

THE MASTER'S ASS and MORE

A Collection of Short Stories
by
Phillip Frey

Some are short and some are long. Some are light and some are dark.
Some are true and some are not.

— Dr. John F. Barber, Brautigan Library Administrator

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CONTENTS

The Master's Ass.....	2
Drapes	11
Other Voices.....	13
Hey, Jack.....	19
H'm!.....	21
Old Hat.....	24
The Savings Bank.....	30
The Hero of Lost Causes.....	31
Subject's Last Interview.....	39
Five.....	41
David.....	42
The Fool.....	44
Jack and Jill.....	52
The Candle and the Flame.....	53
The Turtle.....	55
Epilogue.....	58

THE MASTER'S ASS

Security cameras sat in the trees like birds of prey, spying down on a gravel road that cut through the Malibu woods. A quarter-mile down the road stood a canvas-covered gate crowned with razor-sharp spearheads. On either side of the gate ran a high barbwire fence that surrounded a three-acre estate.

The Master of the estate was a movie star, a superhero who sought revenge for the underdog. Audiences loved to cheer him on to victory. It was their adoration that had pushed his personal wealth to well over a hundred million.

On the dawning of a new day the Master lay in bed asleep and had a dream. He was in a boxing ring, pummeling his opponent. Knocking him out for the win, there came the roar of the crowd as they showered the canvas with money. The Master pulled the card girl up through the ropes, stripped off her shorts and dropped his own. He threw her down on the cash-blanketed canvas and straddled her.

But then—the card girl howled suddenly, so loud that he had to halt his attack and cover his ears.

The Master awoke to the sound of his bulldog mastiff. Bomber was out there howling at the sunrise as if mourning the night. The Master looked at his wife, asleep with her face wrinkled against the pillow, the pink of an earplug seen through strands of blonde hair. Her suntanned hand lay up near her chin. Her diamond wedding ring glittered in a shaft of sunlight.

Women's hands always show their age, the Master thought, thinking then how she had him saddled. He was the number one sex symbol and had to sneak around to get laid. He wished he could dump her but the cost of divorce would be too much to bear.

The Master swung around and sat at the edge of the bed. He lifted the house-phone's handset and pressed 3. Paul the graveyard-shift guard answered from the kitchen. Paul was a 29-year-old aspiring screenwriter, one with the hope that the Master would someday help him break into the business.

The Master never hired professional security guards to work the house and property. It was less expensive to hire young men with film aspirations, with the extra-added benefit of keeping them wanting and easily controlled.

The Master gripped the phone tightly and growled at Paul. "Why aren't you out there shutting him up?"

"I went out and tried, but—"

The Master slammed the handset into its base. His wife stirred in her sleep while her husband got into his nylon gym shorts and hollered "God damn it!" in answer to a long howl from Bomber.

His wife woke up and watched him stomp in a circle as he put on his velour bathrobe. He grumbled something at her. She eased the plugs from

her ears. As he stomped from the room she called after him: "Rehearsing for the part of Rumpelstiltskin?"

The Master hated to be made fun of. He saw it as a resentful attack on his success. He deserved the best because he was the best. It made him see those around him as fools. It wasn't fair to have to pay such people. Everyone was on the take, especially his relatives. As for friends, he had had many before his success. Now he had none. They would be too much of an expense.

Helen the cook was already at work in the kitchen. Paul leaned against the bank of security screens that filled a portion of wall. He sighed worriedly at the sound of another howl.

The Master descended the staircase that led to the kitchen. Paul straightened up as the Master stepped barefoot onto the tiled floor, then strut toward Helen. She said good-morning and he gave her a nod. Paul kept his eyes on the screens, knowing he had better look serious about security.

Bomber howled. The Master threw Paul a nasty look, then turned his dark eyes to the sink. He gazed at the sealed packet of ground beef defrosting in warm water. "What's this for?" he asked Helen.

"I'll be making meatloaf for dinner."

"Didn't my wife or nutritionist tell you no more meat?"

Helen looked surprised. "I didn't see the nutritionist when she left last night, and your wife, I..."

The Master grabbed the wall phone and pressed 1. His wife answered with a yawn and he said to her, "Why didn't someone tell Helen about the meat?" He heard an apologetic groan followed by "I'm sorry, I forgot." The Master hung up on her.

He made a guttural sound as he stepped around Helen and opened the refrigerator. He spotted a large Ziploc bag with four sandwiches in it. "The sandwiches," he said. "Four for Zack's school lunch?"

"No," Helen answered with a little laugh at the thought of an eight-year-old eating four sandwiches. "For the guards and your driver, if they get hungry."

Paul, still before the security screens, tightened up, preparing for what might come next.

The Master looked down at his bare feet and massaged his forehead. "You're feeding the employees," he stated.

"They're here for eight hours, sometimes longer," Helen explained. "They have to eat."

"They're supposed to bring their own food," the Master said with exasperation. He turned back to the open refrigerator. "They know it and you know it." He closed the refrigerator with a slam. "You're fired! I want you out of here—today!"

Helen's eyes moistened and she ran past him, into the long hall that led to the kitchen's back door. She halted at her room, entered and closed her

door. The door next to hers opened. Celia the maid padded out and slipped into Helen's room.

The Master picked up the house phone and pressed 1. "I just fired Helen. You'll have to come down and make breakfast for the kids," and he hung up.

Bomber gave out another long howl. "Let's go, Paul," the Master ordered with a jerk of his head.

Paul followed him into the long hall. About to pass Helen's room, they heard her weeping and saying to Celia, "Because I feed the employees..."

The Master stopped and hollered at her door. "And the onions! I told you I don't like onions and you put them in the salad last night!"

Helen could barely be heard: "I only used a little, and cut 'em up real small."

Paul and the Master continued on, out the kitchen's back door which led them to the circular drive. "Wait a minute," the Master said as he went into the 8-car garage. He returned with a length of 2 x 4. In his velour robe and barefoot, he stepped on a plastic piece of broken toy—"Ow!"

He checked his heel, rubbed it and said, "Who comes on next?"

"Uhh, Ronnie." Paul glanced at his watch: 6:20 a.m., wishing it were 8 o'clock so he could get out of here and go home.

"Tell him to sweep the driveway. And you wash the limo before he gets here."

"Okay." Paul followed him to the pen, a fenced-in concrete slab with a carpeted king-size doghouse for a very large dog. Paul fingered the holstered Magnum on his belt, thinking badly about guards having to do chores. The Master doesn't like paying someone, he thought, just to stand around protecting his life and property.

The Master opened the pen's gate and went in. Paul stayed behind, nervous about the bulldog mastiff's big teeth. Bomber raised his head and howled toward the Master. Paul watched the Master raise the 2 x 4. The wood came down on Bomber's head with a crack. "Now shut up, ya fuck!"

The Master left the pen and handed Paul the 2 x 4. "That's what you do next time."

Bomber was dazed and confused. He whimpered backward into the doghouse and collapsed on the carpet. Paul could swear there were tears in his eyes. Paul closed the gate and turned to see the Master walking back to the house, hoping this time he would step on a piece of broken glass.

The Master entered the kitchen and took a papaya from the refrigerator. His nutritionist had instructed him to have only one papaya for breakfast for 3 days. He went to the sink, cut it in half, then spooned the seeds out. He turned toward his wife's back. She was at the cooking island making pancakes, the ingredients spilt all over the place. She wore an open white terrycloth robe over a pink nightgown, and her blonde hair was pinned up.

"What happened to the meat that was defrosting?" he asked her. He stared at her backside. She was short and the formless robe made her

appear wider than she really was. The Master chewed on the papaya and eyed her thick ankles. Why couldn't she have ankles like his, he asked himself, ankles like a thoroughbred's.

"In the fridge," she answered finally.

He went and pulled out the packaged meat. "There's to be no more meat in this house," and he threw it in the garbage. His wife gave him a sidelong glance and flipped the pancakes.

Eight-year-old Zach came into the kitchen wearing his Catholic school clothes. Grace the governess was close behind, four-year-old Justin's hand in hers. Grace was a sweet, quiet lady who rarely spoke to the Master. She lived in fear of his anger. It was her love for the four-year-old that she stayed on. They sat at the table with Zach who looked over at the cooking island.

"Okay, Mom," he said, "I'm ready for my pancakes."

The Master swallowed the last of the papaya. "I thought the pancakes were for you and Grace," he said to his wife. "The boys are supposed to have soft-boiled eggs and seven-grain toast."

"What difference does it make?" she answered. "They're both trim and healthy-looking."

"They have to follow their diets! What's the matter with everyone around here?!"

"I can't eat gooey eggs," the 8-year-old shouted. "They make me sick!"

His father walked over, glared down at Zach and bellowed, "You eat what you're told! And when you're done you're going to do twelve pushups!" He gave his wife a hard look and strutted barefoot out of the room.

Zach sat shaking. The four-year-old sat crying. Grace eyed them both sadly and put a comforting hand on each. The Master's wife gazed down at the cooking pancakes. A tear fell into the pan and hot oil splattered her wrist.

Wearing tennis shoes now, the Master went out back and strode past the Olympic pool. He headed into the gym, a free-standing structure with two glass walls, the other two mirrored. Taking off his velour robe he gazed out over the pool and eyed his Tudor mansion. Yes, he thought, he would add an addition, a movie theater with at least a dozen seats. If nothing else, it would certainly increase the value of the house.

Standing in gym shorts and tennis shoes he looked around at the exercise equipment. Which should he start with, the weights? No, he was still filled with anger, had to get rid of it.

The Master put his boxing-bag gloves on and stepped up to the heavy bag. He would beat the hell out of it. He raised a gloved fist. A mirrored wall shot a bar of sunlight into his eyes.

The Master repositioned himself and eyed his reflection. He took on a boxing pose, thinking then about having his secretary research sculptors, find one to create a statue of himself. Should look good in the garden, he

imagined.

Keeping the boxer pose, he turned sideways to get a look at his full profile. He ran his eyes down his body and stopped at the gym shorts. The buttocks looked flat. Must be the angle, he thought as he turned his body a little. No, it was still flat.

The Master pulled down his shorts. The meat of the buttocks was gone, flat from tailbone to crotch.

"What happened to my ass?!" he hollered at his reflection.

Paul was in the kitchen at the security screens. He saw the Master enter a backdoor to the house, then heard a hard slam followed by "God damn it!"

Paul decided this would be a good time to get out of the house and wash the limo.

Zach's bodyguard had arrived and had driven him off to Catholic school, where the bodyguard would stay until the school day was over. The kid might get hurt during playtime, or anytime. He was a wild child who fought for possession of whatever he might want. Instant gratification was the key to his happiness. Like father, like son.

Grace the governess was upstairs in her room with the four-year-old. Helen the cook was in her room packing her belongings. Celia the maid was busy doing laundry.

The Master's wife was upstairs taking a shower, preparing for a day of interviews with applying cooks. The Master charged into her bathroom and threw his robe off. She looked out of the shower, happily supposing he was in a rare fit of passion. "Come on in," she said brightly, "the water's fine."

The Master yanked her out, dropped his shorts and aimed his backside at her. "My ass is gone!" He lifted up his shorts, turned to her, took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Tell me what you know about this!"

"Nothing," she shrugged as he let go of her, her green eyes wide with astonishment. "Maybe you've been working out wrong. Or maybe the diet you just got off—all those chickens."

The veins in the Master's neck puffed up. "You fool!" he hollered. "What would chickens have to do with my ass?!" He grabbed his robe and fled the room.

The Master's wife stood wet and confused, her lips in a twisted smile. She glanced down at the water dripping from between her legs, saw her thick ankles and muttered, "Well, at least I've still got my ass."

Paul had finished washing the limo and was in the kitchen now, hoping the Master wouldn't appear. Good news for Paul that he didn't. Must be showering he figured, getting ready for his photo shoot.

More good news. On screen Paul saw the front gate open as Ronnie drove in. 7:55 a.m., right on time to relieve him.

Ronnie was thin as a snake, and he acted like one. Ronnie liked to tell tales to the Master, about the other employees, some true but most not. It was a safe thing to do because the Master never confronted the accused for

the other side of the story. Ronnie was an aspiring actor and wanted to stay close to the Master. The perfect Iago, Ronnie had often thought of himself.

Paul went out and met him in the drive. Paul unbuckled his holstered Magnum and handed it to Ronnie while telling him about Helen's firing. Then told Ronnie that the Master wanted him to sweep the driveway. To keep things equal between them, Paul said he had just washed the limo because he had been ordered to.

A few minutes after Paul drove out the gate for home, Gary drove in. Gary was the Master's personal bodyguard and went everywhere with him. He was tall, dark-haired, and liked to wear Hawaiian shirts out over his waist to keep his sidearm covered. It was hard to tell what a powerhouse he was. It was easy to be fooled by the boyish handsome face and kind eyes.

Gary and Ronnie went into the kitchen, poured themselves some coffee while Ronnie retold the Helen-firing story. On a security screen they saw Bruce drive onto the property.

Bruce was the Master's fulltime limo driver and doubled as bodyguard. He had a boulder body that stretched the seams of his suit; had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a face like those ruddy sailors in World War II posters. Women adored him, and men liked him because of his light, easy-going attitude. But then he wasn't someone to get into a fight with. Bruce was a bone-crusher.

The Master walked into the kitchen wearing jeans, a tank top, and an open three-quarter leather coat to conceal his backside. Instead of shoes he wore his thousand-dollar pair of boots. Gary and Ronnie could see that he was irritated, and both wondered why he was wearing a coat on such a warm morning. The Master walked by them without a word, went through the long hall and out the kitchen's back door. Gary gave Ronnie a shrug and hurried after the Master.

Out in the drive Bruce the boulder was seated at the wheel of the limo. Gary caught up to the Master at its rear door and opened it. The Master slid in with a grimace. Gary shut the door, went around and got into the front passenger seat.

The window partition down, Bruce turned from the wheel and said, "Plenty of time for your 9:30. Need anything? Stop anywhere on the way?"

"No!" the Master barked. "Gary—call St. John's Hospital and tell 'em I want Dr. Shafer there when we get there. Then call the photo shoot and cancel it. Bruce—St. John's. Hurry—hurry it up!"

Bruce and Gary exchanged a slanting glance of wonder. Bruce pressed the gate opener and sped forward. Moving out toward the highway, gravel shot up at the undercarriage like gunfire. Turning on to the Pacific Coast Highway the limo forced its way into traffic and played the dangerous lane-change game. Bruce hoped the cops would take notice but they never did.

The limo screeched to a halt in front of St. John's. The Master jumped out and hurried toward the entrance. Gary leapt from the passenger seat and

followed. Bruce drove off to park the limo.

In the lobby now, the sight of America's number one sex symbol got everyone's attention. Boyishly handsome Gary had to keep a group of them away from the Master, even had to push away a boy in a wheelchair who rolled backward into a wall. Gary hated doing things like that but knew he would get fired if anyone got too close. The kid might've had a knife, the Master would have said.

The nurses at reception stood nervous in the glow of the movie star. One said, "Hi. You're—"

His voice almost knocked her over. "Doctor Shafer, get Doctor Shafer!"

Gary sat outside the examination room. He checked his left hip to make sure his Hawaiian shirt had the holstered pistol covered. He then entertained himself, eyeing a train of passing nurses, some of whom exchanged smiles with him. The caboose was the winner. Blonde and bright-eyed, with breasts like giant marshmallows pressed under her tight uniform.

She turned the corner as Bruce appeared, having just passed her, walking backward to catch the last of her.

In the examination room the Master lay on his stomach in a hospital gown. Dr. Shafer lifted the gown and gazed at the flatness, the back of the thighs continuing straight up to the back. "Interesting," he said thoughtfully. "Never seen... as if the buttocks had never been..."

The Master kept his head down in the crook of his arm. "What can be done?" he asked sullenly.

"Hmm, could wear padded underwear until we get this figured out," the doctor suggested. "It's possible that the prosthesis company I deal with might have a strong, spongy, skin-like buttocks. If not, be a good challenge for them to create one."

The Master turned over, sat up and hollered, "Shit!"

Dr. Shafer said, "Yes, I certainly understand." As he went out the door he added, "I'll call you later and we can discuss this further."

Hawaiian-shirted Gary came up to the doorway. The Master said to him, "Cancel all my appointments for the rest of the week!"

Gary thought about the actress the Master was supposed to pop. "What about this afternoon, the-uh, y'know?"

The Master fell back and moaned, "Yes, her too..." Then, "Get out and shut the door!"

Gary obeyed, sat down next to Bruce on the corridor bench and whispered, "Maybe he's impotent. He's an actor, all he ever thinks about is performance."

"And money," Bruce said with a wry smile on his ruddy face.

"How true it is," Gary said as he pulled out his phone. "Gotta do some cancelling." He called the actress first.

The Master stepped out of the examination room, shoulders slumped, head down, dressed now in his boots, jeans, tank top, and leather coat. He

proceeded down the hall with Gary and Bruce on either side of him. Gary continued working on the week's cancellation calls. He kept his free hand up as a stop sign to fend off anyone on the approach. Bruce kept his eyes peeled for the giant marshmallows.

On their way back to the house Bruce held the limo below the speed limit. In the passenger seat Gary finished the last of the cancellation calls. Bruce looked in the rearview to see the Master wriggling around uncomfortably.

The Master caught his mirrored stare. He leaned back in despair and shut his eyes. "Okay," he said softly, "what do you two know about my ass."

The pair up front exchanged another one of their glances. Bruce couldn't contain himself. "Surely, you jest," he laughed.

The Master opened his eyes and came forward. "That's right, it's a joke—a big joke, and I don't want to hear about it anymore!"

The house was quiet. Helen the cook had vacated with her belongings. Ronnie, the Master's Iago, had watched her to make sure she didn't steal anything. Grace the governess had taken the four-year-old to nursery school and would stay with him all day. The probability of kidnap hung over both children. The Master lived in fear of what it would cost.

The limo drove in. Bruce stopped before the garage and got out with Gary. Gary opened the back door for the Master who went directly into the house. Both bodyguards leaned against the limo's rear panel, each with arms crossed over his chest, both staring downward lost in wonder.

The Master came through the long hall into the kitchen. Ronnie said, "Hi, take your coat?"

"Damn it!" was the answer he got. The Master then stomped around the cooking island saying "Damn it!" over and over again.

He stopped finally and went upstairs. Approaching the master bedroom he saw two suitcases by the door. He went in and saw his wife packing another on the bed. "What are you doing?" he asked coldly, knowing there was trouble ahead.

She kept her green eyes off him and said, "I'm leaving you. I'm taking the kids and I'm leaving you!"

The Master stood silent, burning up inside. He took a deep breath, walked to the bed and bellowed, "You're not going anywhere!" He flung the suitcase across the room, its contents flying every which way.

He grabbed her arm and held it tightly in his powerful hand. He used his other to punch her square in the face. She flew down across the bed, sat up with a bleeding nose and lip. "I know about the bitches you're always seeing!" she screamed. "I know what you think of me!"

He pulled her up and punched her again. She went down unconscious with her thick ankles dangling over the side of the bed, a portion of blonde hair tinted red.

The Master left her there and stormed through the house. He pulled down each of the framed "Best Buttocks" certificates he had received from

different magazines. He threw them to the floor, and with the heel of his boot smashed them all.

He went down into the kitchen where Ronnie stood, having heard everything and scared about what might happen next. The Master pointed a finger at him and hollered, "You tell anybody about this, I'll kill you! Call an ambulance and tell them she fell out a window—now!"

Ronnie picked up the wall phone as the Master returned upstairs. Celia the maid came in from the laundry room. Gary and Bruce were close behind. They had all heard the screams. They listened to Ronnie tell the 911 operator that the Master's wife had fallen out—at that very moment they saw her fly down past the kitchen window.

She was rushed to St. John's, where Dr. Shafer took personal care of her. The Master gave him a quarter-million dollars to keep his mouth shut, and to have the hospital records show that his wife had tripped and fallen down a flight of stairs, to then have slid across the tiled floor into a wall.

The Master's wife recuperated but then had to go through the pain of reconstruction. The divorce brought her 48 million plus \$40,000 a month alimony, which she felt was near a fair price for what she had been through. It afforded her a comfortable future in a Beverly Hills home where she lived with the kids, the same sweet governess, and a new batch of employees. The news media had reported the divorce as "irreconcilable differences."

Other than the Master's wife and Dr. Shafer, no one ever knew about the prosthetic buttocks the Master wore. Because of having thrown his wife out the window the Master had Gary, Bruce, Ronnie, and Celia sign non-disclosure agreements, gave each a batch of money and asked them to stay on as loyal employees.

Ronnie the snake was the only one to say yes. Celia the maid returned to Mexico with a very large check. Gary and Bruce were both hired by a rock star, a superstar with a sense of humor and an open refrigerator.

Paul, the graveyard-shift guard who had gone off-duty on the morning of that fateful day, never did find out what had happened after he left. On his way home Paul had decided never to return to the Master's house. The image of Bomber's tearful eyes would remain locked in memory.

The Master was pleased that he still had Ronnie and Bomber around, in case he needed to vent his anger, which he did from time to time. Ronnie didn't mind because of the small roles he would get in the Master's movies. Not a talented actor, no one else would hire him.

The Master continued to make bundles of money and continued on with his grand lifestyle. His misfortune was that he had to wear the prosthetic buttocks. It crushed his libido and he never again had another woman.

DRAPES

I was living on the upper West Side and had to travel to Brooklyn to pick her up. Two subways and a bus. It was dark by the time I got there. Sarah was at the bus stop waiting on the bench in the dull glow of a streetlight. Her dress seemed old-fashioned, the fabric thick and drab. Sarah lived in the Projects and probably couldn't afford anything better. She was small and plain, and looked like a European peasant doll.

We had met at a party in the Village. She had told me she was seventeen. I would have easily believed her to be a year or two younger. I was twenty-three and shouldn't have asked her out. I must have been drunk. And now I had to pay the price.

Sarah stood from the bench and greeted me with nervous eyes. I thought I ought to say something nice so I lied a little. "What a great-looking dress."

"Thank you," she said softly. "I made it myself, for tonight."

"Really? That's terrific," was all I could come up with.

Sarah had made the dress for our big night on the town. A movie, something to eat, and long rides on public transportation. I thought she must be stupid.

We crossed the street, caught the bus, then rode two subways to end up finally in midtown Manhattan. We walked to the theater in virtual silence. I was upset about being only thirty blocks from where I lived, grumbling to myself about having to go all the way back to Brooklyn to take her home. In addition to that was my embarrassment about that dumb dress of hers.

It was one of those grand old movie palaces. We stood outside and waited in line. I gazed at her profile, her smooth youthful skin and dark hair, the thick material of the dress that no longer appeared drab under the reds and blues of the neon. She had taken on the look of a Renaissance portrait.

We found a good pair of seats and sat quietly while the theater filled to capacity. With nothing better to say I again brought up the dress. "I can't believe you actually made that. It's really something."

Sarah's blue eyes dropped to her childlike hands and she said, "I made it out of some old drapes my mother didn't want."

I felt sorry for her, and to put it in plainly I thought she wasn't good enough for me. Though as far as looks go I had begun to find her attractive.

The house lights dimmed. The film began with a burst of color and we both became lost in a brighter world.

Afterward we went to a restaurant and had a nice-enough meal. We actually had a real conversation. Then during dessert I brought up Shakespeare. Sarah knew nothing about his plays. It didn't matter. I was preoccupied, thinking about the long ride back with her, then having to make the return trip home.

Asking her to stay at my place was out of the question. Aside from not

liking her that much, her parents were waiting up for her. I didn't have the nerve to send her back alone.

When at last at her Brooklyn door I looked into her nervous eyes. They were expectant, calling for the customary goodnight kiss. I took her in my arms and our lips came together. She pressed herself hard against me. I felt her warmth as she trembled with emotion. We then whispered our goodbyes. I left the poor thing standing there, never to see her again.

Back then, so long ago, I thought I knew it all. And now I'm the poor thing, unable to relive that night, unable to hold her close and feel her tremble in my arms.



(photo by Hal Ackerman)

OTHER VOICES

I look after graves and mourn for the dead on behalf of the bereaved. I'm good at it because I take my work seriously; though if I hadn't become so obsessed with it, the unearthly events that took hold might never have happened.

It began nearly six months ago, at Hillsdale, my last visit of the day. I was graveside in my folding chair and couldn't take my eyes off the headstone, mesmerized by the chiseled letters of Barry Martin Burke's name.

It had been a long day and I was tired. Leaning back, my eyes fell shut and the name stayed in my thoughts. Then, for some reason, I don't know why, I pictured the chiseled letters one at a time while repeating the full name to myself. When done I heard: "Feet got gangrene... bastards cut 'em off..."

I told myself I had fallen asleep and dreamed the voice. I tried it again and heard, "Damn tubes—get 'em out!"

With this second try I knew for sure I hadn't dreamed it; the sound of the voice unfamiliar, very different from my inner voice.

I decided to check on Barry Burke's last days. He had died a week earlier, his brother Samuel a new client.

That same evening I was with Samuel Burke on his porch. He said his brother had been a diabetic who didn't heed the advice of his doctor, refusing to change his diet and all. The result was deterioration of the heart and kidneys, along with gangrene of the feet, which had to be amputated.

"Awful," Samuel Burke said, "seeing Barry in his last hours... loss of feet, bunch of tubes stuck in him."

Since then I have called on more of the dead. Some have a word, a

phrase, or maybe a sentence or two. Three of them speak what amounts to full pages.

Echoes of their last thoughts, the last desperate push of the brain; the electricity, the transmission of sound waves that linger in the air. I had somehow become their receiver. I don't think about how or why anymore. I'm willing to accept my ignorance of such things.

My cemetery visits begin at daybreak, seven days a week; Saturdays and Sundays my busiest, from sunup to sundown. On weekdays I'm done around noon, then go to the Toluca Tavern, have something to eat and spend a few hours at the bar. The place empties out after lunch, and that means there aren't any drunks around to bend my ear. I'm a slow drinker who just needs to relax. My graveside visits take a lot out of me because of the grief I expend.

Should I want a little conversation, Nick the bartender is a willing participant. Other than that I entertain myself with the daily paper. When done reading I do the crossword.

Halfway done with the puzzle I glanced up to see Nick restocking the shelves for the night crowd. And there she was, at the other end of the bar. I had seen her here before, once or twice a week, mid-afternoons, coming in as I was leaving; always dressed fashionably, midnight black hair and blue eyes making her all the more attractive.

She caught my stare, returned it with a smile and came down to my end of the bar. Her hand reached for the stool next to me. "Do you mind?" she asked.

"Not at all," I said.

Nick set her drink down in front of her. "You two deserve a formal introduction," he said. "Mary Miller, I'd like you to meet Mister Bones."

"You're kidding," she laughed.

"Kind of," Nick smiled. "That's what I call him, because of his occupation." He looked at me. "Last time Mary was in here I told her what you do, but didn't mention your name." Then he said, "So let me start over. Mary Miller, like you to meet Jack Turner," and Nick went back to restocking the shelves.

"Mister Bones," she snickered as she offered her hand. I took hold of it. The feel of her skin filled me with passion. We broke the handshake and I was left wanting more of her.

"Yesterday," Mary began, "Nick asked me why I was crying in my drink. I told him, and he thought we ought to meet."

"That's why you're here earlier than usual?" I asked.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she replied. "It means you've noticed me coming in while you're leaving."

"And a compliment for me," I said, "you remembering our paths crossing."

Mary gazed at her vodka tonic, lifted it and took a sip. Good sign, I thought. If she were a hard drinker she would have been near done with it by now.

Setting her glass down she telegraphed a touch of sadness, so I said, "Would you like to tell me about it?"

"Karon, my sister." Mary paused and took a deep breath. "Karon died young, from respiratory failure," she said. "I don't visit her grave anymore because every time I did..." Unable to go on, she turned to me with moist eyes.

"I understand," I said.

Mary smiled a little. "I thought maybe if you had the time to care for her; Sundays, if possible? You don't have to decide now," she added as she wrote her number down.

Another good sign I told myself; considerate people are hard to find these days.

Soon as I got home I went over my books and rearranged things. It wasn't easy fitting her sister in on Sunday mornings. When finished I called Mary about it. She asked if we could meet for lunch tomorrow and go over the details.

The next day we met at the Toluca Tavern. I gave her my going rate and she said, "Sounds reasonable." It was an unusual response coming from a prospective client. Not a single question about what she was going to get for her money.

As we ate I became aware of the other men in the room, eyeing Mary with glances and stares. Being with such an attractive woman lifted my spirits, along with my self-esteem.

Leaving the restaurant I walked Mary to her BMW convertible. Her car and clothes reflected rich but she herself didn't. If she had I would have kept our relationship strictly business. Maybe it's just me, but I've learned that people with a lot of money are more trouble than they're worth.

Things had gone much better than expected. The next morning we woke at my place in bed together. For me, it had been one of the best nights ever. Maybe for her too, it seemed.

I cooked breakfast for us. While eating we agreed on taking both cars. That way Mary could show me Karon's grave, then leave me so I could go about my regular visits.

Dressed for work in a suit and tie I put my folding chair and briefcase in the trunk of my car; the briefcase filled with headstone cleaners, brushes, and other tools of the trade.

The sky over Woodgate was clear. Mary's midnight hair glittered in the sunlight. She carried the flowers she had bought on the way. The sheen of their crimson petals turned her blue eyes into the color of daybreak.

She took my hand in hers. We walked up the hillside and came to Karon's grave. Mary placed the flowers against the headstone; the chiseled numbers telling me Karon had died at twenty-two.

"Almost a year," Mary sighed. "The stone has lost its shine, and the grass looks terrible. Woodgate," she sneered. "Must be cutting back to please their

parent company's stockholders."

Her comment surprised me, coming from someone with money. Not in the mood to discuss the rights and wrongs of big business I said, "No problem for me to get the stone like new. And fixing up the grass wouldn't be any trouble." Then asked Mary if there was anything she wanted me to say during my visits, something on her behalf.

"No, I don't think so," she answered despondently, grieving eyes on the headstone. "It's more important that you care for the grave... take the time to sit with Karon."

It was then I wanted to tell her about the voices. That if I felt like it, right here and now, I could call on Karon and hear her last thoughts. Last thoughts that would play over and over from time to time, no matter where I was or what I might be doing.

Mary wouldn't have believed it, so I let it go. No one would have believed it.

I put flowers down on Karon's grave every Sunday, and told Mary I had gotten the headstone as good as new, and had turned the soil and planted grass seed that was coming up a solid green.

I never called on her sister. It didn't seem to be the right thing to do. Until last Sunday, when I thought it might bring me closer to Mary. In my chair at Karon's grave I closed my eyes, the headstone took form and I began:

"Karon Patricia Miller..." repeating it while picturing each letter of her name. And then it happened, the gasps for air as I heard, "Can't breathe... my sister... do this... poisoned..."

It went on like that for a while. It wasn't too difficult to put together. Mary had poisoned her sister; killed her.

Damn it! I thought. It wasn't grief Mary had felt weeks ago when she had shown me Karon's grave. That's why I had been hired, Mary too guilt-ridden to visit her sister on her own.

Confused about what to do I left Woodgate and went to a different bar so I wouldn't run into her. I got drunk for the first time in years.

The next morning I woke in the stench of my vomit. I soaked my clothes in the kitchen sink, then got into the shower. The warmth and steady sound of the water was a relief.

But then the voice came, gasping same as yesterday, clearer now: "My sister — poisoned me — can't breathe — someone — help me..."

I called Mary and said I missed her, told her I overslept and would take the rest of the morning off if she'd come over.

We hugged and kissed, undressed and got into bed. Before getting started I asked Mary about Karon, saying that I would like to know more about her. Mary shut her eyes and lay quietly. I did the same and waited.

"I gave my parents a lot of trouble," she said finally. "It was because of Karon. She always got what she wanted. I hated her for that." Then said, "Our Mom and Dad were a lot older than most parents. They died a year

apart and just about everything was left to Karon." Mary rolled over against me, hugged me and whispered, "When Karon died I got every penny of it. And I don't hate her anymore. Funny, isn't it?"

"Very," was all I could say. One thing led to another and I spread her legs and drove into her with hard passion. I was angry about what she had done. It meant that I would lose her.

We lay there afterward, both done-in. And then I couldn't help it: "Your sister was murdered," I said. "Poisoned."

Mary propped herself up. "Why did you say that? Who told you that?"

"There's something you should know," I said. "It'll be the strangest thing you've ever heard, but it's the truth."

I told her all of it. When finished, she denied her guilt and said I'd either made the whole thing up or was downright crazy. That didn't surprise me. What did was the way she said it, with a coldness I had never gotten from her before.

I said I could prove my ability to hear the dead. Turning on my computer I showed her the cemetery list and asked her to choose one for us to visit. Mary thought the trip was going to be a ridiculous waste of time.

We dressed and ate in virtual silence, got into her BMW and headed out to Fairmount. While driving she had a change of mood, seemingly unconcerned about what I had told her, going on about the weather and what a nice day it was, then telling me about a movie she would like us to see.

At the cemetery I had Mary pick two graves, opened my appointment book and showed her they were not under my care.

After calling on each, Mary wrote down what I had heard. It took all day to verify their last thoughts. While driving Mary home she still doubted me, but then answered herself: "No, I was the one who picked the graves."

A moment later she said, "Okay, Jack, let's go on the theory Karon was poisoned but didn't know who did it. Since it was no secret how I felt about her, she would've figured it was me—wouldn't she?"

"Suppose so," I said. The notion of someone else having done it grew more plausible as the seconds ticked by.

"It doesn't matter how I felt about Karon," she said. "I want to get whoever killed her." Parking at Mary's building she looked me straight in the eye. "You'll help me, won't you?"

I was in love with her. I had to give it a chance, so I said of course I would.

Soon as we got into her condo Mary opened the foyer closet and parted the hanging coats. "Karon's old papers," she told me, sliding two boxes out.

I carried them to the kitchen table. Mary pulled the papers from the boxes and made two stacks. "We'll each make our own list," she said. "Names, addresses, phone numbers of everyone Karon had come in contact with." She then poured us some wine and began to prepare dinner.

Busy at the stove she asked me to get two pads and pens from her office

desk. "Right-hand top drawer," she said.

I left the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with legal pads and pens. I sat at the table and started on my stack of papers. Before I knew it, dinner was served. We then fed ourselves while we each worked on our own list.

When done, Mary put Karon's papers back in the boxes. We moved into the living room and sat on the sofa, where we rewrote our two lists into one, beginning with the people she thought to be the most likely suspects.

Mary was obviously tired, yawning, soon asleep against me, midnight hair splayed over my shoulder. I gently repositioned her, stood up and lifted her legs onto the sofa. As I did I had a flash of dizziness.

Turning off most of the lights I went to the boxes we had left in the kitchen. Carrying them back toward the foyer closet, the dizziness hit me again, harder this time. So hard I lost my balance, dropped the boxes and fell to my knees.

I sat back on the living room floor and had trouble breathing. That's when I saw the small bottle that had fallen out of one of the boxes. I picked it up and looked at the label. Mercuric chloride. I had seen the name somewhere before, and then it came to me. A newspaper article I had read.

Mercuric chloride, a no trace poison... when I had left the kitchen for the pads and pens...

I looked over at the sofa. Mary stood in the near-darkness, blue eyes on me as if she were standing over my grave.

I did the right thing, paying for Jack's funeral. I had to because I really did love him. The way I see it, if he hadn't known the truth about what I'd done to my sister, I'm pretty sure we would've ended up married.

Geez, it's a nutty world.

It took me a few weeks to get up the nerve to visit him at the cemetery. When I finally did I sat on the grass and stared at Jack's headstone. That's when I decided to try the same trick he did with the dead, thinking it would be fun.

Sorry to say, it didn't turn out too well. His voice fills my mind all the time now, telling his whole story over and over again, exactly the way I just wrote it down for you. It's given me terrible headaches, and I can't stand it anymore.

They think I'm crazy and won't let me out of here. Darn doctors, think they know everything. Well, I've got a little surprise for them. I was in the sick ward for a day, or maybe it was two days; I don't remember. Anyway, while I was in there I stole a scalpel. It's real sharp, so I guess it won't hurt much.

HEY, JACK

I was stopped at a light on La Brea. I heard, "Hey, Jack!" It was Hank approaching my car from the crosswalk. I hadn't seen him in a while which was fine with me. Hank had a way of getting himself in trouble, along with anyone he happened to be with.

Last time I saw him we were out to dinner together. I had agreed to it because Hank said it would be his treat. The food was good and so was the talk. When the check came I wished I had refused the offer.

Hank looked at the check, then at me. "You leave first and I'll follow you out a couple of minutes later. When I say go, you go, okay?"

My face must have turned red because he said, "You get to go first. Whatever happens, you're in the clear."

I didn't have enough money to pay the check so I played it his way. We got away with it. I found out later he had done the same to other friends of ours. From then on I had avoided him.

Now he was at my passenger door pointing at the inside lock. I opened the door. Hank hopped in, the light changed and we were off.

"Hey, Jack, good to see you," he said as he turned the radio down. He sported a warm smile. It extinguished my trepidation. It was hard to dislike him.

"Good to see you, too," I responded just as warmly. "Where you going?"

"My car battery died so I was walking to Winston Tire," he explained. "They've got everything there. See that green sign five, six blocks on the right?"

I searched ahead, then nodded. Traffic was on the heavy side but that was all right. It gave us time to catch up on our uneventful lives.

Nearing Winston Tire, Hank asked, "Hey, Jack, what's with the aluminum foil on the steering wheel?"

"I covered it because the horn button cracked and fell off." That wasn't the whole story, though. After the horn button had fallen off I covered with foil so on a quick glance it would look like chrome. A few days later I honked the horn and got a little shock. I use it now only in emergencies, and when I do I use my sleeved elbow.

We pulled up to Winston Tire. "Hey, Jack," Hank said. "You have time to wait? I live only a block from where you picked me up." Then added, "I moved a couple months ago."

"Okay, I'll wait," I said. Carrying a battery all those blocks would be an unpleasant thing to do, while doing him a favor would be a nice thing to do. Hank seemed to have changed his ways. Maybe his outlaw days were over.

He got out. In no time at all he came back with a brand new battery, hopped in and said, "Okay, let's go."

I pulled out and asked how much it cost. Hank's answer was, "Nothing, so

you'd better step on it," and I obeyed.

While driving to his place I asked him why he did things like that. He said, "Hey, Jack, a man's gotta survive any way he can."

I didn't say any more about it. Hank took a pen and torn piece of paper from his pocket. "Got a new phone number since I moved." He handed it to me. I told him mine's the same.

"Hey, Jack, that's you. Constant as the North Star."

We arrived at his place and I let him out curbside. He looked at me through the passenger window and invited me up. I told him I had to be somewhere and was already running late. He stood there with the battery and threw me his warm smile as I drove off.

I had lied to him. I didn't have anywhere to go. As usual I was on my way to nowhere. I crumpled his number, threw it out the window, and was glad that I had recently changed mine.

H'M!

Jenny Pearson had come to Los Angeles to break into modeling. She needed a regular job to support herself and had found one right away, waiting tables at The Moustache Café.

On Jenny's first night I noticed her from my usual seat at the bar. Her figure was lean and fragile-looking, and her silky dark hair complimented her green eyes. It was near closing when the bartender introduced us. From then on, night after night, she would stop alongside me whenever she had time for a quick conversation. One thing led to another and we fell into each other's arms.

Jenny was from Georgia. She had a soft, pleasing Southern drawl. It was always a pleasure to listen to her. The subject matter, for the most part, came in second. As an example, while we lived together she had joined a number of groups. Buddhist, Hindu, and others. She would explain their principles and disciplines and I would respond with, "H'm!"

A solid year went by and Jenny's attraction to shepherds hadn't come between us. It was discouragement that had. She had gotten only two modeling jobs, still working full time at the Moustache. Jenny had decided to give up, go back to Augusta, back to her parents, and hoping to get back with the boyfriend she had left behind.

When she told me this I wanted say that trying to build a career for a year was no time at all. And what about us? is what I should have asked. But all I said was, "H'm!"

It wasn't up to me to make her stay. It was up to her. I had fought and conquered for love in the past. The resulting disillusionment of these victories were still stored away in a dusty corner of my mind.

The day came when Jenny was to leave for Augusta. I would be driving her to the airport that afternoon. We had our last breakfast together at a cozy little restaurant.

We both ordered pancakes, coffee with milk instead of cream, no sugar. We had liked a lot of the same things. I was going to miss her, and that soft regional drawl of hers.

"I can drive into Atlanta and still go for the modeling," she said. "It's easier to get work there. And I can start selling Herbalife again. You didn't know Atlanta's their home base, did you now."

"No, I didn't. That's the stuff you used to sell to people who sold it to other people. Like pyramiding, right?" I wasn't being facetious and she hadn't taken it that way. Matter of fact, she was pleased. I had remembered something she had told me months ago.

"How far is Atlanta from Augusta?" I asked.

"Hundred-fifty miles, maybe."

"H'm!"

Jenny read my thoughts. "Oh, that's nothing down there. And I can go back to school in Atlanta."

"You're going to be busy," I said as the pancakes arrived.

"I'd be here, too, but everything is so expensive."

"Don't I know it. Scotch has gone up again at the bar."

"Oh, you," she smiled while buttering her pancakes. "But they fill your glass to the top." She then went for the syrup and said, "It's because the bartenders like you."

"No, it's because I tip well," I told her while preparing my own pancakes.

"Maybe so, but they do like you. You never bother anyone because of those deep, dark thoughts of yours."

"Sure. Deep, dark thoughts about how I'm going to pay the rent."

"Oh, you!" she laughed. It was her first laugh of the day and it pleased me.

We dug into our pancakes. During the silence I glanced up and was a bit aroused by her buttery, syrupy lips.

Jenny chewed slowly, swallowed, then said, "You'd like Augusta. It's on the Savannah River, where all the old buildings have been restored." She cut another portion of pancake. "It's so pretty. And there's a big garden where the first experiments on planting were done, three hundred years ago. By someone sent over here by the King of England. Didn't know that, did you now."

"No, I didn't. Sounds real nice."

"Yes, it really is."

I ate and asked, "Does your boyfriend know you're coming back, that you want to, uh, start up again?"

"Mm, hm. I called him while were out looking for those weird little screws. It's a beautiful old car, I don't blame you for taking such good care of it." Then said, "He's real happy about it."

"Well, I'm not. I've been searching for those sixty-year old screws almost as long as I've known you."

"Oh, you! You know what I mean. The operator told me how much the call was, so I'd better give it to you before... you know."

Jenny's mood had changed. Her green eyes had become moist.

No, I thought, I couldn't be the cause. I was a bum writer with no future. I had inherited an antique car and that was all I had. Must have been a surge of melancholia or some such thing. Whatever it was I stayed out of it because I didn't want to have to store away another lost victory.

There are some women, possibly many, who romanticize about living with a struggling writer. But then when it finally becomes a reality...

"No, it's okay," I told Jenny. "I'll take care of the phone bill."

"You sure?"

"Sure. What's your boyfriend do for a living?"

"Works on a farm just outside Augusta. In two years we'll have our own."

We planned it all out on the phone."

"H'm!"

I took a moment to worry about the cost of that long distance call. I needed all the money I could get. For rent, scotches, and those weird little screws.

While still working on our pancakes I asked, "Why two years until you'll have a farm?"

"He's got to work to save the money."

"In two years he'll make enough on the farm to buy one of his own?"

"No, silly you," she smiled weakly, her sadness waning. "He's leaving farming and joining the Merchant Marines."

"You're kidding—you mean go to sea for two years?"

"Mm, hm. There's no other way to save that much."

Jenny's plan seemed a bit peculiar. "You're going to wait in Augusta for two years, like in 'Gone with the Wind' or something?"

I made her laugh again and she said, "While I go to school, sell Herbalife, and try for the modeling."

"Traveling back and forth to Atlanta," I happened to remember from what she said a few minutes ago.

"Mm, hm."

"H'm!"

Okay, I thought, leave it alone. Her green eyes looked kindly into my dark ones and I was glad that I made her laugh. "Whatever road you take," I said, "I hope it's a happy one."

When done with breakfast we went home, closed the blinds, hit the bed and whispered our goodbyes.

The phone bill came a few weeks later. It sat alone in the mailbox. Reaching for it I thought about her. I missed her. Maybe if I had tried to change her mind...

I went inside and opened it. Christ sake, she must have talked to Farmer John all day, eighty-nine dollars' worth. I had debts to friends, rent and more scotches to worry about; and I had to keep the car gassed up, my search for the screws had widened to other counties.

It had taken me three months to catch up on it all. I had even tracked down those weird little screws. Twenty of them, stainless steel at \$4.19 apiece. They were more than a half-century old, looking brand new in their original Ford factory box.

It's a few years later now. I haven't heard from Jenny since the day we whispered goodbye. I will always remember her soft regional drawl, those green eyes, and those weird little screws.

OLD HAT

Eddie had just passed his 60th birthday. He lived alone in a nice-enough one-bedroom apartment. "Good leather," he said to the arm of the couch, talking out loud to himself again. He lifted his eyes from the couch and scanned the living room.

"Things. Spend it all on things. Why do I do that?"

His reflection sat across the room on the dark screen of the big TV. The two Eddies gazed at each other as if both expected an answer.

"Because this is Los Angeles," Eddie answered finally. "Los Angeles means 'City of Things' in Spanish," he kidded.

Pressing the remote the other Eddie disappeared in a burst of color. A cable movie had popped on.

This was Eddie's night off and he was hoping for the best. 8 o'clock, he thought, she should've called by now.

They had met last night at the restaurant where Eddie bartended. Emily had come in to meet a date for dinner but he never showed. "Must've been awful for her," Eddie said to the film that was playing. "Couldn't tell by the way she looked."

In his mind's eye he saw her lifting her drink. An overhead light struck the glass and made her eyes sparkle.

He spoke with Emily across the bar whenever he wasn't busy. Eddie had even gotten her to smile a couple of times. Must be around 40, he had judged at the time, with a pretty face that was maturing well.

When she had paid her check Eddie asked for her number. Emily took his instead. She told him she would call him the next night around 7:30 and they would plan where to meet.

This was the night and it was now 8:10. Eddie looked at the phone and said, "Not that late, still time."

Then he remembered she had ordered a meal at the bar. Wouldn't have stayed at the bar and done that if she didn't like him, Eddie supposed. Nice tip, he thought. She didn't have to do that. Emily. Nice name. Said she's from New England.

"Emily," he said aloud, tasting the name. "Emily and Eddie. Eddie and Emily." He then worried over the age difference. He was 60, she around 40. That's a 20-year spread. The difference might have scared her off.

Eyes on the TV he had no idea what the movie was about. He lifted a hand toward it. "Now wait a minute," he said to one of the characters, "I'm trim, physically fit, and she already knows what a good sense of humor I have."

From behind his own eyes he wasn't anywhere near 60. Without a mirror to tell him otherwise, he thought of himself as much younger. "Why is that?" he asked no one, and he mulled it over.

The inner voice, Eddie concluded. It never changes, never ages. He was

listening to his own at this very moment. It sounded like it always had, as long as he could remember anyway. "Ha!" he blurted out. So that's why older men make such idiots out of themselves with younger women.

Eddie sank deep into the couch and wondered if Emily had thought him an idiot.

8:22. A riptide of disappointment tried to pull him under. He fought it off with the little hope he had left. He watched the movie. He watched the clock. He watched the phone.

8:48, and Eddie was dragged to the bottom.

Whenever he felt like this he would put a hat on. He never understood why. Or maybe he did in a hazy way, possibly something to do with his father.

The old Mexican one, Eddie decided. That's the one he'll wear. Straw's soft and it's got a colorful band.

He had bought it decades ago, down in Ensenada. "Gretchen," he sighed suddenly.

They had met just after she moved out here from Germany. She was a beautiful blue-eyed blonde. Eddie's heart would pound at the sight of her. About a year later it was his head that began to pound.

During their two weeks in Ensenada, Gretchen wouldn't stop talking about Dusseldorf, her family and friends, what a good life she'd had in Dusseldorf. Her German accent made it even more unbearable.

Eddie shifted on the couch and said, "Dusseldorf—Dusseldorf—Dusseldorf!" He looked to the ceiling and repeated what he had said to her: "If you miss it so much, why don't you go back!"

She did, two weeks after their Ensenada vacation. Gretchen wrote Eddie from Dusseldorf. He never answered.

"At least I've still got the Mexican hat to show for it." He got up off the couch, took two steps and stopped. Something might be wrong with the phone. Emily might have tried to call. Eddie lifted the phone and checked for a dial tone. He heard it, thinking how strange it was that a sound could sound so empty.

At the hall coat closet now he gazed at his hats. They were on a shelf in a single stack, crown over crown. The alpine was on top, gray in color with a tiny feather stuck in the band. It had been a present from his mother.

Eddie remembered how embarrassed he had been of her when she would do crazy things to make people laugh. He pictured her, plump in later life, wearing a green pantsuit with matching cap, making croaking sounds to strangers and telling them she was a frog.

"Okay," Eddie said to the alpine, "I admit it now, she was funny. I was too young then, too full of myself." He leaned against the doorjamb and wished he could tell her that.

He never wore the alpine on the streets, thinking it would make him look like a tourist. He kept it on top of the stack to shield the other hats from

dust.

Under it was the Panama, beige with a wide dark-blue band. Eddie would wear it on sunny days, not too often though. He feared people would think him bald if he wore a hat all the time. Unlike his mother Eddie always worried about what other people thought.

"John Robert Crawford," he said to the Panama. "Damn right, friends forever." They had met while Eddie lived in New York, just before Eddie's mother died. They didn't need any ties from the past to become friends. It was immediate.

When Eddie had left for California, Crawford followed. It was no secret that Crawford's ex-wife was already there, and that he couldn't forget about her.

A year or so after Eddie and Crawford arrived in Los Angeles they were on Rodeo Drive looking at hats in a shop window. They both liked the Panama, and they each bought one. They were expensive and well worth it.

Six months later Eddie wore his to Crawford's funeral. He had been drunk and drove his car into his ex-wife's living room. She and her new husband weren't home at the time.

"Guess he didn't know that," Eddie said to the closet floor, and he wondered what ever happened to Crawford's Panama.

Talk about expensive, Eddie thought, eyes now on the brim of the fedora under the Panama. Black felt with a black snakeskin band. The band was only a half-inch wide with a thin gold clasp on its left side.

"New York," he said with a quick nod. Eddie was living off Third Avenue, around the corner from the Caliban Restaurant. That's where he had first seen the fedora. A drinker at the bar had it on, his eyes in shadow under the wide black brim. Eddie complimented him on it and asked where he had gotten it.

The drinker answered with, "Made-to-order by an Italian hat-maker. Where King Street starts at McDougal."

Eddie went there the next morning and was measured for the fedora. Three days later he was back in the shop. Eddie gave the domed crown a push downward, formed it, then pinched the front. He put it on and curled the brim down over his left eye.

"You don't need a mirror to put it on," the hat maker stated.

"My father taught me how." It was then that he turned to the mirror. "Wish he were alive to see me in this one. It's perfect." This caused him to recall the death of his father. How angry he had been at his mother for having given his father's hats away.

That was around thirty years ago, Eddie figured. New York, and again he thought about The Caliban Restaurant. Eddie was there a lot. He stood at the closet and tried to think of the waitress's name. It had taken him weeks to get her to say yes.

Eddie took a step into the closet and ran a finger over the fedora's black

brim, the felt still soft. "I think it began with an B," he muttered.

Eddie and B didn't last long. She was too fast for him. All she ever wanted to do was get loaded and go out dancing. The loaded part didn't bother him as much as the loud music and sweaty crowds.

"What was that word B used to use?" Eddie asked the fedora. "Boogie, that was it. 'I wanna go out and boogie.'"

He went back to leaning on the doorjamb. Dance, he thought. Maria, Maria Cruz. Eddie remembered her name right away. He had met her not long after B. Maria had come to New York from Puerto Rico, worked in a record store and studied ballet. She had a daughter, a four-year-old. They lived up in Spanish Harlem with Maria's parents.

She stayed at Eddie's two, three nights a week. Sometimes she would bring her music with her and practice her ballet while wearing the fedora. And while she danced Eddie would imagine the sea, its waves rolling under the moonlight.

Eddie stepped back from the closet and asked himself what had ever happened to her, what was it that had caused their breakup.

"Oh, yes..." he remembered. While going with Maria she was seeing another guy. He was a wealthy Park Avenue bachelor. Maria had told Eddie about him right off, and Eddie had to accept it. He didn't like the alternatives. Either let her go or commit himself to her totally. Playing it on middle ground was the best for Eddie at the time.

Eddie was surprised one day when his Park Avenue competition called. He said he wanted to marry Maria. He wanted to give Maria and her whole family a better life. In a tearful voice he pleaded for Eddie to give her up.

Eddie drew closer to the closet and again leaned against the jamb. "I did it for you, Maria, for you and your little girl."

He straightened up and stared at the fedora's black brim for a while, then lowered his eyes to the hat below it, the one at the bottom of the stack. It was a cowboy hat, given to him out here in Los Angeles.

Connie was an actress from New York. She had invited Eddie to party at a film-star's home. The star had worn the cowboy hat in his last movie, which turned out to be a huge flop. He didn't want to be reminded of it, and that's why he offered Eddie the hat.

It was chocolate brown and the leather was hard. It was impossible to disturb the shape of the crown, the curl of the brim. It was good support for the hats above it. "Connie..." Eddie said to it.

She had lived with him for nearly three years. She turned forty toward the end of their relationship, and still hadn't gotten anywhere with her film career. Failure had begun to crack her spirit, along with her sanity.

At the oddest times while at home with her Connie would dance naked while singing "The Good Ship Lollipop." She would wear the cowboy hat when she did this, and not once did Eddie imagine the sea with its waves rolling under the moonlight.

There had been other women in Eddie's life, vague images flipping through his mind now, fragments of lost loves.

He frowned at the stack of hats. "You're old," he said to them. "So am I," he smirked then. "Everything's old—everything's old hat."

Four hats, he thought. The Mexican one wasn't on the stack. The one he wanted to wear tonight. "Gretchen... Ensenada... Dusseldorf," he mumbled as he searched behind the hanging clothes. It wasn't there.

Bedroom closet, he guessed. About to leave the hall closet it came back to him. Eddie leaned a hand on the knob of the door, stood at angle and stared at the floor.

Ten, twelve years ago the wind blew it off his head. Woman's damn dog caught it and ripped a piece out of the back of the straw brim. After that he kept it in the trunk of his car, wore it against the sun while working construction jobs. Threw it away when he had become a bartender, Eddie remembered now.

Eddie took his hand from the doorknob and stepped into the closet. With both hands he grasped the Panama's brim on either side, lifting it along with the alpine that sat on top of it. He set the two of them aside on the shelf and pulled the black-felt fedora off the cowboy hat.

Returning to the leather couch with the fedora he sat with it in his lap. Eddie couldn't believe he had thrown away the old Mexican hat. Shouldn't have done that, he told himself, brim ruined or not.

The other thing he couldn't believe was that the movie was almost over. How could he have been with his hats so long? He looked at the phone. There was no chance Emily would call this late.

"Just as well," he said to the phone, thinking Emily would become like all the rest—gone, sooner or later.

He wondered then whether it had been bad luck that had ended his relationships or if they were of his own doing. Was it his fault in wanting to move on to a new heartthrob? This is when he realized he had spent his entire life believing he was the center of the universe and deserved to take anything he wanted. It wasn't until now that he understood what a lie it was.

An explosion blew all thoughts from Eddie's mind. A building had just blown up in the last scene of the movie.

A commercial came on. The young blonde in it looked a lot like Carol. How could he have forgotten about Carol. Back in New York. The Panama hat. She thought Eddie looked so handsome in it.

Carol's parents had a vacation home in the wooded hills of Woodstock. Occasionally, when her parents weren't there, she and Eddie would drive up and spend a few days doing nothing but loving each other.

Eddie smiled warmly at the memory of them on the upstairs veranda of the house, watching the most beautiful sunsets he had ever seen.

But then the beautiful sunsets disappeared after Eddie left Carol. He had become infatuated with yet another blonde whose name he couldn't recall.

Of all the women he had known, Carol was the one he should have stayed with. Yes, stayed with, Eddie regretted to himself.

He raised the fedora from his lap and put it on. He pushed his thumb between the brim and the top of his right ear, and the hat tilted to its proper angle. If Eddie had been in a rakish mood he would have used the width of two fingers to angle it even more. This was something else his father had taught him about hats.

Eddie curled the brim down over his left eye, picked up the remote and shut the TV off. His reflection reappeared on the dark screen. "You're kidding me," Eddie said to his other self. "Eddie and Emily—she finally called and they went out to what? To boogie—boogie—boogie?!" and the two Eddies laughed. They laughed hard together.

Eddie gave his other self a wave goodbye and got off the couch. He went into the bathroom where he stood in front of the mirror. The black hat gave him a dangerous look. He liked that.

He glanced down at the countertop, at his hairbrush, the electric toothbrush, toothpaste tube standing in a tall mug that sat next to some colognes he rarely used.

At the far end of the countertop was a small wooden bowl of shaving soap. On its lid stood the soap brush on the flat base of its glass handle. On the lid alongside it, his decades old double-edge Gillette razor, much heavier than what they make nowadays, Eddie lucky that he had found a place that still stocks double-edge blades and soap bowls. The old Gillette gave him a closer shave than the electric ones he had tried.

Aside from the memories of his father, the Gillette and glass-handled brush were all he had left of him.

Eddie leaned over the tub, closed the drain stopper and turned the diverter handle from shower to bath position. He ran the water and went into the bedroom.

Eddie returned naked, except for the fedora on his head. He turned the water off and got into the tub. He pushed the hat forward and leaned back against the porcelain. Reaching out he took hold of the Gillette, turned its handle and watched its jaws open. He removed the blade and returned the Gillette to the countertop.

It didn't take long for the water to change color. It reminded Eddie of the sunsets he had seen in Woodstock. He then thought about that old Mexican hat of his, along with all the rest he had thrown away in his time.

THE SAVINGS BANK

We snaked our way slowly toward the next available teller, guided by Victorian-looking burgundy ropes that slouched between the metal stands, all of us bundled up against the snowstorm that waited outside.

A young couple, maybe 19, 20 years old, neared first position. His hair was dark and curly and spilled down chaotically over the back of his jacket. Probably a rock musician, I thought. Her hair was short and blonde, bright enough to look as if it were sunshine pushing out from under her Yankee baseball cap.

They whispered closely in their matching jackets and scarfs. His long hair shook with confusion. He then ran off to the writing table while ripping up what had to be a deposit slip. I saw him grab a new one.

She was left alone. Behind her stood a hunched old man in a long black coat. Its bottom corners rested on his snow-soaked shoes. He was crowned in a damp crumpled hat and his face was a wreck.

The old man removed the hat, lifted a bent finger and tapped the girl on the shoulder. She turned, so close the visor of her cap threatened his forehead.

The old man pointed his stubbly chin toward the matching jacket in the background. "Ush?" he asked.

"What?" said the girl.

"Ush—ush?" he repeated.

"Jewish?" she guessed. The old man nodded happily. Her hand settled on the sleeve of his worn coat. "No, he's not," she said.

His head slowed and his eyes dug into hers. "Ush?" he asked urgently.

"No, I'm not Jewish either," she answered, knowing it was a disappointment to him.

He turned from her and stared into space. He must have been struck by the past, I thought. Possibly the memory of a lost love.

The matching jacket reappeared. He took his girl by the hand and led her off to the teller's window. The old wreck of a face looked over at me and I saw sad eyes. I gave him a smile. He returned it and we moved on.

THE HERO OF LOST CAUSES

Riverhead is at the far end of Long Island, with a bay to the Atlantic. On Memorial Day the town begins to fill with summer vacationers who have come to take advantage of the fishing season. After Labor Day the townspeople return to their quiet, homespun lives.

A number of decades ago, in this predominately Irish township, the locals would gather twice a month during the off-season to listen to tales of Irish history and folklore. Stories of struggle and courage, stories of sprites and leprechauns, told by retired fireman Kevin Michael Emmett.

Kevin and his parents had immigrated from Dublin, Kevin 18 at the time. Now at the age of 68 he was a man who had lost little of his youthful vitality, and little of his boyhood Irish dialect. But then when it comes to losses, his greatest had been the loss of his wife. She had died during his 21st year of fire-department service. From then on Kevin Emmett had taken to the bottle.

He was never fall-down drunk, or at least no one had ever seen him that way. Most of the locals had come to believe it was the drinking that enhanced his ability to tell a good story. Kevin's voice, gestures and facial expressions created a joyful afternoon of entertainment.

There was only one thing about Kevin Emmett that troubled the locals: Kevin's insistent belief in his kinship to Robert Emmet, an early Irish patriot with only one T at the end of his name.

Robert Emmet was born in Ireland in 1778. Angry over British rule, he recruited an army of farmers, shepherds, and friends. He then went to France and returned with weapons. Robert Emmet and his army waited 2 years for the right moment. When the moment came there was a miscue and a lot of confusion. As a result, the British captured Robert Emmet. On September 20, 1803 he was executed by hanging.

Patriot Robert Emmet quickly became a romantic figure to the Irish people, to this day referred to as "The Hero of Lost Causes."

The Riverhead locals doubted that Kevin Michael Emmett was a direct descendant, especially since Kevin's surname had a second T at the end.

Kevin had answered this many times: "When me and the folks come over, immigration added the extra T, they did, and that's that."

His kinship to patriot Robert Emmet was what he had learned as a child back in Ireland on windy nights by the kitchen fire. With no solid proof, he himself at times doubted the truth of the story, something he confessed to no one, not even to his son.

Kevin had named the boy Robert after the Irish hero, feeling in his bones that someday the lad would become a hero and give credence to the lineage. But up until now Robert's only accomplishment was in having become his

father's drinking partner.

After retiring from the fire department, being a responsible father and a man of responsible nature, old Kevin bought a 40-foot fishing vessel on time and opened a fishing charter business, summers only.

The office was in a trailer just off the marina parking lot. Labor Day had come and gone. It was on a Saturday morning that Kevin was at his desk with a glass of whiskey, the bottle of Jamison alongside it. His son Robert sat on the sofa with his own glass of whiskey, flipping through a fishing-tackle catalogue.

"Hey, Pop," he said, "I'm going to be thirty next month."

"Your mother'd be proud ya, she would."

"For what?"

Old Kevin looked into his drink. "Makin' it ta thirty, safe and sound."

His son stretched out on the sofa and thought about the hero Robert Emmet, a hero at 25. He sat up then. "Pop, you've proven the lineage. You're a hero of a lost cause—me."

"You're no lost cause and I'm no hero. Robert Emmet's in your blood, he is, and one day we'll be sure ta know it."

The phone rang. "Don't answer, Pop, might be a charter."

"Ehh, nobody here to fish." Kevin picked it up. "Emmett's Charter," he answered. "Poseidon? Musta got the wrong... oh... oh?...yep, uh-huh. Stay put a minute."

Kevin covered the mouthpiece. "It's the Poseidon Cremation Society of West Hampton," he told his son in a whisper. "Got a cracked hull and a service in three hours. Says give us three hundred for a half-hour anchor time."

Robert set his drink down. "Not bad for throwing ashes to the wind."

"Saturday—got folks comin' ta listen ta the Big Fella story."

"No problem. I'll take her out, I can handle it," Robert said with quiet authority.

Kevin gave his son a nod of approval. It was Robert's quiet authority that gave Kevin all the more reason to hang on to his dream. His son sounded like a hero.

Kevin uncovered the phone and was transferred to Mr. Evans. Robert went to the coffeemaker and got it going. He and his father never went to sea loaded. Robert then went to the wet bar and from the side of the sink lifted a tube of toothpaste and his toothbrush.

Two hours later the funeral procession rolled in. Kevin and his son came out of the trailer as 14 mourners got out of 4 cars, somber men and women in drab clothing.

Kevin eyed the hearse thinking it a mighty respectful way to carry a jar of ashes. Mr. Evans slid out of the hearse. He was on the short side with a stern hatchet face, neatly-barbered white hair, and wore a suit as black as the hearse.

Old Kevin introduced himself to Mr. Evans. That's when Mr. Evans smelled whiskey. "Mr. Emmett," he said, "are you the one who'll be taking us out?"

Kevin heard the accusation in his voice. "It'll be my son here, Robert. Sober as British Parliament."

Robert and Mr. Evans shook hands, Robert giving him a smile. The smile was actually meant for Kevin. Robert knew his father thought British Parliament was a house of drunks.

Mr. Evans gave Robert the once-over. Robert's tall, strong-looking figure and steady dark eyes reassured him.

The mourners stayed in a bunch alongside the hearse. Kevin and his son led Mr. Evans into the trailer. After Robert showed Mr. Evans the course he had charted, Mr. Evans joined old Kevin at his desk and wrote out a check.

Robert's eyes shifted to an office window. He gazed at the mourners and was struck suddenly by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She looked up and caught his stare.

He turned from the window, a bit embarrassed, her green eyes stamped in memory as he heard Mr. Evans: "I'll ready the pall bearers and you can walk us aboard."

"Ehh, pall bearers, did you say?" old Kevin asked.

"Oh, didn't I—this isn't a cremation," Mr. Evans said. "Burials at sea are unusual but the deceased had requested it in his will," he explained. "We'll strap the casket and lower it from the gin pole."

"Ehh, yep, I see," Kevin muttered. Then said, "Don't matter much, long as it's legal."

"Oh, it's legal all right," Mr. Evans told him, "beyond the 3-mile limit."

Kevin nodded and his son asked, "Half-hour anchor time?"

"Yes, Robert, same as cremations."

A few minutes later Mr. Evans stood with Kevin and Robert at the starboard side of the docked 40-footer, christened Robert Emmet. Mr. Evans eyed the forward hull and said to Kevin, "I see you named your boat after your son, but why is there only one T at the end of the name?"

"Ah," Kevin responded brightly. "Me *ship* is named after the Irish patriot Robert Emmet. Do you know of him?"

"No," Mr. Evans said with little interest, "can't say that I do."

"A grand bit of history that goes back to the early days of the struggle. A time when—"

"Pop," Robert interrupted, "we have to step aside."

Six men bore the casket by them, then up the railed ramp to the deck. Robert saying, "Okay, Pop, we've got to get aboard." Then to Mr. Evans, "Follow me and hold the rail."

Once aboard Robert spread a tarp behind the stern's 3 fighting chairs. The pall bearers gently set the casket down on it. Robert folded the ramp electronically against the hull, then threw the spring lines down to his father. On his way to the helm he exchanged a glance with the mournful beauty and

felt as though he had been zapped.

Kevin called out from dockside: "Good sailin', me boy!" He watched the Robert Emmet glide across the bay and out to sea, and then returned to the trailer where his whiskey awaited him.

An hour or so later a portion of the marina parking lot was filled with families seated in the folding chairs that Kevin supplied. They were listening to the beginning of Kevin's Big Fella story, the story of the Irish patriot Michael Collins.

At the side of the trailer a ship-to-shore speaker squawked a beep, followed by, "Hey, Pop, are you there?"

"Ehh, me apologies," Kevin said to the crowd. "Be back in a minute."

"No worry," Mrs. McGinty called out, "we'll be settin' up the food table."

Kevin went into the trailer. On the ship-to-shore he answered his son and heard him say, "Got an emergency. Said the prayers, winched the casket down, released it and it won't sink."

"She's afloat?!"

"No," Robert told him, "I gaffed it. Tore it up a bit, but got it back aboard. Everyone's pretty upset, especially Mr. Evans, about not having weighed it down enough. So we need a favor."

"Ehh, sure—sure."

"Mr. Evans says bricks. We'd have to come in for them and go out again. So I thought you could go to McGinn's, get a big load of them. Then borrow one of Fred's speedboats and meet us out here. The Cigarette's the fastest."

"Jesus-Mary, I'm in no condition ta go speedin' about."

"C'mon, Pop, set your mind to it, you can do it. There's a copy of the chart on your desk."

"Ehh, yep, so there is, so there is... well now, no sense turnin' a half-hour anchor time into a whole day."

"Thanks, Pop. See you soon."

Moored out at sea Robert stood in the flying bridge. He turned and there she was. Her dark hair shivered in the wind and her green eyes gleamed in the sunlight.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to disturb you," she said in a timber that sent Robert's blood rushing.

His quiet authority weakened. "No, it's, it's all right."

"I came to thank you for saving my grandfather's casket. If you hadn't, my grandmother probably would've jumped in after it."

Robert glanced down at the deck where the old woman was being held steady by a relative. "She really wouldn't have, would she?"

"Granny's very old and out of balance, mentally and physically, what with the passing of grandfather, and what's happened with the casket, along with the rocking of the boat."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." She pointed down toward the stern. "Why do those three

chairs have straps?"

"They're fighting chairs, bolted to the deck. The straps stop you from getting pulled in when you hook a swordfish, marlin, anything big."

"Would you mind if we strapped Granny in one? When we sit her down on the side benches she falls over when we let go of her."

"No, I don't mind."

"I heard Mr. Evans call you Robert, so it's Robert, is it?"

Asking him this he heard a bit of an Irish lilt. He glanced down at her left hand and saw no wedding ring. Barely able to speak he looked into her shining eyes and whispered, "Robert."

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, it was just a..." and he shrugged it off. "And your name is...?"

"Eileen," she smiled.

Back in Riverhead, portly, round-faced James McGinn was where he always was, in his cushioned chair behind the counter. "Ya want old or new?"

"Old," said Kevin, "and I'm in a hurry."

"More costly," McGinn warned him.

"Old bricks more than new? You cheatin' me, James McGinn?"

"Old's got the antique look. Hard to come by with no cracks. Wha'cha ya usin' 'em fer?"

"Ehh, ya wouldn't believe it. Gimme the new."

"How many?"

"'Nough ta keep, ehh... big heavy box at the bottom'a the sea."

McGinn closed an eye and glared at him with the other. "Ya ain't done murder, have ya Kevin Michael Emmett?"

"I'll give ya murder if ya don't gimme me bricks!"

James McGinn pressed the intercom and called for his son's help. He hefted his big body from the cushioned chair. "Come along, then."

Out in the brick and lumber yard McGinn and his burly son loaded the bed of Kevin's pickup with 200 pounds of new bricks. Because of McGinn's persistence, Kevin buckled and told him the troublesome casket story.

When done with the loading Kevin paid and drove off. McGinn returned to his cushioned chair behind the counter, grinned and said to himself, Could happen to nobody but the likes of Kevin Michael Emmett.

Kevin had already called ahead for the Cigarette, tanked and ready when he got there. He backed his pickup down to the dock where Fred Foote stood in his Riverhead police uniform. The dark blue of the uniform complimented his fiery eyes. Fiery due to the red cracks and hues caused by his late-night carousing. He was a likable, handsome ladies' man, always respectful to the townspeople.

Fred Foote could see that Kevin was a trifle off-balance. He poured him a coffee from his thermos and proceeded to transfer the bricks to the

speedboat. He did it alone while Kevin sat on a piling sipping the warm drink. Didn't bother Fred in the least, he had been raised on Kevin's stories and would have done anything for him.

Finished loading the Cigarette, Fred asked Kevin what he was going to do out there with all these bricks.

Kevin gave up, thinking the whole town might as well know about it, and he again told about the unsinkable casket.

Past 3 o'clock and the Robert Emmet was still moored out at sea. The weather had taken a turn and the water was choppy. Granny, strapped in the fighting chair, stared blankly out over the stern. The casket lay on the tarp behind her, Mr. Evans pacing alongside it. The mourners on deck felt the ocean chill and passed it on to Mr. Evans with their eyes.

Robert and Eileen appeared from below, each carrying a pile of sweaters. Robert telling her they had been knitted by the locals for the christening of the ship, and had doubled as a gift in return for his father's stories. He and Eileen handed them out. To get one over Granny, they had to unstrap and re-strap her. Mr. Evans helped with Granny, and that's when he spotted the speedboat.

"There he is!"

Everyone gathered at the stern and gazed entranced at the sea water that sprayed upward on either side of Kevin who stood at the wheel. Eileen touched Robert's arm and said, "Your father looks like he has wings."

Kevin slowed the Cigarette toward the transom, wondering about the bound-up old woman who faced him. "Good woman," he hollered upward, "has me son turned pirate?!"

Eileen smiled and Granny made a guttural sound. Eileen kept her eyes on Robert as he directed his father starboard, throw him a line, then climb over the rail. His father's words still with her, she saw Robert as a pirate, and she felt a sudden warmth.

Eileen went starboard and leaned over to see him step into the speedboat. Robert turned up to her. Their eyes met and held steady. Old Kevin caught the moment, and he knew. "Yep," he said softly.

Father and son tossed the bricks upward one-by-one to Mr. Evans and the others. There were a few misses but no one was hurt. When done Kevin and Robert climbed aboard. Behind Granny, Mr. Evans opened the casket and the bricks were stacked evenly around the body. Granny heard the clink of brick against brick and moaned quietly.

Eileen unstrapped her and held her upright alongside the open casket of body and bricks. Granny stood in near-catatonia, and for the second time everyone paid their last respects.

Mr. Evans closed the lid with a loud snap. Robert tied it up and swung the heavy load out over port and winched it downward. To the tune of its creaking Mr. Evans recited Last Rites for the second time. He then nodded to Robert who pulled the release.

Everyone leaned over the port rail and witnessed the dark box vanish into the depths. Old Kevin muttered, "Yep, done at last," then went to the helm and pulled up anchor.

Robert and Eileen led Granny back to the fighting chair, strapped her in, then joined Kevin at the helm. Eileen studied Robert's hands as he turned the keys and flipped the switches. The engines started with a deep rumble, followed by a horrific shriek. Like the cry of a banshee, as Kevin would later describe it.

Robert cut the engines and dropped anchor. He and his father hurried to the stern with Eileen. Granny gave out another shriek and everyone followed her stare to see the deceased riding the waves like a wooden plank. All stood shocked at the sight.

"Christ sake!" Mr. Evans cried out, repeatedly pounding a fist on the rail. "Why did I—it's an airtight casket—you can't open—damn it—damn it!"

Granny passed out. Her mind wanted no more of it.

The body rose and fell in the waves. Someone shouted, "He's getting away!" and they all tried to get each other to do something.

Robert leaned over the rail so as not to lose sight of him. The ship listed and he went overboard. On his way down he hollered, "Cigarette!"

Eileen kept a fearful watch on Robert who struggled out toward her grandfather. Mr. Evans and the others were stunned silent, the ultimate confusion being Robert's call for a cigarette.

Old Kevin raced across deck to get to the Cigarette down on the starboard hull. He tripped on the tarp and slid headfirst into the bulwark. He was out like a light, the only one who knew what Robert had meant when he called out for the Cigarette.

Mr. Evans followed Eileen to Kevin's aid. They knelt alongside him as he came to and mumbled, "Boat... speed."

With realization Eileen got to her feet and climbed overboard. She hurried down the ladder and into the Cigarette where she frantically eyed the dash. She prayed for luck, turned the key and flipped one of the switches. It started.

She fumbled with the line and got it untied. Looking under the dash there was no accelerator pedal. "Dang it!" she blurted out. Eyes back on the dash she saw a handle that looked like a gear shift. She gripped it tightly and pushed it forward.

The Cigarette accelerated with a jolt and scraped alongside the hull. Eileen worked the wheel, got control finally and took off.

Aboard the Robert Emmet Mr. Evans helped Kevin to his feet, and then to the stern. They watched with the others, Robert nearing the deceased, both moving farther out, sinking and rising between the waves; Eileen racing around in wide circles, then at last achieving a near-straight line. Old Kevin made his way to the helm, pulled anchor, started the engines and turned the ship.

Robert came up for air. Then went under again, the rough waters tumbling him every which way. He saw a blur of black and caught hold of it. He dug his fingers in, pulling himself upward, wrapping his arms around what turned out to be Eileen's grandfather. Above the surface now, Robert choked and coughed into the cold and salty black suit, and thanked heaven for the dead life-preserver.

Eileen pulled the throttle handle down. The Cigarette slowed to an idle and rocked on the waves. She reached out and grabbed Robert's hand, his other held tight around her grandfather's belt. Robert looked up into her green eyes and said against the wind, "We've only known each other for a few hours, but..."

"But what?" she smiled as sea water splashed them both.

They were interrupted by the Robert Emmet pulling up for the final rescue. The soaked body of the departed was hoisted aboard, Robert and Eileen now alone in the Cigarette. There was no more to say as they embraced, lips touching, both knowing that today would be the beginning of their lives together.

When Eileen finally climbed up from the Cigarette she went to the fighting chair where Granny had just regained consciousness, unaware of her husband drying out behind her on the tarp.

Eileen told Granny that Grandpa had been saved and they would be heading back to shore. Then said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we'll have to go through this again tomorrow."

Granny's eyes rolled with the ship.

Robert had secured the Cigarette to the hull and was now climbing aboard. As soon as old Kevin saw him he danced a jig on deck, everyone thinking he had cracked under the pressure. He danced over to his son, hugged and kissed him, something he hadn't done since Robert was a boy. "Me lad," he whispered in Robert's ear, "you went and saved a dead man!" He turned from Robert and shouted into the wind, "If ever there was a lost cause!"

From that day on Robert has been remembered as "Riverhead's Hero of Lost Causes." The locals never again questioned the father and son's lineage to the Irish patriot Robert Emmet.

SUBJECT'S LAST INTERVIEW THROUGH BRAINDEX THOUGHT CAP
Hudson Laboratories

January 28, 2013.

Experiment Number: 915.

Conclusion: First success.

Note: Neuron static at start had eliminated first paragraph of decoded thoughts. Decoded text begins here with second paragraph of interview.

TEXT OF INTERVIEW

Another one of my favorite spots was under the dresser. It was a good place to think about things, like about people. It was there in the dark I came to realize people always need more. Yet, get what they need or not, they remain unhappy—oh, but then people do have their moments of happiness, but it never lasts long. As for me, all I ever needed was a rubber toy or a little catnip. If luck were on my side I would find a live mouse or bird to chase down. Water bugs were all right, though not as much fun.

I know about people because I lived with one. Her name was Suzie. She was an actor. And so were her friends. They would come over and talk about plays, movies, and the jobs they never got.

I would watch them carefully, especially when there was laughter. I came to understand that they used laughter to mask and hide their fears. I never laugh. That's because I have nothing to fear, nothing to hide.

Things were going along pretty well in the apartment. Until Suzie fell in love. He was a stockbroker, moved in and stayed for two years. His name was Sam, or Sammy as some of his friends called him. Whenever I heard his name, Sam or Sammy, I would think of salmon, one of my favorite dishes.

During the beginning of my relationship with Sam he paid attention to me in a kind enough way. Things began to turn sour when I got into the habit of jumping up on the bathroom counter while he preened. He would look into the mirror as if he cared for nothing but himself. Whenever Sam would catch my stare I had the feeling he knew that I thought his self-importance was ridiculous.

Sam didn't like this about me, this special insight I have into people, that people are unable to deceive me. It was my insight that had made him suspicious of me. I didn't mind because I had made a game of it. There wasn't much else to do.

During Sam's second year with us he and Suzie hollered more and more at each other. People don't know anything about silence. All they want to do is make noise. That's what they dream about, making at least one big noise in the world.

Sam wanted to marry Suzie, under the condition that she give up her

acting career and leave New York with him. The brokerage house he was with had promoted him. Sam would be heading up their St. Louis branch. Another good thing for Sam was that he wouldn't be seeing Suzie's actor friends anymore. He called them—what was it? Losers I think it was.

I truly believe Suzie loved Sam. Why she did is beyond me. It seems that the core of human love will never be understood. It was difficult for Suzie when she finally made her decision and refused his proposal.

Two weeks later Sam left for St. Louis. Good riddance, I had thought at the time. Poor Suzie, though. She cried for days. After a couple of months had gone by things had quieted down and we were back to normal.

About two weeks ago Suzie was at the computer looking at her mail. I hopped up on the desk and got comfortable. There was something from Sam, which wasn't unusual. He and Suzie had kept in touch, Suzie with the hope that someday they would get back together.

I could tell how happy she was to see that Sam had sent her something. Suzie opened it and the screen became a fancy-looking picture with words. She studied it for a moment, then suddenly burst into tears. An angry sort of tearfulness. She pounded the desk with her fist. Suzie turned to me and said, "A wedding invitation!"

She shut the computer off. She lay her head down on folded arms. Her weeping saddened me deeply. I purred and licked her hand.

The next day Suzie and I were on the sofa. She stroked my back, telling me how hopeless things had gotten. It wasn't just that Sam was about to marry someone else. There was a money problem, and at 34 years old her acting career was still going nowhere. Even if I could speak I don't know what I could have said to comfort her. I'm the first to admit that I don't know everything.

As a matter of fact, I have been a little confused lately. Any animal would be, stuck in a miserable cage, surrounded by other cages. The dogs don't bother me, they know how I feel about them. The other cats press their noses against the wires wanting to converse with me. I have nothing to say to them. And not much else to say to you.

I was taken out of the apartment last week. They found me in the darkness under the dresser. I never thought Suzie would do that to herself. She's the first person to deceive me. And the last. I have learned my lesson.

Like now with you, my keepers. You think I don't know what you're up to. I can sense the mood of things. I'm no fool.

From everything you have just heard I suppose you think I have lost my mind. Well, maybe I have. It doesn't bother me. Suzie was bothered and troubled, but not me. Yet isn't it odd how we'll both end up the same.

FIVE

(A fable retold)

Henry had a fun late night and didn't wake up until around 11 a.m. While in the shower he flashed on the dream he'd had, remembering nothing but five loaves of bread on a table. Then while getting dressed he decided he had better go to the bank and deposit the cash he had saved.

Ready to leave now he counted out his savings on the kitchen table. Five hundred dollars, exactly five hundred. Henry made the connection to the 5 loaves of bread. Funny coincidence, he thought with a smile.

Leaving his apartment building he tripped and fell down a short flight of stairs. Sitting on the sidewalk he looked at the stairs and said, "Damn you!" It was then that he noticed there were 5 steps.

Henry got to his feet and limped up the street, heading for the bank. When he got to the corner he saw a bus loading. It was the Number 5 bus, its destination sign reading Hollywood Park Racetrack.

Fate whispered to Henry. He limped across the street and boarded the bus. He took a seat, massaged his ankle and the pain quickly subsided. Five minutes into the trip the bus broke down. Repaired finally, it arrived at the track late, but just in time for the 5th race.

Incredible, Henry thought, and then even more incredible was the Number 5 horse in the 5th race. Its name was Five. Henry had an adrenaline rush and hurried to the bettor's window. He bet the whole \$500 on Five.

The race began with the opening clank of the stall gates. Henry stood close to the track and watched Five move up, then move back, move up again, move back again, up again, back again and up again, until Five finally crossed the finish line, coming in 5th.

DAVID

David lived in Manhattan on the upper West Side and worked at home. Mid-afternoons he would ride his bicycle to the Museum Café. It wasn't a busy time at the café, which afforded David the opportunity to get acquainted with one of the servers. She was quite attractive.

Millie was Hispanic. She had black hair and dark eyes to match. The good thing for David was that Millie had a bicycle that she rode to work. During her break they would get on their bikes and take a one-block ride to Central Park. It was always a fun time. If Millie got off early, they would ride to her apartment house. She never invited him in.

This wasn't the only disappointment for David. Whenever he asked her out, she refused. He knew she lived alone and wasn't attached to anyone, at least that's what Millie had told him. He decided the answer would be to write her a letter in which he would express his feelings. A real letter, one to be delivered the old-fashioned way by post.

It worked. She called and invited him over. Millie opened the door and he followed her in. She wore tight Levi's that seemed to call for the touch of his hand.

Entering the sparse living room David glanced at a few framed photos on top of the 3-shelf bookcase. Millie had told him she had a brother so he asked, "Is this one your brother?"

"No," Millie said. "My ex-boyfriend. I've been meaning to pack it away."

Excellent, David thought as he nodded sympathetically.

Millie gestured him toward the sofa. That's when he noticed that the cuffs of her white sweater had three narrow black bands. The clean white spaces between the black lines triggered an image of the letter he had sent.

David sat on the sofa thinking that revealing himself in print might have been a mistake. He then told himself to stop being negative. She phoned him after reading it, and did ask him to come over. Millie's Yorkie came out of nowhere, hopped up alongside him and rested against his thigh.

"What's your name?" David asked the dog.

Millie stood across the room with a warm smile. "Her name is Cat."

"Good name for a dog," David smiled back.

Millie sat at her drawing table and resumed her work, painting with water colors before a tall window that overlooked the street. The daylight set her dark hair aglow. David found himself wishing he were a painter. Her face, the Spanish shading of her smooth skin.

"Cat is short for Catarina," Millie explained. "Catarina van Hemessen. She was a Renaissance painter."

"Can't say that I've heard her," David said.

Millie turned her dark eyes on him. "The Renaissance book on the coffee table, page 48."

Oh, good, he thought as he opened the book. Now he had two things to help alleviate his nervousness, pet the dog and look at the book. Reaching page 48 he studied the three photos of Catarina van Hemessen's works.

"Impressive," he said softly, mesmerized by one of the them. Then shifting his eyes to Cat, "Do you know who you're named after?"

Millie turned to David and rested the heel of her hand on the rough surface of the Grumbacher paper. Instinctively she kept the wet end of the slender brush angled upward.

"Oh, I've told Cat all about her namesake," Millie smiled again. "She agreed it would be a good name for her."

And again David returned the smile. He wished he could carry her smile with him everywhere he went.

Millie glanced at David's letter that laid closed on the coffee table near the Renaissance book. "That's a wonderful letter you wrote, and I think it's time I answered."

"You're going to write me a letter?"

"No," Millie laughed. "I mean answer you now."

"Oh, okay," David said lightly, hiding the fervor of his anticipation.

Millie came right to the point. "For me to have a relationship now is out of the question," she said quietly with a note of regret.

David gazed a moment at her long, lean fingers, knowing now he would never be caressed by them; listening to her as she went on to tell him about her career as an artist, about the current havoc in her life. There was no time for anyone.

As Millie spoke of these things David laid a hand on Cat and petted her. When attracted to someone, he thought, you always have the time, no matter what. Simple as that. Yes, David decided, the letter had been an embarrassing mistake.

Millie stood away from the drawing table. Cat shook herself, jumped down off the sofa and followed Millie to the entranceway. It was over.

David never returned to the Museum Café.

THE FOOL

25 years ago Max worked in Los Angeles as a freelance violinist for radio and TV commercial soundtracks. Needless to say, aside from the competition, there weren't many jobs available for a violinist. But it was better than nothing for a 30-year-old struggling, absent-minded orchestral composer. When not playing for pay, his mind would fill with whatever composition he might be working on. This is why he rarely heard anything that was going on around him.

The afternoon recording session had ended. The musicians were packing up their instruments. Franz the pianist turned to the others and said, "I smell fish, you smell fish?"

Max raised his nose and sniffed. He slapped his jacket pocket with realization. "Yesterday's lunch." Then admitted with a sheepish smile, "My sardine sandwich."

The other musicians had worked with him before. This sort of thing about Max wasn't unusual, and so they laughed, knowing what a fool he was.

Franz was the only one who didn't laugh. Franz was a classical pianist lucky enough to pick up a lot of needed commercial work. He understood Max. He liked Max.

Franz gave him a smile. "How about dinner at my place?" He then whispered, as if anyone else would care, "A friend loaned me a never distributed 1940s rehearsal tape of Rubinstein and Heifetz."

Max's eyes lit up, then quickly faded. "You know I'd like to, but I'm working on a concerto. It's been in me for days and it's all I can think about." Then added with fervor, "I must get back to it."

"I could play the piano part for you. You need to hear it as you go along."

"No, not really," Max said apologetically. "It's all in my head. I can hear it and need to get it from mind to..." He paused. "All I need is composition paper and I've got plenty of that, thanks to the money these commercial jobs give me."

Franz patted him on the shoulder. "That's fine, Max. Maybe you'll need me when you're finished with it?"

"Oh, absolutely," Max said with sincerity. "You should be with the L.A. Philharmonic, and you will someday if you ever get a break."

"Thanks, Max," and they parted.

Max carried his violin case out to the front of the recording studio and tossed the loosely wrapped sardine sandwich into the trash can. He went to his locked bicycle and strapped the violin case to the rear rack, then pulled two elastic bands from his pocket. Slipping them over his shoes he secured his pant cuffs above the ankles, which exposed his socks. One brown, the other gray.

Max liked using the bicycle because of the exercise, and he believed cars

to be undependable and dangerous. Peddling home he turned on La Jolla, the street he lived on. Max was fortunate in that he paid no rent, utilities his only cost. It was an apartment above the garage at his sister's house.

Peddling in the middle of his street now, the music in his mind stopped when for the first time he saw the single-story houses as giant colorful stucco cakes. Some were pink, others rose, green, chartreuse; colors that had been popular in the 1950s and had somehow remained extant.

Eyeing the houses Max thought his Los Angeles street ought to be called Sugarland Avenue. This new cake-perspective gave him a smile, and that's when he turned into the driveway and crashed into his sister's car.

He went up over the handlebars, landed on the trunk and slid down to the pavement, the childlike smile on his face only now about to vanish. Lorraine rushed from her sky-blue house and knelt alongside him.

Max opened his eyes into hers and muttered, "Cake..."

"Ohh, Max..."

"My forehead..." and his hand went to it.

"We'd better get some ice on it." Lorraine took a deep breath, put her arms under his and with a lot of struggling finally got him upright.

"My knees..." he complained.

Lorraine supported him into the living room where he stretched out in pain on the sofa. She took his shoes off and pulled the elastic bands from his pant cuffs. "I wish you'd let me fold your laundry. At least your socks would match."

Max shrugged and saw that Lorraine's eyes were moist. His sister cared about him and it brought him a rush of guilt, a pain that ran deeper than the ones he would soon get over. If she ever found out, he thought, there'd be hell to pay.

Lorraine left him and went for ice. Max heard the kitchen side door to the driveway open and a "Hi, Mom," followed by, "I put Uncle Max's bike and violin away."

Then Lorraine's voice: "Thanks, dear," and Max heard her go on to tell about the accident.

Lorraine's 18-year-old daughter, tallish and seemingly older than she was, padded over the living room carpet to the sofa. "Look at that bump! How do you feel?"

"I'll be all right."

"You big dummy," Nina smiled.

"I was lost again," he agreed with a slow nod.

Nina put two fingers to her lips, kissed them and passed the kiss to the bump. Her touch and aroma diluted Max's pain. "I'm feeling better already," he smiled weakly.

Lorraine reappeared with a dishtowel of ice and placed it gently on the bump. At that same moment Max's eyes were on Nina, taking in her dark shoulder-length hair, dark eyes, the clear skin of her youthful face. The

shock of cold on his forehead gave him an odd sort of pleasure.

The front door ajar, there was a rap at the screen door. Stretched out on the sofa, Max rolled his head and saw a teenage boy through the mesh.

Lorraine said, "Hi, Carl." Nina unlocked the screen door for him. He came in, Max thinking he had that West Coast surfer look, the blue eyes and long straight blonde hair. Nina walked Carl toward the sofa as he greeted Lorraine: "Hi, Mrs. Miller."

Lorraine gave him a nice-enough smile and said, "This is my brother, Max." Carl stood over him and studied the dishtowel on his forehead. "Oh yeah, Nina's told me about you. What's with the towel?"

"Bike accident," Nina explained.

"Cool," Carl said to Max. "Harley, Honda, what kind ya got?"

"Schwinn," Max answered tiredly.

"Ohh, a bicycle," Carl smirked.

"Lemonade and cookies?" Lorraine offered everyone.

Nina nodded. Max said no thank you. Carl said sure, and he sat in a cushioned chair.

Nina gently pushed Max's legs toward the sofa back and sat at the edge. "What time's the movie?" she asked Carl.

"Nine-fifteen." Carl then looked to Nina's right side and gazed at Max's mismatched socks.

Max knew what the boy was thinking. Same as everyone else. Max could have sworn they had matched when he had put them on.

Lorraine came in with the drinks and cookies, and asked Nina about her ballet class. Max closed his eyes. The voices in the room drifted and soon there was music. His music.

A car honked and brought him back to reality. Lorraine headed for the kitchen's side door. "Gotta move the car in the garage so Joe can get by."

Max noticed the empty glasses, empty cookie plate, and that he was alone. It didn't surprise him that the music in his mind had gone on so long. He sat up slowly. Cold water ran down over his face as the dishtowel landed in his lap.

Max set the wet towel on the cookie plate. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket, brushing the bump and feeling the pain. He stood from the sofa. His knees felt better. He tested them with a few knee bends. They hurt, but nothing like before. He took small steps into the kitchen and went out the side door.

Lorraine and Joe had garaged their cars. They were standing now before the closed garage door, Lorraine's hand on her forehead and her husband smiling. Max knew his accident was to become another funny Max-the-brother-in-law story. One that Joe would surely tell his courthouse friends. Joseph Miller, municipal court judge.

Lorraine saw Max and dropped her hand. Joe's smile softened into one of judicial compassion. He and Lorraine moved down the drive and stood with

Max.

"That's some bump you've got," Joe said. "How do you feel?"

"Better, thanks. Knees don't hurt as much."

"You should get back on the sofa and rest some more," Lorraine told him.

"No, that's all right, I need to get some work done."

Four hours later Max was in his apartment above the garage. He had worked steadily and now the inspiration was gone. It angered him. He threw the pencil down. It bounced from the desk and disappeared.

Max leaned from his chair, looked to the floor and became aware of how dark it was. He got up and turned the lights on. The pencil was there on the floor alongside the scattered sheets of the concerto he had been working on.

Must've been working in a frenzy, he thought. He decided it had been a good four hours' work, no reason to be upset. He picked up the pencil and composition papers. Max set them on the desk which was planted under the front windows. He looked out to see Lorraine and Nina down in the kitchen doing dishes. Far as dinners went, if he didn't show, they knew he had to be working. He would fix himself something later.

Max shut the lights and lay on the bed. He turned the bedside radio on, to the classical station. The room filled with Vivaldi's "Gloria in D." Max stared at the dark ceiling and thought about all the good work Vivaldi had done. How unhappy he must have been, pushed aside while other composers got the patrons and court positions. Yet it's been Vivaldi's music that has lasted and sounded through the centuries, into the shadows of the room above the garage, where it now sent Max beyond the planets and toward the stars.

To where Vivaldi must've worked, thought Max, far from those who wouldn't accept him. Then to die, never rewarded, buried in a pauper's grave.

The music reached a crescendo. Max was suddenly engulfed in a bright light and felt himself rushing into its embrace. At that moment he knew he had died and was passing into the next world.

The light vanished. Max didn't feel dead as he got off the bed. He went to the front windows, looked down at the driveway and saw a parked car. It had been the headlights, thought Max. He watched Carl move around the car and go to the side door of the house. Max understood now that Carl must be picking Nina up for the 9:15 movie.

Max flipped on the lights and pulled the shades down. He turned the radio off and sat at his desk. Two car doors slammed, one after the other. The engine started and Max looked up to see the shades brighten. The light receded and he returned to work on his concerto.

A couple of hours later Carl and Nina pulled into the driveway. They saw the lighted shades above the garage. Carl put an arm around her and pulled her close.

"Carl, somebody might see us."

"Good-night kiss, that's all."

Nina kissed him on the cheek and pulled away. "Thanks for the movie, it was great." She put her hand on the door handle. "Carl, you're very nice, you really are, but I just can't get involved now."

"If I were a movie star you would," he said, nodding with long blonde hair bouncing around, looking a little goofy.

"Oh, I don't know," Nina smiled, "maybe." She gazed down at her lap and said, "I've got so much to do. My first college exams, the theater group and ballet class."

"I understand," he replied vacantly.

"We could go to another movie next week if you like," Nina proposed.

Carl liked that and said, "Sure."

In the house now Nina moved through the bedroom hallway. She eyed her parents' closed door, stopped and listened, heard nothing. Entering her own room she closed the door and locked it. The sliding bolt had been a privilege earned, recently received for her 18th birthday.

Nina snapped the lights on, kicked off her shoes, removed her socks and tugged her jeans off. She lifted her sweater over her head and the soft material tickled her ears. In only bra and panties she took her bathrobe down from the hook and pulled it on.

On her way to a window she slid into her slippers. She brought her dark eyes close to the glass and looked out. At this side of the house there was a wide strip of grass bordered by a high wooden fence that blocked the neighbor's view.

Backing away from the window she flashed a mischievous smile at her reflection. Working quietly she unlocked the window and raised it. The rush of night air triggered an excitement that made her heart pound.

Nina turned the lights off. She returned to the window and climbed out, using the gas meter as a rung.

Max was asleep in his clothes on top of the bed covers. The lights were on, composition paper scattered over the floor. The door lock tumbled and Nina came in. She shut the door softly, stood and gazed at Max's profile. He wasn't handsome by Hollywood standards. It meant more to Nina that he was handsome in the classic sense. Like the photos she had seen, the weather-worn statues of the great Assyrian emperors.

She switched the lights off. The sudden darkness somehow awakened him. "What..." Max muttered.

"It's me," and she went to him.

Later at three in the morning Max was naked under the covers. He snapped on the bedside lamp. The first thing he saw was the bathrobe, bra and panties that Nina had thrown on the floor.

She came out of the bathroom freshly showered, long dark hair wrapped in a towel, body wrapped in a bath towel with top corners tucked in. Nina shut her eyes, lifted her bare heels and rehearsed what she had learned in ballet class.

She pirouetted over some of the scattered papers that lay close to the desk. Halting the performance she opened her eyes. "What're all these papers?"

Max sat up in bed and beamed happily. "I finished it."

Nina leapt on to the bed and into his arms. She kissed him wildly and said, "They all think you're a fool but you're not—you're not! You're a genius, my genius, and I love you more than anything!"

He steadied her and looked into her moist eyes. "It's for you. I wrote it for you." He meant it, and she knew it.

Nina jumped from the bed, picked up one of the papers and gazed at the completed measures.

"You can't read music," Max smiled.

"Shush, I'm watching the notes dance on the page." Nina dropped to the floor and began gathering more.

Max left the bed, got his robe and shrugged it on. He stepped to Nina as she rose up and laid the papers on his desk. He came up from behind her, took hold of her and softly kissed her neck. She squirmed with delight and turned in his arms to meet his lips. And once again they knew all there was to know.

Except for one thing. After Carl had dropped Nina off, he had gone home and couldn't stop thinking about her. He lay in bed, tossed and turned, then remembered suddenly what his friend Hal had done. Hal was infatuated with a girl who loved watermelon. In the middle of the night he had sneaked up alongside her parents' house. He stole through the girl's bedroom window with the watermelon and she has loved him ever since.

Carl quickly came up with chocolate sundaes. They were Nina's most favorite thing in the whole world. He sat up wide-eyed and whispered to no one, "Atta way, dude, go to the all-night market, get some ice cream and Hershey's chocolate syrup."

An hour or so later Carl was parked up the street, carrying a small grocery bag toward Nina's house. The night sky was clear with no moon to light him up. Perfect, Carl figured. In tennis shoes he tiptoed quietly up the driveway. He saw light, looked up and saw Max's shades lighted. Damn, Carl thought, what's that old fool doing up so late?

Moving stealthily at the side of the house he stopped in his tracks. There were now two shadows on one of Max's shades. It had to be Max, with a woman in profile, with bare breasts he could tell. Maybe he's not such an old fool, Carl smirked.

No, Max was just being absent-minded again. He had always been extra careful when up there with Nina. Careful never to have them stand between a light and a shade. He had forgotten to turn off the bedside lamp. The desk lamp under the shades off now, the usual was to have it on with no other lights.

Carl continued around back and down the narrow grassy path between the

sky-blue house and the high wooden fence. Reaching an open window he looked in, easily determining it was her room. He whispered, "Nina... Nina.."

He stepped on the gas meter and got himself inside. He tiptoed to the bed, feeling the thrill of what was about to take place. But then he stopped and stared at the empty bed. Maybe she was in the kitchen, the bathroom. Carl turned to the bedroom door. He saw the sliding bolt and went to it. It was in the locked position. He stood there with his bag of ice cream and syrup and a terrible thought came over him.

Carl climbed back out the window, went quietly alongside the house to the backyard. He hid behind a big bush where he sat and waited... and waited.

Dawn hit the horizon. Carl heard a sound. He peeked through the bush and saw her. Nina moved lightly down the stairs at the side of the garage, in tied bathrobe, slippers on her feet. Carl tensed up and held his breath. She crossed the yard and passed right by him.

Carl sat in the dirt, shaking, confused, becoming moist with anxiety. A moment later he realized the ice cream had melted through the bag and on to his pants.

He quickly moved across the yard, through the gate and into the back alley. He slammed the wet bag into a garbage can.

When Carl got home his parents were up and in the kitchen. His mother shook her head sadly and said, "Oh, god, look at his pants."

His father took a heavy step toward him and shouted, "Well?!"

"I was home, home around one and you were asleep and then—and then—then I had to go out again, that's all."

"That's not all!" his father fumed.

His wife pushed him aside and said to her son, "Joe Miller called and woke us up." She put a hand on her chest and took a breath. "He said you must've been in your car with Nina in the back alley. He saw you go out the back gate. He heard Nina climbing through her window and shutting it."

"I'm nineteen," Carl said defensively, "she's eighteen. There's nothing—"

His father hollered, "You were seeing her two months ago when she was seventeen! Do you know what that means?!"

"But," Carl tried to explain, "we weren't having—doing, doing anything."

His father sat down at the kitchen table. "Liar!" and he slammed his fist down on the table. "Her father's a judge, for Christ sake!"

His mother sat, put her head in her hands and wept. "They'll put you in jail..."

Damn it, Carl thought, there's no way out... except to... "The truth," he said. "I'll tell you the whole story and what I saw."

Two hours later everything was out in the open. Max and Nina, since around the time of her 17th birthday.

Nina could be heard sobbing in her bedroom. Max stood with Joe and Lorraine in the living room. Lorraine slapped Max across the face. "I thought I knew you!" she screamed. "How could you do this to us?! You *are* a fool—a

god damn fool! You bastard—I despise you!"

Joe pulled her away from Max and held her crying in his arms. Joe nodded at Max while saying with judicial calm, "I'll fix you, I'll fix you good." Then said, "Statutory rape, incest, and whatever else I can find out about your felonious life."

Max took a bus to Franz the piano player's house. He brought only his violin and satchel of completed concertos. Franz's wife was a bit of a talker. She went on about Max and Nina, comparing their story to others she knew about. She then started in on Max about her paintings, not noticing how red his eyes were. All he wanted now was what he always wanted. To be with his music. And Nina.

Joe Miller had thrown Max off the property. He decided not to press charges because of what his daughter would have to go through; and then there was the adverse publicity to consider, something no one, let alone a judge, would want to suffer through.

Though 18 now, Nina played the game as well as she could. In return for not pressing charges Nina agreed to being restricted to the house and college, and permitted her father to take the sliding bolt off her bedroom door.

While living in Franz's guest room Max, Franz and his wife made a major decision. If they were serious about their work they should move to New York. Soon after their decision they arrived in New York.

Surreptitiously Max and Nina stayed in touch. It was a difficult situation for them both. There came the time when Nina couldn't take it anymore. She ran away from home and went to him. Joe and Lorraine Miller never spoke to her again.

Twenty years later Max and Nina were still together. He was 50 and she was 38. They never had a child for fear of incestuous consequences. But they did adopt one, a baby girl, a teenager now, who sat between Max and Nina in the first row of New York's Avery Fisher Hall.

Franz was on stage at the piano. The conductor tapped his music stand with his baton. The first violinist stood and played as the orchestra joined in to perform the concerto that Max had written for Nina.

JACK and JILL

Jill was a secretary. Every day she called the same messenger service and asked for the same dispatcher. Jack was his name, and it was his voice she was in love with. Their trivial conversations after she placed her pickup order were titillating for her. Jill imagined Jack to be tall and lanky, and around the same age as herself.

Spring was in the air and Jill was ripe for adventure. Instead of lunch she walked a dozen blocks down Madison. She pushed the door open and stood a moment to study the situation. There were four men seated behind the dispatch counter, their faces blocked by messengers picking up their order slips.

Jill approached the counter, placed herself between two messengers and eyed the dispatchers. One of them looked to be about her age. Though seated he appeared to be tall and lanky.

"Jack?" she said to him.

He stood up, tall and lanky. "That's me," he said with a friendly smile.

He was just as she had imagined, but there was something missing. Somehow it just wasn't her Jack.

Jill felt the blush on her face. "Jill," she said to him, "from Colgate." Then quickly added, "Just passing by and thought I'd say hi." Not waiting for a comeback she hurried to the door and left.

Once outside it was easier to breathe. On her way back to the office she passed a bookstore. It brought to mind her favorite book characters that never quite made it on screen.

THE CANDLE and THE FLAME

The old woman needed to be thrifty. To save on the electric bill she had a single candle on the nightstand. Her habit was to get into bed and read one chapter of a book, then snuff the candle out and go to sleep. One night she opened a new book. It was so boring she fell asleep on page 2, and the candle burned on.

"The old woman fell asleep," the flame said brightly. "It means that I'll live longer."

"But the longer you live," the candle said, "the more of me will melt away."

The flame curled her smoke upward. "There isn't anything we can do about it," she said as nicely as she could.

The candle had to agree and there was no more to say. In the silence that followed he wondered how long it would take to melt down to the candleholder.

The flame gazed out the window. She saw a pale moon that set the land in silver shadow. She broke the silence with, "How beautiful it all is."

The candle studied her for a moment, then said, "I have known other flames. Not one of them had ever noticed the outside."

"How's that possible?" she asked.

"They were only interested in their own light," he explained.

"If they had looked outside themselves," she said, "they might have seen something that would have made their stay more worthwhile."

The flame then flashed golden sparks and rose up into a fine red crown. "I'm not too warm for you, am I?"

"That's nothing to worry about," he said. "Candles don't feel warmth. We don't feel anything." Then not knowing where it came from he surprised himself by saying, "You're the prettiest and brightest of them all."

Had he just felt something? he asked himself. No, that would be impossible, he answered himself.

The flame was brightened by his words. "And I would like you to know how comfortable I am lit upon a candle that burns so evenly." She looked again through the window, out into the silvery night. "Does it always look as beautiful as this?"

He didn't know how to answer, whether or not to tell her about the daytime. If he told her about it, she would never get to see it. By the time day arrives he would be a puddle of wax and she would have died out.

The flame read his concern. "What's wrong?"

He looked into her light. He had to tell her the truth, or at least part of it. "Night turns into day. Like the night, daytime is beautiful, but in a very different way."

The flame flickered and thought awhile. Then said, "If the old woman wakes she'll snuff me out. I'll never get to see the day."

"I know the old woman well enough," he told her. "She never ever wakes up early," making it sound a certainty, which it wasn't.

The flame was pleased, but then a moment later she said, "I wish she would wake up and snuff me out, then you wouldn't melt anymore."

Candles are not supposed to feel anything, and yet... for the second time something strange was happening to him. "But then I would never see you again," he said. "I would miss you very much."

The flame's brightness dimmed with the thought of them never seeing each other again.

To lift her spirits he went on to tell her everything he knew about the old woman. He did this because most everything about the old woman was funny.

Listening to the story, the flame laughed, which was a new and happy experience for her.

By the time he had finished the story he had melted down close to the candleholder. "How quickly the time has passed," he said.

The flame knew their end was near, and she again dimmed with sadness. She looked out the window. Darkness left the distant sky. The land soon lit up like a world of blazing candles.

Her sadness disappeared. She brightened into a torch of joyfulness, and the candle felt her warmth.

THE TURTLE

The rocky stream in the forest was home to a family of turtles. The youngest of the turtles asked if he could leave the stream and explore the world. His mother said, "No, dear, I don't think that's a good idea." His father said, "The world is a cruel and dangerous place."

Later that day the turtle sat alone on a rock in the stream. They don't know anything about the world, he thought, and so he came up with a plan.

Early the next morning, before anyone else was awake, the turtle quietly left the stream and entered the forest. The air was crisp and the ground was cool. As he traveled farther he heard the chatter of chipmunks and passed some rabbits at play. He crawled all day under the shade of the great trees. Darkness came and he fell asleep on a bed of fallen leaves.

The next morning the birds sang the turtle awake. He nibbled on some flower heads and continued his journey. He thought about his family, how worried they must be, maybe even angry. But then he was pleased at the thought of his return, when he would tell them what he had learned about the world.

Days later the turtle reached the end of the forest. Before him was a most beautiful sight. A field that shined like gold in the sunlight. He pushed his way through the tall yellow grass. Never before had he seen so many colorful insects. Some were sunset red. Some were midnight blue. Some were autumn brown. There were even some that were turtle green.

The turtle moved deeper into the field and a shadow passed over him. He looked up to see a swarm of butterflies. They fluttered happily and the turtle thought what a friendly, wonderful world it is.

He crawled through the field for days, neither tired nor hungry. The excitement of his adventure was all he needed to get by. When at last he reached the end of the field he stopped and stared in awe. He had reached the end of the world.

The sand sparkled and the ocean rolled as blue as the sky above. The turtle crawled out onto the empty beach. He stopped and settled down into the sand, surprised at how warm and comfortable it was. Now that he had seen the whole world, he knew it wasn't cruel and dangerous.

The turtle shut his eyes, listened to the steady sound of the waves and fell asleep.

Two human boys laughed and raced across the beach. Passing the sleeping turtle they kicked up sand, then ran off into the golden field. Their laughter faded and the beach was quiet again.

A little while later the turtle woke up and spit sand from his mouth. How strange, he thought, finding himself on his back. He rocked on his shell but could not turn himself over. He soon became very tired and had to stop.

The turtle rested until the sun was low in the sky. He took deep breaths

and tried again. He rocked back and forth for a long time. But he could not turn himself over.

He lay exhausted on his shell. His eyes began to moisten with tears when he saw something way up in the sky. It moved in slow, wide circles as it drew ever closer. It was a bird with pink eyes and snow-white feathers. She landed alongside the turtle and folded her wings.

"I can't turn myself over," the turtle said. "I need your help."

"I'll be back in the morning to see if you're still here," she told him. "If you go hungry and die I'll have you for my breakfast."

The turtle was so scared he could not speak. The bird opened her wings and flew upward until she vanished against the sky.

He rocked back and forth. He tried much harder this time. But he could not turn himself over.

An ant with a load of food bumped into his shell. "You're in my path!" he hollered.

The turtle's eyes brightened with hope. "Please help me turn over," he pleaded. "I'll die if I stay on my back."

"I can lift a thousand times my own weight," answered the ant, "but you're much more than that. It's impossible for me to turn you over."

The turtle gazed at the ant's load of food. "I haven't eaten in a long time. Your food might give me the strength I need to turn myself over."

The ant gave out an irritable sigh and said, "I must return to the anthill with a full load!" and he worked his way around the turtle's shell.

The turtle followed him with his eyes. "If you tell the other ants, maybe they would come and help. All of you together could turn me over."

"We're too busy packing our storehouse, and the sun is going down. We never leave our hill at night."

"The world is a friendly, wonderful place," the turtle said desperately. "I don't understand why you won't help."

The ant continued away and called back, "Yes indeed, a very friendly and wonderful place, as long as you have what you need. Otherwise you're nothing but a bother and a helpless fool, and that's that!"

The turtle watched him disappear behind a seashell. He then rocked back and forth as hard as he could. It was useless. He could not turn himself over.

Night came quickly. The turtle looked up at the moon and said, "I'll never see you again."

"Why is that?" asked the round moon.

"If I stay on my back I'll soon die from hunger. Is there any way you could help me turn over?"

"The incoming tide could turn you over," said the moon, "but you're too far from it. I can light the path of the lost, but you're not lost."

"Oh, but I am," said the turtle, "as good as lost."

"I am truly sorry," the moon said sadly. "I cannot change the nature of

your world."

The turtle feared his fate so much that he did not sleep at all that night. At sunrise the ocean wind blew softly over him. He tried to rock his body but he was too weak. He searched the sky and saw her. She flew high above him in slow, wide circles.

The turtle closed his eyes and listened to the steady sound of the waves. He fell asleep at last and dreamed of the forest, the rocky stream, and of his family.

EPILOGUE

What a deplorable situation—what a way to spend the night! I'm a hardcover book, stuck here in the city dump since late this afternoon. At least the smell isn't as bad as it was then. I must be getting used to it.

I landed close to the top. A little luck goes a long way. I have a clear view of the river. Its flowing water flashes golden stars of moonlight. It gives me a hopeful feeling, the only thing I can hang on to, you might say.

Before being carted off I was asleep on a warm shelf, dreaming of those who have read me. Like the woman who had lost her true love and found solace in my pages. The man who had discovered something new about himself. And so on and so forth. It doesn't matter anymore. I'm no longer important to anyone. Funny how things change, thrown out with the trash to suffer in the middle of nowhere.

It's a good thing you can't see me now. My binding is broken, my pages are damp and torn—damn wind. Oh, and I know things aren't going to get any better. I may be an old book but I do have some sense of the future.

That filthy green truck will come back up here tomorrow and empty its insides over me, rattling like the devil's own laughter. And each day I'll be buried a little deeper. It will grow too dark for me to ever see the moonlit river again. The golden stars will vanish and all my printed words will follow.