A Collection of Stories
by Biff Mitchell

Tina and Her Talking Nipple
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Tina and Her Talking Nipple

Some people need to be taken down a peg or two, if not for their own good, then at least for the satisfaction of those of us who have to tolerate them.

Which brings us to Tina, who some would call beautiful, others would call stunning and still others would call breathtaking. But under the long blond hair, behind the deep blue eyes and under the surface of the perfect contours, Tina was a package of self-concern. In short, she was full of herself. She had a small red heart tattooed on her left thigh. Gracefully scripted white letters in the center of the heart spelled her favorite word:

Tina

Her relationships bombed quickly, with sex a one-act play starring Tina’s premature orgasm followed immediately by curtain call. She treated her lovers like a mean-minded employer who laid staff off before it was time to pay benefits.

She had no girl friends, self-absorption being one of those things that demands, well, self-absorption.

But these things sometimes come to a head and, for Tina, that head was the day her nipple started talking. It was the right nipple, the one she considered just a bit perkier than the other, the one she fondled most with her left hand when her right hand was between her legs in those quiet times of self-absorption.

She was in La Senza shopping for something that would look yummy in her mirror, when she heard a squeaky female voice say, “You need to get something red. Yeah, something cherry red … no … fire engine red, red like strawberries and ketchup. Red.”

She looked around. A young brunette rang in stockings for a heavyset woman watching the clerk’s every move and every number ringing in on the cash register. Another clerk rearranged clothing at the back of the store. There was nobody within twenty feet. She shrugged and picked up a thong that, one thread less, would have been lint.

“No, the red one,” said the voice. “You have lots of black. You need more red. Get the red one. Red. Red. Red.”

Not only could she hear the voice clearly, but as it spoke, her right nipple felt strange, as though it were shaking or twitching. She looked around again. There was nobody close, definitely nobody with a voice like that. Quickly, she scratched her right nipple with one of those wispy scratches, the kind that’s more likely to increase the itch, but they don’t look like you’re scratching, and Tina didn’t want to be caught scratching her nipple.

“Thank you,” it said. “That felt good. Now, get the red one. The red.”

Tina jumped, looking left to right and behind her. Nobody was there. She was alone. “Where are you?” she said.

“I’m here,” said the voice.

“Where’s here?” said Tina cautiously, noticing again the movement around her nipple at exactly the same time she heard the voice. She looked down. Two perfectly rounded breasts molded Tina’s black turtleneck into a billboard for fantasy. “You got it,” squeaked the voice. “I’m right down here. Now, we have to make a fashion decision. You need to go with the red. Men like red thongs. Oh, pardon me—wrong motivator. You like red thongs. You’ll look great
in a red thong. Think of all the quality mirror time. Maybe a photo opp. Go with the red, Tina, the red.”

And there it was again, movement under her sweater at exactly the same time she heard the voice. Her stomach tightened. She looked around again. No one was watching. She walked to the changing rooms, looked around, slipped in, ducked into the closest booth and locked the door. She lifted her sweater to reveal every man’s breast fantasy and every woman’s wish list. These were weapons grade bosoms, the kind to trigger wars and wooden horses. Tina stared at the right nipple. It was pink and erect, surrounded by rippled flesh, a masterpiece in balance and form.

The skin at the end of the nipple curled in and moved very much like the movement of lips when the mouth was talking. “Say… I’m not bad at all,” it squeaked. And Tina would have sworn that the nipple was actually pointing toward the mirror, as though it were looking at its reflection. “I’d look great under a red bra.”

Tina looked quickly and down the walls surrounding her. “Who are you?” she said.

“Who do you think I am, Tina? I’m your nipple.”

“No you’re not. Nipples don’t talk.” She looked around the booth again, then examined her sweater closely. “Who are you? Who’s doing this? How are you doing this?”

Again the end of her nipple moved and the voice said, “I’m your nipple, Tina. And we’re going to have lots of fun together—shopping and going to movies and going on dates with boys and having sleepovers and taking long leisurely baths and going to the beach and…”

“Shut up!” said Tina. She closed her mouth quickly and listened, thinking Did they hear me? The last thing she needed was to have two La Senza clerks overhearing her talking to her nipples. Satisfied that no one had heard, she whispered, “Breasts don’t talk. Who’s doing this?”

“I’m not a breast. I’m just part of a breast. I’m your right nip…”

“Nipples don’t talk!” said Tina. I must be dreaming, she thought. She pinched the nipple.

“Ouch!”

There was something about the tone of the squeal and the movement at the end of her nipple as it enunciated the word that convinced Tina that her nipple was, yes, really was, talking.

“Why did you pinch me?” said her nipple.

She stared into the mirror with her sweater up over her breasts trying on this new reality like a piece of clothing she might decide was too loud, wrong for her eyes, or just not her. She decided that it wasn’t her. She wouldn’t be buying it. No, she would put it back on the shelf and look for something else. Talking nipples weren’t in season.

“What are you thinking about, Tina?” said her nipple. “Are you thinking about the red thong? I really like the red thong. It would look great on you. Why don’t you just buy the red thong and we can maybe go to the food court and get something with tofu in it.”

That was enough of that. She pulled her sweater down. She’d had her fill of talking nipples. She brushed by the clerk who’d been rearranging shelves at the back of the store, a too-skinny girl with eyes that were too wide, who was now eyeing the changing room, looking for the person with the squeaky voice she’d heard talking to the stuck-up blond.

Tina marched out of the store and into the early evening quiet of the mall. A sparse crowd of shoppers milled aimlessly, not buying, just looking and milling. Tina wasn’t sure if this was a good thing, or if it would be better to have the commotion of a Saturday afternoon to drown out the voice from her chest.

“You should have bought the red thong,” said the nipple. “Why didn’t you buy the red thong? It was made for you. Are we going to the food court now? Can we get some frozen yogurt?”
A tall man with a red ball cap stared at Tina. Shit, she thought. “Can you please keep it down? People are staring.”

“But people are always staring at you, Tina. You’re so beautiful people can’t stop from staring at you. I don’t want to be anybody else’s nipple. I’m a nipple on the most beautiful woman in the world and I can’t tell you how proud that makes me feel, Tina. So…can we go to the food court now?”

Tina quickened her pace and walked out the main exit into the parking lot. “Oh boy!” said the nipple. “We’re going for a drive! I love going for drives. Where’re we going? Can we go to the beach? Can we go swimming? I love swimming. Can we buy veggie dogs and smother them with organic mustard?”

This isn’t happening to me, thought Tina. I’m having a bad dream. Somebody slipped drugs into me. I’m stressed out. I haven’t been paying enough attention to myself.

“What’re you thinking about, Tina? Are you thinking about all the fun we’re going to have at the beach, running through the surf and building sand castles and looking for shells and…”

“Why are you doing this to me!” yelled Tina. Her eyes darted around the parking lot to make sure no one was listening. With the exception of a few dozen cars and vans, the parking lot was as empty as the mall. “I haven’t done anything to deserve this. I gave at one of those Santa things.”

“Oh, Tina, you’re so funny when you want to be. So, are we going to the beach? There’s still enough sun left for an hour or so and then we could go to a coffee shop or something, maybe get a veggie sub or…”

“How are you doing this?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Nipples don’t talk. How are you doing it?”

The nipple was silent for a moment.

“What are you doing?” said Tina.

“Thinking,” said the nipple.

“Thinking about what? Nipples don’t think.”

“You asked me how I was talking and I was trying to think about how I was talking but then you tell me I can’t think. Well, Tina, you’re right. I can’t think. I can’t think because you keep interrupting me so will you puuuulease give me a little space here.”

“Don’t take that attitude with me,” said Tina. “You’re my nipple and I want you to stop talking. I want you to stop talking right now.”

She stood by her car—a white convertible Porsche with pink trim and pink interior—hand on the door latch, listening. She looked down at the surface of her sweater, at the bump of her right nipple. She waited a few moments before opening the door and slipping into the custom pink leather seat. She looked around. She loved her Porsche. It was so much like her—perfect. She never actually put the top down. That would hair disaster and it might trigger some sort of unfortunate makeup event—not that she used much makeup, perfection being a hard thing to improve upon. She turned the key. The engine hummed. She put the car in gear, eased up on the clutch, fed her baby some gas. She was in her Porsche. The voice was gone. Things were as they should be. She was the gorgeous blond in the white Porsche men would dream about for days after seeing her for just a flicker of a second as she breezed by like a hot dream. She relaxed into the soft leather of her seat as she eased into traffic and Kenny G oozed out of the sound system. Things were back to normal. She breathed easy.

“Got any Rock n’ Roll, Tina?”
She slammed on the breaks. A blue Punch Buggy almost rear-ended her, swerving to the side, horn blaring, and missing by inches. She slammed her hands down on the steering wheel. “Go away!” she yelled. “Just go away! Leave me alone! Why are you doing this to me?”

“Does this mean that we’re not going to the beach?” said her nipple.

“The beach! The beach!” Tina grabbed her right breast and squeezed. It hurt, but she didn’t notice. “We’re not going to the beach, you little shit. Forget the beach!” She shook her breast twice and noticed people on the sidewalk staring at the crazy beautiful blond lady shaking her breast and talking to it. She let go and screeched away, leaving the Punch Buggy driver swearing and checking the front of his car for dents.

“You really need to calm down, Tina,” said the nipple. “Have you ever heard of road rage? Do you want people to accuse you of road rage? And if you didn’t want to go to the beach, all you had to do was say so. I don’t think I feel like going to the beach now, anyway. Sun’s too low. Maybe we could go to that coffee shop now?”

“There’s no way I’m going anywhere public with you yakking your head off, or whatever it is…” She tossed her arms up. The car swerved. She grabbed the wheel angrily. “I’m talking to my tit!” she screamed. This time she didn’t bother to look around to see if anyone was watching her. She didn’t care.

***

Tina’s apartment was like her car, expensive and perfect. Mirrors strategically scattered through the white and pink furniture provided non-stop affirmation of her sense of self, backed up by elaborately framed pictures of Tina-this and Tina-that. Her apartment was a tribute to self-absorption where even the most confident men felt threatened, as though her pad would swallow them, chew them up and blow out pink spit balls. Being pigs, this didn’t stop them from wading through the pink fangs of emasculation and heading straight for the big round bed in her bedroom.

It was white. With pink pillows.

(By the way, Tina couldn’t really afford digs like hers, or the car. She had rich parents who doted on her, worshipped her, and spoiled her. They gave her money and credit cards. They stayed out of her life until she needed something. They were the perfect parents—for Tina.)

“Cool digs,” said the nipple. “You should…”

“You should shut up,” said Tina. “Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is? To have my own breast…”

“Nipple…”

“I said shut up! You’re so annoying. You’re like…like something sticky I can’t shake off my finger. You’re like…”

“What can’t you shake off your finger, Tina?”

“Nothing! It’s just a…” She stomped into the bedroom as she pulled her sweater off. It wasn’t a hard stomp, more like a well-placed stomp, a stomp with purpose and grace, a perfect stomp. She stood topless in front of her dresser mirror. She stared at her perfect body, the perfectly rounded shoulders, the perfectly wasp-like waistline, the perfectly indented bellybutton, the perfectly muscled arms, the neckline that streamed so perfectly out of the top of her body and into her perfectly sculpted jaw and, for a moment, she almost forgot that her nipple talked.

“It’s just a what, Tina?” A very short moment.
Suddenly, a thought occurred to her, something that might shed some light on the situation.

“Why haven’t you spoken to me before?” she asked.

“Should I have?”

“You shouldn’t be speaking to me now. Why did you suddenly start?”

“Which question do you want me to answer first? Why I haven’t spoken before or why I suddenly started?”

“Just answer the question!”

“Which one, Tina?”

“Either one! Just answer me? Why did you suddenly start talking to me?”

“Oh, so that’s the question you want me to answer first, is it?”

“What?”

“Why I suddenly …”

“Just answer the fucking question!” Tina slapped a finger to her mouth and stood, frozen, face astonished. She’d said the F word. The F word. Someone as perfect as Tina never used the F word—it wasn’t in her vocabulary. It was somebody else’s word. It was the word that men thought of when they drooled over her in their dirty little minds. It was something she heard in the movies or on television or on the streets or other public places, or on the radio, in rap music, but it was never something that passed through the finely crafted layers of lip gloss that accentuated the perfection of Tina’s mouth.

“You made me say the F word. You made me use the F word!”

“And you were really good at it, Tina. You should have heard yourself. You sounded really really forceful and, like, what’s the word for it. Oh yeah…pissed. You sounded so pissed, Tina. I was getting shivers in my…”

“I don’t use that word! Ever!”

“But you just…”

“You…just made me use it! I want you out of my life…now!”

“You want me to leave?”

“I want you to leave!”

Tina’s nipple thought about this for a moment. “OK.”

Tina cocked her head to the side. She narrowed her eyes. She stared down at her right nipple.

She said, “You’ll leave?”

“If that’s what you want, Tina.”

“OK then. Just…leave.” She stood with her hands on her hips, tapping her index fingers against creamy flesh. It was about time to end this foolishness. This had not been a good evening. She hadn’t even bought anything at the mall, no shopping bags filled with clothing littered the foot of her bed. This had been a terrible night, all because of a talking nipple. She waited a minute before saying, “Are you gone?”

“Do I look gone?” said her nipple.

“I mean…are you gone? You! Are you gone?”

“Tina?”

“What!”

“How do I leave?”

“I don’t know. How did you get here?”

“I don’t know. How did you get here?”

“I was born. I had a mother and father. They had sex. My mother got pregnant. Nine months later I was born. That’s how I got here. But you…you’re not even supposed to be here.”
“You’re not supposed to have a right nipple? That would look awfully silly, Tina.”
“Okay, you’re such a little brat! I am supposed to have a right nipple. I have a right nipple. But
my right nipple isn’t supposed to talk. You’re not supposed to talk. You’re supposed to just sit
there at the end of my right breast and make men pop their corks!”
“Is that really what you want to do to men, Tina, make them pop their corks?”
“That’s none of your business! That’s…”
“But if you want me to do that for you, then it is my business, isn’t it?”
Tina grabbed her breast again, hard. It hurt. She flinched. The pain made her angrier. She
pulled it up toward her mouth. “No it’s not! It’s my business! My business! Not yours! Mine! Go
away! I want you to go away and never come back.”
“Now, of course, they love you.”
“I want you to.” She loosened the grip on her breast. “What?”
“Your parents. They love you. They’ve always loved you, no matter how badly you’ve treated
them.”
“What’s that got to do with anything?”
“You just said they’re how you got here.”
“So?”
“So, you should treat them a bit differently. You should…”
“Don’t tell me what I should do! I don’t need to be told what to do. You…you should get lost.
You should stop talking…and…and tickling me at the end of my…”
“Is that what I do, Tina? I tickle you?”
“I’m not going there!” She threw her arms up, a movement that made the curves of her body
shimmer and quake with just the right amount of tension to create the perfect balance between
muscular insistence and sensual yielding. This, also, was something that would make men pop
their corks. “I was at the mall. I was enjoying myself. I was looking at lingerie and…”
“You should have gotten the red thong, Tina. It would have looked great on you. You could be
modeling it for yourself right now.”
“Forget the red thong! That’s it! I’m getting out of here!”
Tina stormed to her bathroom, stripping clothing angrily from her body and tossing it onto the
plush white carpet, and what transpired between woman and nipple in the shower will remain
forever in the shower. But, at this point, Tina was ready to try anything.

***

“Remember,” said Tina. “You promised.”
“I won’t forget, Tina. What you did to me in the shower was so…so…so really really cool.
Was it legal?”
“Probably not. Now, you have to keep quiet. I mean it. No talking.”
Laser lights slashed the air around them. A continuous onslaught of blasting that was meant to
pass as music shook the floor violently and nearly sucked the air out of Tina’s lungs. She stood
majestically under the floodlight at the top of the short stairway leading to the main floor where
people pretended they could hear others talking to them at tall skinny tables that barely held
themselves up let alone a glass of beer or a Pina Colada— but were somehow packed with drinks.
The dance floor writhed with a turbulent mash of flesh and designer synthetics. Tina glanced
around casually, assuming her air of Beauty and the Boredom, bathing in the glow of attention
that out-heated the floodlights. Just by standing there, she destroyed relationships. Women
elbowed their men back to earth. Other women thought about dumping their men and crossing over.

“They’re all looking at you, Tina. You’re the star of the night, the center of atten…”
“Your promise?”
“Sorry.”

Tina stretched a devastatingly long leg wrapped in sheer black nylon onto the first step and let the rest of her body—which was also tightly wrapped in black—flow down the stairs after it. A tiny bald man sitting by himself and just about to sip from a Margarita in a wide-lipped plastic glass, squeezed so hard that he broke the glass and spilled green tequila and lime over his white shirt, but he didn’t notice. Men on the dance floor stepped on their partners’ toes. It seemed like Tina walked down those stairs forever. Two thousand corneas strained to keep up with what their irises were seeing in a thousand pairs of eyes. It was a big club. And right now it was full of Tina.

And Tina, of course, was full of herself.

She strode confidently across the floor to the bar and it seemed the music suddenly played for her even though it came from a CD in a tiny room at the top of the club where the disk jockey eyed Tina through the bullet-proof glass of a circular booth. He’d been watching her for months, dreaming about her, fantasizing about her, watching her dance and pick up men. He wanted to announce her name, to let everyone in the building know she was here, but that would bring attention to him. She might want to see him and then she would find out that the man behind the cool DJ voice that made women cream their panties weighed over three hundred pounds and had an extreme case of facial psoriasis.

He kept his peace.

Tina’s nipple didn’t. “They’re still look”
“Shhh” She tried to shush her nipple as quietly as possible, without drawing anyone’s attention, but that, of course, is a tall order for someone who just happens to be the center of attention wherever attention can be centered. Dozens of people in her path noticed her lips open to let the shush out. For some, it was just about the most erotic thing they’d ever seen, those perfectly rendered lips, full and sensual, reaching into the air as though to wrap around…

“Did that man over there just pop his cork?” said her nipple.

Fortunately, not only was the music loud enough to drown out the lack of substance in the conversations going on at the tables surrounding the dance floor, it was loud enough to blot out the sound of Tina’s nipple. But Tina heard it, and for just a brief moment it distracted her precise movement across the floor. She missed a step and nearly faltered. It wasn’t a big movement, it was barely noticeable. Maybe half a dozen people noticed a change in the rhythm of her movement, and they were all men. In their minds, they were doing anything but judging her grace.

But Tina knew. Her nipple had just cramped her style. Her nipple had just detracted from the perfection that she had spent an entire lifetime cultivating. That little flea of a nipple was jeopardizing everything. She did something she never did. She changed direction, abruptly. Regular Tina-gazers in the club were dumbfounded.

She walked straight across the dance floor, and into the women’s washroom.

It was an upscale washroom, a washroom designed and maintained meticulously for a clientele that nightly snorted enough snow to finance small wars. The lighting was soft, the air smelled like wild cherries, the cushioned tile all but massaged the feet, and the music was loud enough to
puncture eyeballs. Tina walked directly into a stall painted tastefully in dark olive with light brown trim. Its tastefulness was lost on her.

She grabbed a thin black strip of material that barely made her dress legal and pulled it away from her nipple. “I’m getting really angry, you little bitch! You promised me that you would keep your mouth shut! I gave you a Triple X massage!”

Outside the stall, several women with white noses looked at each other, smiled and nodded knowingly.

“I’m sorry, Tina. I couldn’t help it. You’re so beautiful and you looked so striking in the spotlight. Everybody was looking at you. Everybody was drooling over you. They all wanted to have sex with you. They…”

More heads lifted up from the long white lines and turned toward Tina’s stall. “Who does she have in there?” whispered a busty brunette with dilated eyes. A pink-haired woman with bits of powder dripping from her nose shrugged her shoulders.

“Will you please shut up! Why are you doing this to me? Why don’t you go and make somebody else’s life miserable?”

“Oh Tina, you know I can’t do that. I’m a part of you. I belong to you. And I’m so happy to be a part of you, Tina. In fact, I’m going to tell the whole world…”

“No!”

“I’m Tina’s right nipple! I’m Tina’s right nipple! Everybody…”

“Shut up, you little bitch!” She pinched her nipple hard.

“Mmf?” said the nipple.

Outside the stall, a crowd was growing.

Tina’s face twisted in pain. It was her nipple, mouthy or not, that she was squeezing, and she was feeling the pain. But she squeezed harder. It was time to leave.

She waded through a dozen women gathered around her stall, all looking innocent and otherwise occupied when she opened the door after releasing the grip on her nipple and flipping the thread of material over it. She felt her nipple taking a deep breath, getting ready to say something. She pushed through the crowd. When she was out the door, the crowd peered into the stall to see the bitch who thought she was Tina’s right nipple.

***

“Where are we going, Tina? You’re driving way over the speed limit, you know. You could get a ticket, Tina. Why are you so quiet? And why did we leave the club so soon? We didn’t even get to dance once. There were lots of really good looking boys there, Tina. We could have gotten lucky tonight. Some of them were losers, but some of them looked really promising…Tina? Tina? Where are we going? Speak to me Tina.”

***

“Mom?”

“Tina?” The middle-aged woman standing in the door of the big white house with the massive pillars out front was well tanned and a looker in spite of the lines around her eyes and mouth, though not as much a looker as Tina, but then, who was? “Is there something wrong, dear?”
Tina walked past her into a magnificent hall with a mahogany-balustraded staircase that fanned majestically to left and right. Her mother used the right; her father, the left. Tina used whichever she pleased. Her mother said, “What is it, darling?”

Tina’s nipple said, “Tina’s having a bad day, Mom.”

Tina’s mother thought a moment. “Is there something wrong with your throat, dear? You sound strange.”

“No, Mom,” said Tina. “There’s nothing wrong with my throat. My throat’s fine. It’s my nipple that’s all screwed up.”

A well-tanned middle-aged man with a salt and pepper moustache walked into the hall with a pipe in his hand. “Tina! What brings you here?”

“It’s her nipple, John,” said Tina’s mother. She looked at Tina. “Which one did you say it was, dear?”

Tina stamped her foot, just like she’d done all her life at her parents’ place. “It won’t shut up!” she said. “It just keeps talking and talking.”

Tina’s father pressed the mouthpiece of his pipe against his lower lip. There was no smoke surrounding it. In fact, there was no tobacco in it. There never was. He didn’t smoke, but he did like his pipe. With a voice steeped in the wisdom of fatherhood, he said, “Have you been taking your vitamins, dear?”

Tina thought a moment. Her father was generally wise about things related to vitamins. After all, he never actually smoked that pipe. But she wasn’t one to think long. She stamped her foot again. “It’s nothing to do with vitamins. Why does everything with you have to be about vitamins? It’s my little brat nipple.” She glared at her mother. “The right nipple. It won’t stop talking. It’s embarrassing. Do we have some kind of family curse?”

Her mother shook her head slowly as she thought and said, “No, Tina, dear. At least, not recently.” She looked at her husband. “John?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t think it would be that, dear. She’s much too young.”

Her mother tightened up like someone with an idea freshly stuffed into her brain. “And you have been taking your vitamin pills, dear?”

“Yes, Mom, I’ve been taking my vitamins! Will you and Dad stop with the vitamins! I don’t need vitamins. I need for my tit to stop talking!”

“Now, Tina,” said her father. Her mother looked mildly shocked but didn’t say anything. “You really shouldn’t talk that way in front of your mother.”

“He’s right, Tina,” said her nipple. “That’s no way to talk in front of your mother.”

“Listen to your nipple,” said her father, nodding agreement. He put the pipe to his mouth and chewed on the mouthpiece as he thought. His chewing was slow and relaxed, the kind of chewing almost certainly to be followed by fatherly advice, possibly with a reference to vitamins.

“Your Dad sure does look dignified when he chews on his pipe, doesn’t he, Tina?”

“Will you please shut up!” yelled Tina.

“Now, Tina, you really shouldn’t be so harsh with your nipple,” said her father, who liked that somebody had finally noticed that he looked dignified with his pipe. “Remember…how you treat your nipple is how you treat yourself.”

Tina stared at her father. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “In case you haven’t noticed, my nipple isn’t supposed to talk. Nipples don’t talk. They don’t talk, Dad. They don’t talk!”
“I think your father understands, dear,” said her mother. “Would you like some pink lemonade, Tina?”

“That sounds really yummy,” said Tina’s nipple. “Some pink lemonade would…”

“I don’t want any pink lemonade! I don’t want anything except for my pestering little nipple to shut up!”

“A cookie, dear?”

“OOOOOOOOOOh!” said Tina. She threw her arms up and stormed out of her parents’ house. As she left, they looked at each other and nodded their heads.

***

Tearing down the street fast enough to leave a wake of dust devils, Tina banged her hands on the leather-bound steering wheel. Just the tiniest ripple of inelegance crept into the movement of her hands descending onto the wheel. Tina noticed this. It fueled her anger.

“You should try to relax when you’re driving,” said her nipple. “You don’t want to have an accident, Tina.”

Tina ignored her nipple. She was thinking. There had to be something she could do. There had to be somewhere to go. There had to be somebody she could talk to. A specialist. Somebody who knew about nipples. And then she had it…the Natural Wellness Mall. An entire mall devoted to mental, physical and spiritual health from massage to transcendental meditation. Two blocks of certified naturalpaths, certified shamans and those who were just plain certifiable.

It would have taken a cabbie looking for a hundred buck tip an hour to get there. It took Tina twenty minutes. On the way, she learned something new. Nipples could scream.

***

The main entrance to the Natural Wellness Mall was a polyethylene tribute to everything wrong with what people think is right about wellness. It was late but the mall was open all night. Annoying sitar music crinkled the air as a plastic waterfall sprinkled chlorinated water into a pool of scum-coated water lilies. The lilies, of course, were plastic. Yes, thought Tina, if there’s anybody on the planet who can help me, that person will be here.

She ran a long perfectly manicured nail down a neon list of live-forever-in-peace-and-harmony service providers. She ran her nail past Steel Penis Qi Gong, Transcendental Whale Sex, Five Finger Stab To Wellness Dance, Intermediate God Walking, and then, there it was, Talking Nipple Exorcism.

Talking Nipple Exorcism. South Wing. Fifth Floor. Room Seven. Finally, somebody who would understand her and maybe even help her.

Her nipple had been quiet for a while now, still in shock from the ride to the mall.

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The withered little woman sitting across from her must have been at least a hundred years old, maybe two hundred. Tina was certain that if she were to touch the yellowed skin attached to the protruding bones it would crumble into dust. Bits of scraggly white hair jutted out of her head. She smelled like fish and incense. Her eyes were hidden under a protruding brow and mounds of wrinkles.
The room was windowless. Dark rugs with Eastern themes hung from the walls. They smelled just like the old woman, maybe less fishier. The old woman’s voice crackled like something crawling out of a time before time. “Have you been taking your vitamins?”

Tina thought for a moment. Did she really ask me that? When she was sure that it was really what the old woman had said, she leaned across the table, stared murderously into the old woman’s eye pits and said, “Mention vitamins again and I’ll dig my fingernails into those two holes you call eyes.”

“Now, Tina, that’s no way to treat your elders,” said her nipple.

Spots of yellowy white appeared in the old woman’s eye sockets. Her mouth opened around cracked brown teeth. “It talked!”

“Of course it talked,” said Tina. “Why else would I be here? Can you get rid of it?”

“Get rid of your nipple?”

“No, smelly old lady…I want to keep my nipple. I just want it to stop talking. Can you make it stop talking?”

“It really talked.”

“Yes, it really talked. Why are you so surprised? You’re supposed to get rid of it. You do this all the time, don’t you?”

The old woman’s head bent slightly toward the table. Her withered lips clenched and unclenched and clenched again like they wanted to say something but were on a tight chain from the brain. She coughed a cough that could have originated in the center of a desert that had not seen rain since the dawn of time. Her wrinkled head raised slowly and Tina could see two embers of light in the recesses of her eyes. It chilled her. The old woman spoke. “Well, dear, I know the theory.”

“The theory?” said Tina.

“There’s a theory about me?” said her nipple.

“I’m not sure there’s ever been a talking nipple to exorcise,” said the old woman.

“Then why have a studio for Talking Nipple Exorcism?” said Tina.

“Well, we like to be prepared for anything.”

“So, you don’t know if it works or not,” said Tina.

“In theory, it does.”

“In theory, it does,” said Tina sarcastically. “This is no damned theory, old woman! My nipple’s talking and I want it to stop! Can you make it stop?”

Calmly, the old woman looked Tina in the eye and said, “There’s only one way to find out…” Tina hung at the end of her words for a moment, but the old woman seemed to be zoned out.

“I’d like to get this done sometime in this century,” said Tina.

“That’s not a very nice tone to…” said her nipple.

“Shut up! You’re the one who’s making me crazy this way.” She leaned forward, her face less than a foot away from the old woman. The smell of fish overcame the smell of incense and there was something else in there…the staleness of age? “I want you to do the exorcism. I want you to do it right now. Right now.”

A ripple spread across the wrinkles in the old woman’s face. Still sitting, she backed away from Tina. “It needs preparation,” she said. “It takes careful planning. You need to approach this with an attitude of…”

“Right now!”

“Maybe you should listen to her, Tina. These things…”

“Shut up! You have no say in this.”
“Easy for you to say...you’re not the one being exorcised.”
“I'll pay you double,” said Tina.

The old woman’s lips twisted into a crinkled smile. “Did I mention the Quick Start Talking Nipple Exorcism?” She stood up slowly, bones cracking and snapping. The smell of fish grew stronger. “Follow me.”

She led Tina through a curtain of black beads into another room hung with rugs, these ones showing strange animals with horns and scales and large teeth. Tina felt her nipple tremble.

“You better be worried, you little bitch. I’m going to shut you up for good.”

“Does this mean we’re not going to be buddies, Tina?”

Smiling cruelly, Tina ignored the question.

“No beaches?” said her nipple.

Silence.

“No yogurt and veggie dogs?”

Determined silence.

“No.”

“No talking tit!” yelled Tina. “Can we do this now?”

“Please,” said the old woman, gesturing to a mottled green sofa. “Lie down.”

Tina eyed the filthy piece of furniture. She didn’t want germs contaminating her dress, and something that looked like that had to be a germ factory.

“You’re not really going to lie on that?” said her nipple.

Tina walked to the sofa and lay down. It was surprisingly comfortable even though it smelled like incense and fish. The old woman sat on a rickety wooden chair by Tina’s feet. She closed her eyes and breathed loudly and deeply for several breaths.

“Is she going into a trance, Tina?”

Tina ignored the nipple. The old woman drew in a deep breath and let it out long and slow as she opened her eyes. “Pull down the top of your dress.”

“What?” said Tina.

“The nipple must be visible.”

“I’m not...”

“Do you want to be rid of this curse?” said the old woman.

Reluctantly, Tina pulled down the top of her dress. She was braless. Two perfectly balanced breasts, complete with perky ups wings—the kind that make men pop their corks—stared at the astonished old woman. One of the nipples stretched out from the redness of its breast ring, its tip folded and moving unnaturally. “Tina sure does have beautiful breasts, doesn’t she?” said the nipple.

The old woman clutched her chest. What little color she had drained from her face. Her eyes widened and froze. Her body slumped into her chair like a sack of potatoes. She looked like she was about to say something, but she would never get the words out.

She was dead.

***

She lay on her bed naked. Except for her right breast. It was covered haphazardly with duct tape. Bits of loose cotton peeped through the swatches of tape. It was going to hurt like hell when she took it off. She wondered if she would have to go through her whole life with her breast taped.
She could feel that nasty little vermin twitching and turning under the tape, its voice muffled. She was exhausted.

She might have been into a little self-absorption before sleep. It was a good way to relieve stress. But not tonight. Tonight she felt like a stranger inside her own body. She felt detached from herself, at odds with the perfection that had suffused her life for twenty-two years.

The muffled voice seemed far away as she lost conscious and fell into a deep sleep.

***

“Time to wake up, Tina!”

She bolted upright, eyes round, staring straight ahead. The tape was off her breast, bunched up under her right arm. “Mom?” she said, and then remembered. Her nipple. It was talking. Driving her crazy. Spoiling her life. Talking. Her nipple. Her nipple had scared the old woman at the Natural Wellness Mall to death and then Tina had just gotten up off the smelly old couch and walked out without even calling the police. Somebody would find her. Somebody else would call the police. She’d left the Mall and driven around for hours, trying to ignore her nipple. It kept talking and talking and talking. She’d come home and taped her breast. And now the damn thing was free again. And talking.

“It’s Friday, Tina. What’re we going to do special today? It’s sunny out. We could go to the beach. Maybe shopping? Maybe we could take cabs today, Tina. I don’t want to complain about your driving, but…”

She slapped her breast hard enough that both she and her nipple ouches in unison.

“You have to stop doing things like that,” said her nipple. “Remember what you father said…how you treat your nipple is how you treat yourself. Maybe you should…”

Tina grabbed the balled up tape and pushed it into her breast.

“Umph!” said her nipple.

“There’s got to be some way to get rid of you,” said Tina.

“Umph!”

“I can’t go through the rest of my life with you yakking and yakking.” A sense of dread crept through her belly at the thought. If her nipple could talk now, then why couldn’t it talk forever? Who put time limits on the impossible? And how could she get away from herself? She couldn’t. She was stuck with this. But there had to be something she could do. There had to be a way back to the way things were. Nipples weren’t supposed to talk. There had to be a way to undo this. What was it? Pressing the tape and cotton against her breast, she swung out of bed and shuffled to the washroom.

Shuffled.

***

“Do you think you could turn the hot down just a little, Tina? I’m not sure if a shower this hot is really good for your skin. Don’t you think it might dry your skin out, or maybe you’ll sweat too much and have an episode or something? Are you going to finish off with a cold shower, Tina? That’s really good for the pores, you know. Closes them up so that dirt and stuff can’t get in and…”

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“I really love driving in your car, Tina. Everything is so...pink. It makes me feel so omph inside. Does it make you feel omph inside too, Tina? Are we going to get something healthy to eat today? I like eating healthy food, stuff that’s low in saturated fats and has lots and lots of fiber. Fiber is one of the most important things you can eat, you know, especially in the morning. Which reminds me...you haven’t had breakfast yet and that’s the most important meal of the day, Tina. Where are we going, Tina?”

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“Don’t you just love the sound of the waves breaking on the beach, Tina? I love the beach—all the sand, the sun, the water, the boys, the smell of hotdogs and veggie fries, the...”

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How the hell can it see? thought Tina. How can it smell? How does it know anything? How can I kill it?

“Whatcha thinking about, Tina?”

***

Let’s see what the little bitch has to say about this, thought Tina.

***

He wasn’t anywhere near Tina’s standards, but he would do. She’d picked him up in front of the post office with a simple “You. Come with me.” And what man could resist Tina? He was somewhere in his early twenties, hair shaved almost to the scalp, skinny body heavily tattooed, he was nowhere near Tina’s type, but he would do.

“Tina,” whispered her nipple, “you’ve got to be joking.”

His name was Bob. He had the predictably threatened look as he took in the huge white bed and the pink pillows, but to his credit, he’d made it through the mirrors and pink in the livingroom. The corners of his mouth shook.

“Take your clothes off,” said Tina.

Bob looked at her, his eyes full of questions like, “Did she really say that? Does she really mean it?”

Tina helped him, not out of sympathy, but to just get this over with. “Bob. Take your clothes off.”

He pulled his shirt off. Ooph, nice six-pack, thought Tina. Shame about the rest of him. He pulled his pants down and stepped out of them.

“Tina,” said her nipple loudly, “You can do a lot better than that. Why don’t you go back to that club we were in last night? There were some really good-looking boys there and I’ll bet they all have better equipment than Bob.”

Bob stared at Tina’s right nipple, noticing with horror the writhing and twisting as it talked. It was like something being tossed around in the wind of its own voice. Less than a minute later, he
was outside, running down the street, clothes in hand, wearing nothing but running shoes and tattoos.

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“Can you turn pure white as fast as he did, Tina?”

***

“Does this mean that we’re friends, Tina?”

Seagulls squawked in the sky, bombing the rocks with globs of luminescent slime. A particularly large package splattered into an outcropping of rock to Tina’s left. “That’s you,” said Tina.
“So… we’re not friends? Is that what you mean, Tina? We’re not friends?”
“Is there anything I can do to make you go away?”
“I think we covered that ground, Tina.”
“Yes, we did, didn’t we.”
“This is a beautiful spot, Tina.”
Waves crashed into seaweed-wrapped rocks and filled the air with the smell of salt and fish. Behind Tina, a wind-eroded cliff soared a hundred feet over seagulls cracking into the shells of terrified King Crabs.

“Are you going to be with me forever?” asked Tina.
Her nipple didn’t answer.
“It’s a fair question,” said Tina. “I think I deserve an answer.
“Can we be friends?”
“Never.”
“It’ll make it easier.”
“You make me a freak.”
“A freak is just someone who’s different than everybody else, Tina. You’ve been different than everybody else all your life. You’re perfect. Everybody else is less than perfect.”
“I’m not perfect with you yapping incessantly.”
“But you’re so beautiful, Tina. Every woman who sees you wants your body, your hair, your perfect lips. Every man who sees you, fantasizes you forever, even when he’s with another woman. You’re the standard, Tina, you’re the one everybody else looks to when they want to know how much their own lives can be improved. You’re the measure of human desire, Tina.”
“You’re full of shit, you little brat,” said Tina.
“On the other hand,” said her nipple, “there is just one little thing wrong with your perfection…”
After what Tina thought was a longer than necessary pause, she prompted, “Yes?”
“There is one little thing about you.”
Another long pause. “What, for crying out loud?”
“You’re just too full of yourself, Tina.”
She thought a moment. “That’s it? I’m full of myself? That’s all?”
“Well, Tina,” said her nipple. “Some people think that’s a pretty big fault. I think there might even be something about it in the bible, Deadly Sins and all…”
“Do you have any idea how hard it is to be perfect?” said Tina angrily. “The attention it takes to detail? The focus? Every inch of my body needs to be coordinated with every other inch of my body. I need hours of quiet and intense focus just to go to the mall for an hour, even if I hardly touch my face with makeup. Everything I say has to be faultlessly coordinated with my image. It makes it hard to be a sparkling conversationalist. It makes it hard to be somebody’s buddy, to go out on the town on a bitch bash. I need to have everything around me focused on me so that I don’t make any mistakes. And now you’re ruining it all. I can’t focus on me with you yakking all day and embarrassing me in front of everybody. I hate you.”

“Remember what your father said, Tina?”

“What? About vitamins?”

“No, not vitamins,” said her nipple. “The other thing. Let’s take it a step further…how you feel about your nipple is how you feel about yourself.”

And with that, Tina’s nipple stopped talking forever.

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Well, with the exception of unfinished business. It happened while she was shopping.

“That’s right, Tina, the red one.”
East Berlin, 1951

In East Berlin, 1951—lifetimes ago—on Schlausen Strasse, in the rain by the puffenhaus—the ladies in the showcase windows enticed us with erotic dances and suggestive hip strategies.

Down the street, a beautiful Arian woman shagged an elephant under a street lamp, her mascara running down her cheeks as she puffed on a cigarette while engaging the panting elephant in talk of existential loneliness.

Behind them a lone monkey howled as it thrust its empty metal cup up to gods that never particularly cared about monkeys. In the dull reflective surface of the monkey’s cup, confused soldiers danced around a bayoneted rat yelling “Vas ist? Vas ist?” One of them uttered something about the next time being the last.

A tall man in black overcoat, black hat and black eyes took pictures of them from behind a mailbox marked “Verboten.” He click, click, clicked for whatever eyes wrapped their horror around East Berlin in 1951, on a drizzly night.

The blare of a car horn sent three teenage girls—with sudden old age disintegrating the whites of their eyes—plunging for the sidewalk with their wrinkled teen hands gripping their heads, while red lights blinked from a passing plane, its propellers roaring ominously over a city still uncurling from fear of the sky.

A sentry in a guard booth lit a cigarette as she dreamed about the last time she ate bratwurst and brochens with curry sauce—about one or two lost lifetimes ago, before the planes and tanks came. Down the street from her, we talked about movies and baseball and threw an empty bourbon bottle into the shadows of a narrow alley and waited for the sound of crashing glass.

It never came.
Smoke Break

A kettle boiling water into dry hell—Kyle’s first thought as he stepped out of the air conditioned building. Pools of heat wavered visibly on the rooftops of mini vans and cars parked in the asphalt lot as Kyle cussed himself for wearing a suit and tie. But the radio had said rain today, just like it had yesterday, when the temperature had soared to an energy-sucking ninety-five. He loosened his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt. He took a package of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, opened it and thumbed out a cigarette, thinking that maybe after this pack he’d try quitting again. Yeah, quit the damned things for good and stay inside all day in the office rooms filled with computers and cool air. Pocketing the pack with one hand, he reached into his pants pocket with the other and took out his lighter. Sweat popped out of his underarms as he fired his cigarette and put the lighter back in his pocket. God, it was only mid morning. What would it be like in the afternoon? He took a deep drag, his first cigarette of the day, and felt his head spin into a nicotine high.

He blew out a long stream of bluish smoke that traveled straight ahead, dissolving into the air without even a slight movement upward. No wind to cool down the scorching heat. Sweat dribbled from the pores in his forehead. He wiped it away with the palm of his hand and then dried his palm on the inside of his jacket. He took another long haul on the cigarette, wondering why the hell they couldn’t put aside just one small air conditioned room for smokers, a room with vents to pump the circuit-destroying smoke outside into this godawful hot day.

Beside him stood a three foot high air conditioning box churning out a strained humming sound, the diamond mesh grill on top ripped open by a snow plow during the winter. Kyle looked at the splayed metal and thought that maybe the heat wasn’t so bad after all, not after the skin-numbing temperatures of a winter that had seemed to freeze and storm forever. The problem with weather, either too cold or too hot, but at least you didn’t have to shovel driveways in the heat.

As he lifted the cigarette to his lips, he noticed movement inside the darkness of the air conditioning unit. He blinked. Probably just heat waves under the torn metal. But it moved again, and not like any heat wave. Must be the nicotine high, playing tricks on his eyes. He stared at the hole in the unit. The metal was ripped right down the six foot length of the gray metal box with a round gouge in the middle where diamond-shaped mesh curled up and away from the hole like grisly lips. Another movement, something long and dark, it looked like. Something solid.

Kyle wiped sweat from his forehead again, wiped his palm inside his jacket again, stepped closer to the, felt air even hotter than outside blast into his face. Just as he was about to step back, he saw it again. Something long and dark, black, shiny black. He blinked his eyes again, wiped sweat from his brows, and stepped away from the unit. Yeah, just the nicotine high, and the heat, the godawful heat, and him wearing a suit, his shirt soaked under his arms and across his back.

He looked at his black Honda, parked thirty feet away, heat waves dancing on the hood where the protective coating peeled and flaked in white streaks. From parking under a pine tree, the autobody guy had told him. Have to strip it down to the undercoat and repaint. Too late to fix the protective coating. Bloody pine trees. Cost a fortune to have it painted.

And then he heard a faint thump in the direction of the air conditioning unit. He looked, saw nothing. Must be the motor stressing out on the heat. Or maybe it was his head stressing. And
then another movement, something definitely long, slender, black, moving from one side of the
gouge to the other. Something loose in there? Blowing around in the exhaust? But the movement
seemed too slow, too deliberate. What the hell was it?

He took another drag on his cigarette, exhaled the smoke before inhaling it fully, walked right
up to the unit and looked into the hole.

There it was.

A twig? Too small. A branch? No. A thick, black spine, leading to what looked like a joint, and
then tapering to another joint, and tapering into a smaller spine. No, not a branch, not wood, but
something definitely familiar. Where had he seen that shape before?

He bent forward cautiously. The long black spine moved slowly back and forth. Gotta be
something caught in there, moving with the exhaust. And then another one appeared from the left
side of the hole, exactly like the first, long and shiny black, three spines tapering down through
two joints. And they both stretched straight forward and stopped, forming two parallel spines
about six inches apart, each at least three feet long.

Where the hell had he seen those before? Still bent forward, peering into the torn grill, He
stepped back. Something too deliberate in the movement of those things, something too familiar
that wasn’t invoking any pleasant memories, something sinister in the way they just lay there
side by side, so intent on remaining still.

And then he heard it.

Not from outside, but inside, inside his head, like something effervescent bubbling into his
awareness, the bubbles bursting into words strung together with no tone, no pitch, no base or
treble. Just the meaning of the words.

“What are you?”

Kyle jumped back, almost losing his balance, the cigarette dropping through his fingers,
burning them as it passed through.

“Shit!”

Regaining his balance, he looked around, eyes popped wildly, shaking his hand as though he
could shake the burning away. No one was there. Just hundreds of empty cars boiling under the
blistering sun, and beyond the parking lot, the city fuming in a smoggy haze. Gotta be the heat,
the nicotine high. Sweat stung his eyes. He wiped them with both hands, felt the pinching hurt in
his fingers begin to loosen into a throb, then waved his hand in a futile attempt to cool the
burning fingers. He looked back at the hole in the grill.

The spines were gone.

Too creepy. Too much heat. He stepped quickly to the door, opened it and walked into the cool
of the building.

***

You could almost bounce off the wall of heat and sear your brows in the process. It took Kyle’s
breath away. The metal door thumped closed behind him as he reached into his shirt pocket for
his cigarette pack. His mind bristled with flashing screens from hours of research on the Internet,
the muscles in his right palm throbbing from using the mouse. Have to fill out a requisition for
one of those ergonomic models. His burned fingers had stopped throbbing. Lighting his cigarette,
he glanced briefly at the air conditioning unit, still humming its strained monotonous tune.

Christ!
Two long black spines stretched out in the hole. Damn, what are those things? Time to get to the bottom of this. Ignoring the alarms firing in his head and stomach, he marched directly to the unit, bent forward and gazed at the spines laying motionless, side by side on top of the fan box. He dropped his cigarette onto the butt-cluttered cement, crushed it with his heel and moved his hand slowly toward them.

Just as his hand reached the opening in the grill, the spines moved. And something in the grillwork right under his head moved. What the hell was that? His hand froze. His body froze. He watched as a dark mass of material roiled under the rusted mesh, moving with slow, fluid motion. The spines curled under at their joints and disappeared, the dark mass gliding forward to replace them. Kyle’s eyes widened, their lids the only part of his body that wasn’t paralyzed solid. The mass in the unit was round and translucent black with a coat of short shimmering hair. It must have been as big as a medium-size dog, or more like a large beach balloon, but bloated in the center and tapering to a point at one end. It turned smoothly around and the end facing Kyle lifted.

First, he saw a flat, crusty section attached to the bloated black beach ball. Sprouting out from the bottom of this, he saw eight of the long spines. The crusted shell rose to reveal four liquid black eyes forming a square under a shell-like brow. Beside the square of eyes, two more larger sapphire blue eyes bulged menacingly. Below the eyes, two hairy black appendages like swollen, droopy lips sucked in and out. Each appendage had two reddish black fangs that curved inward, almost touching each other as the appendages sucked slowly in and out.

Goddam, a spider.

Kyle broke through the spell and jumped backwards. He heard the flat dead-like words bubbling in his mind again.

“What are you?”

Everything in Kyle’s body was moving now, especially his sweat glands, his shirt and pants starting to drench. His heart thumped hard enough to make his head spin. And the words intruded into his mind again, floating somewhere between conscious and unconscious, sanity and insanity.

“What are you?”

And that’s when Kyle realized that the words came from the spider.

The realization came in layers: a spider, a giant spider, a giant spider somehow throwing words into his brain, a giant spider asking him what he was. Musterling his senses like melting tar in the sweltering heat, Kyle broke through the barrier of impossibility and whispered: “What?”

“No need to talk out loud. Just think it.”

Whispering again: “What?”

“Just direct your meaning to me. Just think your words.”

Kyle thought: “How…”

“That’s it. Just like that.”

“But…”

“Yes?”

Kyle stared into the eyes, four black and two blue, all six of them vibrating with inner life, seeming to float around in their hairy sockets, surrounded by the monstrous body with the black fangs moving slowly in and out like breathing.

“What the hell are you?”

“I think I asked you that first, only somewhat more politely.”
What kind of craziness? The thing was talking to him. He was talking back to it. The damn thing had to be real, but the damn thing couldn’t be real. He reached for this cigarettes, the outside of the pack was moist with sweat. He opened the pack and fumbled out a cigarette, hands shaking. Returning the pack to his shirt pocket, he groped in his pants for this lighter. Craziness! Maybe some kind of Internet surfing-induced hypnosis? Too many screens flashing by on his monitor, like the dividing line on a dark night, inducing highway hypnosis? He lit his cigarette with difficulty, lip muscles shaking as much as his hands. Sweat stung his eyes. He wiped it away with the lighter hand, left his wet hand on his cheek still holding the lighter, took a long drag on his cigarette, his eyes transfixed by the six eyes moving around but knowing they were focused on him, and he heard more words.

“No, Kyle, you’re not crazy.”
Kyle’s jaw dropped. “You know my name.”
“It’s in your mind. But what are you?”
“No way, you first.”
The spider’s head lifted up slightly, the eyes now all definitely focused directly on Kyle. “I’m me.”
Kyle pondered this a moment, still shaking from head to toes. “Fine. That’s what I am too … me.”
“But, what are you when you say me?”
Some of Kyle’s shaking began to loosen up in the rhetoric. This is not the way a spider talks.
Not to mention that spiders don’t talk. And spiders don’t get this big. But there it was, a big spider, a giant black spider in the air conditioning unit. And it talked. “OK, I’ll bite. I’m a person, a human being.”
“What’s a human?”
“Oh no, you next, what the hell are you?”
“No, Kyle. Let’s focus on one thing at a time, take this step by step.”
Some kind of goddam analytic psychologist spider? What the hell was going on here? “Look, I don’t even know if you exist! Why should I answer questions from something that might just be a figment of my stressed-out mind?”
“How do you know that you exist?”
Kyle thought a moment. He knew the answer to that one, knew it from first year Philosophy.
He took another puff on his cigarette. It came to him: “I think; therefore, I am.”
“Well, Kyle, I think too. Therefore, I am. And you’ve been reading my thoughts. Therefore, you know that I think; therefore, you know that I am. What’s a human?”
Kyle blew out cigarette smoke in a rush, the long blue stream racing through the windless air right into the face of the spider. The spider recoiled.
“Hey, watch that stuff! It burns my eyes!”
Kyle’s eyebrows lifted. The shaking in his body stopped abruptly, the spider not so menacing now in its vulnerability to the smoke. “Sorry.”
The spider shifted back into a relaxed crouch on top of the fan box, its movements smoothly fluid and silent, almost graceful. “Apology accepted. So what is a human?”
He thought. Images came to mind, images of people working, playing, doing a million different things, but how to describe human? Surely the spider could see that he was a smooth-skinned biped with hair on his head. Start with apes? Describe evolution? Opposable thumbs? The ability to think abstract thoughts? He took another drag on his cigarette and blew it out, this
time away from the spider. He replied: “Look, I’m going to have to think about this. It’s kind of a complex thing. And I have to get back to work. Can we talk about this tomorrow morning?”
“Will you bring others?” Kyle thought about this. Tell Ernie and Jim when he got back upstairs? No. What if he was just imagining this? They’d think he was nuts, and maybe he was. Best to keep this to himself, for the time being. “No, I’ll come alone.”
“Good. I don’t like crowds.”
“How do you know that?”
“I’m not sure. I just know it.”
Kyle dropped his cigarette and crushed it out. “Tomorrow, then.”
“And you’ll tell me what human is. I’ll keep an eye out for you.”
More like six of them. Gotta be going crazy. Find out tomorrow, if it’s still there. Kyle opened the door and walked into the building as the spider glided back into the darkness of the air conditioning unit.

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Almost like God had waved a wand over the sky and the earth, the weather had changed overnight, cooling down under a slate gray cloud cover. A soothing breeze brushed against Kyle’s face as he stepped out of the building, cigarette and lighter in hand. He ignored the breeze, the sky, the parked cars, and looked straight at the air conditioning unit. And there it was, crouched as yesterday on top of the fan box. So it hadn’t just been the heat, or Internet hypnosis. And any further doubt was shattered when the deadpan words invaded his mind.
“Good morning, Kyle.”
It was still unnerving. “Good morning. Sleep well?”
“As well as can be in here. Not much space to stretch out.”
“Ever think of moving to the suburbs?” Kyle lit his cigarette.
“What is suburbs?”
“Oh, just a place with more room, bigger air conditioners.” Putting his lighter back in his pocket, he stepped closer to the unit. “Just joking. Didn’t sleep much last night. Thought maybe I was going crazy or something.”
“I suppose I would have that effect. I don’t socialize much.”
What the hell was this thing saying? How would it even know to say these things? Kyle scratched his head, stared into the lidless, unblinking array of eyes. “You seem to have a good vocabulary for a spider.”
“Is that what I am? A spider?”
Kyle thought a moment. “I’m not sure. It’s what you look like. But different, bigger.”
“Then, that’s what I am. A spider. Have you had enough time to prepare your explanation of humans?”
Kyle sighed deeply. Between bouts of wondering about his sanity, he’d thought about being human, what it meant. He had his answer ready. “Yeah, I think I can describe humans.”
“I’m all ears.”
“Yeah, sure, where?”
“Just a manner of speaking. Please, tell me about humans.”
Pausing his thoughts for a moment, Kyle took another long drag and blew the smoke out, away from the spider. Today the smoke arced upwards in the light breeze, disintegrating quickly into the surrounding air. “OK. But, keep in mind, I’m not the world’s biggest expert on this kind of thing. Took some philosophy in college, read a few books, but mostly, this is just from living my life as a human.”
“Knowledge by experience is good.”
Kyle thought about this a moment. Where does it come up with these remarks? Got a library in that damned air conditioning unit? TV? “We weren’t always the way we are.”
“Nothing is.”
“Look, can we do away with the running commentary? This is hard enough as it is.”
“Sorry, Kyle. Please continue.”
The spider’s mass moved backwards gently, as though relaxing, the eyes still seeming to move, but not move, the black fangs breathing in and out from their hairy appendages.
“We started off as fish, turned into apes, evolved from apes into humans. It took millions of years but, during that time, our brains evolved into something that set us off from all other animals on earth, and maybe all life forms in the universe. We developed the ability to think, to solve problems, to think in the abstract.” Damn, none of this was coming out right. Why hadn’t he written it down the night before? It all seemed so apparent then. “What I mean is, we have the ability to change the world around us so that we enhance our ability to survive.” Kyle paused again, puffed on his cigarette.
“That’s it?”
“Well, that’s enough, isn’t it?”
“I can do all that. With the exception of fish and apes, I must be human.”
“But you can’t change the world around you.”
The spider waved one of its long, spindly legs over the inside of the unit. “Made some changes in here.”
“Oh yeah, like what?”
“Would you like to stick your head in and take a look around?”
Kyle shuddered. Duck his head into the unit right under those two chomping fangs? Not likely.
“Think I’ll pass on that.”
“You’re still nervous. Is that a human trait? To be nervous?”
“Only when we feel threatened, or when we’re in a situation where everything is uncertain, or improbable. Like when we’re talking to giant spiders that can’t possibly exist, and we think maybe we’ve gone over the deep end.”
“Would you like to touch me? Maybe that will convince you that I’m real.”
Kyle’s stomach tightened at the suggestion. “Thanks, but …”
“Right. Nervous.”
“No offense meant.”
“None taken. But is that really all there is to being human? It took you the whole night to come up with that?”
Kyle puffed on his cigarette, getting smoke in his eyes. He rubbed them with his free hand.
“Well, no, it’s a lot more than that. I told you I wasn’t an expert on this. I’ll have to give it some more thought. I have to get back to work. Meet you here this afternoon?”
“You’ll come back?”
“Of course I will. Didn’t we already go over this yesterday?”

“That’s right. I hope I didn’t sound insecure. You’ll come alone?”

“Covered that ground too.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Kyle flicked his cigarette onto the pavement. In the distance beyond the parking lot, the tall buildings of the city appeared as gray as the sky, floating in their sea of exhaust and smoke.

“Catch ya later.”

“Catch you later, Kyle.”

He opened the door and walked into the building. The spider remained on the fan box.

***

Mid afternoon, and the clouds were beginning to open up with a miserly sliver of blue sky here, a sprinkle of sun beams there. So what happened to the rain the radio promised? Kyle walked to the air conditioning unit. No giant spider. Nothing in there. He bent forward. “Hello, Mr. Spider!”

“Hello, Kyle.” The words rippling across his cerebral landscape like tiny bubbles bursting with meaning before taking any particular form.

Kyle watched as two long, black legs speared over the fan box and shifted to the left, the unimaginable black beach ball sliding in from the right. The spider perched on the box and lifted its head, all this in one elegant, fluid motion. The eyes focused on Kyle, but moving still, taking in the back of the building and the area around Kyle. The fangs moving in and out, in and out, slowly, like labored breathing.

“Before we get into this human thing… ” Kyle put a cigarette in this mouth, lit it. “…I have a question for you.”

The spider crouched motionless, only the fangs and their appendages moving, slowly, in and out. “The floor is all yours, Kyle.”

Where the hell did it learn that? “I’ve been wondering about this all morning.”

“Applying abstract thought?”

“Hey! The commentary …”

“Sorry. Please, continue.”

Another puff on his cigarette. Gotta give these damned things up. Maybe not a good time now, though. “Where do you come from?”

Silence. The fangs moving in and out. The legs spread out over the sides of the fan box, motionless. The lustrous, black body, motionless.

“Hello.”

“Yes, Kyle.”

“Oh, OK, just wondering if you heard the question. Where do you come from?”

“Here.”

He puffed again on his cigarette, eyes squinting with puzzlement. “Here?”

“Where I am.”

Kyle thought about this a moment, shrugged. “Oh yeah, well, that makes sense. Been anywhere else?”

“No, just here.”

“I see what you mean about your social life.”

“I get by. But enough talk about me. Let’s talk about this human thing.”
Suddenly, the spider’s eyes seemed to go wild, gyrating in their sockets, the appendages froze. In one quick movement, the spider was gone. Hearing something behind him, Kyle turned in time to see a red Dodge Caravan pulling out of a parking spot about fifty feet away from him. The driver, a man with short dark hair and a black suit, eyed Kyle as the mini van pulled out slowly and then drove to the far exit. All I need now. People watching me talking to an air conditioning unit. When Kyle looked back at the unit, the spider was there.

“A little on the shy side?”
“I enjoy my privacy.”
“Then, why are you talking to me?”
“Why not?”
Kyle expelled a long, forceful sigh. “Have you ever heard about semantics?”
“No. Are they a human thing?”
“Yesterday morning, I would have said yes. You seem to be an exception, though.”
“Thank you, Kyle. I’ve never been called exceptional before.”
“Have you been called anything before?”
“Not that I can think of. But again, enough chatter about me. What about this human thing?”
Kyle flicked an ash off his cigarette, took another puff. Blew the smoke out. “OK then, back to the human thing. I suppose the best way to put it is … we’re the caretakers of everything around us.”
“You clean things up?”
“No. Well, yes. In a manner of speaking. We have the ability to look around us and see the way things are. Then, we apply abstract thought and see the way things could be. Then, we apply creativity to abstract thought and this gives us a vision of how to turn the way things are into the way they could be.”
The four black eyes in the center, though motionless, seemed almost to be spinning with movement deep inside.
“Why?”
“What?”
“Why change things from what they are to what they could be?”
“Well, to make them better.”
“I see. Could you give me an example?”
Kyle thought about this a moment, snapped his fingers. The spider jerked back. Kyle jerked back, regained his composure quickly. “Let me guess. Sensitive to sound?”
“Right on the money.”
“Sorry about that. Something we humans do sometimes when we get an idea.”
The spider moved forward slightly, relaxing back onto the fan box. “Apology accepted. What was your idea?”
“Rivers.”
“Rivers?”
“A body of water that flows through the land. If I want to drive my car from one side of the river to the other, my car will sink and I’ll drown. That’s the way things are.”
“I see. Not a happy prospect. But why do you want to get to the other side?”
“That’s not important. Maybe just for the sheer hell of it. Maybe I left something there and I want to get it back.”
“So you’ve been there before?”
“What does that have to do with it?”
“Well, you must have crossed the river without drowning. Why not do the same again?” Kyle threw his arms up. The spider backed up again. “I haven’t been across the river!”

“Then how did …”

“It’s not important!” He tossed his cigarette down, and in the same movement, brought his hand up to his shirt pocket, took out another cigarette and lit it. The spider moved forward and relaxed. Kyle blew out a stream of smoke. “Let’s say I’m just curious about what’s on the other side of the river.”

“I can live with that.” He glared at the spider. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Now, I want to change the way things are. So I apply some abstract thought and realize that I could drive across the river … if I had a way to do that.”

“How would you do that?”

“That’s what I’m coming to.” Another puff on the cigarette. “That’s the first step in being human. I accept that there is a way to cross the river. We’ve just gone from the way things are to the way things could be. And now we add a little creativity to the situation.”

The spider’s legs moved. Kyle asked: “What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just getting ready for the revelation.”

Smart ass spider. What the hell, talking to a giant spider. Well, this argument has the logic, even if the situation doesn’t have any. “The creativity is what allows me to put two and two together.”

“You use it to add?”

“In a way, yes. I use it to add up the things around me. For instance, I see trees. It occurs to me that, if I cut the trees down, and attach enough of them together, I can build a road out of wood that will span the river, what we call a bridge. Then, I can drive across the bridge without losing my car and without drowning.”

Again the spider’s eyes seemed to roll about without moving, the in and out movement of the fangs quickening slightly. “Amazing.”

Kyle’s eyebrows lifted as he puffed again on his cigarette, looked almost mockingly at the spider. “The human mind is amazing. Probably the most amazing and complex thing in the whole universe. It makes us special, gives us the ability to be the caretakers of everything around us.”

“The trees might not agree with that.”

“The trees?”

“Wouldn’t they die when you cut them down to make your bridge?”

“Of course they would. But they’re only trees!”

“But they’re alive.”

“But they don’t think.”

“I see; therefore, they don’t exist. Pretty shaky bridge.”

“No, they do exist, but they don’t think.”

“But you said…”

“I know what I said, but that doesn’t apply to trees, or rocks, or anything that can’t think enough to ask if it can think.”

Silence.

Kyle lifted the cigarette to his lips, puffed slowly.

“Well, I’m glad I can think.”
“What?”
“It would appear to make me safe from the caretaker’s creativity.”
“I have to get back to work.”

***

A light breeze cooled the morning air under a blue sky studded with random puffs of cloud. Kyle watched the spider mount its perch on top of the fan box, repulsed by the horror of a creature so deadly grown so large, but mesmerized by the fluid beauty of its movement, fascinated by the anomaly it posed in everything he knew for certain.

“Beautiful day,” he said.
And the words came like hooded specters drifting through his mind. “Cool during the night, but nice now.”
An image of the spider shivering in the night-cooled metal of the unit dropped into Kyle’s mind and he almost felt sorry for it. He took the cigarettes from his jacket pocket, stared into the translucent eyes, his focus moving from one to the other, wondering how he looked through them. “I worked out a plan.”
“Plans are good. They give direction, establish order in chaos.”
“Exactly. Now, to continue…” Kyle lit his cigarette, took a deep drag, blew the smoke out slowly. “…I think the best way to handle this is to just let you ask questions and I’ll answer.” A horn honked loudly from the street beyond the parking lot. Kyle noticed that it didn’t seem to have an effect on the spider. “Horns don’t bother you?”
“I get used to them, and the sirens. You humans live in a busy world.”
“Not much going on in your air conditioning unit, I guess.”
“Just the usual things.”
Kyle decided to let that one go, took another drag on his cigarette, stared into the eyes smoldering with spider consciousness. “So, any questions?”
“Just one. How does it feel to be human?”
Damn, where was that covered in first year Philosophy? Psych 101 maybe? Kyle thought, dragged fitfully on his cigarette. He caught his fingers in mid snap, just as the answer came to him. “It’s kind of like a feeling of being in control, of nothing being impossible.”
“That must be a powerful feeling. Can you explain it?” The spider shifted its weight slightly to the left. Must get uncomfortable supporting all that weight on those spindly legs.
“Let me think now.”
“Take your time, Kyle.”
He rolled his eyes.
“Sorry.”
“OK, here’s the way it works. As humans, we can control the world around us. Remember the bridge across the river?
“How could I forget? A beautiful example.”
Kyle wondered. Smart ass, or sincere? He shrugged it off. “Well, that bridge would have actually been constructed out of metal.”
“Good news for the trees.”
“I’m sure they’re all breathing a sigh of relief. But it would have been constructed by people we call engineers, using something we call engineering. Engineering applies things like
technology and science to control the world around us, to build things, to change the world into something that makes it better and safer for humans to live in.”

“Just humans?”
Well, no, for all living things.”
“Except the ones that don’t think.”
“I’m not going to get into that.” Kyle puffed on his cigarette. Damned spider with a one track mind.
“I’m sorry, Kyle. Sometimes I become fixated on details and miss the larger picture.”
God, where does it get these things? Graduated from Arachnid U? “Fine. Let’s look at the larger picture, then. But first, any questions…that don’t have anything to do with trees?”
The spider crouched forward, eyes seeming to blaze with movement under their surface sheen.
“Just a small clarification.”
“Shoot.”
“Engineering is what makes it possible for humans to control the world?”
“Engineering is one of the things. Like I said, it uses science and technology. These are really the things that make it possible for us to control the world.”
“How?”
Kyle sighed loudly. “I was getting to that. It works like this…science allows us to understand how the world works. Technology allows us to take what we learn from science and make the world do what we want it to do.”
“Could…”
A raised finger to shush the spider. “For example, science shows us how atoms work, and technology allows us to use the way atoms work so that we can build power stations to keep us warm in the winter and bombs to protect us from our enemies.”
“You protect yourselves with atoms?”
“No, we protect ourselves with the things that atoms do.”
“And what do atoms do?”
“They make large fires that destroy cities and make them uninhabitable for years.”
“And this is how you use atoms to keep yourselves warm in the winter?”
“In a way, but on a smaller scale. That’s where control comes in. We control the fire so that it heats buildings without burning them.”
“And using them as bombs means not controlling them?”
“No, it means controlling them so that they’re out of control somewhere else, away from us, in our enemies’ cities.”
“Wouldn’t it be better to just eat your enemies?”
“That’s what a spider would do. Spiders don’t have science and technology.”
“But spiders would be able to live in their enemies’ cities after eating their enemies.”
Frustrated, Kyle looked at his watch. “Gotta get back to work. Let’s try this again this afternoon.”
“You seem to be angry.”
“Not angry, just a little…I don’t know what. But, this discussion doesn’t seem to be going anywhere constructive. Let’s just try again later.”
“You’ll come back?”
Kyle frowned.
“You’re right, Kyle, we’ve covered that ground. You’ll come alone?”
Kyle cocked his head to one side, remained silent.
“Right, alone. I’ll see you this afternoon. Have a good morning, Kyle.”

Walking away from the spider, Kyle felt his mind stewing in frustration and possibly a hint of anger. Getting flustered and boggled by a spider? Maybe start smoking at the front of the building? No, can’t do that. Not now.

***

The day was still breezy, the sky spotted with puffs of cloud as Kyle stepped out of the building. In the distance, high rises sparkled above the haze of smog. Kyle took a few steps toward the air conditioning unit, saw the black mass of the spider hunched in the darkness as his hand reached for his cigarettes. “New plan. I’m going to sum it all up, and we’ll leave it at that.”

“Is it wise to switch plans unilaterally?”

No longer phased by the spider’s retorts, he shrugged as he lit his cigarette. “Do it all the time. Called adapting on the fly.”

“You change plans on flies?”

“Just a manner of speaking.” Pocketing his lighter, a thought occurred to him. “By the way, you must eat a lot of flies.”

“Not really. Never acquired the taste.”

“Then, what exactly do you eat? I mean…” waving his hand over the direction of the spider’s body, “…you have to be eating a lot of something.”

“Oh, this and that. I try to keep my diet balanced. Tell me about your new plan, Kyle, your summing up of it all.”

He held a deep drag of smoke in his lungs for a few seconds, then blew the smoke out slowly, a bluish white plume rolling through the air from his mouth. “First of all, let’s forget about the allusion to caretakers. We’ve done a lousy job of taking care of things.”

“Admitting the mistake is the first step toward correcting the mistake.”

Kyle thought for a moment, puffing on his cigarette. “How do you know these things?”

Shifting its weight slightly to one side, the spider lifted its appendages, the fangs moving in and out slowly, and then crouched backwards a few inches. “I have thoughts about these things.”

Kyle waited, dragged on his cigarette. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Kyle shrugged. “OK, then, so … we’ve polluted the world, screwed up the weather, murdered millions in senseless wars, used science and technology to make money for a few while ignoring the suffering of the millions we exploited to make the money, and we’ve created nuclear and biological weapons that might eventually kill us all off.”

“Why?”

Kyle looked at the spider, smiling the smile of a victory won, nodded his head. “I knew you were going to ask that.”

“Then, you have your answer prepared.” The spider crouched forward.

“I have.” Another puff on his cigarette. “It’s because we know things are going to work out in the end. We know that our science and technology will save us in the end, because they are, after all, an extension of ourselves. What you said about admitting the mistake being the first step to correcting the mistake. You’re right.”

“Thank you, Kyle, it’s…”

“It’s the way we do things, throughout our history. We make mistakes, we learn, we go on. And what gives us the will to go on is a thing we call hope.”
“Hope?”
“We have hope in the future, belief that things will work out.”
“And that’s it?”
Exasperated, Kyle blew a long plume of smoke in the direction of the spider. The spider backed up. “Hey!”
Kyle waved his hand in front of him, an effort, too late, to stop the barrage of smoke. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that. A little frustrated, I guess. What do you mean by: ‘That’s it?’”
The spider moved forward slowly to the top of the fan box. “Apology accepted. I meant, that your hope seems to put the future on a shaky foundation.”
“How’s that?”
“Shouldn’t you be doing something other than hoping?”
“We are doing something. We have people working on these things.”
“Who?”
“The scientists and the technologists.”
“The people who made the mistakes?”
“Well, yes, they’re the ones who understand the mistakes, and how to correct them.”
“And if they don’t?”
“They will.”
“How do you know?”
“Because that’s in the nature of humans. Nothing’s impossible for us.”
“So, the rest of you sit around and hope while the people who make the mistakes correct them.”
“No, we keep track of what they do, form groups to protest and watch over the things we don’t like, pass legislation, write letters to the editor, post angry letters to news groups, promote dialogues, demonstrate.”
“Does it work?”
Kyle threw his cigarette on the ground, crushed it with his heel. “I have to get back to work.”
“You seem angry.”
“I’m not angry.”
“Flustered?”
“No, just a little drained.”
“You’ll come back…”
“I’ll be back tomorrow. Alone.”
“Sleep well tonight.”
“You too.”

***

Lighting his first cigarette of the day, Kyle looked over the puddles left by the early morning rain in the parking lot, the radio finally right. Yeah, predict it till it happens. Must be a lot of hand shaking at the station, maybe a few medals passed out, letters of commendation, promotions in the weather department, and predictions that, maybe, today we’ll have sun. To the west, small puffs of cloud trailed in the wake of the heavy cumulous clouds fading into the east. The spider looked dry and relaxed, legs spread over the sides of the fan box. Kyle’s hair was disheveled; his eyes, bloodshot.
“You look terrible this morning, Kyle.”
“Thanks.” Kyle pocketed his lighter, blew smoke through his nostrils. “New plan.”
“Didn’t like the way the last one was going?”
“It was going nowhere.”
“Time to change the fly.”
Kyle pursed his lips and opened his mouth with a pop. “Something like that. Here’s the way it works. Each of us humans do our own thing. We have scientists and technologists to do the science and technology things, accountants and financial experts to do the business things, laborers and clerks and salespeople to do their things. We specialize in our own areas and we all work together to make the world a place that makes sense. But, each of the things we do takes time and ability, just enough time to keep each of us busy with our own thing. So we have to rely on the people who are doing other things to do them right. And if they don’t do them right, we have to raise hell until they do them right. We can’t just start doing them ourselves.”
“Sounds complicated.”
“It is.”
“Sounds too complicated.”
The spider froze, Kyle dragged on his cigarette, eyes on the ground as a blue Cavalier drove past them, splashing through the puddles. The woman behind the wheel ignored Kyle as she drove by.
“What do you mean by ‘too complicated’?”
“Sounds like a lot of potential for things to get out of control.”
“Sometimes they do. But, we get them back into control and go on.”
“Can you give me an example?”
Another long puff, and then inspiration following on the heels of nicotine ingestion. “OK. Money markets depend on thousands of variables and the cooperation of just about everybody who works in the markets. Sometimes some of the variables go haywire and people stop cooperating. The market collapses. But, then, people start cooperating again and the market rebuilds and comes back stronger than ever.”
“Until some of the variables go haywire again.”
He flicked his cigarette into a puddle where it fizzled out in a puff of smoke, and reached for his pack in the same movement. “You’re making me smoke a lot more.”
The spider slid forward a few inches, the huge black beach ball body rippling with the movement. “Why do you light those things and blow out the smoke?”
Kyle thought a moment. How to describe why he smokes? How to describe why he does something he wants to quit doing. “They make me feel better.”
“Then they must be good for you.”
“No. They’re bad for me. They ruin my lungs and heart with thousands of deadly gases, make my breath stink, stain my teeth and harden the capillaries in my brain. They make it hard for me to walk up stairs without losing my breath.”
“And that makes you feel better?”
Bloodshot eyes rolling, head cocked to one side, smoke rushing out of his nostrils. “No! That makes me feel really bad. But smoking them makes me feel relaxed, like everything is OK.”
“Even though everything isn’t OK. Even though they’re killing you?”
“I don’t think about that part.”
Silence from the spider as it shifted its body again, the luminescent eyes motionless in their sockets, but turbulent with whatever fluids washing about under their surfaces. “Is this a hope thing, Kyle?”
“A what?”
“You hope that you won’t die from them?”

That’s gotta be it! Somewhere, somehow, this thing has read a book about psychology. “That’s right! I hope I won’t die. And, if I do get sick, doctors who specialize in making people well again will make me unsick. But, that’s not the point. I can’t just stop smoking.”

“Why? It seems like the right thing to do, especially for a being with such a well-developed mind that it controls the earth.”

“Controlling the earth is one thing. Quitting smoking is another. Smoking is an addiction.”

More shifting from the spider, the eyes compelling in their motionless movement. “Can you explain addiction?”

More smoke exhaled through nostrils, the bluish white plume rolling over Kyle’s jacket and shirt, dispersing into the air about him. “It’s when we want to stop doing something, but we can’t because we depend on it for a sense of well-being. A sense of well-being that we get from the thing we’re addicted to.”

“Then, why did you start to depend on it in the first place?”

Shrugging, arms upraised, eyes brimming with anger, Kyle began to reply, dismissed the thought before it formed, puffed on his cigarette again, staring into the deep wells of blue and green surrounded by fine hair, sunlight bristling along their short lengths. Only six of them? For a second there appeared to be hundreds, all focusing through the bone of his skull, deep into this brain. Shaking his head, he snapped the mood. “My friends smoked. It was the thing to do.”

“Your friends were killing themselves, so you joined them?”

“It’s called peer pressure. It’s a human thing.”

“Can I forward a suggestion, Kyle.”

“Be my guest.”

“Wouldn’t it have been better to have persuaded your friends to quit?”

“They were already addicted. And, besides, it was the thing to do. They wouldn’t have listened.”

“Sounds like the caretakers should learn to take care of themselves before taking care of the world around them.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You needn’t get angry with me, Kyle. Just making an observation.”

Kyle sighed, flicked his second cigarette into a puddle, lit another. The spider watched. “OK. Point taken. We’re not perfect, but we try. We try to better ourselves; we try to better the world. Sometimes we make mistakes. Then, we correct them. Then we make more mistakes and we correct them. We get better as we go along. Things get better.”

“Convince me, Kyle.”

“What?”

“Convince me that you can make things better.”

Interest perked, Kyle stared deeply into the eyes, shifting his vision from one to another, wondering which of them was focused on him. All of them? How does it process input from six sources? The same way humans process from two? “OK. I’ll bite. How do I convince you?”

“Throw down that cigarette. Stop smoking now. Prove that just one caretaker can take care of himself.”

An exasperated sigh, another puff of smoke exhaled roughly. “That’s not going to prove anything. It won’t make a spot of difference on the rest of the world.”
“But it’s a start. It’s one of the caretakers correcting a mistake, making this thing you call hope something real. Just throw down the cigarette.”
“I can’t.”
“Why?”
“I just can’t. I want to smoke. No, I don’t want to smoke. I want to quit. But I can’t quit.”
“Why?”
“I’m not ready.”
“When will you be ready?”
“When things are better.”
“When will things be better?”
“When I quit smoking.”
“Kyle…”
“No! That’s not what I meant! It’s more complicated than that.”
“Kyle…”
“I’m getting confused. I’ve been under a lot of stress at work. I’m talking to a giant spider, answering questions that there’s no way it can be asking. Having doubts from something that lives in an air conditioning unit.” He stepped closer to the unit, bent down toward the spider, bringing his face inches from the terrible eyes. “It’s just too damned complicated for a spider to understand.”
“You’re right, Kyle. Not only does it seem complicated … it seems senseless. You aspire to control the world, but you can’t control yourself. It all sounds pretty fucked up to me.” The words bristled with the fury of thousands of bubbles popping soundlessly through Kyle’s mind.
“What would you know about it? You’re just a spider!” His own words burst through the air, flaring in a noiseless play of color in the hundreds of eyes spinning in the sockets under the bony brow.
“But I have one uncomplicated thought.”
Kyle pushed his face into the face of the spider, nose almost touching the coat of fine hairs below the eyes. “And what the hell might that be?”
“I’m hungry.”
The panic too late, as hundreds of eyes seemed to bore into his brain, the sting of fangs piercing both sides of his neck simultaneously, a sense of being lifted off his feet, a feeling of skin ripping against the barbed metal of the grill, and then numbness, all feeling dissipating into quiet terror, the words flowing dead-like through the remnants of his fleeing consciousness.
“And when I’m hungry, I do something about it.”

***

Blistering heat. Too cold inside with the air conditioning turned up so you have to practically wear a sweater while you work, and then outside for a smoke and come back covered in sweat and freeze even worse. No wonder people get colds all summer long. Crystal struck a match, lit her cigarette, staring at the air conditioning unit. Must’ve been my imagination this morning. Maybe a trick of the heat. Too much pressure at work. Maybe coming down with something. That’s it! Coming down with that cold everybody’s getting. Viruses spreading like plague through the air conditioning. And then, from somewhere inside her head, like something effervescent bubbling into her awareness, the bubbles bursting into words strung together with no tone, no pitch, no base or treble. Just the meaning of the words: “What are you?”
A Shiny New Pan for Jerry

Jerry in the kitchen, commands the action on the home front. The first sortie begins, a direct frontal attack on the surface layer of loose ground beef and noodles. Splash, circle, rinse. Heavy casualties in the rinse sink! Small globs of Hamburger Helper swirl in brown water and wash down the drain with a crackly sucking sound. Jerry moves the washcloth, coated in brown sludge, over to the wash sink and splashes into the grease-scudded water, bits of food flotsam bob in the lukewarm liquid. Jerry squeezes the cloth, releases. Bits of slime dislodge. Squeeze and release. The cloth brightens, the water darkens. The cloth is ready. Three more sorties and the surface layer is gone, exposing the blackened mounds of burned-in, stubbornly resisting food from God knows when.

This isn't supposed to happen, thinks Jerry. He reaches for a tattered plastic scrub pad. Nothing sticks to a T-Fal pan. One or two wipes with the cloth and the pan gleams metallic gray and clean. And so it does, along the rim where the protective coating is still intact. But below that, the coating has long since been scrubbed and burned away, its stick-proofness striated and peeled, forming a powerful magnetic for food. Jerry attacks harder with the scrub pad, softens the entrenched black mounds, bits of them falling into the water to join bobbing wads of meat and pasta. Into the rinse. Down the drain. Assess the damage. Why can't they make glue this strong?

Incoming from the rear. A piece of cookie flies by Jerry's head, sticks with saliva wetness to the window above the sink.

"Da," from the baby, sitting in her highchair in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"Nice try, Little Red," says Jerry, looking at her reflection in the window. The baby's tuft of bright red hair reminds him of his younger brother. Jeez, even the shape of her head. He feels a chill, watching his little girl sitting out there in the cold dark of her reflected image. He turns quickly: "Ho, ho! There's my little food-chucking girl." He reads impatience in the wide blue eyes above the pug nose.

"DA!"

"I know. Don't leave me stranded here in the middle of the kitchen, Dad. I got to be free. Got to scamper around the floor and figure out this big thing called Life. But Daddy's got to get the supper gook--like that stuff on the floor all around your chair--off this very uncooperative pan, into the drain, into the sewer, and into the ground where it grows into Hamburger Helper trees so we can start all over again." He studies the pan as he twirls it by the handle. "And maybe without burning it, next time."

Back to the scouring with wide circular strokes and hard short scrubs on the tougher spots--a war of nerves and small gains. A few spots resist repeated scrubings. Options, thinks Jerry. Leave them and risk ptomaine poisoning or whatever E Coli madness from rotted Hamburger Helper. Or--increase the scour power. Things are bad enough between wife-person and self now. If I poison the kids, she'll withhold vital recreational assets indefinitely.

He scraps harder.

Mission completed. He rinses the pan, looks at his reflection in the window, right beside Little Red, both of them lively in color against the dark outside. He notes the similarity in pug noses
and high cheekbones, and the serious absence of hair on both of them. Getting on and getting nowhere, he thinks.

With a tight squeeze, he rings the water from the dishcloth and uses it to dry the pan and hangs it on the hook on the wall beside the window. He pulls the plug in the wash sink. Bubbles gurgle up and break through the floating layer of slime. This isn't the kind of water he likes for washing pots and pans. Ideally, one sink of hot soapy water for the dishes; one sink for pots and pans. But he and Laurel have worked out The New Household Budget. One sink of water for everything. To conserve soap.

"And now, folks, step up for the main attraction--the liberation of Little Red from the Tower of Flying Food."

"DA!"

"Subtitle: Cut the theatrics and get me the hell out of here! Watch the language, kid." The baby holds fast as Jerry lifts the splattered tray and unsnaps the straps. She reaches her arms up and he lifts her directly into the line of an on-coming kiss to the mouth, which she deflects by turning her head and takes the kiss on her cheek. "No kisses Daddy?" She opens her mouth wide, facing him, her way of kissing. He plants one on her lower lip. "Thank you kisses Daddy." Then he whispers in her ear: "We'll leave the floor for Mommy-person. Wanna go see Mommy?"

"Ya!" Two lower teeth gleaming fresh white, and a tiny food-wrinkled finger points at the entrance to the dining room, which leads into the living room. From that direction, the happy music of Super Mario bounces into the kitchen. Jerry walks into the dining room, baby in one arm, tray in the other. Baby spots Mommy and brother, Jerry Junior, through the opening into the living room

"YA!" Arms waving. Jerry puts the tray on the dining room table, below the chandelier with six candle-shaped light bulbs, just two lit. To conserve electricity.

Two lines of socks, underwear and diapers stretch across the dining room in front of a large picture window, a grim reminder of the War of the Warranties. Break it before you lose it; things always last longer after the first repair. Clothes dryers are not supposed to break down two days after the warranty expires, thinks Jerry. They should wait at least three days. He feels something squishy under his left sock, balances Little Red and bends down to peel off a small piece of macaroni, which he flicks into the far corner. Food for the vacuum, he tells himself. He walks into the living room. Laurel sits in a rocking chair covered in a gray burlap-looking material. Jerry Junior stands. Mother and son are held in a video-noptic trance by a tiny black and white screen, control panels grasped tightly, as Jerry Junior guides Mario through an underwater nightmare of Mario-eating marine life as ancient as black and white TV and the version of Mario on the screen.

"Ohhh!" from the video enthralled twosome. Big Mario has just bitten the bubble from a jellyfish, turns into little mario, who swims directly into the jaws of a silly-looking, but deadly, round fish. Laurel leans forward, her turn with Luigi, working his way through a cavern.

How can they play that game night after night on a black and white TV? thinks Jerry. The color TV, another casualty of the War of the Warranties, is used as a stand for the black and white, a ten-dollar yard sale bargain. ("Yep, of course it still works.")

"Hun, we definitely need to get a new T-Fal pan. Washing the old one's turning into a battle scenario every night."

Laurel motions to Jerry Junior, who puts Luigi on hold, turns to Jerry. Her blond hair is in a ponytail, and she looks young in spite of the lines around her eyes. "Okay."

Uh oh, thinks Jerry.
"And while you're at it, could you drop the color TV off. And the car needs a tune-up. We really should have the stereo repaired. Maybe we could listen to some music. Maybe we should put it all on the VISA. Oh, silly me. The VISA's maxed out, isn't it? Well, let's see." She scratches the side of her chin, thoughtfully. "The Master Card. We'll use--no--come to think of it--maxed out as well, isn't it? Maybe you could check out the money tree and see if it's started to bloom?" And now the quick twist of lips into a smile, a dangerous smile, a smile of readiness to wage argument. "I think the pan can wait--hun." She gestures to Jerry Junior and Luigi continues through the Cavern of Bottomless Pits.

"And don't forget the fourteen dollars allowances you owe me before you buy the pan, Dad." Jerry Junior, another pug-nosed product of Jerry's nose-strong gene pool, hasn't received his allowance in seven weeks. Jerry Senior has given him IOUs written on yellow memo paper, which Jerry Junior has carefully folded and placed in his wallet as though they're real money.

"Well," says Jerry, "a new pan is top priority as soon as we get our finances together." Top Priority. Finances Together. Catchwords he uses often, along with When Things Get Better and This Can't Last Forever, to keep his optimism intact, his bitterness in check. "Make the future your frame of reference when the present looks bad," he told Laurel who, being present-oriented, according to Jerry, sees only a shrinking future eaten away by an increasingly dismal present.

When the kids are in bed, she spends hours playing Super Mario in black and white.

"By the way," says Jerry, "we're out of bottle liners for Little Red." And now, thinks Jerry, for the wife-person response when husband-person mentions something whose need can't be avoided. Shoulders hunch up slightly, indicating tension in all areas below the shoulders. Distraction soon to follow--soon to follow--soon. Luigi plunges into a bottomless pit. Distraction completed.

"Couldn't you have waited until I finished my turn?" she complains.

Tiffed, thinks Jerry. She's tiffed. Super Mario night after night and she's tiffed. "My apologies. We'll have to appoint a commission to look into the matter of unwarranted interruptions of the Luigi-killing type."

Laurel glares at him darkly, then snaps her eyes back to the screen.

Little Red has begun to struggle and Jerry puts her down in front of a large plastic bear with wheels, a Christmas gift to provide her many happy hours of riding enjoyment. Little Red immediately begins to bang the bear with her hands, the influence of Jerry Junior who, when he's not playing Super Mario, spends hours banging rubber wrestlers together. Jerry wonders what she'll do when she gets her first Barbie and Ken dolls, after the influence of Big Brother, Mommy and Daddy. Ken says we need a new frying pan. Barbie says fry your ass. Ken and Barbie bang together, plastic arms and legs flying everywhere.

"Dad, are you gonna tape Ultimate Wrestling for me tonight?" Jerry Junior asks while guiding a small Mario through water, yanking the control panel this way and that.

"Sure, if you don't mind me taping over one of your other movies. No blank tapes, son, and no money for a new one."

"Can you use one of the pieces of paper in my wallet?"

Jerry sighs. "C'mon now, let's not get into that again. We'll just have to wait until we can afford it. Besides, you never watch anything I tape for you anyway."

"I'll watch it!" Plaintive. Jerry Junior has refined plaintive to an art form in its effect on Laurel, but not this time.

"You heard your father," she says, toneless, non-supportive, just stating the situation.
No acknowledgment from Jerry Junior, whose mind, body and spirit focus on Mario, close to the end of the tunnel that will take him out of the water and into a bridge world under constant bombardment by aerial critters. Jerry wonders what his son will look like in his teens, after years of video stress. No picture comes to mind.

"In fact," says Jerry, "I may as well take the grocery list and get the shopping out of the way now. Then, we'll have all day Saturday to do nothing."

"Like the rest of the week?" says Laurel.

"I mean, nothing to do like work stuff-shopping, chores. We can take the kids down to the park for some sledding if it's not too cold."

Laurel considers this a moment. "That would be nice." Almost a cheery lilt in her voice. Jerry scores a direct hit in the Saying The Right Thing For A Change Department. Laurel stands up, tall and lean, a striking woman, with a long, graceful nose. But, according to Jerry, a woman obviously endowed with a weak nose-gene pool. She tells Jerry Junior to keep an eye on the baby. Jerry Junior remains oblivious to everything but the game.

In the kitchen, Laurel removes the grocery list from the refrigerator door, places the bright orange ladybug magnet back on the door, cluttered with a swarm of colorful insects pinning down unpaid bills, lists and original Jerry Junior artwork. She hands the list to Jerry.

"Are you sure this is all we need?" he asks.

"I'm sure it's all we can afford." She goes to her purse on top of the deep freeze, rummages while Jerry leers at her rump and sings in his thoughts. Saturday night. Saturday night. Kids to bed early on a Saturday night. Laurel turns abruptly, bills in hand, catches Jerry's leer before he can avert his eyes to the list. She ignores it. "There's fifty dollars here." She breathes deeply, sighs. "I figured it all out. It's just enough, if you stick to the list. And don't forget the bottle liners for Little Red." She hands him the money. He feels strange taking it from her. This is money his wife has earned at her job. "Jerr, no extras, no treats, no frills. Just-the list."

Jerry feels a flush of anger. She doesn't trust me.

"And don't take all night."

***

Jerry in the K-Car, popular holdover from The Days Of Affordable Cars, hanging together, now, mostly by faith and two thousand dollars a year at inspection time. Not the Jeep Laredo Jerry has always wanted, but, hell, that will come When Things Get Better. She doesn't trust me. Fuck her. He puts the car in reverse, presses the gas pedal, the engine revs, ready to go, but: What's this? The car doesn't move. Oh God, don't let the transmission go. Not the transmission! He nudges the shift and the car backs out of the driveway, over a hump of hard-packed snow, and onto the road. Thank you. God. He shifts to drive and turns to wave to the family standing in the window to wave him off. No one is there. He puts his foot to the floor, but the car accelerates with a sluggish crawl and no squeal of tires. It's not supposed to be like this.

He pushes his tongue against a large cavity in his left eyetooth. Yes, I may soon have an unsightly hole in my smile. Options. Sell the kids to pay the dentist. Or--stop smiling. She doesn't trust me. Jerry is certain that he loves Laurel. It's one of the few certainties in his life, even more certain than This Can't Last Forever. But lately, he has begun to compare their relationship as family breadwinners to a game of Super Mario. Jerry, the high-paid, self-employed Communications Consultant, loses another lucrative government contract in the Ware
Of Fiscal Restraint, jumps the pit and falls in. Laurel, the full-time, permanently employed Social Worker, jumps the pit effortlessly and scores twice the take-home pay that Jerry makes.

Jerry now has two modest contracts. And a problem.

Jerry spends.

"Spending is not inherently bad," Jerry has explained to Laurel. "Under the right conditions, it's good. It keeps the economy healthy, provides jobs for factory workers, store clerks, service people, farmers, fishermen and Communications Consultants.

"Spending allows the acquisition of Necessities. Like food, clothing, shelter, furniture, indoor plumbing, lights and all the other strings and twigs essential to building a comfy nest for Jerry Juniors and Little Reds.

"And then, there's spending for the things that make putting in a hard day's work worthwhile. The Gotta Haves. Gotta have a VCR, gotta have a color TV with on-screen programming, gotta have a camcorder, gotta have a CD player and a Pentium computer. Gotta have it because I work hard and it proves I'm getting somewhere. Well, last year I didn't have a camcorder. This year, I do. Must be getting somewhere. Tired, hun?"

Jerry driving along in the K-Car, thinking: She doesn't trust me. I don't need to be pushed into the pit. I can make it there quite well myself, thank you. So I spend too much. The thought of spending brings it back, that familiar feeling, expansive feeling, of spending sprees, of forays into malls with no purpose but to Walk Where Things Are Sold, to peruse, approve and purchase. The feeling is optimistic, alive with the tang of juicy restaurant steaks, the swipe of credit cards, the smooth slide of bills passed across the counter, the rows of big white signs proclaiming in bold red letters The Best Deal Anywhere, the pungent ozone of stacks of appliances ready to serve. So painfully familiar.

Ah, Consumer Man, deprived of cards and credit, losing the War Of The Warranties, his realm a shambles of high-tech poverty, his pennies, nickels and dimes long since rolled and spent. Empty jars in the kitchen. We were saving those for our first night out together in almost a year. What did I spend them on?

The K-Car glides smoothly on the expressway, heading toward the mall.

***

Jerry in the mall, unzipping his jacket, shaking off the cold and feeling very much at home. Comfortable. Familiar. Yes, Virginia, city streets have roofs and they make the doors too small to get cars in. The ones you sometimes see on display were put there by magic. This is Jerry's favorite mall, simply laid out, with a food store at one end, a department store at the other, and in between, a long hall with more than a hundred stores, fast-food outlets, specialty booths, banks, bars, arcades, skylights, fountains and real trees. Everything but rain and snow.

The mall reminds Jerry of a street he and his brother had walked down in Italy when they were kids. There had been buildings four stories high on either side; food shops, clothing shops and antique shops fronting the cobbled street on left and right. Halfway down the street, they had come to a wide opening to their right and had looked out the opening onto a river flowing underneath them. The busy, building-lined street had really been a bridge.

Jerry feels that same sense of astonishment as he stands in the mall. He takes the list from his jacket pocket, talks to himself: "Now, let's see. Hot dog buns. Three bags of milk. Ketchup. Dish soap, clothing soap, hand soap. Gotta stay clean. We may starve, but we'll die clean, with glistening dishes and fresh-smelling shrouds." A woman carrying a large package walks by Jerry,

Jerry walks down the hall toward K-Mart, mildly disturbed by the sparse crowd of shoppers. Where's that festive look tonight? He passes by the darkened front of a bankrupt shop. Pillow shop. That was a pillow shop--not a good idea to over-specialize in times like these. He passes another closed shop. Christ, they could at least put some travel posters in the windows so they don't look like black holes in space, slowly drawing in the stores around them. He passes a group of teenagers in flamboyantly colored jackets and blue jeans who have established their stomping grounds around a marble and wood bench. A tall, pretty girl with a cold sore on her lower lip looks Jerry straight in the eye, steps back just enough to place herself in Jerry's way. Jerry swerves around her. Wrong target, hard belly. This chicken shit worries about laws and wife-person anger. Or would it be wife-person disappointment? Or just a wife-person shrug of the shoulders and gimme half and the kids? Half of what? A tiny black and white television set?

Jerry spots a man with a mustache and glasses in a camera shop, purchasing what looks like a camera lens. Immediately, he becomes jealous, resentful, even though he has an expensive camera at home and a large tote bag filled with expensive lenses and accessories. He also has twelve rolls of film to develop When Things Get Better. Nope. I won't stand for this. I won't be intimidated by a man with glasses and a mustache. Jerry strolls into the camera shop and begins to browse, not focusing on anything in particular, not even the books and accessories he touches and examines. He lingers a few minutes after the glasses-and-mustache leaves, and then remembers: boppie liners.

***

Jerry in the K-Mart, thinking, Yes, Virginia, the Temple of Outstanding Values, where Santa comes to shop. Attention, K-Mart shoppers. Yes, YOU. You are about to purchase boppie liners at K-Mart. YOU are a K-Mart shopper. Shoulders back and chest out, stomach in, chin up, preeezent credit card. Jerry walks past the checkout counters. Not too busy for a Thursday evening. Three young girls are at one of the checkouts, paying for records with a credit card. Jerry will be paying for the bottle liners with cash. Kids have credit cards. I have creditors. Shut up, Jer. Don't start getting jealous of kids.

And then Jerry sees the signs, the beautiful, reassuring signs. LOWEST PRICES! YOU CAN'T DO BETTER! AFFORDABLE! The baby care center is at the opposite end of the store. Jerry plots his course, a diagonal through men's wear and kitchenware. He feels better now, surrounded by racks of shirts boasting 70% OFF! He feels buoyed by the OUTSTANDING BUYS in men's pants, the SUPER SPECIALS on men's underwear. He stops for a moment to look at some winter jackets that are EASY ON YOUR BUGEY! The lining in Jerry's jacket has begun to rip and both pockets have holes in them. He pushes the jackets around the metal rung until he comes to the medium-size jackets, pleased that the gray and blue jacket he likes is available in his size. He fights the urge to take it off the rack and try it on. Boppie liners. I'm here for boppie liners.

He breaks out of the men's wear section into an aisle with tables packed with GREAT DEALS and BEST BUYS! He spots a stack of Pampers on sale for 40% OFF! Little Red uses cloth
diapers. Too bad. Could've saved a bundle. And then Jerry sees pans, T-Fal pans, on a bargain table in front of the kitchenware section. YOU CAN AFFORD THIS LOW PRICE! Jerry heads straight for the table to check out this low price that he CAN afford. He picks up one of the pans by the handle, as though he were lifting it off a burner. He imagines eggs sliding effortlessly across the perfect, gray, non-stick coating, grease from sausages disappearing with one pass of the dishcloth. YOU CAN AFFORD THIS LOW PRICE! He looks at the red sticker marked SALE in black letters across the top. And, below that, the price--$7.99. Seven ninety-nine. Seven ninety-nine for a brand new T-Fal pan. Sweat forms on Jerry's hands as the excitement builds. YOU CAN AFFORD THIS LOW PRICE! Sold! One T-Fal frying pan.

He unfolds the grocery list. Got to be some duplication here. Time to be creative. Put the mind in gear, assess with critical eye. Hot dog rolls. Scratch the rolls. Cut the wiener and put 'em right in with the beans. Beans and wiener. Save on relish and mustard, and fewer utensils to wash. French fries. Bye-bye frozen fries. Hello big chips, home-cut from fresh taters. Looking like a new pan. Looking like a new pan. Cheerios. Nothing wrong with puffed wheat, called them fluffs when I was a kid. Must be good roughage, and cheaper. Yes, you can afford this pan. Ketchup. No Heinz this time, baby, go for the generic. Beans. Nope, need them for the wiener. Fall back, regroup. Dish soap, clothing soap, hand soap. Soap's soap. The clothes will never suspect they're being washed with dish soap. Come on list. Gotta have this pan. Bacon. Haven't had sausage for a while. Must be at least fifty cents difference there. Kleenex. Nothing wrong with toilet paper for a good snort. Three bags of milk. Boppie filler. Add some sugar to powdered milk. She'll love it and it'll probably be lower in cholesterol. Scratch the Coffee Mate, just stir in the powdered milk.

"Maxwell House Instant. Gotta have coffee to stir the powdered milk into. But hold on. Big savings! Get the generic. Gotta be generic coffee." Jerry realizes that he's started talking out loud when he sees two teenage store clerks standing together watching him. He smiles and nods. Yes sir, Jer, you've got more than enough room here for the pan. More than enough.

Jerry walks, T-Fal pan in hand, along the aisle, examining the GREAT DEALS and SPECTACULAR SAVINGS! He stops at tables, fingers items, imagines uses for plastic odds and ends. SO USEFUL AND PRICED TO SELL! Happily, he works his way down the aisle, soaring into the time When Things Were Better.

***

Jerry in the driveway, bends over the driver's seat and passes the plastic bags from one hand to the other and places each on the roof of the car. Nope. They just don't look wholesome enough to put food into. He has never trusted recycled bags, their lusterless appearance deemed by Jerry to be more appropriate for things bought in a second-hand store. But he loves plastic shopping bags, new or used, enjoys the soft, crinkly sound they make, the smooth texture, like a thin layer of flesh surrounding the things they hold. And then he comes to the bright white and red K-Mart bag. Three bags of serious stuff. One bag of fun stuff. He handles the K-Mart bag carefully, almost fondles it. He straightens up, threads his fingers through the carrying holes in the bags and steps back, two bags in each hand. He pushes the car door shut with his foot and notices that he left the driver's side seat slumped forward. Oh well, make it easier to get Little Red into the car seat tomorrow.

He stands by the car, looking at the living-room window. The play of light against the drapes brings a happy family scene to mind. His family, going about their happy family business--Jerry
Junior jumping left and right, up and down as he plays Super Mario, Laurel preparing lunches between her turns on the game, Little Red sitting on the living room floor, banging her toys and cheering Jerry Junior on with a loud "Ye!"

He imagines the excitement when he walks in, when Jerry Junior spots the bulging K-Mart bag. "Dad bought me a videotape, Mom!" Wife-person will nod approvingly and there'll be Ultimate Wrestling on the tube for weeks. He imagines Little Red tearing the plastic off the cardboard backing to get to the rubber Cookie Monster. JUST 59 CENTS! Of course, she'll probably chuck the toy and just play with the packaging. And Laurel will love the plastic pop-up Super Mario that he bought for her desk at work; ‘though he’ ll have to give it to her after Jerry Junior is in bed so Jerry Junior doesn't think it's for him and turn a happy occasion into a pouting scene.

Laurel will frown at first, but, when she sees that the only thing he bought for himself was a frying pan--and that, of course, is really for the entire family--then she'll smile and say: "Jer, you're just like a big kid." He may not score in the Doing The Right Thing Department, but he will score big in the Having Your Heart In The Right Place Department.

Just as Jerry begins to feel like Santa Claus, the light on the drapes flickers into near darkness, leaving just the dim glow of the television playing across them. Jerry realizes that Santa Claus is late, that the kids are in bed, that Ultimate Wrestling is almost over, that Laurel is sitting by herself in the dark, playing an ancient game of Super Mario in black and white.

***

Jerry in the kitchen, splashing down into the gray, lukewarm emptiness. Laurel repeats: "Where are they, Jerry? The bottle liners?"
The Clearing

Thirty feet past the power company building the road stopped abruptly before a clearing in the woods, as though the road crew had suddenly run out of pavement and gone home. The clearing stretched about two hundred feet, bordered on either side by tall spruces and worm-tattered pines, and then veered off to the left.

It looked to Daniel like a little world, a grand naturescape in miniature, complete with rolling, snow-crested hillocks and white fields, and an ice-covered stream meandering through its center. The naturescape sloped gently towards the stream.

Daniel glanced at his watch and relaxed. It had been years since he'd walked by himself in the woods and he felt an urge to explore, to recapture the magical quality of solitude in a natural setting. The sky was thinly overcast with a cream-colored hint that the sun was melting its way through the other side of the clouds.

Daniel stepped forward and his boot sank a few inches into the snow with a muted pumf. He smiled and made his way into the clearing. Mounds of frozen brown- and white-capped soil jutted through the even white layer of snow. Snow surrounded everything. It stuck like frozen milk to dense boughs of evergreens, pulling the trees into a winter-huddled droop. On leafless trees, it piled like smooth putty filling. In the soft light, the snow appeared warm and comfortable, a glaze molded flake by flake and shifted by wind and the contours of the land into a snug white blanket.

Daniel breathed deeply, savoring the freshness of the winter air untainted by odor, though its absence was a fragrance itself composed inoffensively of the frozen landscape. Another deep breath and he shouted.

"Daniel!"

And the woods called back to him.

danieldanieldanieldaniel

His echoing name scattered his presence into the woods, bouncing off trees and careening into unseen snow banks, giving him a solid sense of affinity with everything that surrounded him. He shouted again.

"I love you!"

And the woods called back to him.

iloveyouiloveyouiloveyou
And he saw in his mind, the woods tucking his words into the beads of crystal water dripping from the trees.

"I am your voice!"

"I speak for you!"

"We are one!"

Filling his lungs deeply, he broke into a slow run through the snow and down the slope towards the stream. He laughed and shouted.

"I am free!"

And the woods acknowledged.

He stopped at the stream, amazed and breathless. The stream was no more than two feet at its widest point, but the shallow gully it twisted through suggested another six feet on either side during the spring runoff. Walking along the edge of the gully, Daniel followed the stream as it wound through the center of the clearing.

A sheet of wafer-thin ice covered the stream a few inches above the trickling water. There was a hint of ochre in the tiny glints of reflected cloud light that gave the ice a sense of warmth. In places it fluffed up, sagged further on, and then slanted from one side to the other like a long curving pane of glass.

Ahead, Daniel saw a section of tree trunk imbedded sideways beside the stream, and he felt this was the place to sit, that sitting on the trunk was a significant part of being in the woods by the stream and in the center of the rolling field of snow. It was what the trunk was for. He yelled: "I will sit here!"

And he made his way clumsily to the trunk and sat down with his feet a few inches from the stream. A long crack split through the center of the ice and portions of the glistening sheet slumped into the water. Where the ice was perched just above the water, the edges melted from sun and wind into jagged fingers so thin that the slightest breeze might snap them. A few inches
below them, crystalline water gurgled over pebbles and rocks and reflected light to the underside of the ice, creating smooth patches of iridescence shimmering with lambent life.

From where he sat, Daniel could see that the clearing continued for another fifty feet to the left and it occurred to him that he was at the center of the little world of the clearing. He imagined the stream was a vein coursing through the heart of the clearing, nourishing and sustaining it, and with the snow and ice melting, the stream was beginning to flow again and to pump life into the bushes and trees and the dormant seeds. Daniel opened himself to the lucidity of the moment, a comprehension of something vital, and he was in the center of it.

He pulled the glove off his right hand and scooped up a few grains of coarse snow from the top of the trunk. They sparkled in his palm like miniature diamonds. He reached his arm out and sprinkled them onto the fingers of ice. Their small weight broke a long knobby splinter off with a plick and it fell into the water and dissolved.

Daniel picked up more grains and let them fall onto the sheet of ice, where they bounced lightly and settled like transparent pimples. His hand reached mechanically for more snow, and he scattered the tiny beads until the fragile ice clicked and sagged with a small frozen sigh. Then, he picked up a larger piece of snow and poised it over the ice and let it drop. It punctured the ice, and the sheet trembled and collapsed into the water like a two-foot blade cutting into the stream.

Where it had been attached, there was now a long, straight edge that looked out of place to Daniel. He felt remotely guilty, as though he had done something ineffably wrong. His hand was cold and he put his glove back on. A shiver passed through his body and he zipped up the turtleneck on his parka.

He stood up and looked with dissatisfaction at the blade of ice breaking apart in the water, beyond his power to repair it. He looked at his watch and remembered the forecast for snow later in the day. The cream color was lost in the sky and the clouds were beginning to thicken as he scrambled up the gully and began to retrace his steps out of the clearing.

The darkening sky cast a gloom over the woods as another breeze rippled across the ground, and Daniel hunched his shoulders. His boots were wet and his toes were numb with cold. He began to jog awkwardly to keep himself warm, and his breath came in gasps. To his right he noticed a long discarded section of power line, snaking in and out of the snow, over and around the hillocks, twisting indiscriminately through the little world of the clearing.
**Downstream**

Hot sun and high water, perfect for a day trip down the Nashwaak.

The four of us had a serious itch to relax and commune with beaver and alders, eagles and backwaters, and whatever Indian gods still cast their spell on river-goers and danced naked with moose and field mice. Not that we were planning to take our clothes off. Hell no! More like hats off to crows cawing from the banks and rocks jutting up from the riverbed, trying to trip us.

I was in a plastic Coleman with my girlfriend, Debbie, later to be my wife, then ex-wife, and finally, good friend and mother of my children. Dylan and Maura were in a wooden Chestnut. Dylan was a friend of mine before I met Debbie. Maura was a friend of Debbie's before she met me. Dylan and Maura weren't aware of this connection until a full month after they started dating. Small world, eh?

A light but pushy breeze shoved aside waves of heat pouring down like crystal gravy from the electric blue sky. Sunlight etched silver castles on the pinnacles and precipices of cumulous mountains. They were the kind of castles that fill your imagination with jumping off misty towers into sticky white pools of marshmallow icing.

Back on earth, cool wavelets flirted brazenly with our gunwales and mingled with the splish of paddles dipping lazily into the water.

Half an hour downstream, we encountered a series of alder-ringed islands, spliced by three channels. Debbie and I took the channel to the right. Dylan and Maura took the channel to the left. The river laughed: "HA!" and went straight down the center.

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There's a kind of reality game I play when I'm in a canoe. I stare at the water and blank out the passage of trees, canyons and abandoned cars until time turns into molasses. Beer helps a lot with this illusion. I reached into the cooler and asked Debbie if she would like another.

"Um?" Her voice was slow and dreamy, faraway somewhere, no doubt, bobbing in the molasses of her own reality game. I used my paddle to pass her a can of beer. Tears of condensation trickled over its frosty label.

She snapped the cap on her can with a foamy crackle, a sound that was almost thirst-quenching itself, you know, by association. She asked: "How much longer to the end of this branch?"

"Oh, a ways," I said.

Twenty minutes later, she introduced a new mood into the flow of river and beer. "Are you sure Dylan and Maura are okay? We haven't seen them in ages." This was a mood peopled with what I called the Worry Marchers--stark little men that appeared as columns of tiny dark shadows
deep in Debbie's eyes, where they marched and marched until the tromp of their little boots became louder and louder and channeled their sound through her brain and down to her mouth where it manifested itself as: "Carman?"

"They're fine," I replied. "The river flows downstream. It's the only place they can go. We'll meet them at the end of the channel."

Minutes passed.

"I'm getting worried." Debbie brushed a bang of blond hair out of her eyes. The bang said: "No way!" and immediately fell back, almost covering her eyes. But for the few seconds that her eyes were completely uncovered, I caught a glimpse of Worry Marchers tromping and stomping in a panicky melee deep behind the irises. "Maybe we should go back to the branch they took and see if we can find them. They've never been on this river before."

I looked back in the direction we'd just come and figured, oh, maybe three long bends in the channel, a couple of miles paddling against the current.

"No. They're fine. We'll meet them at the end of the channel."

"But what if their branch goes into a dead end. What if--"

"They're fine."

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More minutes passed with the lap-lap of water lap-lapping and the occasional ba-bump of the metal keel bumping against the plastic hull. Wind tickled the hairs on my forearms. I lifted a cold brew, wet-fresh from the ice, and soaked my throat with a rush of bubbles.

Debbie looked back quickly, the stomp of the Marchers cracking the corners of her eyes with lines and shadows. Tension swelled her shoulders, pushed her arms into the unnatural act of paddling forcefully in an already quick current. Waste of energy. Better to just drink some beer and use the paddles as rudders, to steer only.

"But this is only your second time on this river. Have you ever been down the branch they took?"

"No. But it can only flow one way." So obvious, it seemed to me.

"Unless it comes to a dead end. What if it comes to a dead end? What if it flows away from the river and takes them--"

Why couldn't she grasp a concept that was so much like life itself? "It all flows downstream. We'll meet them at the end of the channel."

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The Worry Marchers had changed tactics, trading stomping and tromping for slow, perfectly synchronized jumps telegraphed through Debbie's tensed shoulders, funneled through her arms and hands and into her paddle and--

Her head had become granite--

with opal eyes--

and pumice ears--

She opened her soapstone mouth: "I'm getting really worried, Carman. We should have seen them by now. Can you at least call out their names?"

"And scare the wildlife?"

"We haven't seen any wildlife. We haven't seen anything."

"Hm, yeah, wonder where all the beavers are today."

"Just call!"

"Okay." I cupped my hands around my mouth. "HEY, ASSHOLE!"

"Carman!"

"Just joking. DXLAN! MAURA! You guys still alive?"

Alders and sky gobbled my voice. Not even an echo burped back, a blank response from river, land and sky, almost like Dylan and Maura had been absorbed into the tangle of roots, rock and water that was nature, dissolved into its ineffable void.

I was becoming a tad concerned. Like Debbie had said, it was only my second trip on this river, and the first one had been with a drunken armada of ten canoes full of beer and madmen. To tell the truth, I couldn't even remember the river forking into three branches. I didn't say this, but thinking it was enough, all that Debbie needed to pick up on it.
"DYLAN! MAURA!" she yelled.

Nothing.

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Mother Nature, always empathetic to the moods of river-goers, nudged the biggest of the creamy white clouds right across the path of the sunlight. Shadows winked from under the crests of wavelets and smiled eerily from stands of evergreens. A cool breeze raised goose bumps on my forearms. And worst of all, my beer had gone flat.

I lengthened and quickened my paddle stroke, a useless exercise since almost no power is generated once the paddle is parallel to the body. I was working against the natural flow of the current, forcing my intent to be downstream before the river's time.

"Dylan! Maura!" Debbie's voice cracked the air with lesions of panic. "Carman! Where are they?"

"There's only one place they can end up, Debbie." I pointed ahead. "Downstream." But my tottering certainty was no match for the genuineness of Debbie's paranoia.

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Just go forward, to where the channels merge back into the main body of the river."

Debbie dug her paddle into the water.

***

Splash.

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We raised a high white wake as we paddled vigorously, her muscles and my muscles throbbing blood to the same heavy rhythm. It seemed that we gulped the same deep breaths, filling our lungs with the same energy-packed air, and then expelling it through our arms and into the paddles and into the water and into our intent to be downstream. And the rhythm droned with a splash

Splash

Splash

until the inevitable call of the Great God of Paddling clamored in my throat.
"Time for a brew," I said. Debbie, panting, agreed, and I passed her a beer on my river-drenched paddle. We lay down our paddles and snapped open our beers. The smell of pine drifted into my nostrils as we rested and floated, sipped and thought.

"It's beautiful out here," said Debbie. The big cloud had passed and the sun was back, the shadows gone, and mercy be, a beaver slipped into the water to our right with a splash of its tail.

"Wildlife," I said, pointing with my paddle.

"Was that a beaver?"

"Yeah. Big one." We looked for a couple of minutes to see if we could spot it swimming, but it was long gone. Debbie looked back at me and smiled. "Is that why you come on these trips?" she asked.

"Part of it," I said.

I was about to say more, but Debbie, satisfied with my answer, turned her eyes back to the shore, the blue spruce, the sun glistening on late afternoon wavelets, the melody of an endless procession of water molecules sliding over each other in a single direction beyond the march of any beat. The rest of it.

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"Debbie!"

A woman's voice. It was Maura, waving madly from the river bend ahead of us, where the channels merged. "Debbie! Carman! Where have you two been? We've been worried sick!"
Killing Assholes

(Note: This novella was published as a standalone ebook in 2005 by Echelon Press. It was originally published under the name The Baton/)

I’m not a bad person. Not really. I pay my bills on time. Like, I’m a goddamn fanatic when it comes to paying bills. I’m not one of those dickheads who runs up a tab and then says “screw it, I got better things to do with my time and money than pay for something I already used.” I don’t do that shit. I pay my bills. My parents did. I do. It runs in the family, like almost a genetic thing…you owe money, you pay it off. And I’m a considerate driver. I mean, I don’t take any shit when I’m driving. I mean, some asswipe cuts me off, I give him the finger. It’s a woman…hey, I’m all for equal rights…I give her the finger too. But before I lost my license, I stopped for pedestrians. I stopped and let people out at intersections, even if it meant that the prick behind me honked his horn and I had to give him the finger. Or her the finger. Makes no difference to me. I’m that fucking considerate.

I’m not some kind’ve sexual deviate. I haven’t had it in a long time and, you know, like I’ve done some arm wrestling with the Big Snake, but I don’t bop hard bellies…nineteen’s my cutoff and no younger no matter how big their tits are. And when a lady says back off, I back off. No’s no in my book, same as hers. And I don’t watch porno flicks or read those expensive hardcore magazines. Playboy and Penthouse. That’s my limit.

I don’t cheat on my tax forms, even if I knew how to do that. I don’t steal. I don’t lie, at least unless I really have to and then it’s okay because I really have to. You know…life’s gray sometimes. I don’t talk about my friends behind their backs. I don’t do that ever, and I’ve smacked a couple of dicks in the head for doing that in the past. No excuse for backstabbing your friends. No excuse at all. I don’t cut into lines if I see somebody I know near the front of the line. I hate it when people do that! I don’t play my music loud. I figure my music is my choice and it might not be my neighbor’s choice, so I keep it to myself. That’s kind’ve a choice I make for everybody so, like, being considerate can even be empowering sometimes. I don’t give the check-out people in grocery stores or department stores a hard time when their computerized cash machines fuck up or the bar thing on the merchandise doesn’t work and makes the computer fritz out. I don’t give innocent people a hard time. Innocent people get a hard time from every direction…but not from me. I don’t do that.

But there’s one thing I do…and I gotta say that I really love doing it.

I kill assholes.

About one a month.

***

What finally broke the camel’s back was one day when the guy in the scabby t-shirt spit on the sidewalk. That was it. Shit. I was sitting on a bench eating a sandwich. He saw me sitting on the bench eating my sandwich. And the cocksucker spit…I mean, a big white stream of white gunk,
the kind that’s thick and sticks to the sidewalk like dirty lard. I mean, what kind’ve asshole does a thing like that? And he was looking right at me when he did it. Like his eyes were saying: “Enjoying that sandwich, chump? Here, enjoy this.” Hack. Pitchu. White gob piled up on the sidewalk right in front of me. And I lost my appetite.

So I followed the prick.

Yeah, followed him. Really surprised myself when I did that. Just stood up and went after the dumb prick. He didn’t see me…didn’t even suspect that somebody was walking behind him about thirty feet away and sticking to him like a shadow. Probably all wrapped in thinking who he was gonna gross out next. Prick.

I followed him for most of the day…and what a prick he turned out to be. Like, right after grossing me out, and I mean, this was only about a block away, about two point zero minutes after grossing me out…he shoved a kid.

A kid.

Like, he was walking down the sidewalk all wrapped up in asswipe thoughts, probably laughing his brains out about grossing me out a block and two point zero minutes back, and he’s not even looking where he’s going and there’s this little girl in a sort of white and blue sailor’s dress and she’s just standing on the sidewalk right in front of this prick with her back to him. I dunno, maybe waiting for a cab or something…maybe waiting for a friend. But the prick I’m following comes up behind her and instead of just moving a few inches to the side and walking around her, the jerk reaches out his hand and pushes her. Just pushes her! Knocks her right down on her ass. And just keeps on walking. I mean, the little girl didn’t start crying or anything…just got back up and made a nasty face at the guy’s back and went back to waiting or whatever she was doing. I would’ve stopped and asked her if she was okay, but I didn’t wanna draw any attention to myself, following this prick and all, you know. So I just kept on walking and, shit, it didn’t take long before he was into it again.

This time with a dog tied to a street sign in front of a music store. It was one of those ones you read about a lot, attacking kids and stuff. Not a Doberman…the other one, with the flat ugly face. But it was all tied up to the sign and it wasn’t growling or dripping stuff or anything, just lying down all curled up and looking like any normal dog, but the guy I’m following slows down and looks into the window of the music store and looks to the other side. Prick didn’t look behind himself so he didn’t see me, but he suddenly bends over and scoops up a piece of red brick that was littering the sidewalk from construction on the building next to the music store, and not thinking that anybody’s watching him, he just ups and throws the piece of brick right into the poor dog’s side, and the dog takes to yelping and growling at the prick but it’s tied up to the street sign and the dumb prick I’m following walks around the dog just far enough to be out of biting range.

And what happens when the owner comes rushing out of the store after hearing his dog making all that noise? Old guy in one of those hats. Even wearing suspenders. The prick turns on the old guy and starts giving him shit for having a vicious dog and says that he oughta call the cops.
Fucking nerve! The old guy just stands there looking between the prick and the dog and not knowing what to say, just looking kind’ve old and confused and worried about his dog…maybe even afraid that he’s gonna lose the dog if this creep calls the cops. But the prick just turns around and keeps on walking.

And I keep on following him.

By now I’ve got this guy sized up for a real creep. He’s about medium tall, real short hair like he’s one of those punk guys but he’s not wearing those fruity red boots or anything. He’s wearing a dirty brown t-shirt, faded blue jeans, and Jesus boots with no socks. I always hated those fairies in sandals. Think they’re cool, but they’re just a bunch of fucking fairies. He’s got squinty eyes and a long nose. Hate those too. And his mouth is kind’ve pinched up like he spends a lotta time sucking on his thumb or something.

And then he does it again.

Prick gobs another big white pile of spit on the sidewalk like something he’s been saving up at the back of his mouth for a long time. Even looks down at it and I swear he was smiling, thinking about the people who were gonna walk by that pile of shit and gag or barf or something. Cocksucker.

I followed him for another hour, watching him gob and strut and act like a prick, like when he went down a whole block with a key scraping the sides of parked cars. Shit, one of them was a ’78 Firebird. In immaculate condition! Prick should have his hands cut off for something like that!

That’s when I knew that I had to do something, something that was gonna really put him in his place, something that would, I dunno, even the score or something. The prick spit again on the sidewalk and it was, like, all this white froth blowing out of his mouth and that’s when it came to me. That’s when I knew what I had to do. That’s when I made up my mind that I was gonna do it.

I followed him home. I found out where he lived, at least what apartment building he lived in, and it was a real dump. No surprise in that. The sidewalk had all kinds of garbage piled up. Even the steps leading up to the doors of the buildings on his street had fuck graffiti painted on them. Just figure what the buildings looked like…and his was the worst on the block. But I knew where he lived. I knew where to find him. And that’s just what I was gonna do…find him every day for the next few days and follow him.

Prick wasn’t working so he just walked around every day with me following him and him doing the same messed up stuff every single day…spitting all over the sidewalks, scratching cars, stealing everything that wasn’t nailed down and hanging around with a bunch of losers just like him, but he didn’t spend much time with them…seemed like they didn’t much like him either. Seemed like they cussed him a lot and said things that pissed him off, but then they looked pretty pissed off all the time. Buncha bald-headed leathered-up weirdoes is what they were.
But here’s what I did. I followed him and I carried a big empty Vitamin C bottle and a butter knife. And whenever he spit on the sidewalk, I waited until he got a good distance away and then I went over to the spit and scraped it up with the butter knife before it could sink into the sidewalk or dry up. Sickening shit that was, but I did it. And I didn’t barf once. Came close a couple of times, ‘specially at first, but I kept my cookies down. And I followed the prick around for nearly a week…until I had a full bottle of his gob. Man, it was starting to stink like something dead when I opened I up to put more in. You can bet I was glad when it was full and I wouldn’t have to be smelling that shit anymore, at least, not for more than one more time…and it was good that it smelled bad for that one more time.

If it smelled that bad, then it must’ve tasted twice as bad.

I think it was something like the fourth or fifth day that I was following him that I was ready. This time when he walked up the steps and through the door and into his building, I followed him right in. Not really close…just close enough that that I wouldn’t lose sight of him. But, hell, I wasn’t really all that worried about his seeing me anymore.

Nothing was gonna stop me now.

He looked around when I came through the door and he gave me a look like I was maybe the most unimportant thing in the universe let alone his life and he just looked away and started walking up the worst set of rickety-rackety steps I’ve ever seen in probably the worst looking stairwell on the planet. The walls looked like the people that died in World War III…like, when it ever happens. I followed him up the stairs and the prick never even suspected he was being followed, just walked up the steps real arrogant like and I followed him up to the third floor. The hall was the shits…I mean, the walls here were painted with bad smells instead of paint. He stopped at a door. He just turned the knob and walked in. Didn’t even keep the door locked. Man, I could hardly wait to see what this place looked like.

It was a dump. Just like the hall. Just like the prick I was following, and he was looking at me now…still with that fucking arrogant better-than-you look, but I could tell that he was worried about seeing me coming through the door with a big Vitamin C bottle in my hand. I could smell the worry, like he was sweating it or something.

“Who the fuck are you?” he said.

“Got a present for ya, prick,” I said.

That’s when he got really worried…soon as I called him prick. He knew I wasn’t no friend, and now I could really smell the sweat coming off his asshole body.

“Take your fuckin’ present and get the fuck out of here,” he yelled. He still had that arrogant look, but I could smell the sweat.

“But I put a lot of work into this present for you,” I said.
Now he looked a little bit puzzled like he almost wanted to know what the present was, ‘specially thinking that a lotta work went into it, but I could smell that he was afraid of finding out what it was…probably got a lot of rocks and dog shit wrapped up as presents when he was a kid. He sure didn’t look like the popular kind. Not like me. I was popular…or else.

“I don’t care how much work you put into it…take your fuckin’ present and get the fuck out of here now!”

That’s when I just dove right at him. I’m one fast motherfucker. People don’t expect that in someone my size, but it’s true…I’m like pig fat on a freeway. I took the cocksucker by surprise. Works every time. People don’t expect people to just attack that sudden. Catches them with their guard down, even if it’s already up. I was on him and he was on the floor and I was on top of him and I had one hand clutching his throat, squeezing the life out of him. His ugly hairless face was kind’ve bloated like and now he looked more pissed off than arrogant, but I could smell the sweat in his eyes like it was rotten hamburger. He tried squirming his body around, but I was too heavy for him. He was trapped. I pushed my face right into his ugly face and I said: “I spent a lotta time on this fucking gift for you and you’re gonna take it. You ain’t got no choice, ya prick.”

He just stared up into my face, gagging and turning purple, while I wedged the big Vitamin C bottle on my hand that was squeezing the prick’s throat and used my other hand to untwist the top. I tossed the top away and took the bottle in my free hand and held it right over his mouth.

“You ever hear the old expression, what goes around comes around, prick?” I said. He just gagged and looked confused. Dumb fuck. “I’m the guy who was sitting on the bench last week, remember? You ruined my lunch with this stuff!”

And then I jammed the top of the bottle into his mouth and watched the shit inside pour slowly into the prick’s mouth. Watching that thick shit emptying into a human mouth almost made me puke but I watched. I mean, it was like I had to watch, like it would be some kind’ve crime against God if I didn’t. So I watched. And when the bottle was empty except for the stuff sticking to the insides of it, I pulled it out and, really fast, I put my hand over his mouth so’s he couldn’t spit the shit out. That part felt really right. He was stuck with his own gob in his mouth and couldn’t spit it out. Stuck with himself, sort of.

And then something really weird happened. At first it made the hair all over my body kind’ve stand up or something, it was that weird, but then the weirdness kind’ve melted away into something else.

I mean, I couldn’t see his mouth because I had my hand over it, but I was looking right into the prick’s eyes and it almost looked like he was smiling. He wasn’t struggling or anything, just lying there with his mouth full of scraped-up gob and me sitting on him and his eyes were smiling. And then his eyes kind’ve went really dull, like, what’s that word? When something looks not as bright…luster! They lost their luster. And he still wasn’t moving, not struggling or anything, just lying there with a mouth full of gob and all the life drained out of his eyes. And that’s when I realized what was so weird.
Prick was dead.

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I walked around for the rest of the day just thinking about that prick, what an asshole he was, how I followed him and scraped up his spit, watching him and getting to know what a complete asshole he was and then making him eat is own gob. But mostly I thought about that look in his eyes just before he died. And about the way he just sort’ve gave it all up and stopped struggling before he was dead, like he didn’t give a fuck, like he didn’t even want to go on living, like he was almost happy or something. I mean, that smile in his eyes…

I thought about the way that made me feel. It was almost like some kind’ve freed up feeling, like a lot of stuff was being lifted off my shoulders…or like some kind’ve cosmic vacuum cleaner sucked a shit load of crap out of me. It was like God himself was in my arms, in my hands, making it all happen, making it all come to some kind’ve close. It was like I was the last chapter in that asshole’s life.

I was the happy ending.

It made me think about assholes in general, about all the people in my life…in everybody’s lives…who make living more of a hell than it really is. I thought about those assholes who call you up on the phone…on your own fucking phone…and try to sell you something you don’t want and don’t need. I mean, one of those dumbasses dragged me out the shower when I still had a phone and I was dripping water and soap all over the floor while some idiot asks me if I want to buy gardening equipment and I’m telling the prick that I live on the third floor of a fucking apartment building but he says that it’s on sale and they’re never gonna be selling the gardening stuff at this price again, whatever the fuck it is–I don’t know dick about gardening–so I should buy it or I’ll miss out. “I live in a fucking apartment building!” I screamed at the prick. “The back yard’s a fucking parking lot!” And the prick still tried to sell me gardening shit. I hung up. I would’ve killed the prick. I would’ve jumped right through the phone line and killed the prick if he would’ve called back.

That’s what I mean about assholes in general. Like the people who make those automated telephone answering systems that send you around and around, asking for this option and that option, and sending you to this place and that place, and then they send you into some fucking dead end with dead end music like the shit they play in elevators or in some doctors’ offices. I think it’s supposed to calm you. It just pisses me off. And I really get pissed off at the ones that say: “Your call is important to us. Please hold.” If my call is so fucking important, then pick up the phone and turn off that goddam music! Almost seems like phones breed assholes.

* * *

My second asshole had a cell phone.
I hate those things. Don’t know how many times I’ve come a pube hair away from being run over by some asshole talking away on a phone while he’s, or she’s—and it’s really easy to be sexually orientated fair on this one—driving along yakking away on the phone, all wrapped up on the cell phone and not watching where they’re going, so god help anybody who gets in their path because they’re gonna ram their front bumper up your ass and probably just keep on driving and never even know they killed anybody. If assholes had uniforms, they’d probably have cell phones hanging all over their jackets like soldiers have grenades hanging there. Fucking grenades probably do less damage.

So there I was…about a month after killing Mr. Gob-a-Lot…sitting in a this place having a coffee and chocolate dip donut or three, and there’s these two guys sitting about four seats away from me and they’re talking away. One of them is small with dark hair and he’s like mostly listening to the other guy, who’s kind’ve big—maybe about one ninety-five or thereabouts—and they’re talking for about five minutes, mostly the big guy talking, like I said, but I’m kind’ve of studying them. I do that a lot…just sort’ve look at people and try to figure them out, see if I can guess what they’re about. Think maybe someday I might, you know, write a book or something. I think I got a lotta stories I could write about. But I’m thinking that these guys work together or something. I mean, they’re both wearing white shirts and ties and it looks like they just sort’ve dropped into this place for a coffee break to talk business maybe. And right when the little guy starts to say something, the big guy holds up a finger to shut him up and pulls out a cell phone and starts talking into it.

What the hell is the world coming to! I’ve seen this a million times. The big guy just starts yakking away on the phone as though the other guy doesn’t even exist, as though as soon as the cell phone rang or buzzed or whatever they do, the little guy just disappeared into some other world, like he existed only when the big guy wasn’t talking on the cell phone. At that moment, I could’ve gone right over to their table and grabbed that phone and shoved in right down the prick’s throat. “Fucking message on hold!” I could’ve yelled while he choked on his call. I watched for about five minutes and the whole time the big prick didn’t even look at the other guy…yakked away on the phone. The little guy looked kind’ve like he really didn’t give a shit at first, just sipped his coffee and sort’ve looked around the place, but after five minutes, he looked like he was starting to get a little bit irritated, and if the big guy had given a fuck about anything else but talking on his cell phone, he would’ve seen that the guy he was sitting with was getting just a little bit pissed.

I kept watching. By this time, I could’ve just started smashing the phone over the big guy’s head until I cracked his skull open. The little guy was starting to get fidgety. He took a business card out of his shirt pocket and started reading it and flicking it with his thumb. I wanted to just yell at him to just get up and walk out of the place and leave the prick with the phone sitting there talking all by himself. But he stayed and the longer he stayed, the madder I got. The more he flicked that fucking business card, the more I wanted to kill the big prick with the phone.

So that’s exactly what I did.

Not right away though. Not right then. In fact, as soon as I made up my mind that I was gonna to kill the prick, I calmed down. I wasn’t mad anymore. I was determined. I was determined that
the prick with the cell phone was gonna die, so I just sat there all relaxed and drinking my coffee and watching the two men for about another ten minutes while the big guy yakked and yakked on the cell phone. I mean, there’s assholes and there’s assholes…making anybody wait that long while you just ignore the poor bastard while you talk on a phone sitting right in front of the guy so that he can’t do anything but try to not interrupt your call and pretend that his time is worth dick-all while the other guy just yaks and yaks. The little guy was getting more irritated. Like, it showed in the way his eyes were all over the place like he was looking for some place to escape but always coming back to the card he flicked with his thumb because there was no way out…except maybe to just get up and walk out. But he wasn’t gonna do that.

And that made me think…one of the biggest things that assholes have going for them is the fact that the people they fuck over don’t do anything. They just sit there and take it, just like the little guy was doing right now. Just sitting there wanting to get up and just walk out but glued to his chair because he didn’t want to look like an asshole by walking out on the other guy. I mean, shit, that might interrupt the prick’s phone call. They got all those books on etiquette and doing and saying the right thing, but somebody should write a book about when you don’t have to be considerate anymore, about that line that people cross over where you don’t have to treat them like humans anymore and you can just tell them to go fuck themselves. Maybe some day I’ll write that book. I got a lotta thoughts on the subject.

And then, wonder of wonders, the big guy finally finishes his call and puts the phone back in his pocket and, get this, he just like starts talking to the other guy like nothing ever happened, like he didn’t just spend nearly half an hour ignoring him and making him waste his entire coffee break listening to some fat tub of cell phone yakking machine blabbing to some dumbass somewhere else who’s probably doing the same thing at that end. He didn’t even say he was sorry. I could see it in the way he looked while he talked. It was like the little guy was nothing more than some kind’ve stage prop in a play all about the big guy and everything that he didn’t have time for was just supposed to disappear but be right there when he paid attention to it again.

Yeah. This guy had to die.

I waited a bit after they left and then I got up and followed them. They were walking. That was a sign. It meant the big guy had to die. I mean, if they were in a car, I wouldn’t be able to follow them, but they were walking. They walked down the sidewalk about a block away to a discount furniture store. I was right…they worked together…probably furniture salesmen. The store was pretty shabby looking: big dirty windows with cracked tiles under them, and the top part of the building looked like it had cheap apartments and probably needed paint for the last fifty years. But there seemed to be a lot of customers inside looking around. Must be good prices. I walked by the door and slowed down just enough to read the sign with the hours listed. They closed at nine.

Nine.

That’s when the big guy would be mine.
I was parked across the street when the store closed. I was kind’ve split between which was the bigger high…killing the asshole with the phone or using a stolen car. I was fucked if I was caught at either of them, completely fucked if I was caught at both. But what the…with my record, I was already fucked. No loss!

He was the first out. That figured. Probably left all the paperwork for his skinny buddy. And, holy shit! He was walking out of the store with his cell phone jammed into his ear. But that was good. Meant that he wasn’t looking around, wasn’t seeing me waiting there across the street for him. He was all wrapped up in something that had nothing to do with here and now. And I was here and now.

He walked into a parking lot around the corner of the store and disappeared for a couple of minutes. Then his car pulled out of the lot and onto the street. He was driving away from me. Great! I didn’t have to do a ninety-degree, or whatever they call that thing they do. He was driving a Toyota something or other…no patriotism…but that figured. And the prick was still talking on the phone. Took the turn onto the street wide. Not paying attention. Not here and now, where I was waiting for him. I started up the car and followed him. Prick was all over the road, head bobbing up and down while he talked, not paying any attention at all to his driving. Pissed me off so much, I almost hit an old guy who came right out of nowhere on a crosswalk.

He finally pulled up in front of a small single-floor house in a sort of nice neighborhood, like the kind’ve place where there’s no bars on the doors or windows, but there’s all these signs that the place is close to bars…paint peeling on just about all the houses, garbage on the curbs that looks like it’s been there a while meaning that the city’s starting to give up on this street, same with the burnt out street lights and the street signs painted over with “fuck you” for god knows how long.

This is where the dumbass lived. This was his house. The lights were off. He lived alone…or the others were out. But I figured he just lived alone. Only real people in this prick’s life were at the other end of his cell phone.

His next call was gonna be a wake up call from reality.

Reality was parked across the street from his house, watching him, and noticing that there was no basketball net over the garage door. Something unnatural about that. Reminded me of when I was a kid.

I waited for the deep dark, the time when everybody’s probably in bed, even the dogs. I got out of the car and walked real casual-like up to his yard and looked around. Nobody was looking out the windows of any of the other houses, so I ducked into a clump of bushes and made my way up to the house. Fucking prickly rose bushes in there somewhere. Hate those things. There was light coming from a window at the side of the house and that’s where I went. I looked in and there he was, sitting in a recliner chair, watching TV, eating something from a white bowl. That’s when I noticed how big the prick’s gut was. Must wear a girdle or something in the daytime. His arms were big, but they didn’t look hard. I could take this guy…I knew it. I made my way around the house, peeking into all the windows I could see into, and it looked like he was alone.
It was time to kill him.

I went to the front door and knocked. Just like that…I knocked on the door and stood there like I was just any old visitor dropping by at two o’clock in the morning to pay a visit or something. Who the fuck knows, these days. Prick just opened the door. Didn’t even ask who it was. Cocky bastard, this one. He said: “What the hell do you want?” I just ran right into him. Pushed upward on his upper body and lifted him right off his center of gravity and down he went onto the floor. I kicked the door closed with my foot and then punched him a couple or three times with my fists until he stopped struggling as much. He could take a beating…but soon as he quieted, I jumped up and brought my foot down into his chest as hard as I could. I could hear bones snapping. Ugly sound, but this prick needed it. I looked around and saw just what I needed.

He was sort of squirming around on the floor with a dazed look in his eyes, or at least the one that he could still open. He must’ve farted, ’cause the air was filled with something that smelled like burning sulfur. He was moaning with a kind’ve gurgling sound. I didn’t have much time. I jumped across the living room and grabbed his cell phone from the TV table beside his recliner chair and then jumped back fast to where he was just starting to push himself up on his elbow. I let him have it in the side of the head with the cell phone. And then I let him have it again with the cell phone…this time square in the face. By this time, he wasn’t making any more noises and I wasn’t saying a word. It was just the two of us, looking at each other and the only noise was the sound of the cell phone smashing into his face until I was sure that the cocksucker wasn’t ever gonna talk on the phone again while some poor bastard had to wait for him.

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Walking home from his place, I did a lot of thinking. I guess killing people does that to you. I thought about what a fucked up world telephones were making the place. I remembered when I still had one…assholes calling me up and asking me to buy all kind’ve crap I didn’t want. One time, this bitch calls me up—although I know some guys who’re bitches, just to be fair with the sex thing—and she starts asking me questions about what kind’ve shit I buy and I said: “I don’t do shit over the phone. Take me off your fucking list.” And she says: “I’ll do that, sir, but first, can you tell me how many children you have?” I hung up. Phones make it easier for assholes to be assholes. They make it possible for the assholes to come right into your home and fuck you up. Best thing that ever happened to me was losing my phone.

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It was just a little over a month after that that I killed another asshole.

Started in a movie theater this time. I was watching a movie, minding my own business, and this skinny prick sits right down behind me. Lots of other empty seats in the place, but he sits right down behind me. Place was so empty I could almost hear the dumbass breathing. Prick even knocked my chair a couple of times. People should have their feet cut off for doing that. Then I heard some kind’ve crinkling noise, like paper or something. And then I heard it…the one sound that I really hate coming from another human being.
He was chewing gum. With his fucking mouth open! Making all kinds’ve snapping and cracking noises, bouncing the wad of gum off his tongue, wrapping it around his teeth, and making sucking noises with his lips. Whole theater with empty seats and this prick has to sit down right behind me and chew his gum with his fucking mouth open.

Big mistake, asshole.

And there was the feeling again…once I knew that I was gonna kill him, I calmed down. The sound didn’t bother me anymore, just fed my resolve, and I kind’ve enjoyed it now. I sat right through the whole movie listening to him chewing and smacking his lips together. Prick went through three pieces of gum. I turned my head sideways once and saw him putting the chewed-out gum under his seat. That’s why I never touch the bottom of a seat in a movie theater ever since I was a kid and put my hand right smack into a pile of sticky gum that I had to wash off in the washroom and miss half the movie. Man, would I like to run into the dumb prick who put that gum under the seat now. Right fucking now. But he’s long gone. Probably choked to death on a wad of gum.

But the prick behind me was here. Still chewing. With his mouth open. Right behind me. Pretty soon…pretty soon, prick wasn’t gonna be chewing gum anymore. I can’t even remember any of the fuck scenes in the movie…just remember trying to think about how I was gonna handle this one.

It had to be gum. Just like the prick who spit all over the place. This asshole had to die by gum. Fuck, that meant following him around for the next week, hoping the prick would spit out the gum where I could get it. But if the guy had to die by gum, then that’s the way he was gonna die and I would follow him around and I would pick up the slime ball’s gum wads and save them for him. This thing had to be done right, and I was gonna do it right.

I’m that much in tune with my inner balance.

The movie ended and they started playing the credits–credits for a fuck movie…yeah, sure–and the five or six people in the place stayed and watched them, maybe waiting to see if they were gonna give out the phone numbers of the sluts in the movie. Or maybe they just didn’t finish whacking themselves. But the guy behind me got up about a minute into the credits. I stayed where I was, just sort’ve looking over to the side to get a good look at him. Skinny, just like I figured, blond hair growing down over his ears, wearing a blue sports jacket with a wide white line going down one side. Prick wasn’t half bad looking and I wondered what he was doing in a movie like this when he could’ve probably been making it with the real thing. I waited until he was well up the aisle and almost to the exit before I stood up and started following him.

The sun was bright when I walked outside, but these movies were too dicey at night, especially leaving the building. Besides, I figure it’s good to work up your appetite for the nighttime just in case a little action comes along at night. Not much likely to happen in the daytime. I looked around and saw him almost right away. He was on the other side of the street, walking south. Hey, this was looking to be a cooperative asshole…that’s the direction I was gonna go. I crossed the street and followed him.
This neighborhood was a dive. Used to be kind’ve a nice place when I was a kid. Like, the stores used to have big picture windows with lots of neat stuff right up close where you could grab them after smashing the window with a brick. Not anymore though…like everything was barred up and some of the stores even had cashiers inside bulletproof cages with little slots all around where they could poke a shotgun out and like blow your head off. It was a lot easier to get away with things around here when I was a kid.

Two minutes into following the prick from the movies, and like doesn’t he just spit a big wad of gray stuff out of his mouth. Well, Mr. Gum Chewer, looks like you go out the same way as Mr. Gob-a-Lot. I looked around and saw an old cardboard coffee cup by some garbage on the sidewalk. I scooped it up and kept following the prick. I looked around. There were other people walking and standing around doing nothing, but nobody was paying any attention to me or the prick I was following, so when I came to the gum, I scooped it up with the cup. It must’ve still been wet because it didn’t stick to the pavement or anything. This guy was making it too easy for me. Gotta love it when that happens.

I followed him for about three blocks before he came to a door between two storefronts. He unlocked it and walked in without looking around. I went to a restaurant across the street, Dixie’s Diner or something…the words on the big glass window were faded and peeling. On one side of the front, I could see one of those sliding steel grate things that they slide over the front of the place when they close up. Like people just don’t trust people in this neighborhood anymore. Makes it impossible to pull anything. I went in and sat down where I could keep an eye on the prick’s door. Waitress was right on my case to buy something, so I ordered a coffee. Looked like this prick was going to be expensive to kill. Thought that maybe I should save receipts or something and claim them on my taxes the next time I ever filed the fucking things. Position: Asshole Killer. Expenses: One coffee at Dixie’s Dive.

About the same time the waitress was getting in my face again for taking too long to drink the coffee, the prick came out. I gave the waitress a dirty look and left. As I passed by the window, I saw her at my table picking up the cup and looking around for a tip. She looked up and saw me and gave me a dirty look. Watch it lady…I might start following you, so just shove your fucking tips down your throat till change for a buck comes out your ass.

I followed the prick for about a week…took that long to get enough gum saved up. Couple of times, people saw me scoop it up in the old coffee cup and looked at me real disgusted like, but I didn’t hang in this area much anymore anyway, just came around sometimes to check out a fuck movie or three.

This prick had a sort’ve girlfriend he dropped by to see whenever he felt like it. I mean, he spent most of his nights at a pool hall doing a lousy job of sharking…dumbass couldn’t bank worth shit and made about every fourth combination. Sometimes I stayed for a while after he left and got the gum he stuck to the bottom of the table. Had to be real careful about that…fuckers in this place see you doing anything weird and you ain’t walking home…you’re lucky if you can still take a cab home. But the cup was finally full…or about as full as I could wait for it to get. It was time to kill.
I knew about what time he was gonna get home on Monday nights—just before dark—so I was waiting by the pricks’s door when he got home. I had my back to him, leaning against the building like some kind’ve homeless bum or a drunk. I heard the key clinking in the lock and the door creak as he opened it. I half turned my head and watched him go in through the corners of my eyes, and when he was inside, I stepped closer to the door and put my foot out to stop it from closing completely. I stepped right in front of the door and looked up a whitewashed stairway. The prick was nearly at the top of the stairs and he wasn’t looking back, so I scooted in. At the top of the stairs, he turned left into a hallway so I hurried up, trying to be as quiet as possible, like trying not to creak any of the rotten floorboards with my weight.

Dumbass was waiting for me.

Right at the top of the stairs and at the beginning of the hall. Came at me with one of those Karate or Kung Fu kicks, kind that goes around in a big circle and smacks you in the side of the head. Fucking kick did hit me in the side of the head…last place in the world that’s gonna do me any harm. So there he was with his leg still off the ground and me pissed off because the dumb prick just kicked me and almost made me drop the coffee cup filled with gum. I punched downward with my left fist right into his dick and then I brought my right fist—squeezed full’ve the coffee cup and gum—flat down on the top of his head as he doubled up. Prick hit the floor like he was filled with lead. I went down on one knee and grabbed his neck and pulled his head up. I had the gum ready to jam into his mouth, but there was something weird about the way the prick’s head kind’ve just hung in my hand and his eyes were open but not seeing anything. Dumbass was dead.

I stuffed the gum into his mouth anyway.

But I didn’t feel too good about that one…left a kind’ve unfinished taste in my mouth, like there was still something I was supposed to do but I didn’t know what it was. Maybe I was supposed to say something to the prick before he died, or maybe he was supposed to say something to me. Maybe he was supposed to taste all that gum that came from his mouth. I dunno. I thought about it for a while and it didn’t make any sense…so I stopped thinking about it.

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Instead, I started thinking about all the kinds of assholes there are in the world. I mean, it was kind’ve of scary at first. I was hearing all these voices, not God’s voice or voices from demons: I’m not crazy or anything…I’m just as normal as you. The voices I was hearing were the voices of all the pissed off, fucked over, dragged down, and tired people of the entire fucking world.

You know who I mean…the people just like you who’re like sick and tired of people who call you up when you still had a phone and it’s the wrong number but they just hang up without saying sorry or anything, just hang up as though they’re pissed off at you for being the wrong fucking number. And I heard about the pissed off people who put shit up on bulletins boards in super markets and Laundromats and then come back a few days later and see that some jerk has pinned a notice right on top of theirs so that nobody can even see it.
That did it! I started hanging around the bulletin board at the Washing Green Laundromat. Just waiting…waiting. Like, it didn’t take long. She was one big, mean looking woman. Big with frizzy brown hair that looked like she dried it in the microwave or something. And she had on too much makeup. She looked like some kind’ve frigate in a parade. Like, right away I knew that she had a mousy little husband who said things like yes dear and yes dear. And she was dressed just the way you would expect…a plain top that didn’t say anything about how big she was, and pants that showed her flat ass. Like, I don’t wanna be prejudiced against fat people or anything, but how could this woman sit down with all that weight on that no-ass and not damage nerves or bones around that place where the rest of us stack our fat. I mean, she had her cushions in all the wrong places.

And then I saw her do it. Fucking bitch (and not all fucking women are bitches, but this one was) took a pin out of one of the ads on the bulletin board and pinned her ad right on top of it. Like, her ad completely covered the other ad…and she was using the other ad’s own pin! Man, that’s like beating somebody to death with their own tire iron. I mean, who would even see the ad underneath her one? They wouldn’t even know to lift hers and look under it for some kind’ve hidden secret message or anything. Whoever put the ad up that she covered was just wasting their time and their paper! I hate it when that happens. I mean, I try to see this from the eyes of the person who wrote the ad she covered. I mean, this is some poor slob who needs money and has to sell something because they can’t afford to pay the bills or some other thing and that’s why they had to put the ad up in the first place. And then some fat bitch with no ass covers it.

Fat bitch had to die.

And to seal it even more, the bitch looks right at me as though I’m some kind’ve dirt…like maybe I’m some kind’ve criminal scum or something. Like, she was gonna pay for that. I waited until she left and then I went over to the bulletin board and pulled her ad off. Some dumpy woman with a hamper gave me a dirty look. I told her that the woman who just left pinned it on top of somebody else’s ad and she said: “And that makes it alright for you to tear her ad down?” If I wasn’t such a fucking gentleman, I would’ve slapped the bitch right in the chops, right there by the bulletin board. But being a gentleman, I just told her to fuck off and walked away with the ad. It’s people like her give the assholes so much power, like those pricks who say jailbirds should have rights and all that shit. Nobody cares about the victims anymore.

When I got outside, I saw her car pull away, big new Buick. Bitch didn’t even need the money. I looked down at the ad. It was for some kind’ve church thing, a bazaar. It had an address. I knew where to find her. It had a date and a time. I knew when to find her. No phone number, though. But that was all right…I wasn’t the kind of weirdo who would play games with the people he was gonna kill.

I was waiting outside the church when she drove up in her big fat Buick. I hate Buicks; they’re for nose-up-their-asses old people who don’t wanna have anything to do with the rest of the world. That’s why every Buick on the planet has tinted windows…just like the one pulling into the church parking lot now. I was standing in a dark area not far from the front doors to the
church...just waiting. She got out of her car and walked across the parking lot. I should’ve been waiting there, right in the parking lot, but I was by the front door. Fucking bitch went in a side door. Shit, I had to go in. Had to pay two bucks to some old cow who looked me up and down like I didn’t belong there or something. Figured I might come back for her some day...you know, people who pass judgment on others...biggest assholes of all.

There were tables all over the place, loaded with old used shit that people didn’t want anymore. Some of it was even new shit. Saw an electric wax buffer still in the box for ten bucks. Could’ve used one of those at one time. Then I saw a set of steak knives for a buck. Those, I could still use. I bought them. Then I started looking for the Buick Bitch.

She was at the other end of the room, giving orders to a bunch of old ladies standing around a table with cakes and cookies and other baked shit. She was looking at the old ladies with that same better-than–you look that she gave me at the laundromat. I ran my thumb across the blade of one of the steak knives. This was going to be sweet. I stayed at my end of the room...well away from her...just in case she might’ve recognized me from the Laundromat, and I watched her for about twenty minutes. That was about all I could stomach. I don’t like watching fat old bitches like her pushing sweet little old ladies around. But she wasn’t gonna be doing that for much longer.

I looked around the room. It was a big room. I saw a door about halfway down the wall on my right...and another one on the same wall, but all the way down at the end, where the Buick Bitch was still yakking out orders to the old ladies, getting them to rearrange the cookies and stuff as though making different patterns on the table was gonna make the fucking stuff sell better. I mean, a six-foot long table with cookies and cakes. How much bossing around can anybody on the planet come up with for six feet of church hall real estate? I figured it was the far door, the one closest to the table. She would’ve stormed right through it, taking the old ladies by surprise and making them piss their diapers. Wouldn’t be too hard to find it from the outside.

That was where I was gonna wait for her. As I walked back through the front door, I made sure the old cow at the admission table saw the steak knives. I smiled at her and she looked away from me as fast as she could. Not so fucking uppity now, old shit cow.

I walked around the side of the building to the door at the back and waited in the dark by some high bushes. I wasn’t worried about her coming out with other people. She wouldn’t. I wasn’t worried about her coming out in a crowd at the end of the bazaar. She would leave early, after she got bored pushing people around. And leaving early would just drive in the fact that she was above the others. Come in late...leave early. Stick around just long enough to make life miserable for a bunch of feeble-brained old ladies. She wasn’t gonna be doing that much longer. Not after tonight. Not after meeting my bargain steak knives.

I waited there for about two hours. About a couple dozen people came out, some in groups, some by themselves, but they didn’t even suspect that I was standing over by the bushes, waiting in the dark. Too wrapped up in their little church thing and their little church thoughts. Made me think about the time when I was a kid and I went to church every Sunday like I really believed or something. But I went. Until one day I went to some kind’ve teen thing, a teen dance and activity
thing. There was gonna be a lot of knock-out church girls there, the kind that tease your balls off and never give more than a handful of tit…with their fucking bra still on. But I wasn’t getting much of anything anywhere else at the time, so what the fuck, me and my friend Earl went to the dance. Problem was, Earl was a Catholic. The teen thing was in an Anglican church. They told him he couldn’t come in. I told them to take their fucking cock tease dance and stuff it up their ass. Never went to church after that, fucking discriminating assholes.

The door opened.

And there she was, all alone, looking like she was disappointed or something with the whole world because it didn’t live up to her standards or something. I mean, like the whole fucking world was supposed to stop breathing and listen to her breathing so that it could pace her or something. Man, was her breathing in for a big change of pace.

As soon as the door shut behind her, I walked out of the dark by the bushes and walked right up to her. She gave me that same better-than-you look that she gave me in the laundromat.

“Remember me?” I asked. She looked really angry and went to say something but saw the knives in my hand. “They’re for you,” I said. And before she could say anything, or scream, I drove one of them right into her throat. Her eyes opened up really wide, like you see in horror movies where some bitch gets killed by some kind’ve murdering psycho. Right away, I shoved another one into her stomach. She tried to look down, all wide-eyed, but could just bend her head a bit because of the knife sticking out of her throat. Now her eyes started to narrow as though she was confused or something. I stuck another knife right into her chest. It didn’t go in far though. Must’ve hit a bone, one of her ribs. Her eyes winced as though that was the first one she felt. Now she was looking at me, right into my eyes. I didn’t like that. She wasn’t uppity now, just confused and looking at me with one of those “why me?” looks that people get when shit they started comes back and bites their ass. I pushed another one into her chest. This one went in, right between the ribs and must’ve hit something important because now the Buick Bitch’s eyes were wide again…not as wide as before but wide, this time with fear. I reached into my pocket and took out the ad that she put up on the bulletin board and showed it to her. She looked at it and gagged. “Remember this?” I said. I shoved the last knife into it and pinned it straight into her forehead. It went in smoothly for going through bone. Good knives. Her face twisted really weird, like she suddenly looked really vulnerable and fragile. I almost felt sorry for her as she fell down with that fragile look all over her face.

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I thought about that look all the way home. It was like, just before she died, something that was inside her came to the surface…like what she was until then was some sort of cover or disguise. I started thinking that maybe she was really unsure of herself deep down inside where we all know ourselves better than we think. Maybe she wasn’t such a bad person after all, I thought. Maybe all she needed was for somebody to dig through the shit on top of her personality and get to know her inside and maybe then she would’ve seen that the shit inside her wasn’t so bad after all, and that she didn’t have to be bossing around little old ladies and giving people like me better-than-you looks…and covering other people’s ads with her own. And maybe she would’ve driven a Ford.
Or maybe she was just afraid of dying. Maybe all bullying assholes like her are really just a bunch of cowards under the surface, and now she’s a dead coward. It didn’t take me long to stop thinking about the Buick Bitch.

* * *

It was the next asshole who stopped me from thinking about her.

I was sitting in the living room, staring at the wall, thinking about the Buick Bitch…you know, a relaxing evening, quality time with my thoughts…and suddenly it was like there was a minor earthquake or something. I could feel the floors and walls shaking and I could hear this booming sound coming from outside and it was getting louder and louder. I stopped thinking about the Buick Bitch and went to the window.

Fuck, it was like, when one asshole went down, they passed the baton to the next asshole, and there was the next asshole down in the parking lot in a big black Camaro, from the eighties I was guessing. Fucking million watt stereo pounding out that yappy ghetto crap where people who can’t sing just yell and swear a lot, sort’ve like barrio country music. The sound went something like boom boom boom boom fucking boom boom boom boom and it filled the whole air around the block with boom boom boom boom and the dumbass’s windows were all up! Guy must be deaf or something. He turned off the car engine and the music stopped. Then he got out. Young guy with short blond hair and a stunned look on his face. No fucking wonder. Probably deaf from the booming. He walked past a heap of garbage on the sidewalk and ducked into the building with the balconies. Some kind’ve rich deaf dumbass? He can afford a balcony. I didn’t remember seeing him around before, so he must’ve been new to the block.

He should’ve moved somewhere else.

Every night for a month, I listened to his fucking boom boom. He woke me up with it in the day. He dragged me away from my wall at night. He interrupted my thoughts. He disturbed my meals. He pushed his music into my life and backed me up into a corner. For a whole fucking month.

A month.

It was time. I didn’t even hear the boom boom boom that night…not once I decided it was time to kill him. It was like, when I decided to kill them, they were already dead so they couldn’t bother me anymore, and anything they did after that was just fuel, like throwing another log into my resolve. I waited until the next night…right in front of his building. And I had the perfect weapon. I picked it up as I walked by the garbage heap…a broken CD, sharp and shiny. I waited by the door. I didn’t care if he saw me. He didn’t know me from dick anyway.

I could hear him coming from blocks away, the boom boom boom in the distance, getting closer, getting louder, until I saw his car lights first and then saw his car. I could feel the air pounding into my face from the booming pushing it. Nobody has the right to force their music onto everybody around them the way this prick was doing. But he wouldn’t be doing it much longer. I
ran my thumb over the sharp edge of the CD behind my back. It reminded me of something, but I had to stay focused on the prick getting out of the black Camaro. The music stopped. He banged the door shut–no way to treat a vintage car like that–and he started walking toward the door and me. I looked right into his face. He was younger than I thought, clean shaven, skinny. He was wearing some kind’ve band t-shirt, Prison, or something, and faded blue jeans. He looked at me looking right into his face and looked as though he was trying to figure out who I was or if he knew me or something.

Just before he reached me, I looked around…nobody watching. It was just me and him. He started to say something to me. That’s when I walked right at him and brought the CD up and slashed it across his throat. He looked shocked. It made him look even younger. I slashed his throat again. He just stood there, looking like he didn’t believe what was happening. Blood was spurting out of his throat. I slashed again and he sank down onto his knees. He looked right into my eyes as though he was trying to figure out why I was doing this to him. I said: “I’m the volume control.” He gave me a really confused look then and it made him look really really young, and then I realized that this guy couldn’t be much more than sixteen, and maybe he was just sixteen. Maybe he wasn’t new to the neighborhood. Maybe he was living in this building for a long time with his parents and he just got his license and the Camaro was his first car.

He was just a kid. He fell forward onto his face, dead. Blood from his throat started to spread out onto the sidewalk. He was just a kid.

I figured maybe I should cool it for a while.

***

And I did. For a month. And then I killed a litterbug…followed him for a week, picking up his litter. A month later, I killed some asshole who was standing in the middle of the sidewalk yakking to some other asshole about nothing. Dumbass saw me coming and just stood there so that I had to step into the street to get around him. I had to follow him for eight days before I got a chance to push him into an oncoming truck. It was like they kept passing that baton from one asshole to the next. Right after the sidewalk hog, I started tracking two dumbasses who threw a Frisbee back and forth right in the busiest section of the park, right in the place where everybody takes their kids and spreads out blankets for picnics and shit. They kept bumping into kids when they ran after the Frisbee and then they threw the Frisbee right into the middle of people’s picnics…and one day the Frisbee hit a little girl in the head and made her bleed. From that one I learned that a broken Frisbee cuts just as well as a broken CD. No sooner were they dead than I stepped into a pile of dog shit on the sidewalk. Got the dog, too. But that was the last time I followed anybody around picking up their shit. About a month after that I just jumped right into this woman’s car. Jumped right into the passenger’s side, right beside her. She was talking to another woman right in the middle of the street, yelling out their windows at each other, just ignoring all the people honking their horns at them to get out of the way. Just as soon as she finished talking and started driving away, I jumped in. Pushed her and her car over a cliff outside the city. Long walk back but it gave me a chance to think about things.

* * *
I thought about all the kinds of assholes in the world, the assholes who don’t flush the toilet and leave shit floating around or just piss all over the toilet seat so you get your ass wet when you take a crap, the assholes who give bartenders and store clerks a hard time just because they know they can get away with it, the assholes who speed up when you try to pass them in a passing zone and then slow down in the no passing zone, the assholes who draw underlines in library books or tear out the pages like I used to do, the assholes who draw fucked up graffiti on the natural beauty of bridges and freeway underpasses, the assholes who leave chewing gum under tables and chairs in restaurants so that you get their gum all over your fingers when you’re putting your gum there, the assholes who call you up when you had a phone and tell you that you’ve won something but you know fucking well that you haven’t, the assholes who make the phone systems that make it impossible to talk to a real human being even if that real human being is just gonna lie to you anyway.

I thought about all the assholes like shitty bosses, child beaters, wife beaters, animal beaters, terrorists, murderers, bankers, scam artists, politicians, thieves – especially the petty ones who steal from people who have next to nothing, like pensioners and welfare bums – pedophiles, lawyers, bad cops, used car salesmen, bullies, striking government workers, other religions, television holy rollers, cults, obscene phone callers, stalkers, rapists, tobacco companies, dictators, kiddy pornographers, vandals, and teachers who pile up the homework on Friday afternoon.

I thought: “Man, I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

It took me until dark to get home, but that was okay…like I said, I did a lot of thinking. Maybe too much thinking. I thought about all the assholes that I took out. I thought about the looks on their faces before they died. That first one, the prick who went around spitting all over the place. The look in his eyes before he died…like he wanted it. But the kid with the boom boom boom didn’t look like he wanted to die. Even the Buick Bitch looked…like whatever it was coming out of her before she died. I tried to make sense out of it. They should’ve all been happy to die…their contribution towards making the world a better place to live for people like me. They should’ve seen it as a species quality thing. But some of them seemed like they really wanted to go on living. It was those ones that I thought a lot about while I was walking home. They all looked so confused, like they couldn’t believe that it was really happening. They looked afraid. They looked pathetic. They weren’t assholes for those few seconds before they died…they were just people dying.

I don’t know how many assholes I’ve killed. Lots. About one a month for a long, long time. And now I’m tired, especially after that long walk into the city, and all that thinking. I figure the thinking is what was more tiring than the walking. It drained me. It kind’ve scared me—all the killing left to do. By the time I got home, it was like this giant wall standing in front of me and I was standing under it with a slingshot, and I couldn’t even see the top of the wall.

***
And now I’m home, staring at my living room wall, my bare feet bleeding and cooling down in the night air coming through the window. It smells like somebody’s cooking chicken somewhere. I’d go out and get something to eat, but what’s the point? I’m not hungry anymore. I’m not thirsty, even though I haven’t eaten or had anything to drink since this morning. Jumping into that car was a mistake. People saw. But even that’s not important anymore. And none of the assholes who stare at me frightened, relieved, or confused…stare at me in my own mind, right into the backs of my eyes…none of them are important anymore. Only one thing is important now—that one last asshole.

That one last asshole.
I Killed Your Hamster

“I killed your hamster.”
“You what?”
“I killed your hamster.”
“What are you talking about?”
“I couldn’t sleep. I had to tell you.”
“What the hell hamster are you talking about?”
“Stinky.”
“Stinky?”
“I had the female, Sunflower. You had the male, Stinky. Sunflower was twice Stinky’s size.
We used watch them make out.”
“That was nearly fifty years ago. We were kids.”
“Yeah. I’ve been living with this for a long time. I didn’t have the guts to tell you.”
“Stinky died from natural causes. You didn’t kill him.”
“I blew air into him. He went all strange and couldn’t walk. He died later that day. I cried. I felt really guilty and was scared you’d find out and hate me.”
“Why did you blow air into my hamster?”
“You hate me now, don’t you?”
“No. I don’t hate you. It happened a long time ago. We were kids. Jesus, I forgot I had a hamster. Why did you blow air into him?”
“I don’t know. I was curious. It just happened. I didn’t think it would hurt him.”
“You probably exploded his lungs. What d’you think happens when you blow air into something?”
“You hate me now, don’t you?”
“No! I don’t hate you. I’m just a little confused. You’re talking about something that happened half a century ago, something…I don’t know…weird. You blew air into my hamster for whatever reason, and my hamster died. And you don’t even know why you blew air into it. That’s the way you’ve been all your life.”
“What do you mean by that? Like that all my life?”
“You know what I mean; you never think about anything before you do it. You just…jump in.”
“No I don’t. I stick my toes into the waters of life.”
“I’m not even going to guess what that means. But you don’t think before you act. You just act.”
“No I don’t. I practice my lines before I act.”
“And that’s another thing. You don’t make any sense when you talk.”
“I was afraid that you’d take it hard.”
“Take what hard?”
“The news about Stinky. You want to strike out at me. May I suggest a good cry? When was the last time you cried?”
“I’m not going to cry over a hamster that’s been dead for half a century.”
“That’s a long time to carry the pain.”
“There is no pain. I cried then. I got it off my chest and I’ve been fine ever since.”
“No, you didn’t.”
“Didn’t what?”
“You didn’t cry. You just looked at Stinky’s dead little body with no expression on your face. Like you lost a toy you didn’t really care about. Mom cried. I cried. You didn’t.”
“So what’re you saying? That I’m insensitive? That I don’t cry enough?”
“It’s a good way to get garbage out of your psyche.”
“My psyche’s fine, thank you. Without crying.”
“That’s what they tell themselves.”
“Who tells themselves?”
“The people with backed-up psyches full of garbage they never let out. They go crazy and do crazy things like go to work with a gun and shoot their workmates. Or they just lead unhappy, unfulfilled lives.”
“My life is happy. And I don’t own a gun.”
“Mostly, though, they’re in denial.”
“I’m not in denial. I’m happy. I don’t own a gun. And I don’t need to cry.”
“Not even a little? You’ve been carrying this for a long time.”
“I have not been carrying anything for a long time. You’re the one carrying things. I mean, guilt…over a hamster. You’ve actually been carrying guilt over a hamster you killed nearly half a century ago. And you say I’m the one holding things in?”
“I was afraid you’d hate me.”
“I don’t hate you. I just think this whole thing is ridiculous.”
“And that would be just like you…to think that being honest and pouring out your darkest secret is ridiculous.”
“Accidentally killing a hamster when you’re a kid is not a dark secret. It’s just something that happened a long time ago and it’s time to let go of it. You’re making a mountain out of a molehill.”
“You know…I think you’re right. It’s time to let go. I’m going to just take a deep breath and breathe out and let it all out with one big breath.”
“Good idea. Go for it. Big breath in. That’s right, now breathe it out. Let it all out. Keep breathing out.”
“Wow! I can’t tell you how good this feels. I feel free. I feel lighter. I feel…”
“What?”
“Your turn.”
“My turn for what?”
“Your turn to breathe it all out.”
“I’ve got nothing to breathe out.”
“You didn’t cry when Stinky died. He was your hamster. He loved you. You fed him. You cared for him. You denied his memory a good cry. You’ve been carrying this around inside you all these years. C’mon breathe it out. It feels good, liberating.”
“Listen, I haven’t been carrying this around with me since I was a kid. I haven’t even thought about it since then. Until you just mentioned it, I’d forgotten that I even had a hamster. I’m not going to breathe anything out.”
“You really do do hate me, don’t you?”
“No! I don’t hate you! Even though you killed my hamster.”
“Ha! Now we’re getting somewhere. Honestly now, did you suspect all these years that I had something to do with his death?”
“I told you, you idiot, I didn’t even remember having a damn hamster until you brought it up.”
“That’s no way to talk about the dead, especially a sweet little animal that loved you.”
“A sweet little animal that you murdered.”
“That was a long time ago. I was just a kid. I was curious. I didn’t know I was going to kill him. I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known he was going to die.”
“But he died. You killed him.”
“Yes. You’re right. I killed Stinky. But I’ve let go of all that. I’m free now. I can live my life in peace. No thanks to you.”
“No thanks to…what the hell are you talking about? I’m the one who just told you to get over the whole thing, let it out, get on with your life.”
“You tricked me into a false sense of security, made me think that you’d forgiven me for killing your hamster. But you didn’t really mean it. You think I’m an idiot.”
“I don’t think you’re an idiot.”
“You called me an idiot.”
“I didn’t mean it. I was just a little pissed off that you thought that I suspected you of killing my hamster. It just looked like natural causes. Animals die. They just die. You’re not an idiot. Now, let’s just drop the whole thing.”
“Are you going to breathe it out?
“OK. OK…if it’ll make you happy.”
“That’s right. Deep breath. Fill your lungs. Now, breathe out slowly. Let it all out. Clean out the psychic garbage. Feels good doesn’t it?”
“Yes, it does. It feels good. Are you happy now? Can we change the subject?”
“Sure. Let’s talk about something else. I feel really good, on top of things.”
“That’s good. Now, what would you like to talk about?”
“Well…remember your goldfish, Swinger…?”
french popcorn

so I’m in the StuporDuperStore shopping stumbling and fumbling around in aisles that change every other month or as fast as you get to know where all the stuff you buy is stocked and stacked and racked and me without my LIST which is at home magnetacked to the refrigerator door where I can’t possibly forget it and I come across an aisle that I’ve never seen before with a flashing neon sign about ten feet high and ten feet wide with tall fat polar bears with sad eyes wearing skimpy red bikinis dancing on top of the sign which is flashing NEW STUFF NEW STUFF NEW STUFF got my attention

can’t resist
this long aisle
with no end
no beginning
no time limit
like space and time with infinity neatly displayed on shelves and racks stretching into
incalculable shopping distances

but
so much for metaphysics and other stuff that nobody gives a shit about

I see sales here
and specials and markdowns and returns to old prices from way before Kraft Dinner was seven cents a box and candy cigarettes were corrupting our kids long before kids were attacked by branding and had to have the latest…

but what’s this?

an entire shelf stretching into a ceiling that never slows down loaded with plain white boxes about the size of those boxes with six bags of popcorn but they’re unmarked unlabeled unbranded unstamped unpriced unproduct-coded unexpiry-dated unexceptional un-inviting just so un

OK
I wont one of these
wont
like in biblical times back when they ate fish and bread and washed it down with wine and wonted in some biblical way of coveting that for which thou shalt not wont
I can’t resist
I take a box off the never-ending shelf and shake it and hear that familiar clickety clickety sound popcorn
I can hear the cascading kernels doing their pre-microwave gimme-gamma-rays dance
I love popcorn
I wont popcorn
so I buy the strangely unwhatever box and rush home to my microwave where I tear open the white undeclarative and unassuming packaging and there inside are six white packets looking very much like any old unbrand name no name or any name packets except these are unanything just plain white

I pull out one of the packets unfold it and put it in the microwave press the Popcorn button press On and wait

and wait

and wait

and then I hear what? something very unpopcornish very subdued for the explosive energy of popcorn popping

it’s something like

le pop

and ten seconds later

le pop

yes
it said le pop
I yell at the microwave
WOULD YOU MIND TRANSLATING THAT PLEASE AND WHILE YOU’RE AT IT COULD YOU SPEED THINGS UP A LITTLE
and I listen

le pop

NO
THAT WON’T DO
I CAN’T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU’RE DOING

seconds later

le pop

I open the door to the microwave and stare
stare right into the whiteness of the packet still pretty much flat from lack of popcorn-like behavior and wonder about this as I stare for about ten seconds
In my best French accent that I learned in high school I say je no parlay vous French est que vous pop English? est que vous pop faster? but I’m starting to realize there’s no use trying to reason with French popcorn
three
two
one

it has that ancient Academy-driven stubbornness
that consolidated stance of the Immortals who died way back in the 16th Century and left behind something immovable intractable unrelenting and unreasonable so I explain this to the popcorn
in my very best intractable English (in about eight seconds) and ask Quel say vous to that?
and the popcorn answers

so I change the subject
I discuss the weather
Quelle bonne jour, mon ami la popcorn, avec la snow et la short jours!
and the popcorn agrees

I take a spatula from the counter and pound the popcorn pack several times right where it’s flattened out on the revolving microwave tray but instead of a whimper instead of a groan instead of a grunt or a moan I hear

I’m calm
I’m cool
I take a deep breath
count 1
2
3
4
5
6
7

I'm calm
I'm cool
I take a deep breath
count 1
2
3
4
5
6
7

I take a spatula from the counter and pound the popcorn pack several times right where it’s flattened out on the revolving microwave tray but instead of a whimper instead of a groan instead of a grunt or a moan I hear
I am calm
I am cool
no I’m not
more like frustrated infuriated and totally ruffled by French popcorn and wondering when my popcorn is going to stop acting French and start acting popcorn and I’m thinking maybe I should take it back to the Stuporstore but they’ve probably changed the aisles again for my shopping convenience and the clerks will all look at me like I’m stupid and then it hits me like falling into a black hole of meaning

le pop

no
not that
that was just the French popcorn driving me nuts and what really hits me like a quantum anomaly (if you’ll pardon the metaphysical stuff that nobody gives a shit about) is that I’ve been going about this all wrong and I should have just gone to Google after the second le pop and Googled it and that’s exactly what I’m going to do right now as I rush out of the kitchen and into the living room and up the stairs and down the hall and around the corner and pull down the stairs to the attic and rush up the stairs and run to the doors leading to the wooden catwalk from the house to the attic over the garage and open the doors and dash across the catwalk and into the attic over the garage (which is where I live) and scramble to my desk and switch my computer on and click the Internet icon and all of this takes exactly ten seconds

le pop

the sound carries all the way to the garage attic offering no escape but I ignore this and type “le pop” into the Google search field and click Google Search and enter the World Wide Web and no it’s not a bar and no it’s not an album by Katzenjammer and no it’s not a compilation and no it’s not designer wallpaper and no it’s not le Andy Warhol and no it’s not that thing that when you say it backwards 10 times a rock star dies in the distance I hear

le pop

and I’m on the 4015th page of Google results and nothing’s making any sense but then what the hell was I thinking anyway?
that it would come up at the top of the first page of results?
that there would be a name for it somewhere out there in the digital wasteland?
that there would be some reasonable explanation for

le pop

?
what the hell was I thinking?
and that’s my problem thinking rationally
there’s no rational thinking with French popcorn so I figure yep I can be just as irrational as the next guy just as irrational as French popcorn so I run back to the microwave in about eight seconds
9
10

le pop

*Je tu l’amore* I say to the French popcorn on the other side of the microwave door *je tu mon petite chou tete* whatever the hell that means but I heard it in one of those late night French movies and it was really awesome what the woman did after the dude said that to her and I’m thinking that saying this shit to French popcorn must be about the most irrational thing I’ve ever done and the popcorn agrees

le pop

le pop

le pop le pop

les pops

holy elephant ass
the les popping keeps les popping and les popping and the bag begins to swell and bounce and swell and bounce and ululate
yes ululate in the microwave and les popping louder and louder and bouncing off the walls of the microwave with joyful les popping until the bag begins to split and the les popping begins to diminish into a microwave experience winding down successfully and I practically tear the door open and am met with a smell that melts the follicles of my nose hairs

this is not a popcorn smell I say to myself
this is not the smell of kernels of corn after loosening their popped potential into chewable chunks of post-cobbled goodness
this is an odor that reeks of garlic and spices
a heavy odor like something from the ovens of olfactory hell
an odor that surrounds me like a malodorous noose and squeezes tears out of my eyes punches me in the stomach till I gag and spreads my nostrils flat like pancakes

I rush the bag to the sink and stab it with a bread knife and things clink into the sink as the odor explodes into my face like a chemistry experiment gone bad and there in my sink steaming and popping and oozing
yes oozing all slippery and wet and oozy as a slag pile of snails dripping garlic and spices and sauce and dead little snail bodies spilling out of the bag

and now it all makes sense
it wasn’t popcorn
those bastards sold me microwave escargot
About the Author

Biff Mitchell is a writer/photographer/illustrator living in Atlantic Canada where he is notorious for his Writing Hurts Like Hell workshops and his disturbing black gel illustrations. Biff has exhibited his photography, illustrations and constructivist art in galleries around New Brunswick. He’s held writing workshops in dark alleys and hot tubs. Biff is also the author of the world’s first free daily serialized coffee break novel. See below.

You can learn more about Biff at www.biffmitchell.com
Photo: Rob Pasma

You can read The Weekly Man: The World’s First Free Daily Serialized Coffee Break Novel at:
https://theweeklyman.com