

Cashier World

By Tom Lichtenberg

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**DAWN DEBRIS :
IN THE LAND OF MANY THINGS**

On a quiet September evening, I amused myself by playing 'Fly Me To The Moon'.

The moon was full and red on the horizon.

Suddenly, I stopped and stood up.

Something is terribly wrong!

I rushed out the door and onto the teeming city sidewalk, where I stood, confused and battered by pedestrians.

I don't know how to play the piano! - What's happening to me?

It all began when Morris Bevelhead showed up at my office at 9 in the morning, on August the 23rd.

"Dawn Debris? The Private Investigator? I need your help!"

I doubted his story immediately. How could someone steal an idea from someone who looked like he'd never even had one. But that's exactly what he claimed had happened.

"I was on my way to FedCorTron. I had an interview all set up with the Old Exec himself, you know, the man who started it all..."

...I was in my car, driving, and suddenly it was gone. My idea was gone!"

"You mean you forgot!"

"No! No! Not forgotten! Stolen! Somebody stole my idea!"

He had heard of me through my reputation. I was on a talk show once .

(KID FINDS HERO IN DEBRIS

Chatanooga, Tenn.

Three-year old Sammy Delinqua thought he had lost his precious teddy bear forever when fourteen-year old babysitter Sheena Ramone accidentally left it by the garbage cans, where it was subsequently hauled away by the ever competent Sunset Scavengers. His parents, twenty-six year old factory worker Jamie Delinqua and his wife, twenty-three year old Marsha, a becoming blonde with shapely breasts, attempted to console the child with replacement bears, but the boy's behavior became increasingly aberrant and reckless. Unable to tolerate the squalling brat any further, the desperate parents turned to a self-styled private investigator, twenty-nine year old Dawn Debris, a nondescript brunette with scarcely any chest to speak of, who nevertheless has a reputation for recovering lost or stolen articles of dubious or negligible value. Through methods unknown to anyone, including herself, no doubt, Debris was able to locate the missing bear, or at least a facsimile thereof, convincing enough to placate the annoying child. Debris accepted no payment or reward for this effort, except for an invitation to a talk show, which certainly served to enhance her small but amazingly loyal fan base)

"You're the finder of things. Get my idea back!"

Needless to say, I was intrigued. I had found many things before, but never something so insubstantial, so intangible, so obviously nonexistent!

There was the case of the accidentally discarded teddy bear.

And the lost necktie.

Not to mention the case of the missing fibula .

(Why wait any longer? get your copy of "Fissure Monroe" today! brought to you by Pigeon Weather Productions. not available in bookstores or newsstands anywhere)

This was entirely different.

"I'll take the case! ...

But first I need to know what it was"

"I don't know anymore!"

"Oh, then maybe you can me where you were, exactly, when you first noticed it was missing."

"I was on I-95 near Baltimore, just south of the Harbor Tunnel. I was driving down from Philadelphia. I only stopped once, at the Maryland House, for an all-you-can-eat breakfast at the Bob's Big Boy there."

"Then that's where I'll begin."

The all-you-can-eat breakfast was tasty, and a bargain to boot. The curious thing was that the waiter had to bring drinks. Evidently it wasn't an all-you-can-drink kind of thing.

Morris had told me that the waiter and the cashier were the only people he'd had contact with that day.

I showed a picture around , but no one remembered him. Why should they? So I gave up and went home. This was a stupid case anyway. A stolen idea. Who'd ever heard of such a thing?

Well, my friend Jack had, and he wasn't laughing. " Maybe they extracted it", he said.

"Like with a needle to the skull? "

"No. With gene therapy. Where have you been?"

I told him he had better explain what he meant. I had been in Philadelphia.

"The science isn't perfect, but they have come a long way. They've identified thousands of genes responsible for this and that, and it's become quite specific. Everyday another gene is isolated and explained.

"Sure, like for disabilities and diseases."

"Not just that, but also the opposite. Genes for health and abilities as well."

"So what's that got to do with anything?"

"They can put them in you and they can take them out.

"Yeah, but you're talking labs and hospitals, not roadside restaurants."

"Come on, Dawn, you've been around. You know how it goes."

I was going to have to look into the matter further. If what Jack said was true, there must be an insidious black market dealing in desirable and undesirable qualities.

(A recent survey of our readers revealed that certain qualities are more desirable than others. Here are the results of our poll.

beauty 96.2
grace 93.6
style 89.4
charm 89.2
brains 84.9
talent 78.6
patience 66.8
compassion 66.6

duplicity 7.9
hypocrisy 3.2

the margin of error is ± 0.0006
(we're that good!)

Reputed mafia kingpins would be involved. The potential for profit was enormous!

Imagine wanting blue eyes. Tinted lenses are one thing, but actually having blue eyes would be better. Could you actually get injected with the genes for blue eyes?

"Exactly! And not only that, the new gene would be enhanced to override the old one. But you're thinking small potatoes."

Suddenly I understood!

There would be secret laboratories, organized crime, federal laws to be ignored, rich people knowing who to know, hush-hush deals, fancy dress parties, fashion statements in the making!

'My god, this is terrible!'

"Welcome to the future."

It wouldn't stop with blue eyes. That was just the tip of the iceberg.

They would find the gene that produces wrinkles, and extract it.

The gene for curly hair.

The gene for perfect teeth.

But I was being superficial. If all of this were true, you could make yourself whatever you wanted to be, inside and out.

We could all realize our lifelong fantasies! The madness must be stopped!

(A Dissenting Opinion

by Ferdinand Jerome, "so-called expert").

I disagree with the foregoing statement, that 'the madness must be stopped'. Why, indeed, should it be?

What could possibly be wrong with everyone realizing their lifelong fantasies?

I, for one, have long dreamt of losing this bit of paunch I have around the belly.

I've tried everything, from diets to liposuction to rubbing vaginal cream on my anterior.

Why not a little DNA insertion, if that would do the trick?

I feel it would be terribly selfish of Miss Debris to deprive me of this opportunity.

If you agree, dial 1-900-YES-MA'AM.

If you disagree, dial 1-900-NO-SIREE.
Local toll charges apply)

And I, Dawn Debris, finder of things, would be the one to stop it.

But not right then. I felt like singing.

'Fly me to the moon' I sang, and accompanied myself on the electronic keyboard.

The piano sound wasn't very convincing, but I didn't feel like trying to program the damn thing.

I should be recording this. -

Wait a minute, I don't sing, and I don't know how to play the piano. I'm Dawn Debris.
What the hell is going on? -

I realized that I'd been altered. I'd been poisoned with talent!

My mind went back to the Bob's Big Boy in Baltimore.

- It must have been the juice! -

If that was true, then a vast conspiracy was unfolding around me.

(What's all this crap about conspiracies?
by Frankie Johnson

And what the hell is happening to the people of this country that they insist on seeing a conspiracy in every little thing that happens? It's gotten to the point that even if one of these theories turned out to be true, I wouldn't believe it anyway. This is what it all boils down to: UFO's killed the Kennedy's because Marilyn slept with Castro even though he was a homosexual who was blackmailing Khrushchev, who, by the way, was an extraterrestrial agent from a renegade planet which had been secretly bombed by the CIA operating out of a secret nuclear waste dump in Waco, Texas. So there.)

They'd gotten to Morris, stolen his idea, then followed him to me. Then they followed me and drugged my drink with genes.

Must've been a hell of an idea he had.

but nobody messes with Dawn Debris! -
I was intent on revenge, but then I decided to try my hand at watercolors.

Soon I had a lovely landscape, with trees, grass, rocks etc...

It was like the coast of California , only different.

I oughta get myself an agent!-

All I ever wanted to do since childhood was to fight crime and protect the weak and innocent. Well, I couldn't do that, but at least I could find missing things and serve the public that way.

But none of that seemed important anymore.

-Let them find their own damn things! -
I was busy exploring my inner nature.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't my own inner nature.

Okay, so it had been insinuated into me through a glass of juice.

Anyway, I was discovering things about myself I never knew before, because they'd never been in me before.

I was going to museums and actually appreciating the art!

I was listening to modern jazz, and enjoying it!

I watched the evening news with interest!

(NOW MORE THAN EVER

NEWS YOU CAN USE

FROM THE TEAM YOU CAN TRUST

WE'RE THERE WHEN YOU NEED US MOST

WHICH IS NOW MORE THAN EVER

stay tuned for more news from THE news leader ...)

My friends were worried about me.

I was boring them with talk about the transitory nature of experience.

My girlfriend, Ruby, was especially upset.

(Ruby Replies

I wasn't that upset, really. I was getting kind of bored with the old Dawn, and this was something new. Imagine actually having a new conversation with your lover after eleven years of cohabitation! Imagine all of a sudden not knowing exactly what she'll say under any given condition. Imagine a different reaction to the same old stimulus. Imagine having sex with someone else and it's not cheating because it's still her, sort of. So I wasn't especially upset. But since Dawn likes to think she's the tough one, I let her think I was.)

"What happened to the Dawn Debris I know and love?"

My cousin Larry had even less patience than usual.

(Larry Says

As usual, Dawn is exaggerating. I have a lot of patience, at least more than she does. Remember that time the waiter took twenty minutes to bring the water? Who was screaming and yelling, huh? Who got us thrown out of the restaurant? And the time we got stuck in traffic on the beltway? Who threw the tire iron at the beamer? Not me.)

"You need help!"

Of course it was Jack who took action.

"I'm taking you to a specialist!"

Larry and Ruby had to hold me down all the way to the hospital. The specialist declared it was impossible for someone to be turned into an effete bohemian dilettante through genetic transfusion.

(PERSISTENCE OF DISORDER IN CRYOMATIC PATIENTS

Journal of American Cryomatosis, June 2016

In clinical trials occurring over a period of eleven years, it was determined that cryomatosis tends to persist in those patients in whom the disease lasts longer than in others.)

"Stop wasting my time!"

Every doctor they dragged me to said the same thing.

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Finally Jack had enough.

"No more so-called experts! Now let's get down to business!"
They took me to the secret laboratory of Dr. Hideo Tarantula.

He scraped samples from various parts of my body.

While I waited, strapped down in a dentist's chair, he studied my scraps under a microscope.

(My husband is a dentist.
That's why I would never trust my teeth
to anyone but FedCorTron
Makers of an assortment of fine products.)

Occasionally he shook his head and grunted like a pig.

Ruby held my hand and tried to keep from crying.

(Ruby Replies

Actually, I was trying to pry her off me. There was an issue of Highlights in the waiting room that I wanted to read, but she wouldn't let go.)

As for myself, I was pondering the rites of consecration, and their relation to tribal dance forms.

Finally the doctor reach a conclusion.

"I'm afraid the news is bad!"

Ruby couldn't contain herself any longer.

"What is it ,doctor? What the hell is going on?"

(Ruby Replies

I wasn't really paying attention, to tell you the truth. That's why I asked what the hell was going on.)

"I'm afraid her genetic code is being overwritten at an alarming rate. It seems that not only traits, but an entire personality has been insinuated into her system."

"But who is it?"

"There's no way to know."

"What about the real Dawn? How can we get her back?"

"I'm not sure it's possible."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Well, the best hope is Counter-Adaptive Replacement Therapy"

(COUNTER_ADAPTIVE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

Journal of American Counter-Adaptive Replacement Therapy, September 2028

A survey of American Counter-Adaptive Replacement Therapists reveal that a significant majority favor the use of Counter-Adaptive Replacement Therapy.)

"In other words, we locate someone similar to the old Dawn, and overwrite the overwritten genes with those. But you must tell me what she was like before."

My friends proceeded to describe the me that no longer was.

Apparently, I was rude, crude, ignorant and ill-mannered.

All I cared about was finding lost things and pocketing the fee.

I had no use for culture of any kind.

I preferred anything superficial to anything of substance.

I was a bloodhound, a single-minded private eye with a taste for the street and a nose for the criminal underground.

The doctor was pleased.

"I have just the thing. I just happen to have here the personality blueprint of one Inspector Slaymaker, formerly of the Newark police, now in a coma in Secaucus."

My friends rejoiced, and before I could escape they were pouring more O.J. down my throat.

The next few days were a blur.

I lay on the couch, exhausted, as Slaymaker's traits did battle with those of the snob, which were still kicking my own around.

One minute I hankered for a violin to pluck.
The next I craved a shotgun to blow away my TV set.

I would draw a sketch, then set it on fire with my lighter.

I tried to listen to the opera on the radio, but then I'd fiddle with the dial, trying to find the police scanner frequency.

I sipped wine. I swallowed six-packs. I threw up frequently.

I couldn't eat, because I didn't like anything I wanted, or want anything I liked.

Dr. Tarantula took notes at a furious pace, while Jack and Larry played poker in the corner.

(The Notes of Dr. Hideo Tarantula

What are these people doing in my lab? I told them to get out of here it seems like days ago they're driving me nuts i mean how much poker can you play how many hoagies can you munch just what the hell do i have to do to get these morons out of my house? i gave her the damn shot so why don't they leave? like i really care how all of this turns out. i take mastercard, what else do i need?)

Gradually I realized what I had to do to get out of there.

I managed to inhale some hoagies, and belch.

I asked Jack for a shortwave, so I could nap to the soothing sounds of emergency dispatches.

(911 Transcript 5784398723872

Dispatcher: what?

Caller: Hello? Hello?

Dispatcher: what?

Caller: Is anybody there? Can you hear me?

Dispatcher: what?

Caller: Somebody please answer, it's an emergency.

Dispatcher: what?

Caller: Hello?

Dispatcher: what?

Caller: I've been shot!

Dispatcher: what?

Caller: I'm bleeding to death. Is anybody there?
Dispatcher: what?
Caller: aaaah
Dispatcher: what?
Dispatcher2: what was that?
Dispatcher: wrong number, I guess.
Dispatcher2: what?)

I kept my mouth shut.

By morning, I had convinced them I was better.

Slaymaker made me buy a trench coat and a fat cigar.

On the street, I was aware of every nuance...

... a 501 in progress ...
... a 411 going bad ...
... a 666 heading south on Main.

I felt my veins turn to ice as I thought of all the slime I'd put away over the years.
I reached for my piece, but all I found was a ticket to the Grovzny Ballet.

Wait a minute. I can't go like this. I'll have to go home and change. -

The bus ride took forever

Finally home, I headed straight for the bathroom.

But then I saw myself in the mirror.

"Who the hell is that?"

I didn't recognize myself at all!

Of course, I knew who I was. I was Dawn Debris, inspector of things, formerly from Secaucus, now in a coma, listening to angels singing 'Fly Me To The Moon'.

And I could remember my life, or sort of.

For example, my 6th birthday, though of course at the time I was 34, and hadn't even been born yet.

The time I brought down Sonny the Snake. I must have been 2.

The first time I had sex.

Well, the three times I first had sex.

(SEX CLAIMS EXPOSED

Chatanooga,Tenn.

A series of recent revelations have revealed that seventeen-year old Anna Kingsley of Milltown, a redhead with still under-developed but promising boobs, recently had sex for the first time. So-called experts familiar with such claims have claimed that such claims are not altogether unheard of. One of these over-exposed pundits, thirty-six year old Ferdinand Jerome, pointed out the case of Swami Lotu Boptu, the holy hermaphrodite who was said to have deflowered himself in a fit of remarkable dexterity. Another, forty-three year old Miss Joanna Johnsberry, a fairly obese strawberry blonde with an incalculable bosom, referred to the situation involving one Mary X, a woman of varying descriptions but with historical breasts, who was impregnated through the ear by the breath of an eternal spirit.)

I knew I couldn't go on like this.

It was a situation that called for breakfast.

A Bob's Big Boy all-you-can-eat breakfast at the Maryland House off the turnpike.

Every instinct in my body, and I had a lot of them, told me I was on the right track.

When I arrived, everything seemed normal. I was instantly on guard.

The waiter came over. "Nothing to drink, thanks"

He seemed more than annoyed. "Are you sure?"

I ate 14 of those little sausages. They were excellent.

Afterwards I hung around out back, smoking a stogie.

There was no unusual activity. I became suspicious.

(UNUSUAL ACTIVITIES

A recent survey of our readers revealed that certain activities are more unusual than others. Here are the results of our poll.

nude bowling 96.2

water walking 93.6

disco yoga 89.4

hair whacking 89.2
tree sniffing 84.9
latex polishing 78.6
fruit squishing 66.8
avalanche gazing 66.6
group potty training 7.9
ankle twitching 3.2
the margin of error is +- 0.0006
(we're that good!)

Hours passed. Nothing happened.

Finally a truck pulled up, and the driver began unloading cartons.

I peered out of the bushes to get a closer look.

The cartons displayed the initials: **F.C.T.**, and on the truck was the slogan, "Everybody Loves Our Juice".

(FedCorTron! Isn't it nice to know that FedCorTron is always there?)

I decided to follow it back to its point of origin.

Just then, I was grabbed from either side and hauled out of the bushes by two big men.

"You keep quiet!", the uglier one said, as they threw me into the back of the truck.

I made a thorough inspection of the cargo.

Same old boxes, containing nothing but cartons of juice.

I was feeling a little thirsty.

- Don't do it, Dawn. You've had enough already! -
Eventually we arrived at FedCorTron headquarters.

(My mother always said
"There's no time like the present."
That's why I would never waste my time
with anything less than a FedCorTron product.)

of course, F.C.T., FedCorTron! Duh! –

(Minor Back Pain?
Persistent Throat Irritation?)

Soreness In Those "Sensitive" Areas?
Need Life Insurance?
Any Problem Whatsoever?
FedCorTron is always there for you.)

I was forced to wait in a rather nice office while the goons kept watch over me.

A good looking young man in a suit came in and took a seat behind the desk.

"You must be public relations."

"At your service."

We stared at each other like lizards eyeing the same sunny slab.

"Well, Miss Debris, it seems you enjoy our breakfast!"

"I know what you're up to, and it won't work."

"Probably not, but I doubt you really know."

"You're infecting innocent people with desirable qualities!"

(A recent survey of our non-readers revealed that certain qualities are more desirable than others. Here are the results of our poll.

fat feet 96.2
gray eyes 93.6
split ends 89.4
a lisp 89.2
drool 84.9
bad breath 78.6
cackling 66.8
apathy 66.6
beauty 7.9
grace 3.2

the margin of error is +- 0.0006

(we're that good!)

tells you something about our non-readers, doesn't it?)

"Now, why would we want to do that?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet."

"All we want, Miss Debris, is for everyone to love our juice. Really."

"You mean it's all about marketing?"

(WEBSTER'S BRAVE NEW WORLD DICTIONARY

Cryomatosis: Genetic disposition to laugh hysterically at other people's misfortunes.

Gruntoma: Irrational fear of Klingon mating rituals.

Dementia: Belief that reruns are proof of the General Unified Theory.

Pompukus: Involuntary protein spill at the mention of the word 'morality'.

Borascia: Allergic reaction to slow motion instant replays.

Marketing: Plague affecting late twentieth century civilization that led to the near-eradication of independent thought.

Unabombast: Achieving notoriety by means of anonymous threats and posturing.

Flare Devils: Mythical creatures who visit the scene of an accident.)

I don't know why I was surprised.

The Young Exec seemed to be deciding just how much to tell me.

"I admit we've made some mistakes. We were blundering about, really. Hare-brained schemes...

(Hare Brained Schemes

1. Mutually Assured Destruction.
2. Racial Purity
3. Saving the World With Orange Juice

But then we came across a peculiar notion in the secretions of one of our test subjects."

I realized it must have been Morris!

"Yes, most interesting. We were trying to create the ideal consumer.

(The Ideal Consumer. Has nothing, wants everything. give 'em a lot of money.)

Dumb idea, really."

(A recent survey of our readers revealed that certain ideas are dumber than others. Here are the results of our poll.

Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself 96.2

It's All In The Cards 93.6

Big Boys Don't Cry 89.4
What Goes Around, Comes Around 89.2
Virtue Is It's Own Reward 84.9
God Helps Those Who Help Themselves 78.6
Things Go Better With Coke 66.8
Forgive And Forget 66.6
Every Dog Has His Day 7.9
Mind Your P's And Q's 3.2
the margin of error is +- 0.0006
(we're that good!))

"It's been tried before.'

"You might say it is the only thing that's ever been tried; propaganda, advertising, all of that. Change the consumer. Make him what you want him to be. Make him want to be what you want him to be. Make everybody want to be that person. Old hat, really. Makes you wonder where the creativity's gone. But everybody else is doing it ...you know the argument

... But it is not so easy nowadays, not with all this new genetic technology. Not when you can literally turn them into what you want them to be. Too much competition, if you see what I mean. The Pepsi people want you to be one thing, the Coke people something else. Where's it all going to end?

... I mean, you can't give someone a new genetic code after every meal! It would cause too much instability'

"Tell me about it."

"That's where this idea comes into play. Very simple, really. What we want to do is fortify your genes, make them immune to further tampering, and along the way we slip in our little desire. A small price to pay. Well worth it, I would say."

"So you plan to save the world with orange juice!"

"Why not? It is good for you anyway. And we can feel good about our product. They tell me that is important here at FedCorTron."

(It's true!
We **do** feel good about our products.
We're FedCorTron, and it shows.)

"Not to mention the profits.'

"Of course. So what do you say? Can I offer you some juice?"

"You have got to be kidding. I'm not touching any more of that stuff!"

"But I insist. Boys?"

The goons grabbed me and held me down, while the Young Exec poured it on my face.

The goons let me go, and the bigger one offered me his hanky to clean up with.

The Young Exec looked a little sheepish.

"I am sorry, but this is for your own good. Really. You're free to go now. Junior will take you back to your car"

Junior turned out to be a good guy, for a goon. We became friends.

And I became myself again in a couple of days.

No more opera. No more cigars. No more Fly Me To The Moon.

The only thing I regret is that I can't play the piano anymore.

As for my client, he was very happy to get his idea back.

I pocketed a hefty fee.

I didn't bother to tell him that the idea was worthless now that FCT had gotten it for free.

(FCT stands for FedCorTron.

FedCorTron stands for Quality.

Look for us wherever anything is sold.

Anywhere)

I also did not inform him that he could've gotten it back for the price of a glass of juice.

Hey, I've got to make a living somehow.

After all, I have a new O.J. habit to support.

the end

Deadline

This couple lived like an item on the shelf, like a buy one get one free couple. You want to talk to him? You have to clear it with her. You want to talk to her? You'd better see him first. You want one of them for anything, you get the other one too. They were wrapped around each other like the hard clear plastic around a toy that you can't cut off with a knife. Dave and Darcy. Darcy and Dave. I'm Darcy this is Dave. I'm Dave she's Darcy. How you doing? We're great.

They were always great. They found bargains that you wouldn't believe. You know how much we paid for this? Always the we. We were in Mexico once. One time we. The other day we. We drove to. We had to.

There was a time before Dave for Darcy, and a time before Darcy for Dave. A Neolithic era, lost in the pile of receipts they never threw out, but they will tell you, one at a time or in unison, that their lives really began the moment they met.

It was at a Photomat, of all places. Her car was stalled at the booth. He gave her a start. In every sense of the word. From the moment I saw him I knew, she says, in a rare first-person moment. She was like an angel, he agrees. Then together, in the sickening sweetness they combine and form their own little well-worn slogan; even angels need a jump sometimes. Hee hee. You want to look away.

Never before have the hash browns seemed so appealing, or so interesting in the way they appear on the plate, all those strings of potatoes making up such unique and golden brown patterns. Darcy and Dave are still talking. We this. We thought. We that. Hee hee. You'd wonder who invented the hash brown, who perfected the art or science or whatever it is.

Outside the diner the icy rain is still falling, heavy and hard. If the stranger had stopped in Talusa like his body told him to, he wouldn't even be here now, but cozy in a soft and sinking mattress in that motel he noticed off the road. He'd be watching the local weatherman tell him all about this storm, but no, the boss remembered and reminded him of his deadline.

More coffee? Please. Thank you. None for us, no thanks. We've had enough. They take a deep breath. One of them will launch into the next obligatory segment. It was him. Something about a dog that got lost, that jumped off a truck and found its way home. Remarkable, isn't it? How everything knows where it truly belongs. We had a dog once,

you know. So sad. Hit by lightning, he was, the poor little guy. Sparky. That's what we named him. A moment of silence. Then a sigh. It was her. Well, at least that won't happen again! Hee hee. You know what they say about lightning.

He does know what they say about lightning. He's said it yourself sometimes, even though you know better. Better than to say such things. Better than to pretend to know such things. Now he plays with his food and notices, with some astonishment, that even the writing on a packet of jam can be the most interesting thing in the world at a time like this.

He's running late, but it's out of his hands. He came in from the cold. He found the last seat. They were kind, and generous enough to wave him over, share their booth, signal the waitress, smile and smile. They had no idea who he was. I'm Darcy he's Dave. We're Dave and Darcy. How many times did they tell you? And how many times did they ask him his name, and afterwards it was, Steve is it? pleased to meetcha. Mike is it? How you been? Ron is it? Darcy's got a brother named Ron.

They know what it's like to be on the road, to live out of a suitcase, away from your friends and family for weeks at a time. They're on their way to a conference. Franchise opportunities. They've been very successful. No, they've been fortunate. Blessed, they would say. Thank God.

Uniform shoes. Did he hear that correctly? Yes, they repeated it. Oh, shoes that go with uniforms. Yes, he can see how that could be quite the lucrative market. Can't have a uniform without the shoes. Yes, all kinds of uniforms, all kinds of shoes. No size too small. No size too big. After all, every size is somebody's size hee hee.

Yes, those probably are plastic flowers on the table. Amazing what they can do with plastic flowers these days. He's stalling, and he knows it. After all, they're Darcy and Dave. He's Dave, she's Darcy. He doesn't want to have anything to do with this, doesn't want to go through with it, but he's got his job and it's got nothing to do with uniforms or shoes. Better to sit there and marvel, and wonder, and shudder at the task that's facing him. He has a deadline.

He knows he will have to go outside. And heaven knows his car won't start. And it's been written that he'll need their help. And, Ron is it? Darcy's got a brother named Ron. We'll be glad to help. Just let us bring the car around. You stay right where you are. No, no, it's not a problem. We're happy to. Anything we can do.

They will bring the car around. And Dave, it'll be Dave, will grab the cables from the trunk, and Darcy, it'll be Darcy, who'll remain behind the wheel, and you, it'll be the stranger who stands back, lets it happen. It may be that lightning doesn't strike twice, but when Dave is standing in a puddle in the freezing rain and he has the cables in his grip, and then the merest little spark. And he knows who he is, and that even an angel of death needs a jump sometimes. Hee hee.

The Fullness

M woke up on December 24th and the world was small and red. This was not like other days. I was saving you for the bad times, she told him the other day. Because I want you still around when I change, and you know I will change. I always do. But E said back, I don't want to just be around like always, like I always am. What makes you think I'll be here, just because I will be, just because I always am. Because you always are, she said.

E was in the kitchen, burning the toast. One of those things that made her crazy. Here I am, she thought, trying to live my life to the fullest, because you know that every day might be your last and if you don't do it now when will you, and there he is in the kitchen every time, every goddamn time he's in the kitchen, burning the toast.

The world will be smaller and redder than usual, M decided. Whether it is or it isn't. There are really just two kinds of things, those that are and those that aren't. In the cult they'd recommended she stop using the words 'things' and 'just' and 'always' and 'because', but just because she always said those things all the time was no reason at all to stop.

What would it mean to live your life to the fullest, E was wondering. If you were busy measuring in the back of your mind, would that detract from the fullness? The worrying about whether or not you were actually doing it? Or did it mean simply to jump off cliffs and out of planes or dart through traffic on a bicycle? If that is so, then E had already lived his life to the fullest, though not willingly in all cases. And what if you had already lived your life to the fullest? If you stopped, even for a day, would that take away from the fullness? Would it begin to empty like a leaky bathtub? And would you hear that sound you imagine you hear when you duck your head under the water and is it the motion or is it the breathing or is it the cooling or is it really a leak?

M had seen bigger and bluer days, days that jumped off the shelf and shattered on the floor, and days that danced around the room doing cartwheels. I am alive, M decided, as always deciding something. The difference between you and me, she told him, is that I am decisive and you are not. He peered over his newspaper and raised one eyebrow in the way she detested, and muttered, do you really think so? You might be right.

She would begin the day with a smile on her face, and then the Mozart! Of all things, at six o'clock in the morning. And she knew he was hiding behind the kitchen counter waiting for her to come storming down the rickety steps and turn off the stereo with a shout, and she hated it that he was laughing at her again. Or maybe he loved his Mozart in the morning and simply couldn't help himself. One way or another he managed to crush the beginnings of her different day every time.

The thing is, M decided, I would have a perfect life if it wasn't for him, if only if not for him. I would wake up in a different world every day and it would be glorious, spectacular. Yellow and bright. The birds would be the ones singing Mozart, yes they would, and the newspaper would have only items of interest instead of the usual boring stuff about warlike maneuvers in the Balkans. Yes, items of interest, such as how many millions of mummies there used to be in Egypt before the British Railroad sold them off for fuel.

But no, he's always there, every morning, burning the toast, and playing the Mozart, and grinding the juice in that noisy little juice grinder, how she hated the thing. She would throw it away first thing this morning. No, she would break it first, and then she would throw it away. Yes. Decisive as always, she marched to the kitchen where even now the little grinder was grinding away in that horrible little way.

There were rabbits on the lawn outside the small house, apparently not bothered by the dog which dozed by the firewood stacks. One of these days, E declared, someone will go shooting at those rabbits, and M thought, does he have to always talk that stupid talk about somebody shooting something? He was going to drive her insane.

I will leave the house, she decided, and not come back, until later. And then she was in the car, driving off in a huff, and hurrying down the hill trying to think of where she was going to go. I will go to the beach, she decided, or to the city, or maybe down the coast. I have so many things to do at home. Really too much to do. Besides the firewood there was the cleaning and the sorting through documents which had to be sorted through someday, because so much depended on it, and it was, after all, her job, to sort through those documents and make some sense out of all the nonsense they had together been constructing for years.

And then the restoration work was always waiting and if not for the restoration work they would have starved by now, but E was already in the basement, pattering around, she knew it, she felt it, although she was already some miles away. She could never get far enough away not to know at every instant exactly what he was doing and feeling and thinking. There were accounts to settle. Had they been paid for everything? Of course not, they never were. Who would keep track if she didn't keep track? Certainly not E!

We need some milk, she decided, and was relieved to actually have a reason to be where she was now, and to know where she was going.

Milk, and also some jam to spread on the toast, burnt though it always was.

What does it mean, she wondered, to really live your life to the fullest? And when you die, does it all begin to empty out, to spill away to nothingness? And if so, then is the measure of the fullness only the time it takes to drain the tub? The empty life drains quicker and cleaner than the full life? How do you measure the fullness of a life? E would say that the time it takes to do anything is the measure of its value. She would reply in that case then the stupidest slowest people must do all the more important things. Did he really say that? Christ almighty!

In the grocery store M decided she would buy a gun and go and shoot those rabbits, and that would show him, and all his silly talk. But she left with only milk and jam.

It's important to be yourself. Maybe that's what living your life to the fullest really means, to be exactly, entirely, and completely yourself at all times. But how tiring. And if you take a day off, say, from being so intensely yourself, do you begin to lose yourself a little, does it start to slip away? What does it mean to really be yourself? To say out loud all of the things you're thinking? To do in action all of the things you only imagine doing? To hurt people needlessly and make them afraid or angry or annoyed? I can do that, M decided.

Today I will be completely and fully myself, she declared to no one at all. She was in the car again. Starting right now. But if I start right now, I already missed a portion of the day, so it can't be a complete and total day of being completely and fully myself. I

would have to start first thing in the morning and not let up all day, not even for an instant. But how could that be possible, with mister burning the toast around, mister Mozart, mister grinding the juice with the goddamn juice grinder she forgot to smash into a million pieces and throw away, which she would have had to have done in order to have been completely and fully herself that very day. Too late, she decided. I can only be incompletely and partially myself today after all.

If you are only partially and incompletely yourself, you cannot, by definition, be living your life to the fullest. Or does it beg the question, how full is full? Considering that you have to make allowances for moments when being fully alive is hardly relevant (she adds sitting on the can to that list), you can start subtracting from the definition of fullness. Do you have to fully and completely chew every morsel of food or does that not count? How hard do you have to think in order to be fully thinking? It could be that as little as twenty percent might be considered fullness under some circumstances. Nonsense.

E had plenty of time to think it over while cleaning up the supplies after a touch-up job well done. The artist, he was thinking, must include preparation and cleanup time as part of the total process. It all counts towards the fullness of the working. The time it takes to sharpen a pencil. By extension the time it takes to empty the trash basket full of pencil shavings. By extension the time it takes to carry the trash can to the corner on Monday mornings. By extension the time it takes to pay the bill which arrives in the mail, most of which consists of paper which has to be thrown away and taken to the corner for the very garbage collection you are then paying for. By extension the stamps and the long wait in the post office to get them. One hour of actual work implies many hours of before and after duties, without which the work is undoable.

M was in control of her destiny, but the traffic light was red, and so she sat there, waiting.

In my world, the traffic light is never red for me, but always green. Also, the milk does not expire, so you can buy as much as you want and not have to go out and get more every week. She wondered if it was a plot. What would we do if everything we bought was said to expire in a week. Gasoline, tv sets, light bulbs. We wouldn't stand for it, that's for sure. And then something would be done about it. So how come nothing is ever done about the milk situation?

They say that people will soon live to be a hundred and fifty years old and still look like they're thirty. Whereas when people only lived till thirty they looked more like a hundred and fifty when they died. Are people more important now than they used to be? Are people better now than they used to be? Are they smarter? Are they wiser? Do they live life more fully than they used to? When people live to be a hundred and fifty, will they do so without ever having eaten anything that was actually real?

I should find another grinder, she thought, one a little less noisy, and I should find another toaster, that can never burn the toast. Too bad there's nothing I can do about Mozart. She smiled. Just getting away for a little while, just getting out of the house, was magical somehow. It always worked. Distance, and time. She was missing him already. She knew in her bones he was making his way up the stairs, slowly now, his arthritis acting up as it always did when the fog came in low in the mornings. He had finished the job due Thursday She would take it back to the library then, and get the documents together, and throw them on the pile. Someday she would sift it out and fill it in and send it away and they'd get paid. She could pick a piece of paper up at random and do that anytime.

It was December the 24th, and the world was small and red; everything was completely different, and nothing was different at all.

When you've lived your life to the fullest, she asked him, what do you do then? What's next?

He said, whatever you want, I guess.

But isn't that?

The same thing?

Exactly.

IN THE BATHROOM ON THE BUS

I was at the stop by 6 a.m. No one else was there. I knew it was the right stop, because there was a sign, but I had never taken this bus before. It went on Highway 9 to Wetford, about a three hour ride from where I was. The sign said 88X, so I assumed it was an express bus, but if it was an express bus, then why would it stop here? My stop was half a mile from anywhere, and that anywhere wasn't much, just a half a dozen houses and a Super Seven Store, which is where I worked. I rode my bike to work, but I didn't want to ride it all the way to Wetford, so I had to take the bus. I never had a car, and Megan needed hers to go to her job, which was just as far as Wetford, but the other way. It only took her forty five minutes to get there, so when they told me it was three hours, I figured it couldn't be an express, even though it seemed it was because it had an X on after the number. So, I didn't really know, and that was one thing I was going to be discovering for myself.

The bus was supposed to show up at six fifteen, but it did not arrive on time. I figured that was normal because although I almost never take the bus I have heard about these things. I wasn't worried, but I was a little cold, and it was boring standing out there all alone. But there wasn't any reason for anybody else to be out there at 6 a.m. People in my town don't go to Wetford very much, and when they do they drive their cars. So that was just another reason why I got to thinking it was strange they had a stop right there, since no one ever used it. But then I figured there are some things I don't know too much about and that was probably one of them. I stood around and every now and then I looked up and down the highway, but there wasn't any bus. A couple of cars passed by but so fast that I couldn't see if they were anyone I knew who might be going to Wetford but I doubted it. At six thirty five I began to think that maybe it was the wrong stop after all. So I lit another cigarette and tried to think.

If it was the wrong stop, then I didn't know what I was going to do. I had to be in Wetford by eleven or else I'd miss the interview, and I didn't want that to happen. It was an opportunity, and I never got too many of those where I happened to be living at the time. Okay, it wasn't much, but it was something and I needed that. I couldn't just hang around forever there. For one thing I was almost twenty two years old and that meant Megan shouldn't still be taking care of me. Of course, I had this job, so I earned my keep all right, but I was tired of living in my sister's house, especially since I didn't get along too well with Jack, her second husband. He was a writer, so he wasn't any fun, and he didn't want anyone around the house when he was writing, which was almost never, but he said that was because he couldn't do any writing when the situation was "like this". So that is why I had to catch the bus, and if it wasn't the right stop after all, then I didn't know what I was going to do.

I was going to call the people from the bus again, but there wasn't any phone booth right near there, and if I went to where there was a phone I would miss the bus if it came by after all. So I decided I would wait some more before I really got to being worried about the thing. I figured that this is how it is when you do a thing that you have never done before and just don't know that much about. People should never have to do anything for the first time. It made me think about the time I went over to the college

down in Calamar. I didn't know that much about it at the time. I just went down one day and found the place to ask, but since the people there knew all about that stuff and I did not, it got to be confusing, and finally I said well thank you and came home, but I never figured out exactly what I had to do or when to do it by.

I thought next time I'll know better and I would have, maybe, except there was no next time after that. But this was different. I was going to have to take the bus back in the afternoon, so by then I would know better because I had already done it in the morning. And when I came back from the college down in Calamar, I did know all about that bus, and it was easy getting home. I thought well that's something at least, and I felt better about the thing. But since by six forty five there was still no bus and I was still out there alone, I figured maybe it was time to worry just a little bit, so I lit another cigarette and began to start worrying for real. I worried maybe it will never come, and this is the wrong stop after all. Maybe I will waste my whole day off just standing out there like a total moron, and I will lose this opportunity and have to stay with Megan and her second husband for awhile until another chance like this comes up, and then that might be years because there isn't much that comes my way, and it would be a shame to blow it all because I waited at the wrong stop for a bus that never came. Well that was all the worrying I could do, because I never was a person who could worry very well, so it was now six fifty one and I was all out of ideas on what to do.

That is when I saw the bus coming down the road. I stood out on the shoulder and I waved and waved. The driver pulled it over and he stopped to let me on. I got on and thanked him and he laughed and said it's four years I've been driving up this road and you're the only one this year that's got on at that stop. It was only February then, but still, it made a lot of sense to me, because the people who live out here don't go to Wetford very much, especially not at six a.m. on a Monday, and when they do they usually drive their cars. I told him this and he said that's just what I was thinking. I paid him and I started looking for a seat. I had to go all the way to the back because the little signs kept saying 'smoking only in the last three rows', and if I was going to be on that bus for all that time I knew that I was going to want to smoke.

There were other people on the bus already. Up front there was a nun accompanying a little girl who had a box of popcorn on her lap. There were a couple of what looked like sisters in their middle age, and from their hats I figured they were going to visit someone for the day. An old guy in the middle of the bus was staring at a magazine which from the page that I could see appeared to be a business journal of some kind, because it had a chart and graphs of pillars going up and up and up from left to right. Then there was a man dressed up in navy clothes, and he was in the last row on the left, right before the bathroom that they had back there. The only other person was a guy who was asleep all stretched out on the very back three seats, in front of the rear view windshield. And I sat two rows up from him, one up and the other side from the man in navy clothes. It was a quiet bus, which I could understand, because it was so early in the morning, and no one but the driver and myself really seemed to be awake at all.

I was looking out the window, watching as the trees and telephone poles went by, and I felt just like a kid again, in the backseat of his daddy's car when they are on the way to somewhere which the little boy doesn't know but seems like it's forever getting there,

but all the way there's things he's never seen before, especially not like that, from going by so fast, so he doesn't mind how long it takes, he really kind of hopes it will go on and on all day and night, and that is always how I feel when I get inside a bus and it is rolling down the road. I forgot where I was going for awhile, and in the quiet of the morning and the hum beneath the wheels it felt like I was on a big adventure, or really more like I was going to be on one but first I had to get there. I didn't want to think too much about the interview. It wouldn't do me any good to think about the thing. It was something that was going to happen, and then it would be happening, and later it would just be something that had happened and I could think about it then. All I knew was someone's name, and an address that I had that I was going to. That just wasn't very much to go on thinking about.

Nothing happened for awhile, and since the bus didn't stop at any other place for half an hour or so, I figured maybe we would get to Wetford earlier than they told me, and then I'd have to think of something else to do because the interview was not until eleven, and if we got there soon than I would have about three hours on my hands. I figured that I ought to give myself an hour to find the place, because I'd only been to Wetford twice before, and never on my own. Of course, I didn't think that it would take that long, but just in case I planned ahead and set aside an hour for doing that. I remembered once when I had just arrived in this part of the world, and Megan took me in and got me the job at the Super Seven Store that one day I decided I would walk to work, although it was about a mile and a half from where she lived. And it was a pretty sunny summer day, a little too hot, but then the temperature is just never right for me, it seems, it's always one way or the other, and I figure that is just how it is going to be, but any way I went down the windy road that leads from her house to the highway, and I looked at all the fences and I played with all the dogs behind them safely, and I noticed everybody's house and said hello whenever there was someone there, and it was very nice and everything was fine. The I got down to the highway and I started walking down it too.

Well it wasn't very interesting. You couldn't see the houses if they were even there or not, and everything was only trees and telephone poles on either side, and they didn't go by fast at all, and every half a mile was just exactly like the one before and the one that was to come. And I must have walked about two miles before I started thinking that it didn't look so familiar after all, because I had been riding my bicycle ever since I started working there, so for awhile I figured it was just because the different pace of walking that made it seem so different. But then I didn't pass the Chevron station and I didn't pass the trap shop when I figured it was time to do so. I still walked a little while because it didn't seem like it was possible that I would make the wrong turn after all. But it happened that I did, and soon I had to turn around and going back the other way I got to thinking, what if I was almost there back then, and now I'm going to walk forever and I'll never get to work. And I had set aside an extra hour just in case because you never know. Well it turned out I was late in any case because I had to walk the two miles back to where the little windy road led in, and then the next about a mile and a half to where the store was at.

I figured well maybe he will fire me for that, but then he didn't. It wouldn't have mattered much to him in any case. I was the only one beside himself who ever worked

there, and he didn't hardly have to work at all because I did all the work, whatever there was to do of it, which was never very much. People didn't come by there a lot, just once a week or so, but when they did they just bought everything in sight. So it was a kind of unusual place to work, lots of sitting around and doing very little and then all at once a lot to do then nothing for awhile again. I didn't like it very much but since my mother ran away I had to go to Megan since she was the only one and I was pretty young back then. I was glad that I was working, though, because it would have been embarrassing for me another way. I never liked to be getting anything for nothing, and Megan would have had to kick me out in any case because they didn't have much more than I did which was almost nothing at the time.

So I figured just in case to have the extra time and maybe see the sights, although from what I knew of Wetford at the time there wasn't much to see and I doubt that there is more of it by now. And the bus was zooming right along and it was only seven thirty two, but then the bus slowed down and it turned off on this little road that I had seen before but never paid attention to, and it was like a magic charm, 'cause as the bus slowed down and made this turn the other people seemed to wake up all at once, and the sisters started talking and the little girl made fussy noises, and the nun got up and headed towards the back where I was staring out the window. She was going to the bathroom. And that's when all the trouble started, because the bathroom door was jammed and she couldn't get it open. She pushed on it and pulled on it and the man in navy clothes leaned over and he looked around and saw her fighting with the door. He said what's the trouble sister, and she said it's this stupid door is locked. Maybe there's somebody in there he said and she said they would have had to be in there all night because I was the first one on this morning and there is no one else that's gotten on the bus that I don't see sitting out here now.

Well he got up and let me try, he said. And he started pushing and pulling at the door just like she did but even though he was a navy man and stronger than a nun he couldn't get the door to open either. He pounded on the door and yelled out, anybody in there, but it was like the nun had said, there was no one in that bathroom on the bus. Well I'll just have to break it down he said but she said don't do that, we'll have to ask the driver. The navy man sat down again and shrugged. He didn't think the driver would do any better than he could, and he was right. The nun went up and asked the driver to stop and come and fix the bathroom door so that a person might be able to go in there and answer their calls of nature, but he said, sorry, sister, but I can't stop the bus. I got a schedule that I'm on, you know. That made the sister just a little angry and she said what's the big ol' hurry and he said I'm sorry rules are rules and I thought it was peculiar at the least because we didn't stop for anyone and we didn't seem like we were going anywhere in particular, just down this little road that didn't seem to have an end or anything along the way.

It wasn't very long until the little girl had to go to the bathroom too. By that time the nun had resigned herself to waiting, but it was going to be more difficult to make the little girl wait too. The nun said no you can't go now because the bathroom door is stuck, but the little girl said but I have to go. The nun got up and went over to the driver again, and she said can't you please just stop for one minute and fix the door because this little girl has to go to the bathroom too. The driver didn't look around but just said lady

like I told you I'm on schedule and I can't stop even for a minute. This is my job we are talking about here. So when the nun got back and told the little girl the little girl began to cry and fidget in her seat. Just great, the man in the navy suit said, now the girl is going to pee all over herself and the whole bus is going to stink like piss. That's what made him get back up again and try to break the lock with his pocket knife.

The driver must have seen him doing this in the rear view mirror because he called out hey don't fuck with the door bud, it ain't your bus! Then you come and fix the fucking thing the navy man yelled back. I'll fix your ass the driver threatened him, and that is when the window sister got up and said now everyone calm down. There is no need to have a scene. The nun didn't like to hear all this, not everybody saying fuck and piss, but the sister saying that about a scene, so she started yelling at the sister, who do you think you are, that nice man is trying to fix the door so my little girl can pee and here you're taking that stupid driver's side. The sister said I am not taking anybody's side, I just don't like to hear this yelling going on. It is upsetting my sister and me. But the other sister didn't seem to be upset at all. She was sitting on the aisle side just smiling and her head was bobbing up and down like it had been since I saw it when I first got on.

The navy man was still fiddling with the lock, and this was when the tip of his knife broke off and he got really mad and started yelling at the driver about how the company was going to pay for it and it was going to come out of his ridiculously inflated wages. This made the driver so mad that he didn't say a word, but you could tell from the way he didn't turn around or even look in the rear view mirror that he had just then made his mind up that he wasn't going to stop for anything, not even if there was a passenger waiting by the road, because if he stopped at all then he would have to fix the door and he'd be damned if he was going to lift a finger to help out people like the nun, the little girl, and the man in navy clothes. I don't think that there was any reason for the bus to stop in any case. The road that we were on was curving round and round and there wasn't anything on either side of it, just the same old telephone poles and trees, and it seemed to me we could be anywhere at all and there was no way you could tell the difference between the half a mile ahead and the half a mile behind. There weren't any houses, not a single gas station, not even a Super Seven Store.

The bus was going slower now than it had been going on the highway. After the navy man had broke his knife he just sat down again and the little girl was whimpering but the nun just let her be, except for every now and then she'd hush her but it didn't do her any good. The window sister settled back and smiled as if she'd won the most important battle of her life, and the business man turned another page in his business magazine, and I could see, when I kind of half stood up and peeked around the seats, that there was just as many charts and graphs on this page as there had been on the other one. Maybe it is just a chart and graph magazine, I thought, and he is studying the things. I figured there would be a need for experts on the stuff like that, and so maybe he was trying to improve himself and get another job or a promotion where he was. I wondered what he did for a living but since I didn't have all that much to go on I didn't get too far. I never was a person who could wonder very well. I need to have a lot of things to go on wondering about.

Everything was quiet or sort of for a few more minutes, and then the business man, who must have been completely caught up in his charts and graphs, got up and started heading back towards the bathroom as if he hadn't heard a thing that had been going on. Me and the navy man just stared at him, and then we looked at one another and I could tell that we were thinking the same idea; where has this guy been? He got to the bathroom door and tried to open it, but since it was still stuck, he just sat down on the empty seat between the sleeping man and me, just across the aisle from the man in navy clothes. He had brought his magazine along and so he settled down to reading it until such time as whoever was in the bathroom would come out. We let him sit there for a minute or two, but the finally the navy man just couldn't take it anymore, so he leaned over and he said hey, the bathroom door is stuck, there ain't no one in there. The business man did not look up or give another sign that he had even heard a word he said. So the navy man reached out and he poked him on the shoulder.

That got the business man's attention okay, he nearly jumped right up and he was even trembling - I figured he was scared, although I don't know why or what - and he said what do you want with me? The navy man almost cracked up laughing because he thought this guy must be some kind of total moron, but he just said, nothing, pal, I was just telling you that you are not going to be able to get inside that bathroom because the door is jammed and there ain't no one in there anyway. All at once the business man's expression changed completely. It went from being surprised and scared to being righteously angry and uprightful. He said, what do you mean the door is jammed? It is, I said, finally putting myself into the situation there. Well then why doesn't someone fix it? The driver says he can't stop even for a minute, I replied. This is an outrage, the business man declared, and he got right up and marched off to the front of the bus where we could see him bending over and yelling whisperly into the driver's ear. The driver shrugged and he muttered something about his job and then the business man was yelling louder, what do I care about your job? I paid for this bus ride and I am entitled to the things that go with the price of the ticket!

That didn't make the driver very happy and he said listen mac if you don't like it I can let you off right here, and I will kick you off if you don't shut up now and go right back to where you were before. The business man started to say something else, but then he decided that he better not risk it being thrown off out here in the middle of nowhere, since I figure he had important things to do in Welford, like I did, and didn't want to blow it on account of having to pee. So he just turned red and came back to the back of the bus where he told the navy man and me that since the driver wasn't going to do a thing about the bathroom door then we would have to do it for ourselves. The navy man said he tried already and he broke his fucking knife and the business man replied that there had to be another way since there is always more than just one way to do a thing. So we sat there and we started thinking about the matter and then finally I said what if we all push on it at once then maybe we can break it through.

So the other guys agreed that it was worth a try. We all got up and started pushing at the door together but it didn't budge. Finally the navy man said I am going to rush and kick the god damned thing, so we got out of the way and he backed up to the window of the row of where the man was still asleep stretched out along those seats. The navy man got two steps and he threw his feet out at the door but all he did was fall

down and he hurt his knee, but the door didn't come any closer to being open than it had ever been before. The driver wasn't saying anything and I could tell from the way he had his head that he was getting madder all the time, and wouldn't have minded throwing us all of right then and there. The only problem with that would be that if he stopped the bus to throw us off the nun would badger him to fix the door while he was stopped and he couldn't throw a nun off too. That could mean his job.

Instead what happened was the other sister, the one who was sitting in the aisle seat, she got up and started coming towards the bathroom. She didn't seem to notice what was going on, and the three of us stood back incredulous as she stepped right by and tried the door, and then sat down to wait. The navy man leaned over and he told her that the door was stuck and all, but she didn't say a thing or even seem to hear. I thought this is just like with the business man all over but it wasn't. Because the window sister came to fetch her other sister and she told us that the other one was deaf and couldn't hear a thing. The business man said, isn't this just great. Here we are on this stupid bus, and all of us have got to pee, but we can't get in the bathroom and the driver is no help at all. The window sister said well I guess that means that everyone will have to wait, but at the time when she was saying this the other sister had kind of wandered off a bit and she accidentally sat down on the man who was still there sprawled out on the last three seats. This was when this old deaf woman started screaming, I mean if you could call it that, because it was more like suddenly a wounded moose had snuck into the back and started howling in the wind. It scared the living daylight out of me and everybody else I think was also taken by surprise.

The window sister went to fetch her and she tried to calm her down, but the deaf one kept on howling and mooing or however you want to say it, and there was nothing she could do to make her stop. This is when the nun came back to see what all the noises were about, while the driver shouted keep it down back there, this ain't a circus, it's a bus. The nun yelled back at him, it kind of seems like maybe it is a circus, with clowns like you around, and everybody laughed but at the same time we were still upset with all those scary sounds that just kept coming from the sister. Of course the window sister wouldn't let the nun come near her sister because she was the only one who knew her and could take care of her, so once the nun got there there wasn't anything for her to do, so in all the confusion she sat down on top of the sleeping man's feet just like the other one had done, and just like her she started to scream, though we could understand this time. And all at once the thing got pretty serious.

This sleeping man had made it all the way through all of this and never even snored a single time or turned around or anything. And it was the way his legs were so damned cold that scared the sister and the nun. They figured he was really not asleep but dead. They both just had a sense of it. At least that's what the nun kept saying, and pretty soon we were all examining the man and sure enough the guy was dead all right. We argued who should tell the driver, but since he didn't like the nun or business man or the man in navy clothes or me already, it should be the window sister with the purple pillbox hat. So she went up there and told the driver that there was a dead man on the bus. The driver thought it was a ploy to make him stop the bus and have to fix the door, so he just said, well, it'll keep until we get to Welford and he told her not to bother him again. Well the nun was very very mad when the sister came and told us what he said

and she wanted to go up there and smack him on the head, but we said no don't do it because we'll get into an accident and it's bad enough that one of us is dead, it won't do any good for the rest of us to end up dead as well.

So we all sat down and wondered what to do, all of us except the nun who was already praying for the dead man's soul. We sat there, everyone was quiet except the nun, and then the business man spoke up and said, you know, it could just be the killer of that man is hiding in the bathroom there. Well that seemed to be ridiculous at first, but then he went on and he said he could be waiting till it's night out and the bus is parked somewhere to sneak away, because he knows the driver will never come and fix the door because he couldn't care less about his customers conveniences. But then the navy man spoke up and he said maybe the driver is in it with the killer, maybe the guy has paid him off to open the door and let him out once the bus is safe alone. Or maybe, the window sister said, he's just been paid to look the other way and the killer will let himself out of the bathroom when the driver gives a signal that the coast is clear.

We didn't like the idea of there being a murderer in the bathroom on the bus, and we were frightening ourselves to death but then the nun said there is no one else who's gotten on this bus that I don't see now sitting out here. That got us quiet for a bit but then the business man said maybe he got on before you did and has been hiding in the bathroom from the start, only he snuck out once to kill the man then snuck back in when nobody was watching out. The nun couldn't say it was impossible, so we all decided that that is exactly what really happened. And there was nothing we could do about the thing.

I could tell from everybody's face that we were all of us thinking the same idea at once, that if there was a killer in the bathroom then it would be best to leave it be for now and just call the cops once we got into Welford. The only problem now was whether the driver and the murderer were in some kind of communication, like if they had some walkie-talkies or something like that, because if they did, and we were all back there near the bathroom saying all these things, then the murderer could just call up the driver and say these people figured it out and now we have to get rid of them for good. And that wouldn't be too hard, because we were still riding in the middle of nowhere and there wasn't anything around, and all the driver had to do was stop the bus and lock the door, and then the murderer would come out and kill us all and they could throw our bodies in the trees and nobody would ever know. They'd take our tickets first, so there wouldn't be anything to link us all together, and the driver could pretend he didn't have any fares that day and keep the money for himself, or he could make up some phony passengers and say they all got off at stops before we got to Welford.

No one said these things aloud, but I could tell that we'd all watched the same shows on TV and it wasn't hard to figure what the bunch of us were thinking in our minds. There was a killer in cahoots with the driver, there was a body and there were witnesses - ourselves. Well we were all so scared by our imaginings that we couldn't say a word, so we just sat there quietly and trembled. It would have been almost funny if we had begun to talk about the thing and maybe that would have helped to ease our minds a bit, but we didn't want the killer to overhear anything more we had to say. But what I

mean was funny was that we couldn't have decided if we were shaking because we were frightened of the murderer or because we had to pee so bad. Finally the nun said I wonder where we are in any case, and then the window sister said we're halfway through the Indian reservation, that is where. What are we doing in the reservation? everybody asked at once, and the window sister said it is the route. My sister and I come on this bus every Monday morning, and every time it is the same. I asked a driver once and he said it's in the contract and it's forced by law, the government of the state. They have an agreement with the Indians that the government must provide some kind of public transportation service, so the government made this deal here with the bus company, and now they go through the reservation every Monday morning at this time if any Indians want to go to Wetford. And there is a bus that comes back Tuesday in the middle of the night. Of course the Indians don't go to Wetford very much, especially not on Monday morning at eight o'clock, and they don't come back on Tuesday in the middle of the night, but when they do, they usually just drive their cars. So it's all a joke, you see. The state is always getting around these deals they have to make because the federal government makes them make them, but they don't really want to do a thing for the Indians that live here.

The navy man said let me see if I get what you're saying. You mean that this bus turns off the highway just to drive through this here reservation though there aren't any Indians who want to take the bus? That's how it is, the sister said, and once we get through with this part, we just get right back on the highway about a mile from where we'd gotten off, and we just drive into Wetford, which is about another fifteen minutes down the road. But it takes about an hour and a quarter just to get through this part of the trip. Why do you always take this bus, the business man asked her, if I had known I would have taken the next bus - it leaves a couple hours later but it gets there only half an hour later, but I wanted to get there earlier than that, but now it seems it really isn't worth the time at all. Well, the sister said, my sister likes this ride. She likes to be on the bus for hours, for as long as possible. There isn't much for us to do in Wetford, but we have to get out of the house every week, or else she'd drive me crazy. That's why we take this bus. It's about two and a half hours altogether, or five hours both ways and that's enough to keep her quiet for the rest of the week. I can tell you, it isn't easy taken care of a person like she is. You have to do a lot of things like this just to keep her pacified.

The nun said isn't she just deaf? And the sister said, no, it's more than that. She'd out of her mind as well. She thinks she still a child of five, and so she acts like one The best thing you can do with a child that age or somebody who thinks they are is to put them on a long bus ride. We all sat back and thought about this story, and we all felt kind of foolish because I know that we all thought the same thing when we first got on, that it was just like being a little kid again, but that did not explain the fact that that deaf retarded sister didn't even get the window seat. I figured that the other sister thought she was entitled to some privileges from having to take care of her like that. At least that made some sense to me.

I'm just taking this little girl back home to her parents, the nun put in. She's more trouble than she's worth down at the convent, or so the Mother Superior says, but I don't think it's true. I mean, just look at the little girl now. Any other little girl would be fussing and

screaming about this bathroom thing, and she's already calmed down and gone to sleep again. If it was up to me I'd keep her there, but the Mother Superior says that budget constraints make it impossible to keep everyone, so someone's got to go. I can understand about all that, the business man put in, budget constraints are the single most important factor about all life on earth, he said. You just look at those little trees out there along the side of the road. Most of them won't make it, because there isn't enough room in the sun for every one of them. This seemed to him to be the deepest thing that anyone could say, and it made everyone stop talking for a minute, as if they were busy trying to absorb the words.

Actually we just wanted to have anything to think about except the killer in the bathroom, and we didn't care just what it was as long as it distracted us and maybe made the killer think that he could let us live and it would be okay. After all, I mean, we never saw his face or anything, so if he got away we never could identify him in a court of law. I figured we were safe, and that he only wanted to kill one person and he had already done that. Who wants to kill some people you don't even know? You'd have to be a maniac, but I wished I hadn't had that thought occur to me, because I couldn't shake it, and it gave me something more to worry about. I didn't worry very long, though, because I didn't really know, and since I wasn't all that good at wondering, I couldn't wonder enough about him to make me worry very much.

Then all at once we all decided that we'd be better off if we weren't sitting so close to the body and the bathroom, so we all got up and moved towards the front, where we found new seats, and even though I couldn't smoke up there and I felt I wanted to, still I figured it was better to be far enough away that there might be chance to rush on off the bus before the driver and the killer had a chance to trap us in the back. I still had to pee real bad, and so did everybody else, but it's amazing how you can hold it in in case you really have to. We had already turned around and the window sister told us that it wouldn't be too long before we got back on the highway and headed into Wetford. It was now about nine am, and I was ready to arrive, although I had some time to kill. Better to kill some time, I thought, but I didn't want to think about that now. And it's a good thing that I wasn't very good at wondering, because the other people were, and I could see that they were really scaring themselves to death with all of this.

It's funny how nobody said a word until we got to Wetford. No one even thought about attempting to open the bathroom door. It was the last thing that any of us wanted to do. So we didn't think about peeing, and we didn't think about breaking down the lock, and we just sat there and tried to pretend that we were five years old and loving every minute of this bus ride staring out the window at the trees and telephone polls as they zoomed by. But I think he only one who had a good time was the sister who was deaf, and she seemed to have forgotten all about the corpse and was enjoying herself again just like she'd been before. I tried to get myself to think about the interview, but I didn't know that much about the thing I had been to K-Po's once, but that was as a shopper, and I didn't know how different it would be to be a stock clerk there than it was to be a stock clerk at the Super Seven Store. For one thing, K-Po's was a lot bigger, and it had more and different kinds of things, and it was bound to be a lot busier most of the time than where I worked.

I tried to think about what it would be like to live in Wetford, which I would have to do in case I got the job, but since I'd only been to Wetford twice, and I never got a chance to really look around the times that I was there, I didn't know that much about it, so I couldn't really imagine very well about my living there. So I didn't do too well at keeping my mind off things, but at least it wasn't very long until we got there at around nine twenty, and when we pulled into the station I could sense that everyone was getting really tense and bothered. It was time to see this thing through to the end.

What happened was the driver pulled in and he stopped the bus. He opened up the doors and then he said, okay folks, here we are, now there's a bathroom just inside the station on your left, and that is all he said. We stood up but nobody got to moving off. He said again, come on, we're here, I thought you all had to go so bad. Finally the nun spoke up and said what about the dead man in the back? What dead man? the driver asked, and I was right that he had never once believed a word of it but only thought it was a ruse to get him to stop the bus and fix the bathroom door. The dead man in the back, the window sister said, he's just sprawled out there on the last three seats. Who, Charlie? the driver said, hell, he's no more dead than I am. Dead drunk's more like it, and he laughed. But then he went back there to check on Charlie anyhow because no one was going to leave the bus until he did. And it turned out Charlie really was a corpse.

Well the driver was pretty shocked, and he didn't want to open the bathroom door either, so he made us all get off the bus and then he called an ambulance and the cops, and even though we all had other things to do we hung around, and we didn't even go to the bathroom during the time that we were waiting for the policemen to arrive. They finally came and the driver told them all about the dead man in the back and how the bathroom door was jammed, and the cops got on the bus and pulled their pistols out, and marched off to the bathroom door. We heard them pounding on the door and calling for whoever it was in there to come on out with their hands held high or else they'd count to ten.

Whoever it was did not come out and so the cops had to kick the door in, something they did so easily that it made the navy man blush a bit. And it turned out there was no one in there after all. I guess the man just died all on his own. Well we all felt petty stupid, and even the cops were laughing, though I think they were laughing at themselves because they even half believed it too themselves, but we just went our separate ways without another word. It was almost ten o'clock by then and I had just about an hour to find where I was going to, which was the time I figured I might need to set aside in case I couldn't find it right away. And if I did then I could look around a bit at Wetford, though I could do that later too, because the bus going back did not leave until four thirty. I noticed on the schedule that it passed my stop at five fifteen, so I knew it wasn't going through the Indian reservation again. It was funny that I could have taken the next bus and I would've got there still on time, but I didn't know about that at the time.

Wetford isn't very big a town, and it didn't take me hardly fifteen minutes to find the K-Po's, which was right downtown and not that far from the station. So I had another forty five minutes on my hands so I decided I would look around the town. But I can tell you

that there wasn't all the much to see, just a street of little shops, a local government building with a post office and some offices inside it, and the rest was all a bunch of little houses side by side with yards and little fences out in front. It wasn't that the houses weren't pretty and all because they were, but I was never very big on wandering around and seeing stuff and I got bored before too long. I like to ride my bike and that is fine, but walking if I'm going to walk I'd rather do it in the countryside where you don't have to see a lot of people things and think about the things the people do.

I mean, it wasn't much to think about. It was just like where I was except there were about a hundred times more people here, which still isn't very much, and I figured that they lived the same way pretty much and did the same things as the people where I was, so that wasn't very interesting. I could've lived there easily enough, and I thought maybe when I live here than it will be more interesting to me, but at the time it was only just another place and that wasn't very much to go on wondering about. So after a lot of walking I just went straight back to K-Po's and I waited around outside the front until it was eleven and the time to do the interview. Then I went inside and told someone why I was there and who the name was that I was supposed to see.

Then they called the man and he came over to the front where I was standing and he said, listen, I am very sorry that you came all this way and I tried to call you up this morning but you had already left, because, you see, there isn't any job now as it turns out after all, but maybe there will be some other time and if you like I'll call you first when that occurs. I said okay that's fine with me, and I told him that I was very interested in the opportunity because where I was they didn't come around too much and I had to find something because I couldn't stay out there forever. He said he knew and understood and that the next time anything came up he would be sure to call me first, okay? I said okay and thank you very much and that was that.

Well, there wasn't much for me to do in Weford after all. It turned out that I wasn't going to get the job because there wasn't any job, and I didn't even have to go in any case. But there I was and there wasn't any bus fill four thirty so I had about five hours left to kill and nothing at all to do. It turned out to be about the longest afternoon that I have ever had. The first thing that I did was go back to the station and use the bathroom there, because I had forgotten to pee with all the things that had been going on. After that I bought a magazine and wandered over to this little green they had there in the center of the town. I read the magazine about three times, and then I bought the daily paper and I read it twice.

I didn't have anything to think about or wonder about or even to try and worry about. There was nothing I could put inside my mind at all. I didn't like Weford very much that day, and I could see now why nobody ever went there very often, and why they drove their cars if they happened to go there, because if I had a car I could've left at any time I chose, and I think that is a very important thing to be able to do in Weford. But I couldn't, so I waited and I waited for the time to come when I could catch the bus to go back home. And it turned out that I did just waste my whole day off that day, but it wasn't because I missed the bus, but because I'd caught it after all.

FREDERICK HARDWARE'SSTORE

To begin with, everything went wrong. He made a lot of mistakes, which was to be expected on the first day, but it got to him, and he just felt lousy. They'd only hired him because he told them he'd had cashier experience, which was true, which was why he felt so stupid. Mr. Kronin had said, "well, things are different around here", or something like that, but they both agreed he'd probably get the hang of it quick enough. Different was an understatement. They didn't just do things differently, but stupidly, irrationally, he didn't know why the hell they did things the way they did except it was the way they'd always done them, the way all the branches in the chain did them, the way old Mr. K-Po himself had probably done them when he was still alive, if he ever had been. For instance, when you had a master charge or a visa, you had to call the manager over so he could initial it. Well, what the hell could he do that Frederick could not? The manager would just look at the form for a moment, staring at it as if he would receive some metaphysical justification, and then he'd say "okay" and put his initial in the corner. Frederick was used to a machine. You punch the information in and get a number back. It's much more businesslike that way. And they had this incredibly complicated way of doing voids, he didn't understand it, not to mention the other things that could easily go wrong and seemed to all the time when Frederick was concerned. Those first few days were horrible, and he was depressed.

He didn't know anyone in Welford, or even why he'd gone there, except that he had nowhere else to go, it didn't matter much, and after all, every place is pretty much the same if you're alone and don't know anyone at all. It wasn't any different from Lawrence or Hampton or Charlotte or Wheeling or Scranton or Erie or any other place he'd been. He was staying, so it seemed to him, in the same rundown hotel, with the same fat slob attendant, and the same cockroaches on the walls, and he wasn't going anywhere and knew it. The more I move around, he thought, the more my life stands still, but he knew exactly what he wanted, and, even more, he knew that it could happen for him, anytime and anywhere, like it happened all the time for everybody else he saw. So he was in no hurry. The thing took time, and he needed patience most of all. He was pretty good at waiting - my major talent, he often told himself. But he hated when he made mistakes and looked like such a god damned idiot so he went home those first few nights ashamed and angry and wanting only to hide away where no one would see that expression on his face, because the supervisor yelled at him, not once but four or five times every day, and the mistakes he made were stupid and he knew they were.

The machine was unfamiliar. Okay, I'll grant you that. Each cash register is different and you just have to get used to it, but that is no excuse for ringing Kotex on the candy tab, or a spatula on pharmaceuticals. He had to get it down, and soon, or else he'd be without a job again and he was tired of not eating. There were only twenty two departments in the store, from cigarettes and liquor, to books and magazines, drugs and candy, kitchenware and paper things, food and watches, and so on. There were nine cashier stations, and his was in the back, between the beauty supplies and drugs.

Behind him were the boxes of condoms and tubes of contraceptive jelly, as well as dirty magazines and vaseline, but he'd get all kinds of customers who sought the station where there wasn't any line, and all day long he was busy at it, hardly a moment to rest, let alone a chance to talk to anyone. It wouldn't have been so bad if only he hadn't kept making so many dumb mistakes, but that was just a matter of time, and after a few more days he'd have it down and there'd be no more problems.

Even so, he felt like kicking something, but he owned nothing he could kick. The hotel room was empty, but for his backpack with its few old clothes, a bed, a table, and a chair. There was one dim light bulb on the ceiling, and the peeling, cracking walls matched the loose and creaking floorboards. I should be used to this by now, he thought, but he never would be used to it, he only hoped someday to make enough to rent a small apartment, but that meant staying somewhere more than a couple months, which was usually his limit. He'd been like this a long time now, rootless, weary, not knowing or caring where he'd be next year, next week, almost eleven years by now, and how many little cities, and how many lousy jobs. It was the price he paid for being himself, for despising all big cities and all hints of any career and all ideas of having a good life because he thought it wasn't right, that there was something very wrong in settling down too long, in believing you were safe, in putting faith in anything, in expecting things to stay the same forever. There was something wrong with it, and he didn't want to risk it all at once like that, better to have nothing you can lose than lose everything at once. He felt he was a journeyman without a craft, unless cashiering was a trade, who'd rung up sales both up and down the coast, across the heartland and the northern states as well. The wandering cashier, he laughed, but one that makes all kinds of dumb mistakes. But, he thought, how many errors have I made, and how many sales have I rung up to perfection? Too many, Frederick told himself. I'm surprised that I still care. He sat down at the table, and drummed his fingers on it. Well, it's looked bad before, he thought. Bad beginnings bring good endings, so they say.

There was a neon light outside the window, alternating blue and green, advertising jewelry though the store was closed, attracting thieves, perhaps. Otherwise, there was no view at all, but he was used to this. No matter where he went, things always seemed to be the same. There was no one he could call, no one to write a letter to. He was going to have to spend the night the way he'd spent a million other nights, alone, and doing nothing. At least he had a pack of cards to keep him company. He picked them up, and shuffled. He'd invented a lot of his own card games over the years - all of them were solitaires.

He dealt the cards, four rows of four, eliminated the highest and the lowest cards, filled in their slots with two more from the deck, and kept on going in that way to see if he could finish off the deck with only sixes, sevens, eights or nines left on the table. He did. This was a game that was difficult to lose, and always ended up approximately the same. There were exceptions sometimes, a five, or maybe a ten. He picked up his battered black cowboy hat and put it on, tilted over his eyes. He kept his eyes open, and saw only the inside of the hat. It wasn't quiet in the room. Someone was yelling in the street below - there was always a lot of yelling, wherever he wound up. This time it might be different, he told himself, but he did not believe it.

He played again. He shuffled the cards unthinkingly. I'll play the middle one more time, see if I can get a seven and an eight. Yes, he did this time, seven of clubs and eight of hearts. He felt wildly pleased and grinned a little stupidly. This calls for a celebration, Frederick thought, and he reached for his bottle of cognac. Just a little, Frederick told himself, just a cigarette's worth. He poured it out, and sipped to the accompaniment of a camel filter cigarette. Suddenly he felt like turning out the light, and so he did, and sat there in the darkened room, with just the blue and then green neon sign, blinking in the window.

He'd go to work again in the morning, and try not to make so many dumb mistakes. Maybe he'd even get a chance to talk to some of the other people who worked there. You never know, some of them might be interesting, maybe he'd find another friend or two, although he doubted it. He wasn't a very friendly type. It's only been three days, he thought, I'll get it down tomorrow, or by next week, certainly, and after that it would be easy, as long as he did whatever they told him to and did not complain. He'd been through so many little worlds by then he couldn't take them seriously at all. Each one was pretty much the same, filled with foolish, petty managers, silly-breezy clerks, obnoxious stupid customers, a sense of unreality about it all, as if it was just too absurd, that no one could envision such a place, that certainly no god would ever have created it, and yet you found them everywhere. I'll try to stick it out, he thought, but he thought this every time. So far, nine months was the longest he had stayed at any store. Belatedly he realized that anywhere from six to ten constituted middle ground, so there was no aberration after all, except the jack, but jacks are often like that anyway. The mediocre simply covered a wider range than he had thought at first.

Most places that he worked were like this, eliminating over time the best ones and the worst, the highest and the lowest, so that only the mediocre ones remained. Usually, but not always, you could tell who were the mediocre ones right off. They'd been there the longest. And the owner or the manager was usually a five, slightly lower than the average in mentality and attitude. He figured that he himself was about an eight or a nine. He used to think he was a jack, and long before, a king or even an ace, but he was older now, and steadily declining to the correct appreciation of his value. He'd failed too many times, at too many things, not to realize that it must be at least partially his fault, not just the others he had blamed. And he figured he still had a little way to fall, for he thought he'd end up as a seven in the end. He had a special fondness for that number, out of all. So far he didn't know anyone at K-Po's, but if experience was anything, he thought he'd come across some fours, some sixes, and some eights - even numbered people were so very common, much more so than the odd, and, if he got lucky, perhaps there'd be a nine, or at least another seven. That's what he was really looking for. No use guessing now, we'll see what time will bring, he thought, as he gulped down the last drop of the cognac, and put out the cigarette. What time will bring, he told himself, yeah, sure, what time will take away.

He knew nothing of his co-workers for the first few days. There was John, the bearded liquor man, who always seemed to be looking off the other way, no matter when you noticed him. Sherry in cosmetics smelled like it. Harvey, the pharmacist, was a grim-faced sullen middle-aged black man whose every waking moment was an unwelcome

chore, or so it seemed. Dan, at the front desk, smiled too much and seemed too nice a guy, the kind you make friends with first then find out later on that no one else can stand the guy and you learn why yourself. There was Candy actually at the candy counter, red-haired, rouge cheeked, fake eye lidded lizard of a thing, whom Frederick didn't like right off the bat because she cackled when he fucked up doing a void. Mr. Kronin was a tough old guy, crew-cutted, baggy pants, and stars and stripes pinned on his jacked pocket, a veteran of some war he's still too god damned proud of. There were others, whose names he didn't know yet, who worked overlapping shifts, and he'd gotten the clear impression that the staff was divvied up in little cliques of one. There seemed to be no contact between employees, but maybe that was just the rules, perhaps they met in secret after work to bitch about the job, get stoned and drink some beers. Frederick didn't really want to fit in anywhere, but he was split about the issue. He needed other people just as much as he disliked them just because he needed them.

On Thursday everything went well. He made only a couple of small mistakes, and dealt calmly with the endless lines. For awhile he was the only cashier open in the store, so everybody had to go through him, and only once did he request a price check, and only once he needed change. By six o'clock he was very tired, but also very pleased. He expected now someone would say hello, he lingered in the storeroom, but no one noticed him, or even said goodbye. Candy was describing some hideous TV show to Maybelline, the toothpaste headache girl, as Morris priced the kleenex listlessly. Frederick didn't say goodbye but left the store, feeling even more alone. He took himself to dinner at a greasy pizza place across the street, staring too long at the waitress who wiggled badly as she walked away. He had two slices and a beer and then a cigarette, and afterwards he walked along the streets though it was drizzling and cold. He passed some taverns where the television drowned out all the drinkers' sorrows, and the click of pool balls pattered in the background. It occurred to him that he might stop in somewhere for a drink, but he decided not to. He didn't like to do that, usually. It never worked for him. He always sat alone and no one bothered him, and the times he'd started to talk to someone he'd always felt some taste of regret linger on, the women when he'd gone to bed with them, and found himself tongue-tied, who is this person anyway, and he'd have nothing at all to say to her, and she'd say nothing too, and the men whose troubles endlessly repeated themselves from town to town and face to face.

Conversations bored him quickly, but silence even faster. He walked along the streets not paying attention to anything he passed. He didn't want to see a film or listen to loud music. He didn't want to talk or hear or do anything at all. He went back to the hotel, poured out a cigarette of brandy, smoked and sipped in the darkness with the neon flashing on and off from green to blue and back again. Something's got to change, he thought, but he knew it never would. Even in his dreams he was always leaving, always looking out for somewhere else to go. In restaurants and theatres, he noticed first the exit signs. He sat in the very back of buses, so that no one else could see him from behind. He had his back to every wall, and refused to stand in line, he wouldn't wait his turn like just another sheep.

He spent another night alone, the fourth since he'd been on the job, and thought about the day ahead, a Friday, and he had to find something to do before the weekend came. Nothing's going to happen, he told himself, and he reached out for the cards and picked them up. No Retail Solitaire, he told himself. I'm in the mood for something else. Perhaps a friendly game of Hitchhiker will do. He chuckled quietly. It was a rather morbid game. You could wind up dead, or wait for hours in the cold. Each card drawn counted as an hour, a picture card could be a ride, a one-eyed king or jack could be then end of you, unless you were a seven, or a nine.

He played in the dim light, barely making out the cards. His traveler was a four of spades, especially vulnerable to the reds. An hour passed (the ten of hearts), and then another hour on the road (the six of hearts). Two hearts so far, that means he was leaving someone else behind; the three of diamonds meant he wasn't losing very much. A king of clubs stopped by and picked him up and took him down the road a bit, but not too far; the five of spades meant that the driver had to let him off just thirty miles along. The four had no idea where he was going to. He stood there by the road, as the hours ticked away. An ace of clubs, that meant night fell. The two of spades, few cars were passing by. The nine of diamonds, he had his hopes up for a minute there, he thought the car slowed down, but it was only an illusion. He was beginning to get annoyed. The eight of spades; he was tired and beginning to get a little feverish as well. The four of hearts, and now he was regretting his all-too rash departure, thoughts of going back were creeping into his mind, but then the jack of hearts pulled up and stopped. The four of spades was hesitant. There was something about the car he didn't like, but fatigue had dulled his brain, and he climbed in. Too bad. The jack of hearts was in the mood for love.

Frederick smiled - there goes another one. He put the cards away, and shook his head. I'll have to make a friend tomorrow, Frederick thought, even if it means going to some bar and talking to a stranger. I'll say I'm new in town, what's there to do around here anyway? He saw the scene unfold, just as it had a hundred times before. Ain't much, the stranger'd say, why don't you come on over, watch the game, have some beers, meet the wife and kids. Generous natives, always willing to waste your time out of the goodness of their hearts. Okay, he'd say, why not, and what the hell, all right, only to regret it every minute of the lousy day, feeling trapped, unable to feel obliged, barely managing to say hey thanks a lot. No, he thought, I won't do that again. But he knew he would, many many times before the game was up.

He'd been tired of it long before it had begun, as a child observing grown-ups, and knowing he wanted to have no part of their grotesque, aberrant rituals. His parents had not been very social either, mostly keeping to themselves, and quietly at that. There were many long, slow evenings in the Hardware house, huddled by the fireplace, in upstate Minnesota, his father slowly scanning a journal while his mother knitted sweaters and his little sister brooded in the corner. Frederick had always resisted the urge to talk, even at the age when children are first exploring the capabilities of language, and it was because of the way words broke the silence of his family's home like falling through the surface of a frozen lake, shattering the stillness, plunging into the icy waters of complete misunderstanding. He had been a lousy student, hated school, had no

friends among his classmates, didn't like to play, preferred to sit and look not watching, not really noticing the things before his eyes. Even then the time seemed unendurable, and the nights were preferable to the days. He felt that he had never changed, though his body grew and his appearance gradually altered, yet the same stubborn Frederick had remained the same within, he who would not be affected or infected by the general prevailing mood. There was no time he could recall when the pressure hadn't been there, the urge to go away. He couldn't say who'd taught him that life wasn't meant for extremes of any kind, not high not low, but for clinging to the middle, and for staying on an even keel. It could have been his father, but he had no memory of anything his father had ever said to him, except, perhaps, put on your hat, or come inside, you'll catch your death of cold out there.

In the dark, he collected all his ghosts, they paraded once again before his blinking eyes. Louisa, love which never was. Anthony Grey, the friend he'd thrown away. David Wayne Bailey, intrepid companion, blew his brains out in a stranger's house, or so they said. A list of names - Alice, Jerry, Milt, Eustace, Carrie, Dennis, Jackson, Sue, names with almost faces to go with them, and he tired of their memory, he didn't want to know them anymore, the names of roads and towns, the images of hotel rooms, apartments, bars and trucks, cash registers and stores, a useless list of facts, chronology of long lost days, a litany of words and sounds which had no power for him anymore. It was as if he'd bought these memories, and now was stuck with faulty merchandise, things he had no use for anymore. They didn't work. There must be somewhere he could sell them, a memory pawn shop, hidden somewhere in the seedy part of town, around the corner, up the street, a warehouse full of what nobody cares for anymore, the past. And he often thought of meeting someone once again, someone from long ago, not recognizing them, and they not recognizing him, and it would seem so natural, as if they'd never really known each other anyway. It would be like purging some false memories. It probably happened all the time

It was terrible. From the lady screaming for a refund to the twenty dollar shortage, everything went wrong. Frederick found it hard to keep his cool, and he almost lost it once, which would have been unbearable. I mustn't let it get to me, he thought, but Kronin lecturing, the snotty customers, John who looked away so many times he wanted to yell don't look at me, you asshole, don't you look at me, you prick! And the plastic people with their hair done up, their imitation furs, these manikins affecting human nature, buying coated lozenges and aspirin-free cold capsules, look at you, you're all a mess, you've all got something wrong with you, and so it seemed, that one with the hemorrhoids, this one with the headache, that one with the snotty runny nose, and this one in the middle of her period, band aids, cortoids, the horny fuckers loading up on contraceptive shit, whipping out their dollar bills, exacting change, the mastercharge to be approved (and what a joke that was, approved!), they're all so fucking desperately in need, they need a comb (hell, you need a bath!), they need a watchband or a serving spoon, they want their film developed NOW!, and gimme my prescription drugs before I pass away, I need my valium, my darvon, my thalidomide, need a chocolate bar, some raisinettes, they need a shave, a rest, or even a vacation, and they all come here, they all line up, they wait impatiently, they've got their things, their money in their pocket, who is next? It's me me me!!!

Fuck, and then the drawer was off, the tape was wrong, the damn machine broke down, and nobody would talk to him, they turned away, they looked the other way, and he began to hate them all, these small town jerks, their little lives, and what the hell do they know anyway? where the hell have they been? Who the hell are they? He didn't need them, didn't want to know their names. Get away from me, all day he thought of moving on, why not, what does it matter anyway? Not a bit, that's what! I've had enough of this, these needy customers, these stupid managers, these too-good-for-the-likes-of-you co-workers, and this pitsy town, where nothing's happening at all, that no one's ever heard of, that's barely on the map, that's just like all the other dying cities that have lost their industry and have no future prospects. It went wrong from the very start, as soon as he walked in the door, and Kronin standing there, that you-fucked-up expression on his face, and Frederick knew right off that it was going to be a lousy day, the worst. No one said good morning. Candy seemed to snarl at him although it could have been another thing entirely. Sherry turned her back on him as soon as he approached. He knew, he noticed everything, because he'd planned to make an effort to be extra friendly to them all that day, but not five minutes after he arrived that resolution died away, and all that he could think about was making it till six o'clock, just getting through the day, but even this was harder than he had anticipated.

Friday seemed to be the worst day of the week; all the people stocked up on supplies, as if they couldn't wait till Saturday; they just got paid and had to spend it all right there and then, lots of alcohol and cigarettes, lots of TV Guides, lots of snacks and candy bars, as if everyone was going to go home and spend the weekend pigging out and watching football on the tube. It really was disgusting, Frederick thought, the poor pathetic slobs, as if no one had ever told them that they could do something with their lives, but the most ambitious of them bought a can of oil or car wax for their Sunday entertainment. Some of them read books, but this was hardly to their credit, since they read only the most ridiculous trash about the rich, the beautiful, the depraved, corrupt barbaric ruling class and those who aspired to be like them. These women and their romances, these men and their adventures, these comic book children, and these strutting children of all ages who imagined they were movie stars, or were bound to be someday. And someone now and then bought one of those bestsellers about the ordinary folks who fucked around and schemed and planned and died quite suddenly in airplanes, or had their dicks bit off in cars, who talked in cute pretentious prose, and absolutely trapped and captured on the nail the deadly boring spirit of their age.

Too many voids because she changed her mind, she didn't want it after all, and that stupid indecision could end up costing me my job, it's not my fault, I'll tell them, they don't care, and I am stuck with it, but I don't need this shit, I can go away, I can't accept her check and so she yells at me, it's not my rules, there's nothing I can do, the next one smirks, go fuck yourself, I think, he's got the twenty-one, so what? you think I can't make change? You need the penny? I ain't got bottle caps in here, you know. Calm down, he tells himself, you can't go on this way, you'll barely make it up to lunch if you don't take it easier. So he draws a breath, he stills his mind, he goes on automatic and he's okay for awhile, just one thing at a time, no angry clerk, no angry customers, no voids and no mistakes. Okay, he tells himself, it's going to be okay. He stops seeing what they buy, it's only prices after all, a fourteen ninety nine, one twenty nine, a dollar

fifty nine, two dollars ninety nine, a ninety nine plus tax, and everything's a nine, a ninety nine plus tax, and so on, sale after sale. He's in a world that's one square foot, just him, a counter, a machine, a line of interchangeable customers and items, as if they all came out of nowhere and returned there just as fast. He doesn't see their faces, just their hands, and he's able to distract himself away, so far away that someone else is in his place, doing his job, and doing it better than he could if he was fully there. He let his mind float freely on the frivolous paths it loved exploring most, he smiled a bit, and there was someone smiling back. Moments later he realized that it was John, from all the way across the store. Suddenly he felt much happier, and everything was changed. The customers were friendly, and he was friendly too. Their needs were interesting, he began to notice all their faces once again. Outside the rain was falling and it was good to be indoors. The muzak wasn't quite so bad, the line's not all that long. Sherry smiled. Candy laughed. Dan as usual, and Kronin was nowhere in sight. So much for the blues, he thought, and he was positively cheerful all at once, and K-Po's was okay, Wetford was all right, he heard a chorus in his head, a song, the singer singing, nothing else is happening, this is where you are. Okay, he told himself, okay.

-How's it going? someone asked him, and he looked up, expecting it to be another customer, but it was John the liquor man, standing there beside the counter.

-Okay, he said, not too bad.

-Yeah, John smiled. He paused, and added, don't worry about Kronin. He's got nothing else to do but make life difficult for everyone.

-They're all the same, Frederick replied, everywhere you go, the managers and the owners, all pretty much the same.

-I guess so, John said. I wouldn't really know. I've been here seven years.

-Really? Frederick was surprised. Seven years? That's a hell of a long time.

-Isn't it? John chuckled. Much too long.

-I've never been able to do that, Frederick said.

-Well, it isn't so much doing it as not doing something else, John said. I guess I'm just too lazy. Well, I'll see you later.

And before Frederick could reply, John had walked away but Frederick was feeling even better now, someone had actually talked to him, and it wasn't going to be so bad. He wanted to hear more. He was always interested in people who stuck to one job for awhile, what was it about them they could do it, and if he found out maybe he could do it too, because the only thing he really wanted, above all else, was one place he could stay and settle into. They said they wanted to be single once again, but he told them, no, you don't. They wanted to be traveling and he told them, traveling is dull, you'd hate it soon enough. They wanted to go to other cities, other states, see the

country, and he told them you're much better off just going to the movies and seeing things that way, because you can still hang on to your dreams and fairy tales, because there isn't any magic out there waiting to transform your life, there isn't any destiny, lying in wait for you, there aren't any great deeds to be done, no spellbound princesses, no evil sorcerers, there are only other human beings like you and me, each one a fragile shell, and everything we do, and everything we own, seems solid on the outside, and is crumbling away within.

He guessed that he already knew pretty much what John would say if they had another talk, sitting in a bar somewhere, beginning with a laugh, progressing through some jokes, some stories about some girls, a traveling tale or two, and finally the morbid speculations, this is all there is, until they both get tired of one another, and then wearily say goodbye. He thought it through, but calmly, as if all memories were really of the future, not the past, and the reason everything repeats itself is that you never get it right, and you keep hoping next time will be better, but it never is.

Frederick looked around the store and everything he saw was faith; bottled faith, plastic faith, boxes and cartons of faith, shrink-wrapped faith, twist-tied faith, wrapped faith, canned faith, and bargain packs of faith, the stuff of fairy tales. Everything that you could buy promised to be good for you, improving, enjoyable and pleasing. Everything that you could buy could help you, guaranteed. Everything had names you could rely on, names you could be loyal to. There was so much 'good', and it all cost so much money. Even the most unpleasant things were naturally good for you. You couldn't really go into a store like this and buy something that was bad. And all those shoppers come here to be helped. Can I help you? Buy this, it can really help you. It's good, delicious, aspirin-free, one calorie, no caffeine, not fattening, it makes you feel good, helps you lose weight (naturally), improves your face, gets rid of ugly grey, unsightly hair, gets rid of that headache, puts a big smile on your face, makes you feel younger, sexier, more alive, things are forever getting better, so it seems, there's always hope. And this is what the faith is all about. Progress, and improvement, endlessly.

They bought their hairspray, fingernail polish, Q-tips, tape and glue, rubber bands and paper clips, key rings, and potato chips, and the morning passed. He hadn't even looked at the clock since ten thirteen, and was surprised when John came by again and asked him what he planned to do for lunch. Frederick hadn't planned, he supposed he'd go and eat, but he hadn't found a good place in the neighborhood as yet. John knew one, and invited him along. Kronin said okay, get going, and the two of them walked out the store at one twenty four exactly.

-I'll bet you think this city is a pretty shitty little place, John said, as they headed down the block.

-Oh, I don't know, said Frederick, I haven't seen much of it yet. I just came in last Sunday

-There's nothing to see, John said.

-Everybody says that, he laughed, everywhere I go.

-I guess you keep on going to all the wrong places then.

-Well, Frederick said, I don't know. Maybe there's no such thing as the right place for someone like me.

-For anybody, John replied. There's no such place for anyone.

They came to a little restaurant and went inside. They took a booth near the back, and looked over the menu for a minute. After they ordered, John lit a cigarette. He looked at Frederick quietly for a minute, and Frederick said,

-You must think it's okay here. I mean, seven years is a pretty long time to stay in any one place.

-Seven? John laughed. I've only worked at K-Po's seven years. I've lived in Weford all my life. Twenty four years and twenty two weeks. I've never even been to any other place.

-Nowhere?

-Nowhere. Not even for a day. I'll bet you think that's strange.

-Oh, I don't know.

-Everybody kids me about it. By now it's something like a law. I don't feel I can go anywhere else, like it's not allowed, you know?

-But you've been outside the town...

-Oh,yeah, a few times, to the suburbs, this farm out here one time, when I was small. I didn't like it out there. Not enough concrete.

-And your folks? They from Weford too?

-Who knows? I never met them. I grew up in the orphanage on Bleaker Street, and when they let me out, I was almost eighteen then, I got this job, and the place where I still live.

-And you're happy here? Frederick asked, but just then the food arrived, and they set about it. Frederick waited for an answer, curious. But he felt it would be rude to ask again. He only hoped that John would not forget, or change the subject on him. But John felt like talking about it. He was proud of it.

-Yes, he said, I am. I like things just the way they are.

He didn't ask any questions about Frederick, but went on to talk about the store, and the other people working there. Sherry was an airhead, Candy was a lush. Dan was just

obnoxious - John really hated him. Richard was okay, you could talk with him, and he also had good weed, and cheap. Kronin was an asshole, but Henry, his assistant, was pretty easy to get around on, and Frederick listened to the gossip without any interest at all, he'd heard every word before, and each description could have been about a hundred others he had known, but still he had an okay feeling about this John, mostly because the guy was talking to him, not really from anything about the man himself. He listened, and he ate his lunch, and he felt a very pronounced feeling that he'd been right there before, not once, but many times, in the exact same place, in the same company, hearing the same words and nothing was any different, just slightly rearranged. He was musing on this when John asked him what he thought about the store so far.

-Oh, I don't know, said Frederick, suddenly weary of the conversation. There's so many small worlds on this planet, he continued, it seems that I just go from one right to the next, but no matter where I go, it's just another little world.

-Don't you ever get tired of it, John asked.

-I was tired of it before I started out, he said. I never get more tired of it than I already was back then.

-I don't understand, John said.

-Don't you ever want to go away? Not ever?

-No, John said, I never do.

-Well, then you won't be able to understand at all.

-But I want to, John replied. I've seen so many people come and go since I've been at the store, and even at the orphanage before, no one else ever wanted to stick around, and I could never figure it out. What's the point in going somewhere else if you're just going to have to start all over once again and it's just going to be the same?

-Maybe you're right, maybe there is no point, Frederick replied. John smiled, and said that it was time to get on back to work. Kronin would be pissed if they were late, and you don't want to make him mad, John said, whatever else you do. don't make him mad, because he loves to blow his fuse. He'd go crazy if he couldn't explode at least one time a day. They paid their bill and left, and didn't talk at all along the way back to the store. Frederick was wondering if it would be possible to be friends with John, whether it would work or not. John was smiling as they went back in, and said, I'll see you later, as Frederick went to take up his position. The speaker announced that station six was open, and the customers flocked over, like pigeons, settling on a rock.

It must have been the burger and the fries, because he wasn't feeling very good. His stomach felt heavy and his mind was dull, and most of all he felt like taking a nice long nap, which was typical after coming back from lunch. The customers were a nuisance.

Sherry and Dan were off to lunch, and there were only three stations open, and it was, of course, the busiest time of the day. It seemed the store was only fully staffed when there weren't many customers. Frederick kept his observations to himself, and did the best he could. It was no worse than it had been before, and would be again. Disappointment, he thought, is my only friend, and he rang up a price wrong without noticing. The customer noticed, though, and made a little fuss. Frederick apologized, and rang the sale again. Okay, no problem, just another void. One more won't hurt anyone.

He snapped out of his reflections and started paying attention to the work. He saw a procession of orange labels, each with little black numbers stamped on them. No matter what the item, it had the same kind of price tag adhesively attached, and Frederick knew too well the entire process of how the sticker got there, from the boxes coming off the truck, and carrying them inside, to the unpacking and the stacking of them in receiving, counting them and checking quantities against the list, loading up the price gun, adjusting the numerals and clicking out the labels on the packages, putting all the items on the shelves, and now, at the end of the line, rereading all the labels, and punching those same numbers into another machine, taking people's money, giving people change, putting the items into bags and seeing them leave the store, and no matter how you look at it, it will always be the same, in whatever store you work in, Freddy old boy. And in this the future was a trap, an endless hall of mirrors, and even when the corner turns and you get your hopes back up, the new hall turns out to be the same as all the others were. And yet, you could never see more than a few feet in front of you at any given time, so there was always the possibility of illusion, self-deception, wishful thinking, where hope snuck in to trick you one more time.

He lit another cigarette, forgetting the restrictions, and rang up sale after sale. There was a mastercharge, and he called up for approval. Kronin came, and Frederick handed him the slip. Kronin stared at it (as if that was going to tell him something), then put his initials on the form. Frederick tore off the receipt and gave it to the customer, said thank you for the trillionth time, and proceeded to the next sale, not seeing Kronin, who hadn't left, but was still standing there. He rang it up, and took another drag. The line died down in time for one last puff, and then he stamped the butt out on the floor, bent down to pick it up and toss it in the trash when, coming up, he noticed Kronin standing like a statue there.

-What did I tell you yesterday? Kronin shouted. What did I tell you Wednesday, Tuesday, Monday? What was the very first thing I ever told you in my life???

-Uh, Frederick said, I don't know. What?

-No smoking! Kronin yelled, no smoking at the register! no smoking in the back! no smoking in the goddamn store at all!! Are you deaf? No, I don't think you're deaf. I think you're just too smart! You really think you're smart, too smart for us dumb locals here, am I right? Aren't you too smart? Too smart for our stupid rules, too smart for the stupid boss, too smart for anybody, right? Well, I'll tell you, you listen, mister, around there there ain't

anyone too smart, you got that? We got rules and everybody follows them, no matter who the hell they are, no matter how smart they think they are!

-I'm sorry, Mr. Kronin, Frederick said, I just forgot. I won't do it again, I promise.

-That's what you said yesterday! And Wednesday! And the day before! But this time, you are right, this time you'll keep your promise, because you're fired, Mr. Hardware, as of right now, as of this very moment. I want you out of here right now.

-I want my pay, he said.

-Here, I'll give you your lousy pay! Kronin shouted, and he leaned over and opened Frederick's drawer, pulled out seven twenty dollar bills, and held them out to him. Frederick took them, counted them, and nodded, didn't say a word. He went back to get his jacket, and he didn't look at anyone, just got his stuff and left. He wasn't even angry. He was more relieved. Once outside, he put his jacket on, and walked away. It was still early afternoon, and so he walked around a bit, deciding to see the town before he left for good. It wasn't very interesting. Streets and buildings, cars, a couple bridges spanning a murky stream, some trees on the side of the road losing their yellowed, drying leaves in the chilly autumn breeze. He turned and headed towards the center of the town, to see a church, a city hall, more shops, more cars, and people rushing back and forth, the usual city sights accompanied by the usual city sounds. The sky was grey, but the rain had stopped. After walking for an hour or two, he decided to go back to his hotel room. There, he lay down on the bed, and took a nap. It was dark when he woke up, and the neon sign was on, alternating blue and green and back again. He got up and went over to the table, poured out a cigarette of cognac, and leaned back with his drink, his smoke, and began the ritual thoughts.

Everything had turned out as expected, as it was to be expected. He hadn't known the cards to be wrong yet, and no matter how he played them, they always came out the way they wanted to. There was no way to deny it. You shuffled, and you shuffled, but when you dealt, the hand was not your own, and you were at the mercy of the powers you have conjured up. He knew what Kronin was from the very first, hardly a new type, perhaps the most familiar of them all, and although he couldn't have foreseen the details, still the thing had worked out in the only way it would, and here he was again, with some money in his pocket, and no job. He knew he would leave Wetford, but he didn't know where he'd go. Finishing the cigarette, he picked up the cards, and shuffled them. He hesitated for a moment, and almost put them down again. It isn't funny anymore, he thought, and it isn't any fun, not like it used to be. The game was old, and he was tired of it. He shuffled several times, considering alternatives, but there weren't any, really, at least nothing that was better. He turned the cards over, and sorted through them, picking out the two of clubs and diamonds, and setting them aside. Then he shuffled a few more times, cut the deck and turned the top card over. The nine of clubs. Again.

He gathered up his few belongings, put them in his bag, adjusted his hat, and lit another cigarette. He left the darkened room, slipped quietly down the fire escape,

jumped to the pavement, and walked away. Now, he thought, to get out of this town. I think I'll walk it out. And it felt good to be back out on the road again. He took one last tour along the street where K-Po's was, and as he passed by all the little stores he saw the cashiers in them busily ringing sales, taking people's money, giving change. One right after another, in every little store. And he laughed out loud. It is a cashier's world, he thought. Everybody's giving us their money all the time.

Louis

from this side of the hill you look back and behind you there's a shopping center with a dry cleaner and everything. the name of the restaurant is somebody's name. dotty's? A big rig seems to be circling the gas station. and you are there with louis and his three day growth. you might be hot, but louis is hotter. you might be thirsty but louis is dry. you might be tired but louis is fatigued, worn out, exhausted. everything you are, he is more of. and not only that, but everywhere you've been, he was there, and everywhere you want to go, he can tell you, don't bother, he's been there, it wasn't much.

the white van is parked on the side of the freeway, and you are on the side of the hill with louis, just waiting. someone is bound to come by. nowadays all these people have their portable phones and can't wait to interfere with other people's business. you might have a perfectly good reason for pulling over to the side of the road, nothing wrong, just want to take a leak or something, and they will call it in. before you know it, there's a highway patrol man peering down at you, saying everything all right, son? been expecting that for about a half an hour now. nobody's come.

you start thinking about how you got to be there in the first place. didn't even know this louis guy this morning. they needed a hand, you needed the job, they put you in the passenger seat saying just do whatever he tells you, go around with him, and come back later. right away he started talking. been everywhere. seen everything. knows a lot and what he doesn't know he makes it up. that thing about the red indians not making no noises in the woods? bullshit. that thing about the pilgrims and the mayflower? never happened. you know what they say about the common cold? don't believe it. nobody knows shit about that.

you start out venturing opinions but you give up pretty soon. he's not listening anyway. and even if he was, the sound of his voice is making you so sick of the sound of voices that you even get sick of the sound of your own. he's still jabbering away about something and you're focused on the whooshing of the cars passing by, and the doppler effect that makes the pitch seem to change as they go, and you don't know anything about that, or any of the god damn mysteries of the world, you don't know anything about them either. never even take the time to notice.

say something like that to louis and you're sure he'd have taken the time to notice, once, and that it wasn't worth it. idle minds being the devil's tool shed or something like that. you remember the last time you met somebody new. how it started out like, oh, that's different, and it ended up like, oh, it's not. big rig like a vulture still circling that diesel pump. the restaurant's name is bobby's? your eyesight's going bad. it's got a dry cleaner and a mini mart down there. from the side of the hill to that parking lot is maybe a mile, give or take. you could make it in fifteen, twenty minutes. been sitting there for forty so far. nobody's come to rescue you from louis. but you need the fifty bucks they promised for the day. you're stuck.

louis has got a thing about all them kids in prison nowadays. shouldn't be there. oughta be shipped out of state, make some other new state that's just for all the bad seeds drifting around. stick 'em all together and let 'em kill each other off, who cares? by the time they're fifteen, it's over. forget about it. make one wrong turn in life, that's all it takes. you made some of them yourself. you found your way. fuck this louis guy. he's making you angry now. you want to say something, then you remember, it's just the fifty bucks, and anyway, it's just one day, one stupid lousy hot and sweaty day. you might be getting sick of this guy, but think, if you're sick of him just imagine how sick of himself he's got to be.

from the side of the hill you can see across the freeway to the hills all covered with trees and not a house in sight, as if a person could just wander over there, go into it and never come out and never be seen again. it must have happened. you wonder if there's a special entrance for futures like that, like a trailhead to forever. where you're sitting, there's no trees at all, just dead and dying grasses on the side of the hill, and right over there it's nothing but trees, and right behind you it's a shopping mall with a minimart and everything. candy's?

the water looks so good there at the reservoir, blue and cold beneath the trees. there's fences all around it, people not allowed. at least there's one place left where people aren't allowed. you like that. wish you were there inside that fence. louis has a thing about all those sports utility vehicles. he's against them. he'd never get one, though he used to have one, once. that's how he knows they suck. the song in your head's leftover from the day before, when you were loading bags of something into the back of a truck, the radio blaring, words you couldn't even understand because they're in spanish and now they're stuck in your head all day. didi didi dada yeah.

nothing on the side of the hill but dead and dying grasses and rocks. all sorts of rocks. you could pick one up and use it to quiet louis for good. or you could throw one at a sports utility vehicle. or try to skip it on the surface of the reservoir though it might be hard because it's at least a mile or two away. from this side of the hill you can see a lot and you can hear a lot but you can't do a damn thing as long as you're just sitting there waiting for someone to stop and help. help with what, you don't know. louis said something about oil. maybe there's nothing even wrong. maybe it's just what he does every day.

every day, maybe every day he goes out in the van and pretends to get stuck or have a breakdown and then wait and wait, and then after awhile it's all pre-arranged with some buddy who's got a tow truck comes along and pulls him away then you sit and you wait in the garage while the guy pretends to do some work on the van and then you call in the boss and say what's up and he says damn 'cause it's his truck after all and he gets stuck with the bill and he misses the job and he still has to pay you and louis as well. you laugh and you think, that was a tough fifty bucks, just putting up with that guy all day. you ought to get more for that. you tell it to the boss and he just grunts and asks you what you're doing tomorrow and you say you need the work but please and the boss just nods and says ok, not louis. you smile. you get on the bus, go home. and from the window of the bus passing by you can see that the restaurant's name is

buddy's, and that the minimart is all boarded up, and that the big rig is finally gone, and that the trees are still out there, waiting.

BYEBYE

i was working in the b---- b--- toy store on s----- street. i'd been selling toys for years, so i figured i was pretty much immune to their charms. they were all just stock on the shelf, no more, no less. pull the string and it wets itself. push the button, off it goes. batteries not included. not suitable for all ages. it was for the kids to get excited, for the parents to be relieved at finding something to keep the little ones occupied for an hour or so. i was just a salesman - what i sold was meaningless to me. i'd worked in shoe stores, stationary stores, hardware stores, toy stores, all the same, all the job. so you might say this thing kind of snuck up on me. it was not me, not the me i knew and seemed to tolerate. my motto is always 'leave it be'. people always want to change themselves. i say 'leave yourself alone'. people want to understand their dreams - i say 'leave your dreams alone'. problems tend to work themselves out. all things must pass. just leave it be.

i've been stuck in ruts before, but i always kind of liked them. they were comfortable, easy, enduring. this was different. it bothered me from the start, annoying like a mosquito buzzing around your bedroom every night, in the middle of the night, day after day. you wonder how long a damn mosquito can live. they can live a long time i guess. it started when some lady brought back a telephone her kid didn't like. i just bought it two days ago, she said. i didn't care when she bought it. we sell new stuff, used stuff, consignments, whatever. the main thing is customer loyalty. if we didn't do exactly what they wanted every time, heck, they could just as easily go somewhere else, one of the big chains, some other little neighborhood dive like this one. so of course i took it back, and then it was sitting there, on my counter. it could have ended there, but then mathilda had to come and play with it.

matty is my boss's three year old. cutest little girl in existence, she'd say. who am i to say otherwise. tellyfoam! she cried, and reached up to grab it off the counter. she started pushing buttons and then i heard the voice. 'hello', it said. and then, 'bye bye'.

from the very first time i heard it, that voice got into my head and started digging a home for itself way down inside there. matty played with it for a minute or two, and then dropped it on the floor. when i picked it up i intended to put a new tag on it, and stick it back out on the shelf, but i didn't. i put it down next to the cash drawer, and studied it awhile. there was nothing special about it, a little red phone with numbers that spoke their names, followed by the appropriate quantity of beeps. and the big blue button underneath that made the phone ring sound, followed by the words 'hello'. and then 'bye bye'.

i started listening to it on the sly, when no one was around, listening to it against my will. the thing had a hold on me. i can't tell you why. or how many times i wanted to throw it away, smash it to pieces, hide it in some faraway corner in another city entirely. instead,

i started to wonder about the voice. how could anyone sound so damned friendly? that was the thing, i guess. she seemed so nice. what would it be like to meet someone like that, come home to that voice, greeting you at the door, hello, or going off to work in the morning, bye bye. you see, i didn't have anyone to say those things to me.

when i thought about it, which was becoming almost all the time, i imagined just an ordinary encounter. i would meet her, she would say hello, we'd talk about things, or maybe we wouldn't talk so much. we'd drive along the coast, shouting into the wind. we'd bustle through the streets, running through crosswalks as the lights changed red. we'd sit out on the sidewalk making fun of all the passersby. in the end, we'd go our separate ways with a friendly, warm 'bye bye'. not much to ask. it wouldn't matter who we were, or where we came from, or what we looked like, or how much money we had, or the kind of cars we drove, or the number of letters in our names, or what happened in the second grade, or if our fathers hugged us enough, or what the stock market did that day, or who declared war on who, or the size of our shoes, or the color of our hair, or any of it, any of that ... stuff.it'd just be me and her. that's all.

i kept the thing at work, at least i did that much. i promise you i never took it home, never carried it on the bus, never got up in the middle of the night to listen to her voice. i held myself to certain times and places, and i followed the rules as if they were morality itself. and maybe they were. first thing in the morning, with my coffee. a break at ten past ten. another greeting at eleven. nine times a day, that's all. and nobody knew about it, not my boss, not any of the customers, or even gretchen, my busybody coworker who was always prying into things that were none of her goddamn business. even gretchen didn't know.

but then i got too bold. i was always friendly with a certain sales rep - florita munoz - who sold us most of the new stuff we carried in the store. we always said hello, goodbye, little things like that, chatted about the job, the weather, her kids. she almost caught me at it one morning, at the ten past ten. i was putting it back when she suddenly appeared at the counter. 'my kids love those things' she said. she was always saying how her kids loved or hated things. her kids had no sense of proportion, it seemed. and then she just reached over and started pushing the buttons. it felt really weird. i had the strangest reaction, but all i could say was, and i wish i had never said it, 'don't you like that hello voice?'

she gave me a look. i never said things like that. i was always mister smooth, mister aloof, mister unaffected by anything anywhere anytime. the me that everybody knew and seemed to tolerate. 'what do you mean?'; she asked, and i told her. she seemed so friendly. so nice. the kind of person you would like to meet and talk to.florita laughed and said, 'hey, if you want to, i could tell you who she is'.

i was stupefied. didn't know what to say. it seemed to unbelievable,. but then why not? why shouldn't a person who sells toys know the people who make the toys, and know the people those people use to put the toys together. it's a small world, really. incredibly small sometimes. she knew this lady, she said. and she was a good person, florita promised. very nice, very pretty too. and she lived right here in the city. i was feeling my throat close up as if it was going to choke me of its own accord. i must have been blushing, because florita smiled again and told me that my voice was in some other toys i had right there in the store, did i know that? i didn't. sure, she said, she's in a lot of toys. and she started scouting around the place to see if she could find some.

she shouted 'aha' and brought over a little plastic storybook, the kind of thing with several buttons, each of which tells a different story. she started pushing the buttons but couldn't find the right one. i know it's in here somewhere, she muttered. there was a version of goldilocks and the three bears. my voice wasn't in that one. there was the story of jack and the beanstalk, but she wasn't in there. there was the story of hansel and gretel, and florita thought that was it, and it was. she was in there, all right, the wicked witch with the most horrible evil laugh. florita said, 'isn't she wonderful? she can do anything. i think you should meet her, i really do.', but i was still reeling from the sound of that voice, that terrible chortle. could that really be my voice? my sweet, kind, friendliest voice? turned into the wickedest witch. how could she do that? how could she do that to me?

i never much cared for toys after that, didn't stick around there long. it was too disheartening. i moved on to appliance parts after that. nowadays i'm selling groceries. can't go wrong with that. you'll never find a fruit or vegetable seeming to be something that it's not. they are all just stock on the shelf, no more, no less. it's better that way.

The Other Life

in the old room with the big chairs, christina waited patiently for the question. when it came she answered yes. a long pause followed, filled with the silence of familiarity. at last she said no, not really, no. the man with the glasses and the beard wrote something down in his big blank book. he was writing with an orange felt tip pen. his lettering was large and slow. someone on the other side of the room stood up with an empty coffee cup and looked around for more. there were paintings on the wall, many paintings, their content hidden by the glare off the plexiglass nailed over them. track lights on the ceiling pointed every which way. it was a big old room in a big old house on the corner of heathton and veriah, not far from the old train depot which was now the headquarters of a famous brand name weed whacker combine. the building had ivy

growing all around its stately and pretentious towers. a gold plaque soldered onto a rock out front proclaimed the name of the firm it housed.

christina wore nice slacks and a blouse and her favorite lucky earrings, just like the ones denise had given her the year that albert ran away. at least it'll get me out of the house, she told herself the other day. it'll fill the time. i can do anything i want, she reminded herself, but what do i want to do? she'd heard that after you're dead you could learn to play the piano, if you wanted to. but she was in no hurry for that.

almost out of nowhere, another question, another yes, another pause. this time it was a yes for real. she was asked to elaborate. i was responsible for everything that happened, she began, and immediately realized how it sounded. i mean, i took care of the money, the stock, the ordering, health insurance, payroll, accounts receivable and payable. yes, it was. yes, i did. for many years. eleven, i think it was. eleven and some. yes. yes. yes, i do.

large and slow the orange pen took notes or doodles or some stray markings. a person passing by would not have been able to decipher them. from across the room a young man with the bored look was thinking how they looked; the older man, all fat and hairy, spilling out of the big old chair, the woman, so tense, all sitting up straight, all looking so pro, except for the fussing with the hair and the stammering, but who isn't nervous at a time like that? the whole place smelled like the dust in the dark red carpets and the curtains and the mint green lamp shades on the walls.

i think so, christina said, but told herself that thinking doesn't make it so. who'd told her that? her mother, of course, who else? outside the rain was lightly falling on the old brick sidewalks and the newly paved streets lined with national shops in traditional storefronts. everywhere familiar signs announced the tried and true. nothing remains the same. when denise was a baby they'd walked these streets, on summer evenings, everyone together, happy families passing by. and she'd come back for this? i understand, she said. yes. yes, of course. i would like that very much. Tuesday? certainly. nine o'clock. yes. yes. thank you very much.

in the other life, the people who loved her were always around. the dog she'd played with as a child. her best friend alice from grammar school. her grandma. the nice old lady next door. she only had to cross the street and there they were, as they'd always been, waiting for her. the light was green. the day was warm. her daughter was playing

with friends. her husband had left her only days before. her life was beginning again, and all she needed was time and she knew she could make it better for herself and for denise. but a bus was late, the driver upset, and then she was the person you always hear about at the wrong place at the wrong time. as the driver stood there on the sidewalk moments afterwards, he mumbled something about his family. you never know what to say at a time like that.

and she'd come back. for this. she recognized the playground on the corner and sat there during lunchtime. she liked to hear the children laugh. she found an old familiar neighborhood and moved into a building there. she made a friend, roberta, who'd owned the last remaining coffee shop before it got mysteriously roasted like a bean. they talked about the city as it used to be. they volunteered with seniors. they made certain noises for the children every halloween.

something about the old room with the big chairs made her feel at home. she liked it there. her duties were light and varied; a little rustling here, a slight breeze there, the occasional partial reflection in the plexiglass to keep the young men guessing that maybe they were seeing things, that maybe they'd had too much caffeine. as a job it wasn't much but then she couldn't complain., although she was often tired in the evenings, which didn't seem right. and sometimes during the workday she would look outside the window and think she saw someone, just turning the corner, out of sight, someone who's name she couldn't quite recall. somebody she knew, but hadn't seen in years. someone who looked just like herself. .

Yellow

Jeremy Lawton sat down for a moment - just for a moment, he told himself. He could feel that something was about to break. Or was it he who was about to break something? Which is better, he wondered, to keep the blinders on and go about your business, or look up once in awhile and gaze off into the distance, see just where the hell it is you're going? Maybe just a peek every now and then would do. Because the road was stupid and painfully long. And the people sitting across from him waited while he thought of what to say next. He had already said too much.

One was Guinevere Tisdale, known to her acquaintances as Guinevere. Lawton could tell by studying her implacable face that nothing he could say would ever make a dent. She had her story straight and that was good enough for her. The next was Marshall Wallace; endlessly curious, impossibly dim. He would nod his head if you told him that nodding your head was for idiots. Finally, there was Donna Marbury, bold crusading enemy of the truth. The fact was that nothing could be accomplished with people such as these. And it would have to be accomplished tonight.

He had to leave the room that moment, and so he did. Got up and left, murmuring something about taking ten and headed straight for the door, with silent and brooding fury guiding every step. Keep the damn blinders on, he told himself. It's the only way to get through this. And it was possible, he knew it. Let them be right for a change. Let them have their way. Let them do what they want. The result will be the same, regardless. Put some extra words on a piece of paper. Throw a whole bunch of them on. Say you'll do this and this and this and when you don't do it, just say you didn't think you would.

Outside he noticed some pieces of things in the world. Someone ran over a plastic water bottle. A worn out teddy bear in the culvert. A shiny black bird flew into a tree. He forgot where he was. Across the street was a diner, still open at eleven fifteen at night. Before he even knew it he was sitting at that orange table he'd seen in the window, and was staring down a piece of lemon pie. Better to do it my way, Jeremy said out loud.

Always better that way, said an old woman who was sitting at the counter. This was her regular spot. Every night, come ten, ten twenty, maybe just a little bit later if the

weather was chilly and the walk took a little longer on account of her arthritis. Been coming here for seventeen years, she said, ain't that right, Louise? The waitress, who wasn't named Louise, simply nodded and said, uh-huh. Every day for seventeen years, and all because of that lemon pie, she laughed. You'd better believe it.

Of course seventeen years isn't all that long, she continued, not when you've been around as long as i have. I'm eighty seven if i'm a day, ain't that right, Louise? And the waitress, who had never been named Louise, simply nodded and said, uh-huh. For one thing, the old lady continued, i worked a counter myself, yes i did, for thirty four years, yes indeed, a counter a lot like this one, at the K-Po's down to Wetford, you ever been there, Louise? The waitress, accustomed to being called Louise, shook her head and said, no ma'am, i ain't never been down to Wetford. Not leastwise i remember, that is.

Do something a long time and it sticks(!) to you, the old woman declared, practically shouting out the word 'sticks'. It stays(!) with you. You become what you do. Look at me, stuck to this counter like i was born to be stuck. Every night i have to come. You do it too long, you'll see what i mean, young man, she was talking to Jeremy. He hardly heard her voice. He was considering the lemon pie. Too yellow, that's the problem, he decided. Nothing in nature has ever been this yellow. But it's good, he muttered.

Damn right it's good, the old lady said. Best damn lemon pie you'll ever come across, and believe me, i know what i'm talking about, least when it comes to lemon pie i do. i must've made a million in my day, maybe even a hundred thousand or two. Ain't that right, Louise? But there was no answer from the waitress, who'd gone in the back with some dishes. Sadie out there again? Walter the dish boy wanted to know. Yep, replied the waitress. Same old Sadie. Who's she talking to this time? Walter asked. He wanted to go out and see for himself, but Mister Perkins wouldn't like it. Didn't like him leaving the kitchen, even when there weren't any dishes to wash. Dish boy's place is with the dishes, Mister Perkins would say. Theo, the chef, would snicker while pretending to blow his nose. Oh Dish boy, he'd say after Mister Perkins had gone, oh Dish boy! Walter hated Theo more than anything.

Another one of those serious young men, the waitress who wasn't named Louise replied. Got himself all worked into a state. Thinks that piece of pie is gonna solve all his problems, if only he can figure it out. If he can come to understand(!) that piece of pie. What i don't understand, Walter said, is how somebody can eat that yellow slimy thing. The waitress shrugged and said, mm-hmm.

Sadie was rattling the spoon around in her water glass. Always order water, she said, it's cheaper than shit! And she cackled so loud that even Jeremy had to notice. He looked over and really saw her for the first time. I know what you're thinking, Sadie said, old as the hills and just as boring. I can't say you're wrong. First time i saw this face i knew i was in for a long one. No one's gonna want the likes of you, i said to myself, so you'd better get used to it. Did it my way, at least. Better that way. Always is.

Do you really think so? Jeremy asked her.

Why not? she replied. Better than keeping the blinders on, do what you're told, whatever they say. Do you even give a shit where you are, where you're going?

Maybe, maybe not, he said. Right now i just don't know.

Do it long enough, she said, it'll stick. Don't say i didn't tell you.

That was enough. Jeremy set aside the lemon pie, put a few bucks on the table, and left. He was gone by the time the waitress returned.

Where'd the thinker go? she asked Sadie.

Gone off to fix his problem, the old woman replied.

Think he will?

Who gives a shit, Sadie said. Guy like that, who really gives a shit. Wouldn't know a good thing if he saw it.

You want that pie? Of course you do, the waitress said, and she went and fetched it for her.

You look at that, Sadie said, with her mouth half full of pie, just look at it. I haven't seen anything so beautiful since the sun came up this morning.

JULIO AND THE BABES

I don't want to take a lot of credit for myself, because when you get right down to it I didn't really do a thing, least of all the things that everybody said I did. It wasn't me. I don't remember doing those things, and even though they've got these witnesses and people who said I did it, I don't know what to think, 'cause in my mind I know I didn't do a thing. I don't think I'm even capable of doing anything like that. I mean I don't have that capacity. I don't think I deserve to take any credit at all in fact. It wasn't me, or even if it was, I don't remember it. A lot of people, they will take the credit for the thing even though they didn't do it or at least they don't remember it, but I am not like them because I just don't think it's fair or true or even very honest. If you don't remember doing a thing, you shouldn't say you do, even if it means you get your picture in the paper and get to be on TV too. I don't think I even belong here on this Morning Magazine. I didn't do a thing. Or, like I said, even if I did I don't remember doing it so I don't deserve the credit.

I don't remember much at all what happened Friday night. It was very dark as I recall, and cloudy too - it looked like rain. It did rain later on, they say, but I don't remember it raining so I can't really say exactly if it rained or not. It might have very well because it looked like rain and there is no reason I can think of why the other people there would make up such a thing. So I guess that I believed it rained, and maybe if it rained I really did those things, because I don't remember either one so if it did rain, well then you know. I was on the interstate. I remember that all right. There were a lot of cars out there. The traffic was pretty heavy too. I remember wondering where everyone else was going. I knew where I was going, of course, it would be stupid just to be out there and not know where you're going, though if you're lost than I can understand the thing 'cause I've been lost a time or two myself and it's really hell to be out on the interstate if you don't know where you're going. So I wondered maybe all these people here are lost, but that didn't make much sense, so I figured they all had somewhere they were going, and then I wondered maybe they're all going to the same place, and maybe I'm the only one out here who isn't going there, so I wondered where it was and what was happening there. Maybe there was a Julio Iglesias show I didn't know about. I would've been mad if there was and all these people knew it and were going there when I did not and could have if they'd only said something to me. That's another funny thing, if you ever stop to think about it, that is when you're on the interstate there is no way to chat and ask these people where they are all going to because we're all of us going much too fast for words.

Well it bothered me a bit, you know, like when you feel left out and everybody else is in on something special and you're not, so I remember thinking about that a lot. I also wished my stereo was fixed because I could've been listening to my Julio tapes at least, even if I didn't know about the show and was going to miss it anyway because I already had other plans so even if I asked and someone out there told me I could not have made it anyway, which was a same, 'cause I was going to my cousin's house and I do not like my cousin very much, especially not his dog that barks and growls at me. I would've rathered I was going to see Julio instead, but there I was committed to the cousin and I didn't even have my tapedeck working so my Julio tapes just sat there in the glove compartment waiting to be played. I sang along instead and figured maybe if I sang loud enough and someone driving by would hear and say hey aren't you going to the Julio concert too and I could ask them where it was and later on I'd call and make some dumb excuse to say why I couldn't make it to my cousin's house that night.

In any case I sang out loud and it was very dark and cloudy like I said. I was going around sixty five and getting passed on both sides but I didn't mind too much because I think that breaking the law by ten percent or so is fine but never more. Sometimes I used to think about how you could break the law by ten percent in other ways, but I couldn't think of many. You can't just rob a bank by ten percent, or kill someone in tenths. So anyway that's nothing just a thought and I was going around this bend and then I saw these lights were flashing up ahead and there was smoke and flames and it was smelling very bad. This wasn't even Orono County where it always smells like that. So that is just about the last thing I remember. Oh, the Julio song was Love Me Always though I don't know if that is the real title but those words are in the chorus so I always called it that no matter what the real title was. I think there was this guy ahead of me in a beat up red convertible, but I cannot be too sure. In any case, oh, I remember one more thing, that was this guy was going maybe fifty five or so and I remember that because I watched a whole bunch of people swerving around him for a mile or so as I caught up with him. It almost seemed like there was this movable black hole or something all these people swung around to miss, and I remember thinking, in the middle of the chorus, about how weird it looked to see all sorts of cars all doing the same maneuver at the same place in the road.

But anyway there was this smoke and flames, and this was right when I caught up to that beat old red convertible I was mentioning just now. And this smoke and flames was on the shoulder of the road, and I was in the second lane away from there. So that is what I also told the cops, and I don't think it's fair this guy who owned that red convertible got blamed because I'm sure the smoke and flames were there before he even got up to that point. I know that for a fact. At least I think I do. Anyway, it's like I said, I don't remember much that happened after that. I must have pulled over somewhere 'cause my car was later found there on the shoulder about a hundred feet beyond the smoke and flaming place. I think the red convertible went on, but at this point I really can't be sure because it's like I said, I don't remember anything that

happened next. It's really not like me, you know. Usually I have an excellent memory, and I could tell you things that happened long ago I still remember in their details down to every little thing.

But about that night I don't remember anything at all. In any case, I really have a hard time in believing that I did the things they said I did because I've never done any things like that before and certainly not since although it hasn't been very long and I've had no opportunity to do them since. Still, it's not like me to pull a bunch of babies from a burning car. I never would have thought that of myself. And I still have a difficult time believing it's the case. And as far as tearing the car door off, well, that really seems like someone else, not me. Maybe there was someone else who did all that and left me at the scene to take the credit. Yeah, that must be it. I'll bet it was some wanted criminal who's been hiding from the law and didn't want to get involved so he just took off and left me with the credit. Or else somebody else like Superman who goes around and does good deeds and is tired of being the hero all the time. And I could understand that if it was.

Nowadays you do a thing like that, you don't know what you're in for. First it's all the photos and the interviews. Then you go on Morning Magazines like this and everybody knows your face and name. Then you have to go to some parade right on your own street where you live and all the neighbors who would never say hello to you before now think you're just incredible and they knew you had it in you all along. After that, who know, it may be national magazines and even the evening news. It really isn't worth it and so I understand why Superman took off after pulling out those burning babies from the car. I mean he couldn't just let them burn. It is his job. But I am not a man like that, and I have never rescued anyone and never even imagined that I would. It never crossed my mind, to tell the truth. It's just not like me. Not at all. I am the kind of guy who drives on by. If someone was in trouble I would just keep going because I don't like trouble and I don't want to get into it.

You see why I am having such a hard time believing that I did those things? After thirty seven years you think you probably know yourself a bit, and I know what I am and it isn't what they say. I just want everyone to know that, so I would like to take this opportunity to tell my neighbors, no parade, please, thank you, and to tell Dan Rather that I do not want to be on his show either. I would like to get back in my car but first I want the tapedeck fixed, and then I'll look into this Julio concert, and I'll get back on the interstate and go, and all the way I'll get to listen to the man himself, instead of just pretending that my voice is really his. That would make me very happy. So if anyone out there knows when his next show's gonna be, please call me care of Morning Magazine and they will let me know. I guess that's all, so thank you very much. Goodbye.

THE ANIMALS ARE RUNNING WILD

I would not say the animals were running wild. In the first place, you have to say if in fact the animals are wild or not. What, you may ask, makes an animal a wild animal and not another kind of beast entirely? This is a good question, and I have given it a lot of thought. In my profession it's a good idea to draw distinctions since a lot depends, or may depend upon the particular distinction that you draw. Most people think a wild animal is something that goes through their food in national parks, or else a big thing you can only see on nature shows on television. There used to be a lot more of them. Everybody knows that. But most people do not have a lot to do with them these days, at least not in this country as we know it now. Cowboys had to deal with wild animals. Modern city people don't.

What other distinctions can we draw? Well, you might say that a wild animal is an animal that is not tame. That is another important point to make, but I would not counsel anyone to act upon this sole distinction by itself. Tame animals can, and have been known to turn into wild ones at the drop of a hat, or some other kind of stimulus. I have personally known a lot of dogs, for instance, who will actually turn on someone they don't recognize and bite them on the leg or on the arm or on some other part of the body. In fact, this is not so very uncommon as the average citizen might think.

Come to think of it, you could build a case for the distinction that a wild animal could be any animal that is not behaving itself the way that we would like it to at any particular moment. Thus, one could infer that often people like ourselves could likewise be categorized as wild animals. In that case, we would notice first of all that there are plenty of such creatures all around us, even in the cities where we live today. Thus, we would have to throw away our earlier distinction which decided there are fewer such wild animals than there used to be. As you can see for yourself from these examples, the distinctions that you draw can play a role in your conception of the situation facing you at hand.

What then should we do about the wild animals in our midst? Now, considering that this is my profession, one would think that I would have some answers to this question. And, naturally, I do. In the first place, when I am called upon to deal with matters of some animal running wild, I will always, before I do another thing, attempt to simulate all the facts. It is extremely important to have your basic facts at hand before you even begin considering what distinctions you will draw. I would rather not even deal with such a

case if the facts were not available. Without the facts, you have no basis to proceed upon, and might as well forget it. Your distinctions will be, in that case, mere guesswork, which is not at all conducive to the dealing with animals running wild. One should always know exactly where one is, at any given time. This is most important.

I will show you by example, and for example I will take this case that you have heard about on your TV of late. This was a case where I was called into the scene in order to do what I do best. Deal with an animal running wild. The facts were these. A timber wolf had somehow broken free of its establishment at the city zoo. It was somewhere in the streets. No one had yet sighted it. Twenty-four hours had gone by. It could be anywhere by now. The wolf itself was prone to misconceptions. That is, people do not understand a wolf, not even now when there have been a lot of books explaining carefully the facts about that animal. People still think that wolves are mean and not very nice at all. This is unfair to the wolf, who would gladly be your friend if you just left him alone.

Now as you recall the press was running wild, as the news is wont to do. They were clamoring for solutions, and already had whipped up a panic in the public, which is naturally what they do best, being their primary function. Babies were being kept indoors, which was a shame, since it was a lovely summer day, and babies do enjoy the sun like other people do. Aside from babies, women and children were also staying in their houses, stores and cars, while the men were carefully tiptoeing to their bus stop, as if they knew what they would do if the wolf climbed on the bus behind them. Things are all too often like this case. People react to situations in the same way, and that is regardless of exactly what the situation is. I am sure that if there was a war in outer space, the woman and children would be locked inside where they were most vulnerable, and the men would be outside doing nothing and helping not at all, because that is the way things are to be.

In any case, I was getting sidetracked there, and it wasn't what I meant to say. Only that it did no good to have this panic in the streets or in the homes, so the first thing which I did was reassure the press that this particular timber wolf was not a public danger. They did not believe me, but they printed what I said, and even filmed me saying it on the local TV news. That did not help at all, but one must do what one can. At least that is my firm belief, and something I will always do regardless of the case at hand. Okay. Next of all I found my trusty map, and looked for all the places where the woods are near the zoo. There are no woods at all near there. And so I knew the wolf would go to where there were. It turns out there is only one woods in the metropolitan vicinity. It is not a large woods, but at least it is a woods.

It was a hunch, and, I admit, it was not a very good one. I took my team out to those woods and we looked everywhere a timber wolf might reasonably be expected to be hiding. I neglected to consider that the wolf itself was at a disadvantage in that it did not have a map, and therefore would have no idea as to where these woods might be. Realizing this fact, I began to feel sorry for the wolf, which especially likes the woods, and was now not in them like it would much prefer to be. Where was this wolf, in fact? We all now know exactly where it was, and my finding her and bringing her back to safety all depended on the particular distinctions which I drew. And that is why I emphasize this point so much, because it's so important.

Naturally, when you are looking for an animal running wild, you have to make assumptions, which are based upon the facts and the distinctions which are drawn from these. My assumption was the wolf was probably hungry during the day sometimes, and sleepy during the night. Thus we split up our activities into two quite different spheres of action. During the daylight hours we searched the places where the wolf might smell some food. At night we looked around for a cozy place to sleep. But as you know our city is quite large and this could take us months or years. So I did a little more research, feeling as I did that the facts at hand were not enough, and the situation called for more. I talked to several experts, all of whom agreed the wolf was rather foolish to have left its cozy woody home to wander in the streets.

I think most people never give the animal the kind of credit it deserves. If a child was lost, well, it would ask for help, and someone nice would take it home, or at least they'd call the parents and so on. The wolf has no such luck. It cannot speak our language, and it doesn't know about the telephone. But the wolf has other great advantages which a human child does not. For example, the wolf has better smell and better hearing and better sight for certain things than we do. The timber wolf had been given a home that suited its senses perfectly. And can thank the city zoo for that. So when the wolf became confused by all the foreign, and to it unseemly sights and smells and sounds, it naturally reattuned its nose and ears and eyes for things that were more comforting and familiar.

The creature which is lost, whether by its own fault or by accident, wants nothing so badly as to go back home. This was my assumption, and so we went back to the zoo and waited for the wolf to come back home. The wolf did not return. It was time to find more facts. Finally it dawned on me that the next alternative was to set out bait to trap the wolf. My "sense" hypothesis came in handy one more time. We put out things we knew the wolf would be attracted to, and we waited for it to come. The wolf, unfortunately, was nowhere near those places where we put the bait. Unwilling to abandon my theory, I took it one step further. We would work on the wolf indirectly, by using its own language.

There we were, my team and I, out in the streets at night, doing our best to howl just like a wolf. One may well wonder which of us was actually running wild. And yet my imitation must not have been so bad, because the wolf came out to meet me down near City Hall, where it had apparently been feasting on the mayor's favorite tulips. Well, all is well that ends well, I suppose, and this is one case that has certainly ended well. And that is all there is to say about the case. One acquires the facts, draws distinctions, makes assumptions, and asks. Most of all, one gets lucky, or does not. I tend to think the wolf came out of hiding just to see what kind of creature could be making such a horrible noise. Wolves are curious creatures, but, so is everybody else.

AJAX

You have probably heard some things about me that certainly are not true, and I don't know how those rumors started anyway, but now it's time to set the record straight. Now it is MY turn. I paid for this story, it's mine, and I am going to tell you everything I know because most stories never tell you anything, least of all the thing that's most important and is why you bought it anyway. That will not be true of this important document. I can tell you that, at least.

First of all I have to say that no matter what you heard it wasn't true and no one knows the real truth about myself except for me, so you can just forget about the story that you saw last week on Morning Magazine at five. That lady never told me what was really going on and I never would have said those things under such pretenses I only tried to get the message through that there was nothing wrong with me, and that it wasn't my fault at all. In fact, I didn't know anything about the accident until a whole month after it had happened. I was just set up, set up from the start, and that's the truth.

Now I know you heard the doctor say that I have lost all sense of my proportion, and I will stand by that as long as the case is pending in court, because it could be useful to me in the way of getting that big settlement my lawyer made me go for which I didn't really want to but he said come on, you are entitled to it, Ajax! The name is real and I didn't just make it up so you can tell your friends I said so to your face which is just about the only decent way to say a thing in any case.

I have always held to the principle that if you have something you want to say you ought to go ahead and say it, but not behind the backs of anyone involved, but right there to their face just like a man of dignity would assuming it was him who had the thing to say. This is what my uncle used to tell me when I saw him in the gallery at the trial the other day. And I think it is a good thing too and one to bear in mind. If you can't be anything in this world, then you might as well be decent.

There is more way than one of being what is called respectable. Some people buy their way to decency but there is more to it than that, which is a good thing too in case you don't have any money like I don't right now but will if everything goes right and the lawsuit settlement comes out in my favor like it should. The lawyer said there's no way

we can lose, especially since I had my name dragged through the mud like that, the way it's being dragged even now on Morning Magazine last week.

You get up and you turn on your TV and you expect to be informed about whatever it is that's going on out there, and instead you see a picture of yourself behind the shoulder of a frozen blond who's staring at you saying you're a fink with no remorse and not an inkling of proportion to your name! Well, you would be indignant like I am and set about like I am setting the record straight for you right to your face. But this thing is the words are at your face though I am not and that is almost just as good like when they quote the president in the Times and it's like you're hearing what he said out loud because you know his voice and there's his words and it's really almost just as good or bad depending if you like the guy or not which I do not because I think it's only words and nothing there behind it. Mr. Photo Opportunity, like they say.

Only I don't want to see my photo up there in the right hand corner of your screen while this chalk face is blabbing all about you and she doesn't know her bosom from her cue card anyway, you know? I don't know if you regularly watch this show, but that lady cannot even talk and she's always staring down her bra as if that's gonna help her get the words to come out right. And then she always smirks as if it's cute that even though she is a total idiot they're paying her a thousand bucks a week to show her face up in your home. Well, it is a god damned thing at that, so maybe she is right to smirk and even make a joke or two, but not at my expense.

They interviewed the doctor, which my lawyer says could jeopardize my defense since the doctor said out loud there on TV that he thought although it's true I seem to have no sense of proportion whatsoever, he didn't think that anyone could be legally faulted with my having lost it. This is certainly not true and I know exactly who the one is who's to blame and that's the guy who set me up right from the start, and that's why I am suing him for false arrest, humiliation, and damages to cover the loss of that very special sense I used to have but clinically do not these days, as the doctor also said.

Of course there is no legal president for this but that's what presidents are for, for things there are no first time for till then and then there are. It's obvious. So that is not an argument, like my lawyer says, and he is right this once. Everything began somewhere and if not there then somewhere else, so what's the big deal anyway? They want a legal president, they got my vote. If only there was one!

The president we got right now is all just talk and I don't know but I was told that it was legal just to talk, but you ought to do some more if you're the president, and that is my opinion. I got a right to one, even if it's not a legal opinion, which I don't know what that is but something my lawyer told me once or twice some time ago. He is a pretty good lawyer, I think, although we haven't won my case, but that is not his fault considering it hasn't yet come up.

He also told me I should hold my peace and not go broadcasting what I think of all of this, but I say I am not the one who's broadcasting, it's that Morning Magazine, and anyway since I'm supposed to have no sense of my proportions I should blow it up all out of them in any case and that will prove my case and make it stronger, don't you think? You see, I'm just as smart as any lawyer or as any big face TV personality either. They really are just talking heads just like they say, you know? It's all you ever see. Maybe she isn't looking at her bosom all the time. Maybe there is nothing there beneath those pointy shoulder blades. I never thought of that!

It's funny sometimes how the thoughts just pop into your head and then you wonder where they come from, but since there's no way you can ever know you just forget about it all until the next time one pops in and then you think, oh yeah, I thought about that before! Not that it is going to help you anyway, since you can't put tracers on the things, not even radar guns, and I tell you that those things are rigged, and anyway, you're only supposed to be arrested if you go too fast and this guy nailed me for doing only fifty in a fifty five mile per hour zone.

He said that that's what caused the accident, but I know it isn't true, because the accident happened one place where I passed a while before and when it did I wasn't there but I was further up the road, only there is no way I can prove it except my word which they wouldn't take for what it's worth, and that was part and parcel of the whole humiliation thing which I am suing for. I didn't see no accident, I didn't even know there was one till a long time later when they picked me up and hauled me off to jail. He thought he could get away with it, just because he is the mayor's niece's nephew and a cop as well to boot, but it isn't going to wash, oh no, it isn't going to stick, and I will not go down in history as the man who went too slow, like that bonehead lady called me on the Morning Magazine. It may be cutesy filler on her show but it is my life and I am going to sue her too, but not until I win the first case so that I have grounds to go on.

I wasn't even on those grounds he said I was, and here he is pretending it's my fault when now we all know he was drunk and speeding while on duty and he rammed into that truck and doesn't want to go to jail or have his reputation smirched, so he is trying

to have it done to me, and saying it's because I went too slow and he had to veer around when no one ever said he had to veer around or anything like that. It was entirely his fault but is he on the Morning Magazine? Oh no, he is a cop, and the mayor's niece's nephew too, no publicity for him, oh no. Picking on a little guy he never even met, and with this idiotic story too. By god, I will not let him get away with it, I won't. I am going to take this thing to court and make him fry his eggs before they hatch, just wait and see!

So that is all I have to say about the thing. It isn't true, it wasn't me, and it never was or will be. You have heard it from the source, right to your face, and don't you think I am just serving myself because I am a decent sort and if I didn't have a thing worth saying then I wouldn't say a thing. Don't you let them put your picture on T V, that is my best advice, because you have to sue them all, and this can take a while, and meantime there is all the people laughing at you and saying hey aren't you the guy who went too slow, and it really gets my goat.

Well, I may have lost all sense of my proportions, and that was due to all the unpleasant events which I have been relating, but I can tell you this, that there is no one in the world without proportions, even if he hasn't got a clue to what they are, so there!

OH ROSIE

My sister Rosie should've made the news. It's not her fault she didn't. It's just the minicam took off too soon, is all. They came around last Friday night, looking for a story, and she could've given them one if only they had stuck around a little bit, but they were in a hurry, flinging their camera-mikes around, snooping into this and that and always missing Rosie, who hadn't made it to the scene in time. But it was not her fault. She was on her way as soon as Ricky told her they were there and you think they would've stuck around 'cause everybody told them, wait, you gotta talk to Rosie, she will give you a story, stick around, but no, they hopped into their van and drove away too soon as if they had another story somewhere else to find but you and I both know that they had nothing up their sleeve but just were driving here and there to see if they could dig up something for the human interest feature on the evening news.

They have one every night, and it's almost like a policy that they gotta dig one up or else the news is not complete. We've been waiting till they came around, even called them up a bunch of times to tell them Rosie's got one for you, but they never came until last Friday night and then it was by accident, I mean, they came to film the accident that happened on the street around the corner where there's always something going wrong like people getting hit by cars or else the telephones go out or the water pipes collapse and stuff like that, it's always on that street around the corner and they are always on the news whereas it is pretty rare for us, in fact it was the first time in a couple years we even had a chance. Last time Rosie almost made the news, but then it hadn't happened yet so there really was no story then but now there is and even though we called them up and told them that we've got a human interest story here they didn't come and when they did they left too soon as if they didn't know. They probably didn't, it's just the accident which wasn't very interesting, you know, no glass all over everywhere, no severed heads, no blood, just a little fender dent and paint scratched off the side, so they drove around the block and ended up right here where everybody started yelling and calling for Rosie come on quick they're here, but then they just took off as if they didn't hear a thing, and maybe they did not because they had those headphones on and anyway they were driving pretty fast.

Well, it would've been a great big deal for them and Rosie too if only they had stuck around and put her on TV. There is really nothing like it happened here since the last time they showed up about two years ago and then it wasn't much, in fact, they didn't use the footage that they shot, unless we missed it all which isn't very likely since there's always someone on the block who tunes in to the human interest feature every night. We love it in this neighborhood. It's just about our favorite thing, and everyone is talking

all the time about how Rosie should be on the news what with that story she has got, and that's when someone calls them up and tells them but they never come. We had a fire last year a couple houses down but no one came except the firemen who put it out. I think that was because there was a war that day or something else with better footage coming in.

But there always is a fire or else a war and it really isn't human interest unless there is some angle, and when it comes to angles, Rosie's got the best, and I don't say that just because she is my sister but because it's true. It really is some story. You see what happened is, but then you got to know about my sister Rosie else it doesn't make much sense. Rosie is, well, how can I begin to tell you what she's like, I mean, I know her pretty well since after all she is my sister and I have known her all my life, though not all of her life because she is a couple years older than I am, but I think I know her well enough, and that is why I say it's true, this story that she's got, and everyone agrees so you know it isn't just because I'm biased or partial just since she's my sister and we live in the same house with my parents and the dogs. It really is a story, that's for sure.

What I like best is how they give a whole two minutes to the human interest stories on the news, which is twice as much as they give to the president's ass cancer, and almost just as much as the weather halfway round the world. I think that's pretty good of them, and it is important too, because the world is made of people, except for what is grass and water and other animals and stuff like that, but people's what we are and what we want to know about, and I always watch the feature on the news, and even when I don't there's someone else who does and they can tell me all about it later on that day or else the next, it doesn't really matter, because it's timeless stories, just like Rosie's is. Oh yeah, Rosie, well, she's something else, I can tell you that, at least.

She used to be a manicure, but now she works in beauty. What she did was put somebody's hair on wrong, but that is not the story, that is something else, but she's always doing things like that and that is what you need to know about her to appreciate this thing I'm going to tell you which shoulda been on the news last night and mighta been except the minicam took off before she had a chance. Once she lost her earring in somebody's fingernail, imagine that! Mama says that Rosie is a born trendsetter, even though she hasn't set one yet, it's still a matter of time and when the minicams stay put. They're always dashing here and there as if there weren't tons of stories right in my backyard.

I got a story too, and someday I will also be a feature on the news. I know that in my heart. But Rosie, she is older, so it's her turn first, I guess. I've seen a lot of things that

should be on the news, but I am only seventeen and they won't listen to a kid like me. Rosie, though, she's older, and she is a girl, and they like the girls on TV best of all. If you're a guy the only way you get to be a human interest is to save somebody's life, or else if you go out and kill someone. I knew a guy who did both at the same time so he didn't get on the news because they canceled each other out, like in hockey when they tie. But girls get on because of anything they do, it doesn't matter what. At least that's how it seems to me.

Well, Rosie, she's a card, she's always doing something and that is why she will be on the news one day, if not because of this than something else, because there's always something going on with her. One time she got locked into her car and they couldn't get her out until somebody came and smashed the window in. That was pretty funny, everybody said so, even though they made her mad and wouldn't talk all night. But what really cracked me up was when she climbed up on the roof to get her tan but then she fell and broke her arm instead. I mean, I got a sister! But anyway, this is what it is. About two years ago she met this guy, and she didn't know who he was or what, but she really went a little crazy over him, and then it turned out who he really was, and that's the story, basically. And if you watch the news you know exactly what I mean. This guy was one of those guys that's always on the news, and that was pretty big for us because we never met a one before, so he was pretty special.

Of course, if I just tell you who he was, well, that would spoil the story, and I didn't tell you really what this thing was all about, but now I think of it I'd better not or else I'll ruin your surprise when you see it on the news, and maybe it will be tomorrow night, 'cause I am going to call them up right now and tell them that they better send that minicam back out, especially if they want to find out where this guy's been hiding all this time, 'cause we know and we aren't gonna tell until my sister Rosie's on the news, and I don't care how many guys he killed, or how many he did not (because he's almost innocent, we know, because he told us), still it's up to them and they'll have to send that minicam back out, or else, or else, well, that's too bad for them. We don't care about the twenty grand reward. We just want on the news. It's bad to be a snitch, but it's good to be a feature.

Cornelius deSnoo

So this is how Cornelius deSnoo found his name on the job application of a man he never knew. The story has nothing to do with Cornelius DeSnoo, who was listed as a reference. His address was given as 1732 Forkload Rd., Havisham, Wyoming. His occupation was listed as "electrician". He was supposed to have been known to the applicant for seven years. There were two other references given on the form. Neither of the others knew the applicant either. But this was not so strange. If Cornelius Desnoo was unknown to the man, why should one expect the other two to have any connection with the job seeker in question? One should not.

The applicant gave his name as Michael Peter Bedford. This was not his real name. He did not live at the home address he gave himself, which was 459 4th St., San Francisco. The only inhabitant of that address turned out to be a tuna fish cannery's label art design firm. Sea Bright tuna. The phone number listed on the form was actually the number of the Ingleside branch of the Fourth Fidelity Bank. This in itself was odd, since the bank is not licensed to operate in the state of California. Further investigation of this matter was deferred, as it didn't relate to the assignment at hand.

The social security number given by the applicant belonged to a Freddy Gensler, a person of six years of age, who did not exist. This had come about due to the tax reform law of 1986, which required all minors to have a social security number or they could not be declared as dependents on their alleged parents' tax returns. Many such non-children have been turned up in the ensuing years, and it may be noted that the main repercussion of the afore-mentioned law was the exhaustion of the supply of nine digit social security numbers, resulting in their expansion to eleven numbers.

The "job history" of Mr. Bedford was similarly deceptive. It was ascertained by this office that he did not, in fact, work as a "deodorizer" for the Bed Breth Company in Charlotte, North Carolina. No such company was found to exist, and so it was concluded that Mr. Bedford did not, in fact, leave that job in order to "visit Europe", as he claimed. Nor did he work for seven months as a bed sweeper for the Harlem Hilton, in New York City. For that reason we have decided that he was not fired from that place of employment for "letting the bed bugs bite", as he asserted. There are, in fact, no bed bugs in the Harlem Hilton, for the simple reason that there are no beds, nor any Hilton either. As for the previous job listed, it is possible that Mr. Bedford might have worked as a "sidewalk hoser" at the MacDonald's restaurant located at Twenty Fourth and Mission Streets, in

San Francisco. Records of hosers at that establishment for the years in question were lost in an accidental flood in June of 1988.

This brings us back to the question of Cornelius DeSnoo, of Havisham, Wyoming. Mr. DeSnoo was located after an exhaustive search, and, indeed, turned out to be living around the corner from our San Francisco office. Throughout extensive and intensive interrogation, Mr. DeSnoo held firmly to his story that he never knew a William Peter Bedford, nor anyone matching his description. This was deemed peculiar, since there was no description of Mr. Bedford, the application having been received, unsolicited, in the mail. Nevertheless, declared Mr. DeSnoo repeatedly, I have never met the man. Since there was no reason to believe him, he was held for six days in the basement of our Daly City branch, where he continued to fail to cooperate.

In the light of the evidence thus presented, we can now state our conclusions conclusively. The aforementioned application was, in fact, written by Mr. Alfred Albert Richardson, of 1224 Ortega St., San Francisco. It was written as "a lark", "just for the hell of it", and "because I felt like it". We recommend that your company forward our bill to this Mr. Richardson, who can well afford to pay for it, and who, if he does not, is considered to be a prime target for an easy small claims lawsuit.

Jason Hemmings
President
Resume Investigations, Inc.

2849995786.....	03/12/94
parts.....	2354.96
labor.....	16948.59
tax.....	38.12
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total U.S.\$	19341.57
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minimum payment due.....	\$19341.57

WHEN THE SPIRIT MOVES

It isn't a matter of just wanting to and then going out and doing the thing. First the spirit's gotta move. I think it's just like any other thing in life - a gift. Life is a precious gift for those who have it and for those who wish they did. And if you have an extra special talent, that too is a gift from God, and if you have a gift like this you have no choice. The spirit moves, and then you gotta go. Some people have a nose for business, they make money left and right. Other people gotta nose for many other things besides. I never had a head for figures or for anything like that, but I say money isn't all there is, there's other things in life as well as that. That's by way of saying that I never did it for the money or for any other reason other than the spirit moved and then I had to go.

You can take your lawyer - you could build a case from that. Your basic lawyer has a nose for arguing and twisting words around so they mean one thing to a person and another to the next. Well maybe you could say it's all the education and the money that it takes to get to go to law school so that you can be one, that's by way of saying that your basic everyday person could become a lawyer if they had the education and the money that it takes, and I have heard this argument before, but I say no, it takes a special gift, a gift from God, to do that kind of thing. Now you wonder now and then about the kinds of gifts that God goes giving out, but it isn't ours to judge a thing like that because He's God and he knows what He's doing, even if we don't.

It's the same thing with the other skills, like doctoring and baking bread, it takes a gift from God, so they have theirs and I have mine and I have never wanted for a moment to exchange the one I got for any other one. My gift, the one I got, it's good enough for me, and anyway I'm not the one to judge and neither is there anyone who could. The spirit moves in every kind of way. Sometimes it's this way, sometimes that, and either way you never know beforehand just which way it's gonna jump. You have to watch out for the spirit. It's a pretty tricky thing.

Some people'd say I have an extra sense, a special sense that lets me do the things I do, but I say it is not the case, or yes it is but now quite how they mean it when they say a thing like that. I think my special sense is knowing how to let the spirit move and just being there to follow where it goes. A lot of people, you can see them walking all around, their spirit's inside kicking, bumping, jumping up and down inside their skins, and they can't even feel it, even though I do and anyone who could see it going on

in them. I think that's kind of sad 'cause everybody has a spirit moving in their bodies, and there aren't that many who can feel it or who even know it's there.

You want to help these people, point it out to them, but it's no use, I know, I've tried. They look at you like you are nuts or something strange like that. Most people have no special sense of knowing what is going on like that. I've read a lot of stuff about the supernatural or whatever they like to call it 'cause they change the names they use for that stuff all the time, and I think there is a grain of truth in what they have to say. Now I don't know a thing about the hora, but I wouldn't doubt it's there. I don't have a special sense for that but I believe the people who say they do. Why not? It is a gift from God, and there are all kinds of gifts, enough to go around, at least.

I've also read the things about the people who have a sense like mine, or kind of like it, anyway, but I don't think they put it into words the way I would. It isn't like a light goes on inside my head or anything like that. And I don't start having visions or seeing things at all. It's more like I just know a thing, it pops into my head, there's no way I could know it but I do and usually it's right. I never say "I'm right", because I know it isn't me, it's just the gift inside. And other times some people tell me that I ought to use my gift to help society more often, like the psychics I have read about who are always out there finding bodies in the mud and stuff like that. Frankly I am glad my talent doesn't tend that way, because it wouldn't be very pleasant to have these bodies popping up inside your head and knowing where they are and all. In fact I think it would be most unpleasant, and I wouldn't like to have that happen to me at all.

In any case the matter of helping out society isn't something I can help. Once or twice, like now, by accident it happens but it isn't because I wanted it to or made it happen by myself. You never know which way the spirit's gonna move, and even if you did there is no way you could control it if you wanted to at that. But I don't let this bother me because I never thought about it all that much, and I'm not sure about the issue anyway. I mean I don't know what 'helping society' really means. Is finding someone's body such a help? And other things the psychics do don't seem like such a help to me. I say we will find out about the future soon enough, and really I don't want to know beforehand 'cause it spoils the surprise. I don't see the point of even having a future if you're gonna know about it way before. You might as well just cancel it.

But even if I wanted to I couldn't do that kind of thing because it's not the gift I got from God. My gift is nothing great like that. Not that I'm complaining 'cause I'm satisfied with what I got, and anyway it makes no sense to gripe because He knows what He is doing and it must be for the best because He's God. That's only common sense. But anyway

the spirit moves, like I was saying, and then suddenly I know a thing, it's right inside my head where really it has no business even being there at all. It can be quite embarrassing because it is like peeping into someone's brain and that isn't very polite. If people do not want someone to know what they are thinking, then it's rude to know. But then I do not tell them that I know and then it's not so bad because they're not embarrassed only I am but that's just the gift and I cannot complain. I turn all red in the face sometimes, but nobody knows why. Not even my husband. Oh he knows I have the gift all right but I would never tell him any particulars unless it was important, or maybe funny. Sometimes it is very funny what is going on inside somebody's brain.

In the matter of what happened this time I can only say that suddenly the spirit moved and then I knew and I had to tell my husband then because it was a matter of importance. The rest was what he did, and he was the hero really 'cause I didn't do a thing besides just know and tell him what it was. If it was up to me I would have walked the other way because I do not like to get involved in something God is doing. I mean it's other people's lives and I have got no business sticking my nose in. Even if it means that someone will get hurt, because I'm not the one to judge and really know one is but God and He knows what He's doing. It wasn't a matter of conscience, though. I didn't have time to think. I just blurted out to Joe - that's my husband, Joe - that this man was going to hurt this other man in just about two minutes unless something happened quick, and then Joe jumped in the way and he kept the thing from happening.

It was pretty strange, because I knew that it would happen but it didn't because I knew and then told Joe and he's the one who made it not happen after all, so I wondered how come I knew it when it didn't happen after all. Do you see what I mean? I'm still a bit confused about all that, and I don't know what my policy will be from now on in the future. I always kept my nose clean out of it, no matter what it was I knew, because I had this policy which is based on my religion, and I am a very religious person, by the way. It seems to me that God knows what he's doing so I shouldn't stick my nose in business He's attending to, but now I have to wonder if maybe I am part of it because of this gift that I have, and since I know the thing than I'm supposed to do something about it, and my own participation is a part of what God's trying to do.

You see why I'm confused. Now I have to wonder if I've been messing up God's plans for all this time since I have had the gift and wasn't really using it to 'help society', or whatever you want to call it. Maybe I was supposed to stick my nose in all along, and since I didn't than things got all messed up, and who knows how much trouble I've caused to God. I think He ought to have told me what he wanted me to do. He couldn't just leave it up to me, 'cause who am I to judge? I'm not anyone at all. So half of it is that I'm kind of mad at God right now, and on the other hand Joe says I should be proud because I saved that man from being damaged by the other man, but

maybe the man deserved it, don't you see? Maybe the other man was in the right and not the one Joe saved. Well, I don't know a thing. It seems the more I think about it the more I get confused, so I just want to stop. But then I can't. The spirit moved and then you gotta go. You don't have any choice. I only wish it'd tell me where it wants that I should go.

THE ONLY THING A PERSON EVER DID

I'm famous now but I can tell you that I wasn't way back then. It took me longer than I ever thought it would but it was worth it all the way. I never had a doubt. Some people they just know exactly what they're going to do and how and when and all like that and then their life is easy, they just do it like they knew they would and everything is peaches. I didn't have it like that, no sir. It didn't just fall out on me like the clear blue sky. This was something that took years and years of thinking at and even then it didn't come like gravy, no siree. It's the things in life like that that really make it all worthwhile the sweat and toil because then when you got it you have earned it more than they did otherwise that had it come so sweet like apple pie.

And I will tell you that it's one thing when you know beforehand what it's going to be that you will do but then it just can't be a thing that no one ever did before or else how could you know like that, you know? If it comes to you ahead of time like trains and buses never do it's bound to be a copy of a thing that someone's done before already and then what is it good for? Not much, really, least not how I tend to see these things. I didn't ever want to do what someone had already beaten me there to. I wanted to do the only thing a person ever did, and that takes lots of thought, because it's hard to think ahead of time what is it when it isn't and it hasn't been as yet. So that is why it took so long, and also why it's worth it in the end like figuring a way to beat them to the draw and so you don't end on the floor like sawdust just to be a victim of the breeze that comes along, no sir.

Something that it takes to be the only one that's ever done a thing is to have a lot of knowledge of the things that have been done, and this is one more reason why it took a lot more time to get to where I always knew I would be, 'cause I had to get my sources neat and square and make sure of the facts before I even did a thing. You know it would be foolish if you went ahead and did whatever thing came in your head not knowing all beforehand if it is a waste of time or not because somebody's been ahead of you and you could see the footprints on the path if only you would look a bit and check it out yourself. I know of plenty people who just went ahead like that and boy then were they sorry when they found out like they could have all along it wasn't worth the sweat upon their nose or any other place.

So this is where the planning and the preparation comes along and I can tell you if you haven't done your homework then you just won't get nowhere or even if you do they beat you to the draw and there you are like sawdust on the floor of life. But I was checking on the competition long before I did the thing so I knew where I stood along

with everybody else as well. I looked it up in all the books, and I can tell you that there was a lot of times when I was just all blue in the face and down in the mouth and all the things like that, and these were all the times when I was all set on a thing to find out in my reading that it wasn't nowhere near the only thing a person ever did, but one or maybe even seven or eight more people had already done the thing, and some had done it better than I myself could ever hope or dream to do. But in those cases I was roses in the end because I thought I saved myself a world of pain which otherwise I wouldn't have if I hadn't been so smart to check it out beforehand like I did.

It also helps to stay on top of things, 'cause nowadays the competition's rough, especially so since there are far more people living on the planet nowadays than there has ever been before, and each and every one of them is doing things right as we speak. That makes it much more harder just to stay on top and not get buried in the muck before you spin your wheels. I would say that anytime you get yourself a thought you ought to check it out with every source there is before you move an inch along with it. This way you will never get bogged down and you will keep in mind the way it is with all those other people who are getting in your way. So my second rule is don't tell no one else at all. I have made this error all too many times and always to my horror and despair I've e found that telling someone is a sure and certain way to get beat to the draw, and that is something which you do not want to do no matter what, or else you'll wind up you know where just waiting for the you know what I mean.

The third important thing is know yourself and when I say this I don't mean to know your name and where you live and what your area code and telephone are all, but something more and harder than those things because it's nothing you can find out in the phone book or not even on the short form of your taxes. You've got to find out what's the stuff you're made of, and I don't mean zinc and water neither, but the other kind of stuff, the kind the doctors cannot spot when they wrap things around your arm and stick things in your blood. If you don't know exactly what you're made of than you never know if you can do a thing, and I would say it's better to have never done the thing than to try, and fuck it up. I found out what it was I had in me from years of exportation, looking all around my spirit and my soul, and weighing it all against the consequences of the possible thing.

The fourth thing that you ought to know and do is figure out how much it's going to cost and not go over budget. I know a lot of people who are sure of their impending fame, and then they go and get themselves in debt which isn't very smart now is it? no. You cannot count your eggs before they're laid, and if you do, well, then you might be wrong, and it's better to be right than wrong, as anyone could tell you if they only had a brain. Okay, so now we have the first four things, but even all of that is not enough, 'cause you can have the first four things all well in hand and still have nothing in your

mind to do that no one's ever done before, and thinking of this thing is the fifth and final rule. Now I am going to tell you what the secret is, and I don't mind doing so, 'cause I already made it to my goal, and even though it took me longer than I ever thought it would, still the day has come just like I always knew it would, and now I am the winner so I can be as giving as I want. Until now, though, if you'd asked me, I would never tell you what this secret is, because it is the most important thing of all, and remember number two rule which is never tell a soul because you can't trust people anymore than you can trust a dumpster not to overflow.

Okay, now, the secret isn't one thing only, it's a bunch of things, and the first thing is, don't ever try to think of it. I know because I spent my lifetime trying to think of things that no one ever did and I never found a one like that. The next thing is don't ever tell nobody that you even want to think of things like that, 'cause either they will laugh at you and say you are a fool, or else they'll try to do the same and that cuts down the possibilities, the more that other people try the less chance you will beat them to the draw. Okay, and then you have to sleep a lot because it often comes in dreams, and then the next thing is remember them! I must've forgot more things than ever I knew because of this. So then you have your dreams and also you should take a lot of bus rides going nowhere, especially over countryside that's dull, in lousy weather. This will help to stimulate the brain, and keep you occupied so you never try to think too much. If you can't take lots of bus rides going nowhere for one reason or another, than the next best thing is go to lots of meetings for a bunch of things you couldn't care about, and that will do the trick as well as anything.

The most important secret is you've got to be the kind of person who will get a notion when you least expect to have one. And then maybe if you've trained yourself and kept your mouth shut and you've found out what you're made of and you've waited longer than you ever thought it'd take, than maybe, I say maybe, you will get that notion when you least expect to and you then will be a winner like I am, and do what you set out to do so long ago you can't remember when it was or how you ever got that plan stuck in your head at all. But most important of them all, you have to really want to do the only thing a person ever did. Without this deep desire, you will simply end up like a piece of sawdust on the floor, and any breeze will pick you up and scoot you out the door. That may be good enough for some, but not for me. The only thing in life, I say, is getting there, no matter how or when.

Stoplight

When he woke up, he was somewhere else. Where am I this time? He wondered. Around him were some vaguely familiar landmarks; a building under construction on a corner he remembered as a vacant lot, a row of newspaper boxes, a statue of the Virgin Mary in the courtyard of a church. A rose in her stony hand. I've been here before, he told himself, and he almost recalled the name of this place, but couldn't quite. He was waiting for the light to change so he could cross the street. He didn't know why.

There was other activity in his brain; the bass line from an old blues song was bouncing around, turning around, calling for a solo. Some kind of anxiety was in there too, unspecified. He thought he might be in a hurry. Am I late for something? Where am I going? Also the feeling that he and a certain other person had been dogs in a dream together recently. Harvey, he remembered. My name is Harvey Winkler.

In the dream, Harvey and Rebecca were in a cozy living room, on a carpet side by side. One of them was chewing on a rawhide bone. The other was licking at fleas. Suddenly it seemed so clear that he was jolted by the sharp pitched beeping of the walk sign. He crossed the street. It was difficult to move. His legs felt both weightless and leaden. He couldn't keep his eyes open all the way across. It won't matter, he thought, if I just sit down for a minute on that bench.

When he woke up, it was something else. What is it this time? He wondered. The traffic was proceeding steadily up the freeway, but there were brake lights up ahead a half a mile or so. Must be the Bog Avenue off ramp, he decided. Always this time of day. What time of day? The clock on the dashboard blinked the transition from fourteen to fifteen after six. Slowing down. Harvey knew they'd crawl a bit around the bend, take about five minutes to do it.

On the radio the news was about something that happened to somebody somewhere. Drops of rain began to fall on the window, blurring the lights into vertical streaks of red and white. Value-added resellers. End-to-end solutions. Does your business? The wife and kids. By a score of nineteen to three. When in the course of human events. On the radio at the same time were other stations making different sounds.

When I was a child I was convicted of some sort of crime by a jury of zoo animals. I remember it so clearly because I was running a fever, and had been for days. I counted the same song was played on that AM station no fewer than forty seven times that afternoon. A lady brought chocolates. A repairman was fixing something. The animals came from a wall hanging in my room. They were pointing at me and pronouncing the sentence.

When he woke up he was someone else. Who am I this time? He wondered. Sitting in front of the television with its dark green emptiness. The lights were on in the kitchen. Some kind of noise in there - a crunching, like footsteps on gravel. Later he realized it was the cat, eating its food. I could lie down and it wouldn't make a difference, he thought. I could be anyone. Food was another idea. Oh, it's the cat. I don't think I can do anything about food.

The weight was on his eyes. Little activity in the brain cells now. Gearing down. We made it this far. Got him home. Time to check out. I should stand up and go. Get. Make. It won't hurt if I sleep a little now. The hard part now was to move from the sitting to the lying down position. It seemed like a hundred thousand miles away.

A bit of a blues loop in the background, bass line. Doobie doobie doobie doo ... doobie doobie doobie doo. Splashing sound of car on slick tar road outside. Hum of sixty cycles per second. Light bulb. Crunching. Cat. Ten thousand pounds of echoes reverberating to the lowest reaches of the mind. Pressure of the mere idea of thinking. Slipping away. Every little thing a long distance effort, too far, too hard, too slow. See it coming. Don't see it come. What it's like to die.

What it's like to live with this.

EVERYBODY'S FRIEND

In the mornings, he would come to sit and wait. His favorite place was the bench outside the little triangular park, the bench on Bacon Avenue. There he had a clear view of the skyline to his right, and the river to his left. Around him the pigeons would come, no matter what the weather was like, to browse and beg and dance their little funny dance. He used to name the pigeons like the weathermen name hurricanes, alphabetically, in order of arrival, but later on he got to numbering them continuously. After only a few months, he had counted seven thousand four hundred forty three.

He would sit till ten o'clock, and watch the various passersby, and every now and then there'd be someone who sat down on the bench beside him and they'd have a little talk. Nice day, isn't it? They say it's going to hold up like this right through the week. I hope they're right. At ten it would be time to go to work, and he'd slowly stroll the four blocks to the shop he owned, a small tobacco-magazine niche nestled in between a deli and a bar. He used to open earlier, and it's true the trade had suffered through the loss of early morning sales, but he didn't mind too much. He still did well enough to get along.

He'd roll the awning down first thing, a green and blue striped ancient dusty thing with half the letters missing, so it read A E O B C O H P. Then he'd drag the bundle of dailies in, unless it was a Monday, when they were supplemented by the weeklies, or every fourth one the monthlies too. It would take him at least ten minutes to get the works set up so he could open up the doors and let the people in. Meanwhile, he would arrange the magazines neatly on their racks, and spruce the counter up a bit. When this was done, he'd take his seat upon the swivel stool, and wait some more. At ten forty five, or thereabouts, he'd light up his third pipe of the day.

He ran the shop alone, from ten to six, closing it for a short lunch break around two forty five or so, the slowest period of the day. He'd been in business sixteen years, and could count at least four dozen regulars whose nasty habits kept him living well. They all followed schedules just as constant as his own, and on any given day he could be reasonably sure exactly who'd show up and when. They accounted for about a third of his sales, the rest being accounted for by strays and accidental shoppers who just happened to find themselves around in need of smokes or some quick read.

The trade was mostly residential, which was surprising, because there were few houses in that area, which was a designated office/retail zone. And yet, the metro didn't come by anywhere near that block, so the commuters bypassed him without a thought. Only those few office workers who lived close to the zone and walked would come in on purpose. For the rest, he depended on the park, the one commemorating Nathaniel Bacon's dramatic and misleading rebellion about four hundred years before. The park was inked in red on all the tourist maps, and mentioned in the guides.

It was his neighborhood. He lived just seven blocks away, near the corner of First Avenue and Eighth Street. Had he thought of it, he would have realized that he had

only once been outside the general area in the past eleven years. He had nowhere to go out there, and he was well aware that the rest of the city was very much the same as his own part of it. Still, the world kept coming to him, through customers, the radio, the magazines, and the television screen. He knew what was going on. He even had opinions about a lot of various issues.

He had a lot of friends. They greeted him with a smile, which he happily returned. They chatted about whatever it was to say that day, agreed and disagreed, smoothed it all out with a long laugh at the end, and went along their way. Over the years he'd learned exactly what to talk about with most of them, as well as all the topics to be especially avoided. In this way, most of his customers were quite friendly and very nice. There was the man from EPC who walked his terrier at four, and stopped in for a Herald and a pouch of Gorsz on Tuesdays. He was in his sixties and he cleared his throat a lot. He was big on the subject of urban land control, and had even been a member of some commission in his younger days. Now, it was a shame. They didn't know what they were doing anymore. In his time, they'd had a plan, but now it seemed that anyone with influence could use it to his own best interest, never mind the interests of the populace at large. One shouldn't be surprised. It is the way the world works, after all, you know.

And then there was the woman with the purple hair, still living in the previous decade's styles, and yet convinced she was ahead of the game by far. She would scowl or chortle at the covers of the fashion magazines, and let him know if they were right or wrong about the trends. He didn't know much else besides about her, except that she would frequently complain about the smell of mingled perfume and tobacco in the shop, or make a joke about a stranger who might be passing on the street. He was taken in by this. They had an intimacy of sorts, and played a regular game of guess who that one is out there. He was always on the lookout for peculiar passersby, and would point them out to her.

Sometimes he would forget what time it was, and not close up till eight or even nine. This would happen especially when he was absorbed in reading some magazine article, and there weren't many customers coming in. His favorite was the UNIVERSAL VIEWS, a magazine devoted to the extra-mundane events occurring in the world today, even as we speak. There were stories - fact and fiction both - about all sorts of fascinating things. For example, there was one about a man who lived two lives at once, at the same time, simultaneously, in fact. Although his body would be only in one place at one particular time, it would be doing separate things, and it was literally true that his left hand had no knowledge or even interest in what the other one was up to.

There were scientific reports about the unexplained and inexplicable. Someone had discovered that forgetting was genetic, based on the genetic code's ability to forget how to translate itself. This fact had all sorts of intriguing implications. Then there were the people who always had the same dreams at the same time as each other, though they were several hundred miles apart and not related by blood or any other way. The fiction stories in the magazine were not nearly as extraordinary. In fact, he found them downright tedious at times. It was absurd to imagine that a mollusk might be capable

of faster-than-the-speed-of-sound transmissions. It was ridiculous that someone would sit down and write such things. But he read them anyway.

ò The ones that captivated him the most were the articles about the people who had telekinetic powers. It seemed they always did the most foolish things imaginable with their talent. They would send objects flying across the room, and smash them into pieces. They would bend spoons, or short-circuit the electric wires in their apartment complexes. They would pick up heavy objects with their minds, only to set them down again. He could think of better things to do with such abilities. He liked to imagine that he had them himself. And then he'd drift off into a complicated fantasy about all that. He was always the hero of the dream. And in his story, he would stay at home, and do everything he had to do from his favorite fluffy sofa.

This is what he'd do. He'd move the kettle to the sink, and fill it up with water. Then he'd put it on the stove, and make the gas come on. Meanwhile, he'd prepare the coffee and the cup, and concentrate on breakfast. After his meal, he would transport his mind outside, and place his spirit on the bench on Bacon Avenue. Then he'd make the pigeons come so he could add them up. He'd make some passersby pass by, and he would watch them go. Then at ten o'clock he'd open up the awning, and have the magazines collect and then arrange themselves. The doors would open wide, and the cash register would turn on. His customers would know just what to do; they'd get used to it in time. Anything they asked for would be presented to them instantaneously. There would be no need for talk, for he could read their thoughts, and implant his own inside their heads.

The days and weeks and months and years would pass, and everything would be all right. He would be free to develop his other abilities. For example, he would be able to do all this, and watch the TV at the same time, all at once. Or he could do those things and read as well. Meanwhile, he'd be his own telepathical ham radio, tuning in on all the people in the world at will, sitting in on important conferences, whispering hints to heads of state, making a difference in the world, a difference for the good, of course. Diabolical or evil schemes would never enter his mind, but occasionally he wondered, if he really had the power, would it corrupt him like it did to all the people in the stories? Would he have an irresistible urge to melt the keys in everybody's pockets? He doubted it very much. After all, he was a good man, through and through. Everybody thought so. They always smiled and said hello. They liked him. He liked them. He had no reason to be mean or diabolical.

Even though he didn't have the power, it was easy to pretend he did. And sometimes he would do so at the shop. He'd imagine that he wasn't really there, but that he was at home, all curled up in his favorite fluffy sofa. And then everything he did was done kinetically. When he fetched a magazine for someone, he would imagine that it was really just fetching itself. And when he listened to the newsmen on the radio, he'd imagine that he was inside the newsmen's head, and hearing the latest news directly from the source. It made no difference anyway. He'd chuckle and think, perhaps I'm really doing all these things at once. Maybe when I close the door behind me in the

morning, I'm really still inside as well. And maybe even now I'm home relaxing on my sofa.

He never told another person about these notions, for he knew they wouldn't understand. They'd think that he was harmlessly eccentric, or even slightly mad. He didn't want them thinking that, for he didn't think that it was true. He did not need anyone to agree or disagree. He was glad to have a private zone, a place where no one else could go. There was only one thing in the world that bothered him. There was no one he disliked. He had long ago decided that there must be someone out there whom he wouldn't like, but he hadn't found that person yet. It was the only thing he lacked, the only thing he needed, for his life to be complete. But he didn't go in search of that one person. He was sure that he or she would come to him, in time. Meanwhile, all that he could do was wait.

Whoever it was would come. He was sure of it. But until they did, he worried, and it marred his happy life. He worried because he knew that for everything to be all right there must be something that's all wrong. He didn't know why he believed this, but he did. Maybe it was because of something he once heard. It was in a crowd. He was waiting in a line for stamps, and he overheard a woman say, "well, of course, you know... everybody's friend is really no one's friend at all." And until that moment, he had thought that he was everybody's friend.