Quanta

Publishing for three years now, Dan Appelquist's *Quanta* magazine (ISSN 1053-8496) is an electronically distributed journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy. As such, each issue contains fiction by amateur authors. *Quanta* is published in ASCII and PostScript. Submissions should be sent to **quanta@andrew.cmu.edu**. Requests to be added to the distribution list should be sent to one of the following depending on which version of the magazine you'd like to receive.

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DARGONZINE is an electronic magazine printing stories written for the Dargon Project, a shared-world anthology created by David "Orny" Liscomb in his now-retired magazine, *FSFNet*. The Dargon Project contains stories with a fantasy fiction/sword and sorcery flavor. *DargonZine* is available in ASCII format. For a subscription, please send a request to the editor, Dafydd, at **white@duvm.BITNET**. This request should contain your full user ID, as well as your full name. Internet subscribers will receive their issues in mail format.

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lab by the mob of protesters chanting, "Animal killer! Animal killer!"

A woman came over, gently pulled off electrodes that were still taped to me, and released the straps. "Don't worry, puppy, you're safe now," she said as she patted my head. Her voice was even more distorted than Mark's and the professor's had been.

I concentrated hard on saying that I was not a puppy, that my name was Brian, and I would appreciate it if she would not pat me on the head, but all that came out were a few high-pitched, pathetic barks. I tried to sigh but, instead, panted.

She lifted me up to her face and stared concernedly at my jaw. I started to whimper. "It's OK," she said in a tone that was trying to be soothing but actually sounded demonic. "Is something wrong with your mouth? Were they experimenting on you?" Then she pinched up her face and looked away. "Whew. With breath like that, they must have done something." She put me down on the floor and said, "Sit."

I was too stunned to run away. Everything was very tall. I was very short. Lots of very tall people were rushing back and forth breaking equipment. The jagged crunches of destruction were agonizing to listen to, but after the pillaging was over, I noticed that almost all of the background whining was gone.

Protesters came by and patted me on the head, smiling and saying silly things in that now universal harsh tone of voice. Then they started up the "Free the Animals!" chant again and left the lab, presumably in search of another.

With growing dread I looked at my own body and saw that I was a cocker spaniel. I jerked my head up and stared at the other table.

I was able to see my arm, tensed and straining against the straps with which Mark and the professor had so carefully bound me.

One of the protesters had stayed behind and he was leaning heavily against the large table, his face in his hands. It took me a moment to realize it was Jed. He was wearing the same clothes as the previous day but, in black and white, the tie-dye was a lot harder to recognize.

"Oh God, Brian," Jed was saying. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

There was one last whine still audible in the lab. It was a periodic whine, not constant like all the others had been, and it just then dawned on me that it was coming from my body up there on the table. The whine would last a few seconds, be broken by a sharp intake of breath, and then continue.

"I'm sorry," Jed repeated.

The woman who had freed me came back into the lab and said, "Hey."

Jed's head snapped up, startled. "Huh? Oh. Hi, Wendy. How ya doin'?" His metallic voice was strained and his face showed pain.

"Come on, Jed," she said. "You're missing out on all the fun." She gave him a tentative smile but he just stared at the floor. "Hey, Jed, don't worry about this guy. He's probably just having a really bad trip. Anyway, the police'll know what to do with him."

"No, no, that's not… It's…" Jed looked back up at her. "He's my roommate. His name is Brian."

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

"This is all my fault," Jed finally said.

"Oh, Jed, no, don't say that. It's not your fault. It's tragic and awful, but it's not your fault."

Jed was silent.

Wendy touched his arm. "Let's go outside, Jed. We can sit down on some grass and you can tell me about Brian."

I ran out of the lab.

The next few hours were a blur. I ran madly through campus, through various buildings, dodging between students, making bicycles screech to stops. I finally collapsed on the brick steps of the biochem building, panting heavily.

After a few minutes I heard some peculiar barkings. It wasn't normal barking; it was barking out of which I could decipher English words.

"Hi," the bark said. "My name's Chuck. What's yours?"

I looked up and saw the dog that had been napping at the top of these steps this morning. With a bit of concentration I barked, "My name's Brian."

"Well, Brian, in case you were wondering: No, dogs don't communicate like this. I was also one of Professor Billow's subjects. You're the sixth."

"The sixth?"

"Yup. And now with the lab destroyed it looks like you'll be the last. Unfortunately, that also means we won't be able to be retransfered. Billow was keeping our bodies in another room in the lab. I suppose the police will find them, and Billow will be brought up on criminal charges or something."

I stared at Chuck.

"Hey, Brian, don't worry too much about it. It's not such a bad life. You get to lie around and nap a lot. Food isn't very scarce, really, you just have to know where to look. It can actually be a fun life, but it takes some getting used to."

I continued to stare at Chuck.

"Come on, Brian. Follow me and I'll introduce you to the others."

I nervously stood up.

"There you go, Brian. You'll see; it's not so bad. You've even got one good thing going for you already."

"Oh?" I barked. "And what's that?"

"You've got great smelling breath."

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needed for human-animal neural relationship experiment. $500. Please call Professor Billow at 642-0070 if interested." There were many cuts at the bottom of the paper to make stubs that one could rip off and take and that bore the words "Prof Billow, 642-0070, $500."

My eyes grew wide, and I whispered reverently, "Five hundred dollars."

"Yes. Five hundred," said the professor proudly. He tilted his head in modest boastfulness. "I have a very large grant, you see, and that is why I offer so much more than they do." He indicated the bulletin board again with his eyebrows.

I looked around, bewildered. Five hundred dollars! "Professor Billow," I said, "you have yourself a subject." I held out my hand, and he shook it.

"Come, then," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "My lab is on the other side of campus, in the Northwest Animal Facility."

On the way out of the biochem building, Professor Billow stared at the lazy brown dog and said distractedly, "Just a moment." He fumbled through his jacket pockets, finally mumbled, "Aha!" and pulled out a little biscuit which he then tossed to the dog. The dog looked blankly at the biscuit and yawned. With a sigh, the professor started walking away muttering to himself and I hastened to catch up.

I sat facing Professor Billow, his desk between us. He said while rummaging through his drawers, "This is just a technicality, Brian. You see, the importance of this research requires that you sign a form assuring the government that you won't disclose any information about the experiment to anyone. Here we go." He brought out a white sheet of paper filled with fine print and pushed it across the desk. "Just sign at the bottom."

I looked at the text-crammed sheet. "What if I don't sign?"

Professor Billow spread open his hands. "No experiment. No five hundred dollars."

I signed.

"Good!" The professor snatched the sheet back and filed it away. "Now, to the lab." He led me through a side door and into a large room littered with electronic equipment and in the center of which were two padded tables, one large and one small. Off to the side a grad student tapped away at the keyboard of a computer workstation. He glanced briefly at us when we walked in.

"Mark!" called out the professor. "I'd like you to meet our subject, Brian."

"Just a second," Mark said. He moved the computer's mouse around, clicked something, then stood up and came over. He was tall and thin with short blond hair. "Hi," he said. "My name's Mark." He motioned to the large table. "If you'll just step over there and lie down, we can get started."

As soon as I did so, Mark threw a strap over my chest, and Professor Billow, on the other side, secured it.

"Hey!" I said.

"Don't worry, Brian," Mark reassured me. "It's for you own protection, really. You wouldn't want your arms flailing around and damaging equipment, now would you?" He shook his head no for me. "Besides, this was all written down on that paper you signed, remember?"

"Oh. Hmmm."

Three straps later, I was securely fastened to the table. There was no way I'd be able to damage anything. Mark slipped some kind of support device beneath my head and wrapped yet another strap across my forehead. "So you don't accidentally move your head and pull off any of the EEG leads," he explained. He smiled and left the room.

Professor Billow lifted up a syringe and gave it a slight squirt, clearing the needle of air. "Merely a sedative, Brian. When you wake up, the experiment will be over."

"Uh, professor…" I started to say, but he hushed me. I felt something cold wiped on my arm, and then a sharp pain as the hypodermic hit home.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mark reenter the room carrying an unconscious cocker spaniel. He placed it carefully on the smaller table, scratched its head, and strapped it just as securely down. Then he turned around and waved goodbye to me as everything went black.

I felt awful. All of my senses seemed warped and alien. There was a constant whine in my ears, I couldn't open my eyes, and my breath was shallow. I suddenly realized that I was now lying on my stomach and had no clothes on. I wanted to panic but the sedative hadn't fully worn off.

Slowly, I was able to pick out voices from the ringing. They sounded like Professor Billow's and Mark's voices but they were too harsh and metallic.

"…small amount of neural trauma, but nowhere near as much as before," said the pseudo-Mark voice. "My feedback circuit worked, dammit!"

"I'm not saying it didn't work," responded the professor's distorted voice, "I'm saying there's still too much trauma to risk a retransfer. Perhaps with this lesser amount, though, it'll be able to sufficiently reduce itself to a safer level over a reasonable period of time. In the meanwhile I suggest that you further refine your clever feedback circuit."

I tried to say something, but all that came out was a growl.

The professor's harsh voice continued, "Well, Brian's coming to. Who's going to explain this time? Perhaps you should, Mark. You could then also tell him how well your feedback circuit worked."

I managed to force my eyes open and was shocked to see that everything was black and white.

And there were muffled shouts and poundings and kickings on the door. I heard Mark say, "What the hell?" just as the door crashed open. People rushing into the lab shouted triumphantly, "Free the animals! Free the animals!"

Mark ran out the back door. Professor Billow held his arms out in front of himself and shouted futilely, "Wait! Wait! You don't understand!" before being forced out of the

DOGBREATH

BY ROBERT HURVITZ

I SLAMMED DOWN THE PHONE and paced back and forth in my little dorm room, teeth clenched. "Fuck you, mom!" I shouted at the telephone. "You just don't understand!" I kicked the flimsy metal bedframe and it struck the wall noisily, chipping the plaster. Shit, I thought, I'm probably going to have to pay for that. I flopped down on the bed and gingerly poked at the damage. At my touch, specks of plaster flaked off and drifted down between the wall and the bed.

The door opened, and my roommate Jed walked in.

I looked up from the wall and said, "Hi, Jed."

He stopped and considered this, shifting from foot to foot, absent-mindedly pulling at hair that was almost as dirty as his tie-dyed T-shirt. His hand dropped to his side, and he said, "Brian, why were you staring at the wall?"

I sighed and sat up on the bed. "I just talked to my mom."

Jed nodded quickly. "I see. Didn't go well?"

"No. Not at all. She said she was sick and tired of paying for all of my CDs, and anyway, what was I doing spending all my time listening to music when I should be studying? She said if I wanted to buy CDs, I should get a job and pay for them myself."

Jed winced. "Oh man. That's rough." He collapsed on his bed. "I had a job once. Did I ever tell you about that?"

"Yeah, three or four times."

"Oh." He shifted suddenly and wound up staring at me intently. "You sound like you're in really bad shape, Brian."

"Well, yeah, I guess so."

"I understand." He glanced nervously around the room. "Don't tell this to anyone, OK? Promise?"

"Sure."

"OK. Basement of the biochem building, across from the men's faculty restroom, there's a bulletin board where they post 'subjects needed' fliers for experimental drugs. They pay a couple hundred bucks a pop, and you get a really weird trip, too." He rolled over and was silent.

After a few moments, I said, "Uh, Jed?"

Jed started snoring.

I shrugged and lay back on the bed, thinking: A couple hundred bucks, huh? What the hell.

I was on my way to the biochem building early the next morning. I hadn't wanted it to be that way, but Jed had set his alarm for 5:30 a.m. and didn't wake up until after I'd thrown my shoes at him. He'd then stumbled around the room, apologizing for each noise he made and explaining that he had to get ready for a protest.

I suppose it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd gone to bed at a reasonable hour, but instead I'd stayed up thinking about what CDs I would buy with two hundred dollars. As a result my mind was feeling spongy. It was as if my body was marching involuntarily to the biochem building and my mind was struggling vainly to keep up.

When I reached the top of the brick stairs near the building's main entrance I saw a big, brown dog with matted fur sprawled on the ground motionless. As I walked by, it lifted up its head, looked at me, yawned.

I wiggled my fingers at the dog and said, "Woof." It blinked and rested its head back upon the ground.

Inside and down, I wandered the basement hallways, searching for the bulletin board of experimental delights. Five minutes later, at the end of one of the more dimly lit corridors, I came across the men's faculty restroom, its door slightly ajar. Sure enough, on the opposite wall were the postings.

"Don't worry, Brian," Mark reassured me. "It's for you own protection, really. You wouldn't want your arms flailing around and damaging equipment, now would you?"

Before I could read any of them, I heard a toilet flush and the men's faculty restroom door opened.

"Oh! Excuse me!" said the man who stopped himself suddenly, apparently surprised at seeing me standing outside the bathroom. He had a large mass of graying black hair, glasses, a dark green corduroy jacket, an old leather briefcase, baggy gray pants, and tennis shoes. I assumed he was a professor. "But maybe," he continued, "this is a serendipitous moment. Were you, by any chance, perusing the experimental subject fliers?" He arched his eyebrows to indicate the colored postings on the bulletin board.

"Uh, yeah," I replied. I don't know why, but I felt embarrassed. "Yeah, but I don't normally do things like this, you know. My roommate told me about them. This is — Yeah, this is my, uh, first time doing this."

"Of course, of course," the professor reassured me. He reached down and opened his briefcase, fished out a bright red sheet of paper. "But, you see, I was just about to post my own flier. Perhaps you'd be interested…?" He offered me the sheet of paper, smiling widely.

"Oh, thanks," I said, accepting the flier. It read: "Subject

He called for her at her Fifth Avenue hotel at six the next evening and they went to an off-Broadway show called *Slippers* which she would never have thought of going to see, but it was great fun and she laughed so much during some of the scenes that she cried. When they came out it was raining heavily, a miserable night for man or beast to be out of doors, remarked Rose.

"Let's go to my place," Laszlo suggested. "I'll cook something for us."

"Do you like to cook?"

"No," he admitted.

Laszlo's apartment was large by New York standards, with split levels, two bedrooms, fully automated kitchen and a well-appointed living room.

"Ah, let's see what we have," said Laszlo, peering reluctantly into the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. Rose took pity on him then and thrust him aside.

"I love to cook. Let's see what you've got." She nodded in satisfaction. "Who does your shopping?"

"My housekeeper. She comes in three times a week."

"Now you go away." She shooed him out of the kitchen. "Come back here in an hour and help me with the table."

Nemeth looked at her with gratitude and tiptoed out of the kitchen as she commanded.

The crisper compartment was filled with enormous green sweet peppers so Rose had no problem deciding what to cook. She rummaged quickly through the cupboards until she found the ingredients she wanted, then set to work. While the green peppers steamed lightly, she cooked some rice and minced beef, opened a can of peeled tomatoes and finely chopped a mound of fresh mushrooms. Laszlo diffidently entered the kitchen an hour later and she set him to work opening a bottle of wine and laying the table. She did not allow him to see what was cooking.

"You'll see when it's served," she said and shooed him away again.

He had prepared the table very nicely and she set down the covered dish in the middle of the table.

Laszlo gingerly raised the lid and feasted on the vision that met his sight. Peppers stuffed to bursting with a mixture of cooked rice, minced beef and mushrooms, their green contrasting beautifully with the simmering pale red of the spicy tomato sauce.

Laszlo Nemeth's eyes filled with tears. They looked up to meet hers. "This is a recipe from my old country you know."

"Yes, I know."

"My mother was from Budapest. She died last month in Austria. I've just come back from the funeral."

"Let's eat before it gets cold," said Rose, who didn't like the melancholy turn the conversation was taking.

Laszlo Nemeth ate well and spoke entertainingly throughout the meal. Rose laughed at his jokes and together they drank two bottles of wine. Rose was feeling slightly tipsy after the meal but sobered in a second when Laszlo suddenly turned solemn and proposed marriage to her.

Bells tinkled faintly at the back of Rose's head; whether wedding chords or warning chimes was not clear. She lowered her head and the stuffed peppers swam before her eyes, melted and reformed with knotted blue veins on their surface. She determinedly thrust aside the image and all concomitant forebodings of doom, raising her eyes and her glass to his.

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

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suit; expensive, very expensive, Rose decided at a glance. However, she remembered Shalu's warning.

"Three dollars, please."

The man smiled faintly and held out a hundred dollar bill.

"Don't you have something smaller?"

"Sorry."

Rose bit her lip in annoyance. "I'll see if my colleague has change. Back in a minute."

"I'll come with you. I need to stretch my legs." He put down his cards and excused himself for a minute with words and gestures. 35B waved a hand and began to deal the next round for two. Rose was aware of his eyes on her back as she walked down the aisle to the kitchen area. She pushed aside the curtain but Shalu was not there, probably gone to take a cup of coffee into the cockpit. Rose was sure Shalu had a wee bit of a crush on the copilot although she never talked about such things.

"My colleague's not here at the moment. I'll bring you the change in a few minutes."

"I'd like to stand for a while. I'll wait." He leaned an elbow against the small working surface in an attitude of settling down.

"Win much?" She was instantly angry with herself for asking. She didn't want to start a conversation with this man, but his self-assured manner prompted the question.

"Three vodkas." He rolled his eyes. "And they insisted on paying right away."

"You could have said no."

"That would have been very bad form. You don't gamble, do you?"

"No," after a slight pause, "don't play cards," she qualified. He smiled at her, looking her up and down.

"I thought as much."

"Why?"

"Can't explain it. Simply a strong hunch."

"But why? There has to be a reason. You look like the sort of person who has a reason for everything?"

"Do I?"

"Yes, and don't duck my question."

"I felt your disapproval in the small of my back when you walked up that aisle bringing me that vodka and orange. The other girl warned you, didn't she, said this was my third?"

Rose did not reply.

"Didn't she?" he repeated.

"Something like that," she admitted, annoyed that she had been so transparent to him.

"And do you know why I didn't pay? Because the other two don't have a cent on them and they're too proud to admit it. I tried desperately to let them win, but the harder I tried, the more they lost." The man took a deep breath and looked back down the aisle. "Will you tell me how I'm going to get out of this jam?"

"That's not my problem."

"Tell you what. Why don't you come and say to me in front of those two that you made a mistake. Vodka and orange is free on transatlantic flights, something like that."

"I couldn't do that. What if the other passengers heard?"

"All right. I'll tell them it's free and you don't contradict me. Bring them whatever they want and I'll come back here to pay for it. Okay?"

"I suppose I could do that," she said doubtfully.

"Good." He slapped the hundred dollar bill in her palm before she could refuse and went back to his poker game.

Rose clued Shalu in on her deal with the man in the gray suit. Shalu was surprised.

"Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"You agreed to his harebrained scheme without knowing anything about him? What's the matter with you, Rose? This is not like you."

"What's wrong? I'll return his change before the plane comes in to land."

The man did not come back to the galley for the rest of the flight. Rose tried to return the ninety-one dollars change just before the plane began its descent to land at Kennedy airport. He looked dismayed and imploringly motioned her not to give him money in front of his two poker companions. She backed away and had so much to do after the plane landed that she forgot about the man and his money.

Shalu and Rose were talking and laughing together as they made their way to main entrance of the terminal building. There was the usual crush of cabs, buses and private cars trying to ease along the front and pick up people and they kept an eye open for the van with the airline's logo on its side. Rose suddenly came to a dead stop.

"Oh my God, I forgot to give the man his change."

"What? Oh, the ninety-one dollars. Serves him right for being careless."

"I can't do that, Shalu. I have to give him his money. Besides, he might complain."

"What will you do?"

"Find out his name first."

She zipped away and found a ground hostess with a clipboard in her hand. The passenger list! Rose unceremoniously snatched the clipboard and checked the name of the man in 35C. *Dr. Laszlo Nemeth.* So he was a doctor! "Well, Dr. Nemeth, you're going to get your money back," she said.

"What?" asked the ground hostess, totally mystified by Rose's behavior.

"Nothing," said Rose as she hurried off to the public address system next to the information desk.

Half an hour later, paged and repaid, Dr. Nemeth offered Rose a taxi ride into the city, a ride she accepted because she had missed the airline's shuttle.

"Will you go out with me for dinner tomorrow evening?" he asked directly when they were seated in the taxi. "Good food and conversation."

"I don't know," she began doubtfully.

"No hanky-panky," he promised.

"Well, yes then," she laughed.

SWEET PEPPERS

BY AVIOTT JOHN

THE FLIGHT WAS LATE. Somewhere over the Atlantic Rose's body began to rebel. The local time was three in the afternoon but her body was in another time zone, arguing with the clock, disputing her work schedule.

"The fellow in 35C wants another vodka and orange. Should I serve him?" Shalini interrupted her misery. Shalini was Anglo-Indian and looked more Indian than English, with her air of Oriental calm and placid ways. The unflappability was superficial, Rose knew, because she had seen the bottle of antacid Shalini carried in her overnight case.

"Give it to him. We've another four hours to New York. Maybe he'll sleep after that."

"No such luck. They've got a game of poker going there, 35A, B and C, wide awake and having a great time."

"Are they travelling together?"

"No. I'm positive not. They have a language problem, struggling to speak English, each of them with a different accent, but they understand each other somehow."

"Boozers usually do," said Rose dryly, shifting her weight from one aching leg to another. Rose was proud of her legs, but lately they ached after every shift and faint bluish venous bumps were beginning to show after hours of standing. God, it was time for a change of profession. Her mother had varicose veins: great, ugly, big, knotted rivers whose very sight repelled Rose. Imagine the fate! What good the prettiest face in a swimsuit (or without) on the Riviera when you had legs like that?

35C was a surprise, the man who'd ordered his third vodka. She expected an unshaven wino, but instead met a pair of steady brown eyes.

"Rose, you look awful," said Shalini conversationally as she bent down to get a tiny bottle of vodka from a cupboard. "Is anything the matter?"

"Thanks. Tired, that's all."

"Problems? Can I help?

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me." *Piss off, you bitch. Go deliver your vodka and leave me alone.* Rose regretted the thought an instant later as Shalini sighed and set the vodka and orange juice on a small tray. She wasn't too bad, old Shalu wasn't. A very nice girl and pretty in a mousy, self-effacing kind of way. But she did get on Rose's nerves sometimes with her maternal solicitude and eternal calm. Rose never knew half the time what Shalu was thinking. That was the real problem with her. God, she wanted to move out of this cramped galley, just had to. On an impulse she took the tray from Shalini's unresisting hands.

"Here, let me. I need a walk. I'll give it to him. 35C, did you say?"

"Thank you." Shalu sounded absurdly grateful. The poor kid was tired too. "And don't forget to collect three dollars from him. He's one of those who forgets to pay, you know."

The lighting was dim and exhausted passengers sprawled in their narrow seats, trying to find a position that eased the cramps in their legs. These long flights were a bugger, Rose thought. She and the rest of the crew had boarded in London, but by then some of these people had already been in the plane for fifteen hours.

She walked down the aisle. It was good to walk and she carried her slim body erect, suddenly proud. The airline had long ago discovered the secret of really captivating hostesses; not elaborate uniforms, but healthy bodies and happy faces.

Shalini was right: the fellows in row 35 were not about to go to sleep. Their reading lights were on and the man in the middle had his dining tray folded down as a card table. A real mixed trio.

"Your vodka and orange."

Rose had been working at this job for seven years and out of habit automatically appraised and categorized her passengers. 35A, by the window, was a muscular young fellow with close-cropped hair and prominent, twitching jaw muscles which indicated a hair-trigger temper and an inclination to physical violence when frustrated. He unsmilingly clutched his cards close to his face. 35B was plump, the edge of the dining tray pressing into his belly. He was voluble, waving his arms animatedly, speaking with a thick Russian accent and smiling. She noted though that the smile never reached his eyes.

35C was a surprise, the man who'd ordered his third vodka. She expected an unshaven wino, but instead met a pair of steady brown eyes. In contrast to 35B, the mouth did not smile at all, but the eyes were warm and friendly with a humorous glint to them, so that he looked as though he were smiling at her.

"Thank you." He was lean and his distinguished features carried the slightly bored expression that sometimes went with refinement, but he seemed to be on the best of terms with the other two. He was dressed in a plain gray business

"So I'm haunting myself before I'm dead?"

"Precisely. Narcissism unbounded. You are, after all, dying unnecessarily because of an ego malfunction."

"The hell, you say," Jack says, slapping his knee.

"I would be careful about making such statements if I were you. Indeed, I was and I did too, so I guess any warning I might make is a pretty pointless recursion." The spirit turns to depart. "And speaking of preordination in this deterministic universe, I wonder why I'm inclined to go back and reincarnate in my own fetus?" And he disappears.

Nicholson's senses are becoming acute, hypersensitive. Why is it that you become most clearly aware when it's not possible to do anything with it? Like the brilliant insights of drunkenness, the certainty of faith, and the promises of politicians. The background swells slowly to foreground.

Bob Dylan in the corner sings to anyone who will listen. Songwriters like to attach themselves to actor's equity when they can.

Dylan's few film appearances were mediocre to say the least, but his name recognition couldn't be slighted. So his right to throw his lot in with the mostly Hollywood crowd was never doubted. Songwriters usually hate to hang with the musicians and singers. Too much melodic talent who can't make good songs on their own but think they have a say in how fine art gets created. They practice good craft and call it art.

Anyway, Mr. Zimmerman is over in the corner talking and singing his life away, with a soft banjo backup from somewhere. Since he has no hands in the immediate vicinity, it is unlikely that he is doing the strumming directly. James Caan is probably providing the backup, as he needs his hands for his parts. So Bob's a singing and a crooning:

"Like, the original song went like this:

'And she waaalks juuust like a woman,
and she taaalks juuust like a woman,
but she fuuucks juuust like a little girl'

"And man, all the censors at the record company just turns all frown faces. You know what I mean. So before they would cut the record I had to change the lyrics to

'And she taaalks juuust like a woman,
but she fucks uuup just like a little girl'

"And then all the man censors, they turn to smiles and say, 'Like, yeah, it ain't about doing the deed no more, so it's cool.' But all the lady censors still stay with frown faces, and they say, 'It still has the F-word in it. Think about all the children who'd be hearing it.' So I sits and writes some more until I get to

'And she taaalks juuust like a woman,
but she breaks uuup just like a little girl'

"It screwed up the rhythm a little but then all the censors they turn to sunshine and that's how the song got the way you heard it. The children are supposed to be so fragile that some fucking's gonna pervert them all to bisexuals or something. They be screwin' anything that smiles, if they even hear me sing the F-word."

With these pearls of wisdom floating around in the background, who could not be creative to the max? Like listening to Springsteen tell about forming up the E Street Band on the *Great White Boss* album.

From over his shoulder:

"We got Madonna's twat around here someplace, if you would rather try that."

"No. no, thank you."

"That was always the best part of her," smiles Warren Beatty's head, attached somewhere over by a further window. "The only part we saved, anyway. I can still smell it once a month or so."

And Jack, he just keeps sitting there, trying to absorb all the sensation he can. Trying desperately to hold onto to all of it. To cherish it. To take it with him forever. Not just a memory, a hollow husk of abstraction, but the raw, pure instant of sensation itself.

But he knows it is slipping through his fingers like quicksilver. And knowing what will come thereafter, Jack he just keeps sitting there, waiting for the tunnel of light.

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through the new human immune system. Indeed, mixing human organs and tissues was found to be self-actuating—the conglomerate having a finer collective degree of antibody response. Each originally separate immune system had slightly different capacities to produce the antibodies needed for leukocytic scrubbing of the tissues and bloodstream. The recognition mechanism of the antibodies could be adjusted to whatever level of acceptance or rejection was desired.

At first the eugenic purists tried to use it for racial purposes and found it quickly thinned pure blood lines to incipience. With the immune system self-containing a model of what a complete human genome looks like, the antigen recognition system could be improved by orders of magnitude through mixing maximally different tissue expressions of the genome.

The more dissimilar the tissues mixed, the stronger the resultant response. In a bizarre feat of experimental logic, it was shown that if the entire human species were surgically melded into a common blood circulation system, the superultimate maximum of immune recognition would occur.

This was theory, of course, but in practice it encouraged the largest wardrooms. The more people who would have their healthy parts joined, the more stable would be the whole. Societies and companies promoted these as retirement plans at first. It gave new meaning to the term "union meeting." If enough union members would join together, they could conceivably live forever, or at least a very long time — 500 years by one conservative estimate.

Once aging effects were identified with sufficient precision, only young healthy cells would be able to pass the common immune filter. And so the Sessiles came to be, the wardrooms their home.

"And so you don't know how much this pisses me off, do you?" insists Nicholson, pulling Goldblum from his reverie over the treatise.

"So, why don't you just have the location teams patch you in somewhere and have done with it? you're equity as much as anyone else here."

"You don't understand. I think I've been Mobile all along, since the start. Sure, everybody thinks, "Oh, there goes Jack-fucking-Nicholson, always working on something or the other." I got this and that replaced many times, but I've always been Mobile. I don't think I can take being stuck down in one place even for a little while."

"Well, you're about to die a Mobile if you don't let the surgery kids do their jobs on you. I mean, what a waste, Jack. To die, to be gone just because everything lower than your diaphragm has been trashed. Just look at me."

Goldblum stretches his torso out like he's a body builder. He's attached to equity from the waist up. 'Sure, when they took the original pelvic structure away, I thought, 'Oh, shit!,' but the funny thing was that I really couldn't shit anymore. All that baggage around my balls and my dick being gone. It really is better to live for periods without the testosterone poisoning the blood, you know.'

He stopped and looked at Jack with his famous intensity. "But a casting call can put them back anytime. At least ones just as good, or even better." (It depends on what the director needs for the shots scheduled.)

"Nah, it ain't removing the private parts. I had mine rebuilt several times." (So, the tabloid claims were true. They had been speculating on the nature of Nicholson's cosmetic surgery long before the human genome breakthrough.) "I just cannot take being pinned down on some equity hump somewhere."

"Well, have it your own way then," Jeff sighs. "I'll miss having you around except in the reruns." He turned back to his terminal, preparing for another onslaught of lashing hypertextual lexia in his celebrated quirky manner. "If you change your mind, I can have triage here in minutes."

This leaves Jack alone with his thoughts for a few seconds. Not long enough, though.

He sits up with a start, jarring his blood vessel into another crimson aria. He sees himself walking across the ward. His face is a gray color and his belly is grossly distended and sloshing. There's an ill-defined lack of depth to this appearance of himself, like perspective is somehow being violated.

"Whoa, what goes on here?" he says, and the apparition turns toward him.

"Didn't you always want to play Ebeneezer and Marley both? This is your chance," it says.

"But I ain't dead yet," he protests. "At least I think I would have known if I was to expire.'

"Oh yes, I know. So it's safe to say that you will too."

"Now wait a minute. You're not one of them union scabs the producers keep threatening to patch together when our agents are pushing too hard?"

Bob Dylan in the corner sings to anyone who will listen. Dylan's few film appearances were mediocre to say the least, but his name recognition couldn't be slighted.

"No, no," muttered the shade. "I am truly your mortal coil after you have shuffled it off. You will in a few minutes, you know."

"Then how come you are here now, talking to me?"

"Oh come now," chided the specter. "What makes you think the ethereal is bound by any foolish notion of linear time? If our measure is not properly taken with that Judeo-Christian nonsense, why should we keep to strict timetables just for the convenience of your schedules?"

and silent-but-deadlies. Nothing else like it on Earth, and nobody except perhaps primeval Neanderthals might recognize it: a crowded cave, poor sanitation, after a long hard winter just after an attack by ax-wielding cannibals, who gutted many and ate several members of the tribe, spilling their sour gastric juices with their guts. That kind of smell.

Nicholson feels buoyed by the throat-choking stench. Actors took to the wardrooms like they responded to the smell of greasepaint backstage on opening night. It took a while to get used to it at first, but the whole arrangement made so much sense. Theater, movies, then the wards forever.

There was, increasingly nowadays, an underlying tincture to the wardrooms. An occasional waft of sterile alcohol or ammonia and the antiseptic tang of the medical support units. The old-timers say you get used to these otherwise distracting gustatory conflicts. You cannot do without the doctors and their skills, so you've gotta put up with the sharp stink of their trade.

The naive think that one day the medical interventions would cut through the basic odor of concentrated living. But that didn't seem to be the case. The same old guys (with their wisdom of age and experience) would say that you could always tell the smell of someone getting too rich in the biotics. These outbreaks, nasally distinct, would soon be followed by sharp smells of the antiseptic. Those medical kids would step in and ferret out the corruption and putrefaction, leaving instead their own non-living traces. A good healthy wardroom had its own supporting olfaction.

Jack, as he shambles down his corridor, knows that he won't collapse before he makes it across the dayroom, right next to where Jeff Goldblum is almost always typing away at a VT-220. It's truly ancient equipment — the color monitor and keyboard are almost certifiable antiques.

Peck, peck, peck. Goldblum punched at the keys in his own unique fingering. Sometimes hunting, a complicated dance of finger motions and wrist snappings. His keyboarding was like a showboat performance artist: lots of dramatic pauses punctuated by incredibly complicated twistings of fingernails and tips. Just the right pressures for maximum speed of output. Hands suddenly thrown into the air as if expecting instant applause for some piece of brilliance.

Light shines down in a beam from a nearby window. Somehow Jeff always gets a position next to a real window. Most in the biomass of actors equity just get sunlamps at the right wattage to produce healthy Vitamin D in the surface skin. Goldblum always thinks that natural sunlight gives his skin a special sheen which made a perceptible difference in those forty-foot projections on the silver screen. It didn't matter that much for television work, but the true cinema deserved his best… and that always came when he was given a window seat.

Actually, the location teams just got tired of hearing his bitching when he got transplanted into a normal room. Everyone knew that the constant, controlled frequency of the halogen lamps were better than the erratic variability of the sun. So it was not really difficult for him to pre-empt a place near a window.

Natural sunlight gives his skin a special sheen… Sure, he shrugs. 'His skin' could be any color of the rainbow whenever he went Mobile. The surgical crew could see to that. Not to mention what the makeup crew could do when they took over. remember his *Othello?* Nobody ever thought that a skinny, Jewish Goldblum could replace Olivier by becoming darker than Portier. It has become a standard joke in the industry. Still, he likes the feel of the true sun coming in over his shoulder. Perhaps that feeling of self-contentment is what made all the difference in his next adventure before the celluloid. Perhaps it was just the old De Mille-style star system: cater to their quirks between roles if you want the best output from name actors.

Jeff finally notices Nicholson as he sidles into a day chair, sharing the beam of daylight. Jack has been one of his best friends, especially since Geena decided not to have anything to do with him. It had been touch-and-go on the set of *Mutiny on the Bounty,* as Nicholson always managed to upstage your spotlight somehow. His Bligh to Jeff's Christian had that spark of greatness. True, the film wasn't exactly a financial hit, but the critics had understood that producing it as a 3-D space opera had some risks. *Bounty* was guaranteed classic status anyway: the last first-run 3-D with the red and green lens before they solved the close-up problem with the holos.

"So what's happening, Jack?" says Jeff with his cool halfway grin. "You look like you just passed a concrete turd the size of a melon."

"Yeah, it feels kinda like it," Nicholson says as he sinks into the overstuffed naugahide day chair. The sound of a whoopee cushion erupts as his exposed skin rubs against the dry, sun hot surface. "I been shot pretty good."

"So tell me what you been up to these last ten minutes since you left,' asked Jeff, not really listening for an answer. On his terminal he has displayed the last of a treatise on the benefits of species-wide immune responses through direct sharing of antibody defenses in a common blood pool.

It had been the first and biggest surprise of the human genome project. While mapping out the location of all genetic variants, the mechanism of self/nonself recognition was discovered on the molecular level. Of course, the AIDS researchers and the cancer crew all claimed prior superiority, but the Nobel went to a computer operator, a CAD/CAM geek. She got the published data from genetic probes and started playing with the balls and knobs in virtual data extrapolations. A little eye of frog and toe of newt, and presto-chango: the degree of biochemical self-recognition could be precisely tuned.

No more tissue rejection ever. The immune system could be taught to recognize anything human as good stuff to be maintained. Viruses and bacteria did not have a chance to get

TIMESPOOKS

(AND BIT PARTS)

BY STAN KULIKOWSKI II

STARRING: Jack Nicholson, a Mobile. Jeff Goldblum, a Sessile. And a supporting cast of thousands of other small parts.

HE WAS SITTING IN THE CAR WAITING for the bullet he knew would come. When it did, he heard a small tinkling of broken glass, and wondered if the window would crinkle in that sparkling pattern in which a small break would propagate another small crack and another and another until the entire surface became an opaque fractal prism, falling into a zillion separate tiny stars on the slightest touch.

It didn't. That was odd, he thought.

Another thing that was odd was that it really didn't hurt much. The small-caliber projectile had entered on the right front hip, striking the pelvic horn and ricocheting upward through endlessly convoluted turns of intestines, nicking the liver and the hepatic vein, and finally coming to rest lodged in the interior wall of the diaphragm. The point of the tiny Teflon-coated bullet, called a Needlehead, was just sharp enough to grate a little against a rib when he breathed in.

He expected more pain. As it was, the small scritchscritch when he inspired was about it. The bullet's brief flight through his organs and membranes had been like an instant of thin, brilliant ruby laser light. An almost static image of a single spider's thread through his body, so he could note its passage and the resultant damage but hardly more. He kept his face winced and his gut sucked in for a long time expecting an onslaught of agony which never came. Eventually he had to relax and admit that being shot was not as bad as he had thought it would be.

The problem was the nick on the hepatic vein. The entry wound itself was slight. There was hardly a dribble of blood, and that was quickly stanched when he placed his hand over it. All the myriad punctures of the twistings of small intestine were so minor that most of them would seal and heal without much surgical assistance. A little liver tissue would regenerate with just a scar. The slight mass of the bullet itself was just an annoyance, easily removed.

It was the sharp incision across the venous wall that would occasionally gape open, then closed, like a curious mouth speaking large quantities of the dark venous blood into his visceral cavity. Episodic internal hemorrhage. He would eventually bleed to death without losing more than a teaspoon of blood.

If he sat there very still, he figured he might have a few hours left before the circulating volume of his blood lowered enough for him to black out of consciousness for the last time. His belly would bloat outward when receiving the expanding embolism. The internal visceral pressure might eventually equilibrate with the lowering venous pressure so further loss might be minimal, but by then it would be too late to do any good. His brain needed a constant fresh supply of prime, Grade-A, oxygenated corpuscles to survive and a dead-end reservoir that was far too large was being created south of the rib cage.

Of course, the end could come much quicker than that. The sharp, clean tear of the hepatic vessel wall could rupture at any moment and he would see life's vibrant colors drain away to black in a sudden rushing swoosh into the hidden internal sea below.

Just sit here for a while and wait. Yep, thinks Nicholson, *live life to its longest if I just take it easy here for a while.*

But after a bit, Jack gets bored of sitting hunched over in the Mercedes. When he gets restless, he decides that he may as well get up and go back into the studio wardroom. Getting out the front seat gingerly, holding his side (uselessly), Jack walks hunched over like a crab. He crosses the parking lot and makes it up the three steps to the wardroom vestibule. If he's going to die anyway, he may as well seek out the company of friends. If he dies on the way, at least he'll see himself doing a great heroic act — something he always found possible but just missing in his real life.

He passes the nurse's station, with a sneer on his lips and dragging one leg, his hand clutching over his liver tightly. It looks so much like Lon Chaney Sr.'s *Hunchback of Notre Dame* that they just wave him through security and check-in. He had just left, after all, and if this is the way 'an artist' like him wants to work up a part, so be it.

"But I ain't dead yet," he protests. "At least I think I would have known if I was to expire."

A few doors down the corridor, the rich, deep pungency of the wardrooms takes over. An odor so strong and so human that it puts a stitch in your breathing when you first hit it like a wall. The smells of sweat and exhaled air and a little vomit

I looked at Heidi, who stood with her arms crossed. I could see her trying to decide where to place me on a range of possibilities between kind of interesting and dangerously unbalanced.

I figured she was calculating the risk of involvement by estimating the ratio of interest to misery: a woman's standard measure of a man.

"I have to go back," I said.

We had walked half a block when she said, "Is this, like, a normal lunch break for you?"

"Well, no," I said. "I guess not. In fact, it's pretty weird."

"Hmmm," she said. "I'm not sure if I'm glad to hear that or not."

When we got back to the park, she said, "I have to go this way." She waved her hand northward up Fifth.

"Okay," I said. "Can I call you?"

"No. Give me your number. If I decide to, I'll call you."

I took out a scrap of paper and a ball-point pen, scribbled my home and work numbers and handed her the paper. We stood looking at each other. Her hands were folded in front of her. I leaned toward her.

"No," she said. "Don't do that. There might be a time for that later on, but not now."

Then, with an odd, backward glance, she turned, bounded across Fifth, and disappeared into the crowd. At that moment, high above the honking, screaming, grinding sounds of the city, came the peal of a tower clock; a clear, resounding *bong* that rang out over the chaos of the city and spoke to me through my confusion.

I began walking briskly toward Broadway. The fogginess of the pot was wearing off. I thought about the oddness of the last hour and tried to puzzle meaning from it. I wondered if I would see Heidi again or if that even mattered. Whatever she decided, in a lonely city full of self-made prisoners of paranoia, an attractive, apparently sensible woman had spoken to me out of the blue without fear or condition or motive. So why, then, had I responded by playing the role of an immature, self-destructive lout, or was that the real me after all?

I dashed though the doors of my building, past the guard who barely glanced at me. As I passed my boss, she was still playing Tetris, the blocks falling like geometric snowflakes on her computer screen. Without looking up, she said, "Where have you been?"

"Oh, just doing lunch," I said.

"Slow service?" she said.

I suddenly remembered that for all that had happened, I hadn't eaten at all. Nor would I for days if I couldn't find some money somewhere. I chuckled cryptically.

Back in my office, I picked up my phone to check my voice mail. The computer voice told me I had a message, so I punched in my password.

"Hi, this is Heidi. I just want to know if you're as weird as you seem? I mean, it's okay one way or the other. I just have to know. I guess, if you want to meet in the park for lunch tomorrow, that'd be all right. We'll see how it goes, okay? Bye."

I hung up the phone and sat in my office under the unforgiving fluorescent glare.

"Hey, Donna," I yelled into the next office without bothering to get up from where I sat, grinning like a madman. "Can you lend me thirty bucks till payday?"

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Has been writing fiction and non-fiction for over ten years. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Window, Spectrum, Malcontent, Epiphany,* the *Lone Star Literary Quarterly,* and *Elements.* Mark is also the author of a collection of short stories titled *Riddle* (Argo Press, Austin, Texas, 1992).

A dark, attractive woman with short hair and high cheek bones sat down on the bench next to me. She was nicely built and wore black jeans, black T-shirt, black boots and black leather jacket with plenty of zippers and studs. She wore lace gloves with the fingers cut out. Her fingernails were painted black. She took out a cigarette and said to me, "Got a light?"

I fished out my Bic handed it to her. She lit her cigarette, releasing a big cloud of blue and gray smoke. I lit one too and said, "You like it?"

"Like what?" she said.

"The music," I said.

"No," she said. "It sucks."

I nodded. She was right. They guy continued to bang away on his guitar like he wanted to rip out the strings.

"You want to smoke a joint?" I said.

She looked sharply at me and said, "Are you a cop?"

I laughed. "No," I said.

"Well, then. Okay."

"Hold on," I said and went over to where my Jamaican friend was standing with a group of his compatriots grooving to some dub masterpiece rattling out of a boom box the size of a Fotomat. I asked him for a rolling paper. He gave it to me without so much as a glance. I went back to the bench, took out the tiny bag and rolled a joint on my thigh. I lit it from my cigarette and passed it to the woman who took it between the tips of her black fingernails.

"You work around here?" she said.

"Yep."

"What do you do?" she said.

"As little as possible," I said.

She didn't grin. I didn't grin either. She passed the joint back to me and said, "Well, what is it you're supposed to do?"

"I'm not quite sure," I said. I still didn't smile. This was a serious conversation.

"Quite a talker aren't you?"

"Actually, I am," I said. We passed the joint back and forth a few more times until it was gone. I was suddenly high. The guitar player kept pounding away. The park and all its surreal cast of characters seemed to grow small and recede.

"Do you want to walk?" she said.

I nodded and we stood and started off toward Fifth. I couldn't tell which of us was following the other. I wondered how much of my lunch hour was left and whether I could go back at all.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Heidi," she said.

I laughed out loud. I was sure she was putting me on, this dungeon angel in nightcrawler black. But she still hadn't cracked a smile.

"Really?" I said.

"Really," said Heidi.

"I'm sorry I laughed."

"That's okay," she said. "Everyone does."

We walked past the arch and up Waverly toward the West Village. We wandered down side streets past serene brownstones, unchanged for a hundred years, window boxes full of geraniums. I felt very odd and only part of it was because of the pot. I glanced at Heidi walking beside me and wondered if any of this meant anything.

The corner at Sixth Avenue was swarming with activity. Passengers were rushing in and out of the subway and the lunch crowd came and went from the diner up the block.

We turned the corner toward the basketball court.

"These guys are serious," I said. Heidi peered soberly through the chain link fence where ten huge men were playing a noisy, full-court game. Spectators leaned and hung on the fence and kids that should have been in school watched from their bike seats.

"Oh, Jesus, one of those deals," said Heidi. I looked around to see that a crowd had started to gather around a three-card monte game on a flimsy folding table.

The card man laid three bent and worn playing cards face up, flipped them over, mixed them up and put a twenty-dollar bill on the table. "Four of diamonds," he said. "Four of diamonds."

Some guy in the crowd laid a twenty beside the first and turned over the four of diamonds. "All right!" he said, taking both of the twenties. The hustler rearranged the cards and staked a ten. "Four of diamonds," he said to the winner.

"I'll bite," he said and dropped a ten next to the first and pointed to a card: four of diamonds. "Well, goddammit," said the operator. "You doing good." The winner picked up the tens and the house shuffled the cards. This time a fifty appeared: Grant's whiskered, alcoholic face looked up fiercely at this spectacle. Two twenties and a ten met the wager and the crowd was quiet for the brief moment it took to turn over the ace of spades.

"Aw, Christ," said the winner, as he backed away, looking at the ten dollar bill he had in his hand. The hustler swept the bills into his hand and rearranged the cards.

I watched carefully. I was sure it was the card in the middle. Without thinking twice, I pulled a twenty from my jacket pocket, tossed it on the table and picked a card: king of spades. I was dazed. I could ill-afford to lose twenty dollars. Along with the ten left in my pocket, that was all the money I had until payday.

I glanced at Heidi, who looked at me with a bored expression. I didn't care what she thought; I had to get my twenty back. The guy rearranged the cards and put out a ten. I matched it and picked up a card: four of diamonds.

"Yes!" I said. I felt my heart pound as I scooped up the bills. I thought I heard Heidi say "stop now" as I concentrated on the movement of the cards.

Without so much as a pause, I matched the house twenty with my two tens. I was so sure of the cards that I had started to reach for the bills before I realized I was staring at the ace of spades. The hustler's hand snaked out and reeled in my last dime. As I backed out of the crowd, another loser stepped into my place.

Donna looked at me coldly and pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Speak for yourself," she said. "It's not a perfect world. When I see something wrong, I have to fix it right now." She put her hands to either side of her head and hunched her shoulders. "Oh, it just makes me crazy," she said.

I picked up a sheet of paper from the top of the stack in my in-basket and tried to look busy.

"Oh, I guess you're actually trying to get something done," said Donna.

"Oh, well…" I said. She sighed wearily and drifted out of my office back into hers. I looked at the mountain of paperwork ahead of me and decided to go to lunch. When I passed through Donna's office, she was playing a game on her computer.

I passed the guard's desk in the lobby. It was equipped with an impressive panel of video monitors each showing a half-tone still-life of some remote corner of the building: stairwell, fire door, hallway. Occasionally, a human being, distorted by the fish-eye lens of the camera, would pass elliptically across one of the monitors. The guard, busy trying to work the *Times* daily crossword in ink, wasn't paying any attention whatsoever to the monitors. He grunted as I passed.

The glass and chrome doors of our building delivered me into the lunchtime crowds on Broadway. The sidewalks were crowded with the motley assortment of humanity typical downtown: men and women in business suits, NYU students in their uniforms of black spandex and leathers, tattered homeless, hitch-stepping hustlers, junkies, deadbeats and drunks.

I headed downtown. I had vague thoughts of going into Tower Records, maybe a bookstore, then catch a sandwich on the way back. At Astor Place, I passed a woman sitting on a heating grate in the sidewalk. She leaned against the building and across her knees lay a sign lettered on a scrap of corrugated cardboard. It said, "my BaBy diEd, Im TRyinG To gEt EnouGH To BuRy Him And Go Back HomE To NoRTH caRoLiNa. PLEASE HELP ME!"

I'd walked by her on that corner for weeks, always with the same sign, watching the crowds walk by ignoring her. I put fifty cents in her blue and white Acropolis cup.

"God bless you, sir," she says to me. I nodded and went on. I wondered where she'd keep it if she really did have a dead baby. I thought of weird possibilities: a locker at the Port Authority, the coat check at the Met. I started laughing to myself.

In the next block a black man with a gray stubble of beard stepped into my path, his hand out. He wore a hound's tooth sports jacket that might actually have once been a fine piece of clothing, taken off a rack in a men's store on the upper East side, now stiff with grime, lining ripped and dangling.

"Spare quatta, spare quatta, spare some cha-a-a-a-i-i-i-nge!" growled the wino in my face.

I had just donated my last pocket change to the dead baby cause. "Sorry," I mumbled.

"Aii, go to hell, college boy," he said with a wave of his hand, and stumbled away after another victim.

As I approached Fourth Street, the red and orange sign over Tower loomed in front of me. People buzzed in and out of the revolving doors like worker bees around a hive. At the last minute, I decided to pass up the temptation of idle consumerism and turned instead toward the park.

I wandered down Fourth and meandered in a zig-zag north and west through quieter streets past NYU campus buildings and dorms. Halfway down one block, a delivery van was parked with two wheels on the sidewalk, the roll-top back end up and two guys hauling out boxes. As I stepped into the street to walk around it, a deafening shriek filled my ears, echoing down the tight, gray street. A courier on a bike whizzed past me. The whistle in his mouth dropped to the end of its string as the guy yelled at me, "Watch out where you're going, jerk!"

I couldn't tell which of us was following the other. I wondered how much of my lunch hour was left and whether I could go back at all.

I crossed the street and entered the east side of Washington Square park. The usual crowd was there: roller skaters weaving in and out of the mob, knots of guys around boom boxes, kids in Ocean Pacific sportswear from head-to-toe balancing on the tips of neon green and pink skateboards, fat cops walking around tapping their legs with their nightsticks, old folks on benches throwing popcorn to the leprous pigeons, small children swarming the fenced-in playground.

A skinny guy with polyester pants and sandals, his dreadlocks tucked up under a massive, rainbow-colored macrame cap, stepped in front of me and said quietly, "Weed? Dime bag? Nickel bag?"

I slowed down. I usually had enough sense to tell these guys to beat it.

I hadn't smoked much pot since college, mainly because all my friends had dried up. But I felt loose and a little detached. Without saying a word to the guy, I pulled a five dollar bill from my pocket. Like a rasta leprechaun, the guy made the bill disappear, replaced by a tiny zip-lock plastic bag like the Hasidim use to carry rings back and forth across 47th Street or Canal. Inside the bag was enough pot to roll a very skinny joint. When I looked up, the rastaman had vanished.

I stuck the bag in my pocket and went and sat on a park bench. Close by, a crowd had gathered around a guy who was furiously assaulting a guitar and shouting a manic version of "Friend of the Devil."

pockets for another cigarette but they're all gone. I wait for him to catch up to me. When he does, he's panting hard from running so fast.

"Philly, what're you doin'?" he says after he gets his breath back.

"I'm leaving, Slime. I'm out of here."

"But why?" he says. "We were kickin' ass, man."

"What?" I say indignantly. "Do I have to spell this out for you? This thing was a bad idea from the beginning. I've been lied to, laughed at, and humiliated. I've alienated my family and pissed off my boss. I've been reminded of my weakness, my lack of talent and my lost hopes. What else do you want from me, Slime?"

"But—"

"But what?" I fire back at him.

"But, I mean, wouldn't all of that stuff have happened anyway?"

I stare at him for a minute, then close my eyes against the weariness. I feel myself losing the need to blame Slime for any of this.

"Hey, man," he says, "You have it all. I'm, like, in awe of you, Philly."

"In awe of me?" I say. "Why the hell would you be in awe of me? I have a stressed-out job chasing bones for assholes like Cramer. I'm mortgaged up to my eyeballs. I have two kids and a wife I never get to see. I haven't gone out dancing or drinking or even to a movie in five years. I eat badly and I drink too much and I don't ever exercise. I'm probably going to croak from a heart attack taking out the garbage one of these days and it's going to deprive the world of absolutely nothing. In awe of me, Slime? You've got to be kidding."

"No, I mean it," says Slime and, for once, he isn't wearing his silly grin. "Great job, beautiful wife, cute kids, cool house. You got it all. You ought to relax and enjoy it. See, there's the difference between us, Phil. I'm too relaxed to go out and get that stuff you have and you're too uptight to enjoy it."

"Well," I say, beginning to grin in spite of myself. "You want to trade?"

"Huh?"

"Trade, Slime. I mean, Monday morning you put on a suit and tie and go sit at my desk at the firm of Cramer, Dillahunt and Dillahunt and I'll go odd-jobbing around the southwest for awhile sleeping late and playing in clubs. You can yell at my kids until you're blue in the face, sit and drink scotch in the hot tub and do the dinner dishes to your heart's content. What do you say?"

Slime looks like he might actually go for it. Then his grin comes back and fills his face like a sunny window. At last he says, "No, no. I guess not" and starts to back away down the sidewalk.

"Hey man," he says. "I'll call you soon."

"Okay," I say and watch him as he turns and starts back toward the door of the VFW. No doubt he's going to track down Cramer and get paid for the gig. I stand in the cold drizzle and watch him walk away. Long after he's gone, I say again, "Okay, buddy. You do that."

But I know he won't.

DOING LUNCH

BY MARK SMITH

DONNA, MY BOSS, LEANED against my desk and said, "God, am I the only sane one around here?"

I swiveled in my chair and looked up at her. She didn't look great. The fluorescent lights did not flatter her features. Fluorescent lights don't flatter anyone's features.

"What do you mean, sane?" I said. It wasn't an insightful comment. I didn't mean it to be. I only wanted her to go away so I could make some progress on the pile of work she had given me. My in basket was literally broken under a leaning tower of papers.

"I just had a cigarette out on the front step with that guy Bosco in Development."

"Bosco?" I said.

"Yeah. I'm sure you've seen him. He's bald and always wears a bow tie?"

"Okay…"

"Anyway, it turns out he's a raving Republican racist pig. All he talked about for ten minutes was how those people want a hand-out and those people are lazy and those people don't take the time to raise their kids."

"Just don't talk to him anymore," I said, eyeing the paper on my desk.

She went on, ignoring me. "I mean, he actually buys breakfast cereal for his kids with candy in it."

"Huh?" I said. None of this was getting any clearer.

"Yeah. He told me this. How his kids eat this stuff that's like Cheerios except that it has candy in the middle. Can you believe that?"

"What do you expect from a guy named Bosco?" I said.

"I mean, here we are trying to change the world and there are people out there using vast creative talents to make a cereal with candy in it."

"They're just hustling a buck same as the next guy," I said.

eyes to match came to the edge of the stage and said, "Do you know any Guns 'n' Roses songs?"

I looked at her and said, "Sorry," and believe me, I was. She shrugged her shoulders and went away.

We played two or three more songs to similar responses. The kids were getting bored. Knots of kids stood around the edge of the vacant dance floor successfully ignoring my first cover of "96 Tears" in 10 years. When I said we were going to take a five minute break, no one looked too disappointed.

I went outside and stood by myself looking at the cars in the parking lot.

I took out my last cigarette. The door opened and Slime and Mike came out.

"Got another smoke?" said Mike.

"No," I barked.

"How're we doin'?" said Slime.

"We suck," I said.

"Huh?" said Slime. "You're not into this? I'm thinkin' this is cool, us jammin' together again. Runnin' through the old tunes."

"It's not like old times, Slime," I said. "It's new times and these kids are into a whole different bunch of songs by bands we never heard of."

"Phil's right," said Mike. "This gig's not happening."

Slime looked confused. I allowed him a scant moment of compassion.

"Well, then. What do we do?" he said.

"Do you guys know any Jane's Addiction songs or Jesus Jones or Guns 'n' Roses? Because this golden oldie shit is not working."

Slime shook his head. Mike looked bored.

"Here's what we do," I said. "We try some of our originals."

Slime perked up. "You mean the Sex Offenders stuff?" he said.

"Why not?"

Mike groaned, but Slime nodded his head and said, "Wicked!"

"Let's go," I said.

We went back inside, got settled on the stage and crashed into a screaming version of "Kill the Rich." What happened next was like one of those old Alan Freed movies where the band at the prom finally gets sick of playing Strauss waltzes and starts rocking and the kids go wild and the parents get nervous at first and then they start twisting too. The atmosphere in the room suddenly snapped into place. The kids looked up from their punch and stopped talking. A couple jigged onto the dance floor and then another and a third and before I knew it, there were a good number of dancers. I felt myself start to relax for the first time in days. Maybe we could salvage this thing after all.

We finished "Kill the Rich" and launched into "I Hate This Town." I could feel the old energy returning along with my confidence. More kids went onto the dance floor and gyrated to the pounding beat. I ripped harder into the lyrics and started pacing the stage and shouting into the microphone like James Brown.

I caught a glimpse of the caterers who were suddenly standing beside deserted chafing dishes, arms folded, shaking their heads.

We jumped into "I Want To Sleep With You" without so much as a sixteenth note's pause between songs. I glanced at Slime who had a big, shit-eating grin on his face, but Mike looked like he was struggling to keep up. We were cooking. I felt the last ten years of office burden detach itself and float away from me like a dandelion fluff.

Just then, I heard someone calling my name, yelling in fact: "Phil! Phil!" I thought it must be Slime and I turned to look at him, but he only grinned back.

That's when I looked down and saw, of all people, the most unlikely and unexpected face in the world: Cramer, the senior partner in my law firm. He glared up at me with a mixture of disbelief and embarrassment. His sunburned face strained out of his starched collar.

"Phil," he said. "What the fuck are you doing up there?" He seemed as confused as I was. I had stopped playing and Slime and Mike petered out behind me.

"What am I doing?" I said. "What are you doing here?" Though I thought I already knew.

"This is my daughter's 16th birthday party. She's the one with the green dress on." I looked over at the girl he motioned to, the same one who had asked for Guns 'n' Roses.

"Pretty," I said.

"Do you mean to say that you play in this band?" said Cramer, still unclear of the situation or what it meant about me one way or the other.

"Yes sir," I said. "Slime and I used to play together in a band called—" I paused. "Well, never mind."

"I'll be damned. My second chair is a punk rocker."

"Substitute second chair," I said. "Well, do you like it? The music?"

"No. It stinks," said Cramer. He glanced around at the teens on the dance floor and added, "but the kids seem to like it."

"Okay," I said, forcing a grin, though Cramer wasn't smiling. I didn't like that. I wished he would crack a smile. I could tell he didn't know what to say, what to make of my being there. I figured by Monday morning he'd have made up his mind. I would spend a nervous weekend until then.

Cramer nodded curtly and disappeared. I managed to croak out two or three more songs, but the energy had left me and where I had felt the old power again, now I only felt a tightening in my gut.

I turned back toward Slime who was grinning like Joshua when I take him for ice cream. "I'm through," I said.

Slime yelped something at me I didn't hear and I was out of the building by the time he got his strap unhooked.

Slime's gaining on me.

I lean against the brick wall of the VFW hall. I tap my

I sat on the edge of the stage and waited for Slime. After about half an hour, a raunchy looking dude with sunglasses and a beard and mustache walked in the door. He took off his shades and squinted around the room like the dim light hurt his eyes. He headed straight for the bandstand.

"Are you Slime?" he said without a smile or a prologue.

"No, I'm Phil."

"Glad to meet you, Phil," he said. "My name is Mike. I'm the drummer."

The drummer? But where was Damon? Then my brain engaged. Slime had used a reunion to get me in. No doubt he had tried the same trick with Damon with less success. After all, Damon had always shown a little better sense dealing with Slime than I had.

"Give me a hand with my gear?" he said.

"Right," I said and followed him out into the rain. Mike's vehicle turned out to be a late model Ford van with a dazzling purple, metal-flake paint job.

I thought, this guy is doing all right for himself.

We made two trips out to bring in the drums. Once we were back inside, Mike went to work arranging his equipment on the stage with the precision and confidence of a professional. He paused at one point and said, "You got a cigarette on you?"

I gave him one and took one for myself. I struck a match and lit his and then mine. He said, "So you were in that band with Slime?"

"Yeah. It was a long time ago."

"The Sex somethings?"

"The Sex Offenders," I said.

"Punk shit, right?"

"Well, mainly covers," I said defensively. "But we did a few originals when we could."

"I hated that punk new wave shit," he said with an end-of-discussion tone of voice. "I'm glad that shit's dead."

"So what do you play?" I asked.

"Jazz," Mike sniffed with the smug air of the first chair viola at the Philharmonic.

"Great," I said flatly.

By the time Slime arrived, the stage was set up and Mike had smoked all my cigarettes. I was in a sour mood.

"Great!" clucked Slime when he saw that we were set up. He put his bass on the edge of the bandstand and started taking it out of the case.

"Right," I said. "Great." I was annoyed and I wanted Slime to know it, though I wasn't sure what I hoped to gain from him knowing.

"So what happened to Damon?" I asked.

"Aw, Damon couldn't make it, man. He, like, he canceled out."

I stifled a snarl. "Was he ever in?" I said.

Slime stopped mid-motion in the act of plugging his bass into the amplifier. "What's that supposed to mean, Philly?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. "Forget it."

"No, man. Say it. You think I lied to you about Damon to get you to play."

I glanced at Mike, who stood to the side of the stage, smoking. He wasn't looking at us, but I could tell he was listening. I said, "No. Forget it. I'm just tired out. It's been a long week. I don't really care if Damon plays or not."

Slime grinned. Happy as usual to seize on the merest of excuses to be upbeat.

"That's cool," he said. "And, hey. Mike's a bitchin' drummer."

"I'm sure he is," I said dryly.

Slime's bass hung from his neck by a broad, rainbow-colored macrame strap.

"Hey, guys, the joint's filling up," he said, fiddling with the volume button on the red body of his bass.

I looked around. Sure enough, the hall was starting to fill up with teenagers in hard shoes and brand new dress clothes: boys laughing nervously and girls standing very still. I felt my colon tighten. For the first time, it hit me that I had no idea what kind of music these kids liked. I hadn't listened to the radio in years. I couldn't name three bands on any top ten chart.

"Hey, Slime," I said. "What are we going to play anyway?"

"Only the best stuff," he grinned with his hands out, palms up in a what else? kind of gesture. "Only our very best repper-twar."

We started playing at nine o'clock sharp. The place was pretty much filled up and none of the kids were paying the slightest attention to us. I couldn't tell which one was the guest of honor nor were there any adults around to speak of other than the caterers.

We started with a shaky version of the old Human Beinz song "Nobody" which drew about the same reaction as a two degree change in the thermostat. We followed that by kicking into a version of "Sweet Jane," which started out all right except that I forgot the words and had to sing the second verse twice. No one was paying attention. The hum of crowd talk had increased just enough to drown us out. My only indication that we were making any sound at all was that I could see the needles on the amplifier bounce every time Mike pounded on his drums. The crowd huddled around the edge of the gaping dance floor like a poolside party in January.

Slime said, *"Jailhouse Rock,"* but I said "No, *Heartbreak Hotel."* I was encouraged to see a few heads nod in the crowd. They had heard about Elvis, at least. In my frame of mind, I found it easy to put some effort into the spectral, vaguely suicidal lyrics. I even managed to balance on my toes while kicking my knees out into a wobbling hula-hoop dance step worthy of the King himself. Slime said, "Whoa, dude," but the only reaction I could see in the crowd were a few smirks.

A pretty girl wearing a low-cut green party gown with

two years, he decided to skip off to Florida for three days and go marlin fishing with some cohort who owned a yacht. He told the client he was ill and turned the case over to his assistant who, in turn, needed a second chair. Cramer recommended me. For this I was supposed to be grateful except that it meant staying at the office until after ten o'clock for three nights straight planning the redirect of a hostile witness.

I didn't see my kids from Wednesday morning until Saturday.

Of course, that did little to soften Sandy up to the idea of my playing with the band. I cared about her anger, but there wasn't much I could do. I had given Slime my word.

On Friday evening when I finally got home, I ate a cold supper and headed up to the attic where I dug my guitar case out from under a pile of toys my kids had outgrown. I schlepped the thing down into the den, cracked a beer and sat down on the sofa, laying the case on the floor at my feet. I snicked open the silver clips and lifted the lid. There, nestled in its crushed red velvet couch, lay my old Fender Stratocaster, as sleek as a '55 T-bird, as modern as the Chrysler Building. Looking at the guitar, I felt the old times wash around me like a tide.

I remembered buying the thing when I was still in high school and spending hours learning songs off my records. I learned to play songs by the Velvet Underground and a lot of stuff by Iggy and the Stooges. I liked the old fifties and sixties stuff too, garage band stuff like Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, ? and the Mysterians, Mitch Ryder, Chuck Berry, and, of course, lots of Elvis. I liked songs with an edge. I liked the mean Stones songs: "Stupid Girl" and "Under My Thumb" and "Get Offa My Cloud."

I met Slime after I had started college and we immediately wanted to start a band. We needed a drummer and put a card up in the Laundromats around campus that said "drummer wanted for rock band" or some such and had my phone number on little pre-cut, pull-off pieces on the bottom. After about a week, Damon called. He was quiet, the odd man out, but he could play the drums like the devil himself: loud and fast and he never missed a beat.

I put my hand around the neck, lifted it out of the case and set it on my knee. The guitar felt natural in my hands. Before I knew it, I was finding the chords to "Sweet Little Sixteen." Without amplification, the metal strings sounded tinny and distant, but my fingering was surprisingly good.

Just then I happened to glance down in the case and noticed a something I hadn't before . It was a Sex Offenders sticker that I had completely forgotten about over the years. Damon, the artist in the group, had done a black and white drawing of a hunchbacked old coot in an overcoat leering over his shoulder. The text was done in lettering that seemed to be bleeding or melting. I reached down and picked up the sticker. We must have had thousands of these at one time. We gave them away to friends, people who came to the concerts, bartenders, whoever. They ended up all over town on lamp posts, car bumpers, backs of traffic signs. At the time, the sticker represented to us the reality of the group. To run across one by accident around town was a rush. It meant someone out there was paying attention. They were proof that we were having an effect. It occurred to me that I hadn't had that sort of proof in years.

I became aware of someone behind me and I turned to see Sandy leaning in the doorway, smiling at me in spite of herself.

"You with your guitar," she said. "I haven't seen that for awhile."

I blushed like I'd been caught with a love letter from an old flame in my hands. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what.

Sandy came and sat on the sofa next to me. She put an arm around my back and said, "I didn't think I'd have to worry about a mid-life crisis for a while."

"Is that what it seems like to you?"

"A little," she said.

"Well, I don't know," I said. "If that means I'm afraid of getting old, well, I've been afraid of that for years. I guess that's part of it, but it's more." Sandy furrowed her brow at me. I could tell she didn't understand or didn't believe me. "When we had the band, I felt like I was doing something that people appreciated in their own twisted, anti-appreciative way. People would actually pay us to play. Bartenders gave us free drinks. Girls thought we were cool. And when we played, that was something you can't understand if you haven't done it. It sounds weird to say it, but it was the closest I've ever come to real power. We could get people worked up. Make them dance. I lost something when I stopped being in the band and I've never gotten it back."

Sandy grinned a little and said, "Well, then, I guess you have to do it."

I grinned back. I thought, maybe this thing might go all right after all.

It didn't.

First off, neither Slime nor Damon were anywhere around when I arrived at the VFW hall. I found the place on the near east side of town just beyond the interstate in a warehouse district that had lately become gentrified. A greasy near-rain had been falling all day and the sparsely filled parking lot glistened menacingly in the failing light of dusk. Inside, the hall had been decorated with crepe paper and balloons and at one end there was a bandstand set up. I set my guitar on the stage and walked back toward the door where some caterers who looked Vietnamese or Korean dressed in white chefs' outfits complete with puffy hats were setting out trays of food on a long table covered with gleaming white linen. I asked one of the men if they had seen a guy with long hair and a leather jacket. He scowled at me like I had tasted the crab dip with my finger and shook his head. I wandered away.

Slime winced. "Ooh, no. I couldn't do it, man. No way. I don't do real well in the, like, office scene. I was doin' temp stuff for a while. I thought, whoa, get some, like, income, man. You know, cash flow. But it was not cool at all. The first thing they made me do was cut my hair and get some new clothes. You wouldn't have known me, Phil. Anyway, I couldn't hack it. I went back to driving a delivery truck. That's more my type of deal."

We sat on the leather sofa, sipped our beer and talked about the frat parties we'd played where the sons and daughters of Texas oil millionaires puked out their brains in the shrubbery while we ripped through our ten-thousandth cover of "Louie Louie." About our one abortive "tour" when we went on the road in Slime's old VW van playing bars in Dallas, Fort Worth, Tulsa and then back down to Houston. When it was all over, we had made about $50 each and felt lucky at that.

"So tell me about this gig," I said.

Slime's face lit up. "Aw, it's golden, man. Really golden. Rich guy's throwing a birthday bash for his son this coming Saturday. He's rented the friggin' VFW hall, man. Bandstand and everything. Found out about it from a friend of mine. I said, hey, great, I'm gonna get the old band back together. I been wantin' to see you guys anyway."

"What about Damon?" I asked. Damon had been our drummer, the third member of the group. I had completely lost track of Damon and didn't even know if he was in town anymore.

"He's in, man. Definitely. I talked to him today."

Well, that was something. I thought I'd like to see Damon again and I found the thought of the old band doing a gig together appealing. I missed the exhilaration I used to feel when I jumped onto even the meanest stage and started yelling the words to our favorite songs. I felt office work progressively weakening me, making me soft, sleepy. I looked at Slime, who hadn't changed a hair in ten years. I stared down at the shiny red, black and silver band stickers that covered the case of his instrument which lay like a hip coffin on the deep pile of my den.

"So we just run through the old lineup?" I said. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, the stuff the kids will like. Some Stones, Elvis. They'll even go for some New Wave tunes: Heads, B-52s. And some of the hot soul stuff."

"Right," I said, starting to remember our old repertoire: "Land of a 1,000 Dances," "Nobody," "96 Tears." We may have been pot-smoking meatheads, but we knew how to control a crowd. We could move them through escalating layers of excitement from Doors to Stones to hard-rocking classics like "Party Doll," "Devil with a Blue Dress On," and "C.C. Rider." We'd slow down for "Sweet Jane" to give the crowd time to catch their breath and then we'd power through a finale of "Paint it Black," "Gloria," and "Good Golly Miss Molly."

Now I wondered if I could even find the chords on the guitar anymore, much less manage to make my fingers do those old contortions.

"So, are we on?" said Slime with a kind of halfway smirk.

I hesitated. Sandy was right. I had no business doing the gig. I had a wife and kids who depended on me. I had a job and responsibilities. I didn't know if I could play the songs or if I still had my voice. Add to that my old certainty that any venture with Slime was doomed from the outset. I had every reason in the world to say no.

"We're on," I said.

When Slime had gone, my kids, who had been spying on us from a safe distance, came into the living room. Jenny, the oldest, who is seven, said, "Daddy, who was that man?"

"His name is Slime," I said blandly.

Jenny cocked her head to one side, letting her long hair fall to her left shoulder. She smiled a wide, toothless grin at me. "Slime?" she squeaked in a falsetto of disbelief. "That's really his name?"

"He's an old friend of mine."

Joshua, the two-year-old, decked out in Osh Kosh overalls and socks with gumball machines on them, mimicked his big sister: " 'lime?"

"How much did you give him?" said my wife, still standing by the front door.

"Nothing," I said, jamming my hands deep into my pockets and hunching my shoulders. "He wants to get the band together."

Sandy's fine blue eyes got wide, then narrowed. Jenny said, "What band, Daddy?"

"We used to be in a band together."

"I don't believe this," said Sandy, cocking a fist against her hip.

"Really? A real band?" chirped Jenny. "Like New Kids On The Block?"

"Well, not exactly," I said.

"Band, band, band," said Joshua, rolling over to grab my leg.

Instinctively, Sandy reached down and scooped him up in her arms.

"What was your band called, Daddy?"

"That's enough," interrupted Sandy. She set Joshua back down on the floor. "Take Joshua and go and wash your hands for dinner."

"O-o-kay," sighed Jenny as she led her brother out of the room.

When they had gone, I said, "What was that all about?"

"I can just see Jenny at school: 'My daddy was in a cool band called the Sex Offenders!'"

"I see your point," I said.

I promised Slime I would come to his place to practice during the week before our date, but things got crazy at work. One of the senior partners, a pompous asshole named Cramer who thinks he's important because he worked with Edward Bennett Williams in New York when he was in his twenties, dumped a load on me. Smack in the middle of a twelve-million dollar lawsuit that he had been preparing for

SLIME

BY MARK SMITH

SLIME'S GAINING ON ME. I know he'll catch up in a minute or two. I can hear his heels clicking on the sidewalk behind me. In a few seconds I'll hear his wheezing, labored breathing. Then he'll be here, begging me to go back and finish the set so he can get paid. Maybe then I can do what I should have done when he first proposed this fool's errand. Maybe for once I can tell Slime no.

I stop walking and turn around to watch him run toward me down the sidewalk beside the VFW hall. He's dressed the same as me: faded jeans frayed and torn at the knees, black boots, zippered leather motorcycle jacket, studded leather wristband, the whole punk rock wardrobe. The only difference between Slime's clothes and mine are that he's been wearing his ever since we had our last gig, at least ten years ago.

On his skinny, weathered face, he's grinning his usual winning, boyish grin. He flashed the very same smile when he showed up at my house last week, clutching the handle of his old bass guitar case, proposing that we revive the band.

When we had the band… bartenders gave us free drinks. Girls thought we were cool. And when we played… it was the closest I've ever come to real power.

I was glad to see Slime; it had been a while. I led him through my house out into the den, passing Sandy in the kitchen on our way. I could tell she wasn't pleased. She barely mustered a nod to answer Slime's "Hey, howsit goin'?" Slime, of course, didn't notice the dark, sideways glance she threw me.

She could've talked me out of agreeing to Slime's scheme. She's much more sensible than me. She remembered the last time Slime came around. It was around Christmas about two years back. I don't remember the hour, but it was well after the kids were in bed. Slime called from a truck stop phone booth.

He was on his way from Houston to L.A., where his folks live. I talked to him quietly, hoping Sandy wouldn't hear. But when I hung up, all she said was, "How much does he want?"

I told her and she frowned. It wasn't the sum. We could easily afford it. I knew that she was justifiably troubled at how easily I gave in to Slime.

I had no stomach to pretend we'd ever see the money again and Sandy didn't say another word. She understood that helping Slime was neither an act of generosity nor of compromise. It was friendship and mutual history pure and simple, a natural order of things no more subject to question than gravity.

Slime showed up, got the money and stayed long enough not to seem rude — which was too long for Sandy's taste — and split. He promised he'd stop by on his way back to Houston after the holidays and meet my kids. I said I'd like that. That was the last I had heard from him.

I could understand Sandy's reaction to seeing Slime stroll back into our lives, but I had spent a particularly gladiatorial day in the bowels of the legal profession. I needed the antidote of an old friend.

Slime was wearing his usual collection of leathers and zippers and his hair still arched over his head in a jet-black crest like the outlandish topknot of a bizarre tropical bird. As he sat tapping his knee and bouncing his heel on the carpet, I could see that he hadn't lost any of the excited nervous energy that oscillated between creativity and a bad hustle. Whatever the case, Slime's humming energy level attracted people and tended to make them do things that they didn't mean to.

"Hey, man," I said. "Here you are."

"Yeah," he said, grinning, bobbing his head. "Good to see you."

"You look good. You ever eat?"

"No," said Slime, "as a matter of fact, I get my calories in beer."

"I get the hint," I said, and went to get us two bottles of beer out of the mini-fridge we keep in the den for Super Bowl parties and the like.

"Stylin'," said Slime, looking around appreciatively at the room. The den is cedar-paneled and opens through French doors out to the hot tub bubbling on the deck. I could tell he thought it looked pretty good. Probably compared to his one-room efficiency digs, I live the high life. The way I figure it, I deserve it, the shit I have to put up with.

"I try," I said.

"I remember this house," he said. "Doin' all right. Big-time lawyer."

"Not so big, Slime. I just do my job well. Actually, I have to put up with a lot of crap."

FIRST TEXT

Jason Snell

1993 — FOR A LIMITED TIME ONLY

WELCOME TO 1993, and this year's first issue of *InterText*. The time between our last issue of 1992 and this one has been filled with lots of excitement for the people who bring you this magazine.

For my part, I've spent the obscene amount of vacation time given to students at UC Berkeley (six weeks) to meet up with old friends, spending a good deal of time in Southern California — lots of it in my old stomping grounds of San Diego. In fact, almost none of this issue was put together in Berkeley. The bulk of the work was done at my parents' house (and lots of that, including the redesign of the PostScript edition, on Christmas Eve) and in San Diego, where I've put together many an issue in the past.

Among the people I've seen in the past two months is Philip Michaels, author of *Your Guide to High School Hate*, the cover story of the May-June issue of *InterText*. I saw Philip twice, once in December (in his hometown of Danville) and once in January (in San Diego).

Danville, the northern California town from whence Philip came, is an interesting place. It's a somewhat insular city that values its near-rural identity even though more people probably live within its city limits than lived in the entire county I grew up in. When entering Danville, you're greeted with a sign announcing you've crossed the "town limit," not the city limits you see everywhere else.

I remembered an article about Danville that Philip had written about his home in an issue of the *UCSD Guardian* newspaper while I was still the paper's editor in chief. In it, he explained how the town elders had refused to allow a McDonald's to be built because it might bring "the wrong element" into the town.

As we drove through Danville and the surrounding (increasingly high-priced) countryside, Philip and I spotted something on the right side of the road. Could it be? Indeed, as Michaels let out a whoop, I saw the sign: *"Here We Grow Again!"* and a pair of familiar golden arches. McDonald's and its hideous double-whammy (the presence of both "the wrong element" and McRib for a limited time only) had come to Danville.

From there we took a tour through more of Philip's past — namely, his high school, the very high school which spawned Philip's hateful and appropriately-titled *High School Hate* piece. It was fascinating to actually see the edifice that had spawned such loathing, and an *InterText* story.

Anyway, it was a fun trip through a friend's life while at the same time being a trip through old issues of both the *Guardian* and *InterText.*

Also in the past couple of months, I was one of four students at UC Berkeley's School of Journalism to be awarded a *Reader's Digest* Excellence in Journalism award. For this, I got a nice chunk of free money and a trip in the spring to Pleasantville, New York, home of *Reader's Digest.* When I go, which will be in March or April, I'll be sure to give them your best.

This has also been a busy period for Geoff Duncan, *InterText*'s assistant editor. Geoff, now relocated to Seattle from his previous hang-out in Ohio, just got a job with Microsoft as a software tester. So now he delights me with stories of just how many bugs there actually are in all my favorite pieces of software. But I keep on using them…

Geoff and his fiancee also finally moved into a new apartment in Bellvue, Washington, a short walk (on Geoff's injured toe) from Microsoft itself. Because his fiancee was visiting family in Boston when the apartment opened, Geoff (and his toe) got to move all of their stuff into the new apartment by himself.

And yet, with all of this excitement, Geoff has continued to contribute greatly to the production of *InterText.* He took my Christmas Eve redesign of the PostScript edition and amplified it, and also worked with me on redesigning the look of the ASCII version of *InterText.*

All the while, Geoff is also working on creating a viable reader program that would make on-screen reading of *InterText* a lot easier for those with Apple Macintoshes (since Geoff and I use Macs, that seems a good place to start.) More word on all that in issues to come.

And, finally, in the shower at home in December, I had yet another idea for the special "theme issue" of *InterText* that I mentioned briefly a couple of issues ago. Though not off the drawing board yet, I have high hopes that we'll be able to bring you that issue by the end of the year. We shall see. It will depend on the cooperation of lots of *InterText* writers out there.

Well, enough from me. This issue rounds out our second year of publication, and I think it contains some fine material. We have two more stories from Mark Smith, a published writer from Texas who has appeared in the past two issues. This issue's lead story, *Slime,* really struck me as an amusing story about mid-life crises, the changing roles we play as we get older, and rock and roll.

We're also printing *Timespooks* by Stan Kulikowski II, a new writer. Stan's story came to me on Christmas Eve (right before my redesign frenzy), and I really enjoyed reading it. It's one of the oddest stories I've ever read, and Stan helped explain why when he wrote me that it was almost entirely based on a dream he had on the night of Oct. 27, 1992. Stan's been recording his dreams after waking up for some time, and it's a good thing too — without those records, we wouldn't have *Timespooks.*

Enjoy the stories. See you back here in 60 days.

InterText

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Our next issue is scheduled for March 15, 1993.

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