his face and neck and chest. In the early 80s, he had matriculated to the UCLA business school, which is where he met that Steven, who introduced him to Marilyn at a bar on the boardwalk in Venice Beach. She was just the way he liked 'em: Tall and dark haired with a little wiggle when she walked. He also remembered that she was from outside of San Diego or L.A. or somewhere, and then he remembered that she was a pretty good lay.

He adjusted the tap so that the water became cold. "But she wasn't *that* good of a lay," William said to himself aloud as, turning his torso this way and that, he admired his reflection in the mirror. Then he recalled that she always struck his bell of - of irritability, gazing into his eyes and smiling at this poetic foray into poetry of his. When he bent his head back toward the faucet, the play of light and darkness cast by the harsh incandescent light overhead made his face appear sallow, pinched and drawn.

Marilyn was too . . . abrupt? No, methodical was the word he would use to describe her in the sack, mainly because most of the time he could tell that she was only pretending to enjoy what he was giving her. Sometimes, after had rolled off of her, she would even start sobbing uncontrollably. At first, he actually made an effort to comfort her, but when these post-coital fits began to occur more and more frequently, he soon grew bored, which is when he got the hell out of there, and fast. He had no time for that sort of bullshit.

No time at all.

This man lifted his head, which was dripping wet, from under the stream of water and reached blindly for one of the neatly folded fluffy towels hanging on the wall behind him, knocking one to the floor in the process. He wiped his face dry with

a towel and then, again gazing deeply into his eyes, he took deep methodical breaths until his body lost its flush. Although in the dark extremities of his unconsciousness he knew that he had done Marilyn and hundreds just like her wrong, he occasionally chuckled at his own unspoken thoughts while he finished drying himself and then began brushing his teeth.

In a while, he put down the toothbrush, hacked several times and spit prodigiously into the basin before rinsing out his mouth with some cold water and turning off the tap.

Now rubbing some moisturizer all over his body, William stepped back from the mirror and admired himself from head to waist every once in a while. He slapped on enough cologne to make your nose fall off, picked up his shaving kit and, on his way out of the bathroom, winked over his shoulder at his reflection, smiling when it winked back.

After tossing the shaving kit onto the bureau next to his watch, keys and wallet, he stopped mid-stride and cocked his head to the side: If he listened carefully, he could hear that bitch's television filling the silence, and the smile drained from his face. As he disappeared into his walk-in closet, he began humming "Uptown Girl" a bit out of tune.

*

Sandra spent a long time gazing out the window, unmoving except for smoking cigarette after cigarette. The sound of trains underground floated thin on the air whenever they passed by, and she closed her eyes and imagined she could feel its vibration tingling all over her body. But for white specks drifting through the rays of sunlight, there was a brief moment of perfect stillness, and the silence of enchantment reigned. She wrinkled her cute little nose when she smelled the fecund odor of mold built into the walls, and she began to hear this morning's rainwater dripping down the drainpipes.

The sound of birds was so faint that she wondered aloud if she was imagining them in a voice so soft, it was as though each word had been untouched by any breath of human misery. She thoroughly enjoyed her most recent cigarette while idly concentrating on the smoke twisting from her fingers and drifting in the still air. Some of it became a vertigo of delight when it strayed among her flowing black hair streaming out beside her. And then she gazed beyond the iron fire escape at the sliver of blue sky visible through the window as though she were searching for something that wasn't there, could never be there, never be there for her.

At length she heard the dull staccato sound of her most recent roommate plodding heavily around the apartment on her collapsed arches. When she turned on the shower, Sandra angrily stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette before just as angrily lighting another and, after smoking two more, she finally decided to paint her toenails and fingernails a red deep enough to reveal her mood. She continued listening to her stomping up and down the adjacent room, yawning extravagantly, turning on the television, turning off the television.

Sandra was fain to press her fingers to her ears to keep this all too disagreeable noise out, and whenever the resounding steps came close to the door, she gave a deep resigned groan and sighed. Although at first it sounded like her roommate was on the phone, she was actually having one hell of a conversation with herself. Once in a while she broke out with a delighted exclamation followed by the sound of someone dancing up and down in one place, which was accompanied by an insolent kind of shrieking laughter.

"Oh Patricia . . . Sandra?" came a voice just outside the door.

Wincing, Sandra made no reply, and her roommate lapsed into silence for a bit before trudging away. Her eyes went sharp and narrow as she followed her with her thoughts for a while: She didn't like her roommate plain and simple, but this was the only apartment she could afford, and she wasn't about to experience another long stretch of couch surfing. Two little teardrops glistened in each eye, and her skin began glowing with a divine radiance in the sunlight. She tried to restrain the morose

and gloomy feeling beginning to work in her heart, wringing out of it every drop of blood, clouding her nascent joy. She clenched her mouth around a fresh cigarette to stop her teeth from grinding, lighting it with a trembling hand before watching the guttering flame singe her fingertips through a cloud of smoke until it became unbearable, forcing her to make it hiss in the plastic cup.

The sun pricked her freshly burnt skin with little needles, and she looked up out the window and lost herself in the pain until she was once again convinced that there was nothing else in the world but that opaque sliver of blueness. Sunlight shone majestically through the haze and glittered along the moisture evaporating on the fire escape and across the grimy windowpanes into her room. There was not enough of a breeze to stir the forgotten cigarette's smoke now, and it rose perpendicularly to where the shadows were already repossessing the highest reaches of the room.

Insects had discovered the open window, and they flew in and out and around her head. Every once in a while she shooed one away with a flick of her wrist, but even this exertion caused her to perspire, so she didn't do it any more. After lifting her arms and pausing them mid-air, she let them relax in any posture they chose, reveling in this occasion of unhampered reverie. The vast scenery was unchanging except when sunlight winked off an airplane in the distance, now visible, now disappearing.

Sandra had been lying like this for some time when she became aware of something nibbling at the edges of her consciousness. Right then a fresh breeze played across her legs, bringing a fresh taste of rain on the air, stirring the entire muggy atmosphere and the strips of white fluffy clouds. A billowing tapestry tickled her arm and leg, and a flock of pigeons took wing and quickly disappeared when thunder rumbled through the darkening heavens. That odd feeling, almost like something unusual was afoot, that she couldn't quite explain, returned, pervading every sense. And from that moment on she had no peace, and her eyes oscillated as though she were frantically searching for it everywhere. Her face grew tense at the

temples and jaw, flattening her whimsical smile into a dull thin line unbroken except for when she sighed.

The gathering clouds massed up in the sky and obscured the sun, muting the light it poured through the window. Many sounds came from far away.

It felt like the room was suddenly sinking under a heavy weight, and Sandra appeared hideously lonely. She took a deep drag off her cigarette, but it had already snuffed itself out, and she let it fall from her fingers before lighting another and gazing about the room in a sort of daze: No matter how many times she'd moved during her life, her rooms were always cramped and messy and, more often than not, decidedly down-at-the-heel. Most were in apartments, one or two in actual houses and then the one before this, the one she shared for over seven years with her dead grandmother's sewing machine, the one her mother simply refused to throw away. It was while lingering in this room that her mother barged in and screamed "for the last time young lady, clean this godforsaken rat's nest!"

Staring now as though she was destroying all the images before her mind's eye, Sandra's torso jerked with a start and her legs almost fell to the floor. Although she fought hard to keep her increasingly anxious thoughts away, they began to weave themselves together until they overcame her with a feeling of vertigo and utter helplessness for today, she suddenly realized, was the day her mother was coming into town for some goddamned fool reason.

"We need to talk" rang ominously through the cold void of her consciousness although, deep in her heart, she knew their "little visit" would probably only amount to any number of lines of psychoanalytic bullshit. A wave of bitter emptiness now roiled her emotions, and she opened her eyes, passing her hands before them a couple of times then leaving them there, imagining that the entire world was about to collapse around her ears.

*

Three quarters of an hour passed, during which Luther just sat there like a sack of potatoes, staring down the aisle at the activity passing before the closed cockpit door until the flight attendant came rattling to a stop at their row. Still abstracted, Marilyn waved away his offer of something to drink and a snack and then allowed her attention to be reabsorbed by whatever was out the window.

And Luther?

Why, he availed himself of a Diet Coke and not only his bag of snack mix but hers as well. Soon the flight attendant towed the refreshment cart further down the aisle, leaving them alone once more. He poured the entire contents of both bags into the palm of one hand and then, holding the snack mix like a man in prayer, began eating them with an air of contented luxury.

Only after swallowing over half his Diet Coke in a gulp and snuffling up all the peanut dust remaining in each of the little bags did he summon enough courage to speak to her again. "So where ya goin'?" he asked the back of her head in a shy voice, shifting his bulk in her direction. After some length of time, he repeated his question, but in a louder voice.

Since his hot moist breath came so close to her left ear, Marilyn could tell that, in addition to snack mix, he had probably stopped for a hot dog or three right before the flight, too. As if in a daze, she brushed at the nape of her neck until she no longer felt his presence. Whatever she thought when she looked at her watch startled her to such an extent that her face mottled, and soon she was on the verge of tears. In this uncomfortable interval, her resistance seemed to crumble. Her brow darkened as her face took on its most despairing look, and she took a deep shuddering breath.

While slowly releasing it, she came to the conclusion that she simply couldn't bring herself to be entirely insensitive. "Guess," she said, rather shortly, with another fleeting glance at her watch.

The jowls of his face went vague and quizzical. "New York?" he asked in an accordingly altered voice, scratching at the back of his neck.

Although she made an effort to summon a grin to her face, it was so wan and unconvincing that it couldn't even begin to mask the expression of anxious distaste lingering all over her face. She made no comment but, since she nodded before flipping back through the pages of her magazine, Luther must have thought she was only at a loss for words.

"Say, that's where I'm going to too." There was another pause, after which he cheerfully lapsed into song: "New York, New York, the city so nice they named it twice." Now beaming, he drained the rest of his Diet Coke and, belching softly, leaned back into the snug confines of his seat. Then proceeded to spread his legs far apart and lick each and every one of his fingers before wiping them dry on his dirty khaki pants. He inspected his hands and then, after watching her out of the corner of his eye for some time, began playing around with the various articles of trash in his vicinity.

Rolling it all into a semblance of a ball, he tucked it away in the pocket of his shirt and, extending his neck a little, gazed around the cabin with quick, jerky movements. When he saw a woman across the aisle nursing a handful of snack mix, he adopted an attitude of extreme watchfulness. He wet his lips and craved for a long moment before loudly summoning a flight attendant and asking for another bag.

She gave him a knowing little smile and handed him several, which he proceeded to tear open with his teeth and summarily devour like they were going out of style. Forgetting to wipe his hands clean on his pants, he used his fingers to comb what was left of his hair back over his scalp.

"Now," he said. With an oddly detached curiosity, he glanced at the woman next to him every few minutes. He began to say more but then, for some reason, he thought better of it and stopped. "Now," he repeated with absolute conviction, holding his belly and scowling. In a while, he became enveloped by a great earnestness, and he looked around the cabin, grinning at everyone else but her.

Sighing in relief at his unexpected stroke of good luck, Marilyn kicked off her pumps and stretched out her legs. By turning back to the window and composing herself for sleep, she hoped to avoid even the threat of any further interaction with this haunt of a man. Exhibiting a strong sense of self-control, she feigned sleep for a long space of time - about ten, fifteen minutes by the watch she wore on her wrist - before hearing him strike up another conversation. He spoke at random, but even when he wasn't speaking, his words were constantly droning in her ears. Something about his sister and the big "C" was what she heard the most.

After somebody repulsed him with mild ridicule, silence was all for another stretch of time and then, unabashed, he continued on. Thank God he's picked someone else, was the most printable of her dark, confused thoughts. I wished he'd just shut up already, was another.

When there was another long lull in his conversation, she realized that he had been talking to absolutely no one in particular, and her thoughts swung back to being delayed in Cincinnati and what was truly plaguing her. Ruminating on her own troubles at length like this usually had the effect of making her depressed, and she lapsed into a deep gloom where, from the distance, the sounds of passengers chattering desultorily over the toneless air-conditioning came to her ears.

The scream of a child was immediately followed by a mother's stern hush.

"I'm going to New York to visit my sister," Luther breathed against the side of her face.

As if a great door slammed shut in her mind, Marilyn's eyes snapped open and she spun around in her seat with a start. "What? What did you just say?" she asked, a shrill tone threading her voice.

"I'm going to New York to visit my sister," he repeated as though there was no one else around. "She's got a bad case of the big 'C' settling in. Runs in the family, you know." She regarded him with a sad, black look of wonder, so he added: "You know, cancer. The big 'C' right? But I'm fit as a fiddle, praise the Lord, haw haw haw haw!" Pressing ever closer, so close that she looked like she was cowering in an

airless corner, he launched into a completely unabridged explanation of the circumstances surrounding his trip until he had exhausted his entire stock of conversation.

Staring at his big fat mouth moving as if she were in a delirious trance, slowly Marilyn noticed that he had stopped talking and, with that same guileless expression of unabashed stupidity on his face, was waiting to hear her story. For the first time it slid into her mind that there might be something truly disturbed about this relentless man, and when she pursed her lips into a thin, bloodless line, her breath became momentarily caught, and her heart stalled.

"Look. Will you just stop?" she mumbled, struggling so hard to bring each word out that her voice sounded dull and heavy.

"Stop?" asked Luther, as though he was puzzled by a problem he had been turning over in his mind for some time.

Marilyn gave a sigh of exasperation and then said: "Leave me alone." His eyes became bright, and his cheeks flushed deeply. His lower lip was trembling so bad that she thought he was going to cry and blubber something. There was yet another long pause, during which time passed slowly. When he began sharply expelling his breath, she nervously began twisting and untwisting the magazine with her hands.

"Stop leaving you alone?" Luther echoed.

"Stop talking to me," she hissed with malevolence so intense that his face twisted with pain and, as if struck by a disturbing revelation, his whole manner changed completely.

"Hi there now," he blurted. "Do you have something you want to talk about, get off your chest, only so to speak, of course." Another long, awkward moment passed, after which he cleared his throat and added: "Because I'm a good listener you know, haw haw! Once at one of my ministry's retreats - "

"Look Luther," she interrupted before he could pick up another full head of steam. "I'm sure you're a very nice man. But I've had a bad day that's only going to

get worse." He opened his mouth, but she cut him off by sharply raising her rolled up magazine. "*I'm* speaking now. *So* - If you would *please* excuse me.

"Please?" Giving him her straightest look, Marilyn's face grew red as he recoiled from her like a punch to the belly had just stolen all his air. When he busily began scribbling what appeared to be a series of very important memos, she turned away and pressed her forehead against the window. After a while, she completely closed her eyes. Her jaw went slack, and her eyelids began fluttering as, for some time, she went along that indefinable line between waking and sleeping before slipping totally into the latter.

She could scarcely discern Luther's irritating voice as he began talking again, but to someone else farther and farther away now and then, in an instant, everything around her was totally gone. And when silence was all, this is the way the old memories she had no choice but to relive went, or at least as I've reconstructed it here:

Amid quickening scenes from when she was a very little girl to when she was a young woman, Marilyn found herself filled by hope and promise and dreams. She had always loved life, and lived it to the fullest. At parties and in hallways between classes and weekend matinees or holiday dinners and Girl Scout camp on rainy afternoons, her laughter soared above all the rest. Everyone always wondered aloud why she didn't date. They'd ask "do you have a boy in your life yet" even though they all knew there wasn't before invariably assuring her that she was so very pretty and nice and attractive. Marilyn responded to words of encouragement like these the same way she did whenever in close proximity to a cute guy, especially one that she liked: By flushing to her ears and, giggling, scuffing her toes together until she was no longer the center of attention. What it all came down to was that she dated rarely, if ever, which appeared to suit her and her parents just fine.

So it came as a surprise to everyone who knew her when, upon graduating from high school, she moved to Los Angeles to find a job, forsaking her father's pure, undiluted affection and approval. Although for the first time she felt that she was

someone, it soon became apparent in various ways that daddy's little girl was very vulnerable indeed.

One night in a trendy bar just off Wilshire, one of her roommates, Steven, introduced her to a man named William. That evening he cut through her weak defenses and began the conquest of her heart. Right from the start, he made her feel the thrilling sense of having been rewarded by fortune, and they began meeting frequently, then quite frequently, and soon they were an avowed couple.

As William took her from one high-class joint to another and showered her with expensive gifts, Marilyn, who was - according to her parents' now firm, oft-stated conviction - unable to form intelligent positions about men, began falling head over heels in love. During the first two months they were together, she had lost count of how many times he had whispered his protestations of love over and over like a, like a sweetly anesthetizing mantra drawing her ever closer to the cusp of complete and utter subservience.

One of the things she had always tried to forget was the way his dark lustrous eyes crinkled at the corners whenever he smiled . . . God he was handsome.

To mark the occasion of their three-month anniversary, he talked her into a romantic weekend in Tahoe. After driving high up into the mountains to a solitary cabin with an incredible view of an open little valley awash in pale moonlight, it immediately became clear that this was a man who had no intention of skiing.

He started a roaring fire in the fireplace, mixed her a strong drink and then, smiling that smile and snuggling close, began answering all her nervous questions by whispering promises of eternal love and devotion, telling her that he never wanted anything as much as he wanted her now. Her resistance withered under this persistent onslaught of hands on affection and, when his burning lips grazed her throat, she was easily overcome by passion. It was like he was storming through a gate after a long siege, and when he fully possessed her, Marilyn made the mistake of believing she was madly and truly in love.

Over the next couple of weeks following that evening, his proclamations of love and promises of marriage during foreplay dwindled to uncomfortable silences and loud grunts then ceased altogether. Soon their endless stream of small talk while lazing about in bed all day turned into spiteful criticisms and harsh attacks on anything and everything she did or said. Slowly, very slowly, she learned that this whole time he had been hiding a frightful mixture of bitter cynicism and a selfish kind of immaturity behind a maddeningly attractive and charming façade. He was actually loud and boorish, she now understood, and quick to anger, which increasingly became the case.

At first she would protest his vague insinuations and outright accusations of her infidelity, but as soon as she glimpsed the muscles in his thick neck bunch and the pulse in his temples beating, she would just shut her damn mouth and, dissolving into tears, cower in whatever corner he had driven her. Although he never went so far as to hit her, he came close to doing so so often that she actually found herself wishing he would. Instead he chose to rudely manipulate all of her innocence and pride until even her most secret pleasures were worn away and then, with sharp-edged words, he would proceed to slice her self-respect into ribbons.

Soon a day didn't go by that he didn't let her forget she was nothing more than a piece of shit, and then it reached the point where even his mere presence was threatening. For the hundredth of thousandth time for almost a quarter of a century now she remembered how he would show up real late at night with his clothes and hair all rumpled and smelling faintly of cheap perfume, breath mints and bourbon and then, in rapid succession but harrowing detail, she was overwhelmed by William's philandering, his temper, his vanity and overweening sense of pride as well as having to live daily with the abiding knowledge of having done nothing to stop him from walking all over her . . . She had been so stupid, so stupid to confuse all this with love . . . So stupid to have ever loved . . .

Awaking late one lazy Sunday morning, William was nowhere to be found. The only thing he left behind was a brief note - hastily written with a stub of pencil on

a wrinkled cocktail napkin smudged by bright red lipstick - giving Marilyn some flimsy pretext but basically saying *I never want to see you again*. The next day she found one dirty sock behind the bathroom door and she took it to his house in tears. He refused to let her in, so she went home and called and called and called, but he rudely ignored all her apologies and pleas to return before eventually ceasing to accept her calls altogether.

A couple of miserable months later, a completely devastated but somehow still in love Marilyn got sick and went to the hospital, where she found out William had left something other than a sock behind. She imagined, far more than once, a whole series of deaths she could die, and then she resolved never to let anyone back home, not even her parents, know. Alone like this in an unfamiliar place, each instance of his duplicity kept stinging the essence of her soul. She became such a mess that she couldn't even get herself into work, and soon she was let go. And while the electric company was threatening to stop service, she lost her phone, which made her feel so lost and helpless in this world that she completely broke down and went home, admitting to everything and anything.

For a time, no thoughts would come.

But then two figures slowly revealed themselves to the incandescent eye of her inner being, and an instant later she saw her father's sunburned face beside itself with rage come racing towards her through a luminous void otherwise filled by the faint sounds of her mother's incessant weeping and a crying baby. During the next several years, this was her parents' refrain, with little variation:

"How could you be so stupid?" her father would roar over and over for hours on end until she almost became numb to the blunt impact of the words. "You've spit on our good name is what you've done. Getting knocked up. We're - We're laughingstocks all over the whole entire neighborhood!" Now towering before her, the terror leaping from his eyes, one thick scolding finger wagging right in her face, "Everywhere I go now everyone gets quiet and looks at me out of the corner of their eyes like I'm a leper or something. We trusted you against our better judgement by

the way young lady, mark my words. And now look what you've gone and done with that trust, breaking your mother's heart to pieces coming home pregnant like this! You hear me?"

Nor was that all she heard loud and clear:

"We thought we had raised you right, at least to know better than to get, better than to . . . get yourself into something, something like *this*," her sobbing mother would chime in throughout. "If you're going to stay here from now on you're going to have to pay what we have to say more mind - "

"Listen to your mother or else," her father would interrupt before proceeding to tell her, in so many different ways, that they had foreseen her living a more seemly kind of life and that now, now they were only disappointed in her.

"Why didn't you just listen to us in the first place?"

"What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

She quickly learned to say nothing in reply to any of this, and she would just sit there in that straight-backed wooden chair in the kitchen staring over their heads at the pink floral print wallpaper on the walls. They berated her until she learned how to bottle everything up inside, and when they realized that her heartache had become a tenuous but stubbornly guarded pride, they began lecturing her as though she were a child. While the days continued turning into weeks and the weeks into months, always being reminded of the more pressing cases of life like this only made her sink deeper and deeper into herself.

The airplane experienced some turbulence, and when her head lolled around, it appeared that Marilyn was going to awaken. But, after shifting around in her seat and clutching her purse tighter to her chest, she slipped right back over the edge and into another restless stream of memories. As all these years came flooding back, the sorrow in her heart kept deepening, and her face became wet with tears. Soon it held the sorrowful expression of someone who had watched all the excitement in life wither away until not even a blossom of joy remained.

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The combined rhythm of the subway and traffic murmuring below swelled, surged and overwhelmed Sandra, conditioning and driving the movement of her thoughts. Everything fused into one watery line, and the present and the future disappeared in the flow of contorted landscapes and images now swirling through her head, making her feel like she had to reach up just to touch the bottom of this timeless abyss. In this place she became young and innocent like she used to be.

For a few years there she and her mother moved around so often that they didn't even bother unpacking their things. From San Diego to Oakland and innumerable points up and down the entire coast in between - always alone, waiting eagerly for that one lasting friend - before permanently moving in with that old crotchety bastard who was her grandfather and the omnipresent sounds of his ill-humored threats.

Always calling her bastard.

Always telling her that all children who behave badly burn in hell.

Sandra tried not to wretch at the lingering image of the leering withered face of her very own grandfather. That sonofabitch thought that the principle of his authority and his, his high moral standards he only professed stood above everything else, making her kneel in the corner all day long for any perceived trespass no matter how minor.

Never having a dad, but knowing for certain that if her mother hadn't driven him away - which she surely must have done since she never mentioned word one about him - he would've treated her good. This was something she had to be reminded of every time she saw a man playing with a child in the park.

Although she had no memory of her dad, she lay completely still, unable to move because of the nightmare of seeing her mother's shrink at a liquor store in La Jolla. Which is when that prick made a wry grimace of his face and told her, in so

many words that, taking into account everything her mother had told him in session, Sandra only behaved like she did because she was looking for a father.

During the next stretch of time, cigarette smoke sought out the tears in Sandra's eyes, and her shoulders began trembling. She tried to suppress the next wave of emotional turmoil, but the harder she tried the more they had their way. "My mother, " she breathed in a dreamy, far-away voice as once again the slender boundary between now and then vanished:

Marilyn, her mother, who approached life with what could only be called a narrow-minded dread and whose answer to everything was born of despair. A despair that evoked no sympathy, what with her letting that dirty prick denounce his only granddaughter day and night, forcing her to digest his cruelty and humiliation, the endless and unendurable insults as though she were suited for absolutely nothing better.

And then her grandfather getting even drunker than usual one night, reminding her with his unappeasable malice for the millionth time that she had cost him his nest egg before trying to do, do that that that *thing* her mother ever so resolutely denied. Smiling it away, trying to put a happy face on her very own daughter's endlessly tearful pleas, her consoling voice rife with the kind of tone so shamelessly false they wounded her very own daughter bad, making her hate everything about her existence, including her Self.

Her whirling memories led her into a confusion of obscene parties and nights spent drinking down the moon and tons of meth before up and moving away from it all for good, as far away from everything as she could afford. Moving to New York City where, besides remaining a party girl, she became a hostess, an actress and a dancer as well. Someone easily seduced by the mixture of contempt and physical attraction she felt toward cold-hearted men with puffed up egos and testosterone to spare while somehow managing to avoid tears and long sentimental scenes and romantic complications like the plague.

The only sign Sandra gave of being alive was the tears coursing down her face. This interminable period expired when the distant sounds of the shower ceased, and soon her roommate's muffled footsteps could be heard coming ever closer through the intervening walls. They stopped behind the French door, which was soon carefully and quietly opened all the way on its hinges to let an Asian of indefinable sex but for the large pendulous breasts barely confined by an extra-large beach towel wrapped around her entire girth into the overheated room.

If this woman hadn't been so short, the sheer gravity of her bulk would have filled the entire doorway. She lingered there quietly, enveloped in the warm aura of the muted color television behind her, blinking her near-sighted eyes. A black lock of hair escaped from the turban wrapped around her head, and she twisted it around with her plump fingers.

Patricia was tentative, cautious for some time, waiting for her newest most bestest friend to acknowledge her presence in vain before heaving herself across the threshold and into a clear space on the floor. She seemed to be in a very pleasant mood, and every few minutes she began to diminish by one step the distance separating them, making each wooden plank groan and leaving scattered piles of accumulated ephemera in her wake. In going forward with these heavy measured steps, she didn't take her eye off the vision of Sandra lying there in the sun on the floor once.

But despite the racket Sandra's roommate raised doing this, it was the grotesque and disjointed shadow she threw against the opposite wall and into a corner of Sandra's vision that finally succeeded in driving Sandra's infinity of desolate memories away. She rose into the here and now, where she lay as if spent, staring somewhere in the immeasurable distance like something horrible was written there. The more you looked at her hair, the blacker it seemed, the more unfathomable its depths.

*

Sandra soon heard her roommate's rasping, anxious exhalations, and suddenly she no longer felt strange being alone any longer. She watched as her shadow moved along the wall and, unable to restrain her quickening irritation, she swore softly under her breath and closed her potentially visible eye, pretending to be asleep. Her chest rose and fell softly under her deep breathing, and thankfully her roommate went to the opposite side of the room instead of coming any closer to where she lay.

Leaning against the dresser, folding her arms across her chest, Patricia looked at her new roommate long and searchingly, devouring her with greedy little eyes, allowing herself to fall into that kind of passionate indolence people unburdened by imagination invariably fall. Sandra uncrossed her legs and recrossed them at the knee, exposing the entire length of one thigh.

Patricia's eyes grew round, and she stood there and said nothing. After a while, she followed her line of sight all the way up those legs and out the window, miles away through the darkening blue sky and into the roiling mass of clouds. Waiting there, waiting with a painful insistence, she then gazed about the room before making herself thoroughly and unabashedly familiar with everything within her greedy little reach.

Now observing Sandra's unmoving figure for several more moments, Patricia seemed unconscious of things beyond her scope of understanding but clearly in an expansive mood. Her eyes were set so far apart they made everyone she met uncomfortable, and she had a nose a bit too snub for its own good. It unfortunately gave her a hollow, nasal voice whenever she spoke while also revealing the bitter twist of her lips, which soon parted and emitted a soft but lugubrious grunt. A little uncertainly at first, this woman cleared her throat a few more times before breaking out into a strained sort of braying laughter that couldn't be ignored by anyone alive.

Sandra, however, had expected something like this at some point, and she retained enough presence of mind to not only keep from looking around but to create

the impression of total reserve and indifference as well. Since she also knew her roommate's words would come in their own due time, she continued ignoring the immensity of her presence for awhile, wincing with the effort. But her roommate, who now stood there like nobody in the world would ever love her, was silent for far too long and something inside Sandra broke and gave way. She turned her head and considered this creature without any interest, as though she had made the slightest imprint in her day. Then she gave her a perfunctory nod, taking her full measure with an ironical glance, visibly disgusted by the patient moronic smile she always wore.

Patricia made motions of discomfort and her face blanched. She lurched forward a bit, and then her feet became rooted to the floor. Although still profoundly ugly, Sandra thought, at least today she is clean. "I've got a sweet tooth," suddenly for some reason she recalled Patricia confessing wistfully time and time again when caught stuffing her face.

It was as though this incomprehensible city had momentarily lost its breath and, after silence became so suddenly clear that it was possible to hear it, a barrage of honking ensued. While dropping her cigarette butt into the plastic cup, Sandra didn't have to act like her roommate was shattering her peace into a thousand fragments.

"What is it *now*?" she burst out quick and sharp, swatting at the fly buzzing around her head.

For her part, Patricia wore the expression of someone who had just thought of something she'd never thought before. She gave a short shriek of laughter and rushed to the side of the room with an intolerable impertinence. "Nothing! That's the thing!" she exclaimed, making Sandra stare in astonishment through the smoke rising from the freshly lit cigarette dangling from her fingers.

Then she gave her roommate a sidelong questioning glance, her expression akin to disgust. "Nothing," she said in a slow, disdaining voice, pursing her lips into a thin white line of contempt around her cigarette, beginning to point at the door. "I wish you'd leave me alone. In fact, I order you to leave my room now."

"Why do you spend all day cooped up in here when it gets so hot like this?" Patricia replied in a timid, ingratiating voice.

Sandra chose not to reply, instead looking back out the window, counting the individual rays of sun fighting through the darkening clouds. Her roommate blinked while she waited for a reply, and there was a long moment's embarrassment when none was forthcoming.

"Why don't you get yourself a fan or something?"

A look of irritation crossed Sandra's face and, without deigning to respond in any other way, rolled her eyes from the window, mingling a grunt with a sigh.

"Don't you have to be somewhere by seven?" Patricia persisted, beginning to work her gum from one side of her mouth to the other and back again. There was in her behavior something that suggested a child about to reveal a burning secret. "Don't you have to meet someone or something?"

Sandra closed her eyes, and what she uttered next was nothing more than an abbreviated drone: "What - "

"Don’t you have to meet someone at seven? It's like 5:30 right now."

Sandra quickly opened her eyes and, although her face became entirely devoid of expression, the cynicism and scorn she regarded her roommate with was palpable. Patricia didn't move a muscle. Starting to blush, she held her breath from a nervous embarrassment.

"Just wondering is all, no biggee," she finally found the courage to say. And then she began shifting from foot to foot, waiting for a reaction, any reaction.

Time went on like this for a while as Sandra tried to arouse her most hostile attitude. By imagining all the combinations of unmemorably idiotic things this, this - brazen interloper could possibly say next, she was able to turn what had merely been a slight irritation into a full blown annoyance. " . . . And then she comes moping in here," she muttered in a low furious voice, as though she were concluding a long diatribe. "What do you want with me exactly?" she added, making a decidedly negative gesture in her roommate's general direction.

Patricia let out a shriek of unadulterated, almost ostentatious, joy and began snapping her gum rapid-fire. "Someone sure woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning! And I know who that someone is, too! So what didja do last night? Party down?"

"For pity's sake Patricia, don't talk to me anymore," she replied in utter exasperation, drawing the words out into a groan. "Look. I've already got a headache. You're just making it splitting." But even the harsh look Sandra appended to this didn't stop Patricia's trap from yapping:

"Are you going to party down out on the town tonight, too?"

Sandra made another face, and again she closed her eyes. "Yes," she said as though she had gathered enough strength to speak.

"I'd sure like to go out with you and your friends sometimes, you know," came the gushing voice before it faded away into a quagmire of silence the same as the last and the last but one.

*

After her beautiful baby girl Sandra was born, Marilyn walked around in a palsied daze, cowering in dark corners, almost always sobbing or, at the very least, half in tears. Oddly enough her mother was the one who stood up to her father and refused to let "our granddaughter, Al, poor little thing" up for adoption. At times like now, Marilyn wondered what her life would have been like if her mother had lost that argument. And then she recalled all those years with a child to support, a closet full of ill-fitting clothes and shabby pumps and barely being able to eke out a living, sometimes depending entirely upon her parents for months on end.

As everything in her life went on and on like this, she convinced herself that she had no time for friends, and she became very adept at espousing her newfound solitary inclinations. Soon her only attachment to the world was her shitty desk job, her oh so loving family, and the act of observing everyone around her in this world always having fun. Somehow she still held fast to the idea that, if circumstances had

only been different, she could have taken her place in it with joy shining on her face, too - if only she'd been given the chance . . .

Around the time her mother passed away after a brief but ravaging illness, Marilyn was given the choice of either working the third shift or being summarily laid off. With no future prospects of employment to speak of, this wasn't much of a choice at all. Neither was moving back in to take care of her elderly father, whose bitter regard towards everything and everyone shortly became just plain intolerable.

The days of his soft, indulgent smile were long passed, and until the day he died that drunken ungrateful sonofabitch only referred to his one and only granddaughter as, at best, "you" and, at his more usual worst, "that little bastard." So it came as no surprise when Sandra grew into a rude and moody teenager who listened to everything her mother said as though it were a soliloquy of no worth whatsoever.

Marilyn and Sandra saw each other rarely, and then only at breakfast before school and on weekends. Their already tenuous relationship was badly marred by the daily presence of this angry old man, and they wouldn't communicate with each other for days, sometimes weeks. Upon graduating from high school, Sandra wasted a couple of years pretty much drifting aimlessly with the wrong crowd and getting into trouble. Suddenly she got consumed by some half-baked, cockamamie idea of studying acting of all things and followed some guy to New York, breaking her mother's heart in the process.

After she didn't even come home for her own grandfather's funeral, a desperate and lonely Marilyn began to feel that her daughter was the curse that had robbed her of her entire life. When she expressed this feeling to her therapist, she was urged by him to write this man named William a long letter that spelled out the truths of her life and detailed exactly how she'd been wronged. Immediately upon completing this painful, tear-stained missive, she began tearing it into shreds and those shreds into shreds before collapsing in a heap on the floor, where she lay crying for hours and hours.

All alone in this world now, her heart became empty and listless, only beating with the passionate feeling of a desperate solitude intermingled with a sad sense of loss. Each morning she had no other choice but to get up out of bed with the harrowing knowledge of exactly who she was. One day at the grocery store she bumped into her old roommate, Steven. After exchanging polite pleasantries, she steered the conversation on to William. Steven told her that, last he heard, William had gone through a couple of wives but was now hitched to some woman from Long Island and was now living on his family's estate outside New York somewhere. Marilyn wasn't sure if she had heard correctly. Where, she gasped.

Laughing, Steven said New York and then, before hurrying away, he rummaged around through his wallet and handed her William's business card.

*

Still humming "Uptown Girl," William emerged from the walk-in closet some time later wearing a charcoal colored suit, a white silk shirt unbuttoned at the neck. On his feet were designer leather loafers. In one hand he carried a yellow silk tie, which he looped through his collar while crossing the room to the bureau. He fastened his watch around his wrist and then, after hustling his balls until they were comfortable, he began using some mousse to smooth back his hair from his forehead. Upon molding it his hair to his satisfaction, he flipped through all the bills and credit cards in his thick leather wallet before putting it into the inside pocket of his coat.

He left the bedroom and went down a short hallway, which opened into a spacious room appointed with far from humble mahogany paneling. Two pool tables wore plastic covering to protect them from dust while the third, which was bathed in the light emanating from one of the ornate fixtures his father had expropriated from a speakeasy, was all racked and ready to be broken. Looking in both hands, he stopped short as if remembering something and then retraced his steps to retrieve his shaving kit. He tucked it under an arm and, after hurrying back down the hall, he made his

way over the parquet floor of the den and through the comfortable leather furniture scattered in a ring around a formidable mahogany desk cluttered with papers.

William pushing through a heavy pair of mahogany doors came into a broad corridor lined by a series of deeply striated columns and doors on one side and, on the other, huge rose windows. They were spilling long shafts of light across his path that stretched his shadow from the floor almost to the ceiling as he walked toward the television's continually increasing stream of noise. The more he could distinguish between the screaming, the gunshots and the sirens, the more his steps slowed. Soon it became an overwhelming cacophony, and his humming first faltered and then stopped altogether when he realized that the television was no longer allowing any other sounds to be heard.

The smug arrogant expression on his face began to change, and after he finished knotting his tie, he came to a stop in front of the mirror to see if it needed to be straightened. He punched his pecs a couple of times and, after exhaling several short but deep breaths, he crept through the part of the corridor shrouded by gloomy darkness. Right after rounding a corner, he leaned against the thick wall under a high arching doorway, widening his eyes to adjust to the soft darkness and crossing his arms over his chest and his legs at the ankles.

Usually he could avoid his dearly beloved for days on end.

But since his Beamer was in the shop and he didn’t like to take his 'Vette into the city, especially at night, he needed to take her car, which she had insisted on buying with her own money for some reason.

As soon as he could discern her in the far reaches of the expansive oval room, he looked momentarily disgusted, and then a dark look flamed up in his face.

Sitting there on her chaise lounge with her knees folded up in her arms and rocking back and forth, William's wife was staring at her big screen television without blinking. Wearing a short white nightgown and one blue fuzzy slipper, which she idly plucked at with the remnants of her fingernails, she might have been beautiful if the room had been lit by one solitary candle set beside her. But in the

artificial glow cast by the television, you could tell that her sallow and unresilient skin was stretched tight over her lean and wasted body, and that her hair had lost all its color. It appeared that, if you ever went to touch her, she would crumble into dust.

The gleaming glass surface of the coffeetable before her was completely bereft of clutter because everything she needed in life fit on top of the small nightstand she used as an endtable. In fact, the rest of the ballroom, which was designed with an eye to the Rococo and altogether suitable for grand occasions, was immaculately clean and squared away. The long dining room table behind her was covered by linen and set formally with excellent China and silverware service for eight and two heavy baroque candelabras, each holding three white candles still in their plastic wrapping.

Late at night, in one of their drunken rages, she had torn all the paintings down, so there were patches of whiteness the size and shape of the frames brighter than the paint on all of the surrounding walls. Hanging askew high above the mantelpiece was Sargent's impressive oil portrait of William's grandfather. The mantelpiece itself was sparsely decorated with antique crystalware strangely illuminated by the harsh flickering light of the television, which William followed into his wife's eyes blurred by a vacuous indifference that, even after all these years, he still found startling. He watched as she almost drifted off to sleep and then shook herself awake.

Her name was Emily.

A vulgar confusion broke out all over her face. "I knew you were coming just like this," she screamed over the roar of the television, her face contorted by the effort.

At first, William thought she was talking to the television, but then she raised her eyes from the car commercial like they were tied with heavy weights and looked directly into his face. Her expression made her appear as if she were caught between alarm and laughter. Picking up and then immediately putting down a tall thin glass, she smiled a vague, indecisive smile and stuck a cigarette into her mouth. She

apparently forgot all about it and, when brushing a strand of limp hair out of her face, she knocked it out from between her lips to the floor.

After a while, she replaced it with another, which she proceeded to light before reaching through the cloud of smoke that now haloed her body and making the gesture of throttling her husband with his own necktie. "I knew you were coming - Just - Like - This."

When William opened his mouth but did not reply, a spot began burning in the oblique glaze of her eyes. Although her hands were twisted and gnarled, the graceful motion of her fingers as they wrapped around her drink and raised it to her lips was the only feature she still possessed that granted a glimpse of her former loveliness.

Looking at her so hard now that he could almost hear her bones snapping like twigs, he stepped all the way into her presence and paused as if reflecting for a moment before striding to the ornate mahogany bar running along most of the far wall. As he drew nearer to his wife, he noticed that her emaciated face was lined by thin blue veins and blotched red. And right before he passed her, he saw that her nightgown was not only buttoned wrong but covered with cigarette ashes and little round burn holes all over its front. Sniffing at the intermingling fragrance of gin and smoke that hung heavy in this part of the room, he put his shaving kit down next to the set of keys resting there on the bar, and then flung open the French doors.

They gave out onto an empty flagstone patio surrounding an empty pool and, on the soft breeze that blew against his face, he could barely hear the sporadic whirring of the cicadas in the stand of trees under the sounds roaring from the television. Standing there motionless for some time, he watched as the daylight draining from the sky left the rose garden in shadows.

Emily stubbed out her cigarette in an ashtray and drank deeply from her glass. Her eyes couldn't stay in one place, and they wandered all over the room before going from her husband's profile to the television and back to his profile again and again. She finished her drink and, sucking the gin out of the soggy slice of lime, she held her

glass up into the air and proceeded to mingle the partially melted iced cubes together until an old Hispanic woman in a maid's uniform appeared.

The maid came across the room, took it from her, refilled it at the bar and brought it back to the lady of the house, who then motioned for her to turn down the television, which she proceeded to do before retreating from where she came.

"Where are you going *Willie*?" Emily asked in a quiet and restrained voice.

"I'm going out on - "

There was a fleeting moment of recognition in her eyes that was followed by an angry glare.

"Business?" she said with an extreme formality before lapsing into a silence made all the more awkward by the now muffled background sound of blood curdling screams emitted by the television. "Ha!" she snorted. One drop of saliva welled in the corner of her mouth, which soon became pinched into a thin bloodless line.

William turned toward her and let the moment for an answer pass. He just stood there looking at his wife pointedly as, after rousing herself into a visible frenzy, she began to tear at her hair and claw at her arms while uttering a high keening shriek.

"Always going out on business business business," she snarled.

With her eyes now rolling around in their sockets, Emily leaped from the couch in all her disarray and came reeling extravagantly around the couch, parting the air before her with an unlighted cigarette and spilling her drink all over the parquet floor. Her husband tried to keep himself a certain distance away from this as, still shrieking wildly, she rushed this way and that until she came crashing to a halt against the immense fireplace. For a long time she seemed to be dazed and, as if suddenly remembering something long ago forgotten, she tried to regain a shred of dignity by calmly lighting her cigarette and leaning an arm on the mantelpiece like she were in the midst of entertaining guests.

"That's right, I've got to go into the city for - "

"Business!"

His face discolored with rage and he rolled his neck as though getting out the kinks. "*I* am speaking Emily."

She narrowed her eyes and gave him a drunken sneer. "Ha! I'll give you some business!" she said between short bursts of mirthless laughter.

"What? What did you say?"

"You heard me."

William adjusted the cuffs of his coat and then stretched out and peered down each of his legs in turn, checking the creases in his pants to see if they were straight. By the pulse in his temples and the way he rubbed the cartilage behind his jaw, you knew he was furious. "Business calls," he was finally able to say in a controlled manner.

"At this hour?" asked Emily, giving her words a certain biting sarcasm.

Her husband just shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands.

"I don't care if you ever come back here ever!" she screamed before launching into another one of her displays of insane audacity while he stood there gazing coldly at her with his arms wrapped around his chest as he waited for her to finish.

Soon William grew impatient, and when he stepped toward her, extended his arms wide and then turned his hands into fists, Emily could see that his eyes had gone mean, and the thin shrill voice expressing her indignation trailed off into a confused murmur.

He came to a stop a few feet away from her and, biting his thumbnail silently, looked her up and down for a few moments until she babbled off into a complete silence. "Goddamn you Emily I hope you rot in hell," he spat and, by pointing one finger into her face, made her shrink against the fireplace and away from his touch. All of a sudden, he whirled around on his heels and stalked back to the French doors, where he stared hard into the encroaching darkness.

Emily's eyes went expressionless, and she began trembling with such powerfully convulsive shudders that she had to hold tight to the mantelpiece with both hands so she wouldn't fall down. Sweat big as marbles began streaking down

her face, and she was eventually able to stick the cigarette firmly back into the corner of her mouth. She held one trembling finger up toward the crystal chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling before staggering across the room and collapsing back onto the chaise lounge. With her face flushed the color roses left withering at the grave, she looked at him and then clenched an arm over her eyes as if to ward off a blow.

Still standing there in front of the French doors, William brushed idly at the lapels of his coat with the edge of one hand and then glanced at his watch: It was almost seven, and he had to get going. So he summoned a reassuring grin to his face and turned back to his wife just in time to watch as she took a small metal case from her nightstand, selected two little blue pills and a red one and then drank them down with several swigs of gin.

She rolled her tongue around in the hollow of her cheek and began chewing her bottom lip. A few moments later, she opened and closed her mouth before starting to speak, but a peculiar cast crept into her eyes, and she returned her full attention to the television, where a clown was dancing across a stage. Her pupils became two black spots the size of dimes and, although she looked serene, she was actually numb and devoid of all feeling. Staring into a space about a foot from her face, she slowly stirred a pattern into her drink with her index finger.

*

William made his way around the room a couple of times until he could almost hear her head roaring with white light, and when he finally ventured in front of the television, her flickering eyes didn't even blink. He knew that, if he stayed any longer, the rest of the scene would only be bad comedy or tragically grotesque, so he took a deep breath and went slowly to the bar, where he pocketed the keys and tucked the shaving kit under his arm.

"Emily?" he asked as he went to the French doors and backed out on the flagstone patio. In a stronger voice, he added: "I'm going out now. Sweetheart."

Emily stopped stirring her drink and licked the gin from her finger. Something changed in her eyes like a spark streaking through darkness, and tears came rolling down her alabaster face while she watched her husband disappear around the far side of the pool.

"Where are you going?" she whispered as the ripple of her sobs touched her flat and empty expression, her lamentations echoing softly around the room in which she sat, a lifeless statue.

*

The formless mass of artificial light flickering its silent, fantastic dance continued streaming into the room only to be dissolved in the encroaching darkness. It moved like a living thing, making the dying sunlight flee through the window in fear.

When Sandra looked up next, her roommate was fully enveloped by shadows. "Are you going to stand there all day being a complete and utter annoyance?" she dryly remarked, regurgitating some long lost line.

Speechless for once, Patricia just shrugged her neck into her shoulders and began shifting from foot to foot with renewed vigor, now twisting her hands into a perverted gesture of prayer.

Sandra's hands went to her head as though she were about to tear out clumps of hair. Rising abruptly to her feet, she pulled off her T-shirt and put on a short silk robe. While tightening and knotting the belt around her slender waist, she made herself firm and upright and cold before storming away without a backward glance, forgetting her cigarettes. With Patricia dithering along at her heels, she came into the threadbare inelegance of what passed for a living room.

Only a love seat, an easy chair and a small color television with foil-wrapped rabbit ears on milk crates were in it. Wherever the black and white posters of film and jazz greats were not taped haphazardly to the walls, dank crumbling plaster could be glimpsed. The floor was cluttered with empty beer cans, empty bottles of booze

and half-eaten plates of food. As they passed the television set, Sandra paused and turned it off. Darkness in every gloomy sense of the word came rushing in upon them from every direction, weighing down the room's squalid ambience even further.

They both listened for a second as an anonymous couple arguing filtered from somewhere above before proceeding as one around the big steel ashtray overflowing with ashes in the middle of the wooden floor, past a tiny galley kitchen and then down a long hallway unbroken by windows or doors. A bare 60-watt bulb dangling from the bathroom's ceiling at the end of the hall cast the only light visible. It was swaying gently on its cord and glinting dully off the mirror above the stainless steel sink. Only one thought, that of getting away, was left in Sandra's head, and her steps became quicker and quicker.

Patricia struggled to keep up with her roommate's swift gait, her breasts rising and falling in no set pattern. Although she was huffing and puffing mightily, she was laughing and laughing and laughing, creating a confused medley of echoes ringing everywhere.

"Just leave me alone fool!" Sandra shot over her shoulder without slowing down as she flew into the bathroom. She whirled around and slammed her back against the door, trying to simultaneously shut and lock it behind her. But even with all her might, her roommate's big fleshy thigh wasn't budging an inch.

After a moment, Patricia's head peered around the door's corner. "I've got to pee!" she screamed and, although she was out of breath, she threw back her head and burst into a resounding cascade of convulsive laughter.

When she began pressing her bulk inexorably forward, Sandra's feet scrambled for purchase on the scarred linoleum floor. After one prolonged moment of struggle, the door exploded open and she was shoved rudely aside. Suddenly they were so close together, it saw as if they were in a single bed.

Patricia smothered her laughter with both hands and subsequently began snorting, her whole body heaving with the effort, until she got herself under some semblance of control. Then she clapped her roommate on the shoulder. "I told you I

had to *pee* silly," she chortled as she gallumphed behind the cheap rice screen separating the toilet from the rest of the bathroom.

It was warm and damp, and the soughing sound of traffic could scarcely be discerned. The flowered wallpaper was splotched and discolored, stained by water near both the ceiling and the floor. Along the far wall was a beautiful and decidedly out of place claw-footed bathtub. Three wire clotheslines from which various articles of clothing were hanging to dry crisscrossed the area to the rear.

With one hand lifted to her mouth, Sandra remained standing there between the half-closed door and the wall as though she had sunk into a horrific reverie, watching this dreadful woman squatting in silhouette behind the screen. Still giggling and chuckling in bursts, this now squatting monstrosity began tinkling and deeply inhaled a lung full of air before unceremoniously launching into a conversation in which could be distinguished both madness and despair.

"I don't want no desk job or nothing so I've been thinking about going back to school. I've always been good with my hands and stuff, or at least that's what everyone says anyways, and I don't know why, but it's fun giving massages, and massage therapists make a lot of money. Phoebe on Friends makes like a million bucks an hour giving them and I'm like, wow! That's an easy and quick way to make money and so then I can be on my own instead of depending on my Ma all the time," she gushed. "So. What do you think I should do?"

Every one of these words came to Sandra as though they had been emitted from the opposite side of a wide divide, and she sucked in a deep breath, craved a cigarette, wondered about the time with a start, and then approached the mirror, where she picked up a brush. She considered herself to be too beautiful for just one man, and her face went trance-like, as if she were still listening to something far far away. Except for her hair and eyes, she didn't believe she looked anything like her mother, and then she wondered what her dad looked like.

The tinkling stopped, there was a flush, and then Patricia came around the screen and proceeded to elbow more than enough room for herself in front of the mirror, her mouth going a mile a minute:

"My ma, she doesn't think I can be out on my own because she says I don't have enough responsibility for that. She doesn't think I can handle it, can you believe that? That and I think its because I'm her last. So now that I'm getting out on my own it feels so good now. An exciting but scary feeling, you know? I'm almost thirty!" she continued, pressing closer so that their feet began mixing awkwardly. "That's not an easy thing for me to say either!"

The feeling of Patricia's soft fleshy hip jostling against her thigh was revolting, and Sandra drew wincing away so that it looked like she was trying to slip into the narrow space between the sink and the wall. "Can't you give me just a little space somewhere - Anywhere! - For once?" she pleaded.

"Don't I live here too . . .?" Patricia began replying in her own laconic way before stopping and smiling in puzzlement, sweat beading down her face.

Still using the mirror as an intermediary, Sandra gave her an inexorable look and, with redoubled slowness, she repeated her question, adding: "Look Patricia, what do you want with me?"

"We haven't - Chatted in a while and I, well I just wanted to," Patricia replied with some hesitation, her face alighting with an unclouded smile. She wasn't wearing her glasses, so when she turned back to the mirror, she had to squint and lean forward. After a while, she stopped picking at her face and began muddling though all of Sandra's makeup.

Sandra stopped fiddling around with her bangs long enough to pointedly consider her roommate's reflection, how her bad skin contrasted with her otherwise extreme pallor, the red pocks on each side of her nose. When she unwrapped the towel turbaned around her head, her short black hair and the bathroom's cold hard light made her face seem disturbingly gaunt and hollow for someone so fat.

"You shouldn't bite your fingernails like that. Nasty habit," she couldn't help saying with a hint of malice, nodding, making Patricia look down at her hands. She wrinkled her nose in shivering disdain, turned on the hot water tap, and began exfoliating her already radiant face with an invigorating apricot scrub while Patricia tapped into her apparently inexhaustible supply of words:

"So you're going out tonight?"

Sandra didn't acknowledge this in any way.

"Let's just say my Ma - Refused to recognize my, um, independence and . . . individuality. My own - Uhm - Distinct world."

"Distinct world is right," Sandra muttered in a mocking voice, adding a snide comment under her breath.

Although this was clearly intended to wound, Patricia received it with the air of someone hearing, for the first time, news that deserved serious attention. "That's right. You must know all about that, too, studying acting like you do and all. Which is funny because I haven't told anyone this yet but I want to go to Hollywood too. They ask you to find info on all sorts of different things, for movies and stuff like that. I want to look into that, but I can't figure out what it's called."

With one hand, Sandra held her hair in a loose ponytail to keep it from getting wet and rinsed her face under the faucet. Then she began brushing her gritted teeth.

For the next stretch of time, Patricia carried on about all the other things she wanted to do and what she had to do, as well as this and that and the other, too. Her gestures were all undecided and very much agitated, and she repeated herself more than once. Whenever silence supervened, she would put down whatever makeup she was misusing and play with her fingers before selecting something else, this time an eyeliner pencil, and pick up her line of chatter wherever she chose.

Since Sandra's heart was pounding so hard in her head, she managed to ignore most of her roommate's ponderous blathering, looking beyond the reflection of her own hardening expression. Once she thought of putting her hands to her mouth like a megaphone and screaming "leave me the fuck alone!"

*

Just to hear William's voice proclaiming his deep and undying love for her again and again through time immemorial she had any number of times almost persuaded herself to give him a call. But over the course of the following weeks, these impulses gave way to misgivings, and then much thought and worry. After coming to the conclusion that all the demons of her present life could be cured by coming to terms with the truth of her past, she took a breath so deep and clear that it brought an unfamiliar stir of exhilaration to her breast. Under the spell of this narcotic, the overpowering inertia no longer held her back. Awash in the uncertainty an undefined plan brings, she finally decided to give this man, William, the father of her child, a call.

When his secretary put her through, Marilyn spoke so soft at first that he had trouble catching her words and she had to begin anew. "Wuh-William. This is Marilyn. Marilyn Bennett, remember me?" Then, all in one breath she told him that she had bumped into Steven - Remember him? - Who had been so nice to give her his business card.

"Why Marilyn! How's my girl? Still beautiful as ever?" he said as if, even after all these years, he had not only just been thinking about her but had been expecting her call, too.

After several more exchanges similar to this, the only thing she could think of talking about was all those years of burning love he had promised to share with her forever. Instead, after a series of deep shuddering breaths, for some reason unknown even to herself she said that, since she was coming to New York to visit someone anyway, why didn't they get together and catch up on all these years?

With no hesitation in his voice, William immediately agreed to her suggestion. "When are you going to be in The City, Marilyn?"

There was a long, awkward silence, during which she tried to hang up the phone any number of times but couldn't. She simply couldn't hang up the phone, and she began to quietly weep.

"Marilyn?" he asked again in the same easy manner.

For a few seconds or so she felt suffocated, and when she finally began to reply, she truly thought she was going to tell him that she had made a mistake calling him out of the blue like this. But as soon as she tasted tears in her mouth, she found herself lost in the dreamy resonance of his echoing voice and an overpowering vision of his smile while giving him a day right off the top of her head.

"Next Friday?" he asked. "Hold on . . . Okay, looks good. Is 7:30 fine with you?"

As though she were in a trance of disordered confusion, she said that it was fine with her, too.

Although the rest of their conversation was a blur, she clearly remembered that only after softly replacing the receiver in the telephone's cradle and having herself a good long cry did she even think about Sandra, their little baby girl . . .

The bell announcing the "fasten your seatbelt" sign bonged through the cabin while the young flight attendant leaned over Luther's girth and tentatively tapped the sleeping woman above the elbow. "Ma'am? We'll be landing . . . Ma'am?"

Every detail of her heart's living history rushed back over Marilyn like a tidal wave that then receded just as fast. When all the voices in her head had diffused and died away, she suddenly shot straight up in her seat, her arms flailing wildly in the air, her mouth contorted by a silent but clearly hysterical scream. After throwing her purse to the floor, she then clenched the armrests so tight that you could tell she was wavering between the nauseous turmoil of her immeasurably distant memories and the reality of her actual surroundings. While the light in her tear-filled eyes waxed, waned, flickered then expired, the flight attendant's saccharin tinkling of laughter drowned out the low, incessant murmuring of the other passengers.

"We'll be landing in a few minutes so be a dear now and put your seat all the way up," the young woman told her as she moved on down the aisle, still laughing.

Marilyn didn't draw a breath until her last breath gave out. Her eyes were round, and one solitary tear trickled down her cheek as she regained the sense of where she was. Recognizing the flawlessly asymmetrical face giving her an appeasing smile as Luther's, she came all the way out of her past and into the here and now. Shuddering half in hope and half in dread, she glanced at her watch again and again and again and again like everything was lost but despair.

It was almost eight o'clock, and nothing seemed right, nothing seemed real.

The sense of strain and crisis about her grew, and the furious energy she put into dabbing at the tears now streaming freely down her cheeks with a crumpled old tissue was startling. At length she rested her forehead against the little round window as though the bottom just dropped out of her world.

Through the tear-stained gloom now veiling her vision, she glimpsed the regal majesty of Manhattan's glittering skyline gradually take shape against the billowing black clouds looming high in the darkening sky. All of the harbor's lights were glowing before their time, and she could see a multitudinous stream of automobile lights crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. When her eyes went to an invisible realm over in the distant horizon, she looked like someone who, although fully aware of who she was and where she was going, had nothing left to live for.

*

" . . . But that's only what I think anyways. So Sandra, what *are* you doing tonight?" her face alighting with hope, Patricia almost pleaded.

These seven words rushed upon Sandra and she shuddered to attention, spitting out a great mouthful of toothpaste before turning a deliberate but threatening calm upon her roommate.

There was an unpleasant silence and when there was no other reply, Patricia's expectant expression faded and she tottered for a moment, blinking rapidly.

"Sandra?" She hesitated a minute and, as Sandra remained unforthcoming but simply gave this creature a long cold look. She repeated herself, this time with more feeling: "Sandra?"

"What do you want?"

"So where are you going tonight?"

"Out."

"I know *that* but *where*?" she wanted to know after gurgling some mouthwash.

"The Club Quarters downtown of all the goddamned places," she snapped, arching her eyebrows. Any warmth she had retained from that afternoon's sun had long ago ebbed away like the tide, and she began masking her true feelings behind the attitude of expressionless bad humor she acquired when she spoke the following words: "Satisfied? Now leave me alone."

"But you haven't told me *who* you're going out with yet."

Rubbing some moisturizer all over her legs and arms and face, again Sandra waited for her roommate to continue, this time so she could listen to every last one of her words with complete indifference. Still waiting, she began brushing mascara onto her eyelashes.

"I was supposed to go out tonight too," Patricia finally began, yawning and stretching her body so it brushed up against Sandra's. "But I don't think I am. I've had a long day. A long week! Plus I've been going out a lot lately, partying down with my friends. But you can never party down too much can you?" she asked. "I don't think so," she replied, raising her hands to the side and, palms outward shrugging.

"So who *are* you going out with?

They both listened to the thunder.

"Isn't your ma coming into town?" Patricia persisted, looking at her roommate out of the corner of her eye.

Sandra blinked in surprise and looked rudely down her nose at her roommate's oddly upturned face, slamming the mascara onto the sink. When she spoke, her voice was hard and level. "How do you know that? Were you going through my shit again?"

Patricia blushed and hastily began scrubbing her face with a wet bath towel. "No," she said in a very small voice, avoiding her eyes.

"Don't go through my shit, Patricia, so help me God."

"I told you I never ever have. Except for that once. When are you going to believe me?" she cried, turning to Sandra, letting the bath towel fall to the floor unheeded.

They stood as far apart as possible, each gazing steadily at the other.

At length, Patricia turned back to the mirror and merrily began using the mascara. While trying to unclump her eyelashes, she broke the silence as though nothing had ever passed between them: "So. Your Ma's coming, huh? What about your father?" Sandra didn't answer, but in a few seconds, Patricia repeated her question.

"I don't have a father."

"But *everyone* has a *father* Sandra."

"My father," blurted Sandra before closing her eyes for a long moment and taking a series of deep breaths. She didn't want to make the mistake of revealing herself in any way, shape or form, so she summoned an expression appropriate for the sardonic words she so carefully chose and now uttered:

"Let's just say mine wasn't around much, okay?"

"That's too bad. I remember when my folks got divorced - "

"Drop it."

"Alls I was gonna say was - "

"And all I said was drop it," Sandra snapped, giving her a visceral look and another cold dose of silence before turning rudely away and rummaging through the cabinet for her deodorant and mousse.

But Patricia was so dense that she found no clear message in this. "So let me guess," she said. "You must've been one of those dark and brooding teenager types too, huh?"

"Don't start that line of bullshit," Sandra began with a tremolo of asperity before her own sharp gesture broke off the rest of her words, her face coloring with a rush of blood as all her dignity and calm melted away. Hardening her eyes, she turned all of her anger and resentment on her roommate. "We are nothing alike you and me, got it?" she said, letting her cutting words drop like an ax. "You're nothing but a big fat disgusting cow, so don't even start comparing yourself to me in any way, do you hear me?"

Patricia's eyes grew wide and she took a couple of steps back, plopping down soft and listless on the edge of the tub as if captivated by her own image of disbelief in the mirror. Only the expiring afterglow of a smile remained on her face when she nervously began to giggle a giggle that was devoured by the encroaching uncomfortable silence. She stared at Sandra with a frozen unbelief, but shortly she uncrossed her arms and wiped that look off her face, her eyes going soft and quizzical.

"Why do you keep staring at me like, like that?" she wondered before gasping in surprised concern. Heaving her bulk from its perch, she moistened a tip of the towel wrapped around her torso and frantically tried to stanch the thin stream of blood curling from one of her roommate's nostrils.

"What the Christ are you doing?" Sandra exclaimed, jerking her body away. Her roommate clutched at her arm again, but she managed to squirm away as if impelled by an animal fear, twisting her face in surprised contempt while she fought hard to keep this absolute maniac away. "Get your hands off me!"

"But but but," Patricia repeatedly said in a very small voice as she feinted and lunged, bobbed and weaved. "But but but but but - "

"I'll knock the living Jesus out of you!" Sandra's eyes were glassy with rage, and she made as if to haul off and wallop her one upside the head.

Patricia spun away like she actually did. Cowering away against the wall now, her mouth fell wide open and her eyes went hollow with shock before filling up with the painful tears of childlike insecurity.

The arteries in her temples throbbing, her nose still bleeding unchecked, Sandra stood fully erect in the center of the bathroom. Her hands were trembling, and she had broken out into a sweat. "You make me sick to my stomach, do you know that?" she spat in a voice reeking of disdain.

"But why?" Patricia slowly whispered, clasping her hands together, standing first on one foot and then on the other.

Sandra, who began tasting the blood accumulating in a corner of her lips with the tip of her tongue, remained aloof of this plea. She stared at the fat annoying pig with intense reproach until she dissolved in tears and fled, clutching her head and screaming, giving the general impression of someone going mad. Her implacable appearance softening in increments, she watched her roommate recede through the hallway's darkness before disappearing into her room. The whole ramshackle apartment grew silent but for the water dripping from a leaky faucet and the distant screeching of tires followed by a prolonged cacophony of horns when the sound of her door slamming shut faded.

She turned back to the mirror as if nothing had happened. "So I did that last night," she said softly, holding a wad of toilet paper to her nose, wondering what else - who else even - she could possible have done, before asking herself over and over again if it was she who was the crazy one.

Thunder continued rumbling in the distance, and when the blood ceased to flow, she pressed both eyes with the heels of her palms until blue and green stars streaked across this artificially near horizon.

*

William followed the patio's flagstones until they ended a quarter of the way around the front of the mansion. He paused under the scrolling ironwork gateway

while he twisted his gold wedding band off of his finger. As he skipped down the worn granite steps and cut briskly across the wide strip of lawn to her new Cadillac Seville, which was parked under the portico, he tossed it in the air from hand to hand without looking.

When he got into the car, he put the ring in the empty ashtray and then activated the car's lighter. He started the engine and began readjusting the seat and all the mirrors with the tip of just one finger. Then he took out a big fat Cuban cigar, which he unwrapped and stuck into his mouth.

While he drove out from under the portico, a delicate toy-like figure moved in silhouette across the massive bay window, and the corner of the curtains fluttered before parting slightly.

He drove down his long private drive to the road. It was lined on one side by a completely restored stone wall and a bed of well-tended rose bushes and rhododendrons on the other. Every once in a while, bits of gravel and mists of light spray ticked up under the fender and wheel wells. The constantly shifting patterns of shadow and fading rays of sunlight spilling through the canopy of oak trees dappled his face as he lit the cigar and puffed on it furiously to keep it alight. After adjusting the air conditioning to his liking, he settled comfortably into the soft Corinthian leather seats and turned onto the winding two-lane highway, following his estate's piked iron fence, which must have extended for a quarter of a mile.

He drove and smoked, tapping the ashes from the cigar into the palm of his hand before putting them in the front pocket of his coat rather than continually leaning forward and tapping them into the ashtray. Long green stretches of fairway were rolling by the car window when he realized that the stereo had been playing one sappy song after another and, although he began fiddling around with all the knobs, none of the combinations he stumbled upon permitted him the choice of silence. The tip of his cigar, which was clenched between his teeth now, remained glowing brightly. The only thing he could accomplish was turning off all of the speakers except for the ones all the way in the back.

Still simmering, he tried to relax, but he quickly gave up and began slamming his fists against the steering wheel in between at least three more increasingly frantic attempts to turn the damn thing off. And when he recognized "The Way We Were" and realized he had been listening to that goddamned Streisand this whole time, he punched the stereo hard, blinking twice in surprise when a CD came out.

Everything was now quiet, and William took the CD from the stereo and, holding it at arm's length, he squinted at its label bitterly before putting down the window and throwing the thing as far as he could. He put the window back up and watched from his windshield as the line between the land and sky slowly became indistinct and the shadows were extended to their longest. By the clock on the dashboard, it was about a quarter past seven, and he pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator.

Soon he began driving past tracts of housing which were little more than warehouses for human beings and strips malls and new industrial parks on either side of the road. Turning the car wherever it wanted to go, he ended up on an old harbor feeder road. It was empty of traffic and tarnished by years of neglect and an almost complete darkness. His headlights flickered along a dark line of railroad cars rusting away on the tracks and a freight-switching yard. He passed through a series of abandoned factory buildings and near empty warehouses separated from the road by fences topped with rolls of barbed wire.

This was immediately followed by acre upon acre of vast shipyards littered with the rotted black hulls of cargo ships and mountains of empty crates and garbage as far as the eye could see. One pile was on fire, and sent off an acrid reeking black smoke. In another shipyard, the red glare of burning flares could be glimpsed. Thickening shadows encased the crisscrossing cranes and derricks that stood like night trees between sky and sky and, as the last shades of twilight were heralding the night, he crossed a steel-framed bridge. Soon the horizon became filled by the beautiful glow of evening emitted by the Manhattan skyline, which was partially covered by dark clouds.

William noticed none of this.

The Cadillac's taillights grew small before disappearing over the crest of a hill in the distance.

*

During the full bracing pleasure of the city's own kind of silence, Sandra carefully washed the lingering residue of blood from her face with cold water and applied a bit of lip liner to exaggerate her natural pout. Then she brushed a little blush to the hollow of her cheeks, emphasizing the sharpness of her features. Now satisfied with this aspect of her appearance, she brushed the rest of the tangles from her hair and used a handful of mousse to deepen its dark spirals. She inhaled several kinds of perfume before choosing the softest.

After pausing to gaze in the mirror and make sure she hadn't forgotten anything, she turned off the bathroom light, blurring her face, making it unrecognizable. As she went back down the hallway, she ran her hands along the walls, loosening enough plaster to leave a white trail of dust swirling in her tracks. When she got to her room, she turned on the light and closed the French door behind her.

When Sandra found her wristwatch, she put it on. It was 6:34, and she really had to hurry or else she was going to violate one of her tight-assed mother's main tenants by being late, adding yet another transgression to a list of complaints as long as your arm. Slithering out of her robe with the hooks of her thumbs, she examined her nakedness for a while and then bustled around like a bride until she found the red dress (fortunately not too rumpled) slit well up one thigh she had been looking for. Its style was fashionably retro and, when she drew it over her head, it molded to all the curves of her body. She then selected black high-heeled mules that set off her red-tipped toes and, even before she put on a tasteful pair of silver hoop earrings, you could tell she wore all her clothes like a bothersome accessory she couldn't wait to wiggle out of.

She was stepping back in front of the mirror to give herself a tug or two here and a little adjustment there when the thunder reintroduced itself to her consciousness. Catching a glimpse of the heaven's ominous beauty, she went to the window as if drawn to this roiling cauldron of darkness and silent lightning. Her firm breasts pressed tight against the fabric of her dress when she stretched and gripped the window's frame with both hands. Although she struggled mightily, it was only after lifting her legs and dangling for a long moment was she able to shut it, almost breathless from the effort. She glanced at her watch: 6:42.

Shit.

"I'm going to have to spring for a cab if I'm going to have any chance of making it on time," she told herself before making sure she had enough money and some credit cards in her little black purse. On her way out of her room she grabbed a package of cigarettes as well as her keys. Before she can even close it softly behind her, though, she heard the spraying sound of water come echoing down the hallway. Under this was evidence of her roommate weeping convulsively, as though someone dear had just died, leaving her alone and scared.

Darkness pressed in on all sides, making a melancholy mood settle into Sandra's heart, and she peered down the hallway and into the even darker bathroom, but nothing could be discerned. "Thank God I'm not part of *that* scene," she said while tiptoeing hurriedly through the disgusting galley kitchen to the front door, which she shut with a precise little slam.

The landing was so small that, when Sandra came out onto it, she was already at the head of the stairs. It was empty and lit miserably by the fluorescent lights flickering in the foyer downstairs. She knew where there was a switch. But she also knew that it didn't work, so she didn't even bother with it. On top of this she saw that, for the third day in a row now, the elevator was out of order. She went down the steep narrow staircase, clinging tightly to the balustrade with one hand for the entire eight flights.

The dark air was thick and close with the terrible stench of boiling cabbage and onions and meat, ginger and boiling noodles and frying fat. The monotonous creaking of the elevator swaying on its cable and the sounds of her own pattering heels interfered with every one of her thoughts. Until suddenly she remembered how her grandmother told her once that men were actually the first to wear high heels to show power over other men. But when these powerful men began falling down every other step, heels quickly became a symbol of sexual subservience, and rich women wore them to show they didn't have to move.

Upon reaching the lobby, which was strewn with garbage and reeked of urine but well lit, a man began banging against a door on one of the landings above, screaming something at his bitch. "Men," she muttered under her breath as she leaned her shoulder against the triple steel-reinforced door and, straining with the effort, pushed out into this rigorously constructed metropolis' uncertain light.

Now amidst ordinary working people as well as those bone idle and bored, she paused in the middle of the sidewalk next to the bootleg videos arrayed in rows under a plastic tarp to light her cigarette. She tried to act like she didn't have much money, which wasn't too much of a stretch, that she was going nowhere in particular, and that everyone on the relatively torpid street was appreciating her easy, graceful movements.

All of the surrounding air and concrete still retained the heat of the day. Thunder rumbled ever closer, and the play of shadows made everything old and ugly. Two women in aprons, their hair done up in rollers, were hanging out their windows chatting across an alley to each other, every once in a while hollering at the flock of children to stop playing in the gutter water. The street was so wide it looked empty, and she caught a glimpse of a taxicab.

Waving her arms over her head, she hurried to the curb, scattering the pigeons being fed by an old man wearing a dirty seersucker suit almost in tatters, but the taxicab passed on by like she was black. When fat drops of rain began sizzling against the pavement, she ran under the awning of the building across the street.

This healthy, strong-looking woman stepped off the curb and into the splattering rain every time she tried to hail a passing taxicab, but all of them were occupied. Finally, right when she was about to give up and take the subway or bus, she was able to flag one down. It pulled to the curb a half block away and screeched to a halt. Covering the top of her head with her purse, she ran headlong to where it waited, the clatter of her heels echoing through the Upper East Side, her long black hair lifting off her back and neck with every one of her steps.

*

She's most definitely of, the cabby thought, giving her the once over as she settled into the backseat and crossed her naked legs, revealing the magnificent form of her flank. The vaginal persuasion, he concluded, grunting around the cigar reeking from his lips. As suddenly as the rain started it stopped, but the windshield wipers continued flicking back and forth. When he spoke, his voice held a distinctly phlegmatic Turkish echo.

"I was off duty, you know sweetheart? But I thought to myself, I thought anything for a girl in distress." His face bore the dregs of long-ago days of pugilism, and his rodent eyes, which were set deep in the recesses of his battered flesh, looked hard into her face, where he lost himself a second or two before pulling into traffic.

"Where you goin' tonight sweetheart?" he asked while they were passing Queen's Park Bridge.

"The Club Quarters down on Williams," Sandra told him, lighting a cigarette, sending a white cumulus formation into his steel gray cloud of smoke. When she took a deep breath, the pungent taste of the cabby's essence filled her mouth and lungs and, gagging, she coughed hard before taking another deep drag.

Ogling those legs seemingly stretching all the way to her neck in the rearview mirror, the cabby paid her outburst no mind. "Some weather here in this city this summer, no? Big storm tonight the news says will come," he rumbled, trying to get

something going. But Sandra only gave him a wan little smile before gazing out the window.

Whenever she wasn't sucking on her cigarette, she pressed her forehead against the pane and watched the city flowing down Second Avenue. She had just enough time to notice a man in bedraggled clothes pontificating and then arguing with himself on a corner, and she twisted around to see him dwindle in size and disappear before turning back around. She kept gazing through the windshield. All the lights were green, and she quickly found a place of rhythmic absorption in the blinking of the nervous taillights ahead.

Sandra had only been through one long and miserable winter in New York and, although they were still in the heart of summer, she began shivering at the mere thought of hearing the scrape of shovels against concrete, SUVs spinning their tires uselessly in snow drifts, and the feeling of stepping off a curb into a mound of slush. She opened her compact and, with one last shiver, plucked a stray hair or two from her eyebrows while waiting for these depressing thoughts to stop. After putting her compact away, she straightened and smoothed her dress. No matter what her mother said, there was no way in hell she was going back home again ever.

Never ever again.

The cabby watched wide-eyed as she hoisted one of her legs up and scratched the top of her foot. Then his face twisted before becoming taut. "I'll tell you one thing sweetheart," he began apropos of nothing. "Those niggas and spics where you live up there - Christ! They're all over! - They sure get riled up in this kind of weather is all I know."

Shocked out of her reverie, her eyes sought his in the rearview mirror and gave him a look of speechless reproof, which he construed as seductive. So she made a point of dropping her cigarette butt to the floor, crushing it under her heel, and coolly lighting another. A fairly long silence ensued before she turned her attention beyond the cabby to the contents of the windshield. The faceless crowds streaming past became more distinct as the traffic slowed to a trickle and then began to crawl.

One of her spaghetti straps slipped down unheeded when she leaned forward from the waist, revealing her dimpled shoulder in its entirety. "Look. I need to be there five minutes ago so can't you step on it or something?"

The cabby stared at the tops of her breasts with lascivious fascination as they scarcely persisted rolling along, his teeth almost splitting his cigar in two. He got ahold of himself and chuckled. "What do you want me to do sweetheart? Drive over it?" She shot him a searing look, and he added: "Look lady, they are installing those fucking fiber optic cables all over the place downtown and part of Liberty collapsed in the rain this morning early, can you believe that?"

"What? Then why'd you take me this way?" she cried.

He shrugged. "How many of those things can one city need?" he wondered as the traffic ground to an absolute halt a couple of streets up from Liberty. "This looks like the end of the line, sweetheart," he informed her, turning around to let his eyes roam wherever they chose as she searched the contents of her purse, listening to him in rude silence. "Unless you want to site here in the air conditioning and tell Big Daddy what a girl like you can do with legs like them."

Sandra cut her eyes sharply at him, giving him the full force of her most outraged stare, her entire attitude now becoming one of infinite patience as she waited for a moment too long. "You're a dirty sonofabitch," she informed him, crumpling a ten-dollar bill into a ball, throwing it against his leering face before flinging herself out of the taxicab.

The vision of her legs cutting across the street and through the seething downtown crowd in the rearview mirror was like putting a cherry on Big Daddy's sundae, and he smoked his cigar and enjoyed it. Before adding his two cents worth of choice comments to the cops barricading the street, he shook his head and twisted his face into what passed for a smile. "Women: You can't live with 'em and you can't shoot 'em neither."

*

As soon as Sandra stepped into the street's raucous mess, a suffocating humidity hit her across the face like a blast from a furnace. The incessant throb of immobile traffic and the beep-beep-beep of big trucks backing up as well as jackhammers came from every side, making everything its own. It drowned out the thunder as well as the lewd suggestions of the crew of slobbering men leaning on their shovels at the edge of a hole large enough to fit a good-sized truck. Skirting every puddle, she stalked through the closely moving masses, everyone seemingly of one countenance, of one age, all marching to the same tune. Shortly after the sun abandoned the whole vast horizon to the gathering dark turmoil of clouds, the shadows deepened everywhere, and this great ravening city arose and swallowed her whole.

*

William winked at the hostess and smiled warmly. "Looking good this evening as always, Jean, looking good," he said without breaking stride. He made his way through the crowded but largely sedate dining room to the bar as if he owned the place. Still smiling, but now even more broadly, he looked the bartender squarely in the eye and stuck out his hand.

"So you must be new here, no? I'm William."

"That's right," the young man replied as they shook. "Started last week. What'll you be having, sir?" he asked as he slapped a little white napkin down on the bar before this pompous ass.

"Dewars - And don't be shy with it either, understand? - With a splash of water."

"You got it, sir," he said, already reaching for the bottle. "Coming right up."

"Do you know what type of wood this is?" asked William, drumming his fingers on the bar.

The bartender set the highball on the napkin and then looked around. "I believe it would be mahogany, sir."

"It is indeed, good guess young man."

This backhanded compliment made the bartender wince, and he rubbed his forehead until his enmity had abated. "Thank you sir." He sounded tired.

"What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't. But you can call me Michael."

"You know Mike, since you're new here, let me tell you a little something," William began in a voice loud enough to be heard by anyone who cared to listen. For several moments, no one at the bar spoke but he. "Whenever I come here I feel right at home. Let me tell you why. My grandfather made his first million importing mahogany from Mexico. That was his business. And to settle a bet with Raymond Hood - He's the one who helped build this place for old man Rockefeller. Anyway, my grandfather had to make this here bar with the wood cut from the very best tree in all of Mexico."

In this man, Michael recognized the type of person to whom schmoozing and cajolery easily crosses over into arm-twisting and intimidation. "Is that so, sir?" he immediately replied in a voice that said this factoid didn't deserve a more considered response.

"There's even a legend that two Mexican sonsofbitches died because of it, too!"

Michael smiled politely before excusing himself with a nod and moving away down the bar, ostensibly to converse with the barback, who was tapping a keg. William turned and, resting his elbows behind him on the long brass rail that ran the length of the bar, surveyed his surroundings:

The good-sized room was furnished with eighteen or twenty tables, most of which had already been occupied for a certain amount of time. They were placed on levels of three different heights to take advantage of the view. Beyond the great glass wall now, though, the black mass of clouds' roiling tendrils mostly obscured the

bright skyline of Manhattan, which usually spread out alarmingly. Everyone present could have been described as well dressed, and most were partaking of sumptuous dinners. A party of several was sitting in one corner warming up for the evening and, at the far end of the bar, a small cluster of increasingly impatient businessmen, clearly from out of town, were awaiting someone's arrival.

Suddenly the dark heavens opened and it poured unceasingly for a minute or two.

Right when it came to an abrupt stop, a tall elegant girl appeared in the main entrance. Her sculpted chin held firmly erect, her hair a fine robe of lustrous silk streaming down her neck and cascading over her shoulders, she gazed around the dining room and then conversed with the hostess, who gestured toward the bar.

William seemed utterly captivated as this beautiful vision approached through the dim circular fields cast by the ceiling lamps, her breasts jiggling with such perfect freedom. Her magnificent legs cut through the swaying fabric of her dress, which made her look like she was dancing.

"Well I'll be damned," he said below his breath. Without taking his eyes off of her, he tilted his now empty glass toward the bartender who, after filling the little blond waitress' order, came over.

"Another one, sir?" he asked, already making it.

He lifted his hand and let it drop on the bar in reply, keeping his head cocked in the looker's general direction. "A fast thing like that must have a nice engine under the hood," he snickered, winking as if he and the bartender shared a secret. "The only thing I like better than a girl like that is two girls like that."

Michael's smile was, at best, faint. "Is that so, sir?" he said as he set down the highball, glancing at this man dubiously before moving down to the far corner of the bar where the attractive young woman in question was headed.

When she ascended one of the straight-backed barstools, and William leaned forward. "What'll you be having this evening, ma'am?" he heard the bartender ask.

Although he saw her lips moving, her reply was drowned by a loud outburst from one of the more intoxicated businessmen. While the bartender mixed her drink, she looked straight ahead but directly at no one, more prideful than common.

Age and affluence had dispelled William's reticence long ago, replacing it with a far from delicate arrogance. He glanced at his watch then around the entire room before once again regarding her quietly. It appeared that she had not noticed him in the least, but the way she was perched up on that stool with one leg scissoring over the other like that led him to believe otherwise. One hand went to his crotch and, while he squeezed, he bolstered his confidence with the weight of the memories of his past conquests and the eternal craving for evermore.

He leveled his gaze on her from across the bar. Every one of her movements made it look like she was anticipating pleasure and, when he caught her eye, he casually granted her a reassuring glimpse of the lovely white line of his teeth.

Raising her eyebrows, this beautiful little thing only looked toward the dim lights embedded in the ceiling, and then he watched while she made a show of taking a cigarette from her purse and looking along the bar for something to light it with.

Again William glanced at his watch and around the dining room. Oozing now with the self-assuredness of one who thinks he can have anything at anytime, he drained his highball. Patting his lips with a monogrammed handkerchief, he went to where she was pretending not to be waiting for him to make the first move. Still smiling, he made as if to bow at the waist and, one hand over his heart, he extended the fresh flame of his gold Dunhill lighter, maddeningly aware of his own elegance.

As she bent her head and lighted her cigarette, the young woman noted his diamond-studded Rolex and his imported Italian suit, and when she pursed her lips and blew smoke into the air at an upturned angle over his head, she seemed pleasantly surprised that, besides screaming money, this middle-aged man was handsome, too. "My. Aren't you a chivalrous gentleman," she said in her throatiest voice.

"I like to think so," he shyly replied, his smile now gleaming in his eyes. "Do I mind if I join you for a drink? It appears that my business partner isn't going to show."

"Feel free."

"Really?" he asked, letting himself linger in her suggestive blue eyes for a second too long. "My name's William. What's yours?"

"Sandra."

"Well hello Sandra."

"Well hello William." When he signaled for the bartender, she admired his broad powerful back and became more than aware of his strength, which could've crushed her.

"I'll have another, and bring my new friend here Sandra another of whatever she's having."

"Another rum and coke, ma'am?"

"No a Chivas on the rocks please," she quickly said out the corner of her mouth.

"Do you live here in town?" William asked after the bartender set down their drinks and went away. "Or are you just in town for a visit?"

"Nope, I live uptown."

Their hands bumped together when the both reached for the same napkin at the same time, and they each stared straight into the other's eyes, waiting for the other to look away or blush or both.

"What about you?" she asked after a long moment elapsed.

"Born and bred right here in Manhattan."

One of the straps of her dress slipped off the delicate trace of her creamy white shoulder, and he hastened to help her with it. Her soft skin put up a powerful resistance to his fingers somehow, and the intermingling fragrance of perfume and soap filtered its way through her cigarette smoke to his nose. The manner in which

she held her drink with both hands and nibbled at its glass lip made her nothing but lovely, almost too lovely to touch.

William leaned over and began talking into Sandra's ear, stringing together a lot of inventive, impressive sounding phrases, rubbing his hands together to keep them from going all over her body.

*

Right past a playground where no children played the sidewalks were teeming with people. A stumbling drunk woman in rags came from nowhere but out of the shadows and accosted a bum guarding the entrance to an alley with a garbage can lid. Each uttering meaningless oaths at the other, these two were a sharp contrast to all those dressed in suits strutting along with their heads thrown proudly back, their movements rote and uncomplicated.

Caught at a pace between a forced march and a jog while struggling along with her baggage, Marilyn made her way through this phalanx of our economy's anonymous engines building their fortunes on the bowed backs of the poor. Soon the individuals rushing her along became a darkened mob of shadows as the late evening greeted early nightfall with a downpour. Wherever she went, a searing white noise encompassed and pressed in on her. Although she struggled hard against humanity's clutches, for a moment it seemed that she couldn't escape.

Finally tearing free she disappeared through the Club Quarters' revolving front door, breathing hard. She hesitatingly stepped across the mosaic tile floor of the busy lobby as though everyone was well aware of her presence and angry. Soaked to the skin and altogether harried, she looked decidedly out of place as she waited with a rambunctious and unvarying group of well-dressed young men for the glass-walled elevator. When it came, they all somehow managed to squeeze aboard.

Marilyn followed the crowd off the elevator and into the restaurant. Just by the way she was standing there by the hostess' booth dripping wet, you could tell she was nervous with an unbearably despairing anticipation. She peered around the

dining room and then along the bar as if she were afraid of what she'd discover. Shortly she gasped and, unable to breathe any longer, she watched her little baby tug at her own father's sleeve with a carelessly suggestive gesture, her pretty mouth a little open, the glistening tip of her tongue bright and sharp as she replied to whatever he'd just finished whispering into her ear.

When William's fingertips grazed Sandra's bare back, Marilyn gave a horrified look, immediately recognizing what it was she was now witnessing. And, when he pointed to the dimple he could make in his cheek and Sandra leaned in close and pecked it a kiss, a soundless scream contorted her lips and her hands flew to her mouth.

Both suitcases fell clattering to the floor.

A deathly chill began creeping over her entire body, and she felt the air around her whispering sidelong. Her eyes narrowed before going wide and wild as the scene about her receded until only her now grotesque reflection was uncannily focused between their heads in the almost unbroken expanse of mirror behind the bar. She became entranced by the effort of tearing her eyes away, and suddenly she felt a strange exhaustion.

While caught in this all-encompassing limbo, Marilyn imagined Sandra twined around her father's naked torso, and the whole world seemed to lift and spin. She staggered forward a few steps before sprawling over a table and falling to the floor accompanied by a cacophony of breaking glass and shattering plates. Tearing at her hair now, she curled into a ball beside the upended table and dissolved into tears.

Half in reverie and half in waking, she started her life all over again, right at the point before William came in, and her laughter was finally freed from her throat.

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