

Channel 49  
LOOKING FOR A JOB

*The Higher-Man Thing...*

Steven's last film attempt had pretensions of dealing with the puzzle of human redemption. He had steeped himself with tomes of moral philosophy in preparation, --enough to be a walking encyclopedia. Knowing what he does, compared with his meager and declining state in the world, seems like an ironic joke between Providence and himself.

Perhaps what he needs is the reappearance of corporeal reality in the shape of the hard man who tried to shape him into what he could have become --his training sergeant from the military. 'Sarge,' however, is losing his mind. Then there's Buzzo, a beer-swilling alcoholic with neurological problems. If *Cinema* was the fruitless whore for his loneliness, there are others to choose from.

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## LOOKING FOR A JOB

### PROLOGUE

I look for jobs only because I need the money. Not very much higher purpose involved. I have always looked for jobs, and sometimes found them. I analyzed this, and discovered that my best chances for employment were with mis-managed companies who were unsure of what they wanted somebody to do. These situations were always doomed.

Out of extreme frugality, and minimal luck I managed to accumulate a small capital stake from these adventures. I decided to take this money and re-invent myself as an independent film producer. This would give an outlet, I believed, for all of those fantasies cultivated during my sojourns at unsuited jobs.

Film producing was essentially a 24 hour day of looking for a job. Looking for out-of-work actors, out-of-touch investors and out-to-lunch distributors. My net return from this avocation was several un-exhibitible reels --often of me, my most reliable performer for an unpaid 6:00 A.M. call-- feigning acting in front of a partially unfocused camera that, oftentimes, I myself had set up. True, there had been some delicious actresses promised enduring fame to spice up a scene, but in the end it was I who was broke and once again looking for a job. This time with an embarrassing hole in my resume.

### CHAPTER 1 Auditions

Lack of money is the prostitute of invention --to debase a phrase. I had already begun to panic in the midnight hours. One unusable, unreleased film in the can, an odd dozen of shorts, interstitial programming for channels that did not exist...I had already started flinging out the occasional resume, wondering why there were no call backs.

Yet, I pressed on. What else does one do? I had an ingenious scheme to make a movie for about 500 bucks. Yuck, yuck. How does one make a movie for 500 bucks? One doesn't. One attempts a promotional reel; in this case a tape. The collateral material --print--

would have to be cheap. Desktop-published words with black & white photos reproduced on a Xerox with a halftone screen. One out of a thousand would know it wasn't printed. I could use that material as inserts with the portfolio covers I already had on order. What a clever bastard, huh? Go heavy on the photos, spend the most for the one-shot poster. What a damn-fool, to which bankrupt entity was I going to show this to? What would become of it? Why was I really doing this all over again? To remind myself that I existed?

With such a wacky plan, every component must be based on the most bizarre premise. Premise number one: Make this movie in one's living room with a rented camera. I didn't own a living room, but still had enough friends to borrow one.

Premise number two, design the portions of the scripts so that amateur or lousy performers can be used for much of the material. Hope to make the piece interesting with music, narrative and smart cutting. A foolish hope, especially when it was I who would be doing the directing, the camera work and the audio. (as well as the lighting).

I ran out of actresses. I just didn't have the same delusions of success as I had on earlier efforts. I could barely render promises. I refused to pay scale, claiming I was only taping rehearsals without direct commercial intent and outside of union-contract jurisdiction. There were still a few to call. I had plenty of head shots, and resumes...Some gotten through advertising, some caged from other filmmakers, or local theater groups.

There was no more budget for auditions in rented facilities. Even thirty dollars a night, was too much. So I had to make phone calls and arrange for these would-be's to show up at my borrowed house. What sane woman would allow herself to be lured to a home under such tenuous circumstances? Plenty. But their virtue was safe with me, I was only interested in exploiting them in ways that would inflict its greatest humiliation on me.

Sarah Greene was my 10:00 A.M. call. Ding Dong. Attractive woman...Fifteen years older than her photo which was already bordering on mature. *'Welcome to the meatmarket'*. She rubbed sleep from her eyes. She was after all a theater-type person used to going to sleep at 3:00 A.M.. and unused to awakening at 8:00.

"Nice home you have here..." she said.

I hadn't the heart to explain that it wasn't mine. My unfurnished room/office was too small for any production save one starring me. The lights and video camera were set up in the center of the living room. Kind of like taking baby photos. This made, at least, me laugh.

"What kind of a picture are you making?" She asked, nervously.

*'Alright, honey get naked and give me the standard poses.'* Half of these actresses would disrobe. "A black comedy." I said. The younger set, usually asked, 'And you want a few white people in it?'

She was nervous. Almost trembling. She seemed so casually dressed. Worn corduroy slacks, too baggy to be fashionable. An ancient black suede jacket with fringes (a cast-off

prop from a wild-west show?) and worn boots that matched nothing else. Typical actress clothes. I wondered why she was so ill-at-ease. I hadn't made a female nervous since I was seventeen.

"I haven't done much of this lately," she blurted out. "I just...recently returned to acting...and..."

"It's okay..." I counseled, checking the lights.

"I'm gonna do bad, I just know it..." She twisted the strap of her handbag with two clenched fists. She was practically biting her lip to stop from grinning idiotically --out of sheer terror.

There was something very familiar about her. I sat down, away from the circle of light I had concocted. "I'm just taping your audition. All I'm going to do this week is a rehearsal of five performers and videotape it...for a 'promo' reel. I'm also going to take stills. That's it. I'll pay forty dollars a piece for the one afternoon of taping and photos...It's no big deal..."

"I need this," she pleaded.

"For forty dollars?" I asked, "That's car-fare."

"For the opportunity..."

I shrugged, probably dubious about the opportunity myself. "I'm just doing this in an effort to raise money for the project..." I claimed.

"But it's very...Very important to me. Extremely important..." she insisted.

Okay, there were people in this world that were crazier than me, I could theoretically accept that. But I had heard her *extremely* spoken before. It was distinctive.

"Have you done spots? You know, commercials?" I asked.

"Not yet..."

"Have you done...anything?" I asked.

"Not yet," she replied, again.

My expression betrayed exceptional curiosity.

"That's why this is so *extremely* important to me," she implored.

"Sarah Greene...?" I asked aloud, wondering why such a name didn't jar bells in my 'extremely' curious brain.

"My name used to be Grainway...and..." she began to blather. I couldn't hear her. I was flushed with a wave of heat and perspiration. It's not everyday that a ne'er-do well, like myself, could get to audition his seventh grade English teacher. I choked back the loudest

laugh of my career. Yes there was a God, and what an amazing sense of humor the Deity possessed!

I shook my head with humorous disbelief. I leaned forward to share our past. But she changed the moment by removing her jacket and standing for me in the center of the room. Underneath her black, cowboy outerwear was a loosely knit, mesh sweater. Yes, I remembered, *Miss Grainway* had a large bosom. Sarah Greene was able to support this inheritance.

She smiled wanly. There was nothing provocative about this act, nor anything subtle. She was showing her wares...*'Welcome to the meat-market...a piece of this, a piece of that... grind it up; make me some chop-steak...'*

Could I use her, I wondered? She was nothing like the lead female character as I had imagined her. Could I change the character? Should I change the character? I considered enlarging my promo piece to include a more peripheral character. But who would she play off of?

"Can you act?" I asked, aloud.

She shrugged, "...Sure..."

I was certain she couldn't act. I set up the camera, turned on the color monitor, zoomed in all the way (chest high). Focused on her tits and pulled back for a medium shot. She stepped forward and I lost focus and had to run through it again. She watched me focusing on her bosom.

"It's there." I told her. "You'll have to stand still."

"Sorry..."

I pulled back very slowly to a medium focal length and watched the monitor. *'Elements,'* I had been told. *'What are the elements?!' Elements are names, genres... 'You have got to have elements,'* I was instructed at the last exhibition by the independent distributors who would talk to me --before they went bankrupt.

What elements did Sarah Greene possess? Thickly built, pleasantly features. A nice, forty-plus girl friend. Somebody's mother maybe...Certainly no actress...Why was she wasting her time with me? And furthermore, why was I wasting my time with her?

"This is so important to me," she pleaded. "So *extremely* important. I've wanted to be an actress ever since I was a little girl," she recited stiltedly.

I looked at her to see if she was giving me an unknown shade of the comedienne. She wasn't. Maybe, what she wanted to be ever since she was a little girl, was simply, a little girl. And why not? Who was I to disparage juvenile things?

The phone rang. I 'saved' the lights and turned off the camera. It was my 11:30 audition calling.

"I can't make it because I have a code."

"Sorry, I hope you feel better."

A nose was blown into my ear. And then 11:30 tried to entertain me with things from her recent personal history.

"I have someone here," I said.

"Oh sorry...Listen...will... I get another... you know...opportunity? "

We paused in our conversation.

"I could come down there today... later..." she offered, "I've got a little fever...102... but...excuse me..." She blew her nose again.

"Hey, drink orange juice and take some aspirin... Don't worry about it, okay?" I offered.

"Okay," she replied in a tiny voice, lost and sorrowful.

I turned from the phone and found Sarah practically in my face. "Do you have something for me to read?" She asked. "You know, like a script?"

I didn't want to suffer through it. The endearing peculiarities of her voice and diction were unacceptable for the part, *'Welcome to the meatmarket.'* I felt the same way about myself.

"Have you had breakfast?" I asked her.

"I don't usually eat breakfast," she said.

One hundred and fifty pounds of solid woman and she claimed she didn't eat.

"Let's go catch a bite...I could use something... You can have some coffee, maybe..." I said.

"Oh," she pleaded, "you don't want me to read for you,... you don't!" She pouted. "That's cruel... I came all the way out here and you won't let me read for you," she said, growing angry in a restrained and eccentric way. She scooped up her jacket and kept her eyes lowered.

"Hey. Think about it...I'm offering you breakfast with the producer..."

"Oh," she said, brightly. "And where are you serving this breakfast?"

"At a restaurant."

Her face darkened as if she had made an error. "Oh." Another tiny voice.

"I think maybe...I should leave?" She asked me, searching my face for clues.

I broke my cover, "Jesus Christ, why the fuck aren't you teaching English at a junior high

school, someplace?"

She examined me carefully. "That wasn't on my resume..."

"I was there."

"On the staff? Were you the intern assistant principal they brought in for a few months?" She asked, waving a naughty finger at me.

"I was in the back row, next to the last seat, near the window."

She couldn't comprehend what I was talking about. Was she experiencing a fugue state? Had she wandered out of the teacher's room into my film-world with a certain psychic deficit?

"I was one of your students!" I shouted.

"Oh... Well I guess I taught you right," she said.

"Taught me *correctly*..." I shook my head.

"Is that why I can't read for you?" She asked. "You're prejudiced because of my age?"

"Come on, let's get something to eat..."

She wouldn't leave the living room. As if the camera had a magic, an immortality to it that once lost could never be regained. I grasped her forearm and pulled her out of the door with me.

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I ate, she sipped black coffee, plain, and watched. "Sure you won't have anything? Eggs? Pancakes? Danish?" I offered.

"No thank you."

"I hate to eat in front of somebody who isn't eating," I said.

"Oh, it's fine," she insisted.

"What happened to teaching English?" I asked.

"It wasn't me. I had a degree in theater, you know," she said.

"I didn't know that. How long did you stay with it, teaching?"

"Over twelve years."

"That's along time to be *not you*," I commented.

"A person has to do what a person has to do," she stated adamantly.

"Absolutely. I know that. I took every penny I could get my hands on and sunk it into my

dreams. I think every person who has these kinds of aspirations should buy or rent a cheap camera and make movies of themselves acting. It has a curative effect."

"Don't you believe in yourself?" She retorted.

"Not really. I'm about 150,000 dollars short, working capital-wise, of doing anything that has promise of being exhibited anyplace, in any format. But I had to spend thousands of dollars to even learn that..."

"That's why you're doing what you do, to raise the money, right?" She queried.

I shrugged. "My problem, personally, is that I never did any one thing for twelve years. I never had a job I liked, that liked me. I guess I was saving myself for this... It's an important excuse. It allows me this excess. But I envy people who belong."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm an outsider. I have to do things like this, because even if I were to attempt something conventional I wouldn't have a chance. So if failure is my result, I might as well fail at something that's interesting..."

The waitress brought us more coffee. Another river of blackness fell into her cup. It bothered me.

"Have something to eat," I pleaded.

"No thanks... What are trying to say?"

"I don't know. If I tell you that you'll never make a dime as an actress, tomorrow somebody will sign you up with a contract. But I think you should reconsider your career goals."

"You never heard me read!" She protested, "I believe in what I'm doing. It's *extremely* important to me," she said with her usual affectation.

I ate silently. Maybe some kinky casting director would get off on her *extremely*. We mocked her in the hallways in the seventh grade: *'This shit is EXTREMELY extreme!'*

"Have you ever made any money doing this?" I asked.

"Not yet... I waitress."

"Not too far off from a theatrical occupation... Look Miss... Sarah... Even I managed to make ten grand as a videographer doing lousy industrials. True, my illusions lie in other areas but..."

"What are you telling me?" She demanded.

I blushed. I felt bad. What business did I have, of all people, to step on someone's dreams? "Be prepared for a very long and difficult road."

"But you won't let me read for you?" She pressed.

I became thin-lipped. My temple throbbed. "No, you are not right for the part. I need a siren. A woman so photogenic she can be a center for anyone who looks. It's just the way it is..."

She retreated into a shell for a moment. Tears rimmed her eyes. I felt as I had just yelled at my Mom. But she snapped out of it. "When you've made it, you will remember me, and give me a part in something, alright?" She coaxed.

I laughed. I covered my mouth and laughed.

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After the fiasco was finished, I had to pay the remaining bills. This included a printing bill for portfolio covers. I put my suit on, knotted my tie and looked at the stacks of cardboard boxes remaining to be relocated from my office/bedroom to a cheaper, storage locker. Where I would relocate myself I wasn't sure.

Larry Gray, an affable business type, had mastered my printing business. I knew him to be eternally upbeat in contrast to his company's penchant for making errors. In an attempt to match his mood I tried not to be too sullen and stodgy. He kept me waiting for twenty minutes, not to be rude, but because he was disorganized and always behind schedule. I entered his cluttered office with a plan in mind.

"What can I do for you, Steve?" He asked warmly, anticipating a new order.

I slid a portfolio across his desk. "You underproduced; a shortfall of at least 30%..."

"We can hang the plates and run some more." He replied cheerily.

"I don't need them NOW." I said, "Besides, you left off the logo and the third color...and look at those hickeys in the PMS --the rhodamine red...and the registration is off on the reversals... and..."

He adopted a confessional tone, "We've had some changes here. Had to get rid of practically everyone in the camera department... This is the second job they've screwed up... It was done in the stripping," He said, turning the piece over in his hands.

A placed my checkbook on his desk. "Just give me the figure with discount, and I'll pay it now..." I said.

"Oh, I'll have to check with..."

"Come-on Larry, let's do it..."

"Take off... a hundred and fifty..." He offered.

I wrote the check and slid it across the desk. He looked at it to make sure it was signed.



"So, uh, what's next? Going back to the West Coast?"

"No. I'm going...broke." I said.

He laughed, "Hey, I've done that plenty of times."

"I'm serious. I'll pay my phone bill, my rent and close out the account." I told him.

"Any plans?" He inquired.

"No."

"Were you ever in sales?" He asked.

'What do you think I've been trying to do?' I almost said, "Yeah... for a couple of years..."

"Any book; you know, customer base?" 'Welcome to the meatmarket.'

"No."

"It would take about six months to get started building one... Of course I've seen it done much quicker...A savvy guy like yourself..." He leaned back to think. His processes were too evident on his face for this to be real. He was making me a pitch.

"To sell what, printing?"

"NO... I don't sell printing."

"No? You sell mis-printing?" I joked.

He evaded the jibe. "I sell...marketing services!"

"Uh huh..."

He rummaged through several file drawers until he found two sheets of paper which he slid across the desk to me. It was a list of companies for prospecting. "I can show you how it's done." He winked.

I looked at the list. It seemed like a random selection from an industrial directory. I began to feel a reminiscence building.

"That list is not just a compilation of names," Larry said, disputing the obvious, "Each company on that list was selected by a careful and exacting number of variable measurements..."

The only thing the companies on the list seemed to have in common was that they were on the same list.

"I'll take you up to the sales offices and have you meet the other fellahs... Boy, could we clean up with a guy like you out there, pulling for us," he said.

The sales office was a plywood platform over the pressroom. Several seedy-looking

journeymen looked up from their telephones amid a clutter of printing sprawled on top of desks so old they couldn't be gotten at junk yards any more.

"Fellahs, this is Steven." Larry announced.

The fellahs all shook my hand. Soon I would be one of them. They saw the special list in my hand, and grinned. We all had the same list, and it was useless.

Larry did not show me how it was done. I doubt he knew. In time, I managed to garner a few sales commissions which he never paid me. It was how I whiled away the summer before true desperation prevailed.

## **FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE FORGOTTEN FILM-MAKER**

### The Women That Don't Laugh

Short Subject: Man full of angst strolls along wide grassy area in front of an old prison. Several angles intercut softly to produce a lulling rhythm. A VOICE OVER narrative fills the background with the lilting tones of a male confessional. The voice's apparent sensitivity is belied by the sound-mix of birdies chirping. However there is no music.

"It was a long, long search to find my father. My mother never told me anything about him, other than the fact that he was no good; that mine was an unwanted birth..."

There is a betrayal of the emotion in the character's sudden display of angst, putting his hands to his head as if reacting to a terrible commotion, either in the world, or in his own mind. Some in the audience might begin to catch on.

"They were strangers, Mom said,...having passed each other once or twice in a dim and dark hallway a long time ago. A final encounter left long and tragic circumstances ahead."

CLOSE UP, man turns stiltedly, as if in a daze, to the camera, as it zooms in closer. The man reflects befuddlement or lunacy. The shot is repeated from other angles, but too fast, and too jerky.

"I finally found my father. He was serving twenty years to life for rape in the state penitentiary. (Extremely choked up:) "I wanted to know...I needed to know...'Dad', I asked him when we met at the visitor center, 'Dad, did you love my mother, at all?'"

Cut to Alter Ego Character with goofy grin, wearing a bizarre fishing hat. This is a STILL with character leaning against the tile wall of what could be an institution.

"(Very emotional voice:) And he said was...What he said was (cries of anguish...followed by a voice changing smoothly to mimicry and delivering the punchline:) 'For the last five seconds I did.'"

It took weeks of planning, logistics, scripting, waiting for subdued sunshine, lugging, measuring, focusing, acting and editing to accomplish a few minutes of comedic, video verite. I showed it to friends and acquaintances. They looked at it briefly, without the

reverence that thousands of dollars of personal expense should have wrought.

The woman berated me severely, especially contemporary woman, older women laughed and walked out of the room, dismissing it from their minds as trivia. But the younger women beat me up with their superior verbal skills. 'Didn't I know that rape wasn't a sexual crime, but one of severe aggression!' I was scolded time after time...

The men in my audience laughed over the implied confusion of sexual ardor with mystical love. Nobody offered to contribute to my ongoing efforts at film-making. I was left feeling frustrated and embarrassed. Foul-mouthed comedians at comedy clubs did much worse and got applause. Unfortunately, my problem was always in seeking the higher, uncommon denominator.

I fumed. I concocted treatises in my own defense. Didn't my viewing audience see the rationale behind the joke? Those last five seconds are the heat in the soul that produces art itself. When rutting begins to climax, the vision fogs in hallucinogenic splendor making everything beautiful. After climax, it's another story -- guilt and inhibition are re-born and one must sublimate one's way out of feeling shameful and depressed; here is the other counter nurturance for art!

No one took my treatises seriously, including me, because I showed them to no one. My fuming took to an ungainly melancholia. The great commentary and the foolish film both share mute storage space as they, like the undiscovered garbage in a clerk's tomb, languish toward oblivion.

'Good thing,' I consoled myself, that I left out that entire POV (point of view) sequence with the supposed mother and offender crossing paths on a dimly lit stairway. I had prowled unkempt buildings for days with a light meter, but in the end was too exhausted to coax any of my underpaid cast and crew to follow me into those unpleasant neighborhoods. I had considered doing all the camera work myself with portable lighting...

Instead of feeling relieved that I hadn't wasted more time and money, I felt burdened with an existential pressure. I felt the need to do this sequence anyway, as part of another film, or no film at all. The art in the fear of a dark stairway, tugged at me. Not as craft, but as a nagging reminder of humanity's primitive urbanity -- and my own! Why wouldn't I let go of this, I wondered? What magical whore was I seeking to cure my frail need-to-know? Why couldn't I leave those things alone?

## **CHAPTER 2 The Show On The Road**

Down at the heels, baggy at the knees, sweaty from walking, headache forming, still traveling the unknown streets of an alien city. Kept going as if I knew to where.

Wearing a grey business suit and black polo shirt, sunglasses and hiking shoes, I was a cross between 50's hip and 90's broke. --The kind of swine that hippies would beat up. I had no friends thereabouts and less money.

I still looked at the women --out of habit. Some looked back. Maybe the black polo shirt -

-they thought I was a priest (out of habit). 'Sorry, but I get nun.' I grinned at my own bad jokes.

That was why I was looked at. If it had been a dream I would know people there. People would materialize. Old wives and new wives. Unknown lovers and near forgotten acquaintances. I would have a job nearby --even if I hated it --or go to school to travel the hallways endlessly and forget class and miss my final exam. Such are dreams. Dreams, after all, are the more familiar.

I saw her sitting in a car. Lips too sensual, eyes too expressive; a pictograph of appeal. But she moved. I sensed an attitude, self-centered and impulsive. She examined herself in the rear-view mirror. Made a face. More disdain for the world than herself. A narcissist. I couldn't look away. The way she occupied public space with so little regard for propriety was encouraging, even if she wasn't.

She saw me, made another face, gave me the finger and hurried from the car which was parked at the curb. She approached. I resisted an urge to flee. 'Man beaten to death by Beauty Salon Student; Police search for bloodstained hairbrush'.

"Hey asshole!" She said.

"You know me." I exclaimed happily.

She came closer. I trembled slightly in the stomach from anxiety and delight. Her expression mollified to puzzlement.

"Do I know ya?" She asked.

I shrugged, "You an actress?"

"Yeah...", she pointed gaily and laughed. "Seventeenth Street Theater. Oh!" She hid her guffaws in her hand. "I'm sorry."

It hadn't been me. My excursions into even illegitimate theater had been resounding failures. Artsy types --the playhouse crowd, cranky, petulant and always late. I preferred less exhibitionist folks with no or little talent to imprison on celluloid or videotape where their childish manias could be tamed. The camera in raw hands is cruel. No need to be so delighted in ourselves -- see how BAD we really are! (It ain't just a feeling --it's on TV!)

"So what-a-ya doin' now?" she asked.

A pause for another second. A long, sordid journey of explanations formed in my mind. I rejected them.

"Casting a picture." I said. (With two nickels)

"Really!?! Wow!" She was thrilled. "Part for me?"

I shrugged. "Could be." Already I was swooning from this encouragement. Wondering if my VISA card had enough life in it to rent a camera some place.

Her mood tilted toward serious. Confidential.

"The independent film business is DEAD," she said.

Very expressionist on the last word. I believed her. Even if it WAS true, I was drawn to believe her. I wanted to make her my guide. I considered writing books about her. Monographs at least. 'The wayward actress as example in the illusory world. Goddess made flesh/fantasy-in-life, welcome to a fool's paradise by...' She could even star in the TV version.

"You have to know somebody --like your father, to get anywhere --unless..." she said.

"Other markets. Video publishing, multi-media, interactive educational and presentation systems..." I offered hopefully.

"Huh? You mean synthetic people, like cartoons?"

"No." I was sorry to have elevated the conversation into high-tech. I didn't have enough money to even imagine multi-media. It was all in my head anyway -- hypermedia gone berserk -- a huge data base of daydreams connecting or unconnected at random. 'I am a conduit to my own pipe-dreams'.

"So you're still producing.?"

"Yup." This statement of mine could even be true. A life in developmental projects.

"I want to co-produce." She nodded defiantly.

I felt defensive. I wanted creative control of this nebulous possibility as well as 100 % of all downside risk and liability.

"I have ideas," she continued, "A statement. I'm tired of the 'go-get fucked, monetary power structure.' I have a dream. A goal. And this statement." She added.

Finally her attraction faded just enough -- I think her 'statement' did it -- for me to be aware of where this meeting we were 'taking' was occurring. On the jaded street. People were glancing at us. Wondering if I was a drug dealer new to the neighborhood. Or just a foolish john negotiating with a kooky hooker. I wanted to move this potentiality inside, yet only spend for coffee. My mind, not too nimbly, raced.

"Do you have a script?" I asked. Good move, maybe I had learned something from what ever meetings I had blustered my way into.

"I've been writing one," she admitted, "but..." she made a face. "I have it blocked out in my mind."

--Better than blanked out in your mind. Before I could conjure up the next thought, she sprung the trap together.

"We can do this together." She examined my face with sensitive intensity, "We can pull this off."

I wanted to believe her. Even if she thought I was someone else, we are kindred souls -- filling roles made for us.

"I know we can."

She took charge of my life maneuvering me from the main street to side streets. I followed her tight skirt. Dark, translucent panty hose below. I was about to surrender my remaining deeds (rental certificates to the cinderblock space where my aborted films aged). I was captivated. Follow, follow, follow. I tried not to grin too widely.

Suddenly concern entered my elation. Where were we going? Why? Was someone going to bop me on the head to take my change? Would they kill me in disgust of my paltry sums? And, aside from gazing with fascination and admiration upon her stupendous can - - what was it -- without a camera --that I wanted to do with her?

I thought. I watched her lead me for another half-block. Perhaps it was time to get a divorce.

"I just remembered -- I have to meet several investors about a limited partnership agreement..." I lied. "To produce several pictures..." (Of me posing carelessly -- before a self-timed Polaroid --net cost \$ 8 bucks, no proceeds, project another bust.)

"It'll wait," she said.

I continued to follow, but more lamely. I looked around corners for the guy who was supposed to bop me.

We descended several steps to a subterranean utility entrance of an older apartment house. Through doors into darkness. Sounds were different down there. Stifled. Furnaces rumbled, water gurgled through pipes. And the smell...Not exactly odious -- but fragrance of roach carcass, overlaid with hint of pee, a mostly decomposed turd, wet newspapers and the usual dank mold. Already I was a connoisseur. A hot water heater blasted on. I heard a hiss. The serpent of evil, the most subtle (naked) beast of the garden...I was walking into very old memories.

"I started life out in a place like this.." I said.

"Only place I could afford for interiors," she said.

"Uh huh." She paused at a door and fiddled with a key. I remembered my first bicycle. A third hand investment with 20 inch wheels, locked in a storage bin...I almost expected to see it and myself decades ago.

She unlocked the door. "C'mon."

I stepped forward into a darkness so impenetrable I felt vertigo. Was the floor beneath me? Beginning to feel nauseous I forgot about the bop. I would go down on my own.

Let there be light. POW! She touched the switch and photofloods came on. "Ye God!" My eyes hurt.

She smiled, "Ooops -- be back in a minute. Don't go anyplace." She disappeared, probably to summon the bopper who had better things to do than wait.

The chamber I was in was pleasantly painted. White and green oil-base enamel. What we in the paint-business (another sojourn) call a 'maintenance coating'. There was a table of sorts, hip-high -- wooden -- very sturdy and surprisingly clean.

Above the table, mounted on a metal swivel was a television set. Against the opposing wall were several metal cabinets - not new and not very big. There was at least 250 watts of lumens coming down from the ceiling which was considerably high -- over ten feet. That is a clue to the age of the building.

The room itself was only six feet wide, but about fifteen feet long. A prison cell, semi-luxuriant, for a deserving con -- and I was in it!

I tried the door. It was not locked. With the desert sun above me in the chamber I could see nothing of the basement, only its daunting odors greeted me. I had no where to escape to, so I closed the door and sat on the table. Feeling carefree I even swung my legs back and forth in a childish bit of self-indulgence.

She returned with a video camera. An older, consumer model.

"It's got low-light capability," she said.

She began to hook it up. First she set the base on a tripod and then ran a cable to a VCR under the table. She switched on the television set above which functioned as a monitor.

She positioned the camera UNDER the table, facing out.

"I have an ultra-wide angle lens on it." She told me.

"Uh huh." Stepping to the floor I could see the lower half of my body on the monitor above. It was a grainy, noisy picture. Well below the 50 IRE level (stuff from the video-tech world, ha, ha).

She lifted herself to the table top and scootched back. "I planned this shot. Even story-boarded it," she related, proudly.

"Uh huh." I stared at the monitor. Interesting view of my fly. Mesmerized by the image of legs-I-control I moved a bit.

"What-a-ya-think?" She asked.

"I'm on TV from the belly button down." I said.

She giggled. "Let me...Ooops! Damn. --Forgot something important. Be right back," she promised and vanished again.

I rocked back and forth and watched the monitor, then crouched against the wall to put my face on the television monitor from a position where I could watch it. But I couldn't see my eyes watching me. It was the angle.

How easy it was to satisfy me, I thought. With a few toys I was ready to play TV Studio. It was quiet there too. With better lighting the room could be a reasonable place to do close-ups and record conversational audio. But the white and green paint had to go. Light blue or even gray would do better.

'Who knows', I thought, 'maybe she just wanted to video-plan a scene for a demo-project. Maybe she had backing. --Maybe she needed a director/co-producer. Maybe there was hope.'

She returned with something in her hand. In aluminum foil --an alcohol wipe? Alcohol can clean without leaving a dust-attracting residue, but shouldn't be used on a coated camera lens. 'Should I warn her?' I wondered. Or maybe it was a lubricant...for what? -- An anti-bacterial unguent?

She locked the door and placed the foil wrapped package on the table. It was a prophylactic. To be used as a lens scrim? I had heard of stocking mesh -- but even tightly stretched it would reduce resolution to unacceptable levels. You just never know what they are teaching in film schools these days.

"Put it on." She told me.

"On what?" I asked. --To protect a spare lens?

"On your dick."

That, I was sure, was a joke. I didn't laugh, though. My brow furled in consternation. She hiked up her skirt and put her thumbs into her panty hose, yanked and squirmed.

I beheld her vaginal region.

"Oh shit...Look under the table and see if the recorder is running?" she asked.

I did. "Yeah, it's on..."

"You can eat my pussy if you like," she said, "it's clean."

Out of my enormous stupidity some dim sense began to arrive. "I thought this was a statement, not a taste test."

She giggled. "But you got to put the rubber on."

When I had searched for female eros I rarely found it, and never for free. When I had searched for cinematic success it was never there --always elusive -- frantic blusterings in rented hotel suites or dim, forlorn corridors -- always the same headachy excitement. Looking for the magic whore to cure my loneliness -- My physical loneliness and my intellectual, spiritual loneliness as well. Why could I not believe that suddenly both successes were thrust upon me? The camera quality was too bad to make a porno.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

'What are you a method actor?' She taunted. "Uh, like what's my motivation?" She



mimicked. "Get a hard-on, and go to work."

"See that?" I pointed above her to the television screen starring my lower torso.

"No, I can't." She was mildly impatient.

"It won't work." I said.

"No, because you have your pants on."

"Too much picture noise -- not enough light. I'M blocking the light. See!?"

She leaned forward and craned her neck to see above her. Her bosom brushed my arm. This was actually more arousing than gaping at her crotch.

"Uh huh." She remarked.

"That's first generation. From a VHS master you won't be able to dub or edit shit unless you bump straight to one inch, and that costs a lot." I commented.

"Oh..." She leaned back into position. "I want it that way. We'll go directly to the higher format"

"Okay..."

"I want that look." She told me.

I believed her. We had both come to a common calling. I picked up the prophylactic. It was a Trojan.

"They still make these, huh?"

"Every director or producer or even writer has a performer locked inside." She told me. Her eyes had softened.

She was giving me solid encouragement. I could almost envision the role. I admired her artistic temerity; her calculated disregard for industry standards in lieu of creative license; her commitment to guerrilla film-making so audacious she pared cast, crew and story down to its two basic essentials, male and female, Adam and Eve. -An act of procreation stylized as a lewd performance, yet comic in its avant-garde framing.

"You actually want.." I attempted.

She nodded. A malicious smile lightened her face. Yes, she wanted realism! Fade, please...

\*

Art itself must begin from eros. At least cinema. Suggestions of movement lend themselves to scratchy and poorly resolved paradigms of people fucking. In this case, however, the execution lent itself to comedy.

There were only a few moments of bizarre carnality on the tape. Fortunately for my inflated sense of propriety, the medium itself had a physical glitch in it. As we watched our 'dailies' the remainder of the sequence was marred by intense snow, and destabilization. Next thing one knew, trousers were being pulled up over legs.

"I was going to add voice overs..." She said, looking disappointed.

"Hopefully, readings from the tax code," I suggested.

"Well, we can always do it again...This time I'll use a new, high quality tape."

"Got to be careful about cutting corners," I advised from experience, remembering my 16 mm color reversal, single-sync-system sound, with an un-collimated zoom lens --feature film-- that was a tribute to wow and flutter as well as missing heads in long-shots.

"When will you be ready?" She asked me.

The answer was never again, but I didn't want to discourage her film making intensity. Besides, I was already coveting the role!

"Maybe we should rethink this..." I offered.

"Well, I don't have any good tapes anyway..." She looked saddened, even distraught. She rewound the tape, ejected it and threw it into a trash bucket near the door. She lowered her head as if she were in pain.

"It's not that bad." I suggested, rubbing her back.

"Hey, get offa me!" She protested.

"I'm only..."

"You guys are all alike, if we smile at you, you think you own us," she said bitterly.

"I'm just being friendly. Concerned. I mean, we just had coitus, it's not like we haven't met."

"We didn't have nothing! We was making a video and it got fucked up. The only fuckin' done was that tape." She kicked the trash basket for emphasis.

Again, I admired her thorough professionalism. Her apt divorcement of the actor from the act.

"I'm just trying to be friendly. I not only like you as a person, but I'm committed to you as a video artist." I said.

"Yeah?" She brightened and looked up at me, a kid's face, really, in a woman's frame.

"We all got to tolerate our disappointments and believe me I've had a lot of them."

"You believe I'm an artist?" She asked so full of childish innocence I felt shame for what we had done together.

"Of course..." I knelt down to her level, "Even if nothing ever comes of it, you had a vision and --more than that-- tried to share it...that has got to be something..."

She smiled. "I never thought of it like that."

Neither had I, but it was a temporary consolation for the both of us. "Let's get some coffee or something."

"Okay." She stood up readily, a sheepish smirk shining through her features.

She, too, was dealing with the guilt of trial and failure. I could tell by her sudden awkwardness, she was ill at ease with her nakedness even though she was dressed. We had eaten that apple, she and I, and now knew its caustic taste.

On the way out of her green-painted garden I glanced into the trash bucket. Nestled with the wasted video tape was the used condom. Not all creativity is destined to happen.

\*

Over a burger and an ice cream soda she told me her life story. I sipped coffee and savored the smells in the aging luncheonette.

Her beginnings apparently were happy. But mid way to adolescence something had happened to her mother, her father had disappeared and life began to deal her larger doses of torment. Her great revelation grew from certainties that there was more to her than the roles demanded by manipulative elders, boyfriends and employers. A 'her' to be expressed.

She seemed to think that men thought from the waist down until they were sixty and then they became truly weird.

We exchanged our contact places. Mine was a P.O. Box, hers was a series of phone numbers of girl friends, sisters and her grandmother. She seemed to move between them when internal situations called for it.

I had just enough money in my pocket to pay for her treat, my coffee and a standard gratuity. She beamed as I laid out the coins on the check. I arranged one of the quarters over a huge thumbprint of French fry grease. "For art's sake," I said, hiding the real world behind the manufactured and symmetrical.

She laughed.

We walked into the street and paused clear of the awnings spawned by dying business establishments. She was convincing herself that she liked me, but wondering how to invite herself into my life on a more chaste basis.

I wished to save her the trouble, my immediate needs were not for gratification on a higher level. I needed a job. My survival depended on it. There had to be a hamburger with my name on it, somewhere, and fairly soon, too.

"Rosalie," I said, using her once-given name, "You have the soul of a princess... and I've

learned a great deal from you..." I took her hand. She bubbled and blushed and giggled.

"Yeah, well me too," she said softly with dry lips.

I kissed her hand and her cheek. "Take care love, I'll be in touch."

I used my remaining intuition to discern which way she wasn't going so I could depart in that direction. When I got a half a block away I turned and waved.

She had found her voice again and yelled, "CALL ME!!"

"I WILL!" I responded, turned and blithered toward my next destiny.

### **CHAPTER 3 Looking For A Job.**

*Getting a job from a professional's point of view is an ordeal of time vs. opportunity. Resumes, cover letters and phone calls all synchronized like a well-oiled marketing campaign. First stage: target potential employers as well as available job advertisements. Second stage get appointment for interview. Third stage try and sell oneself. Fourth stage get job and hope to fit in without undue strain. Fifth stage absorb demeanor and persona of company. Fifth stage avoid layoffs in the third, seventh, ninth and fifteenth year of employment. Sixth stage retire after twenty, thirty, thirty-five or forty years of service. Seventh stage go to Florida, lose memory become cantankerous, run up hospital bills, estrange surviving relatives. Eighth stage die.*

*Some of us don't want to be hired because we foolishly think we can avoid the seventh and eighth stages by missing the fourth stage. However, the difficulty to professional employment in this current age is that the lag in time between stages one and two can be from three months to three years, and the lag between stages two and four can run another two years.*

*This does not put a hamburger into one's mouth for the next day. The answer is non-professional employment. Produce a slew of resumes aimed at different occupational groupings, price yourself low and cold call.*

*Use the phone for whatever interview can be gotten TODAY. Visit all the businesses, factories, fast food places that can hit your bid. Drop your bid. Ten dollars an hour, Nine dollars an hour, eight dollars an hour...*

*Forget about retirement. Look for a small handful of cash for the next week. Or an advance against a biweekly pay period with hold-back. Think of the money, as small as it is, as a handhold back to illusions. Once fed, the candidate can start plotting to better life's station. Or dream of film cameras and one's next venture.*

*This is it. Clerical and sales...Credit Manager, 'sure I can do that...aging report...delinquent accounts...I love it' (yech!). Sales. 'Right on.' --Where are the sales jobs? The newspapers are full of pyramid schemes: Multi-Level Marketing. So many haphazard, barely legitimate con-games. No salary, no benefits...just blatant opportunity. Some of them demand payment for 'training' and sales equipment (pitch book). Money can be made at these things. Advancement can be rapid. Yes, it's true, one can start on*

*Monday and be an area manager by Tuesday. But by and large here is an opportunity for frustration and burnout, for squandering one's own expenses by reluctantly prospecting for somebody else. --There is always the opportunity to deliver newspapers. --Back into the communications business; in PRINT MEDIA... I'm not in the editorial end of the paper...too ordinary (have to know how to spell), I'm in distribution...get the fresh air in your face (and the rain, snow, dog-bites etc.)*

On the phone, on the street. Forceful conversations and cheery acceptances of immediate or impending rejections. I think of it as a military campaign. Travel light, live off of the land. No fortresses in the suburbs requiring many thousands in mortgage payments. This is guerrilla jobfare. Sweat and headache regardless of the temperature. Advertising like this requires expenditure of all personal and emotional reserves. Job equals eat. All other philosophies are pure, fucking bullshit --for the moment at least.

Somehow I got an interview at a foundation that claimed to need-a-body to write a newsletter...I waited impatiently in the lobby. My mind wandered. I was to be interviewed by women. I regretted my film-short that provoked charges of insensitivity, as if the guilt could rub off. I was armed with samples of promotional materials I had written, designed, printed and otherwise wasted money on. They were inappropriate. What do I know of women's issues?

My mind drifted to the implausible. 'I've been acting as a consultant to a self-help group for large busted woman. I don't get paid, I do it for the satisfaction...ha, ha that's a joke...actually I admire a woman's form from the REAR; which is much more democratic, don't you think? It disallows discrimination because of race, face or social class which is much more of a frontal attribute. But none of this is lascivious. I look, I think, I attempt photography. It's all a sharing of nature's bounty'.

I was called into the preliminary interview. I was truly non-sexist, almost sexless. The interviewer was a very tall, buxom blonde a few years younger than myself. I was glad she was tall, that should have given her a sense of power and control. I intended to be totally non-threatening. I refused to talk with a lisp, however. I treated her as if I she were a President or a Prime Minister. She probably resented it.

I looked around her office as she read my resume...Looking for any hints to her personality. Nothing, maybe she had none... I intended to only show her the material that related to the themes of redemption in my last film. I would gamble that she was not a confirmed atheist. If I lost on this round, it would not be, I was determined, because I came off as a hedonistic-clown. Ironically it could go either way.

Her eyes were focused densely on the center of my resume. I fought back an urge to pretend I was a Russian emigre...'My film masterpiece 'Anna Karina in Spandex' is still un-shown in the Soviet Union...'. I smiled uncomfortably.

Her eyes scrunched up over some obstacle arising from the midst of my resume. Some Chinese hieroglyphic erecting into a mountainous phenomenon in between sentences that were not very traditional.

"It says, here that you were producing motion pictures..." She said.

"Yes, that's correct..." As if I had given her somebody else's resume by mistake. I saw the line of questioning already. She would think that such a glamorous undertaking would never leave a person broke and stranded in the real world. I hoped I wouldn't have to give her an education in the dynamics of failure. How a vast number of projects never get financed, finished or released. How valuable and productive time can be sucked into these abysses without any monetary reward. That still I must have useful talents I could sell and trade away for others' benefit.

She wanted to talk about movies. Was she an astute interviewer, a film critic who suspected that the themes of one's work told of the inner self? Or just curious, and killing time till she concluded the interview. I suspected the latter. I resolved to construct my next resume out of more lies. 'Made promotional video tapes --which were all lost-- for the tool and die industry, sales training, or whatever.'

"That must have been interesting..." She prodded.

'Yeah, then what the fuck am I doing here?' What a position to be in, to ask for a job because --of all things-- I needed one.

My mouth did the talking. I thought of the motion picture experience...deep into unrecoverable expenses -- standing in the corridor of a poorly lit hotel a day before a trade show...hoping to pitch distributors about...my hopes, my dreams, my despair; the teachings of the greater fool. Display suites were locked...Me dressed up with a borrowed leather briefcase 3,000 miles across the continent about to get murdered by my illusions...'She up there, man...your whore...I got da money for the room...you go up an' get her...enjoy yourself (16 year old putz!)

Corridors of promises...talking deals with those who know better. No dough, no 'pic'.

"...Very interesting, and generally unprofitable, especially if you're working with art-house high-concepts..."

She put my resume down. Her chair was away from the desk. She crossed her legs and leaned back in her swivel chair. Meaty, long gams. They meant nothing to me. I resented her for showing them. Prestigious Institution, or no, the drill was becoming a tease.

Something personal saved my application at the first stage. She would not make a negative decision, but would pass my application onto the next stage. She asked me to return to the waiting area for the next series of interviews. I thanked her and gave her a firm handshake. 'So, you too want to be an actress?'

More time to ponder. Wish-fulfillment. I looked around at the intense nothingness that was not visibly transpiring. My mind wandered off.

## VIDEO REDO

Hotel Hallways/Film Exhibition/Marketing Convention. A day early. Waiting for the set up people. Hoping to beat the crowds...This time I am dressed like Clarabell the Clown. HONK HONK. This will disarm the big executives, I believe.

They gather at my side-show wondering if I am taking orders for drinks. Some of them are my age, but obviously had different parents. HONK HONK. Smiles all around.

I hand out poster-sized business cards, with my film treatments printed on them as well as promotional still shots. Some erotic poses. More interest.

"Are these pictures made already?" I'm asked by a Syndicator/Marketer hungry for cheap product. The great question.

I whip a video camcorder from out of my voluminous pants. "No, I'm making them now!" I announce as I video-tape the faces of the throng before me.

"Onto other suites!" I proclaim on my producing way.

A prostitute stops me. "Somebody gave me twenty bucks for you...Twenty won't buy as much now, as when you were a pimply kid, ya know..." She says.

"That's okay." I video tape her. I'll let the money work for me.

She likes me. It must be the clown suit. She looks me over slowly. From my size 14 clown shoes to my bulbous, red nose. "C'mon."

She takes me into the elevator. We go down. She stops us between floors. There, inside the bowels of this massive building, stuck between top and bottom she wants to tryst. The security guys watching the black and white TV monitors must be freaking out. They fiddle with their controls afraid that they've got the wrong channel. Then they gloat, and stand back to watch. "Look at that lucky clown on the seven and a half floor!"

"Steven? They're ready for you..."

Next interview. Setting, a large conference room. Lead interviewer, a small and fiercely determined woman with a hairdo that the old Lois Lane wore in the original Superman Comics. Flanked by a large, reddish-haired man who maintained an unfriendly disposition. Maybe he was the only male in the place and wanted to keep it that way. I could see that they had decided, and it wasn't me.

\*\*

It's important not to overdress for blue color jobs. I wore my fatigue jacket with a clean shirt and green work pants. I carried a resume which listed my occupation as driver and sound technician at my defunct company. On the application I wrote, 'company went bankrupt' in the space reserved for why I left my previous position.

I was treated better by the hiring people than at the Prestigious Institution. The head of personnel and the plant manager were making the determinations and they pulled no punches.

"Says here you were a sound technician, too. Can't you get anything there...My neighbor plays in a band...they do these recording things..." He suggested. He was tired and drank coffee. He had been talking to would-be's all morning, and hated it.

"I wasn't a sound engineer, just a technician (subtle difference) I'm trainable, or re-trainable..." I offered, hoping not to come off as too smart.

"Says here you were a driver. What did you drive?" The personnel person asked.

"Everything up to a ton and a half flatbed." I said.

The plant manager frowned. "No semi experience..you know, trailer-truck?"

"...No..." (Jeeze, something else I haven't done beside brain surgery).

They paused as the plant manager finished his coffee. The interview was taking place in a dank excuse for a company lunch room at a long folding table. There were two piles of applications on the table. The larger one was of rejects. The smaller, the hopefuls. Paper clips lay about in random disbursement.

"Nah...No...Sorry Steve, we gonna have to pass on you right now. We want a few production people. Could use another driver maybe, but with a license for tractor trailer ...Loretta, keep him on file for something that might come up in Quality Control... But, (to me) I wouldn't wait on it. Things are on the slow-side now, Steve..."

I reached forward to shake hands. Loretta, the personnel person tried to rescue me.

"You don't have any forklift experience, do you?" She asked.

"A little..." I said, trying to think of the name of the compressed-air-operated machine at the paint factory, in a different state, that had been graced by my temporary presence.

The plant manager reconsidered for a moment, then waved me away. "No...Sorry."

On the way out I passed a long line of applicants. Their eyes avoided mine. I wondered why. Maybe it was the exuberance I displayed at being passed over.

Next up, cleaning office buildings, and night security guard at a suburban hospital. It's just amazing what a good education can do for you.

\*\*

There is a very narrow difference between being connected and unconnected in this world. Some think it's in the clothes (the outer man!) --'If I wear a suit, I'll never be taken for a bum'. Too many unlucky former white collar types along with professors in the humanities who refused to learn DOS, or did not take the advantages of a military career seriously, now wander among the other insane.

A suit that was last dry-cleaned by sleeping under a warm truck is no barrier against crossing the bridge to public failure. Unfortunates with filth encrusted oxford shirts and second hand sneakers are too common a sight on the byways.

I attempted the tactic of moving in my waning days. Fearing that I would soon be unable to afford a place to live, I took to the bus lines.



'In Transit', city after city... Occasionally stopping to read the local want ads (I had to concoct reasons why my cover letter was written in pencil...laptop broke down, laser printer on the blink...--and why I was there --. Great opportunities in...--where the fuck am I? Waiting for my condo to be ready...).

*The jobs I pursued, first, were often sales/marketing/copy writer positions that I thought REQUIRED one to present a creative version of reality; why I was usually rejected was a mystery. --Did they expect to hire honest people to lie for them? Perhaps my lies and half-truths were just not convincing enough...*

*I thought of starting my own religion --on the back of those buses rocking across nighttime America... but I didn't have enough chicanery in me. Besides, I had already flirted with such things in my last attempt at film making. Creating a workable new faith based on living human redemption seemed like too much weird fantasy. Ruminative thinking about it was not healthy and besides a private mini-series of this starring me in God's eyes was already committed to words that had echoed uselessly outside my own head.*

I surmised that such hopes were the purest form of vanity -- crystalized into substances dangerous to myself. I was determined to hunt down a paycheck doing something I could explain in a simple sentence. I knew it would not be easy.

I shivered off cold thoughts as I saw hobos at the terminals living out of attache cases. 'Oh no, not me, next,' I hoped.

I remembered my last casting call in the upstairs suite of a motor inn off the turnpike. I didn't own a decent overcoat, so I wore longjohns under my summer, business suit. The weather in Vegas at the previous month's exposition had been a better climate to struggle in, but more foreign than the wintry East Coast.

What a cold night it was. The people came to do their tricks for me. And I, like the Almighty, watched and tried not to laugh. Once or twice, --unlike the Almighty-- I broke down and offered vast encouragement to a performer that seemed to have something...but alas was as pitiful as my own opportunities. How sad for all of us...

\*

Always back to where I had begun, with more experience and less resources; it seemed like I just couldn't escape fate. I followed the morning rush hour crowds from the bus station and caught from them a sense of destination, though after many long blocks my pace began to meander.

A city has so many options --even if they rush into a blur. The women tend to exist in grades: Upper class Anglo women with fine hair, high cheek bones and delicate nose bobs, low class woman, dark and sensuous, shorter and in tight britches and heavy makeup. A rising and descending scale of eros. The white whores take American Express in the high rises and only come down to earth for shopping. --The darker women work the streets.

No opportunity, no appointments and no obligations dilute the need to get anywhere. I watched the deal makers at work. The few investment bankers scurrying to their phones. The copier, leasing salesmen making their rounds, the drug dealers and common thieves circulating more slowly. In a city, at least you are here.

I wasted some time filling out an application for a 'temp' job but my typing was too slow for consideration. I gave up and wandered back toward the bus station. I decided to head for suburbia and make a serious attempt for the hospital security job. I hoped they didn't demand a lie detector test, for I would most certainly attempt to lie.

\*

The building was pleasant from the outside. I entered on a hopeful note and quickly found the personnel office. I filled out the application sheet with a pencil stub --an emigre from a miniature golf course.

Education: I gave myself only three years of college. I rejected the idea of using my alter ego film character for the interview, after all he never sold any of my films -- why have him screw up the interview?

Previous Employment: I made myself an assistant production manager at my defunct company...(not too bossy, but detail oriented!) I highlighted military service but stopped short of listing all the weapons I thought I could work. They weren't looking for Rambo here, and I didn't want to use the nickname 'Killer' or 'Gunner' either.

Interview time: With two black women, the Assistant Personnel Manager and the head of the switchboard; (chief operator). The security people would be more on the mild-side, like a uniformed receptionist. Better. I did away with sullen or remote expressions. Nixed the 'dees' and 'does' from my vocabulary and decided to appear forthright and honest. Which ironically, I probably am, though these traits have done me little good in the world of success.

They wouldn't buy my act, these two interviewers. The Personnel woman suspected that I was an ex-Insurance agent moonlighting to pay the bills of personal failure. Perhaps she thought I was addicted to pay-call pornography phone lines. Her eyes seem to ask me 'What are you doin' here, white boy?'

The chief operator paid no attention to me what-so-ever. Her only purpose in the interview was to run screaming from the room if I turned out to be a drug-crazed, psycho killer whacked out on 'crank'. --'I BE FUCKIN' DIS WALL!! YOU HEARS WHAT I SAY, BITCH?!

"When would you be available?" The Personnel person asked.

"This evening."

The Personnel person evaluated me critically. She rolled her pencil between two fingers as if it were a useless dustball. She was miles from me. Her complexion was slightly jaundiced, and so was her attitude. No doubt born of experience.

"Look, " I said... "I don't drink. I'm drug free and always have been. I'm not psychotic. I won't steal and I need the work..."

"How long would you be here? Till something better came along?" The Personnel person asked.

"Months...Years...I don't know...What difference does it make; you're not going to send me to medical school, are you?"

This made them both laugh.

"What do you think, Heddy?" The Personnel person asked her cohort, who still avoided looking at me.

"No difference to me. At least this one doesn't seem to have been in jail..."

"We can schedule you for a physical this afternoon..." The Personnel person said.

My face lit up as if I had been made a head bond trader, or president of a major motion-picture studio. I would be able to use the hot showers upstairs. Hallelujah...if only I could tolerate the hospital ambiance of death and dismemberment. I would force myself to last the week.

## **FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE FORGOTTEN FILM-MAKER**

The 'Alter-Ego'.

A formative, or planned short subject: Man with a mission. Featuring my alter ego character, yet with a mildly criminal determination; a socially maladjusted vitality! Wearing a jungle camouflage shirt (--in the making for so many years it's dated--), blue jeans, shades. Walking. Camera hand-held, in front of character. The mission of course must be ludicrous. The conclusion of the film must contradict its onset. The pacing, the vibrancy of its music and editing must falter for the punchline.

What was the punchline? What was the mission? My first go-round fell flat. I was going to title the film 'The Gunner' and pose this caricature as a would-be hired gunman, but deliver him to a bachelor party where he empties several squirts of his realistic looking water pistol onto the groom and the dancing girls. Eh.

Instead, I worked on a more bizarre offering, 'Marvin of the North Country'. No meanness to the character. A silent epic cut to a narrative using documentary cadences. Marvin in his room packing belongings for a trudge in the frozen wastes of the far north. Packing his duffel bag for the coming ordeal... all the interiors done from a single perspective, --before a 'Visit Alaska' poster. The narration ticks off the spare survival statistics of such an intrepid journey, how every ounce of gear must be worth its weight in need, as my character solemnly packs his portable TV set for the long and lonely winter nights on the trail.

Next shot, the exterior...coming forward slowly into the wide angle lens. Dragging a flexible flyer children's sled along the packed ice of the driveway. Pausing up close to the

camera, giving an expression of such foolish pathos, followed by a silly smirk.

But Marvin of the North Country went nowhere either. Instead, I planned a satire of a B-grade detective movie, with closeups dominating the beginning. The mysterious phone call taken suddenly. The small, unsuspecting voice on the receiver inviting itself into calamity -- punctuated by a crescendo of startling music. The phone call's recipient wide eyed in horror about such an inappropriate and unexpected visit. The next shots are master shots from the ceiling. intercut with floor level close ups. The interior is a mess. Litter and strewn belongings are piled ankle-high everywhere. With frantic expressions and bedeviled, almost slapstick efforts, the character attempts to conquer this vast mess to the sound of a vastly exaggerated music score fit for a heroic effort against a major storm or earthquake.

With most of the mess manhandled into one room, the doorbell rings, and my character collapses from effort. Has he hidden his secret or been outwitted? Company awaits him at the front door. --"The Mess."

I didn't make that one either. I got a renewed ending for the mission of the more criminal-type in *The Gunner*. I had his purposeful walk end up in a hospital. Sneeringly, he arrives at a ward where accident victims sit in their wheel chairs. He selects one hapless-looking young man and meanly wheels him toward the emergency stairway.

Here we enter the world of special effects. He wheels the accident victim to the steps and lets go. As the wheelchair and its victim begin to bounce in descent from step to step. The instigator runs alongside yelling and waving his arms. The audience notices for the first time that the mean antagonist wears white sweat socks with black shoes. The victim also waves and screams as he bounces along from step to step. --Out of sheer panic or is this a roller-coaster ride of thrills? At last they reach a landing and pause. The wheel chair is still upright and motionless. They look at one another and the rider asks his perpetrator "MORE." And they do another flight with all the same insane gleefulness.

At the first floor, the fun is abandoned, and the one with purpose simply walks away, leaving his partner-in-wild-fun, looking back curiously as he leaves. The *Gunner* with his back to the camera walks away with a sense of great accomplishment, --pride in a job well done.

I never made these films, though I did make many like them. Bizarre offerings that gave reference to my uncommercial creativity. The characters, whether they victimized themselves or others were all drawn from visions and versions of my supposed alter ego. It was me, or the part of me who had to stay after school for clowning during class. How simple the origin! Only in the alter ego's world, detention had no limits. There was no discipline to impose itself on this clowning, and no parental authority to reprove it. This was my artistic-comedy period known as adolescents. As I got older it too would evolve.

#### **CHAPTER 4 Suck-sess Demonstrated**

Answering those ads for talent...'scripts wanted'; Is worse than playing the lottery. At the least the lotteries are for real. But from time to time, if I can justify postage I will reply to those dubious advertisements for scripts to such and such a post office box. I usually send

my last attempt at a prospectus: A partial script, treatment, line item budget with recap, promo sheets with stills, a pseudo/semi impressive resume and a mini business plan. I also include a card with my own p.o. box number.

Then I forget about those things. It's better that way.

But this time, I got a bite. A letter on official-looking stationary from some venture capital communications company landed in my mail box. I called the number from a pay phone prepared to do a narrative of calling from out-of-town or my private jet or whatever -- as the trucks rolled by.

Mr. Beel (a real name?), the principal himself, answered the phone and set up an appointment at his office. I was guarded about what could possibly come of this, but his folksy, down-to earth attitudes relaxed my cynicism. Perhaps he was so unfamiliar with the film business he had no idea what was going on. A positive sign!

I rented a shower, borrowed my best suit from the storage locker, outfitted myself with two additional scripts and budgets, considered bringing my 'reel', but decided better of it, and was off to follow his explicit directions.

Miles and miles later...walk miles, bus miles and walk miles, again...In a far away borough of a monstrous metropolis--Outside of a large, older apartment house, I was certain that I had made a terrible error. I must have done a north instead of a south...His prestigious office could not exist behind the facade that hung laundry from its balconies, could it?

The front entrance way was open for a delivery, I entered, feeling silly in a suit and tie. Feeling shamed for carrying scripts and budgets.

The elevator didn't work. I took to the steps. Why was I even walking up there? Why wasn't I hurrying to a phone to call and get corrective instructions to the appropriate building?

The floor. The possible and indicated floor...I had a flashback. Several in fact. Being murdered as a teenager in a would-be bordello which turned out to be a hallway and fire escape...A film exhibition and trade show...trying to peddle my producer-shtick from suite to suite among the west coast and east coast independents encamped in a large hotel. My first impression of the first day in those dim and potentially powerful corridors...Laundry carts filled with dirtied sheets of past patrons. The human residue about to be washed of its soilings...It was so reminiscent of my earliest experience of searching for a whore who was not there. I had come back. And now twice.

At least at the exhibition, some independents showed up by the next day, so I could justify my mounting expenses as I took my rejections and collected business cards. This time some foolish precognition told me I was in the correct building, and still in the wrong place.

I located the appropriate 'suite'. The trimmed remnant of a business card was tacked to the door. I was too tired and chagrined to actually laugh. I did smile.

In fact I savored the full sequence of psychic stimulations that flooded my brain. I looked around at the neighbors' doors. All shut as tightly as clams.

It's in those hallways full of locked and shabby doors behind which other peoples' lives -- no matter how ordinary -- proceeded, while mine waits, that it comes to me ...Accompanied by a vague and excited urge to void, mark my territory, I get that ironic and neurotic deja-vu -- the nostalgic rediscovery of misplaced destiny.

While these unknown others behind the aging doors use them for points of references, to go into and out of, to me they are simply closed and devoid of promise, an unmeasurable distance away from the main stage of life.

Sometimes, my own view of reality becomes so distorted with frightful symbology only an insane laugh based on a total lack of incongruity has any saving grace.

With that maniacal laugh, I rang the doorbell and waited. There was a long nothing. My mood shifted to dark anger. I wanted to confront my tormentor. I needed to know that it was indeed a crafty demon, and not myself who was doing such things to me.

Then the door opened. A pleasant and folksy Mr. Beel, wearing a yellow-stained white shirt let me into his office apartment. I replied to his polite offers of tea or coffee with cheerful refusals. Afterall, being a nut did not mean he lacked capital. Those with more credibility had done nothing for me either.

I sat or rather sank into his aging couch. I listened to his talk. A salesman's gift for separating suckers from their money seemed to surface from his more affluent and rewarding youth. I think he wanted to act as my agent in securing financing for certain advanced sums.

It was remarkable that as my disposition turned cooler his remained the same. He had not the slightest embarrassment for his situation. As his sales chat ran thin, he simply nodded his head, reminding me of some unfortunate bird or reptile taken in by a curious citizen. I felt some pity for him.

"So is this how you make a living?" I asked.

He shrugged. Our chat was over. Perhaps his situation was even more desperate and sorrowful than my own. As I picked up my scripts and budgets to carry back, I realized from my aching arm how heavy they had become. I was very glad I hadn't wasted the effort of lugging anything else.

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The newspapers were full of the typical run of pie-in-the-sky advertisements for the entrepreneurial type. I was lonely for reality, and desperate for an income producing concept. The night-time hospital gig was over.

I considered desk-top publishing --using rub-on letters-- because, while I could borrow a desk-top, I had no publishing apparatus. What would I desk-top publish? How about a ribald novel composed on the backs of fictitious and facetious advertisement coupons. If

the former didn't work, I could use the latter as part of my portfolio --to do what else? I already had an imposing portfolio of mistakes and other also-rans.

My mind, always prone to fall into the same groove, went back to non-print media. It imagined a parody of suave and sexy commercials in which the punch line for every spot was the same: A throaty plea, "I want to see your underpants."

I even designed the climax shot, a model bending over and...I myself would check the lighting (F8 against an 18% grey card) two 1000 watt lowell soft lights for fill, a mini-klieg bounced off of white card for backlight, and diffused mini for soft key lighting. Select the lense, a prime, 10mm wide angle with minimal edge distortion. And direct:

"Quiet!, Slate bottom shot, Grips, as she bends over begin to dolly in. First Assistant, watch the marks and pull focus...(or better yet) Give me the camera, I'll hand-hold it. (To the actress-model) O.k. honey this one's for arts' sake. Remember I got a feature coming up soon (Because God knows I can't pay you for this!) Tape? (Rolling) Camera? (Speed) ACTION!"

Why did I need additional experiences of this kind? The ones I had, had already proven to be costly and unprofitable. I paid closer attention to the want ads. I passed over the big boxed ads, because I had little hope that my resume would surface to the top of the slush-pile amid the thousand or so received. My resume would die the death of an unsolicited manuscript anywhere in the publishing business. I also ignored the anonymous ads that required its respondents to reply in confidence to a box number. Who were those companies? Privatized versions of the old KGB? Besides I had never heard from any of them. For all I knew there was one company at work, determined to get a collection of 500 resumes and award me a 'good-customer' sticker from the U.S. Post Office.

'SALES; BIG BUCKS; CALL MOE!' At least there was a name and a phone number with this ad, though Moe could be the first name of an alias with a dozen pseudo last names like White, Green, Black, Smith, Walters, Blow etc. All of them simultaneously working for a head-hunting firm of 'Recruiters' or 'Placement Specialists' trying to show some activity by having me come in for a useless interview, fill out useless paperwork, grill me about who I've interviewed with and then call up of all my prospective employers in a wasted effort to get himself a job before being fired for placing no one into anything.

I called Moe. Moe sounded busy and was barely interested that I claimed vast sales experience. Moe said, "Come on down."

I went. And hurriedly at that, pulling on wrinkled pants, and a saggy sports jacket. I did put on a tie, hoping I'd pass muster as a hungry sales-type.

The company that afforded Moe his attitude and life style was called F.B.B. Distributors. F.B.B. was located on a dead end, mud-rutted alley in the rust belt section. A mangy dog barked at me. The creature was obviously chained to an ancient fence so that a desperate person in the mood for canine parts or balding dog-skin would not steal him. Surely there was little about of any value to guard!

Inside, F.B.B. I found a bent folding chair in a freezing reception area. Moe himself (I could tell because his name, 'Moe' was sewn onto his work jacket) sat nearby writing things in a ledger. A toothpick hung from his mouth.

Shit, I thought, I'm overdressed.

"Yeah?"

"I'm Steve," I said, rushing forward to shake his huge paw.

"Hiya."

Moe seemed pleased to meet me. Good thing too, because he seemed to subsist on raw meat and steroids. He was a young man and fairly monstrous.

Moe began his mechanical pitch. It seemed that F.B.B. stood for 'Food By the Box.'  
"Direct to the consumer. Flash frozen to lock in freshness."

Marketing plan? Knock on doors.

Commission structure? Ten bucks a box for "Youse."

Company vehicle promised to all sales-representatives? "You seen 'em on 'da way in." -- Seven year old mini-pickup with 100,000 miles on its dented body; a food locker packed with dry ice chained onto the truck bed.

General concept? Combination of Good Humor Man, Steak-on-a-Stick and aluminum siding sales.

Training? Spend a day (at your own time and expense) with one of the guys on his run. When could I start?

"Whataya doin' right now?" Moe asked, removing his toothpick for poignant effect.

I could go home and take a nap, I thought.

Moe read my mind. "Ya gotta be disciplined." (Easy for a guy who lifts weights four hours a day to say this. What about a guy who makes movie in his head?) "You could take the truck out in the morning and go to sleep. --Ya don't make no money, and 'den we get rid-a-ya."

Perhaps he felt he was being too hard on me. He eased up and showed me the other side of Moe, the softer side, "My guys make at least 800 bucks a week. It's 'luke-ri-tive'."

I hesitated.

"Hey!" Moe shouted over his shoulder, "Is Abe back there loadin' up?"

Confused replies answered him from the flash-frozen, interior regions.

"Here's a fuckin' immigrant from Russia or China or somethin' makin' a grand in his pocket -- two hundred a day," Moe confided in me, "--He hustles! If a fuckin' immigrant



can do 'dat; can't even talk right...think whud a person-like-yourself can do..."

'A person-like-yourself'. Suddenly I got a sense of who Moe's usual candidates were...A gaggle of scabied twits, and substance-dependent bizarros. I, at least, was still a person-like myself.

"Bye the way," Moe asked, "You know anything about food?"

I wanted to say, 'I've been eating food for almost a year now. Before that I used to eat dog shit. Food's better.' I affected a quizzical look.

"I mean, you-know, like gourmet steak?" Moe added.

"Uh..."

A grinning fellow of compact stature and dark complexion arrived. His teeth had been the sight of very curious dentistry that left them capped with something resembling stained tin.

"Nevermind," Moe said in regard to his question. "This here is Abram Habiru, a new comer. Bean wit' me for seven months an' doin' real well."

"Hello. Good meeting you," Abram said stiltedly through his self conscious smile.

"Where you from Abe?" Moe asked, his merriment mingled with condescension.

"From? From in de back. Put boxes in truck," Abe answered.

Moe laughed, "That's a dumb-fuck answer. No! Where you from? Like your country. You-country?" Moe demanded, trying to mimic Abe's unique accent, "You-country?"

"From Hha-Run," Abe said. It sounded almost like a bark.

Moe smirked.

"Hha-Run." Abe repeated.

I shrugged.

Moe laughed, "Ya see?" He remarked for my benefit. "You can't even understand where-in-the-fuck he comes from; yet he SELLS food. To Americans!" Moe added so I wouldn't think Abe was acting as a merchant for a colony of his own people who sold jeweled nose bangles for frozen steak and bagels.

"I hab' beeg fam-i-lee," Abe said, grinning. "Very beeg. Need money to survive."

"Abe, you take Steve out --this Steve (he patted my chest with his paw)-- Show him how to make money?" Moe instructed in accented, pidgin English.

I wished someone would show me how to make money, I thought.

"New guy?" Abe asked of me.

"Yup."

"Very good," Abe grinned, "Come, I show you..."

\*

The man worked tirelessly. I imagined that in his native land he arose at 2:00 A.M. to chase wolves away from his goats, fetched water two miles for his donkey and children. And then carried forty pounds of dried dung on his head to a village in the next county where he sold it by the piece for an 1/8th of a cent in order to buy sticks for the evening return to his hut of dried mud.

Abe performed his new labors with the enthusiasm of a freedman in the promised land. He drove great distances, he knocked on hundreds of doors and badly suffered through his pitch about "flesh-frozen mit an' crack-shell, (Flash frozen gourmet meats and King Crab legs sans shell)"

I smirked to myself from behind him. Occasionally he sold things to these people. Some folks recognized him. "Hello there."

A jovial older Black woman greeted him from the hand holds of her walker. "I got some money today. Get me a box of that filet mignon. We got a poor house and no car, but, damn it, we can eat jus' like the rich folks." She told me.

Except for the cholesterol, she might be eating better than the rich folks. Abe knew better than to solicit in exclusive neighborhoods. We seemed to be selling to the poorer neighborhoods. Fifty bucks a box for fancy grub. I stopped smirking.

Eventually, I grew tired and hungry. My fingers were becoming numb from holding the frozen boxes for Abe, who unable to read, had trouble recognizing this variety from that without opening all of them repeatedly.

"No, it's steak," I would say.

"Hmmm?" H would smile politely and begin to open the box again.

"SSS-TAKE!" I said.

"O.K. Sst-ake." He repeated, continuing to smile as he placed more boxes in my tiring arms to bring to another lady too ill to shop, who was preparing an enormous feast in a cluttered and dirty kitchen. I was becoming depressed.

Abe and I had coffee and burgers at a medium-slow, fast food restaurant. We said little. I wondered if I could possibly work at a job such as the one that was occupying my time for free. Abe seemed untroubled by his turbulent existence in the expensive food business.

He did not eat his entire burger, though, but tucked a piece of it into his shirt pocket. The vagaries of life had made me weary enough not to question unusual habits.

Soon, we were back in the worn seats of the pickup heading down a stretch of highway

toward another community of hungry citizens. Unexpectedly, Abe stopped on the shoulder of the road and left the cab to join a nearby telephone pole.

I cringed at the thought of him urinating on it in the full view of the highway. But he seemed to converse before it meditatively as if in prayer. At the conclusion of the impromptu service he took the little piece of hamburger from his pocket and placed it in offering, to either his Deity or carnivorous squirrels, upon one of the metal rungs of the pole. He bowed slightly and returned to the truck. We drove.

"Why you sad?" He asked me.

I pushed away at my confounding lethargy and taking him as a father/confessor admitted my reservations, "I don't know if I can do just anything for the money."

His brows knit together and I figured that he couldn't understand what I said, so I let it pass.

"You (mshzugga..?)" he said.

"What?"

"Word from my country. We have fewer words -- so they mean more things. This word mean, 'you fuckin' silly in your brains'."

"Huh?"

"You rich?" he asked, rhetorically.

"No."

"Then you got make money. No matter what," he said.

The beggar understood. (And had the temerity to correct me!)

"Would you do anything for money?" I asked.

"For sure. If I had to, I pimp my wife."

I betrayed shock.

"Not today. She fat now. But...sometime..." He shook his head with a nervous wisdom, "Remind me, oh...I got call her...See phone!" He slowed down to stop at a pay phone along the highway.

I watched as he jangled the coins in. It was remarkable how this fellow could transcend millenniums from the Bronze Age to the telephone company in moments. I overheard his call:

"Lo? Sarai?..." Then he loosed a cascade of guttural language that contained a strong embodiment of emotion. Of what kind I couldn't tell. He listened quietly for a minute and then erupted into a commotion of vituperation.

Fighting sleepiness, I got out of the truck and began to stroll along the shoulder of the road. Half way out of earshot, I turned to watch Abe. He was gesturing wildly as he unfurled a fluent verbosity I would not have suspected him capable of. Approaching us along the same shoulder was a curious group of tall and rangy fellows. I felt apprehension.

Traffic zoomed by. A truck trying to pass was forced to pull back into lane. The truck blew a tire and lurched toward the shoulder.

"LOOK OUT!!" I screamed.

The truck's grill caught the rear left fender of F.B.B.'s parked pickup and tossed it. The trucker slammed his breaks on smearing hundreds of feet of black skid marks along the highway and shoulder. The pickup careened to its side leaking things. Boxes of food lay scattered about the roadway.

I ran toward the pay phone. Abe was crouched beside it, the dangling phone spoke a female version of Abe's language into the air. He seemed alright, but the tall and rangy interlopers were upon us and uninterested in our welfare.

"Looka-'dis! Frozen food! Pick 'dis shit up!" They exclaimed grabbing at it.

They glared at me as I was elbowed aside. I wondered what course of action to take.

Abe didn't wonder. He shouted unknown expletives as he felt with his hands along the truck bed under spilled dry ice. He located a tire iron amid the stinging rubble and sprang forth to attack the invaders. Shouting onomatopoeic primal shouts, he swung his weapon at their weaving forms.

I stepped forward, shouting, "Abe, it's not yours either!"

Holding only two or three boxes a piece, the hooligans fled from his attack. Abe almost chased after them but followed my cue to pick up the rest of the merchandise and repack it in the freezer with the remaining dry ice.

"Bandits," he said.

The truck's driver reached us on foot. Abe returned to the telephone and hearing something he couldn't understand motioned me to take the call. He and the truck driver commiserated about their awful luck. I put the phone to my head.

"Please deposit an additional two dollars."

"There's been an accident." I said.

"Two dollars..."

"There's been an accident..." I repeated.

"That'll be two dollars..."

I hung up the phone. Abe asked me what the voice was asking for.

"Money," I said.

"For why?" he asked.

"Because that's what everyone wants." I told him. Neither he, nor the truck driver disputed this.

The pay phone rang, but none of us answered it.

"So, where you guys from?" The trucker asked.

"Hha-Run," Abe said.

\*

HOURS LATER: A displeased Moe, summoned from his highly valued work out in the gymnasium was given the facts of the unfortunate occurrences. He wasn't certain if the company's insurance could cover all the damages and threatened to make Abe pay for the stolen food boxes out of his commissions.

"He risked his life against three big thieves." I told him.

Moe was unimpressed. I could see in his eyes displeasure with Abe's performance. If a driver-salesman the size and brawn of Moe had been in that situation not a box would be missing.

"Sorry you had a bad day..." Moe said to me, apparently eager to lose the services of a 'person-like-myself' lest I hang around long enough to contemplate a law suit against Food By the Box.

I waited at a bus stop for transportation that would run very infrequently this time of night. My anxiety about safety in that foul district was tempered by an evil headache and a sour disposition.

Abe pulled up alongside me in a tattered station wagon that was twenty five years old.

"You want ride?"

Afraid of the consequences, uncertain of the directions, I shook my head, "No, thanks."

He nodded, understanding the nature of my personal demons.

"Here," he said, handing something small to me.

"What's this?" I expected it to be some talisman or a newspaper clipping from Istanbul. It was a crumpled fifty dollar bill.

"Jeeze, thanks, but I can't take this," I said and handed it back.

"I still make over one hundred today. Moe mad, but he get over it...who else good as

me?" he laughed, "You take, you helped."

"No, this is yours." I protested.

"If I make \$ 2,000; you take 50, right?" he pressed.

"Yeah..."

"If I make 500; you take 50?"

I began to see his wisdom of have and have-not.

"You good guy," he said, "But you work other place...okay?"

"Okay. Thank you," I said.

Abe nodded, and my adopted father/confessor drove off into his own inheritance such as it was.

Now that I had fifty bucks to steal, I waited all the more frenetically for my bus to arrive. For distraction I forced myself to contemplate my next entrepreneurial venture. I would use what I learned from the food by the box business. How about, I wondered, 'Subs from Home'?

\*\*\*

I was sorting through the last scraps of supposedly creative papers or business documents. By now the larger pile was for the trash. Several boxes and the folding chair I sat on were destined for the storage locker. I had been hesitant about terminating my telephone, but it had been so inactive I hardly considered it a setback. No phone, no bill. No office, no rent

The telephone, perched off of the floor by a short stack of directories, rang. One phone call could turn my life around. One interested buyer could give me sustenance, could enrich my vocabulary with terms like 'completion bond' instead of 'pizza, plain' for the Wednesday night special.

Even a professional-level job in advertising or public relations could buy me time, lend me some hope.

"Production office, Steven speaking..." Yes, my administrative assistant was busy faxing financial statements, and my secretary was on the other line making airline reservations.

"Hello, is this Steven?" A woman's voice, familiar.

"Yes..."

"This is Sarah Greene..."

Suddenly my administrative assistant was painting houses, and my secretary was considering my resume as an assistant receptionist to her.

"Do you remember me?" She asked.

"Of course. How are you?" I asked.

"Are you extremely busy? Or do you have a moment?"

"Several moments..." I said.

"Should I, like, call you back?"

"No, no..."

"Did you sell your project?"

"No."

"I mean, you know, raise money for it?" Sarah asked.

"No."

"Well, you will, soon, I'm sure." She insisted. ""Anyway, I have some news for you..."

"Yes?" Maybe she was forming a production company and would hire me. My newest film could feature her, maybe it would be an after-school special: 'The Teacher Is A Person, Also'.

"I do remember you...in my class..." She giggled.

"Uh huh?"

"In fact," She began, but paused to laugh, "I have some of your papers..."

"School papers?" I asked.

"Yeah..." She laughed. "I put some of the interesting ones in a box. I found yours this morning... You had pretty sloppy handwriting."

"I still do." I said.

"Yeah, well...I marked your paper 'Pretty weird'. I wonder what made me keep it?"

"You can relieve yourself of it now." I suggested.

"Oh no..." She laughed, "Unless," She adopted a conspiratorial tone, "You want to pay me for it..."

"Hardly."

"Someday they'll be worth some money..."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well,... It was a creative writing assignment. And yours came in late. It's a science

fiction story. It's just so goofy. Unintentionally goofy... There were several other students who I thought had some real gift for creativity..."

"They're probably doctors and lawyers today." I commented.

"A lot of fighting over nothing on this strange planet..."

"Sounds like Earth." I said.

"No... Well, maybe it is... but you made sure the reader didn't think so... Who would have guessed that you, of all people, would become a film and TV producer, especially based on this..."

"Did you call me to make me feel better?" I inquired facetiously.

"I'm still going to keep this. One day it might be worth something. All the other juvenile crap I'm gonna pitch. I'm moving you know..."

"Me too." I said.

"Oh? To where?" She asked.

"Anywhere. Actually I have been traveling (by bus)... Taking a look at opportunities in other areas..." I said,

"Oh?" She sounded concerned as if she were about to lose contact with a friend. "How did you find them? The opportunities, I mean?"

"There aren't any. I came back to close the office..."

"Uh huh... Look, I just wanted to tell you that I do remember you. You sat near the window, and daydreamed a lot."

"That's me. I still do that, when I can afford a window, that is." I said.

"I don't remember you having much interest in Literature or Theater..."

"Or spelling." I added.

"Very strange how fate works..." She insisted. "But I know you will make it. You have to have faith. Things that you have done will be valuable..."

"All my experiences have been valuable." I said.

"Remember me, when you get there." She asked of me.

"Absolutely. Sarah, I shall remember you even if I don't get there."

"Well thank you." She said, as if I had said something very kind.

Our conversation ended. I tried to recall if she used the word extremely in her conversation. Then I thought of the story I had submitted to her, thinking it was a



masterpiece. I felt slightly embarrassed.

## **FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE FORGOTTEN FILM-MAKER**

THE 'HIGHER MAN'-THING (and how thinking you know better can just make you crazy)

The script was written and re-written twelve times; the search for backers had been exasperating and fruitless. The independent distributors, once eager to offer one-sided contracts for anything (as long as they could step out of it when delivered) were flush with some unexpected victories and less than indifferent to the prospect of offering a formal cover for me to overextend myself. Soon the independents, laid low by a string of unexpected failures, would be evaporating from the scene. My hope of accomplishing my most ambitious project-to-date was evaporating as well. But the obsession of it wouldn't go away.

Here was an evolution in my work. Formerly, my alter-ego, made fun of the world I had trouble living in. Now my alter ego was attempting to witness the struggle between hope and general depravity; the painful birth (death/mystical re-birth) of the higher human. True, it was an ancient theme. True, I wasn't leaving too much to be guessed at, I had stuck Jesus Christ straight into the formula. To my possibly demented mind there did seem to be something unique, even comical about the framing of the issues. I even considered the climax to be haunting and respectful.

Perhaps I even thought I was uncovering some new ground here. But, as years went by it seemed that what ever I had been working at was to remain unknown. Eventually, I feared, even I would forget it. The only way to preserve reality, I knew, was to contrive it as illusion. This was the great truth of the media age. (Or any age.)

In my determination to accomplish this I had rewritten the 'property' from a small budget to a larger one, and then down to a minuscule one. Toward the end, I decided to play all (or most) of the parts myself and tape it with a video camera. Such was my sense of delusion over this.

Instead I opted to commit my last remaining funds for a practically no-budget promotional reel of the concept. It meant boiling things down to five or six characters, taping some interplay among poorly rehearsed performers with varying degrees of experience and posing everybody in costume for stills.

Reality to illusion; expectation to results --what a delicious joke it made. My vision of the film was semi-art, a smoky-noir; the human comedy spiced with provocative bite, and flagrant pragmatism made silly. I had some sort of dialectic about a Jewish Jesus struggling for acceptance in the Gentile world. Instead, I got a nervous casting call in a rented motor hotel suite near the turnpike. This was supplemented by auditions in a borrowed living room. Various folks, some earnest, some nuts, did their tricks for me. Before it was over, I gave in and had a good time at my own expense.

The tapes are hiding in a box some place. At best they are raw and even ridiculous. I did get my precious poster to remind me of the great film I never made. But sashaying

through some hand held shots is a very sexy actress trying to work with the meagerly understood material I had given her...Attempting cues with my minimalist direction (I was also doing the lighting, still and video camera-work as well as providing donuts and coffee). Others, including some rank amateurs, attempted to play off this neutral sexuality with their own sense of lusts and power-maniacs

Perhaps, erased by now, its only evidence of existing an off-screen still, was me, half dressed in a sheet, posing (mostly for framing and focus) through arbitrary postures as Jesus. In my mind, at least, I add some soft and alluringly gentle music and intercut with Jesus at a banquet table trying to fix a sandwich as he mugs for the camera. I don't even know what this has to do with my theme. In fact, what I treasure about the experience is how utterly incongruent it was. It was something that had to be done.

## **CHAPTER 5 The Higher-Man Thing**

I wandered through the all night collegiate cafeteria, looking for a place to rest my weary angst. There was an empty table near two unlikely junior philosophers lost in a discussion that didn't seem right for them.

One of them was rotund and I couldn't help thinking that he would eventually be successful in the priesthood or selling real estate should the market come back. The other seemed to be a sidekick who I labeled, 'Ignatz' Unfortunately, he was the type of gawky manchild who would be the butt of many cruel jokes in a military, basic training camp. 'Ignatz, get my soap, for me , ha, ha, ha.'

I thought that their private conversation full of futile words about God and Death would amuse me as I sipped hot java. But one of them uttered the magic word, "Redemption" From Latin words about purchases and Canaanite descriptions of the 'go-el', the stand in for Deity in a blood feud...

"Redemption? That's my theme," I announced, surprising myself. Too much book-reading, I surmised had cracked my inhibitions. They seemed to be waiting for me to say more. Perhaps they were growing bored with the small heat they could generate from their own two sticks.

"Are you interested in redemption as part of modern, moral philosophy?" I asked.

They didn't say no, just looked at me curiously, so I launched my topic.

"In modern moral philosophy we have Buber who hails back to the Israelite and Judahite reforming prophets in seeing religion as a 'way of response', a method of relating to Deity by how you relate to others. Buber adds phenomenology into ethics by drawing the Divine other into the genuine meeting of the two..." I lectured, setting my coffee cup down at their table.

They were either dumbfounded or enthralled, I continued, "Rozenzweig on the other hand was not a Jewish philosopher looking outward, but inward, he saw the Jewish purpose as a long link, a chain from generation to generation all evolving upward in order to create the perfect being at the end of time..."

"What's this have to do with Jews?" The more rotund one asked. He was more perplexed than angry.

"Oh," I laughed, "Redemption is always of the Jews."

"Why?" asked his Ignatz friend.

"Why? Because you must be hated for all the wrong and most ridiculous reasons to even consider redemption. Case in point, Jesus."

Ignatz opened his mouth to speak. Diplomacy got the upper hand in his mind and he faltered.

I continued, "Even in the worst of times, the existence of the Jewish remnant hinted of ancient revelations...kind of like how the dust and gases of an exploded supernova gives clues to great, universal phenomenon."

"Do you believe in anything specific?" Ignatz asked.

"Hope, which is not specific."

"So...So you..." The rotund one fumbled.

I continued my discourse to these post-pubescent theologians, too chagrined to properly discuss their own tenuous victories at masturbation. "Western religion has, in theory at least, grown from the primal fear of a dark destroyer demon who demands a propitious bloodletting to pursuing the dignity of our higher selves. It doesn't matter as much if God and higher purpose exists (yeah, sure, tell me that in the middle of the night!) as what internal face we all put on that Deity."

"I don't know if I understand that...Christianity is more advanced than..." Ignatz attempted.

"Worship of Moloch?" I shrugged. "There has been several attempted revolutions in moral thinking. They generally all fail. The prophets tried and failed first. They attempted to disentangle a moral ethic from religious ritual. No one listened to them then, and no one listens to them now. Morality has usually been the morality of the lucky. What distinguishes the Patriarchs and King David from others are not what they did, or how they did it, but that they supposedly succeeded, whereas Saul who appears to be a more compassionate king than David failed and was destroyed."

Ignatz attempted to interrupt, but forgot what he wanted to say, so I continued, "Two thousand years ago, there was a revolution. It appeared at the ebb of the Hellenistic-Roman world. There was no longer much economic or spiritual hope. The morality of the lucky gave way to the morality of the unlucky, something the masses could appreciate. The world got a new god, a loser, just like them."

"And?" The rotund prodded.

"And the usual happened. You know, 'the Lucky' are always telling us that each

individual is solely responsible for their own actions and predicament. But, the basis of society, government and religion begins from the opposite perspective..."

The rotund one pulled a piece of notebook paper to him. "I want to take a course with you." He declared, ready to write down my schedule for next semester.

I acted dumbfounded. "A course?" I could have suggested something, an inter-session offering: 'Changing Reality (for sophomore philosophers) from Descartes to McLuhan'. The Syllabus would progress along the following continuum: *Cogito ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am. *Cogito ergo cogito sum*; I think, therefore I think I am. *Sum ergo audium-videum*; I am, therefore I'm on television. *Cogitio ergo cogito sum audium-videum*; I think, therefore I think I'm on television...

"What do you teach?" Ignatz asked.

"Teach?"

"You're on staff here, aren't you?"

"Sure," I grinned, "washing dishes in the back." I looked at my watch, "Whoops, break's over. See you guys around."

Their sense of credibility was chastened. They immediately dismissed everything I told them from their minds. I ambled away with a wave. What a great sense of bathos I had inflicted upon them. Too bad I couldn't achieve that in a film.

\*

I was late getting into the theater. At least the crowds --if there were any-- were gone. I purchased my ticket from a youngster dressed up to look like a Mohawk Native American from another galaxy.

I stepped into paint and brushed against wooden forms looming out of the near darkness. The place was under construction. Going from a duplex to a quadruplex. The popcorn was two dollars a mini-bucket.

I entered the picture that had started the most recently. The last three rows of seats were broken. DARK. Shuffled over sticky floor to find a seat.

The picture itself hadn't started. Instead commercials were playing at the wrong aspect ratio. I was already developing eye strain. The trailers followed the commercials. Still the wrong aspect ratio. The sound was too loud and not synchronized, some of it was unintelligible. This gave a weirder value to the blatant violence depicted in the movies to come.

The picture began with a very badly scratched leader that was projected. The sound was worse than on the trailers, there was a flutter in the projector's gate. The projector itself was improperly aligned causing the top half of the credits to lose focus on the screen. Was this what I had been killing myself for?

Somewhere assholes were discussing Higher Definition something or other... A few minutes into the picture and one of my former actresses appeared! The sound cleared up enough for me to hear a line I wrote uttered by my former starlet (who had a minor role here).

At first I wondered if this was a surprise party for me. Would long forgotten friends pop out of the dark as the lights came up, all yelling, 'Surprise!'

But no, this was not my picture. Just my line in one of my ex-actress' mouth. 'I should call my lawyers; I haven't got lawyers, I haven't got carfare. I haven't got money for popcorn'. All I had were cans full of prints and boxes of video tapes languishing in storage. All I had were expensive memories.

The sound deteriorated again. I looked around to see if any of the zombies present had any objection. No. Impulsively, I removed my paint stained shoe and rushed at the screen --which was not far in this garage-sized theater.

I heaved the shoe at one of the smug performer's images, just as it cut back to my actress. It left an ugly gash on her nose. Her sexy smile was blemished --unbeknown by either her, or the director or the film's editor-- by the dark stain on her proboscis. I had altered the scene with my brilliant post-production work. I had turned soggy melodrama into refreshing comedy!

"Hey!" Some critic in the audience shouted. Others were astir.

My actress was off screen already. Still the ingenue! My shoe-smudge was on a wall, then marring a horizon shot. This smudge would be the new star of the entire feature. A non-persona appearance that the characters can not see, but the audience does. I have added a dimension! This is the higher view, the view of Deity. The smudge covers a villain's face in a long shot. How banal movies can be.

I sensed activity behind me and fled toward the EXIT sign visible under the screen. I stumbled over my own shoe, retrieved it. The tool of my artistic creation, and a nearly irreplaceable article of clothing.

I ran down a few steps. Out of the metal exit doors, and up into the parking lot. My sock had become sodden from a unattended puddle that collected behind the exit door.

I kept moving across the parking lot, carrying my shoe. Humorous headlines played in my head, 'Film-maker makes brilliant statement with painted shoe. --Flees industry, seeks more normal life as a sheep herder or consultant to mercenaries. Says he will no longer pander to conventional standards, will accept more ethical work with organized crime -- even a job in the White House. If interested in hiring him write your name on the wall of a bathroom the defendant may use...'

I stumbled on, past closed, strip malls and vacant factories. Other dilemmas crossed my mind. Outside a church I wondered what would happen if I was caught defacing a 'Jews-For-Jesus' sign. Would I be accused of an anti-Christian, or an anti-Semitic act. Would I get free defense counsel from the ACLU, B'nai Brith and the Klu-Klux-Klan?

I sat on the dark steps, prayed briefly for mercy and waited for rescue.

Rescue came as I was dosing. The door behind me opened and a priest came out. He was on his way someplace and said "excuse me" as he stepped past.

But guilt made him stop and look at me. An old talmudic fable ran through my mind. 'The messiah waiting at the gates of Rome, covered in bandages; he waits there for you'...

I was inclined to wave him away.

"Need something?" He asked.

"A refund on my movie ticket."

"Hmmm?" He queried, probing for the depth of my insanity.

"Just joking."

"Why don't you go inside. Downstairs. Father Arnold would like to talk to you." The priest said.

I didn't know Father Arnold, nor feel inclined to know him. I had enough trouble knowing his boss.

"Go ahead." He winked.

'Why not?' I thought. The least I could do was relieve this pious man from his guilt. What better way was there than humoring him?

I rose to my feet and slowly entered the church. The other Priest continued on his way, whistling happily.

I found Father Arnold leading a group of the homeless upstairs to the pews.

"Won't you join us in a non-denominational service. We'll have rolls and coffee afterward." Father Arnold advertised to me.

Again, I thought, why not, and fell in alongside the bedraggled and not so bedraggled.

Some kneeled and crossed themselves. Most of us just sat. Some prayed silently, some whispered oaths and incantations to demons of their own choosing.

A service seemed to develop out of this, which took on a greater and greater similarity to a Catholic Mass. I stood and got through the 'Our Father' but passed up the Eucharist at the end.

Soon a discussion began. Since this was not the usual crew of parishioners thankful for their blessings a little more was in order.

Father Arnold wanted to deal constructively with anger. That was his little topic for the night.

The topic was waylaid by a half dozen war stories, until a silver haired gentleman wearing the remnants of a suit rose to address his doubts to Father Arnold. At first I wasn't listening to the man's statements, just noting how an unkempt man in a fraying suit is still an unkempt man despite his attempt at camouflage. I felt nervous about my own self. Soon, I caught his troubled words.

"Why Father, would God masquerade as a Jewish carpenter, doing a few healing tricks on only some of the people, spread a mysterious message as to be misunderstood, get in a fight with his own people that causes them so much future harm? Would a loving father punish his children for observing Halloween, then dress up as a ghost, 'trick or treat' his own house and then punish his children for not celebrating Halloween, and not recognizing him? --Why would the revelation be so enigmatic? Experienced by only a few old cronies, like an Elvis appearance. Why didn't everyone in Jerusalem see the resurrected Jewish saints after Christ's ascension? Why would God try to fool even the basically good folks?"

"Ye who are not perfect..." I muttered.

"Yes?" Father Arnold, anxious to get out of explaining that set of parables, called on me.

"Just muttering."

"Can you answer Dave?" Father Arnold asked me.

Warily, I stood up. Dave stood across the aisle from me. His eye had a pained and deep look. I looked around at the faces of the misplaced. I looked forward in the church at the large crucifix over the alter.

"How do you identify with the savior?" Father Arnold asked me.

I thought of my last movie effort and laughed. I pointed at the statue of the crucified Jesus and said, "That's me up there on that cross, pal...A Jewish guy who overreached himself looking for the kingdom of perfection. I upset my family, riled my elders, was abandoned by my foolish friends and persecuted by powerful gentiles...I just wonder if there's any hope of getting off that thing before it's too late..."

There was a pause and then my remarks, unexpectedly, brought the house down.

I was surrounded by backslapping, laughing patrons. Soon, to restore order, Father Arnold shepherded us back to the downstairs where the coffee and rolls awaited us.

Father Arnold sat down beside me while I drank my coffee. He seemed to be in good humor, as if, in some way, he appreciated my remarks.

"I don't often find cynicism entertaining. But in your case...If everything is a pretense then what meaning can there be in life?" he asked me.

"I didn't say it was a pretense. We can make it into one, if we like. I would say that in spite of everything, people want to believe; everyone needs a set of illusions to live by."

"Maybe you can find some meaning to your potential work," he offered, hopefully.

I laughed.

"My job is to find a job."

"Were you in sales?"

"Could be..."

"Sales can be rewarding..." he said.

I looked at him closely. There was selling and there was selling. "All selling isn't the same."

He nodded but I could see he did not understand. "You have to be...internally motivated."

I laughed again. "I've met great salespeople. The most successful ones in the business world have this reptilian sense of what to kill and what to eat. You really need clever instincts and a large appetite."

He shuddered, "Is it that simple?"

"No. Karl Marx and Saint Paul were both reasonably adept salespeople. Salesmanagers even. Paul the more successful, but both were driven by similar desires."

He furled his brow. "Karl Marx and Saint Paul?" His tone was gently derisive, but I took no offense.

"Both struggling to shake off the second sense of being others, having Jewish antecedents, groping for a universal folk that would have them.--End the loneliness born of oppressive rage. They saw a great deal of evil in their worlds. Paul thought the answer was in remaking the inner man. Nineteen hundred years later, Marx gave up on that and thought he could make over the outer man first, so the inner man could follow. Obviously it didn't work out."

"How can you compare those two?"

"They both died as relative failures."

"But Marxism's days are numbered, while Christianity..."

"Time is not over yet, and to anyone being burned at the stake during an inquisition it's hard to find the pure inner person in the soul of him holding the torch."

"Oh...Maybe...I don't know what to say to you."

"Thanks for trying, please pass me a roll."

He did so. It was moderately stale.

"What did you do, before?" Father Arnold asked.



"Made films, or tried to..."

"There isn't anything for you to do now?" He asked with concern.

"I guess not."

Dave joined us. "I was a professor of Anthropology...at a community college...."

I nodded.

"I had a problem with..." His fingers traced the outside of a paint chip on the table.

"Drugs and...and I hurt my family pretty bad..."

"Why don't you go back, now?" I asked.

He drew away looking uncomfortable. "I've been replaced...at the school, and at home..."

Father Arnold was unable to deal with such events-out-of-control. He excused himself and regaining a robust composure visited other tables. This left Dave in my company.

"What kind of films did you make?" He asked, sitting down.

I shrugged, "I always started out with bizarre and mildly sexy comedies but uncontrollably gravitated to universal themes that were beyond my abilities and my budgets."

"Like..." He prompted.

Since he had already told me the worst about himself, I felt obligated to reciprocate. "I even got carried away with a film involving our close friend Jesus."

"Oh?" He perked up.

I drank some coffee.

"Was it a penetrating and revisionist analysis? I myself have read the gospels very closely," Dave said, "I can't make up my mind whether he was truly brilliant or nuts, or a combination of the two..." --Was this true of Dave, also?

"Actually, I was hoping to use him as the one figure in which human sympathy was already ingrained... The film was fairly weird, but thematically about intolerance and power. Jesus did his standard shtick but with no holy music in the background. I guess if the thing was completed I would have been invited to a party in France and totally ignored every where else. Malaysian film buyers want rape and machine-gun violence."

"I know what you mean..." He retrieved several sheets of aging notebook paper from his pocket. The two of us were entering the borderland where one of us would assume the other one to be psycho.

"I've been making some notes on religion..." Dave told me.

"Yes?..."

"Religion is either primal or neurotic or a combination of the two...You know, life, birth, sexuality, death, hope for future consciousness in the primal form. Seeking to mask the primal by withholding and self-punishment in the neurotic phase..."

"I can't really say I'm an expert on religion..." I interrupted, 'or anything else'. "I mean I've read some books on moral philosophy...I've been hooked on the theme of human redemption...but..."

"I know...But I was thinking...Maybe we could plan a film about Western Religion? Think about it...from an anthropological model. Beginning with the Canaanite/Kenite, Judaite cult and tracing it through Hellenistic soterological developments."

I looked at him. He didn't have money for coffee. I had stumbled across a more erudite, mirror image of myself. Some of the same thoughts that had lamely befuddled my mind had run a more logical gamut in his own. Had I been a teenager at a study hall table I would have said, 'Oh wow, let's make a movie about it!'

Instead I shuddered.

"We could use a great deal of animation." He offered, with a latent joy spreading through his cheeks.

Suddenly, I ceased doubting divine intervention. This was a sign, I thought. I should immediately get out of there.

"Sounds interesting, but, boy, I got to find a place to sleep tonight..." I rose.

He still clutched his notes. "The church has a mission house next door."

I nodded. "Maybe some day..."

"Look..." He stood up as if he wanted to exchange addresses. My storage locker for his cot at the mission.

A tiny voice was crying out through my being. 'Leave here, and don't come back. This is only the way to doom.'

I extended my hand, "I'm really glad to meet you, Dave, Thanks a lot for sharing."

"Okay."

We shook hands, I waved goodbye to Father Arnold and hurried the hell out of there.

## **CHAPTER 6 Sarge**

I was sitting on one of the few spaces left that had not been edged with jagged rocks to dissuade people from loitering their cans in the vicinity, when I spied an almost familiar lunatic crossing the street in my direction.

He wore a loud colored, clashy sport-shirt with baggy gray work trousers above brown buckled shoes long out of style. I felt chilly for him.

In his own defense he muttered curses under his breath. Thin strands of graying hair were spread over his scalp and waving in the breeze. He saw me watching him.

"Hey you! What you lookin' at?!" He demanded of me.

It was instant recognition on my part, "Sergeant Staff!" I shouted. My heart felt joy. Seeing this rotten, son-of-a-bitch in any other circumstance would be curious at best. But, in this foreign place, a figure from my own past could help convince me that, yes, I too was real.

He drew up into a perplexed brace. "You know me?" He asked.

No, asshole, I always shout out stranger's names. "Yeah, I did basic training with you."

"No shit. Well stand up."

I did so, almost coming to attention. He surveyed me --how one shoulder tilts, then from the side.

"Turtle!" He announced, resurrecting my ignominious nick-name from the time of sweat-sodden, stiff, leather boots and baggy green fatigues.

I beamed. "How the fuck can you remember me?" I asked.

He became sheepish as if a superior officer had accused him of being queer.

"D'nno..." he mumbled.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Travelin'," he shrugged. "So, I guess you didn't make a career of the military, huh?" he asked.

"Nope." Gone where my rationales, my vicissitudes, my angry rhetoric -- even my jokes like saluting defecant as it slid down the plumbing, 'Good-bye, Sgt. Shit.'

"Just as well. Hungry?" He asked.

Damn, I thought, putting the bite on me for food money. "I'm broke." I said, thinking it would prove a bonding.

"C'mon --I got my pension check today -- let's get us a meal," he offered.

I had imagined him squandering his government check on slattern women with multiple infections and rotten booze purchased in enormous quantities all within moments of cashing it.

"I got some change." I offered with pride.

"C'mon. The Old Sarge will stake troop Turtle to chow time -- fall in." Then he muttered a stream of obscene curses under his breath. Time had worn down the control line between his swearing and his conversation. It used to be that he swore at things in

particular, not in general.

We walked. I stayed a half-step behind, and to the right. We came to a curb.

"Road guards out! --Goddam fuckin' whore's cunt, horse-cock bullshit...PISSHEAD!"

I crossed half way to hold traffic for him.

"Bring 'em in! Cunt-rag, motherfucken' pee-pee-brains." he trudged across the street with a rhythmic determination as if he had a body of troops ten ranks long to file beside him.

"What you up to these days, Turtle? --Washin' windows, or you can't stand the heights?"

"Well Sarge..." He still had a quick pace and I felt winded walking and talking simultaneously. "You see, I got a calling but no profession." I told him.

"You a fuckin' preacher?"

"No...I made films but no money."

"What kinda films?"

"Films...movies...like...video..."

"Pornos?"

"Not exactly...I mean...I never did anything commercial."

"Maybe that's your problem, sport. Gotta show 'em the titty. They always like the titty." Sarge said. His cinematic analysis was short and abruptly phrased, but there was little I could argue with.

A truck cut us off at the next intersection.

"Goddam, shit-faced, mother-fucken', cunt-hair, doo-doo dummy! --Maybe you ought to get a job," he advised.

"I get them when I can."

He laughed. "You're all right, Turtle. --Motherfucken', dick-stickin', shit-ass, cunt-kicken' voo-doo, hoo-doo, little fagedy-assed piece of POO-POO!"

Did I sense some regression in there or even rhyme and meter? I looked around for a cheap hash house. Something cafeteria style with those thick off-white plates. Dishes that could survive 50,000 washings, something fit for fatty gravy and disgusting crud-food, gallons of mashed potatoes, lard, and bitter teeth-staining coffee -- something like he was used to.

He stopped under the awning of an unbelievably pricey and exclusive restaurant.

"This is the place," he said.

I looked inside, shading my eyes against the dark glass. "You must be kidding."

"Back me up...over here, Turtle." He motioned me to follow him to a nearby alley-way. "Cover me, Turtle." With me camouflaging his operation he intruded into his trousers and brought forth his peninsula in order to water the slimy stones."

"Ah... " he exhaled, "had to take me a piss."

Respectful of his surprise attack, I turned my back to him and hoped he wouldn't splash my socks. Finished, he headed directly for the expensive restaurant; I was unable to read its marquee, but its name began with a 'Le'.

"Sarge, I don't think this place is for us."

"Fall in, Turtle." He coaxed, showing not the slightest denigration of social self-assurance. And this from the man who just relieved himself upon the outside wall.

"It'll cost two hundred bucks to eat here...if they let us in..." I said.

"What's dough, if you can't throw it in the garbage? --Shit!" He turned to me on the carpeted steps. "These ass holes think they're better than us. Can you imagine that?! Better than *us*?" He shook his head. "Cock-sucken;, mother-fucken', pee-pee norks."

The maitre d' intercepted us immediately. "I'm sorry but you must have a reservation." He wasn't even going to bother insulting us about our appearance. We didn't rate that high.

"Hey sport. I'm Sarge. This here is Turtle..."

The maitre d' was hardly impressed.

Sarge continued. "We just finished makin' us a movie..." He turned to me again and winked, "--with, uh, Barbara Stries-rand...and...and...Barbara Walters, and...and...Jack Parr. And here's a fifty to get us seated." The Sarge held out a fifty dollar bill.

Mr. Maitre d's face pinked with delight. "And what's the film's title and subject?" He asked as he accepted the bribe.

Sarge's jaw convulsed with swear words rushing to get out against muscles slamming shut. "He spat out a garbled, "Cunt-rag..."

"Country Rag." I said.

"It's a titty-picture.," Sarge blurted out with a widening grin.

"Follow me to your table, gentlemen."

We followed. The ambiance was just heightened enough to mask the Sarge's soft stream-of-consciousness. "Cunt-rag, asshole, dick-head, fuck-face..."

We were shown to a table amidst the other diners. A flurry of waiters began their groomings. We were royal larva waiting to be fed.

"Yes, I'd like to see the wine list. --Or better yet, do you have Thunderbird? How about some really low class vino? Something pigs wouldn't swill," Sarge said.

The wine steward, unused to joking of this sort, maintained a perplexed expression. I could see in his sensitive young face an actor trying to hatch, someone who could reign on the day time soaps or even get a cover on a weekly magazine as Hollywood prepared to swoon before his feet. I felt sorry for the guy.

Sarge continued to toy with him, "I'll give you a five spot to go out an get us some, huh? -No? Piss on it, then, get us champagne. A Don Penguin or whatever. You pick it."

Released from the Sarge after suffering his humor for only moments, the young wine-steward-actor fled with a blushing smile. But a few eyes were curiously turned our way. Sarge didn't like eyes leaving formation to roam about at none-of their business. I can still recall his thundering into the side of my head, 'WHAT THE FUCK YOU LOOKIN' AT, ASSHOLE!?' --many years ago.

Sarge looked back. If there was a general theme to the dinning room it would have been: Never So Few Made So Much, Accomplishing So Little. Sarge picked on one particular yuppie who was making his date titter with something unkind about us.

"Nice suit, must a cost ya, 800 clams, huh?" The Sarge asked the onlooker.

The suit's wearer, a well-to-do of 28 tried to look away, as if nobody was speaking to him. His date squirmed. I turned in my seat to get a better look at her. SWF, 26, pretty, spoiled. Likes to hike, play tennis, travel, listen to music. Wants to share expensive fare with sensitive, virile man with large bank account. Desires sharing, caring relationship. Prefers non-smoker.

Sarge would not let them off the hook. "Whata-ya do for a living? Huh!" Sarge demanded.

Annoyed, our onlooker felt compelled to answer. "I run the desk at Metro Bank."

"The desk? --A fuckin' copy clerk?" Sarge wondered aloud.

"I trade cash against futures." The desk-man snapped.

"And you can afford such snappy duds?" Sarge replied.

"I make 250 a year, alright!?"

"Two - fifty?" The Sarge repeated, shaking his head.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars." I translated for Sarge.

"A punk like that?" Sarge grew livid. He turned back to our new acquaintance.

"Hey, You know what I do? Or did..."

The money manager was uninterested. He picked at his salad with determination and

resentment.

"I yell at kids like you," Sarge said. "Yell at 'em, step on 'em. Fuck with their minds. Make 'em fit to get shot at. I keep this country safe for foreign investment," Sarge instructed.

The young money-manager threw his napkin onto the table. He sprang from his seat and bounded to our table with a fairly steamed expression.

"I wish you would leave me out of your conversation," he insisted, hotly. No doubt muscles rippled beneath his suit. Lots of racquet ball and pumping iron.

Sarge showed him two fingers and grinned. "Know what I can do here?"

Our friend made a face.

"Blind you and poke you in the beans." Sarge said. Then, for emphasis, he brought the flat of his hand down on the French bread, smooshing it to crust in the center. "And knock your fuckin' teeth out."

The money manager sniffed the air. It had been communicated to him that we -- especially Sarge was not from his world. He had made a mistake by rippling youthful testosterone at us. Sarge had that odor-of-the-sewer about him, that cologne of genuine machismo that can't be purchased in the finest stores. Without an additional word he retreated to his date who continued to stare at us with horrid fascination --until...

Sarge began leering and winking as a prelude to playing rudely with his cheeks and slapping the back of his neck to produce fucking sounds for his own amusements.

Hushed and chastened their gaze became glued to their plates where they picked lamely at things despite a concomitant decline of appetite.

"What a sin it is," Sarge said, "to pay me a year his monthly salary to protect him! Things just ain't right. Next time I'm gonna let the commies come through, take what they want and get them and the goods on the way out, --Makes more sense that way."

"What commies?"

"Shit," Sarge hissed as if missing a solid adversary or an old friend.

"Plato wrote, 'it's impossible for a nation to honor wealth and maintain moderation among its citizens,' " I said.

Sarge screwed up his face. "Plato? --Mickey Mouse's dog?"

"No that's Pluto."

Sarge roared with laughter. "I know, I know...I was jus' kiddin'. Jeeze Turtle, you think all I read is fuck-books?"

Sarge spied an older couple sitting behind me. "Now if the kid makes a quarter of a

million a year, this old fart must make a million and a quarter."

"Maybe," I said, "Though on the fast track most people are on the way down by forty." I was ahead of the pack.

Sarge shook his head. "Fuck 'em and feed 'em beans." His mood grew quiet, even somber. In the dim orange light of the restaurant I saw his jaw quiver. His eyes peered into mists far away. He lowered a lip. "Fucking, piss ant, shit-eaten' cunt's liver..."

Our salads arrived along with the champaign. Sarge shook off his pronunciations. "Tell me Turtle, how'd you end up to be hangin' around with fuck-all to do?"

I struggled for a simple answer.

"See, I remember you," he said, pointing his fork at my face. "A smart aleck, shifty kid. But..." he chewed lettuce, "--you responded. Yes you did. Made a remarkably fine troop. Surprised the shit out of me. Thought I'd have to beat your ass constantly."

"I thought you did." I remembered our first morning together. I remembered him kicking my ankles as he yelled at me.

"Responded very well."

"Out of fear," I remarked.

"Fear's got its use. The world moves on fear."

"And greed." Though fear had been with me more, recently. We ate.

"So, tell me..." he prodded.

"Well, Sarge --it's this way..." I timed my explanation for comic filler, "I am the self UN-made man."

For some reason he thought that was hilarious. He opened his mouth of half-chewed food and spewed out laughter along with Caesar salad which formed particulates about the table cloth. All diners turned to look. This potentially mean man in a ludicrously loud and outlandish shirt, growing smaller with his harsh years, contorting with spasms of totally impolite laughter made an impression that challenged the very mythological universe of a dozen patrons. They doubted the order of things in their own philosophies.

Looking into the Sarge's insane mouth, I seized his glee and joined him in mirth. At this point the patrons looked away. Since there were two of us chortling madly they must have reasoned that an explanation existed for this phenomenon. An explanation they did not want to know. I overheard, "Check please."

The Sarge calmed down and spit the remaining contents of his mouth onto the carpet, near his feet. "You should have stayed in the military," he advised.

"I did," I said, "At least one night a month I'm back. Living in those barracks from dark to dawn. I dream I'm still there." Aging more slowly toward oblivion than the military city



that decays into obsolescence around me. Old latrines, the shower tiles becoming cracked. The air of temporality becoming transfixed in an impossible permanence.

"You might say I'm in the mental reserves." --Another unpaid avocation.

Sarge found this hilarious and began a new round of mad chortles. Breaking bread with a maniac had affected me too. Knowing that it was not my humor but something amiss in poor Sarge's head goaded me into fits of shared laughter also. Yet, we had a bond, he and I, forged from that tenuous time when I was forced to place my life into his hands. Despite all reason, and perhaps based on some flaw in my own character, I still trusted him in ways I couldn't understand. I laughed till I was too weak to sit upright.

The champaign and finally dinner helped to calm us. Apparently Sarge was not much of a drinker these days and the bubbly went straight to his head. Instead of raving harder the alcohol had a mellowing effect on him.

Waving a potato on the end of his fork he struggled to make a profound statement. Or I imagined he was struggling to make a profound statement.

"What's happened to everything?"

I shrugged, hoping he would fill me in. He leaned across the table, his eyes still had that bright, almost translucent and scary blue beam in them.

"Turtle...Turtle, I got more respect for those gentlemen in the bush than for this crowd..." He waved his fork to the side of him, losing the potato to the floor. 'Those gentlemen in the bush', were not gentlemen at all, but a euphemism for the hardened and ruthless warriors that Sarge had exchanged unpleasanties with before we had met.

"I'm not just talkin' about this here restaurant, I'm talkin' about everything. It's just so much bullshit. At least Charlie was solid. Charlie could live on a mouthful of rice with a treat of rotten fish-head twice a month. Charlie could use 400 rounds and a couple-a RPGs to stop an assault...but this...We don't know what's what, we don't know where the fuck we stand, we don't even know who the fuck we're workin' for...get me?"

Yes and no.

"Who we fighten' for? An' why?...Petro-dollars, Japs, A-rabs? A new car costs me a year's pay...I fought so that..." Sarge hesitated as if he were about to utter a blaspheme. "I fought so that I could live under comm-u-nism, and the fucken reds could go dancin' at Club Med wearin' thousand dollar suits. They pulled a switcheroo on us, Turtle."

"Welcome to the losing side," I said.

"Shouldn't-a-had to be this way. I didn't realize that our boss-men were such greedy and stupid pigs..."

"Don't you think there's any opportunity left?" I felt an ass having said it. Something inside of me, no doubt unlocked by the food and spirits, was back to planning movies again, with Sarge as Executive Producer. They would be socially positive titty pictures.

With eros as the hook, comedy as the method and redemption as the theme. I was still bullshitting myself and hoping to share it with others.

"Opportunity for what? Louse farming in your crotch? I'm used up Turtle, all used up."

If he was used up, what was I? I leaned across the table to him. I had forgotten that part of his mind was elsewhere. I shared my newly made up sincerity with him. "Do you want to be used up?" I asked.

"Fuck no." He blinked.

"Then don't let it happen." I instructed profoundly.

He blinked again, then began moving his arms in a wordless song. Perhaps he was conducting an orchestra playing some marching song. I felt frightened for the both of us.

Words began to escape his mouth in a little sing-songy ditty, "I got to pee, oh me, I got to pee.-- Once again, I got to pee..."

I was relieved that his mind and body were still connected to the world. "Me too." I admitted.

"Let's go hit the can, Turtle."

We wove between tables in a trot on tip-toes toward where we suspected the lavatory to be. We were not disappointed.

At the hallway entrance that housed the facilities we encountered two young women. The one facing us modeled a very short black dress. Purposely oblivious to our presence she asked her girlfriend, "Am I making a statement with this dress?" She scootched her hips askew to emphasize her legs, longly covered in a provocative coating of dark pantyhose.

"You sure are," Sarge told her, "You fuck, but price range uncertain." Sarge winked to me as he entered the room marked 'Esquires'.

What a wit Sarge had. Maybe I had misinterpreted his antics. Perhaps he was to be my deliverance after all. Reacquainting myself with Sarge could galvanize my floundering hopes and re-motivate me. Under Sarge's profound direction I could conquer high and difficult hurdles --kind of like before.

The young woman wearing the statement met my eyes. She arrested my journey to the can.

"What did he say to me?" Her eyes were moist. Not kindly-so. I could feel an indignant heat from her friend. Trouble. Sarge had not made friends here. I looked into the face of her companion. Anger. The Israelite prophets could say what they wanted about harlotry and ostentation. The Israelite prophets could suffer their rebuke with the fires of moral certainty to sustain them --so one could imagine. Sarge was of a slightly different ilk. He was a cowboy of a man like Amos, but with Joab's appetite.

I could envision policemen turning my I.D. cards over slowly in their heavy hands.

'Where do you say you live? Who do you work for? How come this is expired? Did you make indecent overtures...' I fretted. Sarge was a sick man, and I was his accomplice.

"I'm his therapist," I said. "I'm deeply sorry. The guy has a bullet in his brain. A steel plate under his scalp. He's been home-bound for ten years. I'm sorry if..."

"You'd better be fuckin' sorry." The friend spat out at me, "We have friends here."

"I don't like to be called a whore," the slighted one added.

This was not the movies. "I apologize on his behalf..." Part of my own sick brain angled for a way to arrange an audition with the offended party for a part in my next film-fantasy. A part with a sexy, young woman making just such a statement, 'Scootch out your hips, just so...like that! Great!...'

"Where's he get the balls to talk about what I do anyway?" She asked.

That was a bit much. "He's got a touch of misogyny in his language. He's from a different era." I offered.

"Wha...? Well, what ever it is, he should have it cut out of him, or be put to sleep."

"He should stay in his room," the friend added.

"We're making great strides..." I hoped they would take their cue and leave before Sarge finished his business, but Sarge exited the latrine yanking up the zipper on his trousers. He had a malicious look in his eye. He was going to get us into an evil holding cell in this Godforsaken city.

Simultaneously, Sarge and the women opened their mouths to insult one another. Oppressive jokes were about to be traded for equally foul psychoanalytical comments.

I summoned my ancient skills. Even the Sarge's skills. Command voice. Deep tones. Sharp projections. Repressed rage. Seething hostility. North Carolina inflections. Rhythmic Anglo cadences. The farm, the military camp: "SSSARGEANT STAFFff!!!"

He came to attention before me. The women, against their will took a half a step backward.

"Please take your seat," I instructed Sarge. He obeyed.

"Sorry Ma'am." I said to the offended party, who glared back with open contempt.

I followed Sarge to the table.

"Boy, you got that voice down. Made me jump. Shoulda stayed in the war!" He said gayly. Then he began launching cold peas from his spoon.

"Sarge?..."

"Yeah man?"

I hesitated. "Sarge...are you...crazy?"

"Nah! Did someone tell you that?" He laughed.

I felt relieved. Since he wasn't crazy, maybe we could throw in together. "Where were you heading?" I inquired.

He shrugged. "Well, I guess dinner's over. Better prepare for damages."

"I'll pay ya back," I offered.

This made him laugh. "Sure."

"I mean it," I said.

"Shit, partner, I don't even know who you are," Sarge said.

"Turtle. It's me, Turtle...You named me that yourself."

"I musta called two dozen troops 'Turtle', or 'Dawg-Ears', or 'Skunk'. Can't do that anymore. Can't say 'fuck' anymore. Drill is co-ed." He dug out his wallet and opened it. "Shit. I musta spent my check already..." He showed me a lousy fifteen dollars and grinned from ear to ear.

I knew that sooner or later Sarge would be catching the next bus out of town. And if he didn't, I would.

My extrication would require a subterfuge; a redeployment. I would claim to Sarge a means of covering expenses and a need to speak with the manager: My cover would be certainty-of-purpose. An operation remarkable only in its simplicity. A rapid decision would be made. Sarge would have to be sacrificed. Humiliation wouldn't phase him. He could probably deal with insolvency better than I. My absence would grow lengthy. The maitre d', the waiters would advance --like an enemy formation with superior firepower. Sarge would have to realize he was trapped, and that I had evaded capture. He would flush, laugh, and give in to his interminable swearing rages. And I would be gone. Streets awaited me. Not with any noble purposes behind them. Only another walk neither forward nor back, but onward. There would be variations on this theme, like leaping from a memory to an illusion.

## **CHAPTER 7 Jen**

She intercepted me in a smoky lounge crammed with flirting young professionals. She was black and beautiful, brown actually with a deep purple lipstick and remarkably lovely eyes. "You look kind of lost," she said.

I was. I had come in to use the men's room and was confused about getting back out.

"I am."

"Buy me a drink." She said. It was not a question. My pulse raced as if this was the actress I had been looking for. But I dismissed the pulse.

"I haven't got any money," I said. I made no attempt for pathos and was still looking for the correct byway out. There seemed to be three bars in the place on two and a half different levels.

She produced a twenty. "Here buy us both drinks."

I had no lust for her, or more likely no avenue for realizing my lust. "Is there someone real foolish here that you want to make jealous?" I asked.

"With you?" She laughed.

"Just curious."

"I'm the only black chick in this place, hon. An' I don't want to sit here alone." She was very cool.

"What do you drink?" I asked.

"Gin. But get me a white wine or something."

I elbowed my way into the bar with her twenty in the air. By the time I was served I expected her to have vanished. Surprisingly she was still there. In fact she had secured a table for us.

"You drink cheap beer? A white boy in a posh place like this?" She asked.

"They honored it as a special request."

She took a long, slow sip and inhaled deeply on a thin cigarette. "So, what's on your mind, tonight, darlin'?"

"Actually I was amusing myself with implausible scenarios. See I had imagined this ballgame, only with three teams. Team three represents muddling pragmatism. Neither good nor truly black-hearted --whoops -- sorry for the racist imagery. Anyway team three is made up of your less ambitious MBAs, junior accountants, law clerks, incumbent congressman and an overweight clergyman. They lose. Go down one, two, three. But so gracefully they could almost be redeemed. It's confusing, no? Anyway because I'm in control here, I stage a riot in their dugout. The clergyman cracks heads with a wiffle bat. What do you think?"

"I think you are fucking nuts, darlin'. But I do like you. Who are you, anybody?"

"Nobody. A former...media consultant."

"Really. What do you think of the media. Frankly I can't understand some of these avant garde things, weird movies about weird young people."

Smoke and noise swirled around us. I decided to keep talking, for lack of a clever way out of the conversation. "It's the new non-verbal, non-communication. It poses challenges for media, especially cinema. The central youth theme seems to be, 'how remoteness can work for you'. Remote being cool, but I know better. Remoteness is nothing but

socialized fear."

Her eyebrows went up. With a languid motion she removed a fragment of cork from her tongue. "All except you. You're not non-verbal. You talk a mile of shit and don't say anything at all."

"At least you're listening."

"So are you." She said. "You were right. There is a boy I want to burn here. He's near the mirror next to the bar..." I didn't look. "Get up and walk out with me, like we're going to make it." She stood.

"Can I keep the change from the twenty?" I asked, rising.

"OOOO, I do like you.." She cooed. I couldn't tell if this was the act within the act or just the act itself.

I walked with her. I glanced to the bar. The man in question was a handsome youth in a very expensive suit. He glared at both of us. She caressed the cheek of my ass as we walked. I hoped I wasn't going to get killed.

She knew her way outside. She stopped caressing my ass. "What an outrageous punk he was. So fucking snide. But this ought to ruin his evening. Me leaving with you."

I handed her change back.

"Keep it, hon. You earned it."

I did, as I prepared to watch her leave.

"Well come on, then. What you gonna do now, on your own?"

"Get a burger."

"I'll make one for you. Come on I won't eat you up."

I followed her, she waited up for me, but removed her earrings. It seemed that some of her act began to peel off as well.

"Was that blond guy at the bar your boyfriend?" I asked.

She shot me a look "No honey, I don't go to places with nobody. I come from places, like that, with somebody."

"Uh, huh..." I said, not getting her drift.

"It's supplemental income...you white boys." She said.

"Not me." I protested.

"You ain't gotten' a sniff. I'm fixen' you a hamburger and that-be-it!"

I wasn't sure I got the message. It was dawning on me that she might be one of those ladies with a heart of gold. She must have sensed me re-examining her.

"Look, sugar, you can hook with out bein' a hooker." She said.

Sure you could. I was a film-maker with no films. I was a positive of her negative, or the other way around.

We stopped walking forward and entered a building whose steps we proceeded to climb. She was fast on the steps and her rump bobbed and weaved above my head. We did three flights.

"It gets lonely in this life," she complained.

She was ill-at-ease inside her own apartment. "Do we have names?" I asked.

She considered the question and invented a name for the evening. "Amanda."

"John," I said, making her smirk.

Well sit down JOHN," she said with great emphasis, "while I go to the JOHN and wash my hands before I cook your food."

"Actually it's Steven," I told her.

"Well sit down while I go to the STEVEN."

She disappeared. I contemplated physics. Does an electron travel or disappear one place and re-appear another? Was I traveling or disappearing one place and reappearing another? After all, I was not physically located inside a movie. My comings and goings were not linear. In other people's consciousness I appeared or disappeared. Was I an electron? How about within my own consciousness? Was I linear there, or did my own perception of myself vary as affected by other people's perception of me? That unsolved, I daydreamed.

I heard a toilet flush and water run. Moments later, my host was moving about in the kitchen.

"You still here?" She asked.

"Yeah." I visited her in the kitchen. It was bright and neat. Her cabinets were pastel colored.

"Thought maybe you left, taking a few things. I've done it, got to expect the same back, don't I?"

I shook my head in amazement.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked.

"I had another dream, last night, in which I had re-enlisted in the military. I danced with

this civilian personnel administrator at the NCO club. She was a thirtyish, reddish blonde who was uncomfortable with life inside my dream. But she did seem to like me," I said.

She laughed, "Damn, if you were an honest black man with a good job, I'd marry your ass, but quick! You say the damndest shit."

"You too," I offered

"Me, no! I'm to the point. Like a sharp stick I'm to the point."

She put three frozen hamburger patties into the microwave to defrost them. "But where in God's name anybody gonna find an honest black man with a good job? In this white-world? Shit, it's gettin' so, you can't hardly find an honest white man with a good job."

"You can marry me, anyway."

"Not on your life," she threatened. I want more outa life than this. You gonna start gettin' me nervous. Go into the living room, don't mind the mess, an' sit down."

I did. "What mess?" I asked.

"Oh, you are sweet." She called after me.

She made me two hamburgers and herself one. The paper plates were tastefully arrayed with pickle slices, relish and potato chips.

"So what's running through your mind?" She asked me, her eyes still watching as she drank from a tall glass of cherry flavored soda.

"Not much." A few questions. Nothing verbal. Nothing I felt like asking.

"That's good. My Mamma and my Aunt sang in the choir at church. Very religious people. I was raised to be one with Jesus."

"That's commendable. I tried to BE Jesus."

She watched me suspiciously as she fished something from her palette with a very active tongue. "Were you institutionalized?"

"Not yet. Do they still do that? I mean I see people wandering the streets talking feverishly and attempting magic tricks, like making shoppers vanish into thin air. You only get institutionalized for murder, or shop lifting candy bars on an ongoing basis.

"So what were you talking about a minute ago."

"I'm sorry to have interrupted. Go on, tell me about your family..."

"No. Tell me about YOU!"

"I was a film-maker. A would be promoter. My last effort had Jesus as an important character. I even posed for the promo piece, the 'one sheet' --wearing a sheet."



Her eyes drank me in for a long time. I wasn't sure I wanted to stay. To have a theoretical relationship with her, yes. To embark on an actual tryst with its awkward disrobings, frets about disease, performance and aftermoments, no. I wanted to experience her in a dream. I wanted to direct her...And truth was, I liked her.

"How did you get into the situation you are in? You seem like a smart guy. --Damn, I've wasted time with dumb shits who had zero on their minds and paychecks so fat they could choke a big dog."

"I'll tell you a story..." I said. I rubbed my face wearily as I tried to concoct a reasonably interesting story. She leaned back in her chair, folded one leg under the other and gave me a tantalizing view of her thigh up to almost where life begins.

"Do that." She smiled.

"Sometimes we want something too much. I didn't want a thing -- but a process. A way of life. A way (I said this dramatically) to realize my dreams. I wanted to make films. I advertised for backers; newspapers - magazines.

"This guy named Julio answered one of my ads. Mid twenties, gold chains, rings, nice clothes. Drove a white cadillac. I should have known better, but he seemed like a nice guy. A curious and boyish fellow who genuinely wanted to better himself, in spite of his newly amassed fortune --which he said was due to consumables and had to be re-invested.

"He gave me 50 thousand in cash. Mostly in twenties. A small suitcase full. He told me I could have ten times that as time went along. He told me to open six checking accounts with the money. Never to deposit over \$9,000 at a time and keep everything in my name. I suggested a joint account, but he was adamant.

"We discussed film ideas. He seemed to like action-comedies. Sexy stuff, but no porno. He said he'd leave it to me.

"Here was an opportunity. Eros on one hand and Redemption on the other (I forcefully demonstrated this with two clenched fists). But a subtle redemption. Eros, my and everyone's base physical self; and the ethereal dream of rising above animal needs to a higher plane.

"Tits and ass on the one hand and the pathos of the man Jesus feeling the divine grace, believing in it, teaching it, counseling it and then deserted by his child-like followers, uncertain of his convictions, sorely distressed, tortured and hung -- feeling forsaken of this promise..."

"How would you mix that stuff with out being obnoxious and getting your own self hung?" She asked.

"Using a subtle and modern-day, gray comedy approach..."

"Uh huh..."

"Anyway," I continued, "Several weeks into the project Julio reappears, wants to see what we had. All we had were some screen tests, camera tests, lighting experimentation. He demanded that I show it to him.

"So I did. Slated takes. Some MOS, without sound, auditions...Women wearing tight jeans, halter tops...(I grimaced) bending over...And me...I uh...didn't think I should really play the Anointed One...but...anyway, there was me cavorting around with a sheet on...Film, lab and equipment rental alone came to over \$ 8,000...I tried to explain... 'We hadn't started yet!'"

" 'Hadn't started! You already spent ten grand!'" He shouted at me.

" 'We had only some preliminary work...imagine the music...DA DA DE...' I tried to add music concepts...explain; the pathos, the example, the story of man's painful rise above his base nature...Julio would have none of this.

"He took out his gun. 'I shoot you in a bad place!' he threatened.

"I gave him the remaining checkbooks. Told him I'd give him collateral worth \$ 15,000 -- three rented Ziess lenses. I went into the other room and ran down the fire escape."

"And you've been running since," she said.

"Yes." I said, emphatically.

"Is that story true?" She asked.

"No."

There was a pause as her consternation began to blend toward mirth. Afraid of where things might go if we started laughing, I resurrected the serious.

"It's only true if you consider me to have been my own Julio --in a way. You see, unlike the movies, most of us run from and toward things that begin in our minds."

This made her think. Slowly she began to nod. "That is so damn true." Her eyes and mine locked.

"And here I am...broke!" I announced, thinking that the word in this present age would melt all interest in me.

It didn't have any affect on her. She slowly tapped her near-empty glass on the barren part of her leg. Her smile began to broaden.

"You know..." she began, as her grin widened, "I feel like I should give you something."

I couldn't help it, I blushed.

She started laughing. I grinned.

"Now, you wouldn't want to give anything of value to a fool, would you?" I asked.

"I don't know. I might. In the end it'll all be wasted."

I exhaled and leaned my head back meditatively. I tried to imagine her handing me 50,000 dollars in cash and her own future to star in my, no, OUR film. But I knew better. Her hints were of the flesh. Didn't she realize, that I demanded fantasy instead?

"It won't hurt that bad." She said. "Or maybe you're too religious..."

She had given me an out, but uncontrollably I began laughing.

"Guess not." She stood up and walked over to me. "I just don't understand why you aren't rich. You got something special about you. I can tell it." She leaned forward coming close to my face. "What stopped you from making it? What got in your way?"

"Me. I got in my way." I said.

"You couldn't compromise?" She asked.

"Life in society is compromise. Even the most evil people often have to compromise their vicious intentions in order to avoid immediate ruin."

"You ain't evil, honey. I can smell evil. I know evil."

"Conversely, honesty and moral grace won't afford a bus ticket."

"What's your special thing, John-Steven?"

The phone rang. Saved by the bell. The heat dissipated from my face. I felt as if we were about to devour one another. There was an unimaginable link growing between us. As much as I hoped it was tenuous, I feared discovering how alike we opposites might be; in other words, I feared that she might be horrendously nuts.

Her phone conversation was ordinary. Very domestic. It seemed as if she was talking to a family member. I took the opportunity to stand and stroll about.

Leaning against a bookcase I turned and watched her. Her pose seemed so relaxed, so natural. I found this alluring. I was prepared to accept her offer. I began to resent the phone call. She was saying a lot of 'uh-huhs', and nodding slightly. The conversation went on. Arousal declined.

Instinctively, I reached back into my primate repertoire and began scratching my chin. This made me titter. She turned and watched me, motioning me with a finger. She was telling me to hold on. I appreciated the encouragement.

She returned the phone to its cradle. "That was my Aunt (ON-T). My Ma's been hospitalized again. She's been having these mini-strokes." She stood so confidently, her eyes and smile beaming some secret we may have shared. "I guess I got to go...see her..."

"I guess so."

"You want to come?" She asked. It was almost a little girl's voice, but still it held so

much seduction.

I actually didn't want to go. Too much empathy, it's what ruined me for the helping professions. I saw myself torturing my own soul over a strange woman on a respirator. Dwelling on such morbid and depressing realities as the passage of all life. I already felt sick over it. On the other hand I could always brace myself with some sort of snide indifference. But that wouldn't get me laid either. 'Iz zat bitch yer Ma? Pull the fuckin' plug I tell ya and let's go back to your place. I been on my feet all day.' Even considering the options left me with little interest in earthly delights and distractions. I felt ready for a hospital bed myself, possibly in a clean psychiatric ward.

"Jeeze, I don't know...I'm not good about hospitals. Just walking inside...the smells...make me..."

"Ties my stomach in a knot. We won't be long. Ma's been admitted three times in the last month. They'll probably send her home tomorrow."

"Sure. O.K." I said, already cursing my lazy and polite compliance.

We took a cab to the hospital. Outside of the apartment, she reverted to role, perhaps as defense --the black chick with a white guy. I didn't want to become quiet but I did.

She linked her arm with mine. "Cat got your tongue, sugar?" She asked, a bit too loudly just for me. I looked forward at the cab driver. A refugee from middle Asia

"No, the cat don't have my tongue." I said, with a hint of acid.

"What's-the-matter?" She withdrew her arm from mine. "Don't like to be seen with a black chick?"

What ever magic communication we had shared was gone. I shook my head. "On the contrary...I want to be seen with a black chick, with any kind of chick..."

"But what?"

"But...nothing."

"You have any relationships...ongoing?"

"No."

"That film producer-line don't get woman to get their clothes off?" She asked.

I laughed. "Actually it can. But I only took advantage of it once. I was taken by surprise and lonely."

"You lonely now, aren't you?"

"No. I'm with you."

"Aw, that's sweet." She bent close to me and whispered, "Don't worry, you're not like a

trick to me."

Her breath was hot and scented, but the message angered me. Our relationship was fleeting. I tried for art's sake to try to reconstruct its magic from short moments ago. I was unable, it fled like vapors. I wondered if I should keep the cab, at the hospital, and go somewhere else.

We arrived at a small neighborhood hospital, a brick building of no more than three stories. She pulled me out by hand with interlaced fingers, and I yielded. I paid the fare with her change, tipping the driver only a dollar. He said nothing and vanished in a plume of unregulated pollution. The remainder of her twenty was now fairly small. Of course a twenty is fairly small to begin with. I offered her what was left. She accepted it, but hooked my arm again with hers as we walked inside.

It occurred to me that this was a Friday night. Victims of violent trauma moaned from gurneys. I tried not to cringe.

"Welcome to my world," she mumbled. I feared she was trying to give me a lesson in something. We found our way to the information desk.

"Matilda White?" She asked.

"Are you family?" The information woman asked.

"Yes."

"Well then, you can go up, but I'm afraid you can't go inside," she told me.

"He's my husband." My new wife told the woman, as she led me quickly to intensive care.

I sensed a new urgency, that perhaps this wasn't another mini-stroke. Her eyes were riveted on the elevator floor numbers, trying to make them go faster.

"Is your name really Amanda?" I asked.

"Amanda Jean. I'm called 'Jeanny' by my family, 'Jen' at work.

The doors opened and we sped-walked along a corridor. First in the wrong direction, then back. Added to usual odors, I sensed fear.

At the nursing station I saw a glimmer of white uniformed people in slow motion. We blurred past. From out of a room several hospital people wheeled a bed. I saw a woman who seemed comatose...

"MAMA!" Amanda Jean cried. She let go of me and flung herself to the bed. The woman had expired. One of the hospital personnel was in the process of wrapping a sheet over her. I guessed they needed the room quickly.

The hospital people seemed unprepared for Amanda Jean, and were uncertain of what to do. Sobbing, the daughter clutched her mother's corpse.

I stood there stupidly for a second, and then suggested that they wheel the body back into the room and pull the curtain for privacy.

"We need the room," a nurse told me.

"C'mon..." I said, pushing the bed back to where it came. My brief sojourn in hospital security had served me, after all.

They made a face at this but did not interfere. Some stabbing or gunshot case coming out of O.R. would have to loiter elsewhere for awhile.

"Oh Jesus, God, help me!" Jeanny cried. "I didn't get here in time. Fuck you, I didn't get here in time!" She screamed at me, with more grief than anger.

I said nothing.

"I didn't get to tell her how much I loved her. How much I loved my Mama. How important she was to me. She was the only person. The only person who ever loved me. The only one. And now she's gone..." And she shook with despair. She heaved with sobs of such tremendous force that I feared she might hurt herself.

"And you can't say nothing." She said to me. "Because you don't know us. You and all your big talk, don't mean nothing. Just bullshit. Making-movies-bullshit."

"I couldn't phrase it better," I admitted. "But don't be angry with yourself," I said.

"She would never approve of what I done..." Jeanny said.

"She loved you, I'm sure. And you loved her back. I'll wait outside for you." I patted her shoulder and left the room. My head was pounding. The hamburgers were in revolt. A drug overdose patient jerked spasmodically from an unattended bed in the hallway.

I leaned against the wall opposite the door and lowered my eyes, trying to screen out some of the glare.

Time passed. My headache dulled. The overdose case stopped thrashing. I wondered if maybe he was dead. It took a great effort to look and see. No, he was still breathing.

She came out the room of her mother's death. She walked to me slowly. "Did you say your good-bye?" I asked.

"Yes. I tried."

"Let me take you to your Aunt's (Ant's) house." I said.

The distance was close enough to walk, and we did. She shuddered from time to time. I let her walk separate from me. I watched and wondered about her.

Suddenly she stopped and put her hands to her face as a washcloth for tears. "I can't go in there." She told me.

"In where?" I asked.

"My Aunt's."

"Why?"

"My Mama was one of six. I got so many relatives. Some I haven't seen since I was in high school. My God, I can't face them."

"Why not?"

"Me? Jeanny? I was the valedictorian of my class. I had a scholarship to school, dance and art. Now look at me. I'm a word processing temp. I can do 70 words a minute..."

"You can type all my scripts." I offered, hopefully.

"And I pick up rich white boys on Friday or Saturday nights... How can I face them? Look at me! They all thought I'd be a fashion model, a black cover girl. Or an artist...Goddamn..." She screwed her face and cried, "I'm not even *married*."

So that's what we shared, I thought. "Don't even think about it." I told her.

"Let me tell them that your my fiancé," She asked, grabbing my hand, "That's right! You'll be what I was keeping secret." She laughed, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"It's too bizarre." I suggested.

"No. You'll be that rich white boy I got."

"Get out."

"They won't be prejudice. These are good people. I'll tell them we met at a Bible study group."

"No fucking way." I hissed, adamantly.

"You don't want to be my fiancé?" She asked in that little girl's seductive voice.

I relented slightly, "We didn't meet in any Bible study group."

"Of course not. They would never believe that, anyway." Having made the sale, she wiped her face with the arm of her sleeve.

We marched up the stairs to her Aunt's flat in an old three family house. After two knocks. Warmth, light and supper smells greeted us, enveloping the sister of the deceased I had recently met.

Jen burst into hysterics, "Mama's gone!"

Her Aunt shrieked in dismay. They clasped each other and all of us --including me-- were pulled inside into the private world of grief. I fought back tears myself, and thought, Jesus Christ, I hope she remembers my name.

As the wailing subsided, Jen's Aunt began asking questions. "When did my sister pass? I was just there two hours ago and believe me she did not seem so serious...Did you get to speak with her?"

Before Jen could answer, her Aunt spied me from the corner of her eye. I was neither a doctor nor a policeman and her brow furrowed in consternation about just what the hell I was doing in her living room.

"Steve." I said, advancing with a ready handshake.

She took it with a half-hand, folded and only partially yielding. She was deciding just how rude to be if I were a salesman intruding on her at this bad time.

"Steve and I are planning to be married next year." Jen said, linking her arm with mine. "I am so glad he was with me this evening...He helped sooo much." She gushed at me.

I had finally found my great actress. But I don't think the discovery was what made my knees so tremulous.

"Well, I'm very glad." Her Aunt beamed with acceptance and affection.

"Steve's an independent producer and a media-consultant," she said next.

I tried to step on Jen's foot but could find no graceful way of doing so.

"On the news, maybe?" She asked me. "You produce the TV news?"

"Noo...I. uh, --doing research on migratory labor patterns among...urban semi-professionals...that's uh..."

"Documentaries." Jen said.

"Well. I don't know what that is either. I'm just so glad that our little Jeanny found someone nice. Now, you take good care of our girl, here," she gave Jen a squeeze, "Just too bad about our beloved Matilda..." She cried a little but arrested it quickly.

"Now, Jeanny," her aunt began, "We can't waste no time in makin' arrangements with Deacon's Funeral Home. We got family to get here from all over. And you let Uncle Earl come with us, so they don't do no funny business. And I'll call Reverend Wilson and Brother Thomas right away. They'll want to get things started. FREDDY! Freddy, you upstairs? Get on down here. FREDDY!"

A door upstairs opened, a loud blast of music came with it.

"Turn that off!" Her Aunt shrieked. The music upstairs lowered in volume.

"I said turn that devil-noise off!" Her Aunt commanded.

The music died. A black man of about twenty two came downstairs. A linebacker or a running back wearing a tee shirt and sweat pants. "Mama? Hi Jeanny."



"Get over here Freddy. Your Aunt Matilda is with the Lord this day."

"Oh God." Freddy squeezed his cousin Jeanny, lifting her off her feet.

"And this here is her boyfriend, Steven."

"The white dude?" He asked giving me a hand to shake.

"Now you get yourself dressed like a Christian, because Brother Thomas will probably be here to pray with us in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Yesm" Freddy said, rolling his eyes with good humor. "Brother Thomas will be looking for a free meal." He whispered to Jen. "Boy I am sorry about your Mom. We just seen her this afternoon."

"It hasn't sunk in all the way, yet, Freddy." Jen admitted.

"Think I understand. Hey, I got to get dressed and get to the store, buy some cold cuts and bread for the folks be' over..." He looked at me.

"You ever been to a black person's funeral?"

"Not recently." I admitted.

"By tomorrow night -- they'll be seventy people in this house. Maybe a hundred. More by Sunday. Maybe we could use you as a pall bearer. Lotta women in this family. You ever been to an African Methodist or a Black Baptist service?"

"No."

"It be different. What religion are you?"

"Freddy's real direct." Jen told me.

"Uh...kinda...non-practising Unitarian."

"A uni-what...oh, a moonie..." He made a face.

"No...There were at least seven U.S. Presidents who were Unitarians or non-practising Unitarians..." I said.

"Oh a religion for rich, white folks. Y'all stand around listening to lectures and such." He did a little pucker-lipped parody of dry, withered, white folks standing around in solemn boredom.

I grinned.

"Well, can't waste too much time now, Brother Thomas and the Rev are snappin on their collars and puttin their walking shoes on. I got to get movin'. Better get my gun before I go out this time of night. You be alright, now?" He asked Jen.

"Uh huh."

Freddy bounded up the steps three at a time.

"Get his gun?" I asked quietly.

"Freddy's a cop." She told me.

I nodded. "Over a hundred people?" I asked.

"At least." She told me, her eyes widening with the mystery that befuddled me earlier.

"Go easy on me, okay." I pleaded, "No more producer-shit, alright."

"It's too late for that. Aunt Elizabeth has the word."

A sea of faces-to-come flooded my eyes. I could see that several intense days of play-acting before this gathering crowd of the unknown would have the same effect of two hundred days of normal intensity. After this weekend, anything would be possible. I began to feel remorse over my unusual predicament.

"And practically everyone here will be black, except of course, you...darling." Jen added.

I looked into her clear, yet calculating, vision and tried thinking of Sammy Davis at his first Beverly Hills bar mitzvah. Nothing clicked save the merciless hold that Amanda Jean now held on my pitiful existence.

I spent the night on a tiny cot in the laundry room of Aunt Elizabeth's house. About Two in the morning the family dog arrived. I suppose the laundry room was his. He sniffed the air menacingly and began barking. I kindly told him to shut up and he growled meanly for five minutes.

"What do you want, dog?" I asked in a husky whisper.

"GRRrrrrr"

"C'mere. C'mon." I offered.

Slowly he advanced with his ears back and tail between his legs. A fearsome opponent lit by a night-light.

I put my hand up before him. He continued growling until I lowered my hand to his head. Quickly we became friends. It seemed like no one had patted his head in a half a dog's lifetime. He whimpered and yapped with pure joy.

"Good dog, now go curl up over there on your rug and go to sleep."

But doggie had other ideas. He put his paws on me, leaned back for leverage and leapt on top. He licked my face once, circled around as if to find his tail and then lay down with his head forward on my chest. Our eyes were not far apart.

"You're kind of heavy." I told him. He blinked once or twice and then went to sleep.

"If dogs like you, you can't be all bad..." I said and lay back for a long night. The dog

snored.

Freddy had been right about the gathering masses. They gathered. I escaped their inquisitive eyes for mortuary duty, selecting a coffin with Jen, Freddy, Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Earl. Mr. Deacon, the funeral director was as smooth a salesman as I had met this side of an automobile showroom. Freddy put him in his place once, and Uncle Earl took him aside to discuss prices. My purpose was to be clutched by the sobbing women.

The day dragged. I was either a rock of support for Jen who would not let go of me, though we rarely spoke, or a lone piece of drift wood left awash by its lonesome in an unfamiliar tide.

The producer-shit did not stop. Virtually everyone who paused to make conversation with me started on that point. Nine out of ten mature adults disapproved of the level of violence in films, TV shows and the news. Several people told me that there should be more and better parts for black performers.

I ate or appeared to in order to have something to do. I sipped soft drinks. I sat on uncomfortable folding chairs.

People came and went. Hundreds came calling to pay respects. Every forty five minutes or so the living room ensemble would change. At one point, I was surrounded by young adults. A few seemed to glare at me. Some snickered over what they perceived to be my uncomfotability. What they didn't realize was that I was already comfortable with being uncomfotable. All I wanted was a shower and a week long nap --in escape to a dream world that made better sense than this one.

Eventually, I excused myself and went down stairs to the laundry room. The cot had been put away, but the dog was there, curled up on his semi-circle of rug. What's good for the goose is good for the gander.

I lay down on the floor and put my head on the dog. "Wake me up when it's over."

Jen found me and was furious. "What are you doing, laying there like some lazy, no-good nigger? Get up." She hissed.

"I've never seen you this angry, hon. Maybe we should seek pre-marital counseling."

"Don't you embarrass me." She spat.

I put my hand out. "C'mere..."

"Just get up from that floor. And wash your head tonight."

She walked out, closing the door behind her. My hand was still in the air, ready to pat her head. Jeeze, it had worked with the dog.

The funeral was an awesome responsibility for me. With the viewing, church service, procession and interment it meant most of a day with a front row seat before the casket.

Jen cried throughout, clenching my hand and arm. The service was rousing, with a

chorus, a heavyweight female soloist, three preachers and a lot of 'amens' and 'say it's screamed from the congregation. I actually got into it, with some clapping and hollering during one of the hymns. Jen stood like a Presbyterian at my side.

She looked at me as if I were an apparition. "You've got no rhythm, Steven, but a lot of soul." She said.

Other than demeaning me for napping in the laundry room it was our only conversation. I didn't know how to take it, but dissolved back into an emotionless white man standing transfixed before the entry of the dead into the arms of the Almighty. I kind of despised my new life.

I wondered what Sarge would do under these circumstances. I searched for his advice in my memory banks. The only thing I could recall, was 'if you got to travel light, don't take prisoners'.

It was dusk when we returned to Aunt Elizabeth's house for more. I returned to my folding chair with a small piece of cake and waited for time to cease.

I overheard Jen talking to a relative. "...Steven is expecting an assignment overseas. So I guess we'll have to travel...Oh, I'll pack for those places, you better believe it...Yes, his career is going very well... He's won a lot of awards...very distinguished. Much of what he does has religious overtones...Redemption...He's hoping for more commercial success...but I know it'll come...We met at a private gathering...I had heard about his work...

Jeeze, I thought, maybe I should go play with the dog, a good roll in the dry dirt of the back yard might do us both a world of good. I could teach him how to fetch a stick. We could howl at the moon together...

I stood amid the commotion and purposefully maneuvered for the front door. Freddy stopped me.

"Yo, where you going?"

"Get some air..." I said.

"Be quick, this time of night ain't healthy out there. I'm serious." He said.

I nodded. "Real quick."

I left the porch and scuffled along the side walk. There were furtive shadows, threatening potentials in the night atmosphere.

At the corner I found a pay phone. I dug for change. Called information for her Aunt Elizabeth's phone number. Then called and asked for Jen.

"It's me Steven...your fiance."

"Where are you?"

"Listen, an important call came in. I've got to go on assignment. Immediately."

"What...? Can't you wait?"

"It's my big chance. I'll, uh, look for a ring...a proper ring for you..."

"That would be nice..."

"Say good-bye...or see-you-later to Elizabeth...Earl and Freddy. okay?..."

"Sure...okay...You know we're invited here for the holidays..."

"Great...Okay, love...I'll cable you..."

"Thank you...Take care Steven...Love you..."

"Bye."

I hung up, and stepped from the pay phone. An older car with out-of-state license plates swerved down the street toward me. It stopped and the back door opened.

In the front seat were two frisky looking blondes, and in the back seat a drunken post-youngster of nineteen

"Heya dude..." He laughed, waving a beer bottle in the air..."We-uh seemed to get lost here in coon-town..." More laughter as if he had invented some great, subtle joke, "An' I can't drive on account of me havin' brain damage an' all...You know how to get the fuck outa here?" He laughed.

"We been drivin' in circles for an hour." One of the women in the front seat said.

I looked in at them with my hand on the door handle. 'Whoops, and here's my ride!'

## **CHAPTER 8 Frosty, Lucy and Buzzo**

"Let me guide you out of here...personally." I suggested.

"You'll have to sit back here with me, an' I'm dangerous." The back seat character told me.

"Shut up Buzzo --hop in." One of the blondes said.

"Step over me...I want the window." Buzzo said.

"There's two windows, you know..." The other blonde told him.

I hadn't even sat yet when the first blonde peeled out, laying rubber and fishtailing a block. I practically fell on Buzzo.

"I'm Frosty." The driver said.

"And I'm Lucy." Her accomplice bubbled.

"I'm Stevie..."

"Where to, Stevie?" Frosty asked.

I didn't have any idea. "Just go straight." I told her.

Lucy turned around to face me, sitting on her knees. "Shut up everyone...What do Frosty and me have in common?" She asked me.

I shrugged. "You use the same toothpaste?"

"No. It's serious...guess again."

I looked again. "You're sisters."

"See!" Lucy shrieked with delight.

"Would you bet money on it?" Frosty asked, watching me in the rear-view mirror.

"I ain't got money." I said.

"What a pussy..." Buzzo rebuked.

"Well we're not exactly sisters..." Lucy said.

"Brothers?" I asked.

Lucy laughed, and waved at me. "No, now you're being silly...Guess again?"

"I give up. I haven't had much sleep recently..." I said.

"All right, I'll tell ya...Frosty is my Mom..."

I leaned forward to get a better look at Frosty. Yeah, it was barely possible.

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed with made up exuberance. "Is that for real?"

Frosty nodded, beaming at my incredulity.

"You musta been five years old in the maternity ward!" I said, really stretching it.

Frosty loved it. I hoped I was making friends here.

"Sit back, you're in my way..." Buzzo complained, tugging on my sleeve. Not friends all around, though.

"How come you got a tie on?" Lucy asked.

"Funeral...This is a black police officer's necktie...It's a loaner, and I intend to return it some time in the near future..."

"Is it worth anything?" Lucy asked.

"Not very much..."

"Who died?" Frosty asked.

"A...My fiancée's mother..."

"How sad." Lucy commented.

"Did you shoot her?" Buzzo asked for amusement, and then went ahead and laughed anyway.

"That's not very nice, asshole." Lucy rebuked him.

"Did she suffer?" Frosty asked.

"I don't know...I didn't know her very well...in the flesh, so to speak..."

"Didn't get to diddle her, huh?" Buzzo commented, to be play-slapped by Lucy.

"What's your fiancée like?" Frosty asked.

"Very beautiful, very smart..."

"What's she doin' with you?" Buzzo asked, rhetorically.

"What does she do?" Lucy asked, but was pre-empted by Frosty.

"--You sure we're going right?"

I leaned forward again to see. It seemed that we were hopelessly lost in unfamiliar territory. The streets were deserted, and the neighborhoods foreboding or worse.

Suddenly we all noticed a sign for the Interstate. I pointed at it as Frosty accelerated and took a quick turn to zoom up the approach ramp.

"I guess, that's enough for this city..." She said.

"But you promised me a ball game. We would get to go to a ball game here..." Buzzo lamented.

"Place is too creepy...We'll just head south." Frosty said.

My face must have registered displeasure at being whisked, not miles, but possibly continents.

"Is that okay with you?" Lucy asked me.

"Well...I got to return this necktie..." I said.

"You gonna miss your fiancée, now?" Lucy asked.

"Oh yeah...and my dog." I said.

"What's his name?" Lucy asked.

"I'm not sure. We didn't talk much." I answered.

Buzzo laughed to himself. Lucy nodded solemnly, "I think I asked this before, but what does your fiancée do?" She asked again.

"She's a...a typist and a part-time hooker. But very high class."

Buzzo guffawed, but neither female blinked a lash.

"And you love her?" Lucy asked.

"Infatuated." I said rather blandly.

"Isn't that sweet," Lucy said, "You hear that Mom?"

"Yes I did." Frosty said, nodding approval. There were several moments of silence.

Finally Frosty spoke, "Well, settle back cause we got a little drivin' to do..." She goosed the car to at least eighty and eased into the passing lane.

I contemplated asking to be let off by the shoulder. But it was already so far away from what I knew of that city, so dark and transfixed with distance that I wondered what advantage I would have being 'here' rather than a 'there'. Besides, what if she said, no?

"So, you bum clothes offa cops, huh? What kind of gig is that?" Buzzo asked from his menacing shadows.

He was a good reason to be deposited at the roadside, I thought, but pressed on, anyhow. On the positive side, I could consider him as a role model for a younger version of my alter-ego film character.

"D'n'know..."

"Are you just stupid?" He snickered.

"Buzzo, knock that shit off, will ya?" Frosty requested from the front seat. Apparently, his challenging commentary was annoying her speed concentration.

"Did ya ever know anybody like me --with brain damage?" He asked in a less threatening tone.

"Yeah... My ex-Sergeant..."

"Sergeant? What are you, some kinda plain clothes cop yer-self?"

"Nope."

"What a ya doin' wi'sergeants?" Buzzo asked.

"The military."



"You tryin' to impress me like you was some kinda military hero or somethin', 'cause I don't fuckin' believe you."

"Actually I was in the Explorer Scouts...why don't you just look out of the window?" I suggested.

"Nuttin' to see..." He said, looking. "So...uh...were you, like, trained to be a killer?"

I wanted to baldly lie, to tell him I was trained to fix typewriters, but the effort would be wasted on him. I lied anyway, but not with humor.

"I was only in for a few weeks...they threw me out.." I said.

"Why?" He asked, growing interested in this phony story.

"I needed a drink bad, so I drank all the mouthwash in the barracks. Then I went crazy and knocked all the lockers over, four guys held me down till they got me to the nuthouse...I puked for two days after that, and then they let me go home...psycho."

"Hey, that sounds like what happened to me." He said, his tone affecting an air almost akin to friendliness.

"Put her there, pard." I said offering my hand for a shake. He slapped my palm instead, but at least we had a truce for the moment.

Buzzo grinned, but there was still meanness in his eyes. A cruel joke seemed to be forming behind his rough features. Suddenly he gave a slight twitch.

"Heya Frost... stop the car... stop the car!" He said.

Frosty hit the brakes which pulled us sharply toward the right. She held the monstrous auto as its screeching tires melted tread across the concrete highway. We careened across the shoulder, hit the grass, bounced and jolted to a stop. Frosty and Lucy laughed uproariously.

Buzzo bailed out. He yanked the door open and disappeared below the car as if he had dropped five miles out of the stratosphere. A truck barrelled past us and its headlights illuminated his rump sticking into the air beside the car door.

With the coming quiet I could hear him retching beside us. After a moment he rose from his knees and stumbled away from us, occasionally gushing vomit to this side or that. Without bothering to address his puking, he began to urinate.

"What an act." I commented.

"He can drink twelve beers an hour if he's in the mood." Lucy said.

"I don't doubt it..." I said.

"Was that true about you bein' throwd out of the Army like you told Buzzo." Frosty wanted to know.

"No such luck. I was stuck there for years. I was reborn in the military." I told her.

"Well Buzzo wasn't. He went in crazy and came out crazy, in a big hurry." Frosty said.

"What do you do, like really?" Lucy wanted to know.

"Like look for work. I was a security guard on the night shift, recently. At a suburban hospital. But I can't tolerate the smells, you know..."

"Come on, you're too smart to do that shit. You're some kind of business man. A lawyer maybe." Frosty said.

"Bullshit." I said.

"That's too bad, we coulda used a good lawyer. You need a pimp and a lawyer in this world." Frosty said.

"So what did you do, before?" Lucy asked.

"An unpaid storyteller."

"Tell us a story." Lucy prodded.

I looked out to Buzzo doing jumping jacks.

"I'm unable. Truth is stranger than fiction." I said.

They followed my interest and watched with me, as Buzzo's antics developed into some bizarre calisthenics. He did a lot of jumping and twisting.

"It settles his stomach." Lucy said.

"He'll come into the car. Take a brain pill...you know for his brain-damage, like. Go to sleep, be up in a couple of hours and ready to drink a case of beer. It's a miracle really." Frosty related.

She was right. Buzzo took his pill and mentally vanished from our presence. Except for some unintelligible mumblings, he lay still, his head rocking against the window and remained in his own sleep world.

"Let's stop in that city and see if there's any action." Lucy recommended as we zoomed past an approaching-exit sign.

"You like the night, Stevie?" Frosty asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you a night creature?" She asked.

"We's night animals." Lucy told me.

"Well, I'm still awake. I don't know how... but I'm still awake."

"I'm more creative at night." Frosty said.

I recalled traipsing about a borrowed house, video-taping a rehearsal for my last unmade film...the hour growing late... everyone weary. Hoping to use the tape as a promotional vehicle. Having to redo it the next day. The nightmare of intercutting the two sequences in editing. Window shades up with shades down... I grimaced.

"I think I'm more creative at night. But it only works while I'm sleeping." I admitted.

I braced for the high speed turn that I expected Frosty to make at the exit and was not disappointed. Buzzo's head slapped the window a few times. He barely stirred.

"You know, you could get pulled over..." I warned.

"By the troopers in this state?" Frosty laughed.

"Pulled over means pulled down." Lucy joked.

"These boys are horny devils. Yank their stick and no trouble at all." Frosty told me. The two of them laughed.

We were heading for downtown at past the bewitching hour.

Frosty seemed to find the area of the city near the docks. Rows of debilitated factories lined the wharfs. Here and there was a plant still in operation. Across from one of these companies the women located a bar. Seedy, no more than a low spot, a gin joint. A place for the second shift to guzzle spirits. Business was probably down from years ago when there were more thirsty throats to serve.

"Here we go..." Lucy announced.

Frosty pulled over to the curb and turned around to me. "Okay Stevie, we're gonna need the back seat..."

"Back the car into that alley over there, Mom," Lucy advised.

"Okay." She did so.

They stopped, parked and got out. I did also.

"Help us with Buzzo." Frosty asked.

"To do what?" I asked, thinking they might want to dump him in the river.

"Take him outa the car and lay his ass on the trunk. He can sleep there...."

Lucy got his legs while Frosty and I hefted the rest of him and carried him to the car's large trunk. He farted as we lay him down.

"Jesus Christmas can he cut some raunchies." Frosty exclaimed.

Foolishly, I looked around wondering what to do.

"Okay Stevie, take off. If you want..."

"To where?" I asked, feeling angry. Just like me to escape to something worse. Leave the burbs for something more desolate. Always getting further from the mysterious promised land.

"Have you-self a beer." Lucy advised, good naturedly.

"If you want, meet us back here about dawn and we'll give you a ride out of town." Frosty said.

"Dawn?" I shook my head, "How come he gets to sleep on the trunk?" I asked, "How about giving me space on the hood?" I half-joked. Shit, the hood would be warmer!

Lucy seemed to consider the proposition.

"Cause it won't be right... Look, sugar with any luck we'll be fuckin' up a storm. That ol' car will be a rockin' and a buckin'. Now, they won't even see Buzzo, out of sight.. Get my drift?" Frosty said.

"Dawn?" I asked for verification.

"Thereabouts...sure..." Frosty hooked her arm through mine as she escorted me toward the curb. "I'd give you beer money, but I haven't got enough change to pee... Find yourself a dry cardboard box and get some sleep..."

"See you later, Stevie," Lucy called.

I began walking. Sleep-walking through a landscape that could only serve as a backdrop for a nightmare.

Who destroyed this city, I wondered. Who destroyed this city and pulled out, leaving me behind? This was like one of my military dreams. From the last-one left in-country, genre. Sarge didn't do the proper head count. Even if I were dead, he left me to wander the desolate battlefield, my soul forever in turmoil in such a place.

Where were the southern dreams? The vacation dreams? The luxuriant college campus dreams, where I could idle in the library of relative bliss? Or even get lost in a rush to find my missing classroom? Or even a military dormitory dream. --The obsolescence rising out of the uselessness of the experience. The aged resort crumbling into plaster; leaky shower rooms. Interconnected theaters of dreams, merging into one another like a kaleidoscope being turned absently in the perpetual-motion machine of the universe.

I saw a man, a body lying on brown paper. Something from the meatmarket. The man had no shoes. Somebody had stolen his shoes. Was he dead or asleep? Either way, wasted. I hurried on.

To my left I saw some buildings and an abandoned train platform. I walked toward the buildings. A fragment of human noise floated its beat along the vapors of the night. "In-the-ur-ban-night/the-rappin'-song/floats-like-'poem-tree'."

I put my head up like a primitive anthropoid on the Serengeti Plain and sniffed the air for this communication. I heard nothing further.

Along a broken sidewalk, I advanced past concrete-busting weeds toward the buildings. They were shells. Only a sign remained from a destroyed grocery store. I had little money to buy anything anyhow.

I brushed the bits of glass shards from a rotting window sill and sat on it. If I had a few goats and a tent I could have settled there for a while. No, I would need a water source. Something untainted with toxic pollution. Even a professional nomad could not dwell in such a place.

I attempted to analyze the loneliness and regret that I felt. It welled up in my throat. Then I heard the human noise again. Louder. It began to grow till I could find its direction. It approached... "Wrestle-the-demon-and-get-his-name/You-could-get-holy/You-could-find-fame..."

A black-man wearing tinted glasses walked toward me, carrying a large portable audio system that blasted away at the emptiness. I lowered my head onto my hand and rooted myself to my window sill. I looked like I belonged there.

As he approached me, he turned his volume down. "Say man, you want to buy somethin'?"

"No."

"Stay cool." He showed his hand (no weapon), turned the volume back up and continued with his pace till he was out of hearing.

There was a large, empty cardboard box on the ground, nearby. I began to pull it apart, but it was wet on the inside. "No, I can't do this I said..." But, I was very tired. Maybe somewhere on this planet something good was happening. Maybe Sarah Greene was marrying a divorced dentist. Maybe some children were snug in their beds...Maybe...

I sat on the sidewalk. Maybe I could catch a nap. Just for a moment. I lay down. Before I could even feel the cold of the crumbling concrete my mind drifted away. Across this wasteland and onto fresh highways bearing me away. Far away. Something tickled my ankles. Within my evolving dream I realized I was asleep. I was asleep in an evil place and somebody was stealing my shoes! I struggled to find my body.

I opened my eyes and kicked with force. I leapt up and looked behind me. I had kicked the air. My shoes, one slightly stained with black paint, were safe. Was I? My breath was coming quickly, my pulse was racing. How much of this could I bear?

I began retracing my steps. Walking quickly, with great purpose. I tried not to see myself as the progenitor of all my troubles. I tried to get angry. But at what, exactly?

I broke into a trot near where I had past the body, turned and kept going. My lungs ached. I could hear Sarge's exhortations: 'Com'on girls get the lead out of your lard asses. Turtle! You layin' down on me, boy?'

I passed the old factories and neared the waterfront. I would go to the highway. All the way to the Interstate I had dreamed of. Ahead was the bar where Frosty had parked.

Their car nearly hit me. "Stevie, where ya' been?" Lucy called out to me.

"He's doin' his P.T. Look at 'im sweat!" Buzzo shouted with glee from the back seat.

I slowed down to a walk. Frosty spoke to me from the driver's side. "Well, get in, why don't ya?"

They stopped in the roadway and I rounded the trunk and got in behind Frosty. "It ain't dawn yet." I said.

I banged my shin on something hard, as Frosty floored the car.

"These sorry-sons-of-bitches had no damn money!" Frosty lamented gaily. Lucy laughed.

"We had to do the owner for a cooler full of beer." Lucy told me.

Buzzo guzzled a cold one, stopping long enough to exclaim, "Yahoo!"

"An' the old buzzard took a month to get started..." Frosty began, "--And a minute to get finished!" The two women announced, together.

We roared along the river road but must have missed the interstate. Frosty slowed down as the road narrowed.

"Damn it all, lost again. Okay Stevie guide us out of here." Frosty said.

"He don't know where the hell we are." Buzzo complained.

I didn't want to backtrack. "Make a left." I suggested.

She did and the road widened out and found a dark and sleeping city.

"What a crap-hole." Buzzo observed.

Ahead we saw lights and soon entered an intersection which had a population of sidewalk patrons drifting past nightclubs and go-go bars.

"Stevie, you done it again!" Lucy exclaimed.

"It was dumb luck!" Buzzo protested as he fished into the cooler for a new beer.

"We can make us some cash-on-the-stump here, can't we gal?" Frosty said.

"Uh... you might want to be careful..." I said.

"Of what?" Frosty asked.

"These... territories might be staked out..." I added.

"I'll take care of all that!" Buzzo bragged.

"But Stevie knows about this too, remember his fiance's a whore." Lucy interjected.

"A high-class hooker. Part-time." I said.

"And we're low-class?" Frosty asked with an angry bite rising.

"You have a lower rate of capitalization to your enterprise, that's all." I said.

Buzzo laughed, "If that ain't a mouthful of shit."

We past a corner pharmacy with a blue clock poised over its doorway. It was 1:45. It seemed like 4:00 A.M.

"Okay fellahs, get your butts out." Frosty said. Buzzo made a face. "We gonna work the street from the car, see how it goes..." She said.

"Either of you ladies have a watch?" I asked.

Lucy turned around with a big grin, "Got one tonight." She said, showing it off. A cheap, man's watch.

"Bars should close in fifteen minutes. Meet you at the drugstore over there by 3:00 ?" I asked.

"That sounds reasonable." Frosty replied.

Buzzo stuffed fresh beer bottles into his pants pockets and wrapped his fingers around as many as he could carry. "Don't give away this beer to customers, okay?" He pleaded.

"Business is business." Frosty announced.

Buzzo and I exited the car. "Awww," Buzzo moaned, "We won't be able to get any fresh beer until mid-morning...Just don't give it all away." He asked of them.

"See you boys later." Frosty waved as they rolled from the curb.

Buzzo turned to me, he clutched his mobile beer cache with two arms. "I ain't hangen' aroun' wi' you, asshole, so you can beat it." He smirked as he lowered his head onto the open neck of his current round and holding it with teeth alone, cocked his head to let its precious contents wash down his throat.

I walked past him. There was a cove in the indented doorway of the drug store. I pulled some discarded newspapers over to the far wall and sat on them. I only had an hour and a quarter to kill. That should be nothing for a pro like myself.

When I was a kid, the city, any city, represented exciting possibilities; potentialities. As if one could travel the labyrinths of streets and discover fortune, adventure and romance all in a day and night's efforts. Perhaps even uncovering arcane and woolly wisdom before dawn's arrival. The city was after all a discussion with a million variable arguments. The city was a resolution with an infinite number of options. The city was a dreamscape in which I peddled a mysterious manuscript of esoteric originality. Finally locating a patron,

a benefactor, a spirit of guidance that could lead me to credibility. The city was always a dream that began to evaporate upon awakening. The city could also be the prostitute who was not there.

The city, this city was a realization of decay. The city itself was a personification of failure. It was a great hoary beast with paralyzed limbs and vast numbers of parasites. It would croak and groan and threaten, and turn a blind eye to the extravagances of pleasure-seeking of those who would still seek. But overall it was enthralled with its own disorganized anarchy, and suffering the premature consequences of its own death.

I heard an altercation from the street. A fierce scuffle of angry men, shouting to obscure their own fright.

"Look what you done to my beer!"

The voice sounded like Buzzo's escalating in volume and up an octave in excitement. I felt no loyalty to interfere on his behalf. Yet I was curious. Besides, we were fellow travelers for the moment.

I reconnoitered to the street. I saw the two of them circling one another warily in the midst of the deserted intersection. Buzzo had two hands free. His unconsumed beer bottles lay splattered by the curb. His adversary was an older man.

I walked into the intersection staying several feet away from the center of activity. Buzzo was feinting at the other as if he was intent on wrestling. They continued to circle moving counterclockwise till Buzzo's back was in front of me. His adversary was Sarge.

In a great rush of hormones these two charged one another like stags and locked into an evil embrace. Sarge saw me and his eyes went wide just as he and Buzzo rolled over.

They lay together locked into holds with one another which yielded no advantage to the other or themselves. Buzzo attempted to bite Sarge's arm and Sarge managed to twist Buzzo's head away with his elbow. I saw Buzzo's eyes twitch and at that point Sarge began to roll and drag toward the broken beer bottles, possibly calculating how best to roll Buzzo over these dangerous materials.

Sarge's will was working. But how he could calculate who's back would actually grind into this mess of shards, or whether one or the other could free and hand and grab some of this as a weapon --I couldn't figure. I beat Sarge to the booty and with my foot shoveled it down a storm sewer.

"Fuckin' cock-nose, shit ass, bullcrappin', dork, pee-pee noggin...Turtle, you fuckin' me up boy!" Sarge exclaimed.

Buzzo freed a hand which flew toward Sarge's crotch. Sarge tried to twist out of its way, but I intervened pinning Buzzo's wrist to the pavement with my foot heel. Sarge still had Buzzo twisted up so that he could not see who was pinning this free hand.

Sarge's eyes' went wide in appreciation. He jumped clear of Buzzo letting him go. I sprang away from the two of them. Buzzo recoiled like a spring, but the alcohol, or his



latent infirmity caused to him to wobble and delayed the arrival to his feet. Sarge took the opportunity to cold-cock him with a haymaker-right which sacked him out in the gutter.

Without a word, Sarge dragged Buzzo by the collar over the curb and deposited him near the sidewalk.

"Good work Turtle." Sarge said to me. "I guess that squares us."

"Squares us?" I asked.

"You run out on me in that-there restaurant. Said you were goin' for a piss or pay the tab and left me with fifteen bucks. "

"I left you a five for a tip," I said.

"The bill was over a hundred and fifty dollars!" Sarge exclaimed.

"It was your idea to eat there. Your invitation," I protested.

Sarge shrugged. Possibly he couldn't remember those details. "Know him?" He asked of Buzzo, who was twitching in his deliriums.

"Sort of. I'm catching a ride with these two whores he's friends with. A mother and daughter act." I said.

"Yeah, I met them," Sarge related. "Sometimes you don't want to fuck pussy, just know it's still there."

I didn't respond to his philosophy which was probably true whatever it meant.

"I was backin' out of their car. --All I could afford was a handjob-- and this asshole wants to start a fight with me..." Sarge shook his head sadly. "Well, I got to be goin', I think I'm in the wrong city..."

Without anymore good-bye than that the Sarge traipsed off down a darkened street.

Frosty and Lucy didn't show up until 4:30 in the morning. It seemed they were invited to a private party for an hour or two. They wondered where Buzzo was and I pointed to his prostrate form across the street. Lucy went out and shook him.

He woke up badly and finally rolled into a form that supported itself on its haunches. Eventually he stood and urinated. Lucy remained with him, talking to him and coaxing him back to the car. Slowly he came over to us.

"God was I in a fight. With that big guy who didn't pay you..." Buzzo said.

"The ex-Army General? He wasn't so big," Frosty said, making Lucy laugh. "Besides he did pay me, he just didn't leave the tip he promised."

"Well I chased him down after you guys pulled away..." Buzzo said, "He knocked my beer into the street and then swore he'd kill me. Boy, did I kick his ass." Buzzo bragged.

"Did you see this?" Frosty asked me.

I shrugged, "I was sleepin' over there..." I said, pointing to the pharmacy doorway.

"Knocked all the teeth outa his ugly mouth. I think I punched his eye out..." Buzzo added.

"Well, get in here..." Frosty ordered.

We began to drive. Buzzo reached into the cooler. "Boy, I need a cool one." He fished around in the icy water but found nothing.

"Frosty! ...Frosty there's no beer in here!" Buzzo cried betraying genuine pain.

"I'll buy a case as soon as the stores open, sugar." Frosty promised. "A cold case. Two or even three, if you like." She said.

"But, what will I do now?" Buzzo asked.

"Take your brain pill and rest a bit... okay, hon?" Lucy advised.

"Oh jeeze... I want a beer..." Buzzo moaned resting his head on the back of the seat.

I watched the buildings pass, as light came into the eastern sky.

Buzzo, soon faded as the sun came up. I peered into the front seat to see how Frosty fared.

"You never get tired?" I asked her.

"Oh, I'll sleep tonight. You can count on it. Work then play, then crash..." She said.

"Mom's on the twenty-four hour day." Lucy added.

"From eleven tonight till three or four the next day I'll be outa it." Frosty said.

I sat back. "Unusual." I commented.

"So, Stevie, what kinda storytellin' did ya do?" Frosty asked.

I shrugged. Buzzo was drooping over the empty cooler into the seat-well. He was out of the conversation. "Storytellin' like the movies..." I said.

"No shit. Cheapy movies, huh?" She asked.

"Real cheap."

"Huh...I've posed for pictures, you know..." Frosty said. "Didn't pay much. Not naked either...not totally naked, anyway. You gonna make another picture soon; 'cause Lucy and me is great actresses."

"We are. We act every day." Lucy said, bouncing around in her seat to make eye contact with me.

"Great ones." I acknowledged.

"So, why you movin'... you know... on the road?" Frosty asked.

"Broke." I said, knowing that would answer their questions satisfactorily. They both nodded with seeming approval.

"What does it take to make movies?" Frosty asked after a moment of reflection.

"A lot of insanity." I said.

They laughed. "Oh, we got plenty of that!" Frosty replied.

"What do they cost... I mean a cheapy-movie. Like you see on TV but no where else?" Lucy asked.

"A few million... Use to be, you could get started with a couple hundred thousand. Now-a-days you can't get started." I answered.

Frosty thought about that. "How did you get started?" She asked.

"With considerably less. I was in the money business for awhile. The lower, bottom fringes. I hated it, but thought I'd never miss it."

"You've done everything!" Lucy commented.

"Almost." I admitted. "Never drove a semi, though."

"You ain't sold your ass, have you?" Frosty asked, making Lucy laugh.

"It seems like I have..."

"Well, don't you worry, Stevie... We'll be in the money soon. Who knows, maybe we'll all be makin' movies together." Frosty said.

"Who knows." Next to me, Buzzo drooped lower. He was anybody's worst caricature of an alter-ego. Who knows.

\*

Lucy and Frosty had pulled the ice chest from the car's trunk and in moments were swilling the beer. It was difficult to fathom from their gusto that the hour of day was barely ten.

Buzzo sat in the dust, contemplating nothing. His looks, perhaps his wayward eyes, seemingly going in two directions, gave hint of demonic possibilities. His scruffy, do-it yourself, short-haircut and blotchy left cheek added to this impression.

I sat on a nearby log and thought of elsewhere. They were hard to conjure. Almost as absent as a daydream when one lies awake in the black of night fighting dread and horrific revelations.

"Come on sugar, manufacture pee." Lucy said, offering Buzzo a beer.

He accepted it, almost reluctantly, but then chugged it in its entirety. He coughed up an eclipsed "Wahooo..." which brought some regurgitant to his chin and boots. He seemed to slaver some of it back down his throat and held his hand out for another.

There were plenty to pass around. Frosty waved a spare cold-one at me.

"Come on asshole. Party!" Buzzo encouraged.

I held up my hand for it, but Frosty laughed and began drinking from it.

"Get up off yer ass and get it, asshole." Buzzo counseled.

"Hey, don't keep calling him asshole." Lucy rebuked. "It ain't him who got brain damage, you know."

For his next trick Buzzo tried chugging two beers simultaneously. The women cheered him on. He got half way through and had to come up for air.

"When I'm ready I'm gonna kick his ass." Buzzo threatened.

I laid a hand on the next beer Frosty offered. Playfully, she held it back. I let go of it.

"See, he's a real pussy. He won't take nothing!" Buzzo shouted. "Do that wi' me." He stood up to play grab-the-beer bottle with Lucy. She simply let go and his vicious grab, accompanied by a growl, propelled the wet container out of his hand.

The women laughed at him. He took two more beers and put his head back to chug them.

"He's gonna fight you." Lucy warned me. "And he fights dirty."

"Kick his ass." Buzzo warned with a throaty groan as he came up for air.

"Maybe you should run away, now." Frosty said.

To where, I wondered.

"You bein' a former storymaker an all...for the movies...Or what was you...a big shot with money?" Frosty continued.

"I was and still am, a fool." I admitted.

This made Buzzo titter. His drinking was proceeding with the abandon of a circus bear. But already his frame seemed ready to totter. He lay back in the dust and closed his eyes for a moment. A tremor shook through his body.

"It's from the brain damage, but he'll be okay, soon." Frosty whispered. Her breath held a fragrance of orange peel behind the cloud of brewery solvents.

"I'll be kicken' ass in a minute." Buzzo warned, his eyes still clenched shut.

Not mine, I thought. I picked up the ice chest, still half full and quite heavy and slogged the several feet over toward his prostrate form.

"Hey!" Lucy yelled.

I dropped the container and its belongings upon his twitching face. It was the greatest act of immediate violence I could ever recall committing. Idly I wondered if he were dead beneath it. Gingerly, I picked up the container. Some of the ice-water had splashed to the ground, otherwise it was still as heavy.

Buzzo seemed to be snoring.

"It might make his brain damage worsen." Lucy said.

I returned the ice chest to where I had taken it from.

"He was annoying me." I said. It seemed to be true, and I wasn't capable after my last 36 hours of hijinks, of saying much else.

"But darlin' he was gonna be our pimp. Now what are we gonna do? You got to have protection." Lucy said.

Somehow, I thought that Lucy was more dangerous than Buzzo. Stupidly I shrugged.

"Stevie will be our pimp." Frosty said. "After all, He done in Buzzo."

"But, Mom, Buzzo was blitzed."

"That's my point. An' Stevie is smart." Frosty said.

"He don't seem smart." Lucy said.

"I'm not." I said in my own defense.

"He even said hisself, that he was a fool."

"That's me." I grinned at them.

They both looked at me. Examined me in studious preoccupation. I couldn't help mugging with an idiotic leer.

"He'll do." Lucy admitted. They each took an arm and escorted me toward the car.

"What about all the beer?" I asked

"Leave that for numbnuts," she said of Buzzo

I looked back to behold him coming out of his deeper stupor toward a new twitching.

"He might drown himself in all that." I said.

"It's a free country, an' we got work to do." Frosty said.

"Don't worry, we'll get more beer later." Lucy added, breaking into a spirited chortle.

## **CHAPTER 9 The End**

I was relieved to travel without the menace of Buzzo. I sat alone in the back seat and let a smile spread on my face. My head wagged from the drive and I slid back on the seat and slept.

We stopped at a fast food place to eat. Frosty bought. I was famished. I ate several burgers. A large order of french fries and a chocolate shake. Still it didn't seem to be enough. Yet I could swallow no more.

Frosty and Lucy watched the comings and goings of the staff and during a supposed lull, barricaded themselves in the women's room for a quick sponge bath. This was life on the road. Whores shouldn't stink, it was a business decision. I sat amid my paper wrappers and rubbed my stomach. I wondered if we could get far enough south for a warm rain to wash me clean.

Soon, we were off again. I continued to doze in the back seat, till Lucy shook my knee. "Stevie, this is it, hon."

I looked out of the window. We were in another city. In a district where prostitutes, wearing the skin tight, scanty outfits of a streetwalker's trade, inhabited the corners during mid-afternoon. They looked at us as if we had neon lights advertising something. It was an uncomfortable evaluation.

"We found the supermarket." Frosty gloated.

"Why?" I struggled to regain the thinking process. I was still in the intuitive mode. "Look at the competition." I demanded.

"Hey...Stevie, that's just fine..." Frosty replied. "A lot of darkies in whore clothes. And here we are, two white cowgirls in jeans. I'm sure we will find good opportunities here."

Lucy nodded in agreement.

"But there's so many women working this district." I protested, using the logic of a market consultant.

"And here, darlin'," Frosty said, "is where the men come to shop!" Case closed.

The two of them scouted for a place to park the car.

"It's dangerous," I said, "I'm sure you'll be intruding on somebody's territory..."

"That's why we got you, hon." Lucy said.

"To do what, machine gun everybody?"

"Put that cop's-tie back on, and the jacket... Lucy you got any perfume for Stevie... We'll get a motel room and buy some clothes tonight, sugar..."

"No...it's a bad pick..." I observed of the area.

"Honey, we ain't been workin' checkout at the Piggly-Wiggly for some time now. We can turn a couple hundred here in a few hours... Listen to me, I know. You just wander around, sulking, with your hands in your pockets and everything will be fine."

"No..." I shook my head, "I'm outa here..." I opened the car door. "There's trouble here."

"Oh shit. Buzzo was right, he is a pussy..." Lucy said.

"We shoulda kept Buzzo..." Frosty sighed.

"The only thing that Buzzo was going to accomplish was get himself killed. Which he will do soon enough." I said.

"That's true," Frosty agreed "Look Stevie, we'll work this area carefully...Just keep an eye on things...if it gets weird...shit, call the cops," She laughed, "A few nights in the hoosegow beats the morgue anytime. I want you to help us, best you can, okay?"

I looked at her earnest face. "I want to support you... You know, help a family business...self-employment...it's the American way... but, honest, kids, this area could be bad..." It was my final recommendation.

Frosty patted my hand and coasted off to find parking. I sucked in my breath, thrust hands into my pockets and strolled the sidewalk like I lived there.

It was an hour or so... I saw Lucy approached three times and wander toward the parking lot, Frosty had to be more solicitous. She hooked her arm around two johns in the same time period... I shook my head. It was so damn pathetic. And it had bought my lunch!

They were both out of sight for awhile. I became concerned and slowly meandered toward the parking lot, cut into a side street where a building had been demolished. There was a bit of commotion and a loud noise. It could have been a gunshot. Not a rifle but something smaller.

I couldn't restrain myself, I trotted through the sparse crowd toward the parking lot. I expected, hoped, rather to discover nothing. Instead, I found Frosty on the ground, bleeding and Lucy standing over her in tears.

A John, a fifty five year old guy in chinos attempted to revive Lucy's interest. His libido could take a lot.

"Better hit it, Mac." I warned and the bonds of libido burst and he fled.

Lucy was white-faced, she was curled up and clutched her left thigh, grimly. "You were right, Stevie..." She sobbed.

"What happened?" I asked, simultaneous to seeing blood forming beneath her.

"I was working the wrong spot...an' this bitch came up an shot me... Tried to get me right in my business...I think it's my leg...I hope I'll make it..." She cried. "I ain't got no

medical insurance...Oh God, I'll be gimpy..."

"I'll take care of you Mamma." Lucy cried.

I left them to locate a pay phone. I found one not too far away. Near a street corner that still had signs with street names on them. What a lucky break.

I returned to the duo. Quite a large pool of blood had formed. A few of the curious took a glimpse before strolling along. I tried to move her out of the puddle and straighten the leg to get a look at it, but it hurt too much. She began to tremble from loss of blood.

"Don't let her die!" Lucy protested.

I grabbed her legs and turned her over. She screamed briefly. Her grip slackened for a moment. From behind I found the bullet's exit hole near the upper inside of her thigh. The fabric was sodden, but the bleeding had ceased, perhaps the vein had collapsed. I placed my handkerchief over the wound. Frosty grasped it.

"Hold it tightly there..." I advised.

We waited, the three of us for seemingly a very long time. Finally a police car and an ambulance arrived, poking their way slowly into enemy territory.

A heavyset policewoman took the initial statements as the paramedics set up a gurney.

"Who's who, here?" The policewoman asked.

"I'm her daughter..." Lucy sobbed.

Next, the policewoman looked to me, "You?"

Frosty was beginning to fade into a natural relaxation. Only Lucy's eyes held me with intent. I raised my eyebrows to her as if to say, 'sorry'. She looked away.

I shrugged to the policewoman, "Just a bystander."

"Good Samaritan, huh?" The policewoman said, not believing me. "What were you doing here?" She asked.

I stepped back a pace. "Me? I'm just looking for a job." I smiled.

She exhaled and turned to Lucy. I stepped back further. Frosty watched me quietly as the paramedics prepared to lift her into the ambulance, I gave her a little wave. She nodded and I faded back into the oblivion of another impersonal city.

I wandered through a coin-operated cleaners looking for change. I picked up a half-bar of laundry soap from the trash. I walked on.

I walked across dreams of America. Dreams that once played in someone else's head. It was a long journey out of corruption and into a better neighborhood.

I found a likely house. It had a swimming pool in the backyard. Untended, and littered



with leaves, but the water still possessed some degree of clarity. Several cords of wood were stacked under a car-port roof and also they had a large, brick barbecue with a handy, half-gallon of kerosene in a plastic container. Unpractical, but there. No one was home, in fact, the rear patio doors were covered with nailed plywood and a recent paper was stapled upon it. A foreclosure.

All I wanted were some matches. I debated indecision in a dream. Whether to wander or to rest? If I wandered would I lose this opportunity?

Feeling some attachment to this new property caused me stress --I didn't want to get lost! I made forays this way and that. Trying to keep bearings as I searched the nearby neighborhood for a convenience store; the ground for a discarded cigarette lighter. I needed a basic element, --fire.

Several blocks away I found a grocery. My intrusion was direct. "Can I trouble you for a book of matches?..." The girl behind the counter would not suffer a comment. She slid two books of paper matches to me. "Thank you."

I hurried to my new home. A foolish tune escaped my lips. I think I sang Christmas carols, or at least the one about building a fire.

Many pieces of wood, soaked with kerosene made a splendid fire in the barbecue pit. Splendid. I took the bar of laundry soap and plunged into the pool hoping I wouldn't meet any ferocious beavers who had taken up residence.

The water was much colder than I had imagined. Still, I had a body and scalp to cleanse, and clothes to wash. I went about my toilette with a ferocity punctuated by involuntary shivering. A few leaves drifted by, and I splashed them to the further depths of my bath.

I rung out my wardrobe as best as I could, shook off what excess water I could manage and re-dressed in the wet and wrinkled clothing. I was frightfully cold. I snuggled up to the fire's blaze and tried to concentrate on its warmth, but my teeth chattered and I shook horridly. Perhaps, I thought, I had made a mistake.

I hoped there were no concerned neighbors peering over fences and bushes. I turned myself as on a rotisserie; front then back, trying to ward off a devastating chill. I told myself that relative cleanliness was worth the agony.

My last memory of that twilight, before night commenced, was of stuffing the barbecue pit with as much firewood as would fit.

Sarge fell in beside me on my journey. He had a box under his arm. We said nothing for what must have been a mile or more.

"If you had stayed in, Turtle, you would have that monthly pension check comin' at you. Bing! Dough on the first." He said.

"I expected much more out of life, Sarge. I never thought I'd have to live for a small check, so that I could manage to live some more. This-here was America you know..." I told him.

"Things change, Turtle."

"So, I gather."

We saw Frosty and Lucy to our right. Frosty used a cane. Behind, trailed Buzzo. I couldn't see Buzzo's face. Perhaps he had none.

"I don't care for that creep." I admitted to Sarge.

"Between you and me, --an' his boozing,-- we helped kill him you know..." Sarge said.

"Bullshit. He was short for this world." I said.

"You had some of his hormones when you were eighteen, I know, I helped stomp them outa you." Sarge said.

"I guess I'm grateful," I told Sarge. "But I acted like that only for laughs, not because it was the real me."

"But those weird films you made, were they just for laughs?" Sarge asked.

"What are you, a film critic? You didn't hear me criticize your helpless swearing." I said.

"Oh, " Sarge grinned, "I don't have to do that anymore."

I waved at Frosty, "How's the leg?" I yelled.

She waved back, but Lucy didn't. "I'm gonna have to retire." She shouted. Her smile faded, and I thought that her age was beginning to show. "Back to the Piggly-Wiggly, if I can learn how to stand for a couple of hours at a time. Otherwise...otherwise...Lucy's gonna have to support me..." Frosty looked sad. Sad and remote, her face contorted as she began to cry. She looked away from me, hid her face and the three of them disappeared.

"Where'd they go, Sarge?" I asked.

"Come-on Turtle, can't be dealin' with all that shit now. Come on troop, we got some travelin' to do." He said.

"Sarge, I'm a bit tired of all this aimless traveling. Why don't we sit a spell, okay?" I asked.

"Sure thing. 'Fall out! At rest, smoke 'em if ya got-'em!'" Sarge called out, "Some things don't change." He admitted, sheepishly.

We sat on the ground. "I got somethin' here you might be interested in, Turtle. Won it in a poker game..." He set the box down and began to open it.

It was a camcorder. "Damn if I know how to operate this thing...But maybe we could all make us some movies, now." Sarge suggested.

"Hot damn." I slid the battery in and turned it on. "Great, but what can we make movies of?" I asked, aiming it this way and that, checking out the nothingness of the landscape.

"I got some videotapes of your old films...We could edit it all together and shoot some new footage, an, well, who-the-fuck knows. It might be pretty neat..." Sarge said.

"We can edit it in-camera," I said, peering through the viewfinder.

My films were playing. Someone had already edited parts of them into a collage. And used digital-enhancing techniques to turn useless out-takes into captivating scenes. The viewfinder metamorphosized into color. The sound came through in high-fidelity on 24 tracks. I was amazed. There was my alter-ego character, and even me in the higher-man, thing. And the other actors and actresses...

I no longer needed the viewfinder. Sarge must have rented an old drive-in movie screen. He grinned with glee as my films played before us. They became three dimensional, allowing Sarge and I to walk through them taking new angles and re-directing sequences. The music was extraordinary, stimulating every thought, illustrating every nuance of emotion in perfect synchronization with the narrative.

I even had the time to chat with old friends and performers, get their ideas, incorporate our recent lives and learned experiences into the newer segments. Hand-held I could execute the most difficult dolly and crane shots, without worrying about set-up or lighting or anything. Every-so-often, I paused to introduce Sarge, grinning at my side to everybody in the cast --and the crew who were playing cameos of themselves in this refilming.

"I couldn't bring my parents along," I explained, "They had no time for this foolishness, and some of my best fiends are gone... but Sarge knew me 'when'; you know, in the formative stages."

"Yeah, I helped form him," Sarge related with an enormous, somewhat malicious, smile, "With my brogans if need be. See, when I got him, he still had his head up his ass and dreamed that all things were possible. I kinda unlearned him of that bullshit."

"But I still had a lot of unfounded optimism, even after we parted company, --for the future." I added.

"Yeah, the future!" Sarge laughed, "Ain't that a kick! I couldn't unlearn him completely, I only had his ass for a short period of time... Greater realities than even me had to work on him..."

"Whose side you on?" I questioned Sarge, uncertain of where his loyalties were.

He shrugged, "I gave you the camera, didn't I?"

The huge cast had grown impatient with the discussion between Sarge and I and clamored for more direction. In the brief interim they had gone off on tangents, taking every suggestion from all of my scripts to work together a torrid potpourri of visual material. It was impossible to restore order.

"What'll I do?" I asked Sarge.

"Go for the center, troop." He suggested.

That was what I needed. I found the photogenic center, the pose of allure and interest. The blonde hair, the poised lip, the bounty of nature at its momentary and neutral best; there! She was easy to direct, I took few liberties. I had much to do. I had to work intuitively, with few words. There was a need to make this center hold. A few times she turned into Jen, or Rosalie, or any of a number of others. But only by establishing a control and command to this feature, whether it be along her silhouette, or with the light shimmering through her hair, foreground to background, or the suggestion of life in her fine legs. Even in her eyes. I knew no one would ever be certain of the message there, Neither would I. That was far beyond my ability to control. I could only work with it, combine, add and re-posture in order to use my own human wants as a communication to other humans' wants.

Soon, I was exhausted. The camera was heavy. The hour and strain were showing on her, even she needed rest, or else was simply too elusive to keep on the set. I drooped to one knee. Sarge was there with Sarah Greene.

"You know, Turtle, you promised her a chance too," Sarge grinned.

"Yes you did. That chance is extremely important to me. --And I helped form you also...I had him in the seventh grade," She told Sarge, who had taken up the luxurious smoking of a fine cigar.

"Seventh grade, what a snot he must have been, then." Sarge commented as he blew smoke rings. He had his Smokey-the-Bear hat on; "Alright, girls, LINE UP...YOU CALL THAT A LINE?! YOU!...CAN'T YOU STAND UP FUCKIN' STRAIGHT?! YOU LOOK LIKE A FUCKIN' TURTLE?! YOU THINK THAT'S FUNNY, ASSHOLE?! AM I A FUCKIN' COMEDIAN?! HEY, SGT. STICK, WE GOTTA PUKE HERE WHO WANTS A GOOD LAUGH! (kick)..."

"We didn't do that..." Sarah said, "We just made him wait till he grew older. God knows we couldn't make him grow UP!"

Sarge looked her over, Her stomach too rotund for the belly dancer's outfit, she wore. "Seems you didn't grow up either." Sarge commented.

"And you?" She retorted to an older, less defiant Sarge who stood in the shirt sleeves of his loud and foolish sports shirt. "What are you about, these days?"

I tried to get order again. But I was too weary to orchestrate another scene. "People..." I implored from the ground I lay on. "People, please..."

Sarah stood over me, "Stevie, you were my last hope of realizing my own dreams...and it seems you didn't work hard enough...You didn't have enough commitment to success. You wasted what ever small potential you might have stumbled across. Just my fortune too."

I heard Jen's voice, "Steven, maybe you weren't ruthless enough..."

"He's had bad luck, is all..." Sarge piped in from behind Sarah, "Misunderstood a lot of real basic stuff. Got confused on the way to the market place. Somehow thought people wanted to buy truth. --His fuckin' version." Sarge laughed. He poked me with his boot toe. "Think you'll ever get off yer back, Turtle?" He laughed again, delighted with the analogy.

I couldn't move. I felt very cold and weak. The commotion retreated into the distance. Far away at a small bon-fire Sarge clapped as Sarah Greene attempted to dance. Smaller and smaller. A speck of red light...

"Daddy, Daddy!" I heard from another chamber. --I awoke facing the dieing embers in the brick barbecue. I lay on the cold ground. The front and the back of me was dry. Stiff and smokey, but dry. Only the inner seams of my arms were still damp, but not overwhelmingly so. I rubbed my face and slowly put my shoes on. Against my better judgement I also fastened the necktie and hoped that the wrinkled-look was still 'in'.

Thoughts of Amanda Jean came to me. God, I missed her vitality. I missed exploring her options. I imagined her sense of humor. In my deranged mental state I erected her as a beacon. She was a power, a source of hope and inspiration. She was ambitious and could build a career out of all my vague meanderings; I had convinced myself of that.

I literally fell into a pay phone. The door had been torn off but the light still worked. I made an operator-assisted reverse-the-charges-call. I was fearful that all my illusions would be shattered at once. Maybe she was on a cocaine high with a professional football team. Maybe she would hate me for abandoning her.

"Hello?" Her voice seemed so small and sober. It practically choked me up.

"Will you accept a collect call from Steven?..."

"Yes...?"

"Jen?..."

"Steven."

"Oh Steven...where are you? What happened? I haven't heard from you. I was so worried..."

This couldn't be true, I told myself.

"Steven your fiancée from the funeral..." I added.

"I know...I've got to talk to you. Come home, now, okay hon?"

Something was very strange, here, I surmised. I feared I had Groucho Mark's disease 'why be interested in anybody who would be interested in you?'

"How ya' been?" I asked, striving for some neutrality.

"Desperate. Steven. I've returned to Jesus."

'Oh no,' I thought and lay my poor head on the cold glass of the booth.

"I've brought Jesus back into my life...I've been reading scripture...Steven, have you read..."

"I've read a lot of stuff. Especially before I attempted to make my last film..." I was so momentarily depressed I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

"You need this too." She insisted.

I struggled for sobriety of the intellectual type. "Jen...I don't know if I'm prepared to discuss this on the phone, but the best thing...the thing I remember about Jesus' theology which is not really Christian but hopeful..."

"Yes..." She prodded.

I tried to remember... "Jen, the brain isn't working..."

"Make it work." She commanded.

All right, I would start listening to her, "Ye who are evil -or imperfect...if your child asked you for bread...would you give him a stone..." Tears of guilt ran down my cheeks..."Your Father in Heaven...presumably perfect...Jen I can't recall the exact words. But if there is a loving God then you don't have to DO anything but accept this love unconditionally. The irony is that Jesus' own life ended so miserably and maybe all one can expect is reality and the unknown dynamics of luck..." I didn't think she was getting any of this. I was having trouble with it myself.

"But we can MAKE it HAPPEN. Don't you see, Steven, love can create miracles. Love can make the face of God....Are you crying," She asked.

"Yes, I suppose I am...tired mostly...out of jokes..." I laughed and it felt better.

"Steven come home, okay? We can talk here?"

"Why me, Jen? Why me?"

"You're a real gentleman. You helped save me." She said.

"How? For Christ's sake...Your mother died, and you got emotional...I hung around for a couple of days and then deserted you..."

"You were there when I needed you Steven, I needed someone real bad, and you were there for me..."

"You know I...I was married before with...kids..." I sobbed. "And I blew it...I fuckin' blew it..."

"You got to have pain to know the truth, hon, that's the way it is. Come back."

"Yeah..." I said, unconvincingly.

"Are you coming back to me?" She asked.

"I'm not gonna be thumpin' any bibles or anything," I said.

"No, of course not... I want you to come; are you commin'?"

"Yeah...I'll... I have to..."

"Are you nearby?" She asked, thinking to rescue me. Her urgency made me laugh.

"No. I'm not...I'll be on my way..."

"Do so. I got a new job, full time...I'm managing an office..."

I couldn't exactly listen to her words, just her hopeful tone. She was winning, and I couldn't tell if I was losing or not... "Sounds good..."

"Anytime after five thirty I'll be here...tomorrow and every other day..."

"Okay." I hung up. She held out too much hope and was too strong for me. I was literally overwhelmed, and fatigued. I could hardly leave the phone booth. I considered calling her back and sleeping there for days till she found me. But there were other obligations against my future. A man is not re-made by one phone call, even to an angel.

## EPILOGUE

How many streets must I traverse? Walking bone-numbing mile after mile. So many neighborhoods look alike. Furtive shadows and half hidden lights giving a dreamy glow to this planet I trod through.

There, finally I find the old house and come closer. I touch the warped ancient wood of a window sill, my heart cries out with submerged longing. I hear their voices, grown now, but still arguing. Always arguing.

In reverence, I kiss the window and retreat. I walk on, more miles, perhaps missing an intersection in the dark, going in a convoluted semi-circle; always traveling. If my body would stop I believe it would collapse onto the gritty pavement. My face would burrow into refuse as litter was blown in drifts upon me.

I find the encampment of mini-warehouses that holds my storage locker. The hour seems late, but it is early enough to pass through the chain link fence. I slip through unnoticed and go to the building door marked 'A'

I enter this orange door. The lights are on. A power strip has been installed near the auto-timer light designed to plunge me into periodic darkness. Workmen have recently been here. A drill and several other tools were left near the power strip.

I slip the key into my padlock and open my compartment. The trunks are undisturbed, full of my film reels, video tapes, scripts and potpourri of neglected promotional materials. A score of once precious still shots, industry catalogs, notes and other assorted paraphernalia sit in their boxes. My now obsolete video equipment and lights lay in their

dark cases

I contemplate the uninhabited ruin of my life. Again, I begin to cackle. Quickly I strip off my jacket, and unpack one of my light stands, parabolic reflectors and photofloods. I have hundreds of feet of 75 ohm shielded cable and grounded extension cords. There in the back are the gun cases. I unzip one of them to see the M1 carbine bought as a prop for my first 16mm effort. -- Done on medium speed color reversal with single system sound, it was a disaster. Somewhere there is a cartridge case of real ammunition that was used as props also...

Giggling gleefully, I know how they will find me. There is a case of video tapes containing endless recordings of embarrassing auditions and rehearsals. I have fodder to work with.

Though it's been years, I can still do this work. Like magic I take out my systems, my vast array of connectors, bncs, RCA phono plugs, F plugs, F push-ons, XLRs for mic cables and begin to build the design of my own illusions.

I run lines to the errant power strip and from there power my storage locker studio to lumens enough to do a commercial. Soon, I'm able to step among the wires and cables, remotes and amps to find my place before the camera moored on its tripod. From the monitor on my filing cabinet I am able to adjust focus after several attempts. I have enough light for a reasonable depth of field. Probably more light in this small space than for anything I ever attempted on an interior set.

Tape in, the anticipation mounts. I hit record, check the monitor and wait till I see the tape roll. Then into the silent snake face of the camera's red-blinking eye. For a moment I'm lost. All the lines of all the scripts packed away are forgotten. I just stare. But then the grin comes. I find the voice.

"I spent over a year trying to make a movie about J E S U S...(I giggle) but I'm better now..."

And that's how they will find me in the early hours of the next day, before I go looking for another useless job, -- making movies for myself.

*Approximately 1990*

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