

AS-IS FICTION

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Spring 1999

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Ads

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- Gary M. Blakely II
(fall 1996)

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Thank you once again for
your interest in
AS-IS Fiction

THE WAR AT GIVERNY

by
Sydney Harth

The snow, the evening Amanda fired her first shot, fell heavily. She fired it after Tilly, enthusiastic tail wagging, had finished escorting some of the guests to the guest house and others to the gate where a van from the inn waited to take them to the village. Beautifully trained as Tilly was, she shook snow in every direction when she returned, finally settling herself on the hearth rug in front of the couch to which Mrs. Carruthers had lowered her bulk and blocking access to the heat. Mrs. Carruthers wondered out loud why she had agreed to visit Vermont during the worst winter in years. Cold air troubled her joints and gave her headaches.

She and her daughter Jewel had told each other frequently that an artist of Cliff's reputation should never have buried himself in the wilderness just because he married some little nothing of a librarian from these parts. Her inherited farm, they had to admit, did provide some pleasant settings for the neo-Impressionistic landscapes which engaged him in the summers to the exclusion of most other subjects, but during the long cold winters the farm was more a burden than an inspiration to art or anything else.

Monet was Cliff's ideal, and his mother and sister could understand why he wanted to change the name of Maple Hill Farm to Giverny. But why marry the girl? That boisterous crowd of her friends and relations actually had managed to turn a tumble-down barn into a studio of sorts, but he could have gone on renting that space from her as he did when he first discovered this godforsaken area. Jewel wished her mother had made a sensible offer to buy the place early on. They had no idea that the young miss Cliff married would not, at any price, have sold her farm early or late.

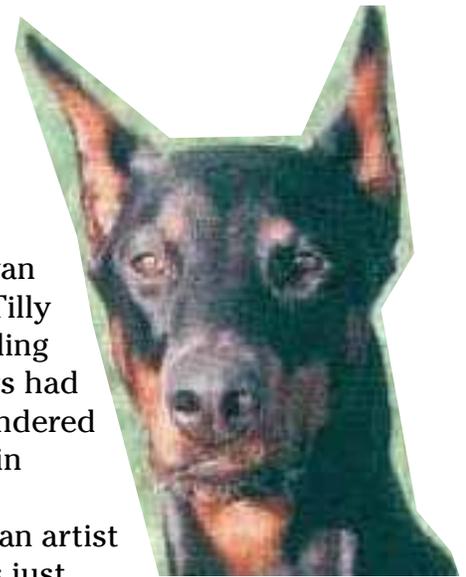
Five years into marriage, Cliff had yet to implement most of his grand plans for creating his own Giverny. Much of his time seemed to go to that autistic child his wife said was his. The wilds of Vermont might be a good place to hide such a creature, but Cliff was not thinking properly of his career. Some clients, while he was working on their portraits, might put up with staying in the guest house, another project undertaken by those rowdy relatives of his wife's starting with some old stone machine shed, but his better clients preferred staying at the inn in town, which dated from revolutionary days, and he could attract even better and richer ones if he had a studio in Boston.

Cliff's eyes examined a far away site as his mother repeated to him again the conclusions she and Jewel had reached about his career. Unable to rouse him, she looked at her watch and told well trained Tilly to fetch Pete for his walk. This imperative command Tilly ignored.

Amanda had just cleaned up after a large meal served to a number of Cliff's friends (possible clients) from New York as well as Jewel and her family, who had arrived for the holidays at Mrs. Carruthers's invitation. The New York crowd had talked wittily about Christmas in Vermont and the grotesque plumbing at the inn. None of them had offered to carry so much as a dish out of the kitchen for their hostess. The Jewel contingent, two parents and three teenagers, also had remained seated at the table and had been equally witty about the cramped guest house. They said they could endure the place only as long as the food held out and Amanda served up enough of it. Amanda had grabbed a bite on the fly in the kitchen, having had small desire and no time. to break bread with these strangers.

"Go fetch Pete for his walk," Mrs. Carruthers commanded again, now in a shout. Tilly lay motionless, her head between her front paws and a low growl in the back of her throat.

"Tilly's done enough tonight, and Pete doesn't need to go out any more, Mrs. Carruthers. He'll soon fall asleep, as Tilly would like to do. If we don't disturb them, we won't hear from either until morning," said Amanda, her gentle voice not reflecting a determination new to her.



The mildest and most self-effacing of women in those days, but always an excellent shot, Amanda had never before taken aim at Mrs. Carruthers. Cliff had persuaded her not to disturb his mother's belief in a vision superior to everyone else's. Much more sensible to let her enjoy the satisfaction of what she called, "doing only her duty," than to face her sulks and recriminations. "Mom only comes four or five times a year," Cliff kept saying, and Amanda, he thought, could face short periods of disorder. Was all the money to go to Jewel?

Love interested Amanda, at this point, much more than money, as Cliff knew. Her intense love already had weakened his grand (artistic) passion for her, but he let her imagine she could enhance his feelings by doing his bidding. Amanda knew she was making mistakes young women often make, but her heart was so full of Cliff, she could not stop herself.

Mrs. Carruthers had heard somewhere or read in some magazine that autistic children, like her four year old grandson, needed to use up their hyperkinetic energy by taking exercise every half hour or so throughout the day and half the night. Weather should make no difference, she told anyone who would listen. Cliff had spent hours training Tilly, an elegant doberman of German pedigree, to accompany Pete on his walks. Amanda had put in less training time with Tilly, but she related to animals more directly than Cliff, and she thought the bitch a bit skittish still for such a heavy responsibility. She usually, in hard weather when Mrs. Carruthers announced the child's need for outdoor exercise, took on Tilly's job herself, but that night she suddenly dug in her heels.

Her first shot had sounded more like a canon than the BB gun it was, falling as it had on a chance moment of complete silence. She plopped down awkwardly on the hearth rug next to Tilly, and brought the bitch back to sociability by scratching her ears. The other two watched their gentle play, Cliff with a vague smile, Mrs. Carruthers with a sigh, followed by, "Well, if you won't take care of your poor child, I suppose somebody must."

This formal declaration of war answered Amanda's single shot, and emitting great threatening grunts, Mrs. Carruthers set her huge form on its gouty feet and waddled over to snatch her cloak from the peg by the door where she had thrown it some days before. She clearly meant to teach Amanda a lesson in submission by taking Pete into the stormy night herself, and she expected unconditional surrender to follow this show of severity.

"Don't you dare touch my son," Amanda growled, an Uzi going off. She ran up the stairs with it to defend his room. Cliff said, "Oh my God, Amanda, behave yourself." She did not hear this command, nor would she have stopped if she had. She stayed with Pete in his room until voices no longer rumbled from below, and Mrs. Carruthers and Cliff trudged noisily up to bed.

The next morning, with the arrogance of someone who has successfully invaded Poland, Mrs. Carruthers began the phony war, making jokes about women who flew into a tizzy when they had to entertain for their husbands' benefit. She told Jewel over the eggs—which Amanda deliberately had overcooked—about the confrontation, calling it "Mandy's little outburst" as if it had been entertaining, and as if she did not recall how much her daughter-in-law hated that diminutive. They all ate the rock-solid eggs and droopy bacon amid hearty laughs, and to make sure Amanda understood her error, Cliff took her aside. Her conduct, he said, had to take into account his artistic sensibility as well as her duty to his mother. He asked for a guarantee of future improvement, asked her to remember how much he loved her, and how well he knew that pregnancy made her tense. She ran away from his lecture in tears. He optimistically told his mother these were tears of repentance.

Cliff, over the next ten years, lost some of his optimism. Sometimes he found no way to get through to Amanda, and he had to strike her for stepping too far out of line. He told his mother his life had become so harrassed he was ready to give up Giverny. He thought Amanda might improve if they sold the farm, put Pete in an institution, and moved with the other children to Boston. That would take away the sense of power that living at Giverny seemed to give her, but she would consent to none of his ideas. She took a moral high-ground which he found absurd and offensive.

She said the property had been in her family for more than two hundred years. Cliff said that was nothing. Lots of British peers were having to dispose of estates older than that. His reputation was growing, and it would grow faster in Boston, he said, and his mother agreed with her usual enthusiasm. He tried to call upon sympathies he remembered Amanda's having had in the old days when he told her his mother had grown too weak to come up to Vermont more than once a year, and felt his wife was cruel to keep him to herself so much.

"Go see your mom any time you want and stay as long as ever you want. I can get a lot of things done while you're gone," she told him in an indifferent tone. Finished tying up her long black hair, she walked to their bedroom door as if the conversation had ended.

"This place would fall apart without me," he said—another Monet—rising from bed and fumbling for his slippers. She snapped her fingers, and their current doberman, another Tilly who waited quietly to go downstairs with Amanda and have breakfast, found his slippers under the bed and presented him with them.

"Much you've ever done for this place. It will do nicely without you, and I won't stop you from moving to Boston. It's a lovely city, and it suits you. I'll stay here with the children because this place suits me, and Pete has more freedom here than any institution would give him."

"He doesn't need freedom. He needs order. Are you so dull-witted, you can't see that? What kind of moron have I married? You should live in a cave," he shouted at her as he put on his silk dressing gown and tied the sash with firm finality.

She laughed. "What a pompous ass you are."

"Insulting bitch," he said and slapped her face, wondering as he did so what had happened to that pale sensitive librarian he married.

Tilly, the most beautifully trained bitch ever to look out for Pete, had never seen him make such a move before. She had not been around when Mrs. Carruthers wanted to pay tuition for their bright son David at an excellent school in Boston and Amanda refused to let him go. Nor when Amanda sent David to the village to stay with someone and would not say with whom until Cliff's mother withdrew her offer in a fine display of contempt.

Cliff had been alone with Amanda the time he slapped her about David's education and alone with her every other time she had pushed him too hard. This time Tilly saw him and went for his throat. Amanda called her off before she could hurt Cliff. He died of a heart attack before an ambulance could plow through the snow to Amanda's farm or Giverny, depending how you looked at it.

Local authorities, who had come to like Cliff less each year and who thought Boston would be a good place for him to settle as long as Amanda and the children did not go with him, had to consider both putting Tilly to sleep and charging Amanda with murder. Sheriff Talbot felt seriously obliged to investigate the possibility that Tilly had gone round the twist for some reason. Amanda might also have commanded the dog to attack her husband. The local attorney relieved a lot of minds when he pointed out that no one could charge Amanda with more than manslaughter if she, on the spur of the moment, had commanded Tilly to attack after Cliff struck her. A broken nail of Tilly's caught on his dressing gown's shoulder indicated that the dog had jumped on him, and even Amanda's best friends assumed she had given some command because beautifully trained Tilly had always been the most stable doberman ever. Nobody had a single shred of real evidence one way or another.

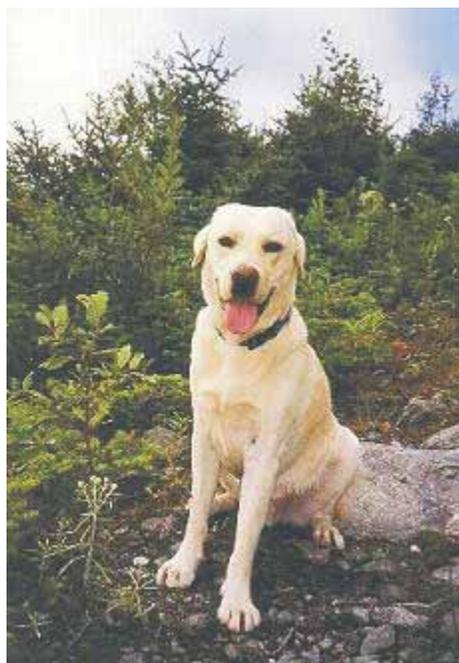
Mrs. Carruthers soon came steaming into town to vindicate her son. She demanded that Amanda be tried for first degree murder and sent to prison for the rest of her life, at the very least. The stupid clod had never known how to appreciate her husband's artistic temperament. She had made him live for years in her rural slum. She had refused to have their afflicted son institutionalized, in a sensible way, and refused to let the other two other children receive the education they deserved, although their kindly grandmother had offered David an excellent school and planned to offer the same to Peggy when her turn came. Mrs. Carruthers was most clear on Amanda's having killed Cliff to get her hands on the landscapes he had stacked in his studio which would one day be worth millions. Such a conniving woman, Mrs. Carruthers said, should receive the most severe penalty of the law, and her rabid dog should be put down forthwith.

Sheriff Talbot said he hoped Mrs. Carruthers understood that Cliff's death still was under investigation, and that they had first to decide whether any crime had been committed. The law had not, so far, accused Amanda of any foul play, and even if it should in the future, under Vermont law, which would cover her case, she was innocent until proven guilty. Tilly was under observation at the vet's. She had had all her shots and probably was not rabid, but occasionally the shots did not take, like with some dogs on Okinawa when Sheriff Talbot was in service there, and it seemed right to quarantine Tilly for ten days. She was a guard dog, not an attack dog, and from such good lines that he felt sure she would not have attacked without serious provocation. Unless she had some awful disease and did not know what she was doing. Whether Amanda provoked the bitch, or the animal hated Cliff enough to kill him to avenge Amanda, whom she obviously loved, remained a mystery so far. He promised to keep Mrs. Carruthers informed as he unraveled the matter.

Mrs. Carruthers, unsatisfied with this response, took rooms at the inn, from which vantage point, joined by Jewel, she could watch Sheriff Talbot's progress and make sure he made some. He reported in a few days that the vets considered Tilly healthy. "She went after Cliff, and if she ever repeats such a move we'll put her down, but around here we believe in giving a great dog two chances," he said.

"That insane beast killed my son," Mrs. Carruthers howled.

Sheriff Talbot pointed out that Cliff had died of a massive coronary. "I kept telling the man to get more exercise," he said. Amanda testified at the inquest that Cliff had slapped her often, but never when anyone was around. This time, she thought they were again alone. She thought Tilly had gone down for breakfast, and she would hardly have given her any command. Mrs. Carruthers, at that defense, leaped to her feet and called Amanda a liar. No one else in the room thought so, and the inquest brought in a verdict of "accidental death". Mrs. Carruthers immediately and loudly pronounced this verdict a corruption of justice, not surprising among a bunch of impoverished illiterate louts. Jewel led her mother out of the courtroom before Sheriff Talbot fulfilled his threat to arrest her for disturbing the peace if she talked out of place again.



Amanda remained with Pete, and David, and little Peggy on the family farm. The Tilly who had attacked Cliff stayed with them, but Amanda boundry-trained her, no longer letting her go where Pete went as she had before. Any questionable dog violence in town might be blamed on this Tilly, and Amanda loved her enough not to take risks with her. She trained a golden retriever named Jamie as Pete's new dog, and she could, once Jamie learned his duties, safely leave this son alone with the golden for hours at a time. Tilly happily followed Amanda around the farm until old age took her away. Dogs and bitches, unlike humans, always return love for love, and Amanda said that out of gratitude for this loyalty, and because she had loved Tilly so much in return, she could not bear to live closely with another doberman bitch. Her next companion would be a dog and a lab. She named the charming almost white yellow lab she found Chamois. Tilly was no name for a dog.

ALEXIS

by Jack Beavers

The first sweet touch of her lips came long after Tommy saw her. Years after. After the drugs had killed Jessie. 5 years after they had found her fucked-out corpse by the fetid waters of the Guadalupe. It isn't rape if you wait till they OD, just for your 411.

That first day had been drenched with sun and coffee, wholesome pursuits for a bunch of kids waiting to see who would be the lucky pallbearers and who would take the path of least resistance. Tommy always thought it would be him getting lowered by his mourning friends, sure that 27 was his magic number. "Just like Janis and Kurt, man!" That was the battle cry in those numbed moments, but the twinge of paradox rang through him even then, though he didn't admit it. Big difference between those romanticised meteors and Tommy the unknown sax-man: no-one would miss him enough to immortalize his passing with bad posters. That, and the fact that he was too much of a suburban pussy to spike.

That first day. Jessie had told him to meet her at the Keystone, a too-clean, too-new cafe where dirgy brats gathered to sulk and spill mochas on copies of No Exit with uncracked spines. Tommy was there a lot, too, but fancied himself a true neo-boho kinda guy. You could tell because his Kafka collection was tattered from hours of feverish, frustrated study. He was empty handed today. Days spent with Jessie tended toward the unproductive, and he wasn't going to lose his bleak bible in some stoned-out squat later. Early for a change, he got his drink and a table at the front, so he could watch the door, smoking and distancing himself from the black eddies of bad poets that were already collecting in the shadowy corners.

The sun felt good. Really good. His eyes stung a little, still tender from whatever dipshit endeavour that had ended with torpor the night before. But damn! The sun seeped into his palid skin like a new nutrient, better than the coffee that warmed his empty belly with sugar and the all-important alkalioids. It even stopped his cringing for a while. Tommy held that moment to his chest, gently squeezing its texture till it stuck.

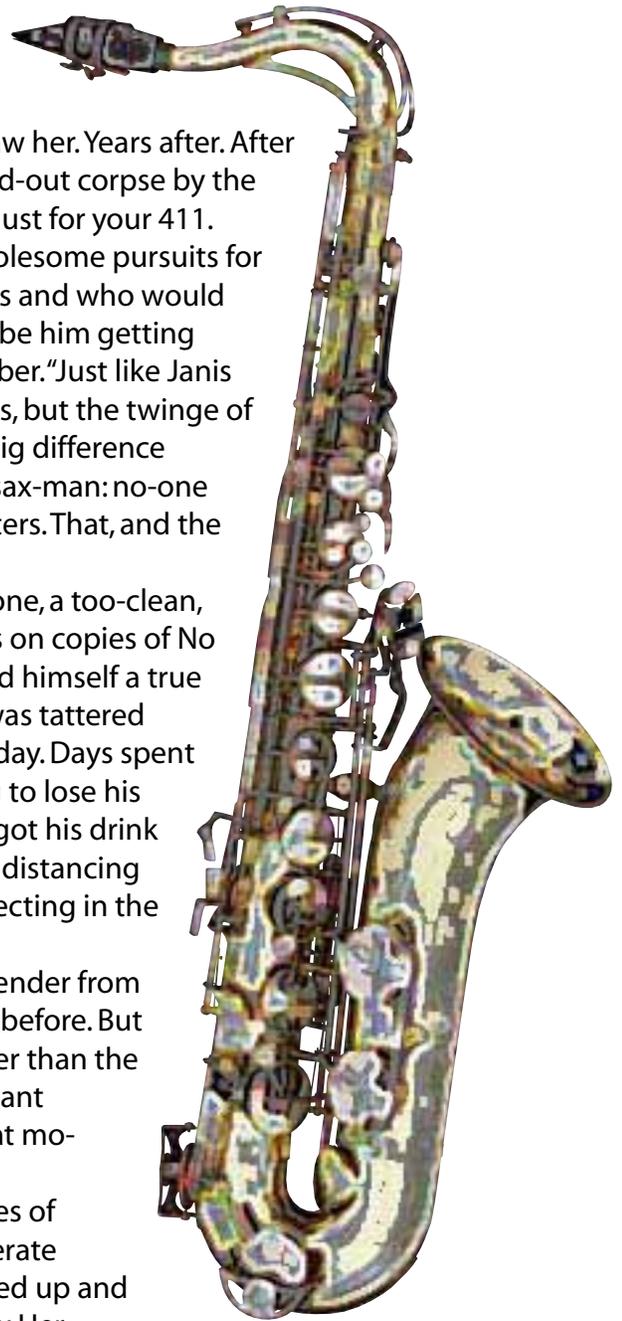
He heard Jessie's steps, those long legs stretching out paces of impossible length, tapping her boots down firmly in a slow deliberate rhythm that was shared only by lovers; a post-coital strut. He looked up and blew a kiss, the kind of dramatics that go with that scene...and saw Her.

That first day she was like a black sun. Another kind of nutrient he hadn't realized he needed. He couldn't put his finger on why. Cute, yeah, but cats are cute too. No obtuse breasts. Nice curves, but his current fuck-mate had better. Way better, actually, Charise had hips that sank men into submission. The eyes? The smile, that wicked little mouth that curled up on her face and promised the moon for a VERY high price? Nope; again, nice, but if that was it negotiations were closed. Was it the way she made no sound when she moved?

"...and so she'll only be here for a week or so." Tommy realized that not only had he missed some vital information here, but he was holding her hand, and those eyes and that smile and all were very close now.

"Charmed, I'm sure." Swell, thought Tommy as soon as that trite bit of pretension popped out. She made a slight gesture with her head, a kind of sly nod with a bit of English on it. Nice. Her mouth was still curled in its Mona Lisa bargaining position, but she withdrew her hand slowly.

Very nice. Tommy knew he would be saving his pennies to buy the moon from this girl, although he had no idea why or just what the hell he was going to do with the moon. He also knew that it wouldn't be happening today, or during this precious week before she returned to wherever fallen angels come from.



They spent that first day chatting, smoking, being snotty together in a fun kind of way, vacillating between gente conversation and talk of genital peircing. Tommy at some point realized that they were all sober. That was when he knew Jessie was subtly tuning the social machinery of the day. He let her; she definitely knew best in this case. This was one of the few times he ever let her take the reins.

Now he wondered if he should have let her do it more. 'Course, that would have probably ended with a wild night on the oily bank of the 'Lupe with a rusty needle in his arm and a transient's diseased choad in his ass. Tommy always wondered about how the truly charming souls wound up dying in gutters and halfway houses.

He had never slept with Jessie, in the biblical sense. They had rubbed each other crazy, had seen each others' bodies in many stages of dress and undress, shared the same bed on many occasions in various states of relative intoxication, flushed with need and crazed debuachery. But never fucked. She was (when in shape and not strung out) striking, full of curves and sensual motion. It just never happened, so they were friends, not even conscious of maintaining sexual distance to protect that oh-so-fragile space so rare between the sexes. He always had a few female freinds, but it was always a matter of time before a beer too many came along and ruined it with a night (or day, or week or two years) of passion. Jessie had been different.

A charming soul, destined to be mangled.

Tommy looked at Alex's sleeping form. The early morning sun danced across her echrue skin, highlighting the suple swoop of her hips with golden fire. She was worth saving the pennies for, all these years. They were doomed now, he knew, the magic of unrequited lust had been dispelled by sweet consumption. Only a matter of time until they stopped talking to each other, or the talk was toned down to birthday cards from another state. This was Jessie's bad poster, an altogether unfitting tribute to her work. A cheap post mortum momento, the fleeting smell of sex and smoke and sweat in another sun drenched moment. He stroked her cheek, and as she sleepily reached out for him, held the moment to his chest forever.

Pleather

by Gregory Merritt Williams

Jefferson stood in the doorway of the small cafe as a heavy rain fell on the street behind him. It was an unusual rain for this city, being so forceful. He did not own a hat nor an umbrella; he shook the excess rain from his coat and ran his fingers through the short crop of his brown hair. Water danced above him as he did this. He wiped his forehead with his palm when it settled.

The cafe was dark except for amber lamps that hung low above the booths that lined the narrow establishment. From behind the counter the waitress waited until he was finished shaking off the rain. "Hi. Are you going to eat?"

Jefferson shook his head amiably and followed her as she pulled a menu from the rack that hung on the wall near the door. She wore a short flowery dress with lace trim and seemed taller than she was due to the immensity of her shoe's soles. She was attractive, her hair however was bright orange, a natural orange. In his experience Jefferson had found that "red-heads" were the craziest of all women and should be avoided despite their good looks. All that aside he could not help but smile at her just a little as she motioned to the booth that would be his.

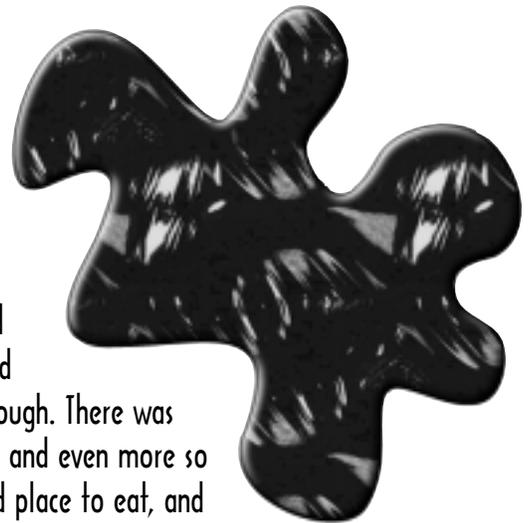
"Thank you," he said.

"Something to drink?"

He did not need to look at the menu, he ordered coffee.

"Do you know what you want yet besides that?"

"No," the waitress ran off to get the coffee, and Jefferson adjusted himself in the plush, pleather (plastic leather) booth. It was quite "puffy" and very large in some spots, very depressed in others, but it was comfortable enough. There was enough room to stretch out. He got as comfortable as he figured he could be, and even more so upon noticing the ashtray on the table before him. It was hard to find a good place to eat, and smoke. This was a big plus for Jefferson, being otherwise annoyed when ever and where ever he was kept from smoking. That was another one of the things he needed to quit, smoking, but now it was so much a part of him or he was so much a part of it. He was sure it was not in his favor in either case, but "whatever" as he often said.



Just then the waitress bounced up happily. "Here you go. One coffee. Can I get you anything else?" She was perky.

Jefferson had not yet even opened the menu. "Yeah, uh...I really didn't look at the menu yet. Can you give me a minute? I apologize."

She waived her hand and slid her pen back into her apron. "Don't worry about it. You look tired, have some coffee and then think."

"Uh...ok." They were the craziest of all girls, but by and by they were more polite than brunettes, at least from the get go.

"My name is Arial," figured she would have a name like that, "Just shout when you decide." She smiled and bounced off. She was perky. Probably too much caffeine.

The menu had nothing really, all sprouts and starch, but Jefferson knew he should eat; he could not remember the last time that he had eaten except for the fact that it was yesterday sometime before lunch should have happened. It did not happen though, now he would eat, but he wanted more than the "sprout bagle."

"Nothing interests you?" There was Arial again, happily bouncing.

"No, its not that. I just haven't eaten in a while and I was thinking of something more than sprouts."

"Oh," she said and tossed her hair slightly. It was curled and pulled up out of her face and hopefully the food. She did have a cute face at that, but these girls had been judged too dangerous. She continued. "Do you want a hamburger?"

" Well, yeah that would work, with fries. But that is not on the menu, " said Jefferson.

" It is if you look at the back of the menu, there is a big section called `Burger`. " She snapped the menu from his hands and flipped it over putting back between his fingers directly where it was before. " Ya see, " she asked perkily.

" Ah...yes. Thanks, I guess I am sleepier than I thought. "

" Did you have a long night? "

Jefferson thought about that question for a long moment, just as he was about to answer, the door opened. Two people came in a man and a women. Up until now Jefferson had been the only customer.

" Hold on. " Arial held up one finger to Jefferson, " I will be right back. " She strode up to the customers that had just come in and began leading them to their seats in the non-smoking section. They asked when they noticed him sitting in the booth.

Arial walked by smiling and holding up one finger at Jefferson. She ran behind the counter and began to get the other customer's drinks. What was it with her? She was obviously as crazy as any red head he had ever met. Admittedly he had only met four or five and of those only three were any where near attractive, but they were all crazy. Arial had to be the craziest of them all; he knew this just because he could tell. She was mad, but so perky? He should not have come here.

" Ok. "

" Uh..oh, uh...I`ll have the `Mushroom Burger`, " said Jefferson after Arial popped up out of nowhere.

" Ok. How do you want it done?"

"Cooked please. "

" Well done, " she said as she wrote on her pad. " That it?"

" Yes, " he answered.

" So are you going to tell me? "

Jefferson looked surprised.

" Did you have a long night? "

Jefferson looked at Arial. What did it matter if she was crazy? " Sister, you wouldn't believe it."

" Let me get your order in, and I`ll be back." She smiled and ran off again, her red hair bouncing behind her.

This was a bad idea. Jefferson knew nothing good could come out of a chance meeting with a red head; it had happened to many times in he past. He knew it was a bad idea. But then she was back, actually sitting in the booth and waiting for him to tell her. She wore green lipstick, sort of shiny. Jefferson could not help but smile, and she smiled back.

He began. " I guess it all started around four-thirty yesterday afternoon. I`m sitting at my desk, right? Right. So there I am, and my phone rings. I pick it up. Its a friend of mine from the fourth floor; he wants to go drinking after work. " Jefferson shrugged, his hair was starting to dry and stick up a little on top. " So I say, `Sure I`ll have a drink`, So I meet him at this bar down the street (The Ok Hotel its called, you know its kind of like that movie `Singles` except, well, different. Anyway there we are in the Ok Hotel having a drink in a booth near the bar.

That booth was uncomfortable by the way. I want you to know that."

" Really? "

" Yeah, its all made of wood and at ninety degree angles and what not. Mighty hard to sit in. "

" I`m glad we have nice booths, " said Arial, " You do like our booths right?"

" Of course? What`s not to like? " Jefferson was not above twisting the truth if it made a girl happy. Even if she was a red head.

" So you drank to much last night? "

" No, that isn't it at all. Let me finish the story."

" Oh, I`ll be right back, I think those people`s salad`s are up. "

" Ok. " Jefferson could not help but be giddy. She was attractive, and very cute. If only she would bring more coffee. His was almost gone.

She was back in a flash and ready to listen, she even brought more coffee. Who cares if she is crazy?

"So go on," she said.

"Uh, Oh," then Jefferson continued. "So there we were, me and my friend, his name is Androff, Eric Androff." Arial looked astonished but he put up one hand, "I know, I know, but he is a nice enough guy. Any way, there we are..." He stopped. Arial was laughing.

"What is it," he asked?

"Nothing. You just said 'there we were' like eighteen times." She kept laughing, putting her hand over her mouth as if that would stop it.

"I will just continue," Jefferson was intent at this point, "There we were, in the bar, drinking. We aren't really even talking about anything important; mainly we were venting about work when suddenly we see our boss walk in. Well he is kind of 'our boss' he is the CEO, he's everyone's boss, but not our direct boss. Anyway, he is with this girl right? Yeah, a girl, not his wife, not his daughter, a girl. A youngish woman that is. He isn't a pedophile even though he is a falanderer. Uh? No, we weren't surprised at all. We heard things around the office, and what does he expect taking her to a place so close to the office?"

"Did he see you?" Arial asked from across the table, "Can I have one of your cigarettes?"

"Sure, and no he didn't. So we kept drinking and watching from the booth near the bar. Finally, my friend and I are rather buzzed.

"Do you want to go talk to him?" I ask my friend because he is bit squimish at best, but I'm not going to go over there you see.

But my friend says 'sure,' and he gets up as fast as lightening and starts walking over there. 'Mr. Jenkins!' he says, 'what a wonderful surprise?'

'Who the hell are you?' asks my boss.

'Androff, Eric Androff from the fourth floor.'

'Oh' says my boss. He isn't amused you see.

'Say Mr. Jenkins I was wondering how everyone is. Your wife? Your kids? Haven't seen them since the Christmas party.'

'You never met my damned kids! Get out of here!'

'What do you mean? We went golfing two weeks ago.'

'I don't know what the hell you are trying to pull here you son of a ..a...a..' my boss looks like he's in pain all of a sudden, and he grasps his chest.

He dropped dead right at the table there; he was trying to stand up to give it to Androff, if you know what I mean."

"That's awful! I'll be right back." Arial was up and off again. When she returned she had Jefferson's burger." So go on."

"So there we are, our boss dead on the floor of the Hotel. The bartender calls an ambulance, and me and my friend just stare. Then the girl that he was with opens her mouth.

'So which one a you guy's is gonna pay me?'

'Pay you?' I ask.

'Yeah, you kill my trick, one of you fucker's is gonna pay!'

'Look, I would get out of here before the cops show up you bitch!' Androff has never been very tactful.

'Fine, we'll see what's up you shitheads.' Then she just stormed out.

I look at my friend like, 'what the fuck?'

"Did the cops mess with you?" Arial was leaning forward now.

"No, they asked us what happened and all that. They could see he was just a drunk old guy, and we didn't even tell them about the girl until the bartender brought it up.

"So there was a prostitute with him?" The policemen looked at us with scorn for not telling him when he asked if he was with anyone.

` Yeah, there was a hooker with him. ` I slapped Androff on the shoulder for saying it like that.

` Oh, well did she give him anything?`

` What do you mean, ` I asked.

` Did they do any drugs?`

` How should we know?`

` Just a question.` The cop was kind of a dick, but then he told us we could go. It had only taken about two hours for the whole thing to end. They hauled the boss away in a bag. The police took our phone numbers and asked us not to mention the incident until his family was notified. We said sure and stayed for another drink. After that we needed one.

` How late were you there? Is that why you were up all night?`

` No, not at all, by now it was only around nine o` clock. We left the bar after the last drink. `

` So why were you out so late, ` asked Arial very cutely.

` Well you see, there was still the matter of the prostitute. She wanted her money very badly...so I guess she went and got her pimp who came into the bar after the police had left.

` One of you sons a bitchess gonna pay my bitch for her trouble.` He was a large man, wore quite a bit of gold. I wasn` t about to pay him a damn thing that was for sure, but I was wary. I did not want to get shot because my boss died before he had a chance to pay.

` This is all a misunderstanding.` I tried to be as polite as possible. ` We didn` t hire her.`

` You killed her fuckn` trick` he said.

` Did not!` Androff interjected just as I was cooling him down.

` Hey! Shut the little man up.`

` Look` I said, ` We aren` t paying since we did not get laid. We never touched her.`

` So, if you get laid you` ll pay? `

` Well yeah, if we wanted to fuck a hooker.` Androff just did not get it, but at least he tried. But not good enough. The pimp grabbed him by the lapel of his jacket and picked him up from the bar stool and held him off the floor. The pimp was a *very* large man after all.

He looked at Androff and said, ` You gonna pay if you take the pussy or not. I` m lettin` the other little man off the hook.

Androff looked at me as I let out a great sigh of relief and then up at the pimp. ` ok,` he said.

` Be happy you gettin` the pussy.`

` ok,` Androff said.

Then the pimp told us that we had to go with him.

` Why do I have to go?` I shouldn` t of had to go with them, I didn` t want to fuck the prostitute.

` Because I said so dip-shit. Isn` t it enough that I am showen you any god damn empathy at all?`

So I went, followed, well he sort of pushed us out of the bar and into his car outside.`

` That is weird. I` ll be right back.` Some more customers had come into the cafe and Arial went to seat them and get their drinks. Jefferson continued to eat the french fries that were left on his plate. `Ok, I` m back.` Arial said as she slid back into the booth.

` I don` t know. I don` t feel like telling the rest right now. Suddenly I am very full and very groggy.`

` But you stayed up all night because of Androff? `

` Yeah, and went into work this morning.`

` Ok, I` ll let you off the hook, but you have to answer one question. Did you fuck the hooker?`

` No. But I did inherit the `pimpdom`.`

` What?`

" Ariel, I am sorry, " began Jefferson, whose eyes were drooping more and more, " but I should go before I can't, and it is such a long story."

" Ok, I understand." She got up and returned with his check.

She looked somewhat sad as he feebly counted out the bills and a healthy tip. He looked up at her and caught a smile.

"Would you like me to tell you the rest sometime?" He knew she was crazy, but that did not matter.

She looked up from under her eyelashes, " Yeah. "

" Yeah? " Jefferson smiled back at her. " I'll need your phone number."

" Give me yours. You could be 'a crazy' for all I know."

Rye

by Ben Oh

a.

Looking out over the ocean from his balcony he began to realize that he had done nothing with his life. He had spent his teenage years in listless anxiety, playing the guitar for a tape recorder on which he had recorded a mild collection of folk tunes he'd authored. He liked to play it back to himself on Friday and Saturday nights when the soft arpeggios of guitar strings affected him in a pleasing and melancholic way. He remembered the songs, not the people or his family, his one girlfriend, or high school events. He remembered the songs and the book that he would purposely lay beside the copy of the Bible on his nighttable. He'd read only parts of the Bible and he had read *Catcher in the Rye* several times. As the sun darkened and sank to meet the edge of water on the horizon, he held the dog-eared copy in his hands and flipped through the pages, stopping now and then to glance over underlined paragraphs. The ocean was real, he could smell the sea in the air, hear the waves licking the shoreline, the balcony railing cold against his forearms, and he could taste the burning wood from a nearby campfire, but it felt unreal, everything elements of a sensory screen that concealed a great void. He struggled against this feeling, beginning to focus his thoughts on his situation. He had to do something, leave his wife, leave the state, today, tomorrow, this week. There was something profound he wanted to think, to put into words, it was there, matted under the confusion, the countless meaningless words weighing down his brain, his body and spirit. Frustrated, closing his eyes, he blurted out, "Hunting hat."

b.

He couldn't erase the image of the prostitute's legs from his mind. They were so skinny they reminded him of the legs on young girls at the summer camp where for two years he'd worked as a camp counselor. The stench from her mouth, the acrid and warm odor from between her legs, and the salty taste of her neck were in his system still as he stood on a bridge in the middle of the park. He felt infected and ashamed. He'd given her an extra twenty dollar bill after she became furious when he stopped just as he was about to penetrate her. She looked down at his limp penis and began to mutter obscenities. He couldn't understand why she was so angry. "What are you, a fag?" she said. He wanted to give her another twenty. When he closed his wallet the prostitute zipped up her skirt and walked out, saying she'd known it the moment he'd come up to her. A few minutes later he left the hotel and took a taxi cab to the park. Now looking down at the frozen water below the bridge he wondered about the ducks. He wondered if that prostitute even remembered him. He still felt embarrassed, but he wanted to help her. It wasn't the sex that had drawn him to her. He wasn't sure how he had let it get that far. Suddenly nothing seemed as important as helping her and not letting go. He tried to recall the street where he'd found her, but lost his concentration when he heard the music from the carousel somewhere in the park. At first he started walking in the direction of the sound, but then suddenly he could hear nothing and absentmindedly stopped by a park bench. He sat down and some minutes later a man sat beside him. "If a body catch a body, isn't that right?" the stranger said, dropping bread crumbs on the ground, waiting for pigeons to come. "Don't pigeons go south?" he asked the stranger. The man smiled back without replying and continued to shake pieces of stale bread from his loosely closed hand. Closing up his new book he walked away. Soon it would be time. He would walk the streets for a while, perhaps with a little luck find the girl, make his way to the apartment building and wait outside. Standing on the edge of the curb, waiting for the walk signal, he heard a woman call out, "Holden!" and he turned around to see her raise her arm to stop a cab. In his head the music repeated, "Surely you're not happy, you no longer play the game." He said to himself, "It is. This fall i think you're riding for is a special kind of fall, it's a horrible kind."

c.

He had heard it in his words, his voice, and he marvelled at the idea that perhaps he knew what would happen. The lyrics were clear to him: he had given up. As he watched him close the door to the chauffeured car he heard in his head, “Do it, do it, do it, do it, do it.” It had all come to this, this moment in history, neither of the past nor the future, but which would close the one chapter and begin a startling new one. Everything would be changed. He reached into his coat pocket for the gun he’d purchased a couple of days before. He felt for the safety switch. He didn’t feel nervous, and it occurred to him that it was so strange, because he felt calm. The calm filled him with conviction. As he raised his arm and prepared to pull on the trigger he suddenly heard shots being fired. Behind him stood another figure in a long coat with his arm still raised, his arm bouncing up and down with each shot. ...Three, four, five. Maybe there was another, he wasn’t sure, he’d turned his head to see the victim on the ground and felt paralyzed. Then he looked at his own gun, at the fallen figure and at the person who’d fired the rounds, but found the street light was too dim to reveal his face. But it was his face, he thought. Then the gunman walked away. It was over, and he felt a diminished sense of closure, a lack of satisfaction, at the mark in history he’d nearly left. To himself he said, “Zoo.”

IT'S SO HARD TO GET GOOD SERVANTS

by Anjana Basu

She was one of those thin, pinched foreign women who look as though the sun has sucked every drop of life out of them and left only a withered husk behind. The black and white photographs scattered in their brightly polished silver frames on the occasional tables showed her to have once been pretty, though people who met her later, after her husband's death, found that hard to believe. In the days of once upon a time, when the world was young and dashing, her husband, the seven-handicap polo player, had discovered her blooming in the shadow of a tent at Cowdray Park. An English rose, who had not borne the transplanting to foreign soil too well.

When her husband was alive and the house was full of celebrities, she had managed to suppress her distaste for the country and its climate. A bearer who could mix a perfect dry martini, she vowed, made up for a lifetime of Delhi summers. There were other consolations: a sprawling bungalow set in an often dusty square of lawn, neatly bordered by what she called 'English' hedges; darkened rooms crammed with overstuffed chintz covered sofas and a frenetic social life that raged up and down the capital and occasionally moved, like the feast it was, to Simla or Mussoorie or Chail.

It was more luxury than a general practitioner's daughter from the Midlands had any right to expect, averred the uncharitable after too many perfect dry martinis. But most of them contented themselves with admiring the dewy tea rose complexion and slapping the polo player heartily on the back. After all, an English wife was an achievement, even though she held her teacup with an abominably crooked little finger and was certainly not the debutante she claimed she was. During her husband's lifetime, she flitted starry eyed through the cocktails and the dinners, counting all the personages she met and making sure that she invited them home at least once, so that she could fill her letters to England with maharajahs, film stars and politicians. She collected them the way a lepidopterist does and stored them neatly labelled in the glass cases of her brain. Her conversation overflowed with stories of her encounters: 'the Prince was telling me yesterday at dinner...'so and so...she's so sweet for someone so famous.' She was never quite part of any of the crowds at all the parties that she frequented because she never knew any of the right things to say. With the Indians, she blundered from topic to topic, confusing all the religious customs grafting a Muslim name with a Hindu rite or vice versa and there were never enough expatriates to keep her totally occupied. In the beginning, her husband thought her naivete quite charming and paraded her as his little ignoramus. The image suited her tea rose complexion. But as time went on and the tea rose began to wither, most people found it irritating. They dismissed her airily as 'Neel's English wife' and stranded her in corners with newcomers

who were willing to be enchanted by her confusion.

The parties she threw for her husband were organized with the precision of military parades and catered for with a profusion of bland curry and stodgy plum pudding that she swore reminded her of the puddings that her mother had made at home. Muslims and Hindus alike dug their spoons into the dark brown crumbly mass that they were convinced contained suet or some other such substance, but out of politeness no one protested. Most people drank themselves into a comforting stupor and left the party rosy with benevolence, perfectly willing to forget the poor quality of the food.

By the time her husband died she had become very much a part of the social life of the capital. It was hard to imagine a time when she hadn't been there, clutching her sola topi against a chilly December wind and trying to look as though she enjoyed the dust and confusion of yet another polo match. "I'm too old," she'd confide to one or the other of her acquaintances. "And even when I was just out, I spent more time in the tent eating strawberries and cream than I did watching the match. It was the done thing, you see. Mind you, Neel looked so very dashing the day I first saw him on his flea bitten grey..." Neel died abruptly of a heart attack as the first chukker of a match against the Jodhpur Four ended. He had no relatives, so the bungalow was hers without dispute.

She stood looking as dazed and out of place at the ghats as she had on the polo ground, submitting with limp hands as the priest made her dip down into the waters of the Yamuna three times. The other team members promised that she would want for nothing as long as she lived because they would look after her and, unlike most promises made in the heat of the moment, they kept theirs. One or the other of their wives would look in on her during the day and take her out shopping or visiting. In the beginning it was simply a custom - after a while, as they all grew older, it became a habit. Neel passed out of her life but his passing failed to change it.

For a while she toyed with the idea of returning home, but the thought of the Midlands and its narrow confines seemed unexciting after champagne parties with Nawabs and film stars. In Delhi, she was Neel Randhawa's widow, once the wife of a dashing seven-goal handicap star. In England she would dwindle to 'Dr. Smythe's daughter who married that Indian polo player, poor misguided thing,' a dull, scarfed woman who made trips to the corner grocer's once a week and lived off her stories of the exotic Indian climate, going older and greyer and more and more misunderstood. There was no choice to be made. She stayed in her bungalow and grew more particular about her hedges with every passing year.

When Neel was alive, he took most of the decisions of hiring domestic help off her shoulders, or left them to his old manservant, Jaffar. His wife's relations with Jaffar had always been tinged with an edge of coldness because she felt the man took undue advantage of his position in the

household. True, he was one of the few butlers in Delhi who could mix a Creme Curacao or a Brandy Alexander, but he was also one of the most unreasonable. He insisted on napping for three hours in the afternoon, in addition to the time allotted him for his prayers. The truth was that Jaffar had been with Neel since his bachelor days and had seen far too many women walk in and out of the bungalow to be particularly impressed with the one his master had finally married. He had seemed to consider her beneath his dignity and Neel had once made the mistake of telling her that Jaffar believed every man should have at least two wives, especially if the first one happened to be foreign. Every time she saw Jaffar, she remembered the way Neel had lurched in to the drawing room choking on a fit of laughter to spew out the words. "He's jealous of you, poor man. He thinks his position will be affected." Jaffar's eyes glinted like two chips of black ice over the steel of his cocktail shaker. He loomed over the neat lines of his white uniform like a threat. A woman born in the country, more confident of her position, would have sacked him outright immediately after marriage. She was not confident, so she'd tried subtly to hint him out of her house but Neel, no matter how loving, had never quite seemed to take the hint. And Jaffar was such a legend! Princes tried to entice him away to grace their mirrored teakwood bars. "He's half the reason people come to our parties, Neel had told his wife. "As long as you have him, you can be sure everyone will look at you with respect." And that had ended the matter for the length of Neel's life. But after Neel's death, he had seemed to loom large and threatening.

Jaffar stonily receiving the widow with a consoling brandy as she returned from the ghats and then calling her maid after allowing her precisely two weak drinks. "The memsahib is tired, take her upstairs, it has been a long day." She understood Hindi now, even spoke it with some semblance of fluency and it seemed to her that those words held a note of contemptuous dismissal. Even though Jaffar was useful, she thought, attempting to pull herself into the feeble brandy haze and trying to forget those three dips into the dirty river that had supposedly ensured continuity for her husband's atma, Jaffar had to go.

She said nothing for the first few months because they were difficult ones, despite the presence of her husband's team. Jaffar brought a kind of order into the house, made sure that everything ran on smoothly oiled wheels and that the cook did not cheat her too much on the household expenses. "He must be such a comfort to you," cooed Minkie Singh, waving her long ivory cigarette holder. "My husband always says that he did everything for Neel." It was Minkie's day for keeping her company, a day in which they usually drove to Nizamuddin to bargain for rose attar or picnicked in the ruins on champagne and smoked trout. "Not such a comfort," she said, with more sharpness than she intended. "Jaffar's spoilt. Neel gave him far too much

freedom when he was a bachelor!" What was it Jaffar had done? Looked scornfully at Minkie's cigarette holder and brought her an ashtray with just a hint of condescension? She really couldn't remember. And when the words left her mouth, she felt immediately guilty as if Neel would hear them. Minkie had picked them up on cue: "Oh these servants, they do take such advantage of one. But one can't do without them, can one? Now take my Munna Maharaj..." and she launched into a long tirade about her fifteen-year-old family chef.

After a while, it seemed to her that every conversation that she had was about a domestic crisis, ending with the condemnation of an old, faithful retainer. They had all suffered, Minkie, Nafisa, Rina...it was so commonplace. "And after all you do for them. No gratitude whatsoever!"

Jaffar was so awkward that she dreaded having guests - she was terrified that he would express his disapproval in some embarrassing fashion. The vacuum that was left by her husband's absence was gradually filled by her hatred of Jaffar. The big six-foot man who had tracked mud on her verandah after his polo matches began to recede into a distance where he could be comfortably regretted.

"I think Jaffar's beginning to become some kind of obsession with her," Nafisa told her husband placidly one evening. "I think she resents him being there while poor Neel isn't."

"That's bad," said her husband.

"I think we should find a replacement for Jaffar."

"Who were you thinking of?"

"Suleiman Khan said he needed a butler for his Simla summer house. He said he was trying to train one of his durwan's sons or something. Perhaps they can just swap." And so, the plan was proposed and accepted, though at the last minute, the durwan's son cum bartender could not quite be located. Suleiman Khan shrugged the embarrassment off with the suavity of a once Ambassador to the Elysees Palace and promised to find a replacement for Jaffar as soon as was conveniently possible.

She was conscious of an immeasurable sense of relief as soon as Jaffar salaamed his way out of her presence with the customary wishes for longevity and good health. Now she could devote time to mourning her husband as he should be mourned. She could tell her friends how she had been Neel's only consuming passion without dreading to find Jaffar eavesdropping disbelievingly on the conversation. Now she could rearrange the running of the kitchen as she had always wished. She sank back into the sofa cushions with a deep bubble of brandy in her hand.

But somehow her contentment was shortlived. Things in the bungalow did not order themselves quite so smoothly. When she had guests over, she had to supervise the martinis, because the mali who had been pressed into temporary service could quite as easily drown them in water as in gin. Jaffar left a

gap that was more difficult to fill than the one Neel had left. Her guests finally had to resort to pouring themselves their own drinks. In the three weeks that it took Suleiman Khan to find her a substitute butler she suffered greater agonies of embarrassment than she could have ever believed possible. She caught herself staring at the door that separated the kitchens from the drawing room hoping to catch a flash of Jaffar's starched white jacket. "You must be relieved that he's gone," Minkie said, catching her in mid-stare one evening.

"Relieved?" She asked guiltily, "Oh yes, I'm relieved. Yes, that's it, relieved."

She was so relieved that she didn't bother to question the man who arrived the next day brandishing Suleiman's name like a battle flag. She waved him towards Jaffar's uniform and sank back into the sofa waiting for a brandy to be borne to her, crisp with soda, the way Jaffar had known she liked it.

The new man came and salaamed clumsily and stood and waited. "What are you waiting for?" she asked. "Brandy soda lao!" He fumbled among the bottles in the bar. She listened to the thud of each bottle being put back for what seemed an interminable while. A while in which she watched the second hand of her watch circle its rhinestone-studded face. Her mouth was already parched for the bite of the brandy and soda. Finally she couldn't bear it any longer. She heaved herself out of her nest of cushions and found him standing with helpless hands beside the bar. "What are you waiting for?" she demanded. "That's the brandy - that bottle there." She went to the bar and poured herself the brandy and sat down to drink it, her pleasure considerably diminished while the man stood there glimmering like a phantom in the shadows. She was tempted to grab the phone, call Suleiman Khan and demand an explanation for this strange behaviour, but a sip or two of her drink persuaded her to wait for a few days. Perhaps he was nervous, perhaps he needed time to find his way around a strange house.

Nafisa dropped in at teatime and was shown the new acquisition, who did duty under the heavy silver tray. Nafisa looked him up and down and observed that she found him a trifle coarse. "Not quite what I would have expected Suleiman to send you. Looks more like a goonda to me." She herself had not observed that. He looked like the typical class of Indian servant - though she was bound to agree that Jaffar had had more presence. The tea was coarse and badly brewed. She sent him back to the kitchen to fetch another pot and he went reluctantly, dragging his feet. "Are you sure Suleiman sent him?" Nafisa asked, surprised.

"Oh my dear," she said, "but they're all like that, so abominably rude... I mean these natives..." It was out before she could stop herself and she realized that Nafisa was offended. Nafisa looked at her watch and suddenly realized the time. She had to be gone, she'd promised to take Kissi to the park, no, she really couldn't stop for another cup of tea.

It was twenty years since the word 'native' had passed her lips. It shook her and made her gruff to the bearer when he came with the fresh tea. "You think the memsaab will stay to be insulted by your bad service? Take that pot away juldi!" And somehow in the middle of the shouting the heavy silver pot fell from the tray and the tea gushed out onto the carpet. "Now look what you've done! Meryem! Idhar aao! Juldi!" The teapot was dented and the carpet stained. "I'm going to take it out of your pay," she declared, once she had assessed the damage. "Now get out of my sight!" All the while she was ranting, he glared at her with his small angry eyes and she felt uncomfortably that she was in the presence of a wild animal. In mid sentence he turned his back on her and left the room, deaf to her shouts.

The maid told her later that he had stalked out of the house, collected his things and walked out of the bungalow. Under other circumstances, she would have picked up the phone and called Nafisa or Minkie but she was afraid that Nafisa had spoken to Minkie and the others. She sat in her drawing room all evening fretting and staring impotently at the phone. Neel would never have forgiven her for a mistake like that. Finally, she did the only thing she could, which was ring Suleiman Khan.

Suleiman was, for once, not gracing one of his innumerable parties. She couldn't hear the echo of voices on the other side of the phone. "A servant?" he said, "But I haven't found anyone yet to match your incomparable Jaffar. How you must hate me - but wait, what is this man's name?" She told him. There was a dramatic pause on the other end of the line. Then his breath hissed out in dismay, "But of course, I dismissed him the other day. My dear Mrs. Neel, have nothing to do with him. He is extremely dangerous, he has taken up with the local charas smugglers." The smooth, polite voice was suddenly full of concern. "I have no idea how he got your address. Please have nothing to do with him."

She was shaken by what she believed was a close encounter with death. It seemed to be stalking her - first her husband, now this - and thanks to her stupid tongue, she had probably alienated all her husband's friends. She sent for the gatekeeper and ordered him to keep a strict watch on all comers. That evening, all alone, she brooded on what it was to be a widow in a foreign country. To pour her own drinks and have Meriam bring in the tea was a small price to pay for being saved from the clutches of a dangerous ruffian. She was not particularly religious but her prayers that night had a special fervour.

Three mornings later, the goonda, as she thought of him, materialized at her breakfast table. "Tum kahan se aaya?" She asked and her hand shook, slopping tea onto the Irish linen tablecloth (a stain that she was never able to remove). He mumbled some tale of woe and forgiveness while she contemplated screaming, wondering who was within earshot. Meriam came bustling out of the kitchen with porridge and stood stock still in astonishment. "I cannot take you back," she said. "Who let you in here?"

"I am a poor man, memsaab, forgive me, forgive me. I need a job, I have a wife and children..." all the while he begged, those amber eyes glowered at her like a caged beast's sending her cringing into her chair.

"Nahin. Meriam, get the gatekeeper - who let this man in here?" Meriam went flying and for once the gatekeeper was at his post. He came running inside with his iron-sheathed stick. She was safe! "I won't take you back!" she declared with all the passion that safety made her feel. "You're a goonda. I know that - Suleiman Khan said so! Gatekeeper, take him out of here!" And she triumphantly rang Suleiman Khan to tell him what had happened. "My God," he said, "you said that to him? Don't you realise the man cannot be trusted?"

"My wife," Neel said, "chatters about nothing. She lets her tongue run away with her. It's a habit these debs have. Sometimes it can be very charming." He had said that to his friends soon after he brought his bride home, in the days when he was praising his little ignoramus and she was flitting starry eyed between the princes, the polo players and the film stars. They remembered it when the news of the murderous attack on Suleiman Khan - the paper said by one of his servants - made headlines.

She was one of those thin, pinched foreign women who look as though the sun has sucked every drop of life out of them and left only a withered husk behind. The husk of Neel's wife blew through the Delhi streets haunting the few parties to which she was still asked - because, after the attack, she was no longer one of the chosen people. She had reverted to being one of those.

Dittohead

by Jonathan Lowe

“What’ll it be, bud?” the bartender asks me.

“How ‘bout a Bud . . .Light,” I say.

I pick up the channel changer from the bar and tune the overhead TV from ladies mud wrestling to a local news report. As I do a big tattooed biker in a tank top slowly stands behind me.

“Hey—”

“Hey yourself,” I say with a wink.

“—you!”

The biker steps up behind me now, and I reach into my pocket and without looking back hold out a \$20 bill. He stops, stunned, and takes the money. I’m still staring at the screen, where a newscaster is saying that the final vote was ninety-eight to two against line-item veto. In other news, the EPA has just banned the latest CFC replacement, drawing fire from representatives in the southwestern states already struggling for energy since the last ban. As a side note, the ceiling fan business is booming in Phoenix and El Paso, and it’s hot even here, in Missouri.

“It’s worse than I thought,” I say, now watching a commercial for Honkey Kong Condoms, followed by a phalanx of government promopops—Department of Bankruptcy & Suicide, Immigration & Nationalization, and something called the Discrimination Bureau, specializing in all kinds of favoritism whether racial, sexual, verbal, animal, vegetable, or mineral.

I give up, change the thing back to mud wrestling, drawing cheers from the bar’s patrons. The bartender sets a beer in front of me, which I sip then spit out.

“This is warm!” I complain.

“What’d you expect?”

I lay a \$10 bill on the counter and turn away.

“Hey, I can’t accept this,” the bartender says.

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s too much. I’m over my tip limit. You want the IRS to throw me in the slammer?”

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“Wanna bet? My wife’s in prison right now. Made way too much as a waitress . . . fifteen thousand . . . she’s got big breasts. I miss her.”

“I’ll bet.”

“An’ I’ll bet you work for the IRS too . . . ya got that evil eye.”

I shake my head. “Can you keep a secret?” I lift my wig to reveal that I’m bald. “I’m the President of the United States.”

The bartender laughs. He thinks that’s funny. Then his eyes narrow. “Hey, if you are him, whatta you doin’ here? You here for a drink on the House, or

the Senate?” He snickers, thinks that’s funny too.

I hold out my executive Gold Card and Presidential ID. The bartender takes it, stares at the embossed photo of me seated in the Oval Office. “I ran away this morning,” I tell him. “Came straight here. But you’d never believe why.”

“Hey, that’s you,” the bartender says.

“You’re right, it is. And I got me a stolen Harley belongs to some Congressman right outside . . . and I’m on the lam.”

“No shit.”

“Yup. I’m looking for a guy was once on the radio, name of Rush Limbaugh. Used to live in this town. So you seen him in here, or what?”

The bartender gives me his best cheese-eating grin, then a light bulb seems to turn on behind his eyes. He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Hey, if you’re really the Prez, where’s the Secret Service?”

“Shhhhhh,” I breath, turning away. “It’s a secret.” Now I climb up on top of the nearest table. It sways, and I regain my balance. “Hey! Everybody!” I yell. “Anybody seen Rush Limbaugh? There’s a reward if you can tell me when.”

“Last night?” one man guesses.

“Last week?” says another.

A hooker leans forward into a circle of light. “Last Thursday, eight P.M.,” she says, lighting up a cigarette as the other jealous patrons eye her long white cancer stick. “He stiffed me . . . on my full fee.”

I step down, and lead her outside using a \$50 bill as bait.

“What did he say?” I say.

“He said ‘ohhhhhhhh baaaby.’”

“Beside that. Did you find out where he lives?”

She grins from the side of her mouth. “Gruntsville . . . it’s somewhere in Moantana. Know what I mean?”

I shake my head. “Come here often?”

“He did—for a little while.”

“And if you had to find him again, could you?”

She grabs at my money, misses it by a hair. “What kinda game you playin’? He owe you money too?” I shake my head. Her eyes turn even harder. “He’s an evader, huh. An’ you a Fed.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m a Fed, all right. Ever since last night. But I’m also a Dittohead.”

“A what?”

“A Limbaugh fan. A faithful listener to his radio show . . . biggest in the country . . . hell, in the world. I read every book he wrote, watched his TV show, bought his gold-signature coffee mug, his videos, his newsletter. The works.”

“Sure,” she says. “Sure you did.” She holds out her hand. “Name’s Bambi.”

I take her hand, not sure what to do with it other than check the cool damp palm. “Bambi. Can you help me or what?”

We walk over to my motorcycle below a billboard which reads: EQUALITY FOR ALL—EVEN YOU. In small print below the big print it reads: Paid for by Your Generous Tax Contributions.

Bambi says, “Nobody can help you, man.”

“What if . . . you’d be helping your country?” She laughs, so I hold up a \$100 bill. And she stops laughing. “Or are you over your limit too?” I ask her.

Getting on the back of my Harley, she snatches the money, says: “Tell ya a little secret. I don’t report everything.”

I gun the engine, then lift my wig for her. “Neither do I,” I say.

When she puts her hand into my hip pocket and starts pinching me, I slow down. Then she points up toward an overpass where a row of huge cardboard boxes is wedged between the road and the concrete grade. And I stop.

“His house is third from the left,” she tells me. I look at her and she shrugs. “Used to do charity work.”

As we walk to the top, several shelter residents peer out from behind the sheets covering their cardboard homes. One old man points a gun at my crotch.

“Oh,” he says, seeing Bambi. “It’s sweet cheeks. . .”

Bambi lowers her hands. “Is that thing real?”

The old man examines his ‘weapon,’ smiling through his rotting teeth. “Wouldn’t be livin’ here if it was, would I?”

We go to residence number three. It has a big #3 over the makeshift cardboard lintel in grease pencil. Bambi knocks. “Hello . . . Rush?”

A voice booms from inside. “Go away, I gave at the office.” The flap opens. At the sight of us, he shuts the flap, then opens it again slowly. In shock, he mutters, “Who. . .”

“It’s a wig,” I say. “Rush, we need to talk.”

We’re sitting on spotted cushions made of torn blue vinyl. With light from the raised flap above us I can see that the walls are decorated with old Time magazine covers . . . Reagan, Bush, Clinton, then me. There are no bumper stickers reading Dittohead Until I’m Dead or Rush Rules, but on the shopping cart in the corner a plaque reads: Just Say No To Government Waste.

“Look,” I say, “it’s not what you think.”

“So what do you think?” Rush asks fearfully.

“I think you’re a little thin,” I say. “Must be your diet lately.”

“What diet is that?” Rush asks me.

I shake my head and briefly close my eyes. I can almost see the old Rush at

his desk . . . the rotund Rush—brazen, fat, and sassy—delivering his diatribes with a lusty and humorous elan. The Rush that sits before me now is emaciated and nervous, reduced to trudging the city in search of beer cans, taking in laundry, and investing in a diversified portfolio of Uncle Sam’s lottery tickets and food coupons. It is a Rush that didn’t exist until I came along, and the guilt I feel is heavy.

“It’s worse than I thought,” I confess. “If it weren’t for me you’d be a star right now, smoking imported cigars and dining at places like Brennan’s and The Four Seasons.”

“What kinda joke—”

“No joke. You should be up there on the cover of Time, not me.”

Bambi starts to get up. “Hey, this is too kinky for me,” she says.

I grab her arm. “Let me explain.”

“You do that.”

I tell them about the UFO, and how it landed in a field right next to my house in Cape Gerardo the previous night. They sit there staring at me like I’m a wacko, except they can’t get away from the fact that I’m also President of the United States.

“That’s it,” says Bambi, reaching her threshold. She hands me my embossed ID back. “I’m outta here.”

“No, wait! I didn’t mean that. It’s not what you think.”

Bambi sighs. “Was it a UFO or wasn’t it?”

“Yes and no. Well, yes . . . but maybe not.” Rush is examining my ID now. “Look, I don’t know what the hell it was. It didn’t come down from the sky, it just appeared. Opened up, like from another dimension or something.”

She laughs. “So what happened, some little green men—”

“No, no, see, it was more like a crystal, a light, and a feeling.”

“A feeling?” Rush asks me. “A feeeeeeling.”

“Power. It gave me a power.”

“What kind of power?”

“Random power. Over everything. Like God. It focused on me, and flowed into me. Then it vanished. Like a singularity, a black hole.”

Rush nods thoughtfully, a gleam of jealousy in his right eye. “So what happened?”

“I . . . ah . . . I felt powerful. And I wished I was President. I know it’s hard to believe. Kinda like a White House press briefing.”

“Who?” Bambi clucks, then adds: “You’re as nutty as I am, ‘cause I voted for you.” She puts both hands to her head. “What got into me?”

“I did,” I say, “evidently. I became President, and the power was used up. Or almost used up.”

Rush leans forward. “What do you mean, almost?”

Bambi clucks again. “This is nuts.”

“No, it’s not . . . not to me, don’t you see? I changed history in that

instant for everyone but me. I remember it because at that instant I thought it might be nice to be able to look back at myself too, dumb workin' stiff that I was, and remember how I once was." I spread my hands. "It was just a stupid wish. Step on a crack."

Rush is aghast now. "My mother, she had a fall. Broke her back."

"Like I said, the power isn't all used up. I couldn't help it. Ever heard of Elvis Presley?"

I watch them stare, then shake their heads in ignorance.

"See?" I say.

"See what?" replies the ghastly thin and mousy Rush.

"I did away with rap music too, and, I'm sorry to say, Mozart."

"Who?"

"But I think it's okay now. The power is mostly gone, and if there's any left I'd have to really concentrate to use it."

"What'd ya call it?" Bambi asks. "A . . . singu. . ."

"Singularity. Something known science can't explain. Like black holes."

I cross my fingers. "Now comes the unbelievable part."

They look at each other, then back at me. I try to smile.

Of course they didn't see anything wrong with the signs carried by the homeless, either. They didn't see the humor in WILL WORK FOR VEGETARIAN FOOD, or AMNESTY FOR SERIAL KILLERS, or SAVE CAVIAR, or even the long one: STRANDED IN TOWN, WIFE RUN OVER BY BUS, AM DYING OF AIDS VACCINE—AND TODAY IS ONLY

TUESDAY. Come to think of it, I don't see the humor much myself. Not anymore.

I tried to explain that it wasn't like this in the sane world I remember. I told Rush how I used to listen to him on the radio, and how because of that the next President will be from the communist party, with no more elections. And how they're patterning it after the old Soviet Union, all because of me.

"You?" says Rush, dumbfounded.

"I listened to you too much, see? I was a dittohead, labeled a wacko. And I wasn't even a member of the N.R.A. or a militia. No sacks of fertilizer in my garage. No AK-47s and years supply of K rations. But I had an imagination, though, see. And now my worst fears have come true. So apparently the next Congress will be a Politburo, and this morning when I found out how insignificant I am to stop it, I came to find you for help."

Bambi rubs her eyebrows. "Les' see if I got this right, now. Ya were like God, and now yer the President, and this fool here was yer hero, and so now you wanna change the world back to the way it used ta be before ya changed it to begin with. . .and nobody but you knows any of this is true. Have I got it?"

She waits for my response. I nod. She hangs her head.
“So what do we do?” asks Rush. “And may I call you Bubba?”

They follow me down to the Harley, where I rummage in the saddlebag for a cellular phone. “You could go on living like this,” I warn as I dial. “That’s the alternative.” Into the phone I say: “Need a cab at the Grant Road overpass.” Then I put the phone away and hand Bambi more slush fund cash. “When you get home I want you to try finding those people I mentioned.”
“Let’s see . . . Bill Bennett and Gordon Liddy and. . .”
“Newt. As in eye of newt.”

I get on the bike. Rush climbs on the back. Bambi sticks the money in her cleavage as I start up.

“What if that guy Buckley isn’t at the work farm anymore?” she asks.

“Cross your fingers,” I say. “We’ll be in touch. . .”

Rush grins as I gun the engine. “What’s the plan?” he shouts in my ear.

“Who knows,” I reply. “We gotta find Bill Buckley, he’ll know what to do. Maybe get him to come back to Washington, help me do my State of the Union speech. It’s the only thing that might save us from all this.”

“Oh, okay,” he replies, patting my saddlebag. “I go where the money is.”

Traffic is light. A sign on the highway says gas is ahead, \$5.50 a gallon. Rush rubs my skull like a genie’s bottle and yells in my ear to pull over.

“Gimme a ten for snacks,” he insists. “You wanna save the world, I can’t do it on an empty stomach.”

I pull in for a fill up. When Rush is inside I ask the attendant: “You ever heard of the Brady Work Farm? They tell me William F. Buckley Jr. is there.” The attendant points at my wig. “Kinda crooked,” he says, then: “Yeah, it’s two hundred miles east, give or take. Who’s William F. Buckley Jr.?”

“Dissident.”

“Oh yeah, right. That guy had a magazine before the non-recyclable paper ban. What was the name of it? Wackos Illustrated?” The attendant stares down at the wad of bills I take out of my pocket. “Reckon you need a sidecar for your friend? Got one out back, and it’s for sale if the money is right.”

“I should need it,” I said, “but I don’t. Thanks anyway.”

Rush comes back out, frowning. “They’re outta snacks,” he says. “What do we do now—hunt for rabbit? Dog?”

Three hours later I run over a cattle crossing, brake hard, and almost hit a bull. It wakes Rush up, and he points to the sign just ahead: BRADY WORK FARM—Environmental Sensitivity Permit #107AX4.

When I see the brand on some of the cows the bull is protecting I tell Rush

it's worse than I thought.

"What did it say?" he asks.

"Beware of methane gas."

We pass under an arch with another sign on it next to the Brady mailbox: WORK MAKES FREE. Then a guard house. A man with an AK-48 steps out.

"Which way to the work farm?" I ask him.

He points with his assault rifle. "Straight ahead one mile, hang a left at the Farm Aid stage. And keep it under twenty or else."

We pass along a dirt road through a field of corn. A sign on the right reads: DESIGNATED FOR RUSSIAN COMMONWEALTH. On the left the sign reads: FOR JAPAN. And when we come to a barren field the sign is: SET ASIDE AS HABITAT FOR THE ENDANGERED WHITE FLY.

"I can't believe this," I say.

"Well," Rush replies, "at least there's something you can't believe."

We pass a muddy field with a sign reading ENDANGERED WETLANDS SEIZED BY ARMY

CORP OF ENGINEERS. Next to the muddy field is a corral where a band of listless people are milling about like zombies. Several of the people are drinking water from a trough. A sign on the adjacent barn reads: FEDERAL HOMELESS ECO-SHELTER. And the building next to it is a NASA INTELLIGENT LIFE RESEARCH FACILITY. I get off the bike, taking the saddlebags with me.

"You can't be serious," says Rush.

"Ask not what your country can do for you," I reply.

A dinner gong sounds as we enter the corral, and Rush rushes to get in line. A fat cook hands us rusted metal trays. "No talking," he says.

"Why no talking?" I whisper to the couple in front of us. She points to the cook's tee shirt. On the back it reads: COMPLAINTS TO THE COOK CAN GET YOU DRAWN AND QUARTERED.

At the front of the line a glob of green goo is slapped on our trays.

"Excuse me," I say, boldly. "What's this?"

"Gloup," the server tells me, glancing fearfully back at the cook. "Creamed wheat and recycled soup. Gloup. Got a complaint?"

We shake our heads, move on, following the elderly couple into a far corner of the corral. "You're new here," the man whispers.

"We can't leave," the woman adds.

"What?" I hold my hand over Rush's mouth, and smile in the direction of the cook. I notice he packs a 9mm with a silencer.

"We're the Brady's," the man says without moving his lips. "This is our farm."

"Was, dear," the woman says, mimicking her husband. "Until they passed the beef ban and caught us marketing to a fast food restaurant. Remember McDonalds?"

"How long ago was this?" I ask.

“Last one to survive the boycotts got burned last month, day after the ban went into effect. Owners were still inside.”

“Gees. . .” I spit out my bite of Gloup, and stare in the silence.

An announcer over a hidden loudspeaker says: “Attention! Anyone accepting a meal will be required to work two hours in the fields tomorrow.

That is all.”

“Now they tell us,” I say.

“I’m outta here,” says Rush. He turns toward the gate, but the guard with the assault rifle is there, smiling. Rush sits next to me in the mud.

At the risk of repeating myself, I say: “It’s worse than I thought.”

“Dittos on that one,” says Rush. And he smiles like he’s pleased by his own words.

Unable to find Bill Buckley yet, we sleep on Army cots in the barn. Cow moos and farts punctuate the silence as we stare up through a skylight high above.

“How did it come to this?” I ask Rush.

“Didn’t happen overnight,” Rush explains. “Took years of passin’ the buck, an’ spendin’ it. Deficit reached twenty trillion an’ bammo—the Fed knew they’d never pay off the debt. So they print the new money . . . a Jackson’s still worth fifty, but now it’s got Jesse’s mugshot on it. An’ your savings bonds, T-bills, C.D.s? Suppose you could burn’em to keep warm. Too many folks cryin’ Uncle, I guess our Uncle had to get him a gun.”

“And all because of me. And some damn singularity that—”

“Hey!” Rush cries. “Here’s your chance to prove what you’re saying is true. Get us outta here with some of that power you got left.”

I shake my head. “Don’t wanna waste it, may need it later. I just wish there was enough to set things right, but there’s not. Not totally, anyway. Why didn’t I just make everybody happy and wealthy when I had the chance? Why didn’t I do away with crime and overcrowding and pollution? There could be a hundred million people on earth, all of us living like kings.”

“You mean you’d kill everybody else?”

“No . . . don’t you see, they would have never existed. I was God for a moment there, and now I’m not even Superman.” Two men in lab jackets suddenly appear in the skylight above us, peering down. “What are they doing up there?” I whisper.

“Seen them before,” Rush replies. “Looking for intelligent life, I imagine. On a government grant.”

Tired of talking, we close our eyes and cut some z’s. In my dreams I imagine the American flag being lifted over Capitol Hill with a hammer and sickle in place of the stars.

In the morning they let several bulls into the barn to wake everyone. I look up and see a two guys with AK-48s grinning madly. During some rather

difficult work with a shovel, we run into William F. Buckley Jr.. He's caked in mud and sticking his head repeatedly in the water trough. We sidle over and I show him my Presidential ID..

"You'd never believe what I'm going to tell you," I tell him. Then I tell him everything.

"You were right," he says. "I fail to believe it. The more logical explanation is that you are mad, is it not? Wacko, shall we say. Three forks, two spoons, and a salad bowl short of a full place setting. One maraschino cherry shy of a perfect romantic tryst."

"But if what I told you was true, what would you do about it?"

Buckley cocks his head, water still dripping from his chin, considering it. Now he looks like an aging Alfred E. Newman. "Well, first I would gather as many. . .as many conservatives as possible. . ."

"We're doing that. This is Rush Limbaugh, for one."

"Who?"

"Limbaugh. He's—" I pause, and look at Rush's hayseed, meet-me-at-the-morgue face. "Nothing in this world is what I expected."

Buckley nods grimly, takes out his teeth, and proceeds to clean them. "The impropriety of your situation, of course, would demand that you use your influence to get a bill returning freedoms like private property rights put before Congress."

"You think I could?"

He keeps nodding. "Then I think . . . I think you should use whatever Godlike power you have left to change the vote from no to, shall we say. . .yes?"

I slap his back. His teeth go flying. "Yes! It might work!"

He slaps my back back. My hairpiece flies off, and I tell the two men with AK-48s approaching us that they're doing a great job, keep it up.

After pardoning Buckley, we all leave in a jeep to a twenty-one gun salute that's just a little too low for my liking. We drive for hours as Rush sits in back drinking beer and hanging on Buckley's every articulate phrase. At the outskirts of Washington I call Bambi and get the addresses of Newt the parking attendant, Liddy the bookie, and Bennett the pharmacist. Dole was in a nursing home and couldn't help. The next morning we set up shop at an abandoned car dealership with the intention to lobby members of Congress, using what money I may be able to siphon away from Outcome Based Education's petty cash fund, which is used to buy kids their condoms, bullet-proof vests, and stun guns. I leave them there around 11 A.M. to begin cleaning up the condemned building when Bambi arrives with Oliver North the Roto-Rooter man.

Wearing full Marine dress, a guard opens the door for me. He salutes. I step into the White House foyer. The butler takes my muddy jacket.

"Good morning, sir," he says, winking. "Did you have a nice holiday?"

"Where's the bathroom?" I ask, and am attacked by a fox terrier with a wicked

set of rat-like teeth. After using the facilities, I'm handed my clothes.

"Sorry you're not better yet, sir," says the butler. "Unfortunately for us you have a conference."

"What's the plan?" I ask, remembering that I'd told Jenkins two days ago that I was suffering from amnesia and needed a rest.

"Jenkins, sir. Remember?"

"I guess. What do I do, Jenkins?"

"Well, sir, as little as possible. Except at your luncheon you feign illness. "I . . . illness?"

"Stomach cramps, sir. The chef will be blamed. But he's such a pompous ass, sir."

"Two birds with one stone, eh, Jenkins?"

The butler smiles. "Will there be a problem, sir?"

I smile back. "No problemo. You mind if I eat my fill first? And maybe a little action . . . girls. . ."

"You think," asks Jenkins, "that the White House is a whore house?"

He pauses. "I believe something can be arranged later, sir. At taxpayer expense, of course." He dusts my collar. "Just please don't spoil it for me, sir. I'd never make it on the outside."

Five men are seated in the conference room in the east wing when I enter. Two of them are studying papers. Two are playing backgammon. One is asleep.

"It's about time," the fat one with the beer mutters. "Okay, we've got some things for you to sign. Nothing important. Just put your John Hancock here and here for starters."

I scan the papers shoved me. Twenty cents additional tax on gasoline, and a ban on all roach pesticides.

"I can't sign this," I say. "Have you ever had one of them big buggers slip into your mouth while you're snoring? You kinda crunch down on it, like a reflex, and it doesn't quite taste like chicken, either."

More sheets are paper-airplaned in my direction. Across the board pay hikes for all the People's Congress of Deputies. Double time for overtime, five month paid vacation at overtime rates. And unlimited chauffeured service including space shuttle service to Tahiti. A quickly penned codicil to the final death of freedom is activation of Camp Concentration just outside Fargo, North Dakota.

"What's this?" I ask. "Another camp where dissidents and political prisoners play Scrabble and Jeopardy?"

Mingled giggles. "The final solution," says the one with a spoon up one nostril.

"Sorry," I say. "Have to veto that one. Can't. Sorry."

The man with the french fries and chocolate mustache presses a buzzer and a kid comes in. "Run this over to Congress for a quick override," he commands.

“You can just make it before they break for cocktails.”

Four men smile at me as they leave. The man who’s still asleep just sits there, snoring. So I search the executive washroom, then the kitchen, and then the executive pantry, and . . . and finally return with a half-dead cockroach, which I drop in his open mouth on the inhale.

At luncheon I entertain some visiting dignitaries seeking money. They wear strange costumes, and ask me strange questions. In reply, and right on cue, I hold my stomach.

“Are you all right, sir?” Jenkins asks me.

“I feel ill,” I reply.

Jenkins glares at the chef, a tall slender man with a hawkish nose.

An Arab pulls out a gun. “Bad food? Bad food?”

“No . . . no, please,” the chef pleads.

A Secret Service man takes the gun, staring at it numbly. It goes off accidentally. Everyone recoils in shock, drawing their own guns and pointing them at each other.

“See that they get dessert,” I tell the chef on my way out. Then, in the hallway, I turn to Jenkins. “Order me a helicopter. I’m going to play golf. And make sure my friends are on board.”

“Friends, sir?”

“Jim Beam, Johnny Walker, and Jack Daniels, you ninny.”

I tell the helicopter pilot to detour and land on the roof of a car dealership. The two Secret Service agents beside me are already drunk. As the pilot begins to circle the dealership, which now has a giant target painted on top, I notice that the tip of the pilot’s nose has a dimple of white powder on it. He grins madly, and slumps forward. The helicopter tilts and begins to fall. One of the Secret Service men tries to gain control, but is having difficulty seeing straight. He succeeds in killing the helicopter’s engine and putting us into a dive.

I do my best Spock imitation, closing my eyes and concentrating.

There is a blinding flash of purple light.

I open my eyes and now I’m seated at the bar in Cape Gerardo, Missouri. The bartender sets a beer in front of me. I taste it.

It’s . . . cold.

Reaching for the remote, I change the channel on the overhead television, and there’s Rush—loud, fat, and sassy. He’s attacking Gore, and talking about the Republicans winning the next elections. I smile, albeit nervously. A biker stands up behind me. “Whatda you. . .” he asks, “a dittohead?”

I nod. He slaps my back, grins, and sits down again. He ends up buying me three more beers, and inviting me to a survivalist meeting at his uncle’s corn liquor still ‘out in the boonies.’ When I finally leave, half drunk myself, I find that there’s no Harley in the lot, just my old Ford pickup. . .the one I

used to drive when I was just Randy Johnson the lawnmower repair man.

“Hey, ya shouldn’t be drivin’ like that,” someone says to me.

I turn. It’s Bambi. “Hey, yourself,” I say. “You . . . know me?”

“Well, I could, honey . . . if the price was right.”

“Can’t afford it,” I tell her. “Not anymore, thank God. It appears everything’s gone the other way now. . .guess I had enough power left, after all.”

She puts a hand on her hip. “Ya mean ya don’t like girls?”

I shake my head. “You don’t understand. I was God for a while, see, but it looks like I set everything right again, and now I’m just plain me. I don’t understand life, the universe, or politics any more than I ever did.”

She offers to drive me to her place until I sober up. I agree. Along the road I see a lot more traffic, and the gas signs once again indicate a reasonable price—\$1.37 a gallon. But as we pull off onto a dirt road I get a scare because it looks a lot like the area where the Brady farm once existed in my alternate world nightmare. I try to calm myself by reading the signs we pass, which now indicate Private Property, Keep Out, and OPEN RANGE. Yet as we approach her farmhouse an odd feeling of dread begins to grow in me.

“Ever heard of Mozart?” I ask her, as a kind of test.

“I like country music myself,” she tells me. “That an’ rock.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “So you know Elvis too, then,” I say.

“Presley?” She nods, and then cocks her head at me. “Sure. . . Ya wanna meet him?”

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Jonathan Lowe’s novel *Postmarked for Death* was published in hardcover, endorsed by Clive Cussler, and will be online soon at www.e-pulp.com

Poetry by Neca Stoller

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Captives

On a seamless summer day
it was so simple to capture
the unguarded clouds stirring
between the skies, crawling
like dusty snails.

To say they were born here
instead of there and bound them
to this gliding satin. Until their raillery
creates a breeze. Now this lake
holds nothing more than me.

A Stone Wall

Gripping the pock marred
rocks
Fallen under
the thin overhanging
sandstone rim
Ten thousand years
of rain, freeze and wind
breaks the boulders
Red gravel;
sand dunes
lapped by the ancient seas
Building a stone wall.

Changing Tides

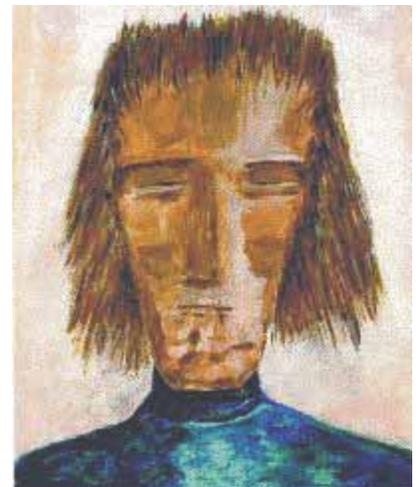
In the warming air
where the last flat land dies
headlong into the sea
migrating birds mark the coming summer.
How do they remain so faithful?

Like coifed nuns, waves move
down green aisles, and again
a youth returns from their
obscurity, walking sharply toward
the black loom of the beach.
The spring tide streaks
his shorts with salt crystals,
waxy, clotted seeds,
easily brushed away.

Unlike the deep tides
of early autumn
whose stagnant skeins of seaweed
will leave sullen residual stains,
latent and still evolving.

The Deep Gully

deep gully
on the
meadow where
light
rarely hits - thick
with leaves
out of which pokes
the rusted
frame of an iron
headboard
and white
shards of bone.



PASSIONATE PATRIOT

by Gary M. Blakely II

On more than a rose hip afternoon,
The walls around me,
Changing shades,
Yellow and Green and Red and Black,
Providing a darkness above me,
The floor is dry and empty.

A single moment in the box,
The box, the box, the trap.
She's about to give up,
Unavailable saviour beckons,
And blind white picket pursuit,
A national hallucination.

The dream dies in a cardboard,
Reality trauma sequece,
Ending in an alley,
Of narrow loneliness,
Bare brick poverty love,
Far below flickering neon,
In a two income household.

Her father never touched it,
He was a dignitary,
He wore a skirt,
And her mother loves,
The deep inhalation he gives,
And psycho-scars accumulate.

His mother baked bread,
Before she beat him,
For crying,
When he was lonely,
His father was watching the game,
And forgot him.

I ate the drain cleaner,
I ate the drain cleaner,
Under the sink.