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CUCHIFRITO

by TOMMY SWERDLOW

on cuchifrito alvarado
vato circle wagon train
cry blue tequila screwloose
for their special meow meow meows
vehicle theatre
live at the night tribe
summoned thunder
of camshaft apache
trip the sonic rip cord
bada boom bada boom bada boom
& the man as lean as ever
undercover in a nova

wax poetic

bring a shotgun

do the crossword

have a ball

he gotta feel for the cadence avenida

he gotta search for the great bandana kingpin

he gotta listen for a morphine twisted birdcall

for the spit & polish death squeal

of the smith & wesson night

summer velvet hector

raises pidgeons dreams calypso

sings the aztec operetta

kicks his candy anna gomez

in the booty

dig the culture

dig the tattoo menthol g-men

dig the teflon chicken itza

of manangel j capone

head chef hero

el chemisto

of the 20 second rock

he no bang bang sunday school

he run kilo con

velvet hector

chivo hefe

vende bueno balloon negro

8 for 50

diabetes

it's a tender montezuma

& if you shop wholesale

we got weight

in the back

in the back

in the back of the artery bar

talk to carlo

talk to cielo

talk to 'salazar the vein'

dio sangre

architect of

the dominican love treaty

he play serious

he buy his white rice 110lbs
at a bloivian time
(it's the future
it's the furnace
it's the crossbone lost frontier)
 he used to work the corner
 read that righteous manifesto
but that che guvera bang bang
ain't worth bang bang
in the bang bang
 do the white thing
 do the sing sing
 tip the bang bang scales uptown
he don't want no trouble

that's the reason for the 12 gauge
that's the reason for the death list
drawn in red ink
on a black page
talk to darwin
it's a paycheck
it's a zoo life in the big cage
& he just want a
 wet vacation
& he just want a
 perfect listen
 tender shiba
 magic waistline
 hair below her pork rind cutoffs

candy anna gomez
perfect lean against the wall
he scream “candy anna
yo soy hector
hear my bang bang
i need wetness & forgiveness
& I have the cash for both”

But meow meow candy anna
has 12 hot brown eyes for carlo
& she wants to free the dragon from
his aztec bag of doom
& she wants to eat his caramel heart
in her junksick hot plate room
as the wagontrain grows restless

as the pirates start to cruise
as the consulate to methadrine
tries to tie his neon shoes
as ‘detective anabolic’
dusts the mayan night for clues
as the watermelon moonlight
blows its muted trumpet blues.

12/89

FUNERAL ON FAIRFAX

by TOMMY SWERDLOW

there's a funeral on fairfax
deposed countesses are spitting
chunks of seeded hebrew
dragging rheumatic husbands
to a suicide of stuffed cabbage and piano music
rummaging in piles of unwanted
cossack flatware
loaded in a holocaust garage.
better get there quick
before sharon yemenite she bitch
claims it all as a great day

for the albanian communist party.

there's a funeral on fairfax
the rabbis are looking to score
we've just returned from 4 days of china
the weather was incredible
it snowed huge flakes of geisha girl
but now we're back
& israeli wenches
with eyes dyed brown murder
want to fuck me dry & feed me pita
or blare falafel arias
on the hot rod stereo
of their jerusalem toyotas.

there's a funeral on fairfax
the downstairs garbage
is angry hypodermic
there's heroin in the rye bread
beware of bad boys from marseille

the insane girl next door
screams from the dungeon
of her halfway house day dream
"i need to wash my hair"
which sets off a shotgun
of hasidic ballet.

there's a funeral on fairfax

pontiacs grieve
in front of chabad house
an ancient tugboat
with iron forearms
sorts through her bag
of serious onions
she left her teeth to the austrian border
she left her soul to the pawnshop of dachau
she hands her heart to a korean cashier girl
& searches her purse for the pennies of warsaw

there's a funeral on fairfax
i have just crawled out from under
the rock of a 20 hour sleep

& am dragged telepathic
through the mondelbread street
to prayer ground holy land
sam & ruby kosher butcher
where i davin before
a sacred breast of veal
or have my chosen shoes fixed
by maury the maven
a million ghosts of ellis island
a billion years of jew
buying the same terrified flannel pajamas
watching their women
grow strong as they wither
soon i will check bruised cantaloupe

in bargain fair sandals
soon i will weep over checkers of gibberish
& when I'm gone just tuck me
in the womb of a poppyseed chala
ignite the mystic carraway
& lay me in state at famous bakery
next to the seven layer
of my childhood best behavior

there's a funeral on fairfax
it's mine.

DON'T FORGET TO REMEMBER

by GEORGE DJURIC

“Own only what you can carry with you; know language, know countries, know people. Let your memory be your travel bag.”

- Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Of all the people I've come across during my lifetime no one fits the above concept more accurately than Ranko Rubezic, nicknamed Dutch Schultz for a good reason: other than Ljuba Zemunac, he was the most famed Belgrade's gangster, and by far the most feared. Other than his

beloved hand grenade, a .41 Colt Magnum, and occasionally an Uzi, he had no attachments - not even a silencer. Boorish and unstable, he single-handedly terminated an era of Belgrade's criminals with style and impish flare. Semi-retired, Dutch gave a break to Austria, Belgium, and Holland, transferring his demons to homeland underground in 1981.

St. Augustine's confessions include references that describe his old pagan personality of which nothing seemed to remain in his waking state, still must exist since it was revived at night and in his dreams. He wrote, 'Am I not myself, Oh Lord, My God, and yet there is so much difference betwixt myself and myself

within the moment wherein I pass from waking to sleeping or return from sleeping to waking.'

Jean Genet was in prison and he arrived late in the exercise yard for the weekly book exchange; as a result he was forced to take the one book all the other prisoners had rejected. And yet once he'd read the opening pages of Proust he shut the book, wanting to savor every paragraph over as long a period as possible. He said to himself, 'Now, I'm tranquil, I know I'm going to go from marvel to marvel.' His reading inspired him to write; he hoped to become the Proust of the underclass.

Two guys I knew quite well throughout the years - first when preparing my rally car in their

neighborhood of Konjarnik, then as my fellow taxi drivers - Dragan Popovic Nanny and Milovan Vujisic Vuja happened to admire Dutch and enjoy his company; this delusion lasted for two-three years. Once the romance flamed out, leaving only wild memories for daily nutrition, they found the exit locked. Arguing incessantly with the boss and losing the track of time, they didn't realize that the word is not a representation but a living thing, and it is much less a mnemonic sign of the glorious past than a pictorial translation of their present despair.

Proust, 'In truth, the person within me who was at this moment enjoying this impression enjoyed in it the qualities which it possessed that were common to

both an earlier day and the present moment; and this person came into play only when, by this process of identifying past with present, he could find himself in the only environment in which he could live, that is to say, entirely outside of time.' Proust's eternal premise by eliminating time effaces metamorphosis, assuming petite madeleines never to taste differently: where is the nefarious joy of insinuating future, manic intensity of the langoliers behind horizon!? On the other hand, time did accelerate dramatically for the past decades, vortexing beyond recognition thus leaving our obsolete minds aghast.

Seeing my two buddies here and there while driving the cab around town, I couldn't help but notice their altered reality: Nanny acted like a cornered tiger, tended to lapse into his childhood stuttering, while Vuja was all fear under the face skin, tense to pain. You could tell the fuse was getting shorter by the minute. The present time eventually exploded into future bloodshed: on February 19, 1985, they gunned down Dutch in his car, with bullets galore. The deal was allegedly made with police, yet they both ended up with 15-year terms to serve: the bars stood where the detectives' firm words had been just days prior. When I think of them it becomes clear that the punishment preceded the crime, and the

public sentence was only a tragic extension of pagan memories they had prior to the murder.

I'm not sure if Nanny or Vuja ever quite grasped what happened that night: around us are pseudo-events to which we adjust with false consciousness so to see them as true and real, and even existing. In the society of men the truth resides now less in what things are than in what they are not. Our social realities are so ugly if seen in the light of exiled truth, and beauty is almost no longer possible if it is not a lie. Our rudimentary vision prevents us from taking any unequivocal view of the sanity of common sense, or of the madness of the so-called madman.

I am a specialist, God help me and St. Augustine, in events of inner space and time, in experiences called thoughts, images, reveries, dreams, visions, hallucinations, dreams of memories, memories of dreams, memories of visions, dreams of hallucinations - yet I've never executed a murder or lived with its consequences, so I'm missing the adrenalin juices that transpose water into wine. I miss Nanny's black Fiat 132 with beige cloth seats, as well as Vuja uncorking an unwarranted tidal wave of verbal sewage that would nearly drown his interlocutor, offering a useful blueprint for his future prison psychiatrist. I simply miss the guys.

Officially, Nanny was named Dutch's executioner. That is never a good companion in the city which just turned from fair and proud street fighters to cowards carrying guns and roses without smell. Recently, I surfed through the anthology of who was who in Belgrade's circles throughout the years, surprised to learn how many of them I either knew or met courtesy of our mutual friends. Voja Govedarica, nicknamed Cruiser Warship, made it all the way to Hollywood, became Stallone's bodyguard, even played in a few movies, like Rambo III and Lionheart. Now he walks his poodle up and down Santa Monica neighborhood. Buddy Stone (where

Stone is the moniker) threatened me with his gang, and once I verbally flipped him the middle digit of my fist, he backed away. Later, we both played drums at our high school's rock concert, exchanging the gear. Alex Alfa Romeo, a week after ending the seven-year-term came straight to my apartment to brag about driving a stolen Fiat (desperate, he couldn't wait for an Alfa) 70 mph down the crowded boulevard with crosswalks every few meters. Citakovic, Yugoslav heavyweight wrestling champ, tough guys' Gaius Maecenas, and I talked philosophy on occasion when I'd give him a lift to feed his cats. Still vivid in my memory lies the photograph where Cita stands like a pillar in the sand of the river Sava, Ljuba

Zemunac erected straight on his shoulders, and a guy I didn't know on Ljuba's - their arms crossed. 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,' my namesake Santayana used to say. I see my past as the present-in-progress, since it made the man I'm going to be: its lard-smear'd face is radiating rancid odor of the colors I'd never be able to visualize.*

*Vuja tried to escape from jail few years later, breaking his leg in the process. Nanny got out on parole, only to be shot by automatic weapon in July of 1995 while walking with his girlfriend in

the broad daylight. As for Ranko Rubezic, hopefully God will remember to bless his heathen soul.



WHAT DON DID BEFORE CLASS ON FRIDAY

by MAUI HOLCOMB

It was ten on Friday morning, the sun threw diverging stripes through the blinds onto a silent video dancing on the flat-screen, and Don Curtis had class in an hour. He slumped on the couch, tossing his phone between his hands, and watched Pete examine his reflection in the toaster. A big guy, Pete smoothed his orange goatee and tucked his ponytail through the back of his cap. Sucked in his gut, dropped it, and opened the fridge. Don

smirked, patting his own flat belly. His phone vibrated.

Incoming message from Sara Costello, the screen read. He opened it and was greeted with

FUCK U!!!

Still getting three exclamation points, he noted.

Pete emerged from behind the fridge door with a soda.

“Last night you said you’d do it.”

Don shrugged and turned to the TV. He’d have to get a move on soon, with two classes wrapped around lunch and his final ever bio lab after that.

As Pete shifted onto the living room shag, Don returned to his phone.

CAN'T WE TLK ABOUT THIS?, he typed.

Pete flapped his arms from side to side. "Come on, man, it's all set up. All we do is go from **HERE** over to **THERE**," he said. "You can wait in the car if you want, but we gotta be there in twenty."

Don exhaled and rubbed his eyes.

"I was angry last night. Which makes me nuts. Like you all the time."

They'd been shooting quarters at the kitchen counter as a party pulsed through their off-campus house when Chet showed up. He was Pete's friend from way back and his townie herb connection. Don had been to Chet's place and met

his kid, giggling at them from a baseball-themed bassinet as Chet cleaned his gun at the coffee table and Pete examined bags of weed. Anyway, Chet had hustled them to the back bedroom, without the baby but probably with the gun, and whipped out a joint. It was good stuff, he said, and there was plenty more. He brought up his plan as they passed it around and smacked their lips, the noise from down the hall throbbing the walls.

"It'll be easy," he concluded, sputtering while holding in his hit, smoke curling up from the blackened tip of the doobie. His pudgy face pinkened and his 'stache retracted as he sucked in some escaping tendrils and passed the weed to Don.

“How do you know he’ll have it?” Pete asked, leaning over the back of his chair, lower lip curled around a fat dip.

Chet blew the smoke out the side of his mouth and stretched his lips around like he was doing oral Kegels.

“Cuz he already called. Wants me to get the word out, and fast.”

“Why’s he in a hurry?” Pete asked, spitting juice into a cup.

Chet shrugged.

“Payment due on his Rolls or something? Who knows.”

He grinned. “The old guy trusts me. Through thick and thin, you know.”

A drunken first-year chick bumbled into the room, peeped a scandalized “Ohhh!” and backed out.

Don’s head was swimming, still stunned that Sara had dumped him earlier in the evening. She had found out about the time weeks ago when he’d hooked up with one of her friends. Okay, that hadn’t been cool, but it was just a drunken mistake. He was too ashamed to look at the friend now, and now the idiot had let it slip to Sara in some passive-aggressive oops-moment. Sara had sent an angry text as they were tapping the keg, and he had hurried over to her dorm. He was on his knees when she told him to

“GET THE FUCK OUT!” through clenched teeth, smacking him in the face with the sole of her shoe. “Just beat it!”

He fell back as her voice reverberated around the walls of her room. She wasn't much for wall hangings. A bulletin board with a few family photos, practice schedules, a poster of Einstein sticking out his tongue. He'd felt all year that it was too damn bright with those white walls and her laptop always shimmering with a half-finished essay. Brushing off his ass now, Sara looking at him with a quivering jaw, he felt a rush of compassion for her and this room. Then Abnormal Psychology collided with his head.

He had gone back to the party; his loyal friends handed him a full cup of brew, and he nursed his wounds over the quarters match, the house filling up, till Chet burst through the door in a cloud of dope smoke.

As he and Pete formulated the plans for ripping off Chet's family physician, Dr. Hanford Stern, Don shrugged and nodded assent, busy dwelling on his fuck-ups.

“He usually picks up 3 pounds. Even if we each skim an ounce that's, like, seven grand each,” Chet had whispered, eyebrows bouncing rhythmically with each syllable.

“You’ll be able to stop driving me around everywhere, Donny,” Pete said, his eyes lost in the middle distance.

Pete and Chet had heisted small things here and there, junk food, CDs and whatnot, and talked about bigger things, but they’d never actually set out for anything like this. Seven thousand sounded nice. Most of his friends at Vesta College, a small liberal arts school sprouting from an affluent corner of inland Southern California, had an inexhaustible supply of cash. Scrounging pennies and borrowing from his grandmother for the car had helped—at least now he could drive if they bought—but he was still begging bong hits and

beers off his buddies by the time his work-study check appeared every second Friday.

Now, surveying the remainder of the party mess in the morning light, he wasn’t so sure. This old guy could apparently spare the dough like Chet said, but Don found himself leaning on Sara’s words, Sara who had never trusted Chet. He rolled the phone in his hands, waiting to hear from her.

“You want to graduate and go to Hollywood, stay away from that moron,” she’d yelled over the band a few weeks ago. “Five years from now he’ll still be here or in jail.”

His phone vibrated in his palm.

UP YOURS DICKHEAD!!!!

He rolled off the couch.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

They headed out the door, serenaded by a silent Jay-Z.

A broken strip of concrete split dead crab grass to Don’s Datsun wagon at the curb. Lush lawns and bushes sprouted in all the surrounding yards, and a sprinkler swished across the street. A car pulled away from next door as they sauntered around the Datsun, the driver not waving. Pete flicked his cigarette butt into the street in its wake, and they settled into the sagging threadbare

embrace of sheepskin-covered seats. Pete wrinkled his nose.

“Ewww. What IS that?”

Don hooked his thumb towards the back. The rear seats were collapsed and the space taken up by three large aquarium tanks, three-foot sides grimy and two-thirds filled with murky greenish water. The air above seemed to shimmer, and a slimy, rotting odor filled the car.

“My biology experiment. Fermenting algae. Couldn’t leave it in the lab anymore.”

Pete rolled his window down in alarm and leaned into the wind. “You sure that stuff is healthy?”

They drove up a wide avenue toward the hills. Older houses gave way to open space and subdivisions. The sun spread orange light upon the approaching mountains, the highest topped by a dusting of white. Pete lit another smoke.

The road met another hugging the base of the hills. A nursery sat on one corner, with rows of identical potted plants. Vacant lots occupied the other three corners, but a glossy sign advertised a planned development in bold lettering – *Majestic Estates: coming Spring 2009*. Don turned past the sign along the baseline road. Large new homes surveyed the valley one after another as they drove.

After a minute or so he pulled the car up to a low stucco wall. Beyond stood a two-story house painted peach, with a red tile roof and large triangular windows. They got out and looked around. The street was quiet, not a sign of a doctor or a lawyer or an entrepreneur, not a mom or a nanny or a retiree. Several young palms shot skyward from amidst the deep green patchwork of recently laid sod. Flagstones of irregular shape cut a path to the front door. As they followed them an old truck loaded with mowers and leaf blowers clanked past behind them, crooning tinny Spanish.

Pete peered through the frosted glass window and pushed the bell. The muffled chime echoed through

the house, and they waited. Glanced back at the street. Pete tried the door, and it opened with barely a sound.

Don stepped onto the white marble floor in Pete's wake and glanced at a massive grandfather clock. Twenty after ten. Right on schedule. Wide carpeted stairs and a mahogany banister curved past a crystal chandelier, skylights bathing the space in a pleasant glow.

The only other time he'd been here had been at night. Chet had stood in front of the clock that night three months earlier in his baggy shorts and untied high-tops and introduced them to Hanford Stern, AKA Dr. Happy. His eyes wide and

crosshatched behind bifocals, lips smacking, he grasped Don's hand firmly. He wore a maroon velour tracksuit zipped to the neck.

"Good to meet you, boys." He ushered them into his sunken living room. "Come see the goods."

A hop in his step, Dr. Stern walked like a man thirty years younger. Don tore his eyes away from the swirling grey comb-over on his head to look at the long marble coffee table. Several rows of rolled-up plastic bags were spread across the top.

"There it is," Stern said. "Top notch, primo stuff. The best."

He paced the room, rubbing his hands together and smacking his lips. Sweat beaded on his forehead

as the ceiling fan blew the ends of his hair up and down. He seemed a nervous man, Don thought, despite the house and the Rolls parked out front. He had been happy to make a sale and told the guys to come to his office and he'd write a prescription. Make it all legit, eh compadres?

Dr. Stern had once run a thriving Family Medicine practice. He'd cared for grandparents and singles and the kids of people he'd seen as toddlers. Then, impressed by the help it had given a patient, he'd developed a side practice prescribing marijuana for a wide range of ailments. Word got out during the early days of decriminalization that he was the man to see for legal dope; he was

happy to dispense it for anxiety, depression, and all kinds of chronic pain conditions, and swore by its ability to get his most nauseous and emaciated patients to hold down a meal.

Things had gone downhill, though, after he wrote a prescription for an ounce of the kindest chronic per month to a svelte and honey-lipped 20/20 producer with a bum elbow. They got the whole thing on tape, from first flirtation to final reveal, at which point Dr. Happy's jaw dropped and he spluttered about the law in the fish-eye lens of the camera pinned to her breast. This may be Cali, but many of Dr. Stern's patients were older and conservative and jealous. They fled in droves.

At first he embraced his new out-of-the-closet persona of The Pot Doc. He added a pot leaf to his snake and rod and did interviews for High Times and the LA Weekly. But when the Feds began to harass the shops that filled his prescriptions, many patients returned to the streets. Dr. Stern decided to cut out his middleman, driving his Rolls down from Santa Cruz once or twice a month with a big supply for both his loyal legitimate clients and the self-medicating college crowd. Chet, a patient since diapers, became a conduit to campus. Dr. Happy had a soft spot for him because Chet's recently deceased grandmother had stayed loyal through it

all, only pursing her lips at his pot leaf refrigerator magnets.

At the house party, Chet said he'd be able to get the doctor out of the house in the morning after checking out the supply. Dr. Happy liked to take him to a favorite burger joint, do a little mentoring. Chet would make sure he left the dope out. All Pete and Don had to do was show up at the right time and walk off with it.

"What do you plan to say when he finds it gone," Pete asked.

"Just play dumb, blame the gardener," Chet shrugged. "If I have to, I'll rough him up a bit. What's he going to do, man? He's four feet tall."

“Anybody here?” Pete called. His voice echoed back down the stairs. After a moment an erratic thump-thump . . . thump-thump came from the living room, and they stepped down onto the thick white carpet. A shaggy mutt with opalescent eyes lifted its nose from a pillow and woofed feebly at a spot just to the left of where they stood.

“Hello there, you tough old pooch,” said Don, leaning down to scratch its ear. The dog scraped him with a gravelly tongue, managed another cough-like bark, and laid its snout back down.

“Well, there it is,” came Pete’s voice. Don followed his gaze to Dr. Stern’s coffee table. Next to a framed photo of the smiling doctor

surrounded by younger versions of himself rested a stuffed blue and white duffel bag. Pete unzipped it. Half contained dozens of smooth plastic baggies filled with bright green and orange weed. The other half, separated by a vinyl divider, held translucent orange prescription bottles, small, large and larger, all packed to the rim with bushy buds and emblazoned with brightly colored labels: Bubblegum, Lemondrop, OG Kush, The Chronic, Granddaddy, God’s Gift. For a moment they stood transfixed, eyes wide, pulling deep, slow breaths. Then they grinned at each other, and Pete zipped the bag closed.

“We should have plenty of time, but let’s move anyway.”

The dog lifted its head. Don paused, looking at the photo of the doctor and his happy family.

“You sure about this?” he said.

Pete turned, his hand on the doorknob.

“Dude, look at this place,” he said, gesturing at the stairs, the clock, the chandelier. “He’s rich, he can handle it. And,” he pointed at Don, raising his eyebrows. “He’s selling drugs to kids, man. That is so not cool.”

The dog woofed at the air as they walked out the door.

Pete heaved the bag behind the aquariums, shut the liftgate, and settled into the passenger seat.

“What’re you waiting for?”

Don hit the gas, and the car fishtailed through the gravel onto the road.

The neighborhood still appeared deserted. A quarter mile along they came to a red light, and Pete ducked down.

“Shit!” he croaked. “It’s them.”

A two-tone brown Rolls Royce turned through the intersection in front of them.

The gnome-like figure of Dr. Happy, with his gray helmet of hair, peeked over the wheel, grinning as his passenger gesticulated. He wore the same maroon tracksuit, this time open and flapping in the breeze to reveal a sleeveless white undershirt. As they passed he bit into a burger, and Don’s stomach growled.

“Idiot, don’t let him see you,” said Pete, and Don flinched away, but not before the doctor’s eyes brushed across him.

“Oh,” said Don, looking in his rearview mirror. “He may have. Probably didn’t recognize me. We only met the once.”

“Smooth, dumbass,” said Pete, whacking his shoulder. “Well, was Chet there, or what?”

“Yeah.” The light changed, but the car died before he got into gear; he turned the key again, the engine caught, and they jerked across.

“Well, shit, let’s go the long way then, in case he tries to follow.”

“I thought Chet could handle him.”

Pete shrugged.

“He’s like, 80 years old. It shouldn’t be a problem. But, you know . . . he is a jumpy little guy.”

Don turned sharply onto a side-street, and before long they came back into the main part of town. Cars zipped across a freeway overpass up ahead. Pete kept glancing back behind them. A school bus pulled in front. Don switched lanes but couldn’t get up to the intersection before the light changed. They stopped with a squeak; the water in the tanks sloshed behind them, drops sprinkling the back of Don’s neck. A mother herded two children and a stroller through the crosswalk towards Taco Bell. The light dragged

on, and Don drummed his fingers on the windowsill and checked his phone for texts.

A beep jerked his head up, he saw the green, and he started across the intersection. Two more honks drew his eye to the mirror, and Pete turned around again. Their jaws dropped at the fast-approaching Rolls, headlights blinking, Happy Stern behind the wheel.

“Motherfu-,” Pete began, but at that moment a Sheriff’s vehicle pulled in immediately behind them from Taco Bell. The driver’s head tilted to the side to crunch a taco. The Rolls swerved side to side behind the cop, an arm reaching to the sky.

A nervous flush spread across Don’s brow. He rolled down his window.

“Dude, does this car smell more like festering biomass or several pounds of weed?”

Pete, his face pale, sniffed the air and managed a nervous chuckle. “Hard to say, though you could maybe market this as Stony Slop say, or Kinda Gross...”

Don clenched his teeth and watched the road, keeping just under the speed limit. The Rolls continued to trail the Sheriff’s vehicle as the cop followed the Datsun.

“I’d stick with the cop as long as Happy is back there,” said Pete. “Provided you don’t have any unpaid tickets.”

As he spoke, the police car suddenly changed to the right lane and angled towards the I-10 entrance ramp, giving the Rolls an opening to catch up to them.

“Shit, he’s getting on the freeway!” shouted Don.

“You, too! Go, go!” responded Pete, sticking out his arm and pointing. The policeman waved them in just as the ramp left the road.

The back end of the car bounced as they accelerated and entered the fast moving mid-

morning traffic. The deputy swung in right behind them.

“Did Happy get on, too?” Don asked, watching the mirror. He glimpsed several cars back there, but they didn’t look right.

Pete craned his neck.

“I don’t see him,” he said.

“What do you think he did to Chet?”

“Who knows? Maybe that dog responds to a kill command.”

The cop’s lights started flashing and the siren whooped. Don’s throat fell into his stomach.

“Oh shit,” he said.

He slowed, and the truck to his left moved ahead. As soon as the lane cleared the cop changed lanes and rocketed ahead.

Pete let out a whoop.

“Whoo-hoo! Free and clear,” he yelled. “Phew! That was close.”

He dragged on his smoke and flipped it out the window towards a minivan, two wide-eyed gawky kids staring at them.

“Dude, drop me off at home before your class,” Pete continued, wiping his hands together. “I gotta divide this stuff up.” He started counting on his fingers, glancing past Don.

Don sighed. He doubted the doctor would leave it at that. Happy knew who’d stolen from him, and being on some crazy dude’s hit list made Don queasy. In one more year he’d graduate, and he didn’t want anything to delay that. He opened his mouth to answer, but caught Pete’s face looking past him, frozen mid-syllable. He turned to the left, and there sped the Rolls Royce. Stern had neglected his hair altogether, and it was whipping in the breeze as he swung his fist. Chet slumped across the back seat, his face a purplish mass of bruises against the window, holding tissues to his nose.

“What the . . .” Don began.

Stern swerved his car and pointed at the shoulder. The Datsun lurched as Don struggled to avoid a collision, wheels scrabbling at the road. The water sloshed in the tanks, splashing more gunk on his neck, and the duffel bag rolled back against the liftgate.

“Whoa,” said Pete, holding on to the doorframe as the thirty-year-old car rocked and creaked. “You okay there?” But he’d seen Chet, too, and his face was pale and splotchy.

Don pushed the accelerator towards a group of bunched-up semis. Squeezing into the only free lane, they shot forward beyond the trucks. The car bounced and vibrated, and for a moment they

pulled away, closing the gap between them and the cover of more traffic ahead.

Slowing to swerve around an overloaded pickup, he found himself face-to-face with Stern again, honking and screaming at them. Don lifted his phone, flipping it to video mode with a BEEP.

“I’m going to get evidence of this,” he said “He can’t harass us in traffic like this. It’s dangerous.”

“You CRAZY?! He can DO whatever the hell he wants to do,” screamed Pete, holding out his hands for balance. “We just robbed him. Put that down!”

Don squared the phone to the window and pressed the record button. But the angle on the

screen wasn't right—he couldn't see the image. He turned himself a bit more towards the window.

The car hit a dip and bounced, Don felt a flutter in his stomach, and the world turned slightly off axis. His hand on the wheel dropped.

The Rolls suddenly veered towards them. He dropped the phone as the chrome plated door handle loomed, and . . . BANG!

They bounced away, and Don struggled with the wheel, which felt like it was going to spin right off. Pete was hyperventilating.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING,” he screamed. “YOU’VE GOT TO STOP THIS FUCKING THING!”

They floated a bit to the right, and Don steered with it, trying to catch the road again. But they kept gliding; the back end of the car swung out to the side. They continued forward with the traffic around them, and Don could see the whole thing happening slowly in front of him like on a movie screen. The left side of the vehicle thrust forward, leaning towards the ground. The right hand wheels slid along the road for a moment, then let go, and as the road rose to meet his window Don waited, hands clenched, for the inevitable crash of a vehicle from behind. Sooner or later someone would ram into them. Some mother or father, maybe with a pre-schooler in the back, just in the wrong place at the wrong time, sharing the road

with these idiots. Don gritted his teeth. His mother would flip out.

The left side finally scraped against the ground, metal shrieking along the blacktop. Gallons of slimy water splashed and crashed into the front, soaking his head and charging down his neck. The car didn't roll, but slid along at 70, 65, 60 miles per hour. Don watched the speedometer fall and the asphalt streak by, inches from his face, white dashes rushing past as they changed lanes without signaling, steamy globs of greenish muck sliding around on the inside of the door and window, dripping from his hair. Pete's massive, howling bulk hovered above him, stretching the seatbelt.

The roof of the car led the way towards L.A., but the expected impact to the undercarriage never came.

Don could see out the front windshield that they were approaching the right-hand shoulder, somehow crossing three lanes without hitting anybody, slowing, slowing. Then they hit the curb of an island next to an entrance ramp. The Datsun rocked to a gentle stop, and rolled over onto its roof with a crunch. The aquarium tanks clanked against one another once more, their plexiglass sides intact. The guys hung from their seat belts, an entire semester's plant physiology experiment clinging to them, and Pete's wail finally petered out into amazed silence.

All sound ceased, drowned beneath a hollow wind rushing through Don's head. He released his belt and climbed out. Pete scrambled after him and collapsed in the median. Drivers crept past, gaping at the crumpled car and the ever-expanding puddle of dank sludge.

Don stood, dazed, on trembling legs, aware of cars inching by, faces turned toward him. He was bombarded by the colors and scents and sounds of the Southern California roadway all at once, washed out, bleeding into one another. He stared vaguely at a small cut on his wrist, but nothing else seemed to hurt. He couldn't believe they hadn't

caused some huge chain-reaction multiple-injury accident.

A voice asked if anyone was still inside. Don glanced at Pete, sitting on the ground, and shook his head. Footsteps ran up to him, asked, "Are you okay?"

"No matter what, say someone cut you off," a man said, his hand on Don's shoulder. "Or the cops'll hassle you."

Don nodded, trying to swallow, trying not to shake. His mouth tasted like sandpaper.

And then Dr. Happy was at his side. Don flinched and looked around at the small group of people who'd stopped to check on them, seeing faces for the first time, but the doctor's eyes were wide and concerned

behind his cumbersome glasses. His frazzled hair hung all over. He handed over two water bottles.

“Drink these,” he said.

Don twisted off a top and guzzled the contents. It slid down his throat leaving his mouth as dry as before, and he followed quickly with the second.

“Here’s another,” said Dr. Stern, who held Don’s wrist and watched the hands of his wristwatch. Don finished off the rest of the water, empty bottles bouncing at his feet. After a moment the doctor seemed satisfied, nodded.

“Now, son,” he said, looking over his glasses. His grip tightened on Don’s wrist, but his voice remained kind and calm. Don stared at the faded Marine

Corps tattoo on the doctor’s forearm. “The police will be here soon. Don’t you think you’d better give me what’s mine before then?”

Don looked at Pete, who was staring wide-eyed at the doctor. A siren arose in the distance, punctuated by big fire engine honks. Pete lurched up and reached through the broken rear window. He yanked out the dripping duffel bag and held it out at arm’s length. The doctor took it and disappeared into the crowd.

By the time they’d wiped themselves off with someone’s towel and given their story to a bored motorcycle cop, and the tow-truck driver was

loading the car onto his flatbed, Chet had pushed through the crowd, the arms of Dr. Happy's tracksuit wrapped around his bloody head. He didn't want to talk about it, pitching his head from side to side. The cop eyed him; the paramedics stretched him out on a gurney.

On the way to the tow-yard, Don sat open-mouthed between the truck driver's greasy overalls and Pete's flabby thighs.

He should be dead. Pete, fingers trembling on his smoke, should be dead. For what? Why the fuck were they doing this crazy shit?

And did he have time to bum a binger before class?



GREAT LOVES OF THE 21st CENTURY

by KELLY OZIEMBLO

my aged yellow cuckold—
chokeholded by thankfulness
puddle with smoked infection—
diseased and fuzzy fungus
melting the shelter of the American
dream—

placating
and bingeing
on the sex of another.

LOVE THE PRICE OF A HOTEL ROOM

by KELLY OZIEMBLO

her sonorous pink lips
lingeringly kissed
the curvy black cigarette
tasting tangy with her sweat—
as my horny black pen
sweeps salty words
across the
page like ambiguous
blue blood

i notice her jarring yellow
breasts dancing willingly
sporadically
under her shirt
and i force my spiky
blue eyes
to reluctantly drag
themselves away

THE BLACK SPOT

by MATHEW A. GARCIA

They calmed the blaze that had consumed four lives at 4:03 a.m on December 22nd, 2005. When they found him he was hanging from a beam in his study, an extension cord tied around his neck. His neck was swollen around the cord itself, so it could not be seen beneath the folds of skin and flesh that had been pumped with blood left with no where to flow. In the autopsy report the coroner found horizontal markings on his wrists indicating that Mr. Hobbs not only hung himself on the third floor of his apartment complex, but also slit his wrists beforehand. The coffee kettle was left burning on his

stovetop, which firefighters found to be the source of the blaze. Neighbors stated they heard the whistling at around 10:30 p.m., but thought nothing of it. Mr. Hobbs said he was working on a manuscript for a novel regarding the prostitution business in Los Angeles. They thought he was working late, and went to bed without the slightest thought. When they awoke around midnight, the third floor of the complex was engulfed in flames. By the time firefighters put out the fire, the death toll had risen to thirteen.

A preliminary investigation of his apartment found nothing indicating motive. Family members, who admitted that they did not stay in touch as

often as they should, claimed that Mr. Hobbs had a history of depression. Medical records confirmed this, although not to the extent that the family claimed. Most cases stemmed from life events; his divorce in '87, his mother's death in '95, etc.

The only thing of note in the investigation report regarding the state of his apartment was the fact that every single window in the apartment, and mirrors, were broken. It was later discovered that a shard of glass from the windows was used to cut the crude slits in his wrists, as traces of his blood were on the edges.

The manuscript was found two months later, when family went through Mr. Hobbs's things. It was

found under a loose floorboard in a metal box under his bed. The heat of the metal singed many pages so that a few sections could hardly be made out, though many manuscript pages (all largely unedited), handwritten notes, newspaper clippings, and a small leather bound journal survived. Some pages were completely illegible.

When asked who would take the box, only his nephew, Michael¹, volunteered. His research into his uncle's death, the notes, journal entries, as well as sections of the unfinished manuscript would later be published in a collection known as *The Black Spot*.

¹ Michael R. Burnes; son of Martin Hobb's sister, Jayden Burnes. At the time of Martin's death, Michael was only nineteen years old. *The Black Spot* was published in 2013.

The Black Spot

By Martin Hobbs

Edited by Michael R. Burnes

Wilshire Boulevard was cleared back in the mid 90's of prostitutes. Government officials thought the eyesore of women walking the streets in five inch heels, skirts that barely covered their asses, and offering hand jobs in restaurant doorways and alleyways had to be stopped. Most LAPD efforts were minor, mainly

involving asking these women to cover it up and sending them home. Most returned the following night.

Acting on his election promise, Mayor Guillermo Ortega began a campaign in what became the biggest wave of prostitution crack downs in Los Angeles's history.

The prostitutes disappeared, and the years following Ortega's tenure as Mayor were met with clean streets. Hollywood's prostitution history even became a sort of draw, like Al Capone and

Chicago's alcohol Prohibition back in the late 20's. There were museums about it. Movies were made.

But the street walkers themselves didn't disappear. They didn't find God, get married, or buy homes. They didn't reform and get degrees, or become third grade teachers. They walked other streets, bought computers, and posted ads on Craigslist or in local papers. They waited in the safety of their apartments for clients to come.

Some were scooped up by gangs or pimps, others were imported as "exotic limited time only" whores who stayed three months and then rotated with another poor chick from Russia, India, or Japan. Prostitution never left.

And with the surge in business, the 5600 block of Wilshire Boulevard became a hot spot for the string of suicides that plagued the Wilshire Center apartment complex. A location I

quickly began referring to as *The Black Spot*.

(Cashmere/Interview # 3)

Cashmere is a tall Latina. Out of her cheap heels, pungent fruit aroma'd perfume, layers of smokey mascara, and barely-anything-there hooker ensemble, she can be a young mother, or an English Lit major at UCLA. It's our third meeting and she's more relaxed.

She lives in the 17th floor of Wilshire Center. Rent in this high rise starts in the low two thousand for a one bedroom apartment. There's an amazing view overlooking Downtown Los Angeles. From here the cars on the 101 freeway look like rows of fireflies.

-I didn't know you wore glasses, I say.

-My clients don't like them, she tells me. Make me look like a chica in the real world.

She smiles a little.

-So tell me about your friend, I say, sitting down on one of the mahogany chairs at her kitchen table. She's got the window open even though it's sixty degrees outside.

She shifts in her chair, rubs her left shoulder and sighs. She looks cold.

-Diamond was my partner, Cashmere tells me. Sometimes we'd do doubles with guys we both comfortable with.

-What happened to her?

-She ditched me, Cashmere says. Started offering 24/7s. Didn't have time to shoot the shit with me no more.

-Why? I ask.

-How the fuck I'm supposed to know? She says. She gets up and pulls a smoke from a drawer in the kitchen, then puts it back, maybe remembering the apartment doesn't allow smoking.

-We had it pretty good, Diamond and me. She had the tits and I had the ass.

Cashmere shrugs and pulls the cigarette pack back out. Decides to light up anyway.

-She wasn't too crazy 'bout doin' doubles at first, but she learned to like it. I kinda did too. We did it in her room, mostly. She had this big ass mirror on the sliding doors of her closet. Clients went ape shit for it. Loved watching Diamond's tits

swing as they gave it to her. Sometimes they asked me to lay underneath and touch her, but it got to the point when I'd do it on my own. Sometimes they'd just watch. I liked watching her too, I guess. She had something. Some draw.

Cashmere looks at me, as if she's forgotten I was there. She keeps her eyes on mine, and I get the sense she's searching for something. Reading me to see if

I'd think she was crazy for what she was about to tell me.

-What happened between you two?

-I loved her, Cashmere says and her voice softens. Loses its edge. We'd get together sometimes on our days off, you know?

-I know, I say. Go on.

-We were foolin' around in bed, and shit. Always under the pretext that we was practicing for the clients, you know. Diamond never'd admit she was a rug muncher. Anyway, she was going nuts,

enjoying it, and I get to looking in the mirror at her. Loving how her body moves. But I see something in her reflection.

-What? I ask.

-Shit...

-What did you see?

Cashmere sighs.

-I see her in the mirror. Not *her*, though. Fuck. I don't know. I see Diamond with me, but she ain't enjoying it like I think. She's upset, crying in the mirror. When I look at her in bed she looks

different, with an expression like it's the best thing she's ever had. She bites her lips like it's the only thing she can do to stop from screaming, but in the mirror she looks like she's dying. Her lips twisted, her eyes swollen, her face all dead lookin' and pale.

Cashmere sighs, and runs her hand through her hair.

-When she notices me lookin' at her, she gets all uptight. I

should go, she says. She doesn't talk to me after that.

I can see Cashmere's forearms break out in goosebumps. I ask her if she wants me to close the window.

-It's fucking cold, I say.

-Leave it like that, Cashmere says. I like it.

I notice her hands are shaking, and she hasn't taken a drag of her cigarette. The ashes collect in a pile under her hand, burning a black mark on the kitchen table.

-Let's me know I'm alive I
guess, she says.

*Dated Excerpts are taken from salvaged entries from
Martin Hobb's journal:*

Friday November 21st, 2005

I've been back to see Diamond too many
times to count. Does it have anything to do with the
others who've lost it? I don't know.

I dream with her.

She's thinner each time I see her. So am I.

I forget to eat.

(Diamond/Interview # 1)

I tell her about my project. I
tell her I don't plan on using her
real name.

-Something doesn't sit well,
does it? I ask.

Diamond walks with a strut
that's common in escorts who'd
been around long enough to
remember what walking the streets
felt like. The attitude was
palpable in her two bedroom
apartment located on the top floor

of Wilshire Center. She's five-foot-nine, short hair, and one hundred and thirty pounds of "Belizean Exquisiteness". Her words, not mine.

-Well, I been workin' the streets for about ten years now baby, she says.

We're on the balcony, sitting on two white plastic lawn chairs. She opens up a bottle of wine like we're celebrating something.

-Been around, Diamond says. It's a tough gig; most girls can't deal.

-They go back to being waitresses? I ask.

-Sure, baby. She winks and sets her hand over mine. Gives it a tap. Looks me directly in my eyes and smiles, then takes a drink of her wine. It makes her lips look red and juicy. Makes me almost want to get up close and bite them.

In ten minutes she's made me feel comfortable, even wanted. She toys, touches my arm, sets her hand on my thigh just a second too long. Like we'd known each other for years.

-What do you think about all the suicides? Know any of them? I ask.

She pulls her hand away, and stares out into the night.

-Maybe. I ain't good with names. When I stop seeing them around I assume they got tired of the life. Moved on.

-So you don't think it's weird? I ask. I mean, so many happening right here, in this building?

-Course it's weird, Diamond says.

-Cashmere says there's something wrong here, I say.

Diamond tilts her head back and cackles.

-Cashmere can't hang in a place like this, Diamond says. She's one of the ones who disappears. You'll see. Gone in another month.

-She says this place is wrong, I say.

-This *world* is wrong, Diamond says. You dig enough, everything's wrong, honey. You just gotta dig deep enough.

-Wilshire Center?

-Sure, baby. Smart girls, they ride this wave. This place make you rich. Make you popular. Some of the richest workin' girls live here. Cashmere, she'll catch on like the rest of us.

Diamond tosses back the rest of her wine.

-They all do, she says.

Tuesday June 15th, 2003

For each occurrence of an escort suicide I placed a dot on the map. While there were quite a few located in the various neighborhoods of South Central and Boyle Heights, notorious gang hot spots, a high majority of suicides centered around the Downtown Los Angeles area.

Two hundred and thirty nine cases in the last five years. Not too crazy, right? It's a big place. When I

narrowed it down further, I almost fucking died.

Two-hundred and thirty-nine cases in the last five years, over two hundred of which happened at Wilshire Center.

Eighty-five percent. Eighty-Five fucking percent. Jesus...

From my living room, the giant map of LA in my kitchen looks almost normal. A few areas are peppered with a string of suicides. Wilshire Center, by comparison, looks like a massive black spot.

(Cashmere/Interview # 5)

The following was not included in first edition due to fire damage. Provided below is a salvaged excerpt of the full interview.

Cashmere looks tired. She's lost a bit of weight since last time. Got a cold, she says.

-Did you know her? I ask.

-Sorta, Cashmere says. She lived down the hall. We bumped into each other once in awhile. A few clients talked 'bout her. Said they couldn't get enough. I guess neither could she. Started bookin' 24/7s like Diamond. I could hear her door open and close all night. Couldn't sleep. A few even booked me thinking they might get lucky and catch her between clients. Fuckin' *desgraciados*.

-She broke through her living room window and fell to the street, I say.

-I heard, Cashmere says, a little defensively as if I had assumed she was stupid, or didn't care.

-What did the other girls say about her?

Cashmere shrugs, turns to look out the window.

-Police reports said that she made several 911 calls within the last month. She claimed she-

-I know, Cashmere says. She came over a couple times. Said she heard voices in her walls. Thought it was Magda, the escort who lived next door.

-But Magda moved away, didn't she? I ask.

Cashmere nods.

-It continued?

She nods again.

-Doesn't that worry you? I ask.

-Maybe, she says. Maybe not. Got nothing to do with *me*. I ain't letting it in.

-Letting what in?

-Don't you feel it? She asks, her eyebrows raise up. You been hookin' up with Diamond long enough to feel it.

-What the fuck are you talking about? I ask.

She shakes her head.

-*Olvidalo*, she says. Forget it.

She looks at the skyline outside her living room window. I almost forget it's Fourth of July and Dodger stadium's doing their fireworks show.

-Anyway, I'm leaving soon, she says. Got some money saved up.

While the grand firework finale plays out in the distance I realize it's her reflection in the window she's looking at.

As if she's expecting it to change.

-Cashmere?

-Huh? Cashmere turns, slowly, as if she noticed something interesting in her reflection.

-Did she tell you what the voices sounded like?

She stares at me, her jaw muscles tense and rigid.

-Her clients, she says.

She turns back to look at the window.

-She said it was all her clients.

Friday December 15th, 2005

It lives there. It breathes in the walls. It breeds in the hallways. It eats there. It shits there. And it's taken hold of me somehow. Cashmere's warnings ring in my head.

*Sucubo*².

I can't look in the mirror. I see her when I look at myself. I see her.

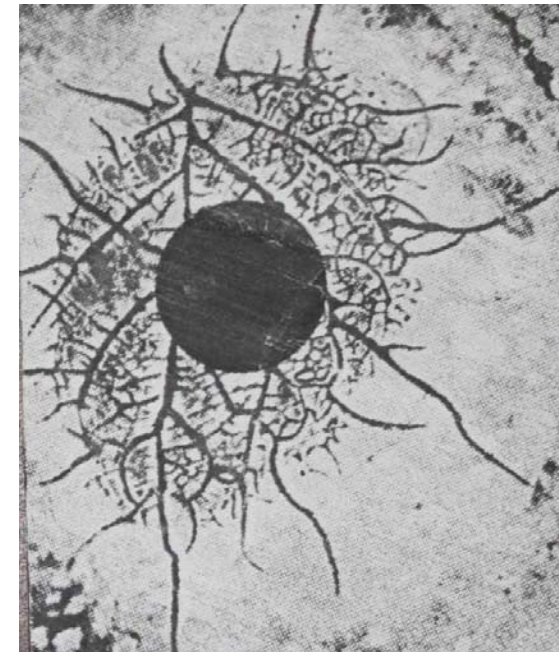
² suc·cu·bus [suhk-yuh-buh s]

noun, plural suc·cu·bi [-bahy]

1. a demon in female form, said to have sexual intercourse with men in their sleep.
2. any demon or evil spirit.
3. a strumpet or prostitute.

The following is the last entry in Martin Hobbs's journal. On closer inspection the entry seems to be stained, smudged fingerprints on the top corner of the page, and pin pricks of what looks like blood. Entry was not dated:

She sleeps in a sea of glass. I let her out.



TWO HEADED GHOST TALKS ABOUT THE WORLD

by RANDALL AVILEZ

grazing the silken slope of
cream against the moon washed
sheets, pearl droplets dance
and spill along the spine
and your bones gracefully echo
in a reverberation of
your hollow body exposed

diving in and out of the cavity
of your mouth reeling
among the white sails of
your teeth, i glance along the

horizon streak and blood roared
from the ocean, a volcanic sob
of menacing love, a ghost flies
away from us.

there was an ugly face in
the clouds that sang and talked
sending rockets in tearing fists
down onto the earth like
holy water and searing our skin into
molten blankets of joy. skinless,
we were free among the
bones and teeth of the world,
jangling together in a furious wave.
never stopping.

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

by RANDALL AVILEZ

i close my eyes
under the season's golden
ray of auburn light
of forest fires and stinging bug bites all
the horrible summer veils
ripped and torn and thrown
covering the chaparral in
a whiskey glow of
harvest lies and half truths

the approaching winter of
the dawn ridden steppe
entangles the strings of
snow angels, the carving
in the bedrock and
the scribbled prophecy of lesser saints
with earthen mouths
and canyon vocal chords.
crawling skin does bid the
head farewell and wishes it death.

WALID

by NELSON LOWHIM

In the dream Walid sat at a table across from Mahmud. All Mahmud did was look at him, shaking his head. None of Walid's apologies worked. He woke up with sweat gluing his shirt to his skin.

Walid looked at his wife who slept beside him. She stirred to his movement, but soon returned to her steady breathing. He swung out of bed and walked outside to the lawn, listening to the helicopters in the distance. He was tired of the sound. The steady beat of an American machine gun started up. Either someone was standing up to them or they were shooting at shadows again. Walid lit a

cigarette and shivered as cold Baghdadi air leaked into his blood. The Samarra Mosque had been bombed earlier that morning, and though he still felt anger, he wasn't certain what to do about it.

"Walid, they're coming!" Haji Salaam yelled.

Walid turned. They had just set up a checkpoint, and he wasn't certain if it was a joke. It was late morning and he was still thinking about the dream he had last night—what was Mahmud disapproving of? Smoke from fires thickened the air and blurred the street.

"Minoo?"

"The Americans," Haji yelled as he got into his car.

"Wayeen?"

“The bridge to Azamiya.” Haji started his car.

No way, thought Walid, he had promised to get at least one. They were parked on the side of a road that was regularly used by people who tried to avoid the traffic elsewhere. They had plenty of ways to drive away, he reminded himself. Besides, no one in this neighborhood would help the Americans.

“Get back out, they are at least five daqeeqa away,” Walid yelled. He tried to stop his voice from quivering. Normally he would have done exactly what Haji did.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled out his handgun, pointing it at the first car that came down the

potholed street. He hoped it would stop; he knew he wasn't going to shoot.

“Identification. Where are you from?” Walid asked the driver when he stopped.

“What is this police checkpoint?” the man asked, scrutinizing him with a look of disdain as he handed over his ID.

Walid looked at the man, surprised that he had obeyed him so easily. “Us?” He looked back at his group and felt more powerful. “We ask the questions here, where are you from?” Walid asked, the ID checked out.

“Hurriya, azizi, you?”

Walid smiled. One of their own. “We are only looking for Sunnis, drive on.”

The driver hesitated, looking at Walid, Haji and their entourage, before swallowing his words and driving on.

Walid pointed his gun at the next car.

“Walid, they’re getting close.”

He tried to slow his breathing down, he didn’t know whether to start driving away or try one more car.

The car came to a halt.

“Identification please. Where are you coming from; where are you going?”

“Where are your uniforms?”

Walid pointed the gun at the driver’s face. “No questions, just answer.”

“Azamiya. I’m going to the market.”

Walid’s heart jumped. He looked over the man, who had beady eyes and a large nose. Walid felt queasy. He was not certain if this was right. He turned to Haji and the rest of his group and they came at the car.

“You are Sunni, n’am?”

The man’s eyes darted to the other men and he nodded uncertainly. “But I am a good man, I work with Shiites, azizi you must not...”

Walid opened the car door and pulled the man by his shirt, again the man was surprisingly compliant.

“No please, I have a family, what are you doing?”
Haji opened his trunk and they stuffed the man in. When the man gave him another look, Walid felt like crying.

They all jumped in the vehicle and drove away. Walid looked behind to see an American Humvee slowing down near the abandoned car. Two soldiers cautiously approached it.

They drove a little ways until they got to Salaam’s place. They pulled the man out of the trunk and dragged him into the house. When they had him on the living room floor, the man got on his feet and started to beg. Walid tried to stand as tall and steady

as he could. He could feel the eyes of his group on him. He hated the man for not making this easy.

“Please, why are you doing this?”

Walid stepped forward, his hands shaking, sweating, and gripped the gun as tightly as he could. “You think you can kill our people and not expect us to fight back?”

“No, no, I have never done anything. These are Arabs from other . . .”

Walid stepped forward, steadied his hands and shot the man through his face. The sound jolted everyone including Walid. The man crumpled to the ground. Walid realized he had been hoping the gun would jam, any excuse to let the man go. A pool of blood

spread. He told the group to clean up and dump the body near a Sunni neighborhood. They stared at him in silence. He decided it was awe.

His wife was giving him that look again.

“What is it?” She shouldn’t have been complaining. They finally were getting more and more money to live on. A good night’s rest was all he wanted. He was scared of killing again, so he found other things to do. Quite a few Sunnis lived in Hurriya. He took his group and started to harass them to leave. They managed to collect taxes from some of the people or take some of their possessions.

His wife pulled out a poster that had his picture on it. Wanted, for 500,000 dinar. He was shocked;

first that he would be on a wanted poster, then, that he would be worth so little.

“Where did you find this?”

“At the market. They are everywhere. I tore them down, but then there were shorta everywhere.”

He smiled, he loved that his wife would do that when she saw his poster. Other women would have just run away. He kissed her and caressed her smooth skin. His stomach started to churn, wondering if the police would knock his door down at any moment.

“Is dinner ready?”

She didn’t reply and walked into the kitchen.

That night, after they had made love, she stared at the ceiling in a way that let him know that he needed to say something.

“It will be zian honey, don’t worry about it.” He of course hadn’t stopped thinking about it. Again he felt small, foolish.

“You have one son and another on the way, in sha allah, what will we do without you? Think about it, Walid, please?”

He wanted to slap her, but she was right, he had to think about his family. He could not get arrested. He knew what happened in those prisons; sometimes people never returned. His family would most

certainly starve. Of course she was concerned with him turning out like Mahmud.

“I will,” he said to calm his wife down.

“But what will you do now? Your face is everywhere and people need money.”

He looked around their room; the house had been theirs since they married. They recently bought a new heater, but the cracks in the wall were still growing.

“You could live with your relatives in Karbala until things got quiet again.”

“Walid! Don’t become like your brother, you are not him.”

“Ooskut,” he hissed, angry that she would dare to say such a thing. “I will take care of this.”

Mahmud would have known what to do. He had always been the one everyone in the neighborhood looked to for guidance. After the invasion, Mahmud had told them to wait and see what the Americans were going to do. He always thought about some greater good that Walid couldn't see.

Walid walked into the kitchen, then put on a coat and stepped outside. Winter was slowly giving way to spring, but the air still bit. He could hear the helicopters again and, in the distance, some shooting. He lit a cigarette, sucked in the smoke to warm his insides. “Mahmud, Mahmud, Mahmud,” he muttered

to himself. He missed him. It was Mahmud who, when Al-Sadr rose against the Americans, decided to fight. We cannot lie down like dogs. Walid followed his big brother to Karbala and they fought against the Americans. Mahmud fought without fear, firing clip after clip against the Americans. Sitting in a dilapidated house they found themselves overwhelmed as the Americans returned fire. Walid began hugging the ground, his stomach churning. He remembered the look Mahmud gave him, the look that he had given him throughout his life whenever Walid had disappointed him by being too weak.

Mahmud had been shooting from a break in a wall when Walid, who was looking for a way to get out

of the house, heard a grinding splat. He looked over to see Mahmud, half his head gone, falling to the ground.

Walid finished his cigarette and threw it into the street. He walked back inside the house.

He remembered lying on the floor of that house in Karbala and thinking about how to escape. He managed to hide as the Americans came through. He crawled away when night fell. He came back to Baghdad, and everyone thought he had been a brave warrior. People stood in awe of him, of Mahmud. He didn't tell them how wrong they were. But he did lie to them about how many people he had killed. In reality, that man in Haji Salaam's living room had

been the first person he had slain. The man's face was still etched in his brain.

The next day Walid awoke to his cell phone ringing. "Yes?"

"Walid, your pictures, they are everywhere. Abdullah was stopped at a checkpoint today, and they asked about you, if he knew who you were. I think you should lay low right now."

Walid felt his stomach acting up. He wondered what would happen if he did lay low. Would the police forget him and chase someone else? No, he was being a small man again. It was his time to stand up.

“We will not hide, we are protecting our neighborhood. Have the police done that for us?” He fought to keep his voice from cracking, from showing Haji how scared he really was.

“No,” Haji said tentatively.

“Of course not. Drive here now, we’re going to settle this once and for all.”

He reached for his gun but remembered that it was in the bedroom. He had the urge to drink, to stop his trembling.

He hung up and put on his clothes, though it felt like someone else was doing it for him. He checked his handgun, then grabbed the wanted poster. His wife was cooking breakfast and he rushed out when

she called him. He did not want to stop, but she called him again. He poked his head back through the door. “I will be back in a few hours.”

Haji pulled up in his car and Walid jumped in.

“Where to?”

“The police center, where else?”

Haji stared at him. “But...”

“Are you deaf? Drive!”

Haji put the car into drive but didn’t press the accelerator. “Are you mutaeqed about this?”

“Yes, stop being a coward and drive. You have your gun right?”

“Yes, but the police center?”

Haji's voice threatened to kill the bravery he had mustered. "You never fought against the Americans. Are you a dog?" Walid asked.

"No."

"Then drive. When we get there I will go inside and you will stay with the car. All right?"

Haji drove the car without another word. Walid fingered his handgun and remembered what his father had told him: that no one was scared of an AK, since everyone owned one, but handguns reminded people of Saddam's secret police.

Within five minutes they stopped in front of the police station, and Walid hopped out of the car. The guard at the front door didn't say much and Walid

walked past him to the main lobby. He felt the wanted poster folded in his pocket and rubbed it once before realizing that he was sweating too much. He wished he had asked Haji to come with him so there would be someone beside him. No one paid him any attention, but he couldn't help fearing that they knew who he was. Everything in the building was brand new and shiny. He saw signs for the police chief's office. It was down a long hallway to the left. He would not be able to fight all these policemen, he calculated.

He saw a large poster with his face staring back at him. He couldn't stay in the lobby for much longer. He felt for his gun, tucked in his pants, and walked

down the hallway. His hands started to tremble. He felt like he did after he shot that man in Haji's living room. He had gone home to drink a whole bottle of whiskey.

He stopped at the door with the police commissioner's name printed in English and Arabic. He leaned against the wall and looked up and down the hallway. Still, no one seemed to have noticed him. From inside the room, he could hear a man yelling on the phone in a gruff voice. Walid thought about Mahmud, he thought about his family. He knocked and squeezed his trembling hands together.

“Enter!”

The voice sounded large. Walid pulled out his gun with one hand and his poster with the other. He walked in the room.

“What can I do for you?” the chubby bald man asked, hesitating when he saw the gun in Walid's hand.

Walid placed the wanted poster on his desk. “You're looking for me?”

The police chief glanced down at the image and recognition crept up on his face. “I . . .”

Walid felt more powerful as the man stuttered, unable to finish a single sentence. He went around the desk and grabbed the policeman by his collar. He was fat, but compliant. Walid pulled him out to the

lobby. “On your knees.” The man fell down and started to cry. Everyone was looking at him, but even the guards, with their AKs, didn’t try to move. “I am Walid, the man on this poster.” He pointed at the poster on the wall. “I am not here for anyone else but this man,” he looked around when he said it. He felt invincible and the trembling had stopped. The overweight man continued to whimper, rocking himself like a child. Walid pointed, shot; the man fell. He looked the guards in the eye, and they looked away.

Outside, he lit a cigarette. He inhaled the nicotine hit and sauntered over to the car where Haji sat, staring at him. “Drive.”

He didn’t say another word to Haji and when they got to his house he just nodded and walked in. His wife warmed up his breakfast and he ate it, not speaking to her either, but keeping his eyes on Mahmud and the first man he shot, both standing behind her.



AMERICANS

by FRED SKOLNIK

First prize was an all expenses paid trip to Hollywood with the woman of your choice and as much money as you would ever need. That meant you could just pick a woman, any woman you wanted, even if she belonged to someone else, and you could have millions of dollars and your picture would be in all the papers and they would interview you on television and everyone would listen to what you said and you'd get invited to the White House and then you'd live in a mansion with thirty-six rooms and have a staff of twenty people and your

own plane and a dozen cars. Everyone entered the contest. You'd have had to be crazy not to.

John entered the contest. He was a short order cook in a greasy spoon in Brooklyn. He lived in a rented room and had seventy-five dollars in the bank. He liked action movies and popular music. He was a high school graduate and had served in the navy. His parents were still living and he had an older sister.

Charlie entered the contest. He was a used car salesman in Memphis. He was married and had two children. His wife was a receptionist in a dentist's office. They had a dog. He subscribed to *Reader's Digest* and was a Titans fan. On their twentieth

anniversary he had taken his wife to New York, where they had gotten mugged.

Joe entered the contest. He was a laid-off welder at Ford Engines in Cleveland. He was divorced. His wife had run off with his best friend. He bowled and drank a lot of beer. He weighed 325 lbs. His nickname was Tiny.

Tom entered the contest. He was a bellhop at a downtown Boston hotel. He had a season ticket to the Red Sox games. He was a heavy bettor. He slept with a whore named Flo twice a month. He had six brothers and sisters.

Dick entered the contest. He was a truck driver in Alexandria, Virginia. He had married late in life

and had no children. His wife had a heart condition. They lived in a mobile home and were having trouble with their medical insurance.

Harry entered the contest. He was a lumberjack in Portland. He had four sons. The oldest one was studying horticulture at the state university. His wife had worked at Wal-Mart for a while and liked to watch Oprah and Dr. Phil on daytime TV. They were still paying off their mortgage.

For weeks and weeks everyone talked about the contest. The President himself had said that anyone could win, regardless of race, religion or color. Everyone wanted to have millions and millions of dollars and the woman of his choice. There had been

previous contests and everyone could see how well the winners were doing. Some of them played basketball and others sang songs, some traded in pork bellies and others traded in junk bonds. Some became powerful people. You could be a Supreme Court justice or governor of a state or the chief of staff or a talk show host or even a senior analyst at CNN.

John wrote in his entry form: "I want to win an all expenses paid trip to Hollywood with the woman of my choice and all the money I will ever need because that is the American Dream. The woman of my choice is Jennifer Lopez or Jennifer Aniston. If I had millions and millions of dollars I

would buy everything that rich people have and live in Bel-Air or Beverly Hills."

That was more or less what everyone wrote, though not necessarily choosing Jennifer Lopez or Jennifer Aniston. Charlie chose Andie MacDowell. Dick chose Julia Roberts. Tastes differed. Joe wanted to live in Shaker Heights. Tom wanted to live on Beacon Hill. Everyone wanted a Porsche.

Charlie had a satisfactory marriage and his kids were doing all right but he was not satisfied with his lot. "There's more to life than this," he would tell his wife on certain occasions. "Like what, hon?" she'd reply, and he'd be forced to say, "Oh, I don't know." Charlie had always daydreamed about having

millions and millions of dollars and the woman of his choice. He daydreamed before he fell asleep at night and when he woke up in the morning and during the commercial breaks in the football games, and sometimes he tossed a football around with the kids.

After the layoff Joe hadn't worked for a year. He'd had to sell the house in the divorce settlement and had used up most of the equity. He felt betrayed and brooded a lot. He needed those millions of dollars and the woman of his choice to get his life back on track. Otherwise he thought he might do violence to himself.

Tom also daydreamed about winning millions of dollars but had always thought it might come at the

track or the card table. He spent a lot of time reading the scratch sheets and looked like a jockey himself. Tom knew the contest was a swindle. All contests were swindles but you entered them anyway. When he was a kid he'd had a post office clerk standing by with his stamp in the air in one of those earliest postmark radio contests and still he'd lost. The experience had soured him. Until then he had believed in his dreams.

People won all kinds of prizes in America but the big prizes were hard to get. Everyone wanted them, so the competition was fierce. Some people said they didn't care if they didn't win because there were more important things in life than being rich like

honor and decency but deep in their hearts they did. Some people took losing pretty hard. When it turned out they hadn't won the tears filled their eyes. "That's the only chance I'll ever get," they said.

Dick was tired of driving a truck. The money was good but he was on the road most of the week and with a sick wife he needed to be home more.

Winning millions of dollars would have changed his life. He'd make sure his wife got proper care and maybe buy her a house and go off to Hollywood with Julia Roberts. Then he'd see.

Harry had the four sons to put through college and he was barely scraping by. The wife looked worn out while he was a healthy type. If he had

millions and millions of dollars he'd maybe send her to the beauty parlor and let her get some new clothes. Then she could sit around with her sister gossiping all day while he took the woman of his choice out on the town.

John had gone out with a woman for a while and for a while it had looked pretty serious. She was a few years older than him and had been around the block. She stayed with him one or two nights a week in his room, where they were squeezed together on the narrow bed so that neither of them could really sleep and sometimes he just sat in a chair smoking until the morning and wondering how it was going to end. Neither of them had any prospects so maybe

they made a good pair because they drank together and got maudlin together and he got to thinking that maybe her mind was a little shot. Sometimes he'd buy a big bag of groceries and some wine and fix her something nice when she came over and that was romantic just like the movies. In any case it hadn't worked out because he'd caught her with another man and there'd been a fight and he'd broken a bottle over his head and was lucky he hadn't killed him and was lucky they didn't call the cops.

Charlie had had a rough spot when the commissions weren't coming in and for a while they'd had to get by on what the wife was making, which wasn't much, and Charlie cursed all the

dentists in the world and all the automobile distributors in the world who kept raking it in and living off the fat of the land. That was the spell when he got cynical and took to muttering under his breath when he saw the fatcats and fast talkers on TV. "Did you say something, hon?" his wife would purr. Despite being a tiny woman with veiny arms and legs, she was a real southern belle, wrapped in a cocoon of sugary sweetness like cotton candy. They sat in TV chairs side by side with just a little table between them where they kept the snacks. The kids sat on the sofa and kept the snacks in their lap.

Joe's brother lent him some money to tide him over and he got an apartment in a three-story

walkup in a rundown neighborhood full of empty buildings and abandoned warehouses. He tried to get a job bagging in the supermarket but they didn't give it to him because he looked too fat to work with the public so he ended up doing janitorial work in a ballbearing factory for a cleaning service. Every Sunday he had dinner with his brother and his family. His sister-in-law tried to cheer him up because he looked so depressed and told him all kinds of amusing stories about her clients in the beauty parlor where she worked as a manicurist. Joe wasn't amused. The clients reminded him of his ex-wife, who'd had red hair and red toenails and kept her bra on when they made love.

Tens of millions of Americans entered the contest, maybe even a hundred, maybe more. The organizers were pleased. The sponsor was pleased. The President was pleased. "This is what makes America great," he said between foreign policy speeches. "It makes me proud to be an American to know that anyone can win millions and millions of dollars and the woman of his choice. That was what our forefathers had in mind when they framed the Constitution."

When he wasn't at the race track or the ballpark Tom usually spent his free time in the poolroom where his bookmaker sat at a card table in the back sorting slips. It was a pleasant environment,

populated by high school kids and working stiffs like himself. Tom didn't play much pool. He was more interested in placing his bet and then stood around like everyone else watching the action with half an eye and only occasionally getting interested and putting down a sawbuck or two. The regulars all had the green poolroom pallor and Runyunesque nicknames like the Genius and Max the Ax and Tooty-Fruity. Tom was sometimes called Phil after the old Philip Morris ad. They were maybe a colorful bunch but they sure as hell weren't going anywhere.

Dick did long haul driving and knew the waitresses on highways all across the land. They told

him their troubles and he told them his. That's how it was on the road. Everyone had troubles. For years he was faithful to his wife but then she'd gotten sick so sometimes he'd take one of these waitresses back to her bungalow or trailer and they'd have a few drinks, usually with a kid sleeping in the other room, and go to bed. Once he was hijacked and got pistol-whipped. They caught the gang but he couldn't identify anyone. One of the cops called him chickenshit and one of the hijackers winked at him. That riled him. He'd have nailed them if he could. He wasn't afraid of anyone. Dick was his own man. He'd been a brawler in his younger years. He'd fought with everyone, his brother who thought he'd been

screwing around with his wife, which he was, his brother-in-law who called him a thief, which he wasn't, and finally his old man, who he popped in the mouth before taking off for good. Fuck them all, was what he said.

Harry liked the outdoor life. He had a great crew and liked to hang out with them more than being at home. His wife was a nag. The boys didn't need him anymore. He'd set them straight fast enough and they had become God-fearing young men who never failed to call him sir. He liked hunting and fishing and killing things. He liked the way the deer dropped when he caught them between the eyes. He figured he could survive in the wilderness if it ever came to

that and could see a day when the forces of good would be arrayed against the forces of evil and people like himself might have to take to the forests. They'd talked it over in the crew and swore they'd stick together.

People went about their business but they were thinking about the contest all the time. Previous winners appeared on television and shared their experiences with the viewing audience. Some endorsed products and some delivered learned opinions sitting around big tables from morning till night. Whenever you saw someone on television you could be pretty sure he had won unless it was someone talking about what not winning was like.

Some of those who didn't win went to jail but sometimes someone who won went to jail too. That was odd. People really couldn't understand it. Not even the President understood it. He said as much answering a reporter's question before flying home for a short vacation.

When John got out of the navy he'd been full of hope. He thought he'd find the right woman and a good job and be set for life but it hadn't worked out. He'd bummed around for a few years, moving out to Chicago and then going down to New Orleans by way of Louisville and ending up in Miami where he'd worked for a while doing maintenance in a beachfront hotel until he got into a fight and they

fired him. Then to New York where he'd signed up with the merchant marine as a utilityman and shipped out on an oil tanker running raw petroleum to the West Coast and then a coal barge coming out of the Great Lakes and then down to Norfolk and then New York again. Once he thought he'd be a chef but though he'd been a ship's cook no one wanted him in the good kitchens. He was a helper once in a fancy restaurant but they fired him after two days when he came in smelling of alcohol and he waited in the alley and slugged the chef when he came out for a smoke and that got him 90 days but didn't stop him from brawling and boozing until he felt the juices draining out of him. John was starting

to lose confidence in himself. He figured this was his last chance. He had no real friends now. There were a couple of people in the building he said hello to but that was it. It was just a rooming house with a lot of transients that he rented by the month instead of by the night or week. He was glad he had his day off in the middle of the week. When he'd had his day off on Sundays he'd go nuts and spend the day reading the papers and watching TV. Now he went into Manhattan from time to time and walked around. There were plenty of good-looking women in Manhattan in expensive-looking clothes but he couldn't get near them. That was why he wanted to win all those millions of dollars.

Charlie wanted to take the family to Disney World when the commissions started coming in again but the experience in New York had made his wife balky about traveling. She liked it just fine where she was and the kids would just as soon spend their time with their friends. They went to Graceland instead. Charlie regretted that he would go through life without seeing Disney World and started thinking about all the other things he'd never done. He'd started working on the lot just a few years after getting out of high school and had married Ginny soon after and they had bought the little house with the seedy lawn and that was it. They'd had a fine old time for a couple of years and then the

kids had come and they had settled in and twenty years had passed and he had nothing really to show for it, just barely enough for a rainy day and the lines getting deeper and deeper in Ginny's face and the veins getting stringier and stringier in her arms and legs and he himself feeling under the weather occasionally and barely able to crank up the arm to toss the football around. Sometimes Charlie felt like an enormous weight was sitting on his chest and he couldn't breathe and dreamed about being at the bottom of a pile of big bodies and no one getting off and not being able to move his arms and legs and feeling the panic coming over him. That was what

his life was like, he thought. He couldn't get out from under the pile.

Joe had known Christine in high school but had never gone out with her. He wasn't fat then but somewhat stout and she was a fairly popular girl with big tits that were the talk of the school, a kind of standard by which boys measured the size of their hands. They'd run into each other at someone's wedding and he'd reminded her that they'd gone to high school together and she'd remembered him well enough and there was a brief courtship and satisfactory honeymoon but after they settled into the house he'd bought he'd had to negotiate her out of every article of clothing she wore to bed and the

bra stayed put. At first this had been a kind of coyness but as time went on she barely tolerated his now distinctly corpulent body on top of her for the 30 seconds or so it took him to detumescence and then pushed him off with a look of disgust. Then one day she was gone. Joe took it hard and on top of that he was laid off too which she led him to understand at the divorce hearing at which she got half the house only confirmed the wisdom of her move, as though she had been prescient and had known enough to abandon a sinking ship burdened with more cargo than it could safely bear. His best friend took her to another state. His other friends consoled him. He put on another 50 lbs. Fat women didn't appeal to him

and thin women wouldn't go near him. Things just went from bad to worse. He felt like a giant beach ball rolling down a hill.

If anyone wanted a whore at the hotel for one of the rooms it was usually Tom who took care of it. He just gave Flo a ring. She didn't necessarily come herself. If she was busy she gave the trick to one of the other girls. Tom thought of himself as having a special relationship with Flo. She never took money from him up front and she'd let him kiss her on the mouth which made him come in two seconds flat, which may have been her intention though he liked to believe it wasn't. Tom was small in every respect. He'd always been self-conscious with women despite

his bravado at the front desk. She called him her little boy and liked to ask him when she was in an especially playful mood if this was his first time and he had to swallow his pride and play along. Aside from Flo there was nobody, but otherwise he led a busy life. He'd been sleeping with whores since he was a kid and hadn't been with a straight woman more than once or twice. Straight women wanted to get under your skin and run your life. He'd been crazy once about a pint-sized girl who drove him wild and she'd seemed just right for him, they would be two little people in their own little world, but she wanted things too, things he didn't have to give, and the thing had run its course. That had been his best

shot. He knew there'd never be another unless a miracle occurred.

Dick took good care of his wife when he was home. He pampered her and sat her outside with a blanket on her lap when the sun was out. Sometimes he fixed the meals. She was pretty much an invalid now and her hair was gray like his and they hadn't slept together for years though sometimes he could tell she wanted to. She'd been an active woman, running a little stationery shop. He was driving a van for one of her suppliers at the time and that was how they'd met. He'd moved into her neat little apartment and then they'd bought the home, figuring they might do some traveling but except for a trip to the

Grand Canyon they really hadn't been anywhere.

Now Dick had been everywhere and he was tired of it. He'd wanted to start up his own trucking operation but the wife needed a transplant and they weren't fully covered so he went on running the long hauls and put aside as much as he could. One of his neighbors in the park had had a similar problem and his wife had died. It wasn't something he wanted to think about.

Harry had lived in Portland all his life and aside from a few trips to Las Vegas and L.A. had never been out of the state. He'd married his high school sweetheart after missing out on a football scholarship and they'd had the four boys and lived in a house full

of hunting trophies. Harry's father had been a hunter and a lumberjack too and was always telling him how the country had begun to change just about when Harry was born and those Kennedys got in the White House and brought the hippies and pornography to Washington. You could get the pornography on TV now and sometimes Harry sat in the den late at night with a bottle of beer just for the extra hot look they gave you in certain movies, the young breasts and the big nipples and the woman wide open, and then woke up his wife and got between her legs before she knew what was happening. Once he'd caught one of his sons with a girl in the house and threw the girl out and beat the

living daylights out of the boy calling him a hippie scumbag. That had straightened him out. His wife didn't like him hitting the boys, or hitting her for that matter, but as soon as everyone knew his place there wasn't any need for hitting. Harry was out of work for long stretches of time and had tried professional wrestling and local lumberjacking competitions for a while. He'd also worked as a tourist guide and dreamed of running a tourist camp out in the wilderness for tenderfoots who wanted to impress their women. He could show them a trick or two. But all that took cash he didn't have. Not having cash made him surly and mean. Other people had it, why couldn't he?

The better the economy did, the President said, the more winners there would be. That was a simple law of economics. Things always started moving at the top and then worked their way down. In the end everyone shared in the wealth. Therefore he was cutting taxes for the rich. That would serve as an incentive and consequently there would be more contests and more sponsors and more people getting rich. A reporter asked him if he was going to enter the contest himself. "I've already won," he said.

John worked mornings or nights. That meant 6:30 a.m. till 4 p.m. or 4 p.m. till 1 a.m. They switched every week, or sometimes, for whatever reason, he'd work mornings or nights two weeks

straight and once for a solid month, like when Mac, the other cook, got married and wanted to be with the wife at night. When he worked nights the whole day was shot. He'd get up late in the morning and hang around the house until it was time to go to work, at the most doing a little shopping or maybe his laundry. When he worked mornings he could lead a normal life, which meant having a proper dinner and maybe seeing a movie and afterwards stopping in at a bar and having a couple of beers. Mostly he stayed home and watched TV, which he figured was what most people were doing with their time. He didn't mind working nights on weekends since he had nothing special to do so sometimes he

switched with Mac at the end of the week and did two straight weekends at night. He envied Mac, who it turned out had been in the navy too. He had married a waitress from a place down the street where he'd tried to get a job before landing at the greasy spoon and they were able to coordinate their schedules so they'd be together most of the time. Their whole life seemed to revolve around getting their hours straight. The waitresses at the greasy spoon were nothing to look at and most of the time he was busy slicing and weighing and washing and scrubbing if he wasn't actually cooking so he was on his feet for hours at a time. He wore a chef's hat and a dirty apron and lined up dishes at the service

window for the waitresses to take away. At first he'd liked taking orders, never knowing what was coming next, the tuna on rye or the poached eggs or the cheeseburger, but there were only so many dishes on the menu and after a while it didn't matter what he got, he was on automatic pilot most of the time, his mind a total blank. At the end of the shift his feet and back ached and he felt the grease all over his skin. When he got home he couldn't sleep right away but had to decompress for an hour or so, so he took a shower and watched TV for a while. He worked for a little more than the minimum wage with minimum benefits and nothing for nights. The waitresses gave him something out of their tips.

Dishwashers were a problem. They came and went. Once he'd had to do a double shift for nearly a week sharing the dishwashing with Mac. Everyone treated him like a hero and Mr. Lipmann, the owner, gave him an extra fifty bucks. Mr. Lipmann would come by with his wife from time to time wearing his expensive camel's-hair topcoat and leather gloves and smoking a cigar. They never ate in the place and who could blame them.

Charlie was a social type. That was why he'd gone to work on the lot. His wife was social too. They were always having barbecues on their seedy lawn or getting invited to barbecues on other people's lawns. Charlie played cards once a week and jumped down

to Tunica a few times a year for the riverboat gambling. He wasn't really much of a gambler but he liked the milieu. He liked crowds and parades and festivals. Ginny was on all kinds of church committees. There were plenty of people in Memphis just like them and they all got along fine. Once in a while Charlie got depressed, even when the commissions were coming in. If it wasn't one thing it was another. There'd be some incident on the lot or the roof starting to leak or a death in the family. When he got depressed he sat around drinking and muttering for a spell. Ginny didn't notice such things. She was always bright and cheerful, seeing the world in rosy colors. Nothing

upset her and nothing surprised her, or if something did it was hidden behind her languorous locutions. Charlie was more vocal though he seldom raised his voice. More often than not life confused him. He couldn't understand why he wasn't getting ahead or why the years were passing by so quickly with so little to show for them except a bald spot in the middle of his hair and a little paunch and the creaky joints. If something didn't happen soon it wasn't going to happen at all, he knew.

After all the entry forms had been received by midnight of the appointed day a panel of three judges began to read them. They were to be judged most of all by sincerity. Spelling didn't count.

However, as most of the entry forms were identically phrased, or pretty near so, and in any case the judges couldn't possibly read the millions of entry forms pouring in every day, even with an army of assistants to help them out, it was deemed advisable to devise a system of random selection. The system was approved by the President himself and put into law by Congress. The system devised was to blindfold one of the judges and have him or her wade into the ocean of entry forms that were being stored in the Los Angeles Coliseum and pick one out. A certified public accountant was on hand to make sure there wasn't any monkey business. In this way everyone had an equal chance. The winning

entry was kept in a vault until the announcement of the results.

Joe showed up at the plant at 7 a.m. and started on the toilets on the factory floor. Some of them got stopped up good and proper, not like the executive toilets upstairs. He figured the big boys didn't want to have their shit all over the place and look like ordinary mortals. Aside from which, they were scrubbed down about every 20 seconds whereas the downstairs toilets were only cleaned after the shifts where you'd have ribbons of used toilet paper trailing along the floor and big turds swimming in the bowls. He still retched from time to time. He'd developed various techniques for cleaning out the

bowls, holding his breath or going in with air freshener first, but nothing really helped. When he finished the toilets he took a break and then he started washing down the floors in all the corridors. He wore a nylon jumpsuit that made him sweat and had the name of the cleaning service stitched on the back and all the pockets sewn up tight to make it hard to steal. He got the minimum wage with full benefits and time and a half for overtime and his crew boss was a regular guy so he really couldn't complain. He would rather have been welding but the automation had come to the big plants and there was little chance he'd ever find work as a welder again unless he retrained and maybe worked in a

garage but he wasn't too nimble anymore and knew he'd have trouble on the floor. He knew he was developing a heart problem, his breath was short and he could hardly get up stairs. His body was a burden. He was carrying it around like a sack of potatoes. It was doubtful if the woman of his choice would give him the time of day in his current shape and he thought it might be a good idea to lose some weight before winning those millions and millions of dollars so at least he'd get off to a good start and then of course he could hire a personal trainer. From time to time he thought of Christine. He had desired her and regretted losing her. He had desired many things in his life and had gotten few of them. Christine had

been one of those things with her big tits that he hadn't seen or touched more than once or twice and that had only lasted for a while. He'd always liked eating though and hadn't stinted. That had been the only real satisfaction in his life. Over at McDonald's he could put away three or four burgers at a sitting and a gallon of coke. At the plant they gave you subsidized meals that always left you hungry so he'd have two of them. The first time he'd gone to a whore after the divorce they'd had to reposition themselves for a quarter of an hour until he could get it in. Fortunately she'd been a patient girl. Joe's life didn't seem to going anywhere. He'd wanted to build something but he hadn't. He was back to

square one, so to speak, and for him too time was running out.

Tom had made some killings in his time. He'd had his ups and downs. In the hotel he was someone to be reckoned with. He wasn't a physical type so he had to get by on finesse and personality. There were some pretty girls at the front desk but he knew they didn't see him as a romantic option so he let them call him Phil and giggle behind his back knowing that sooner or later they'd find out who he was and change their tone, not that he'd ever be in a position to take advantage of them or even thought to. All he wanted was respect and that was what he generally got. In addition he got around \$400 a week plus tips

and the occasional sawbuck for services rendered above and beyond. Half of that he needed to live on and half for the gambling. When he won big he went on a binge and blew it all in a day or two and felt good. When he lost big he regrouped and bounced right back. He wasn't an introspective type and the gambling and hopping kept him busy and Flo was a kind of bonus he had to look forward to. Whenever he got to feeling sad he would shake it right off. He felt sad about not being the type who could knock a woman off her feet or make himself heard outside the poolroom or the bellhop station. The first time he'd hopped had been at a summer resort in the Berkshires when he was 16 and some fool in the

personnel department kept asking him if he'd brought a truss and a few of the women seemed interested in him but apparently had second thoughts in the little silence just before they handed him his tip so he had to settle for the skinny whore from the nearby town who they whisked through the security gate passing her off as a guest and even got into the dining room to fatten her up but the lines were too long and when he got back to the city he started looking around for a classier act and finally found Flo who told him about her johns when they lay in bed and they had a laugh about that and he sometimes stroked her cheek as he might have

stroked a wife's and missed the intimacy when he went to bed alone and was sad then too.

Dick's wife encouraged him to make it up with his family. She was a genteel woman who had tamed him in many ways and he never cursed in her presence and people noticed that he was a different man when he was around her. He thought it was unjust that she should have been stricken in this way and might die but she never complained, she just sighed and smiled in her apologetic way. However, he had no desire to make it up with his family, he only regretted not having one of his own. There were just the two of them and the years going by. When he was on the road he forgot he had a wife

and lived a trucker's life, bedding down in the sleeper behind the cab in a row of trucks at the side of the road and living on hash browns and greasy burgers. He'd always liked trucking, he'd liked the power behind the wheel and the rough men on the road and the women at the pit stops but now it was a chore and people saw that he was slowing down and asked him what was wrong and he opened up soon enough and they commiserated with him and cursed whoever it was who made the rules by which they lived. On the short hauls Dick ran down to Richmond, which was a city he loved. There'd been a woman there before he met his wife, it had been

the great love of his life, it was so long ago but he could never forget her fiery temperament, she was a like a gypsy woman under the hot Southern sun, but she had married a doctor and they had gone north passing out of his life and he often remembered her and wondered what she looked like now. He'd never told his wife about her but she had told him about a man she loved and how he'd used her and how it had made her shy of men for many years until Dick came along and she knew he would be good to her because he was at heart a gentle man made hard by life and he had to admit that this was true, life had made him hard, it hadn't been fair to him, or to her.

When Harry got the call from the probation officer at juvenile hall he couldn't believe what he was hearing. One of his boys and a friend had tried to rob a 7-Eleven store with a toy gun and had then run out with the hysterical store clerk right behind them and it wasn't long before the cops had them in cuffs with their faces in the gutter. The first thing Harry wanted to do was strangle his wife whose mollycoddling had undone every lesson he'd ever taught them. The second thing he thought of doing was to tell her that the boy could rot in hell for all he cared. But at the hearing, after a titanic effort on the part of the lawyer his sister-in-law had found for them and a great show of contrition with many tears

on the boy's part, he was released into their custody. Harry didn't talk to him for a month. The four boys and his wife would sit around the dining room table almost every night talking in whispers and he was excluded and felt put out and cursed them all when he was a little drunk and waved his hands around in the familiar threatening way but it didn't have any effect, they ignored him and waited for him to run out of steam and go away. Being together like that gave them courage. Harry would kick the furniture and knock things off the table and then have some more beer and fall asleep in his clothes and no one would bother waking him up and in the morning he'd stink and feel even meaner and slam the door

when he left the house and not come back till midnight and sometimes sit in the den all night drinking and cursing.

The contest was sponsored by a beer manufacturer so that each entry form had to be accompanied by a great many bottle tops while TV commercials showed previous winners drinking the sponsor's beer. In this way the beer manufacturer hoped to increase sales and retrieve old bottle tops which could be reused in the beer manufacturer's bottling plants and therefore produce considerable savings in view of the tens of millions of bottles of beer that were consumed each day by consumers throughout the land and the tens of millions of entry

forms that were arriving at the Coliseum. This ingenious link between the consumption of beer and the dream of winning millions and millions of dollars was mentioned by the President in his talks with the Russians as an example of how a modern Western economy worked.

People who did not consume the sponsor's beer or win contests were shown in an unfavorable light. They were never seen having a good time or surrounded by beautiful women. They drove battered cars and had bad posture. Often they were seen being searched by state troopers or the local police. They had low credit ratings and were turned away at the better restaurants. This made more and

more people enter the contest and drink beer, further stimulating the economy, though for reasons the President couldn't understand the dollar kept dropping against all known currencies.

John seldom saw his family. His sister had three kids but she was living in Pittsburgh. Her husband was managing a supermarket there and they were doing fairly well. His folks had retired to Orlando. It seemed to him that they had more or less written him off. His folks had never shown him any real love and he had always fought with his sister. In effect he was alone in the world. Sometimes he felt sorry for himself and drank himself into a stupor but most often he was sober and got through the day without

doing any damage to himself or others. When he drank in company he sometimes became expansive and convivial, talking about the things he'd seen like a seasoned traveler and people listened and told him he'd had an interesting life and he'd say, "Yeah, that's for sure," and tip back his drink in a cocky way and get a nice lift for a moment or two before he came crashing down again. He'd used drugs for a while and that had given him a lift too but he was clean now, he'd known it could kill him and had taken himself in hand right after he broke up with that woman and preferred to drink, which was cheaper, though he knew that that could kill him too. When he'd gotten out of jail he'd checked into a cheap

hotel and lay on the bed smoking and staring at the ceiling where the neon lights from across the streets kept blinking on and off and made patterns like the bars on a prison wall and he went downstairs and found a whore and felt better than he'd felt in years. But the good feeling hadn't lasted a day. It never did. He'd had these few good days in his life and the rest had been like prison days or shipboard days or days in the greasy spoon. He was just punching in and punching out now. All his dreams were like wads of crumpled paper.

Charlie's boy was studying business administration at the community college and the girl had gotten a job in Walgreen's and neither of them was around a

lot. The girl had a boyfriend too, a gangling, pimply type who looked like he had hayseed in his hair but it turned out he had a basketball scholarship at the University though he wasn't a starter or anything and the girl went to every game and both Charlie and Ginny started watching the telecasts looking for him on the bench and the girl in the stands and once they saw her jumping up and down and had a big laugh about it and when she came home told her they'd seen her on TV and treated her like a celebrity because nothing like that had ever happened in the family before. Down at the lot they did TV ads but Charlie had never been in one. He was a good salesman. He had an easy manner that inspired

confidence and aside from the few rough patches did pretty well though not well enough to lift him out of his circumstances and thought of himself as being stuck on the lot for life, not liking his boss who never had a good word to say and treated him like an indentured servant. Ginny, on the other hand, loved her job and thought her dentist was a god. A word of praise from him and she'd float around the house as though he'd pumped her full of laughing gas. She only worked the mornings and had her own car, devoting her afternoons to her social life. They ate dinner together at seven and the kids too if they were around and chatted for a while before settling down in front of the TV though if Ginny got on the

phone it could be for hours. She had a sister in Georgia and another one up north. Charlie's brother and widowed mother still lived in Memphis and they'd get together from time to time for a family day with the barbecued pork ribs. Charlie's brother had a boy with leukemia and they were at the hospital a lot and sometimes his wife looked like a wreck so he didn't envy them though his brother was the head of a regional marketing office and had a \$400,000 house in Germantown. Life was like that, Charlie reckoned. It always managed to knock you down, but most often it didn't let you get up.

Joe daydreamed about Christine sometimes, mostly about getting off her bra, tearing it off her

and making her do whatever he wanted, and sometimes about hurting her too the way she had hurt him. He knew they'd looked funny in the street together and she was ashamed to be seen with him. He was just 5'8" so he'd been a roly-poly type, shaped a little like an egg, even before he put on the extra pounds, and she was a knockout with her big tits and all in all perfectly if solidly made. Joe had thought once of becoming a professional bowler but he wasn't good enough. He had wondered what you had to have to put you in a different class. Was it some endowment, or just character? Bowling might have been his ticket out of the factory but it wasn't, he was just another little fat man with a bowling bag

who could put together a few strikes when he was in the zone. The country was full of such people and some of them were cleaning toilets just like Joe.

Christine's family hadn't liked him though he'd been making good money and they'd put the pressure on him to get the house with all his savings and hadn't put in a cent themselves so she was a gold digger at heart though with half a brain she could have done a lot better for herself from the start. Go figure it, he'd tell his brother, and even got to thinking that maybe there was something to him after all, a notion he was disabused of soon enough. For sure she'd been sleeping around and sometimes she'd tease him too, walking around in a slip or a nightie and not letting

him touch her. They were married just two years. There'd never be another woman like her, or any woman, he was sure, and he needed one just as he needed those millions of dollars to help him forget who he was, as he had in those first few weeks when he thought she loved him. Scrubbing his hands and climbing out of the nylon suit at the end of every shift he'd put the toilets behind him and have a couple of beers with the crew. Then he'd walk all the way home for the exercise and to save the carfare. He could hardly make it up the stairs and knew he'd have to move before he found himself stuck somewhere and needing the fire department to get him out. This didn't stop him from consuming 5

lb. bags of potato chips and endless quarts of ice cream as he half lay on his king size easy chair and watched the bowling on ESPN. And then to sleep on his king size bed.

Tom was honest on the whole though he'd stolen from a few guests when the opportunity presented itself. And once a drunken guy had handed him a hundred dollar bill instead of a five. And once he and a few of the hops had rolled a drunk behind the hotel at three in the morning. But that was in his younger days. He didn't go in for the rough stuff. He preferred to work with his head. The hotel belonged to a chain now and had been remodeled and upgraded and Tom had thought he might make

captain but the new management had passed over him and that had embittered him somewhat though they told him how much they appreciated his long service and hoped he'd continue there for many years to come. The hotel had been a favorite of ballplayers once and once he'd spotted some Seattle Sonics on the subway who he knew were staying at the hotel and they looked lost so he took them there himself and they couldn't thank him enough and they had stood in the lobby together for a quarter of an hour just shooting the shit and he told Flo about it and the other hops and was still telling the story today and lots of other stories about the ballplayers and the women who followed them around and people

listened because he was on the inside like one of those reporters who hangs around politicians and can give you the lowdown on everything and you can't contradict them because they're there. Once some guy had come sniffing around the station and Tom had wanted to tell him off but was lucky he hadn't because he turned out to be some vice president in the chain, he'd asked them all kinds of questions, and one of the hops got fired the next day, and once Flo got her face messed up by one of her johns and Tom wondered where her pimp was but he never came around and the whole thing was a mystery until she told him the john was a sadistic cop. Tom had seen it all. He was on the inside but he was on the sidelines

too. He wasn't part of the big show. It was other people who made the world go round.

Dick and his wife had long talks when they sat outside on Sundays and he could see that she was resigned to her fate and worried about how he'd manage after she was gone and urged him to marry again and Dick didn't want to tell her how easy it was for him to manage without a woman though he had to admit she'd given him something he hadn't had before. He missed the days when she'd had the stationery shop and had been so efficient and independent and yet waited breathlessly for him to get back when he was on the road like a schoolgirl really and tried so hard to please him. She seemed to

like the idea of having a rough-hewn husband and he of course liked the idea of possessing a genteel woman and she loved to listen to his stories of the road which were like stories from adventure books and loved to watch him eat amazed and delighted that he could consume so much food and he loved to watch her in the shop where everything was laid out so neatly in a perfect little world like a little house of dolls. They were just the two of them alone in the vast land closing out the night in the safety of their mobile home which he would know how to defend if it ever came to that. And at the same time it seemed to him that there was another country just out of reach, a fabulous land where dreams came

true. He never saw it in the flesh, only on the TV screen and in glossy ads and movie theaters and yet he knew it was real, so many prizes waiting to be claimed by the lucky few. He'd wanted those prizes when he was young and then he'd settled for something less and now he wanted them again.

Harry brooded and let his wife go her own way and took less interest in what the boys were doing, withdrawing the little he had invested of himself in them like a disgruntled customer closing a bank account. The older boy had a girlfriend and they came around the house and he was civil. His real life was in the woods. Families emasculated you though he affirmed their worth and wouldn't hear of anyone

knocking traditional values though he'd never been a churchgoer or a real family man, just someone who ruled a woman and four boys with an iron hand, but a patriot for sure. He had a flag raised outside his house and in the woods the men talked about how the country was going to the dogs. This was the real life, in the woods, logging and hunting and drinking beer and coming out for the barbecue on the Fourth of July and getting a little big in the belly and having arms like hams and not bothering about the fine print and the verbal sparring of pasty-faced little men in thousand dollar suits but cracking heads when the logs got jammed. Harry was bitter and disgruntled and tended to be short-tempered now.

For a while his circumstances had seemed ideal, four sons and a pretty wife, and men had envied him, but then it all seemed to fall apart, there was nowhere really for him to go, the boys breaking away from him, the wifely charms fading fast. He brooded and drank more than he should have but he stayed afloat like millions and tens of millions of men like himself and pulled himself along like those sea turtles making their way across the beach with their heavy shells to drop their eggs in the sand and disappear.

Millions and millions of Americans waited for the results of the contest. So many dreams were on the line, more dreams than you could count. John waited. Charlie waited. Joe waited. Tom, Dick and

Harry waited. Someone called Gus won. Everyone else lost.



CHAPLAIN CHARLIE

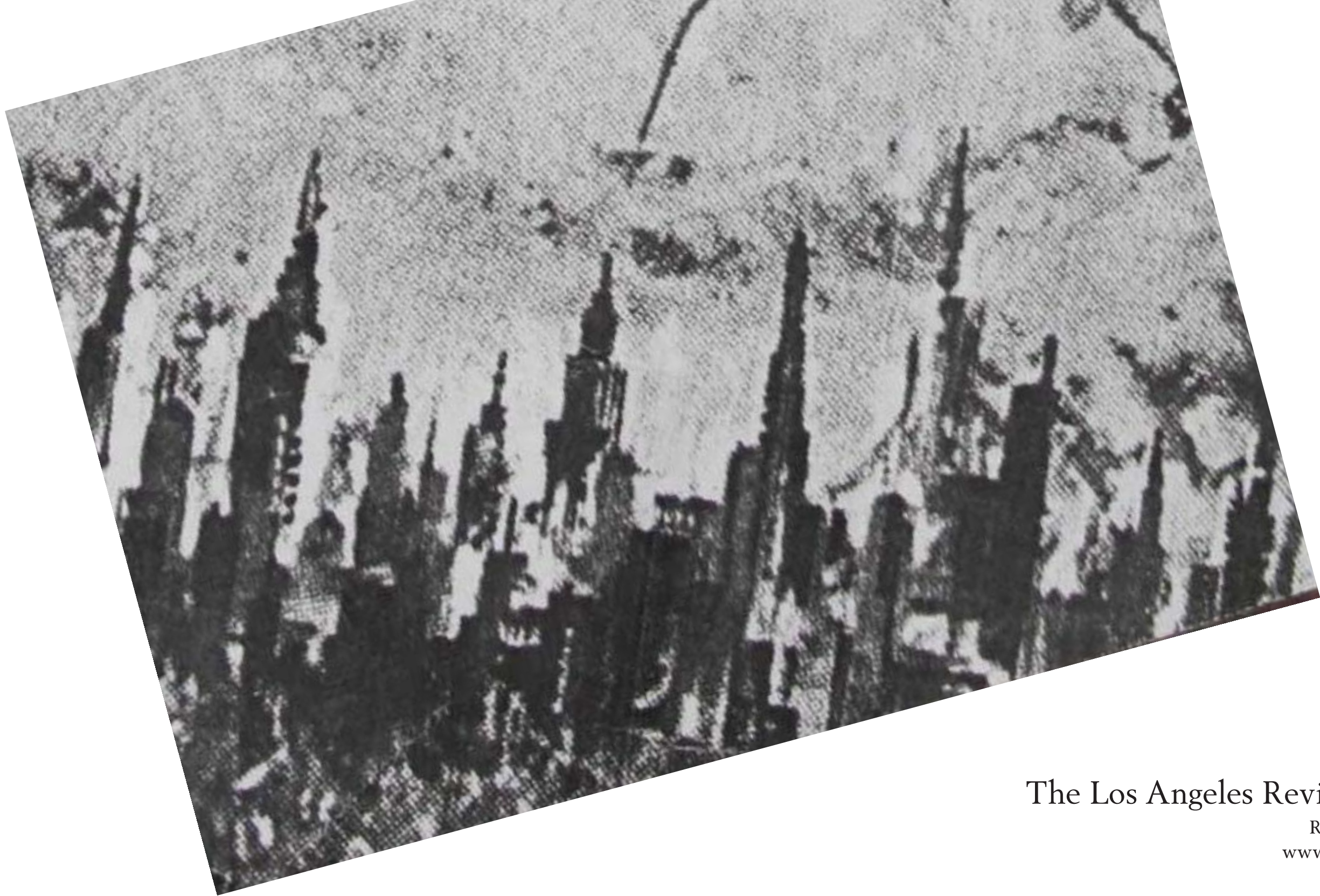
by CHRIS OKUM

Some people stare at me in disbelief when I tell them how optimistic I am about the future. They think I'm indulging in gallows humor. But this is how I feel. And being here, at the Front, has only served to strengthen my resolve. Yes, you see, man is evolving right before our very eyes. The blasted bits strewn throughout this desolate landscape attest to a great period of human growth. I'm sorry, but I don't want to be a naysayer. There are already too many of those types around. These are the types that hear the cries of anguish from their fellow soldiers and start to despair. I shan't think

of it. I am here because I want to help as many people as possible. That's what human beings are for. And I am a human being. I want people to be happy no matter what the circumstance. If one can find happiness in such a place then anything can be accomplished. Just yesterday I was doing my duty as a stretcher bearer, and we came to a young man whose legs were nothing more than two quivering bloody stumps. The young man asked me if I knew where his legs were. I said I did not. He asked me if I could put his legs back on. I told him that if I could find them I would do my best. He thanked me and then he smiled and died. But what a moment we shared. There was a generosity of spirit that I find very infectious. Imagine a world in which

there are a million, a billion moments just like this, all happening at the same time. The Earth is very large. There is enough room for everyone. There is enough water and food. There are enough natural resources to build a glittering global network of mechanized utopias. Maybe no one has heard the news. Maybe someone needs to tell everyone the news. Maybe I am that man. Or maybe not. I don't know. All I know is that my fellow man is eager to sacrifice himself for what he believes in. I see it every day and you can color me impressed. There is so much for us to be proud of. Look at what we can accomplish when we put our minds together. Look around you. It's all just so exciting. There is such passion and commitment. Some people

don't understand where the grace and glory are to be found, and I don't understand how these people cannot see what is before their very eyes. Think of the aeroplane. And the radio. What are these great inventions but the means by which mankind will finally get in touch with itself and come into full consciousness? Am I the only one who sees this? It can't be. To think that one day I might be able to reach millions of people with my voice and say, Nothing has been lost, what we have experienced here is but a minor historical hiccup, the Kingdom of God is within reach, and such and such, but oh, that was a big one, wasn't it? And a little too close. Perhaps we should move.



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