

THE
POETRY
AND
WRITINGS
OF AN
OUTSIDER

KIRK ANDERSEN

Copyright © 2020 Kirk Andersen
All rights reserved
First Edition

PAGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Conneaut Lake, PA

First originally published by Page Publishing 2020

To Cheyenne,
who inspired me to write

ISBN 978-1-64701-048-5 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-64701-049-2 (digital)

Printed in the United States of America

You're just a human, a victim of the insane.

—John Lennon, 1970



CONTENTS

I. Poetry

1. Televiso View.....	11
2. To Spring (Sun's Hero)	12
3. So Long, Farthing Day	13
4. Blue Cheese	14
5. A Christmas Prelude.....	15
6. Dim Night	17
7. Worm-Kind.....	18
8. Through a Dark Reflection Pass'd	19

II. Short Stories

1. Jail World	23
2. The Dwitter Note.....	34
3. The Importance of Being a Cheapskate	39
4. The Package	47
5. The Raw Deal	52
6. The Windmill.....	60
7. The Evil Schoolboy	70

III. Short Shorts

1. Daniel and the Three Witches	81
2. The Natural Troublemaker	84
3. The Skyrthing	87

IV. Slice-of-Life Vignettes

1. The Fleets.....	93
2. Gonzo	98
3. Dick Wendt's Workshop	103



POETRY





TELEVISIO VIEW

Sitting in on the half-light, a peer through evening shade
Shadows fall in on evening, a glass-blown blue mockery
Wake up at sunset, leaving shadows until dawn
Eating berries in plowed farmer's green pastures

In the inside of time, spiraling optics of evil
Opens the venetians, running past the midnight
A dark brown stand, blocking shades of light
Raises the morning dove and buries the gold leaves

To open the heart door, a firm fist of love
Must settle its bitter toil and draw a new dawn
Opening lakes of sun and seas of fire
Like great throwing stones, dropping pebbles into rain



TO SPRING (SUN'S HERO)

Spring is a flower
A rising hope
Sun's hero
Night's heroine

Were it for a day
With spring
Like blowing reeds
And seeds to fling

Then I would grasp it
And hold it hard
Love would not be duty
But meaning

But if malice be a heart
With dagger word
And backward glance
Then spring would be a dying flower
A seed unsown



SO LONG, FARTHING DAY

Deeper than flowers
Or villains in the night
Steeper black the tower
Falls rushing leaves awake

We walk through lanes
And sidewalks past light
Clinging the gleaming twilight
My future is worth the wear

Numbing fortune sits greater than a throne
With a believer sitting on
Silent shadows fall together inward
Filling the township square

Fate falls on the hard sidewalk
Too early for the sun
Darkness opens the window shade
To fly away into blue



BLUE CHEESE

On this violet night, lovers scramble for pieces of the moon
With flashing lights and metal crates, pointed staves, and interest
rates
They eat away the smiling face with gentle eye and lipstick trace
Together, you and I, let us reach out and chew the lunar metallic blue



A CHRISTMAS PRELUDE

I looked upon a day of brown
The leaves were moving underneath
The trees were fighting for a place
In the time before winter
Where seasons break in the soft twilight

Bells rang in the distance
Black branches against the gray sky
Clouds like young mavericks
Rushing to a destination unseen
Where the rain doesn't fall in drops

Flakes fall to the ground
A tranquility that resonates
Like stars in a peaceful disarray
That pound the earth and grass
And call on yonder moon

The coldness like a celebration
Brings forth hope and promise
Of old days and frozen laughter
And daring young men
With their gifts of love and hope

I rested for a day in snow
And made my sign upon the snow
I walked through trees embedded by frost
And ate the berries that once were lost
That grew upon the mistletoe

I journeyed onward under the starlight
Finding my way to a cozy, bright home
I listened to the sweet words spoken
Of love to share on Christmas morn
I wept at what was said and left forlorn



DIM NIGHT

The great encroachment
The endearing quality of night
Bringing on the gentle silence
To fade away and linger

The intonation of distant bells
Reveals a jury of souls
That shine their hard-won glory
Into the brilliant mist of stars

Colors of sight projecting layers
Of shadow into the free-form
Induce a silent greatness
Into the dissipation

The yearning of all the years
Will never close the gates
That shut the love between us
And drive us into the dim night



WORM-KIND

Echo-blue mist night
To radiate the star-dawning
Break through the eyes of
Yonder dark; the white moon

Trailing its cloud-wisps of
Image-surreal; comes the worm
Burrowing its burden of
Blackness and stark toil

Somber slithering slumbers
Seeking its solemn mate
Searching for moody vistas
And avenues dim-lit and dark

Awake, crest-bearer and donner
Of light and stars, diligent
Footfalls to arrest this
Encroaching darkness descending



THROUGH A DARK REFLECTION PASS'D

Night sky oil
Heaven's bitter toil
A deeper sense of time
Through a barrier of endless rhyme

Meters flung by night's sordid tongue
One hand grasping for a light
Two hands clapping at the sight
Three, four flick once more
Doubtless, through a dark reflection pass'd
A body of endless mirth
Seeks a world
Of brilliant gold and light
Of places fix'd and whole
Of cabinets crafted and mansions Tudored
And a sun burning bright rays
Through a black sea atmosphere



SHORT STORIES





JAIL WORLD

The two men walked through the narrowing corridor of the shadowed facility known only to them as jail. As the corridor narrowed into a small doorway, the pale light from the oncoming room beamed its hazy aura on the men as they entered the eating section of the facility. They sat together on a small metal table and drank their cups of water with beef broth and hard bread. They sipped the beef broth and coughed on the shards of bread as they ate their meager servings for the day.

The intercom called out, “Five disciplines for the day roamer.” The men were able to interpret this as, meaning, if you roamed around too much during the day, enjoying things, you would receive swift discipline. The men talked about the various mandates that would be coming down from the Minister of Discipline. The thinner of the two named Sagreb began to discuss with the bigger one named Zaren their various activities throughout the day. They spoke of exercises with the other inmates involving pushing and pulling and simple acrobatic maneuvers.

Sagreb and Zaren entered the sleeping section of jail and waited on the Minister of Discipline. The Minister of Discipline entered the sleeping section a half an hour later with questions he wished to raise the inmates about their method of exercise. He explained to them how they must learn to be more regimented in their maneuvers and practice a less freer style.

“Your pushing and pulling is erratic in its movements, causing a disruption in the social fabric of the facility,” said the Minister.

Sagreb walked around the sleeping section, eyeing the Minister, and made his statement: “I don’t feel I have any relationship to disciplinary procedures at this jail.”

“Do you feel you have been unfairly treated?” the Minister asked.

“I feel as though I have been hindered in my ability to exercise in a free style,” Sagreb replied.

The Minister of Discipline stared at Sagreb and noticed something strange. As he was talking to Sagreb, it seemed they were communicating on different levels. “We seem to be talking in different ways,” the Minister said.

“We’re on different wavelengths,” said Sagreb. The two men ate the rest of their bread as the Minister of Discipline walked out of their cubicle.

Sagreb and Zaren sat and talked about their confinement and the predicament of their situation. They knew they had many disagreements with the Minister and decided to take their grievance to the men in the eating section. The men in the eating section all had long, gray dreary faces and ate their food with a deliberate slowness. Sagreb and Zaren walked into the eating section and sat beside a bearded man with a dark complexion who was ranting about various things.

“It is written. It is written that all men of strange ways and questionable virtue shall end their days in confinement and misery to a life of toil with no reward or compensation.”

Sagreb and Zaren began to talk to each other about the bearded man and his ramblings. “I think he has a lot of interesting observations to make, and we need to discuss his importance in our congregational sessions,” Zaren said.

“I don’t think we have to believe what he says is the absolute,” Sagreb replied.

It was then that Zaren began talking to the bearded man about their situation. “What do you think we can do about our confinement?”

The bearded man replied, “Men of virtue know the true way to freedom and must decide on our paths of destiny.”

The burly Zaren nodded his head in acknowledgment.

“I know this is true,” he replied. “And I know I am facing the just punishment for my actions.”

“What all do you think has led to this degradation of virtue in the world?”

“Consumerism,” the bearded man replied. “The human being wishes to take in more than it puts out. Everyone wants to consume and consume until their virtue is worn out and they have no more to give.”

Sagreb listened and decided to comment in contradiction. “I don’t see how this could be. Virtue is an act of the soul and purely attained from within. It can’t be degraded by the outside world. I don’t think a consumer is necessarily a bad person.”

Sagreb walked away from the bearded man, and Zaren was wringing his hands and fiddling with his necklace. He approached one of the guards and made a gesture with his hand and nose in defiance. The guard stared back with a look of annoyance in his eye. Sagreb kept walking and left the eating section for the dimly lit corridor beyond.

Zaren stared with resentment at Sagreb leaving and went back to the bearded man who now had a tablet in hand. On the tablet, he was writing a list of various disciplines that could be used against dissenters and upstarts in the jail. Zaren began asking him what these were.

“The disciplines involve many areas of strictures on the jail man. One discipline would be making a jail man push a coin across the floor with his nose in front of the other jailers. The embarrassment of the act would be enough to discipline the jail man to right his wrongs,” the bearded man said. “Another discipline would be to make a jail man recite the seven doctrines of discipline to the other jailers. The doctrines would help the punished jailer understand the error of his ways and provide a new perspective on how he should function within the jail. Other disciplines would be enforced ranting, frown deprivation, darkness discipline, and of course, reduction of cognitive abilities through the use of psychological damage.”

Zaren replied, “Wouldn’t this result to more upstarts and rebellious jailers in the jail?”

“Of course,” said the bearded man. “But the disciplines should always be enforced no matter what the consequences.”

Zaren sat and thought about what the bearded man said and came to his own realization that the bearded man must be right.

Sagreb and Zaren met in the work cubicle set aside for jail men of determination and virtue. Many hobbies of interest were promoted in the work cubicle as well as the increasing of productive capacity. Sagreb was not always a proponent of such work cubicles but knew he had to go along with the work ethics of the facility.

The work cubicle contained many types of machinery that was used for the work ethic. Lathes, drills, sanders, cutters, and other forms of tools scattered the work cubicle. The disarray had a disorienting effect on Zaren as he watched the workers create their candlesticks and sculptures. He observed the workers at great length and walked through the cubicle thinking of the possibilities that only the jail could bring.

Sagreb was annoyed at Zaren's increasing interest in the work cubicle. "Why do you think this work ethic is so important? Should we be doing exercises for the jail? Should we be giving speeches for the jail? Should we be keeping track of the various disciplines for the jail? Should we be doing everything for the jail?"

Zaren answered, "Work is always good in any form of activity it takes. You work for food. You work for clothes. You work for the pride of it. But most importantly, you work for each other."

Sagreb and Zaren walked into the community section of the jail to gather for what was known as Groupthink sessions. The Minister of Discipline was there to conduct the proceeding and dictate his stipulations to the congregates. Groupthink is our way of bringing the members of the jail into a new way of thinking. Groupthink is sustenance. Groupthink is life. Everyone will think the same as the others. We will commune as a group and discuss the dictates of the jail. The seven disciplines we fight to enforce and keep them on a posted sign in the eating section. They are as follows:

1. Live to eat.
2. Fight for work.
3. Dream only at bedtime
4. Don't read.

5. Be silent when made to.
6. Don't think apart from the others.
7. Discuss the seven disciplines frequently.

Sagreb thought of the Minister of Discipline's seven dictates and raised his hand. "Why is it necessary to follow these dictates?"

"These dictates are the word and the way and must be followed," the Minister of Discipline said. "If you deter from them, you will face dire consequences."

Sagreb decided to discuss the seven disciplines with the bearded man. "I don't understand why it's so important to live for eating," Sagreb said. "A person should live for other things, like a walk in the park or to sing a song."

"Eating is living," the bearded man said. "If sustenance becomes a secondary action, we will lose our ability to pursue healthy actions. It should be an act of concern. A responsible action."

"What about fighting for work? Work should be something that is enjoyable that you don't have to fight for," Sagreb said.

"To fight is to live," the bearded man replied. "If we fight to work, we're exercising our own self-esteem and rightful antagonism toward others."

Sagreb thought about this and replied, "To fight for work would mean that work is no longer available to everyone and would involve determination and force to acquire it. I don't think force is an option."

"The fighting man has rights that others don't. If he fights for his work, he is propagating himself and gains the necessary work hours for his own gain. You do know that work hours are a necessary achievement and are highly regarded in the jail. If you fight for work, you are a necessary individual in this facility," the bearded man said.

The bearded man seemed to always be a solitary individual. He ate his bread and milk alone and wrote on his tablet in solitude.

"Let's discuss dreams," Sagreb said. "Dreams can be voluntary or involuntary. If they're a waking dream, they can be a vision of the future. A hopeful daydream. This would be a dream of your choice."

A voluntary one. You ask us to dream only at bedtime. These dreams are involuntary for the most part. They're thrust upon you."

The evening sun cast a shadow of the bearded man on the floor. "Dreams are not meant to be enjoyed," he said. "A waking dream is from a person who wants more than what they already have. They are from spoiled people. A dream, even a nightmare, should be a form of discipline on the individual."

"There are waking nightmares," Sagreb said.

"What is the point of thrusting a nightmare on yourself?" the bearded man replied.

Sagreb didn't answer. Sagreb paced the room and eyed the bearded man with resentment. He knew he had to change the subject. "Why is it important not to read?"

"Reading is meant for knowledge and attainment of wisdom. The people of this jail need a physical outlet. They should use physical work as a remedial activity. Reading is a useless, worthless act that is not a means to an end. You must learn not to read for the sake of the jail."

"I think I understand," Sagreb said to try to fool the bearded man.

"Do you understand the reason for silence?" the bearded man asked.

Sagreb stared at the bearded man.

"Silence helps with many things. The spoken word can be deadly. It forms ideas in our minds that are unnecessary. That's why we make people silent," the bearded man said.

"People should always communicate among one another. It relieves tension and stress and alleviates the problems of everyday living. I am a talkative person and would like to be so. Voices should be heard when they need to be heard," Sagreb said.

"A talkative person is unwise. He talks for the sake of talking. The only reason I am talking to you now is to explain the dangers of talk. If you must know, I wish to be silent. That is all." The bearded man stood up and went across the room and sat in a dim-lit corner.

At that time, Zaren walked in and asked Sagreb, "What will we do tonight if the groupthink sessions are not held? Will we have to think on our own? I'm not used to that."

"According to the sixth discipline, we are not allowed to think apart," Sagreb said. "I would like to ask the bearded man more about this, but he is not in a talkative mood."

Zaren gawked at Sagreb. "You think the bearded man knows more about the seven disciplines than the Minister of Discipline?"

"I've talked to the bearded man and he is knowledgeable of the seven disciplines," Sagreb replied. "I've discussed in detail all the first five disciplines with him, but now I'm hesitant to speak to the Minister of Discipline about them."

Zaren was soon startled by the intercom's message: "The Minister wishes to speak to select congregates in the community section of the jail. The day roamers must not be daydreamers as this would violate one of the disciplines soon to be outlined in the community section."

Zaren and Sagreb walked out of the eating section and joined a crowd of congregates as they stood in unison for the Minister of Discipline to enter. The Minister of Discipline entered the section and announced to the congregates his intentions for the jail, "I have plans for the jail that will have to involve the cooperation of all congregates in the facility. I intend to set up a groupthink session so that all will be compliant in the process I wish to instill on the jail."

"The process will involve a capitulation of duties to a section of jail that is in need of repair. Repairing the section must involve groupthink to promulgate the activity," the Minister of Discipline said.

Sagreb uttered a word of denial. He listened closely to the Minister's words and secretly denounced the idea of groupthink in his mind. He knew he would be chosen in the workforce but wasn't worried too much. They would do their work hours and go back to their cells. The work cubicle would probably be used and to good effect. Many tools were used and materials were never wasted. Sagreb decided to stay silent.

The Minister of Discipline continued with his address to the congregates, “I have spoken to the bearded man, and he has discussed with me the seven disciplines and their relevance to this jail. What I haven’t discussed is the seventh discipline. It should be within your nature to discuss the seven disciplines frequently. Even the discussing of the seven disciplines should be discussed.”

The congregates cleared out of the community section until only Sagreb and Zaren were present. The two men approached the Minister with various ideas for the jail.

“I think we should allow freer movement from the community section to the sleeping sections of the jail,” said Sagreb. “I also think that freer discussions should take place in the eating section.”

“It is not your place to discuss such things,” the Minister said. “Your duties are to the jail and the proper management of your work hours. The seven disciplines will keep your thinking clear and free of the fetters of creative thinking. I do wish to explain to you my plans for the jail. Come with me.”

He led Sagreb and Zaren out of the community section into a bright-lit hallway that led down farther into a large court open to the sky where many men were doing their work duties. “We now have a large portion of the populace in this jail, and someday we will have the populace of earth doing these duties in the open sky. The seven disciplines will be followed, and many, many large courts similar to these will be scattered throughout the land where men of questionable virtue will have to conform to the laws and disciplines of the jail.”

“But isn’t there things about all men that are problematic to society and in the end you will have everyone in this jail? Is that your goal? To imprison everyone?” Sagreb said.

“It is my goal to serve the few men of virtue and good stock that set the example for all of us here.”

The Minister of Discipline finished his speech and exited the community section with his henchmen close behind. Sagreb and Zaren talked between each other about the Minister of Discipline’s plans. Sagreb, for the most part, was in disagreement with the Minister of Discipline. Zaren seemed to be somewhat compliant

with the Minister. Both eventually decided to conspire against the Minister.

In the sleeping section, they sat and talked that night for many hours trying to devise a plan to thwart the Minister from his designs. Planning a jail riot was thought of as well as a possible assassination of the Minister. They thought about enlisting the aid of other members of the jail and raiding the cubicle for possible weapons. Their methods remained rudimentary and full of possible flaws, but as the night wore on, their designs began to formulate.

Enlisting the aid of other members of the jail would involve clandestine talks at night in the sleeping section where they would lay out to the various jail mates their scheme of rebellion. The key thing that was necessary was the timing involved in the raid on the work cubicle. They would need weapons to overcome the guards and the Minister’s henchmen.

What also was important was the picking of locks in the sleeping section. Other jail mates devised plans for the obtainment of wires from various sources. Contraband was hard to come by in jail but was necessary for bribery of certain guards. Sagreb and Zaren knew the henchmen of the Minister, and certain guards could not be bribed and some kind of force was needed. For this reason, the raid on the cubicle had to be timed right.

Sagreb and Zaren began to interview jail men in the sleeping section with questions pertaining to recruitment.

“How long have you been in this jail?”

“What do you know about the guards?”

“Do you have lockpicking skills?”

Many of the men mumbled answers while some would be coherent in their comments. The importance of the questions helped the two men determine how to enlist certain jail men for various duties.

Contraband was an issue of the jail. The men enlisted found ways of obtaining it, and it would be used mainly for bribery of guards to their cause. Hopefully some guards could be turned while some would not. It was Sagreb and Zaren’s plan to find out from the jail mates which guards could be turned.

The henchmen of the Minister were of concern to Sagreb. He was thinking of how they would disable the henchmen but decided that, with the proper weapons, a fight could be started. If a raid on the work cubicle would be done it would have to be done at night so that the guards would not detect the missing materials for makeshift weapons until the morning.

Zaren was silent about the henchmen but went along with the plan. He listened to Sagreb's talk of the raid on the work cubicle. The plans were laid out by Sagreb. Zaren listened and gave a crooked smile.

The night of the rebellion, Sagreb and Zaren gathered the jail men together and made their breakout plan. Contraband was found, and some guards were bribed for keeping silent and utilized for their accessibility to breakout materials. The guards had to close up the sleeping section at night so that it was up to the jail men to lockpick the doors. Contraband ranged from narcotics, prescription drugs, electronic mini games, jewelry, and various other small items. Video cameras were a constant worry so that the items were handed back and forth away from the cameras.

Sagreb talked to the jail men in the sleeping section, and all agreed to their various duties and assignments. That night, the men waited until the last guard that wasn't loyal left the vicinity and sight of the jail men so that the lockpicking could begin. A man named Rory used the wire provided by the guard by inserting it in the keyhole and feeling around for the correct fit that would open the lock.

By turning the wire enough times and focusing on his task, Rory eventually found the catch that was necessary to open the lock. The men filed out of the sleeping section and met some of the bribed guards. The guards led them to the work cubicle, and various items were taken hurriedly before the loyal guards began to notice.

Very quickly the jail men assembled the weapons and silently filed down the corridor toward the rec room of the guards. Together they charged the guards in the room, and a bloody melee ensued. Men on both sides were killed, but the jail men claimed the fight.

Sagreb and Zaren walked out of the rec room with the other men into the hallway that led to the community section. Standing in

the section was the Minister of Discipline with his henchmen. The Minister held up his hand to Sagreb and Zaren. They all stopped and eyed the Minister, trying to anticipate their next move.

The Minister cried out to the men, "Why do you rebel like this? Do you realize that you are not men of virtue? Rory, do you believe your crime of petty theft should go unpunished? Zaren, do you believe your outburst of anger and assault against your fellow man should be forgotten? Sinor, do you think you shouldn't be jailed for suspicious paraphernalia?"

"Think of all the wrongs you have committed and tell me, is this not the proper environment for you? Do you feel the seven disciplines are not tried and true rules to follow in this institution of ours? Sagreb, do you think your involvement in a suspicious group on the outside that could have led to suspicious activity against others is a rightful thing?" the Minister said.

"What kind of suspicious activity was he engaged in?" Zaren said.

"Many things that don't involve mentioning," the Minister said. "Your true enemy, the enemy of the people is Sagreb."

Zaren's heavysset muscled body tackled Sagreb to the ground. As he overpowered him, he began to pummel Sagreb's head with his fists until his head was a bloody mass. As Sagreb lay dead, Zaren began to play with his head to see if it was still attached. The henchmen came over and helped take Sagreb away from the others as they looked on. Mumbling and low-spoken vulgarities were made by the mob, and Rory interjected, "What are we to do now?"

The Minister said, "Return to your cells, and further orders will be made to you."

The men returned to their sleeping section, and Zaren's job was to confiscate the materials stolen from the work cubicle. The men willingly gave them up, and over the intercom the Minister spoke. "The worst is over, and all men in the jail will be rewarded with free passes to the guard's rec room." All men were rewarded the free passes except Rory, who was led away, never to be seen again. Later that night, Zaren stared at the floor of the sleeping section, thinking only of the seven disciplines.



THE DWITTER NOTE

James walked into his room and donned his arm keyboard for the day. He knew the importance of his device and the solace that it gave him. He was very happy with it on his arm. He decided there was much that needed to be done for the day, so he entered his acceptance code and asked the computer for his appointment calendar. The appointments were laid out for him to see, and he considered the layout very helpful to him. At the time, it seemed the right thing to do, and he got into his flying car and traveled to his friend's house across the hills and river that made up a part of his town.

When he was in his flying car, he looked on his arm keyboard and made the settings for his destination. His friend Richard had sent a message earlier, inviting James for a stately visit to his homestead. As James traveled across the countryside, he looked at the browns and greens of the hills and the ripples of the blue water.

His flying car vibrated for a while in mid-flight, and James took the necessary steps to readjust his course. He keyed in the settings on his arm keyboard, and the flying car changed direction, leaving James a little apprehensive. In the distance, James could see Richard's homestead with its brownstone facade and colored tile decor. He landed his car in the landing pad and took the sidewalk to the entrance. The door had a security globe that was activated and soon the door opened with Richard inside.

"How long was I supposed to wait for you?" Richard said.

"Well, the message I received had an alert message on it that told me to wait a couple of hours before I came to your house," James replied.

"That's fine. That was probably a weather warning. I wouldn't worry about it. You should really get the dwitter note."

"What's the dwitter note?" James asked.

"It's a way to communicate directly with alert bureaus and government agencies. I used it all the time to gain access to various government doings and communications. It's a different way to communicate. Everyone is doing it. You'll learn to go along with it too."

James walked into Richard's homestead and looked at Richard's surroundings. The house was very well-kept with colored vases holding flowers and blankets with Aztec designs. Richard led James to the entertainment hub of his homestead where music was playing and a viewer was present. Richard turned on the viewer where a game of bounce ball was being played.

"This is not the game I thought it was," Richard interjected.

"This game is about bouncing balls into various zones and scoring the point objective," James replied.

They both watched the game for a while and decided that the cheering of the crowd was too loud and inevitably the viewer was turned off. James and Richard talked about the weather and the recent storms that were brewing in the area. Because of their flying cars, a storm sounded like a frightening ordeal.

Very soon it came to be lunchtime and the robo-server served a *VegeMeal* for James and Richard. The meal was served on plastic plates with utensils that were disposable. James and Richard enjoyed their meal and retired to the entertainment hub.

James sat in a curvy floor chair and pondered the problems he saw as growing and flowering in his society. He talked at great lengths with Richard about the precariousness of the social strata. Richard listened to James with a reserved eagerness and a tacit compliance. James talked to Richard about the so-called nonexistent caste system with a bitterness.

"Do you think the upper classes deliberately try to make it hard for the lower classes to get ahead?" James asked.

"I'm not an expert on sociology, but I imagine things like that go on and there's not a lot you can do about it," Richard retorted.

James and Richard continued to hold this conversation for quite a while when the viewer automatically came back on again. It

was an announcement from the viewer service telling the residents in the area of a local madman attack.

James was indignant in his comment. "I think these people are made, not born, that way."

"You have to realize that some people are naturally spoiled individuals who are never satisfied with what they have," Richard replied.

James called for the robo-server to pick up the plates and serve them some drinks. Richard asked the robo-server for an olive in his drink, and it responded accordingly. The robo-server was silent in its actions but remained steadfast in its servile manner.

Richard received a message from his viewer that he identified as a dwitter note: "It would be important if you left your arm keyboard in the house and walked outside to check the weather."

Richard responded accordingly. He returned from the outside, puzzled by the message that was sent to him. "I don't understand why I had to go outside to check the weather like that. Now I have to reattach my arm keyboard and send feedback for the dwitter note."

"I wouldn't always go by what the dwitter note says," James replied.

"You have to if you want to continue to receive the dwitter note. I feel it's important to have it," Richard said.

"Now what exactly does the dwitter note do?" James asked.

"It's a way to communicate with government agencies and bureaus. It's a social media for people working in government. It's kind of a way to get inside information."

"Can you really gain information that's important to you?" James asked.

"What's important is the form of communication you're using is improved and more efficient to your lifestyle," Richard replied.

It was then that James's arm keyboard on the table gave a signal to be worn again. James got up from the floor chair and donned his keyboard. The straps tended to be difficult to fasten, but after a while, he was able to wear it again. He typed in his security code and received his regular advertisements before his keyboard was fully operational.

"My dwitter note security code is complex, but that's necessary for security purposes," Richard said.

A beeping tone was heard from the viewer, and Richard turned around to the viewer and walked up to it.

"This is a message that needs a security code to access." Richard walked up to the desk drawer that contained his complex security code. "The security code is complex enough where it becomes hard to remember." Richard shuffled through the drawer, looking for his code.

"I can't find it," he said.

He began looking around for his code in different areas of the homestead. He searched the gathering room under pillows and various furniture. He then checked the dinner room, but to no avail.

"I guess these codes were meant to be elusive to me," Richard said.

For an hour, they looked around the homestead for the paper with the codes to his dwitter account.

"What kind of paper was it on?" James asked.

"A special discolored paper that's supposed to blend in with the surroundings," Richard answered. "It's called camo paper."

"There it is!" James exclaimed.

The paper was on the mantelpiece, and Richard was immediately relieved. He took the newspaper and typed his code into the viewer. The dwitter note displayed a message informing the two homestead dwellers of a secret social meeting to be held to discuss recent disturbances in the nav fields that govern the movement of the flying cars they flew.

"This cabal is an important socially interactive group sponsored by the government that was formed to solve problems our future society might face. I think the cabal might prove useful to our needs as private citizens," Richard said.

Richard walked through the arched doorway that led to his flying car, and James shook his head and followed. They both seated themselves in the flying car as James began to fidget with his arm keyboard. "Are you sure this dwitter note is on the level?" James asked.



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING A CHEAPSKATE

As the social club societeers were taking down the garnishments, Johnathan was making his way into the courtyard of the mansion owned by the social club leader. The social club was known as the Connecticut Cats, and Johnathan felt important and significant as a member of this society club. He wished for a simpler way to deal with the cleanup of the party decorations, but he would eventually give in to the slow, arduous work of cleaning the embellishments of the summer get-together.

As he cleaned, he realized all the tiny decisions that went into cleaning his own room when it needed to be cleaned but realized that this was not necessary when cleaning the society club's things. All he had to do was pick and stash, pick and stash. The Connecticut Cats were known for their wild parties, and this one was no exception. Johnathan took a break from his cleaning to get a drink of water. His thirst consumed him as it was a hot day in the courtyard. As Johnathan cleaned, he thought of his current income and how it would help make an impression on the Connecticut Cat's club and its members. He knew he needed the social leverage necessary to do this, and a profitable income always is an advantage.

Johnathan was struck on a girl that frequented the parties on occasion who was named Betty. Betty was of a gentle, reserved nature and dressed in fine clothes that fit the various styles that are popular in the day. She wasn't a girl that was overly happy and blissful in her demeanor, but Johnathan felt he could get to be friendly and talkative with her and perhaps date her on occasion.

"It's a very efficient communication system," Richard answered.

The flying car began to hum, and Richard entered the nav field coordinates in the computer monitor.

"These are the coordinates to the cabal from the dwitter note I received. The friend group I convene with will approve of this. The cabal should be within our sights in a short while," Richard said.

As the flying car slowly charged up, Richard gave a quick side-glance to James and said, "I think I might take a different route than this."

"I'm sure the dwitter note would be giving the correct nav field coordinates. As you have said, the dwitter note is the new way of doing things," James said.

"I know you're right about that, but I still would like to use my flying car," Richard answered.

Richard rose up from his seat and exited James's flying car and entered his own. He gave one last backward glance at James and charged his car up. He entered coordinates of his own, doubting the dwitter note's data. He felt assured that he would find the cabal.

James checked the coordinates on his computer and felt satisfied that he had a way to the cabal. The flying car took off and flew into the light blue of the evening sky. As he was traveling along the nav fields, he felt the engine begin to shudder and shake. Alarmed, he checked the control monitor and exclaimed, "This must be the right way!"

He fought the controls as hard as he could, but soon the struggle with the electronics began to overwhelm his concentration. The flying car swerved and jolted back and forth, causing a hysteria that James couldn't control. The car took a final dive into the mountains near Richard's homestead, and James was lost forever.

His responsibilities to the Connecticut Cats remained steadfast as the dues needed to be paid and the various members would promulgate their reputations in the club at the parties. There was Steven who was always the sensible-headed one who knew about all the practical matters at the club that needed to be addressed. Then there was Phillippe who was helpful to Johnathan at times in cleanup and various club duties.

There was one member of the club that always seemed to reside in the shadows of the club's parties and would not contribute to a lot of the duties of the club. His name was Frank, and everyone thought he was the cool one that didn't even need to pay his dues. Frank never contributed to funds but had to pay his dues like everyone else. He was a cheapskate.

Johnathan was encouraged by members of the club to help with dates that all members were expected to do—except Frank. Johnathan came up with ideas for game night at the club. He took it upon himself to spend his money to buy a bunch of board games that his friends would like. He was up on all the new ones, and so were the other members of the Cats.

At board game night, all were invited, including Frank even though he didn't pay his ante like everyone was supposed to. That night, Frank didn't show, but everyone had a good time anyway. The room was all buzzing with players and onlookers, and Johnathan was the usual butt of jokes.

"Hey, Johnathan, what do you think about the weather?"

Johnathan had to do outside duties this week, and it was raining.

"Boy, you really lost that game terribly, Johnathan."

There were times when Johnathan would win a game and the other players would never comment then. At times they would resent it.

Johnathan noticed there were girls there, but Betty was nowhere to be found. As the night wore on, Johnathan wondered why Betty decided not to show for board game night. He imagined the night before having a good time with her and telling her things and was disappointed when she didn't appear.

As the night wore on, Johnathan thought of Betty and how he could win her over. He began to eat some of the snacks that were for

the night's games and overheard one of the guys say, "Hey, save those snacks for Frank. He's coming by later on tonight." Johnathan didn't understand why Frank didn't show up for game night. The board gamers drank their sodas and ate the chips provided by Johnathan when there was a knock at their door at about ten.

Johnathan answered the door, and there at the doorstep was Frank and Betty. Frank had taken her out that night on money that he had from not contributing to the club. Both walked in and sat down at the board game table and began playing a game. It was a game involving charades but with a points system.

At around eleven, the games began to come to a close and Johnathan was leading in the points. Frank was visibly upset and, at one point, banged his fist on the table when he didn't get the points he wanted.

"You think you can win against me. I know all the ins and outs of this town. I know how to schmooze my way through any club. My reputation is good because it's bad."

Frank stormed out of the game room with Betty. The other members felt a little afraid about the whole situation, even Johnathan. Johnathan thought about Frank and Betty and knew that Frank was throwing down some kind of gauntlet. The members of the Connecticut Cats decided to disband early, and Johnathan went home heartbroken and lonely. He made it to his room and set in the shadows thinking of Betty. The half-opened blinds left a cold glare of sunlight that permeated the room and went along with the shadowy gloom.

Johnathan opened his refrigerator and drank the power soda that everyone in the Cats drank. He tried to fit in with the club as much as he could and would buy clothes that other members considered appropriate. He drank his power soda and thought about last night's board game activities and how the perceptions of the member had an effect on his own viewpoint and opinions.

The next morning, he woke up to the radio playing a song he knew well: "Peggy's got a gun. She having so much fun. She'll send you on the run and make you shit a ton."

Johnathan walked into the brisk air of the university grounds and watched the students studying under the tree and eating their lunches. School lessons were handed out daily, and Johnathan knew he had to hunker down and study if he was to make grades that he was proud of.

He went to his class for the day and tried to listen to his teacher but couldn't stop thinking of Betty and Frank. It was obvious that Frank was able to get dating money because of his unwillingness to help out with the club's dues. Johnathan was harmed by Betty's unwillingness to go with Frank but knew Betty was a lot like him in her own willingness to go with the crowd.

"Hey, Johnathan, what are you thinking about?" the teacher asked. "You need to keep your mind on the classwork."

Johnathan remained tactful in his comments to the teacher about his lack of attention.

"I don't think I'm missing anything that would be important in my studies," Johnathan said.

He began to pay attention to the class after this and took his mind off Betty and Frank for a while. The teacher was instructing the class on money management and finance. Johnathan was a little bored but tried to gain an interest in what the teacher was saying.

The next day, there was a festival in town for all the students in the school. Johnathan thought a lot about what was taught him in his class. Money management and finance weren't his forte, but he began to understand the importance of frugality and shrewdness in money. The festival was held with a lot of things to contest for and buy. Johnathan decided to hold back on buying things and instead decided to contest for an item by trying to win at a dart game. The darts would be thrown at various stuffed animals ten feet away. If an animal was picked, he would receive various chips to buy items that could be needed for him or maybe his club.

After a while, he went to a food stand and tried the famous hamburgers that were broiling on the community fire. His father always told him, "Money spent on food is never wasted." Johnathan thought about his duties to the club and how he was bearing the brunt of the club's indulgences and needed a little relief.

He ate his hamburger and watched the crowds gather for the various activities. In the distance, he saw something that grabbed his attention. Frank and Betty were seen over at the contest area. Frank was doing his best to win at the dart contest but didn't seem to ignite Betty's interest. Johnathan watched from afar and thought about how he could impress Betty but didn't know how he could do it.

He traveled down an alleyway that was dark and desolate and full of fallen leaves that the season brought. Apples were falling from the trees and many were on the ground where Johnathan walked. The wind stirred the leaves under his feet, and he pondered how he would attempt to confront Betty about her relationship with Frank.

Johnathan entered his dorm room with his usual ennui and switched on his lamp. He began to read his books on money management and finance, and the various advice given was hard to digest for the first time, but he held back his cynicism and tried to understand the texts. As he read, he slowly became bored with the books and closed them for a while.

He sat at his desk and tried to imagine Betty's pretty face in his mind. He thought about how Frank may be treating her and knew he needed a change of ideals. The money management books do not prove helpful to Johnathan, and he realized he had to develop his own plan for himself. His first thought was to cut off the charity work at his club and the donations that he gave along with it. He also thought about a budget that would cut out some of his indulgences. When he was finished thinking for the night, he went to bed with a basic plan in mind.

He woke up the next day and walked to the local clothing store and did some shopping for clothes. He bought the best shirts and pants he could find and left the store a little confident about himself. He decided to scout around the restaurants, looking for ones that might be the best atmosphere for Betty. He was determined to put up a good show for Betty but still didn't know how to do it.

He thought about the expensive restaurants but came to the decision that a hamburger joint at the local pool hall would be a better choice. It was cheaper and would be a better choice. He normally would go to a restaurant by himself but decided to save his money for

other things. He wasn't interested in buying little trinkets for himself anymore and thought about maybe saving money if Betty ever asked him to buy something for her. He walked around the block to an alleyway where bums were smoking and asked them questions about girls. He was surprised to find out how much they knew about dating girls and how you should approach them.

"A girl likes a take-charge type of man that gives off an air of being a dark man."

Johnathan noticed that he was a fairly tall man with dark hair and complexion. He knew if he tried he could get Betty's attention, first he had to find out where Frank's hideouts were. He decided that in order to do this, he would talk to some of the other Cats that were still running the club.

He went to the next Cats council meeting and waited till it dispersed before he took one of the members aside and talked with him about Frank. It was Phillippe. Phillippe was always loyal to the club and its duties. He knew he could get a straight answer from him. Phillippe explained to him about where some of the other members were going at night, and that night they were meeting at a club and Betty wasn't going to be there. Various members of the Cats would attend, including Steve, the problem solver.

"Do you know where Betty will be tonight and how I could get a hold of her?" Johnathan asked.

"I think she will be at home tonight, and I can probably get you her number," Phillippe replied.

Johnathan knew he didn't have to bribe Phillippe but thought about Steve and what he could learn from the club meeting. He realized he had money saved now that he could use to bribe Steve about information at the club meeting.

Johnathan went home to his dorm room that night with Betty's phone number in his pocket and thought about what he was going to say to Betty. He sat by the phone for a while and felt a small thrill and nervousness before he mustered up the courage to call her. The phone started to ring and was picked up by a woman.

"Davidson's residence," the woman said.

Johnathan replied, "Is Betty there?"

"Whom may I ask is calling?"

"Johnathan from the Connecticut Cats," he said.

"I'll get her," the woman said.

There was a pause before the phone was taken, and Betty answered, "Hello."

"Hello, Betty, this is Johnathan from the club."

"Well, hey, Johnathan," Betty said in a resigned tone. "I was wondering why you didn't go to the club meeting tonight."

"Well, I was hoping maybe we could spend some time together," Johnathan said.

"I don't think Frank would like that," Betty said.

"Frank doesn't need to know," Johnathan said.

There was a pause from Betty as she thought about this, and then she responded, "I'm not sure what you're asking, but I'm still listening."

"I've thought a lot about what you and Frank, and I don't think he's the right guy for you. He doesn't take you to the best places. He also seems to be into himself a lot and doesn't think enough about you."

"Well, Frank has always been that way. I've learned to get used to it," Betty replied.

"I'm not the type that would treat a girl badly. If that's what you would like, then I hope you're happy."

"I'm not always happy," Betty confessed.

"Do you want me to find out what went on at the club get-together tonight?"

"You really shouldn't get involved in all of that, John."

"I think you should know about him, and if I like you, you might understand why he's not the right guy for you."

There was a silence on the other line as Betty thought about this.

"You can call me back if you want," Betty said and then hung up.

Johnathan decided to make a trip to the clubhouse to see what he could divulge about the club party from Steve. Steve was waiting in the clubhouse that night when Johnathan entered and made a nod at Steve, and Steve nodded knowingly back. Johnathan began dis-



cussing details of the party with Steve after Steve accepted Johnathan's bribe. Steve began to explain that there were other girls at the party and Frank's bragging of the girlfriend to the members of the club and his general debauchery.

"I'm not sure even if Betty would be bothered by all that," Johnathan said.

"She might be the type of girl that doesn't go for things like that," Steve said. "Then again maybe she doesn't care."

"I've got to find out," Johnathan said.

Johnathan went back to his dorm room and lay on his bed. He picked up a book and tried to concentrate but eventually set it back down again. He knew he had to think of something to make her like him.

He waited until the next night to go to Betty's house. He thought about the words he would say to her and hoped for the best. He decided to go to the bedroom window where he knew Betty was. He tapped on the window until Betty answered it. She opened the window and said, "Johnathan, what are you doing here?"

"I want to know how you feel about Frank."

"I like him, I guess," Betty replied.

"He seems to brag a lot about his conquests and shady deals. He likes being crooked and doesn't care to tell everyone about it," Johnathan said. "Is that the type of guy you want to be with?"

"I don't think too much about it," Betty said.

"Well, maybe you should," Johnathan said.

"You think you can give me something better?" she said.

"I think so," Johnathan said.

She opened the window and crawled outside to face Johnathan. The sky was a hazy orange, and the sun was beginning to set. They both looked at each other, and in between each other, the sun burned its bright rays. They kissed, and the rays glistened in response to their strong embrace.

"I'm not too sure about this," Betty said.

"Don't worry, I'm learning to be a cheapskate," Johnathan replied.

THE PACKAGE

Sam was at rest for most of the first day of the week. He was waiting for his mother to return from work in order for him to be able to do the things he needed to do. He thought about the package he was expecting from a merchant that was due any day now. He ate his meal thinking of the package and its contents and what it meant to him.

He was sure he would like the content of the package as it would give him much happiness. His mother had told him that these packages gave him happiness for a little while, but eventually that fades away. She was trying to instill discipline in him, and Sam was usually annoyed by his mother's concern. She wasn't always an upright mother as Sam noticed that she smoked on occasion. He would think about her advice and wish that she would keep it to herself.

The next day came, and there still was no package. He thought about the possibility of living on his own away from his mother so he could erase the guilt he would have when a package came. It was then that he thought of the possibility that the package was misrouted. He got on his bike and rode to the package facility to inquire about his delivery.

When he entered the storeroom, a clerk was there in the regular uniform of the facility's workers. He was helpful to Sam in trying to locate the package, but Sam was still uncertain as to where the package could be. The worker explained to Sam how they could possibly track the package. Sam brushed off the idea with a gruff remark. He wasn't ready to search for the package yet.

He traveled home on his bike thinking about the facility and the worker. He had a suspicion of him that he couldn't let go. He decided he was going to try to locate the package at an alternate

facility in the area. When he got off his bike, he felt a pang of emptiness strike him. He didn't wish to enter the darkness of his home but walked into the lone solitude anyway.

His mother was waiting there for him and started to complain to him about how she was alone in the house and expected him to be there for her. Sam growled in reply about the misrouting of a package of his. His mother nodded her head with sad understanding. Sam walked into the house in a resigned mood and slouched in a chair.

Jeremy had worked at the package facility for sometime now. He was a good-hearted person who always tried to service the customers to the best of his ability. When he went home at night, he would usually relax and watch television.

Jeremy noticed the images on television always showed happy families and couples in love strolling along the beach, which made him long for that life. When he thought about it, he began to realize that these were just actors and actresses acting out that they were in love or were a happy family. He ate his microwave meal that night and tried to forget about the illusions that were part of his everyday experience.

Jeremy walked into the package facility the next day with a lot on his mind. He knew his workday was going to be a busy one. He had to organize packages and route them for his customers. He knew if he kept up the good work he would be due for a promotion.

While he was in the sorting room, a young woman walked into the dim room and asked about a package that was due her. Jeremy noticed her pretty eyes and beautiful light-brown hair and did the best he could to answer her questions. He had his lunch on the table out of the sack, and she commented, "I know how to make a tuna salad sandwich the way it's supposed to be made—with celery, eggs, and relish and all that stuff."

"I don't think I have ever had it that way," Jeremy replied.

They began to talk about the weather and various other things, and Jeremy eventually was able to divulge from their conversation

that she was still single. He gathered up the courage to ask her out, and she nodded in affirmation and gave him her number. Her name on the strip of paper was Dayla. Jeremy finished his sorting after she walked out of the facility and began to dream about his date with Dayla. He knew if he got his promotion he could afford to see her on regular occasions.

Sam had lived with his mother for a long time and had usually taken advice from her about his frequent obsession with packages. The recent package's lateness was a drag on his nerves, and he couldn't shake the emptiness he felt from his desire for such a material possession. His mother was clearly uneasy about his compulsions but tried to cloak her dissatisfactions with her son.

The next day, Sam took a trip on his bike to the other facility in town and inquired within. A muscular, burly man answered Sam's questions and began to offer a different opinion to Sam of the whereabouts of his package.

"Trackin' is not the way to find out where your package is," the burly man mumbled. "It sounds to me—now this is just my own sentiment, mind you—that the other fella is a-doin' you wrong."

Sam growled in affirmation of the man's theory and asked the package facility's worker for some sort of tracking number from him so he could find out in any way for himself if the package was deliberately misrouted on purpose.

He rode his bike to the computer facility and placed it in the public locking station. He fumbled for the tracking number in his pocket and pulled it out in haste. At a computer station, he began to search for the correct codes for the package facilities he was researching. He became frustrated at not being able to locate the package facilities that he visited but decided not to give up so easily.

Eventually, he found the package facilities that he visited and started the slow, arduous process of finding the facility worker's profiles that would give him an idea about their working performance. He found Jeremy's profile and soon began to suspect the worst.

He used the tracking number but was unable to bring up a scan of his package. He tried various computer icons to find the exact location of his package but still ran into difficulties in finding his info. The computer stalled at one point, and Sam shouted in frustration. The proprietor went up to Sam and asked him to leave the computer facility, and Sam agreed and walked out in a huff.

During that day, Jeremy was working diligently at the package facility, hoping he would get an early dismissal so he could prepare for his date with Dayla. He did his encoding of the packages and hoped he would not make any mistakes today when Sam walked in.

"I've done some tracking today at the computer facility, and I'm on to what you're doing," Sam said. "I think you deliberately misrouted my package."

"Do you have any proof of this?" Jeremy asked.

"No, but there are scans at the various package sites that don't match up to the codes that the package has, and I suspect you have something to do with that," Sam replied.

"I don't have anything to do with that," Jeremy replied.

"You don't be a smart aleck to me," Sam said. "Call in the manager."

The manager entered the front room and asked, "What is this all about, fellas?"

Sam pointed at Jeremy. "He misrouted my package."

The manager replied, "I don't usually have a problem with Jeremy, but if you have a problem with our work service, we will look into it."

"I hope that you will do something about it because I have other ways to get what I want if you don't." Sam walked out of the building and mounted his bike. He slowly made it home.

The manager talked to Jeremy for a while, but Jeremy's answers seemed slightly guarded though Jeremy didn't intend for them to be. The manager eventually came to a decision that he would have to terminate Jeremy. Jeremy knew the termination would be complete, and he would be unable to ever return again to the facility. Jeremy walked out of the facility in shame, knowing that he would not be

able to afford his dates with Dayla and would have to call the whole thing off.

Sam was thinking about the things he said to the manager and snickered a little to himself. His bike rounded the corner to his mother's home, and he looked at his porch walkway. As he rode up to the walkway, he gazed at what looked like a package with brown wrapping and straw ties sitting resolutely on the porch.



THE RAW DEAL

The night was dark when Steven entered the convenience store and bought candy bars for himself and his brother. He was tired from working at the solar panel plant and wanted to get home quickly so that he could relax at the television set. He began to eat his chocolate bar on the way home and hoped he remembered that he bought the right candy bar for his brother. He knew Raymond complained a lot about things and hoped this was not one of them.

On the way home, Steven thought about his workweek and the time he spent assembling the panels that the company lauded so much to their customers. There was a great deal of investment and research that went into the manufacturing of the panels, and he wanted to make sure he was doing the right thing.

At the door, Raymond was waiting in his beaten-up slippers with his arms crossed and a frown on his face. Steve showed him his candy bar, and a subdued smile of satisfaction crossed Raymond's face. There was so many things on Steven's mind that he wasn't sure if he got the right candy bar or not.

That night, Steven thought about his new boss. Frederick Rowland was name, and he had new ideas about how to run the solar panel company. Steven was not overly concerned about the way the plant would be redone. He met Frederick at the picnic that welcome him into the company and noticed he was a big man without a full set of teeth. He also noticed he wished to be called by his normal name Frederick.

When he talked to Mr. Rowland, he would notice he smiled a lot and seemed to be guarded in what he said. He seemed to be the type of guy that smiled a lot deliberately to hide what he was

thinking. Steven played the games at the picnic, but the new boss remained aloof from participating in the sports.

The picnic food was barbecued chicken and beef brisket, and Steve noticed it was catered when the former boss cooked it himself. His name was Dick Gillespie, and Steve remembered the fun times he had with Dick. They played horseshoes and kickball and told political jokes to each other.

The new boss seemed to be less interested in such things and more interested in formalities and customary procedure. He was also a tall man with a balding scalp. Steve wasn't going to let looks give him a prejudiced view of his new boss, and he made it a point to approach him at times with small and friendly talk.

Steve was home with Raymond thinking about the possible changes that would happen with the new boss. Their house was a small bungalow in the little township that was near the factory. Their house was unkempt. Steven tried to keep things clean at times, but because of his work hours, he had a hard time with his home management. Raymond was a dysfunctional brother who shirked a lot of the household responsibilities.

They ate microwave dinners that night, and Steven began to talk to Raymond about the office clerk he knew at the factory. Her name was Cheryl Jacobs, and she helped run some of the accounting at the factory's offices. Steven liked Cheryl, but she always seemed to be aloof from everyone. He talked to her at times, and she seemed to confide in him about various things but kept a lot of her work to herself.

He came to work the next morning with some extra duties to perform. He was happy to do them because he was eager to please the new boss. The duties involved packing solar panels into foam boxes for shipment to Venezuela. Steven never heard of the country before but was sure it was an important shipment. He finished his duties around noon and took a lunchtime break at the factory's eatery.

At the eatery, Steven recognized Cheryl eating a burrito and rice at one of the company tables. The table was reserved for some of the company heads, and Cheryl had a seat with them in the first row. Steven held his breath and went up to talk to her.

“So have you read any good books lately?” Steven said.

“Mainly romance and mysteries,” Cheryl replied.

“Do you think a lot about love and men?” Steven asked.

“Only if it’s helpful in getting a free paid-for date,” Cheryl said. Steven frowned but kept at it.

“I like some romance movies, but I’m more interested in reading fiction that’s down-to-earth. You know, homism,” Steven replied.

“I’m interested in homisms too. I think a lot of the romance I read is down-to-earth and talks about these things.” Cheryl faintly smiled.

Cheryl was a thin girl with a thin face and fair complexion and wasn’t the type that wore a lot of makeup. Her face was not the cutesy doll-type face of other girls. It was more plain but with a tigress-like look.

“Well, I’ve also gotten too much of my share of homisms too,” Steven interjected with a laugh. Cheryl laughed too.

“I’ll talk with you about it later and maybe we’ll do something sometime,” Cheryl said.

Steven gave a curt nod and walked out of the eatery with an elated attitude. He stopped by the fruit bar and picked up an apple to eat. He walked out thinking of his extra duties for his boss, Frederick Rowland.

Later in the day, as he was packing the shipments to Venezuela, he was called into Frederick Rowland’s office. He walked into the office and was met by the friendly gaze of Frederick Rowland.

“Have a seat,” Mr. Rowland said.

Steven sat down, and Mr. Rowland began to talk.

“I’ve been in the solar panel business for almost twenty years now, and I know what makes it tick. I have credentials from many different companies, and I’ve worked all over the country. There’s just one thing you need to know. People will respect you when you have a lot of money. But only when you have a lot of money,” Mr. Rowland said this with a slanted smile.

Steven listened to him and gave a humble reply, “I’m sure you know what’s best for the company, Mr. Rowland.”

After finishing up with a few other remarks, Mr. Rowland dismissed Steven with some other work duties that he promised would earn Steven better advantages in the future.

That afternoon, Steven was working in the shipping yard when Dan, a coworker, came up to Steve and started talking.

“Do you know these shipments to Venezuela are illegal shipments?”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re not supposed to be shipping solar panels to Venezuela. It’s illegal to do trade with Venezuela.”

“I’m sure the boss has a good reason to do what he’s doing.”

“Well, if I were you, I would try not to be seen on the video cameras. This was considered extra work and duties that you agreed to take on.”

Dan walked away from Steve while Steve continued to pack the shipments. He noticed a video camera above the exit door and thought about what Dan just told him. He hoped he wasn’t caught up in some kind of predicament. He finished his work and went home late that afternoon.

That night, he lay in his bed thinking of his day at work when he received a phone call from his boss.

“Steven, this is your boss. I am wondering if you would like to have a meeting at my house for dinner where we could go over some of the work that needs to be done.”

Steven thought about this and decided he wanted to know more about what was going on in the factory. “I guess that would be all right,” he said.

That evening, he drove up to the house of his boss and noticed it was on a hill. It was a big house with old American decor and a swinging bench on the porch. He went to the door and knocked on the stained glass. The door opened, and Frederick Rowland was behind it.

“Come in, Steven,” Mr. Rowland said.

He made his way to the living room where the TV was on. A football game was playing.

“Do you like football?”

“I don’t follow it a whole lot, but my brother Raymond does,” Steven said.

Steven noticed the house was in pristine condition and, unlike his house, was well-kept and organized. He noticed the dull, droll sayings in framed pictures and wooden plates hanging on the walls and doorways.

“We’ll eat in an hour,” Mr. Rowland said in a commanding voice.

Steven sat in an upholstered chair and tried to gain an interest in the football game. Mr. Rowland sat in another chair and watched the game intently. He heard shuffling and clanking of cookware in the kitchen and realized there was someone else in the house.

“Would you mind taking off your coat and setting it on the coatrack?” Mr. Rowland said.

It seemed he wanted to make it clear that Steven wasn’t doing the proper thing by not taking his coat off. Steven began to realize that Mr. Rowland was a man concerned about being a proper Southern gentleman. Steven surmised that Frederick Rowland thought himself a man of proper southern upbringing.

At six, Steven was called into the dining room by Frederick, and it was then that he first saw the Asian woman that was Frederick’s wife. She was short with a semi-dark complexion and black hair. She seemed to be younger than Mr. Rowland but definitely older than Steven.

They sat down at the table and began to eat.

Mr. Rowland started talking, “I’m thinking these extra duties for you are working out all right and you will be properly compensated for them.”

Steven paused and decided to make a comment, “Why are these extra duties assigned to me?”

“We feel that you are the best person for the job.”

Or the best lackey, Steven thought.

“We can’t think of a better candidate,” Mr. Rowland reiterated with a smile. “Be sure you wipe your mouth with a napkin when you’re through.”

Steven began to feel uncomfortable and picked up the napkin as an affirmation of Mr. Rowland’s southern customs.

When dinner was finished, Steven got up from the table and said to Mr. Rowland, “I think I need to get home. My brother Raymond is probably wondering why I’m not home yet.”

“Dan will pay you for your extra duties tomorrow,” Mr. Rowland said as Steve began to walk out the front door.

The next day, Steven walked into the factory entrance intent on speaking to Dan about his extra duty pay. He went into the assembly area and found Cheryl Jacobs waiting there. She seemed to be a little fidgety and nervous, so Steven tried to strike up a conversation.

“Is everything all right?”

“There are things going on here that you probably need to know about.”

“Well, Dan has told me about the illegal shipments to Venezuela. Is there more?”

“Well, there’s talk that Mr. Rowland is getting kickbacks from Venezuela and is bribing the government to get the shipments through,” Cheryl Jacobs said.

“Well, shouldn’t someone get this out in the open?” Steven said.

“Steven, I like you and I think you will do what’s best for both of us. I hope we can meet and get to know each other on better terms than this.” Cheryl Jacobs walked away, and Steven thought about what was said and decided to try to find Dan.

He walked past the assembly area and saw Dan coming out of the tech room. Steven stopped him and began asking more questions.

“What did Mr. Rowland tell you about those shipments to Venezuela?”

“You’re getting into things you know nothing about, Steven,” Dan said.

“I think I have a right to know about these things.”

“Just mind your own business and know your place, Steven.”

Dan walked away into the assembly area as Steven watched him go with a little resentment in his heart. He sat down on a bench with his chin in his hand and thought about how much the factory had

changed. He wished he had some kind of place in this new transition but was having his doubts.

He decided to go to the cafeteria to get something to eat when a small group of people gathered around the office. He wanted to take Dan's advice and mind his own business but couldn't help but notice them talking and looking in his direction. It was then that he saw Dan walking toward him.

"Steven, Mr. Rowland wants you in his office now."

Steven followed Dan into Frederick Rowland's office. As he entered, he noticed two other men sitting in chairs beside the boss. Steven was asked by Frederick Rowland to sit down in one of the company chairs.

Frederick Rowland began to speak, "We feel it is necessary and in your best interest to be laid off from this company. If you don't want to be fired, we suggest you keep your mouth shut."

"I know about your connections with Venezuela and bribing of government officials. I could help get you prosecuted for serious crimes," Steven replied.

"We have video proof of you engaged in helping with shipping activities to Venezuela. You would be considered culpable in the whole operation. I suggest you keep quiet."

Steven bowed his head in defeat and didn't speak any more about his knowledge of the company and Cheryl Jacobs. He answered simply with the fact that he would do his work for the day and turn in his work clothes and close out his locker.

He walked out of the factory late that afternoon and saw Cheryl Jacobs getting into her car.

"Hey, Cheryl, what have you decided to do?"

She turned around and gave Steven a quizzical look.

"I've decided to go with the company. I don't think Mr. Rowland is that bad of a guy."

"But you said yourself that he has done all types of illegal activities. Don't you want to relieve him of his job?"

"Steven, I think I'm just going to go along with what they say and follow the code of conduct of the company."

Steven turned away from her and walked out of the company lot without saying a word. He walked to his truck and turned around to see Cheryl Jacobs driving off into the late afternoon sky. He walked to his pickup and, with a bitter taste, drove back to Raymond and his home.



THE WINDMILL

Jared was happy he was getting the chance to visit Ben in the windmill. He thought with a contemptuous smile that he could shape Ben's thoughts into a way that would benefit his group of fun seekers that thought about Ben's solitary and meager existence in the windmill. They weren't concerned about Ben's livelihood. They weren't concerned about Ben at all. They just wanted to learn more about who Ben really was. They didn't understand him and wanted a closer look at his surroundings and workday.

Jared continued his journey to the windmill through the forest that was ravaged years ago by a war no one understood. He knew of no place in the woods to eat the fruitful growth that once existed there. The stream was not too far away, so Jared was not worried about quenching his thirst. When the stream came into view, he looked upon it with a smile and slowly walked up to it and took a deep drink. He knew he was not too far away from the windmill at this time.

As he walked along the fog-shrouded bank, he saw a dark shape in the distance that seemed to have a rotating appendage. He thought with determination that this must be the windmill. The fog began to lift, and Jared saw berries on the fields in front of the windmill. He reached down and picked some of the berries and ate of them. He looked up at the windmill with a glowing smile and walked up to a wooden door in the center of the frame.

He knocked, and Ben was seen in the window. Jared laughed, and Ben opened the door and let Jared in. Jared walked around what was a main atrium with what seemed to be a loft above. He took out his info phone and verbalized a short message to a friend before he began to speak to Ben.

"All my friends are wanting to know what you do at this windmill. We seek thrills and fun and are trying to understand why you live in this old mill."

"I'm not a thrill seeker and don't seek out frivolous things that mean nothing to a practical life," Ben stated.

Jared stared at Ben and then began to walk around the room, inspecting the various idioms of practicality that Ben possessed. There was a woodstove, a grandfather clock, a coatrack, a desk and desk lamp, a washbasin.

Jared reached into his jacket and ate some of the berries that he picked in Ben's fields and remarked, "I don't know how to grow things. I don't have a green thumb."

"It takes time but you can learn it," Ben said.

"Oh, we get all our organic foods from the hydroponic garden plants, but that's not why I'm here." Jared changed the subject quickly. "I'm here to talk about your failure to comply with the directives from Central Information," Jared said in between bites of the berries.

"Why do I have to follow such directives?"

"It's written in the New Law."

"This New Law, what does it say?" Ben asked.

"It says that technology must be respected and used to its fullest potential. It also says that interference into the directives of Central Information can lead to economic restraints."

"What kind of restraints?"

"You may not be able to purchase seeds for your fields or use your mill to make flour," Jared said.

"But I sell flour and produce to the techno-communes that you inhabit. Technology doesn't solve all your problems. You still need to do your laundry. A computer can't do that for you."

"The directives are clear and concise. You must follow them or all is lost. The other people on the fringes with their disrespect for technology will have to follow them too."

"What kind of people inhabit the techno-communes?" Ben changed the subject.

“Boys and girls. The ones that fit the genetic requirements and necessary makeup of what the techno-commune expects,” Jared answered. “For example, Doris has blue eyes and brown hair and is five feet four inches, which fits the necessary size requirements and genetic makeup for a girl of our commune.”

“Can I see this Doris?”

“I can arrange it. But the directives must be discussed further.”

“What need have I for directives?” Ben said.

“These directives are important because they help fulfill the objectives of the techno-communes. We all must live in happiness, and this is achieved with our entertainment viewers and politico shows,” Jared iterated.

“Give me an example of a directive I must follow,” Ben said.

“Well, for example a directive says that every dwelling must be fully equipped with an info line and viewers so that you are fully aware of all political doings and are completely connected to Central Information.”

“Why do I have to be connected to Central Information?”

“Everyone must have the necessary data to lead a knowledgeable and happy life,” Jared said.

“I don’t feel it’s necessary. I have all that I think is necessary for a happy life.”

“What you think makes you happy is not necessarily what really makes you happy. We know better.”

“When can I see Doris?”

“I’ll send her over tomorrow,” Jared replied.

Doris was briefed about Ben’s activities at the techno-commune’s meeting the night before her visit. She thought about the things they discussed about Ben and how the directives were inherently against what his goals in living seemed to be. She also learned that members of the commune’s board were once friends of Ben in the early days before the techno rise. She wasn’t sure how she was

going to handle her conversation and meeting with Ben but felt confident that important things would be said.

She ate her meal and began her journey to the windmill. She knew of the berries in the fields beside the windmill as she was told of them by the board. She looked forward to seeing them because she was interested in things that grew. She was told to take a certain trail through the forest that would be the quickest way to get to the windmill. Her hiking shoes were well adapted for the journey, and she knew she had to mind the rocks and crevices if she was to have a safe time of it. She wanted to get to the windmill before noon, so she pushed on through the forest.

As the sun set high at noon, Doris could see the windmill in the distance. She saw the fields of berries but decided not to eat any of them because she hoped Ben would provide a meal. Maybe meats.

As she approached the windmill, she saw Ben digging with a hoe near the base of the windmill. He looked up and saw her, and with a dark resigned look on his face, he said, “I’m just about finished.” He delivered a couple more strokes and gestured to Doris to walk into the windmill.

They both entered through the latched door, and Ben asked Doris to sit in his main chair. She sat down with a slightly apprehensive feeling, knowing her visit might take a long time.

“What is this windmill for?” Doris said.

“The windmill’s blades are turned by the wind and used to grind oats and wheat into flour. The techno-communes need the oatmeal and flour and wheat to make their bread. I barter with them and make my living that way,” Ben said.

“I would like to make a living someday,” Doris said. “But it’s not necessary in the techno-communes.”

“Maybe you don’t feel life is as fulfilling as it should be in the techno-communes,” Ben said.

“I don’t know why you would think that. I get all our holo shows and newsfeeds for free. We also get to watch the hate matches and human duels. I have duties and jobs to do but, usually there is enough free time to do what is acceptable.”

“Acceptable? What do you mean acceptable?”

“Well, we have to do what is acceptable and popular in our commune or be monitored and disciplined by the technocrats.”

“These technocrats, are they in charge?”

“They are the enforcers of the New Law and chroniclers of all the Old Time. We have to be the ones that fill all the orders and manage the accounts that ship out to the Fringelands like yours.”

“I’ve noticed the Fringelands have to take whatever the techno-communes give. Whenever they make mistakes, we pay the price. Whenever we make mistakes, we also have to pay the price, but they’re all immune to their own mistakes. It’s a losing battle for us,” Ben said.

“I don’t think we make that many mistakes. I’m fine with the way the system operates,” Doris replied.

Ben thought about this and asked her another question, “How long have you been working for the techno-communes?”

“As long as I can remember. You get trained when you’re young.”

“Is technology the sole reason for the directives?”

“As far as I know. I think they want to do what’s best for all.”

“Well, technology keeps changing and progressing at a rapid pace. The people on the fringes have a hard time keeping up with the changes,” Ben said. “I think that you might find high technology has it downfalls too.”

“Well, I’ve noticed a lot of this intense music, intense news, and intense shows are effective.”

“They’re sapping your strength,” Ben replied.

“But our leader is always ever present in the feeds. We appreciate his contribution to our people. He is very charismatic.”

“I’m wary of charismatic people,” Ben said

“I don’t completely understand your way of thinking, but I don’t think I have to report everything you’ve told me to the techno-board. I-I think you might be right about some things.” She stumbled in her words.

“What are your duties and jobs?” Ben changed the subject.

“I help chronicle the Old Time and also manage accounts for imports to some of the Fringelands.” She looked down in sadness.

“Would you like to stay with me?”

“I don’t know anything about the ways of the Fringelands,” Doris said.

“You could learn,” Ben replied. “I know of friends that were banished to the Fringelands that help me at times. These men are considered bandits to Central Information and the techno-communes. Some are farmers, others are carpenters, blacksmiths metallurgists, horse trainers, and they help with keeping the Fringelands operational.”

“I don’t know if I could gain a fellowship with outcasts from the techno-communes. They were outcast because they doubted technology and disagreed with the directives of Central Information.”

“Why do you feel that this is wrong? They just thought differently.”

“I-I’m not quite sure.”

They both looked away from each other at the birds perching on the sill of Ben’s window. The light of the sun began to fade behind the growing clouds.

“I’m going to have to leave here pretty soon,” Doris said as she stared out the window and its view of the fields and flowers. “Jared will probably be there at the briefing when the directives are discussed.”

Ben thought about what was going to be discussed and replied, “I’m not planning on following the directives of the techno-board, and you can bring Jared with you next time for any kind of disciplinary action he wishes to enforce.”

Doris rose from the wooden chair and said, “It was a pleasure speaking to you, and I hope I have the chance to talk to you again.” She went to the door and exited through the opening. Ben came to the door and watched her walk through the fields in the growing dusk of late afternoon.

There was a knock on Ben’s door, and he rose from his desk to answer it. Outside was a man with a black beard and simple coveralls. He greeted Ben with a nod and Ben gestured him in. The man walked round the windmill’s main room, looking at the various and sundry items in the atrium.

“Are you the Cecil I’ve been hearing about in these parts?”

“I’m Cecil.”

“The brother to Raymond?”

“Yes,” Cecil replied.

“Is Raymond aware as the others of the directives that the techno-communes and techno-board wish to impose on the Fringelands?”

“We’re aware of what they intend to do and have gathered together in a rebellious assembly to face the growing threat.”

“Are they aware of your books?”

“If they were, we wouldn’t have them right now. Everything is supposed to be on their feeds and nowhere else. We’ve made sure to stow them away to a hidden place.”

“Do they know about your guns?”

“They might but we don’t intend to use them,” Cecil said.

“Do you think the Fringelands are a way to propagate a self-reliant community?” Cecil asked.

“A self-reliant community produces more than it takes in, and we certainly do that so I would say yes we are a self-reliant community,” Ben replied.

“What kind of books do you think they have on their feeds?”

“Pure science and nothing else. Fiction has been abolished.”

“I don’t think fiction is more important than nonfiction,” Cecil commented.

“It’s not us to judge which is better,” Ben replied.

Cecil sat back and thought of this and eventually nodded his head in agreement. They both sat down and began to discuss their plans for the freedom and liberation of the Fringelands. They ate the bread and fruit that Ben had grown and made and soon retired from their conspiracy to wait for Jared’s return.

As Cecil walked out of the windmill, Ben called out to Cecil, “You don’t have to come by until the next moon. I’ll take care of the meeting with Jared.” Cecil reacted with a look of bewilderment and trudged through the thicket into the forest beyond.

Ben sat in his room thinking of the time he spent with Doris and Jared. His mind was muddled with theories of conspiracy and collaboration. His mind began to picture Doris’s face and movements during her time at the windmill. He felt a little obsession with his thoughts of her.

He sat in his room and imagined the possibilities of his relationship with Doris. He thought of situations and experiences he might have with her and the thoughts she might have of him. He imagined a confrontation with Jared and the techno-board. He began to have thoughts of persecution and oppression that he couldn’t shake from his mind.

As the night began to become omnipresent, he started to notice shadows in the room and sounds in the distance. He thought of the disjointed communications that existed between the Fringelands and the techno-communes and wondered who really controlled things in the techno-board. He knew Jared’s role was to obey and deliver the directives of the techno-communes and not interfere with any of their political plans.

He thought he understood Jared’s character and the general character of the people that existed in the techno-communes. They didn’t seem to have minds of their own and were self-indulgent and fickle in their behavior. Before the techno-communes were created he remembered some of the friends he had there. He remembered whenever Jared was with these friends he would poke fun at him, but when it was just Jared and Ben, he was not that way. He was friendly to Ben. He thought this behavior of Jared as being very cowardly.

As the night grew darker, Ben continued to think of conspiracies and plots that he felt were being waged outside of the windmill. A myriad of voices seemed to talk to him and coax and persuade him to follow some course of action. His responsibilities in the windmill made his thinking an arduous task that was full of burdensome and dark notions. He finished eating his late meal and decided to retire for the night. The nighttime sounds induced him into a deep sleep that enveloped his racing thoughts.

On the day of the half-moon, Jared and Doris walked unto the fields of Ben's windmill and looked upon the poppies and daisies that grew near his plowed ground. Doris was apprehensive about their meeting with Ben, but Jared was quietly comfortable in his black coat. Jared broke their pause by going up to the door and loudly knocking on it.

They waited for a long while until Ben appeared out of the shadows in the window and opened the door. Doris and Jared entered and waited for Ben to show them a seat. They sat down in silence until Jared began to speak.

"Well, the directives of the techno-board are clear, and we all feel it is imperative that you follow their truths. We feel it is necessary that you turn your windmill over to the techno-communes and disband the Fringelands.

"My goals are much different than that," Ben replied.

"I understand that you wish to keep the Fringelands free, but the techno-board has goals of its own, and they must be fulfilled in order for us to progress together as a commune," Jared said.

"I don't think progress, in your sense of the word, is necessarily beneficial to the people of your commune," Ben said.

"Ben, I don't think we're going to get very far if you continue to resist my statements for Central Information."

Ben rose up from his chair and grabbed Jared by the lapels of his black coat and threw him bodily through the window of his room. The sound of shattering glass could be heard throughout the windmill. Doris watched in disbelief and looked at the window and back at Ben, seeming to be undecided as what to do.

"The techno-communes are not going to last. I suggest you stay with me at the windmill and help us carve out a life in the Fringelands," Ben said to Doris.

Doris paused and thought about it and silently nodded her head. Ben closed the door and positioned the latch as he was well aware of the social intricacies of Jared's behavior and knew he wouldn't attempt to enter through the window even though he could hear shouts and expletives outside that wore on for a time until eventually they ended. Doris looked out the window and saw Jared limping

away. It was then she understood the failings and mistakes that the techno-communes bred and nurtured. She looked down and closed the curtain on the window.

On the night of the full moon, the various members of the Fringelands, man and woman, came to the windmill and gathered for what was a rebellious assembly at best. They shouted their speeches and drank the wine that was served in their casks. They were in unison in their decision to fight against the communes.

Around the windmill, the outcasts, the dissidents, the outlaws, the outsiders, the derelicts, the vagabonds, and generally, the heroes that once were members of the communes knew their fight could be won at last. As their plans were made, Ben oversaw their preparations and made their designs into reality. Above Ben's abode, the windmill's blades swung in a sure, slow, and certain progress.



THE EVIL SCHOOLBOY

The church was open that night to all attendees, and Michael rubbed his nose with the palm of his hand and walked through the double doors of the religious institution in a somber mood. He had just recently returned from baseball practice with a bruised ego from a game he had lost. He knew the refreshments at the church would be good, and he felt he needed the relief.

He sat the fruit in the banquet room that was served for all the members of the church and joined the congregation in prayer for all the victuals that would follow. Michael knew the sermon would be long that evening because of the Easter holiday season. He always got depressed at Easter because the sermons tended to mention the suffering of Christ and the dark day of the Crucifixion.

Michael sat in the banquet room and thought about the activities of the day he had. He knew he would be met with more challenges in the coming weeks and was uncertain how he would handle them. He ate his dinner and walked out of the church thinking of the days ahead.

In his humble home, his mother was washing the dishes and asked him, "How was the Easter service, dear?" She always tried to give him the proper attention a mother should give her son. His father was sitting at the table, eating his mother's cooking. He was a thin man with a dark complexion and thin slender hands. He was a very studious man who spent his time reading books on math and history.

Both of his parents did not go to the church service and did not make a normal habit of doing so. Michael himself was not a regular churchgoer. He didn't know the exact reason why his parents didn't

make a regular routine of the church service attendance, but he himself felt it somewhat of a burden to have to attend every Sunday.

That night, he tried to read a book on adventures in Africa to spark an interest in the outside world. He thought of traveling a lot but had apprehension about such things. He looked out the window of the little bungalow that was their house and the white picket fence that surrounded their lawn. They had their fair share of birds and hornets, and tonight was, unfortunately, not a stormy night for Michael to get too engrossed in reading.

The next day, he went to baseball practice and practiced his catching and throwing with some of the other players when he noticed a group of loud and talkative players near the dugout. Standing in the middle of the group was a short boy who seemed to be directing the other boys and giving all the orders. Michael knew him vaguely and remembered that his name was Brett.

Brett was a son of a family of means in the town. Michael considered him well versed in the art of financial background. He would brag frequently and have his group of stoics that were his followers.

Michael walked to the dugout thinking about speaking to Brett's group and being some kind of friend to them. He directed a question to them that he hoped would spark some kind of friendship, "How long do you guys plan on practicing today?"

"Well, Michael," Brett said in a derogatory tone, "we plan on staying as long as we like. My dad knows the referees and coaches here, and we pretty much have the run of the place."

Michael expected such a rude reply from Brett and countered with his own reply, "I hope you don't have to pay off the coaches and referees in order to win, Brett."

"You don't say things like that to me and get away with it," Brett injected. "You'll find out that my family means business."

Michael went home that night not overly fazed by Brett's words and thought about the way Brett was. Brett was a regular churchgoer and hung around friends that were. He remembered talking to a girl that made a comment about Brett. "He's one of those 'is, was, and always will be,'" she remarked.

He ate his mother's supper thinking about the big first baseball game that was on the following week. He was interested in what other friends thought about Brett. Was Brett someone he needed to be worrying about? Or was he all bark and no bite? He finished his meal and retired into his room. He had some studying to do that night and calmly opened his book to read.

The next morning, he awoke to see his dad go off to his job as a bank clerk. His mother did spare jobs as a housekeeper in the town, and usually both minded their own business. Both were proud of Michael being on the baseball team. They weren't strict on Michael's studies and told him often, "As long as you're learning." Michael overheard his father say about some of the members of the town as arrogant money-grubbers. He never understood why his father felt that way about some of the people of the town as Michael himself would think it interesting and exciting to be friends with such a social set.

On the day before the game, Michael went to school to see his exam grade for the early term tests. He sat down in his homeroom class, waiting for the grades to be passed out. As they called the students' names, they finally called Michael to the teacher's desk. Michael walked up to the teacher and held out his hand for the test when the teacher instead looked at Michael in a quizzical way.

"Michael, we have reason to believe you cheated on the test last week," the teacher said.

"Who told you that?" Michael said.

"We have heard it from various students of merit in this school," the teacher answered.

"I didn't cheat. I swear," Michael said.

"Well, we searched your homeroom desk yesterday and found the teacher's edition with the test answers to the tests in the back," the teacher replied.

"Someone must have put it there," Michael said.

"You would have to prove it," said the teacher.

"Well, I don't know how to prove it, but I know there is someone trying to spread something about me."

"Well, until you can prove it, you will receive a failing grade on your test score," the teacher replied.

Michael was shocked and disgusted by what he heard but took it all in stride and left homeroom a little confused by the sudden turn of events.

That night, he explained the situation to his father but his father, but his father wasn't too bothered by what he heard. He explained to Michael that these things blow over after a while and he need not worry about the machinations of the classes.

Michael went to his room thinking about what his dad meant by machinations. One thing he noticed was middle-class advice. The middle class would give advice that they felt was necessary for your own improvement, but in the end, the advice wasn't very helpful and seemed that their motives were ulterior. For example, a friend gave him advice about not to be too picky about girls. He felt the friend was telling this so he could get the good ones for himself.

That night, he decided he would go to church Sunday and prepared for the service. He usually didn't worry too much about what he wore and tried to wear shoes and shirts that were appropriate for a church. He wasn't the type that spent too much time looking at himself in the mirror and never seemed to have the perfect hair that some of the other boys did.

When he entered the church, sitting at the front pew was Brett with two girls on either side of him. He looked back at Michael and smiled, urging him into the nave. Michael walked in reluctantly and took a seat two pews behind Brett.

Brett stood up and walked over to Michael to pass a sly comment. "Isn't it something that I have the girls and you don't?"

"It's not good to taunt guys like that," Michael said.

"It's not a sin to inflict psychological pain on someone. I'll be all right," Brett said. "By the way, do you know it was me that spread it around about you cheating on the test? I've got other things in store for you too."

"I don't know why you want to do these terrible things to me," Michael said.

"I'll have no problem doing these things. I go to church every Sunday so I'll be forgiven for it."

The sermon that day was, “Do unto others as they would do unto you.” Michael tried to digest the sermon as best as he could with Brett and his girls there.

As Brett and his girls started to walk out of the church, Michael decided to make a comment. “Those are pretty girls. I would like to get to know one of them.”

“You can’t have sexual feelings like that. You will be punished for it,” Brett said.

Brett and his girls walked out, leaving Michael behind in the church. As he walked out and made his way home, the bells of the church began to ring in the distance, and Michael had a minor feeling of tranquility awake in him. It was not often that he got feelings like this, and he wondered how long it would last.

As the day began to end, Michael thought about the baseball match next week. He decided not to pray that night and instead worked on a variety of loose ends and homework that needed to be finished for the coming week. He ate an apple and went to bed.

The next day, the bus took him to school, and as he walked off the bus into the entrance courtyard, three boys met Michael and surrounded him. They began to bully him and push him around. “You better know your place at tomorrow’s game. We have a license to do this.” Michael stood his ground but said nothing. He was not the type that could think on his feet.

Later that afternoon, preparations began for the baseball match. Michael went into the locker room and changed into his baseball uniform. Across the locker room, Brett and his buddies bragged about their possible enrollment in a fraternity and their anticipation of a win in baseball that afternoon. Michael was sitting next to a friend named Keith.

Keith and him began to talk about things they had noticed in class and their school. Mainly though they were excited about the afternoon of baseball. They both agreed to meet after the match and talk about their school and other things.

Michael walked into the dugout a little depressed about the day’s events and how the match would turn out. Brett was on the other team and were the first to bat. Michael noticed the umpire was

someone that Brett often conversed with. He shook off his feeling of self-doubt and concentrated on the game. He felt he practiced enough catching where he could catch a fly if he had to.

At the bottom of the ninth inning, the teams were tied 3–3 with two strikes, and Michael came up to bat. The pitcher eyed him arrogantly and threw him an outside throw that Michael didn’t take. The umpire called, “Ball 1.” Michael lowered his head in relief and concentrated on the next throw. The pitcher threw a fast one, and Michael hit it with all his might. The ball went down left field, and Michael started to run. He rounded first base when he noticed out of the corner of his eye that the left fielder missed the ball. He kept running and rounded second base before the left fielders could get his hands on the ball. By the time he made it to third base, they had the ball but fumbled with it slightly. Michael ran with all his might to home base and slid in.

The ball was caught by the catcher, but Michael didn’t think the catcher tagged him. The umpire called out, “Out!” Michael and his team were disappointed by the call, and members of his team ran to the umpire and shouted against the call. The umpire, with his stoic visage, stood by his word and stammered back his statements to the losing team, “The call has been made.” Michael walked back to the locker room and changed into his regular clothes. He agreed to meet Keith at the dugout that evening.

Keith was a boy who minded his own business and accepted his chores at the baseball match with a grudging retort. He did what he was told but thought a lot about the things that went on at his school. He like to play baseball but never picked on other kids at school or bragged about his wins.

That evening, Michael walked to the dugout and Keith was in the shadows. They both nodded their heads in approval and began to talk.

“Do you think that was fixed?” Michael said.

“Ain’t no telling,” Keith said.

“I damn sure was safe,” Michael said.

“You probably were,” Keith replied.

“You know, I wonder about what they do sometimes,” Michael pondered. “They want to keep you under their control so they say things to gain the upper hand.”

“Yeah, they like to mess with your mind and give you complexes,” Keith remarked.

“We’re supposed to count our blessings, but sometimes I wonder about that,” Michael said.

“It’s like Stockholm syndrome, you know. When the one that’s held captive believes they deserve what they get because they’re told by their captors they deserve it,” Keith replied. “That’s why they criticize you.”

“Well, I think I’m going to go home. It’s getting too late for my parents to be comfortable with,” Michael said.

As Michael was walking home, a cloud of doubt formed in his mind, and he began to walk a bit slower. That night, he sat up in his bed and decided he was going to go to church this Sunday. He finished his homework and turned off his light for the coming day.

That Sunday, Michael entered his church with the intention of meeting up with Brett. He knew Brett was a regular churchgoer, unlike him. As he walked into the atrium, Brett was standing there with a wry smile.

“So what did you think of the game, Michael?” he said in a taunting tone.

“I thought it was fixed,” Michael said.

“I told you you would pay for what you said to me. This church is for the go-getters and the connected,” Brett said.

“I thought a church is for the humble and merciful,” Michael said.

“That’s what they say, but we intend to change things for the better,” Brett replied.

“Well, don’t you think the point of religion is to make the rich and the cruel feel better about themselves when they treat the gentle and the kind badly?” Michael queried.

“That’s sacrilegious to say that, Michael,” Brett sneered.

“What is more, they make the gentle and the kind feel guilty about themselves when they have bad feelings about being mistreated,” Michael said.

“What do you mean by that?” Brett said.

“Well, we have to go and ask for forgiveness for our thoughts as well as our words and deeds,” Michael replied.

“Well, Michael, you definitely need to go and ask for forgiveness for that,” Brett said.

Michael decided to walk out of the church and make his way home. He got to his house and found his dad sitting on the porch, waiting for him.

“Michael, I don’t want you to worry about what problems life gives you. Things work out in the end.”

“I know, Dad,” Michael said.

He walked into his house and passed his mother, who was making apple turnovers. He went into his room and lay on his bed. In the other room, he could hear his mother singing, “Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah. Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah.”



SHORT SHORTS





DANIEL AND THE THREE WITCHES

In many years gone past, there was a boy who lived in a grove in the forest. He did his best to plow his fields and make his farm the best in the land. He was a boy who longed for something more, though, than just the simple tasks and duties that came with farming the grove. He wished someday to find a girl he could share his life with. He searched all over the land for such a girl but could not find her.

Then one day, he was plowing his field when he saw a strange object hanging from a tree. It was strangely shaped, like some kind of cobweb with a symbol in the middle. Daniel didn't think too much about it but was curious about this strange object.

As the days passed, Daniel continued to work his farm and dream of a better life. He would go to the market in the village and buy his flour and sugar and seeds and talk to the local proprietors but was unable to find out about his strange object and its creators. Then one day, he was in his home at night and was looking at the stars through his window when he saw fireworks begin to erupt in the sky. The dazzling display ignited his imagination and filled him with wonder but remained a mystery as to its originators.

Days would turn to weeks as Daniel was filled with melancholy and sadness over his loneliness. One day, he decided to take a walk through his grove and stare at the nighttime stars when a mist formed around him and he became dizzy and fainted from the intoxicating odor. The next thing he remembered, he was in a cave bonded by strange ties and knots.

Daniel was bewildered by his situation. He attempted to break free of his bonds but to no avail. It was then that he heard a rustling in the dark and noticed a small figure in the distance. As the sunlight gleamed in, he saw the face of a girl staring at him. She was very

pretty but was dressed all in a black cloak and hood on her head and a stick in her hand.

In the background, two gravely voices shouted out for the pretty one. She turned and ran to them, leaving her stick behind. The other two witches shouted at the younger one to do their bidding, and she did what was asked of them. Daniel was hungry and called out to the witches for food. The young witch came to him and rudely threw down a plate of stale beans.

“That’s all you get from us,” she said coldly. Daniel had to eat the beans with his mouth, and the young witch stared at him with contempt. “We need to fatten you up so we can eat you,” she said.

Changing the subject, Daniel said, “What’s your name?”

“Tara,” she said.

The other witches began to sing a song, “We shall eat, such a teat, tender meat, simple feat.” They then started to light a fire and cackle as they rustled the embers. Daniel was smitten and knew not what to do. The witches contemplated their next move. The two older witches explained to Tara that they would need spices for the soup that they would cook. Tara was ordered to go out in the forest and gather the herbs.

It was then that Daniel formulated his plan. He explained to the two older witches that Tara professed her love to him and was going to go out and get poisonous herbs for the soup. He would convince the two older witches to untie him and go get Tara and the proper herbs for the soup to eat her instead.

The older witches began to untie Daniel when Tara walked in with the herbs. Tara exclaimed, “Why are you untying him?” The older witches explained what Daniel said to them, and Tara denied such a claim to the older witches. She said she would prove it by making the soup with the spices and have Daniel drink it.

Daniel was tied up again and given a taste of the soup, and when he didn’t get sick, the two older witches were satisfied. Soon they began to sing their song again, and Tara fidgeted with her hood. She thought about what Daniel had said and soon came to a realization. She brushed her hand from her hood and looked at Daniel and smiled. Daniel smiled back and a new plan formulated in his head.

He gestured to Tara to undo his witch knots while the witches were preoccupied with their song. She did it without question.

As Daniel and Tara ran out of the cave, the older witches ran after them, but the pot with the soup fell over and spilled on the floor. The two witches slipped and fell on the soup while Daniel and Tara ran into the forest. When they made it to his farm, Daniel pulled the hood over Tara’s head and looked in her eyes. She looked back and smiled and then kissed him. They would live on the farm happily ever after.



THE NATURAL TROUBLEMAKER

My name is Billy. I used to walk home every day from school with a frown on my face about the homework that I had to do for the night. I was always asking the teacher in class questions. She would be annoyed by my questions and talk to me after class about my disruptive behavior. I never let it bother me although I wondered why she felt it necessary to use her authority on me.

When I got home, Derek was there to lecture me about girls. He was always giving me advice because he claimed he came from a higher social set than me. He would tell me how to approach a girl and not to let off too much body language. I had my own ideas on how to talk to girls.

I decided to put them into action that afternoon by going to this girl's house. Her name was Veronica, and she was what I considered to be well-endowed. I decided to tell her, "You've got big knockers." She ended up being offended by my comment and replied, "Buzz off, jerk."

Later the next day, she told everyone about what I did. We were eating lunch, and Derek was telling me how I should have said something romantic to her instead. I said to Derek, "What's the use of telling a girl I love you? She'll be scared by that and call the police. You're better off saying something honest and bad."

"That wouldn't be right," Derek said. Derek was the type of upper-middle-class boy that it didn't matter what he said to a girl everyone else would think it was all right what he said.

Another boy at the lunch table named Eunice said, "Just say you're a brilliant scientist and want her to help you with mushroom breeding." Eunice was weird and always said things to be misunderstood. He wanted to be misunderstood.

At the end of the week, we were back at the lunch table talking about TV shows. I started talking about *I Dream of Jeannie* and how I didn't understand why Jeannie liked Major Nelson. He was such a boring guy, always telling her not to use her magic. She should have went with Healey. He had the right idea, always asking her to get him rich. She should have listened to him. I also mentioned *Gilligan's Island* and how Mary Anne was more sexy than Ginger. Everyone at the table jeered and laughed at me and threw things at me.

We had a history teacher named Mr. Richards who was a very nervy guy. He would explain things in class and let out short breaths in between his comments and stutter on occasion. We knew where he lived, and I came up with an idea to go to his house and try to cure him of his nervousness. What I did was to sneak under his bedroom window and, every so often, tap on it and then run and hide. I decided if he got used to this, he would no longer be nervous. Derek said, "That's a dumb idea. That's like Chinese water torture."

I remember going to two bookstores in town and liking one better than the other. I would tell Derek, "I don't like overly enthusiastic and overly friendly customer service. I would rather they were a little rude and had a dark demeanor. It's the same with doctor's offices. They're so friendly it's sickening."

"That's ridiculous. You should always be nice," Derek said.

I decided to break the window of the *nice* store and buy books from the *rude* store. They were better books anyway.

I also talked to Derek about the different places to meet in. If you met people in a church, you wouldn't be able to say things that you really mean to them. You couldn't say profanity or vulgar language. You don't necessarily want to speak in a vulgar way, but you should at least be given the opportunity.

I used to talk about church boys. These were boys that were fanatical and going to church every week. I would yell on the street, "Hey, church boy, don't you know how to have real fun?"

Derek confronted me one day about my behavior. "You're always making trouble. Why don't you just let people be?"

"I have to cause trouble," I answered. "Otherwise, people would go on doing what they normally do, not thinking about what caused

the trouble in the first place. If you can get things done because of it, then it's all right, right?" We both went home that day and decided to plan some troublemaking in the future.



THE SKYRTHING

There once was a happy kingdom named Oretia. The leaves were always green and the valley was always full of blossoms in Oretia. The people of Oretia dance and frolicked gleefully in the glades and fields and were very happy. Then the people of Oretia began to war with their neighboring kingdoms of Dumoon and Jansar. The king of Oretia was troubled by his kingdom's problem. He decided to search for a warrior to help solve the riddle of the conflict.

It was in a drawing that was held in a secret meeting that it was decided that Lord Ortho would go adventuring to find a clue or solution to the kingdom's woes. The kingdom of Oretia needed a warrior like Ortho because of his courageous nature and abominable strength. He fought for many years in the crackling war and many foes and friends that threatened the kingdom's very existence.

He traveled through a dark forest when he came upon a band of dark hoppers that frustrated and disrupted his meandering voyage through the woodland. It was then that an idea came to him. He would soothe the black hoppers' nervousness by singing to them, and soon they halted their wretched hopping.

As Lord Ortho tread through the forest, he came upon a hill. Very cautiously he looked inside the dark opening and noticed a foul smell pervading out from the entrance. He ignored the putrid odor and entered the cave. Inside he felt around for a faggot that could be lit when a loud roar came from a few short steps away. It was the dreaded kracknaw—a creature of unbelievable strength and ferocity. He used his halberd to do away with the foul-smelling monster.

He found a faggot and lit it and looked around for various items that the monster could have hidden, then off to a corner there came a brilliant glow. The glow emanated from a device that had a large

handle and two prongs. Ortho didn't understand the device's purpose, and it certainly didn't look like a weapon. He decided it was something of importance that he would take back to the kingdom of Oretia.

On the way back, Ortho was traveling along the main road when two men in leather breeches and multicolored striped shirts stopped him from his journey. They immediately started threatening him with the short swords they had. It was then that the device Ortho had started to glow. The two short swords from the bandits were mysteriously yanked from their hands. Ortho realized the importance of his device and decided to give it a name. "I shall call you the skyrthing," Ortho said.

When he made his way back to the main gate of Oretia, he commanded the guards to open the gate. "I have an item that everyone should know about. Call the king." The gates were opened and Ortho was let in.

"We shall take you to the king," they said.

Ortho entered the hall and was led to the courtiers and assemblage of the king. All were bothered by the entrance of Ortho. Ortho began to explain to the king his device, "I have an item that can disarm. There would be no need to shoot or harm others. Their weapons would be taken from them."

"That sounds interesting, but I'm not sure how that would work," said the king.

A burly guard shouted among the assemblage, "That wouldn't be any good. Then we wouldn't be able to beat the one up that needed it."

The courtiers gathered together and discussed the matter with the king. They decided on a course of action that would lead to the making of many skyrthings to be used against the kingdoms of Dumoon and Jansar.

Thus started the skyrthing war.

As the skyrthing war raged, the kingdoms of Dumoon and Jansar began to devise a plan to rid the kingdom of Oretia of their skyrthings. They dispatched a squad of warriors to raid the storehouse that contained the skyrthings. Lord Ortho was waiting for

them and told them, "You are free to take your share of skyrthings. Just be sure to remember to leave us our fair share." The warriors thought about it and agreed to Ortho's judgment.

The kingdom of Oretia would make a treaty with their neighboring kingdoms to call off the skyrthing war. The nobles and royalty gathered together in a mighty room and discussed their newfound alliance. Cheers and hearty laughter erupted in the grand hall, and Ortho became the receiver of much applause and compliments.

Ortho addressed the hall, "I am certain that all will be well in our kingdoms, and the skyrthings will be the pride of our people. I hope that each and every one of you will learn to appreciate what the skyrthing is capable of accomplishing and that we can all live in peace and harmony."

With all this said, Ortho walked out of the hall, and the people of Oretia resumed their life of frolicking and dancing.



SLICE-
OF-LIFE
VIGNETTES





THE FLEETS

We lived in a small red brick house. Living in Chicago, these houses were close together with lawns in the back and fences that separated the lawns. The house's metal fences and railings were dark, chipped, almost rusted metal. The front door had a metal latticework with a similar cold worn feel that seemed to dominate these houses in Calumet Park, a suburb of Chicago. During school, I would walk out into the cold, brisk air, the Chicago wind blowing at my jacket. I would always walk with my brothers to grammar school about three blocks away from where we lived. I remember wearing dock-side sneakers which looked similar to nurse's shoes or something a navy steward would wear. The all-white shoes left me with a string of self-consciousness. There would be a group of three boys that would follow us around when I walked straight to school and would make fun of my girl shoes.

"You look like a real girl," they would say with their conceit. "Walking around in those white shoes. You're just a girl." We would calmly keep walking not saying a word.

My brothers and I would play often with a large family that lived across the street from us. This Catholic family was devout and strict in its ways but appeared as a bunch of hooligans when playing on the street. They were the Downses, and all had brown to dark brown hair. They also had brown skin which was unusual for a devout Catholic family. Apparently there was some Indian strain in their family, and oddly enough they were slightly racist.

The oldest two worked in a meat market while the younger ones stayed at home. The girls were young, but there were three boys. Danny was creative and the youngest of those still living at the house. Me and the youngest of my older brothers were friends with him. We

would create songs and musical groups of our own, and Danny was a good artist. We had fun playing in the dim, dark sunlight right before evening fell. We didn't think too much about the games we played or the yelling and stammering that went on between us. I wasn't as much a physical player as my brothers. I was more of an inside person. Living in Calumet Park meant a lot of things that we had to do. We had to make sure we ran to the ice-cream truck in time. We had to eat with forks and spoons. We had to say, "Kum ba ya, my Lord, kum ba ya" at church. We were happy kids with neighbors next to us that were not so happy.

My brother would go out every so often with my other brother. The oldest was Scott and was the shortest of the bunch. He had brown hair and brown skin with a very cool demeanor. He was certainly the oldest by the way he looked after us others. I remember at Christmastime he would tell a story to me of a light in the sky that he saw through the living room window, which was obviously the sleigh bells of Santa. I completely believed everything he said. My other brother, Phil, was the tough one of the lot. He had light-brown hair and light skin. He was loyal to Scott, and both were devoted followers of the sports section of the Ben Franklin convenience store down the block.

One day, they were playing street football in the backyard. The leaves were falling and autumn was coming on. Scott decided to kick a high one to Phil and instead drove it over the fence into the Fleets yard. Out came Mr. Fleet with his war scars and overcharging belly and picked it up and carried it back into the house with his grumpy growl and knowing smile. Mr. Fleet had just found his pleasure for the day. Scott knew he would never see that football again.

The Fleets had always been a problem. Mr. Fleet was a veteran of the Korean War and had a son who was very spoiled and always rode around on some kind of motorcycle. His wife was always silent and caring to her husband. He would always walk around in a gait and make it clear to everyone that his house was his property and no one was even to walk on it. The son would always say that his father would beat us all if he ever caught us walking on their lawn.

My mother also explained to me that Mr. Fleet would come home from work and see his clean home and then deliberately clutter

it, throwing underwear and clothes everywhere and say to his wife: "There, now you have something to clean up."

My brothers and I and the Downses were prone to doing things that we probably shouldn't have done as well. There was a Spanish family that lived next to the Downses that had a daughter and son. They were called the Tweets, and the Downses were especially known for picking on the young boy. They all considered him devious, and so a rite of hazing seemed to be the answer to curing his devious nature. They would throw water at him and hose him down with a cold spray in the summer. Other pranks could have been played on him, but I was unaware of them.

There was even time for love. Ricky Downses had a crush on the Spanish Tweet girl who was an attractive girl and became a constant butt of jokes from the other Downses. The Tweet girl had a professor at school that she liked and rode around in his nice car. Whenever the car passed the Downses house, Ricky would stop what he was doing and stare at the Tweet girl in the car with an open mouth and blank look on his face. He would also try to do things to get her attention. He tried to learn how to play tennis and became a dedicated follower of the tennis racket for a while. Unfortunately, Ricky never seemed to have the ability to attract this girl.

The hoopin' and hollerin' of the Downses would go on in their continued sports endeavors, which would take place in an abandoned lot near our neighborhood. All my brothers would be participants in the sports activities, except me. They would go on to call me Kirk the *non-sport*. I would find myself doing things that weren't nearly as important. I created a rock star called DJ Action. I made sure I was involved in the creation on the album titles, but my brother had to be the artist in the whole affair. He would draw pencil sketches of each of the albums, and we had fun devising a chronological history of their music. I had other challenges to accomplish as well.

The Downses had two girls. Donna, the oldest, had long brown hair and thin small body. She seemed to have some kind of street wisdom that a girl like her had to have living in a city like Chicago. She was attractive, and at times, I remember jumping up and down with her, just simply enjoying life. The younger one, Anna, was one

year younger than me. She had black hair cut into bangs and a round face with barely noticeable freckles. I remember she would bother me every so often. One time, she was teasing me and I felt left out and wishy-washy, so I went home with the feeling I had been teased too much. It was then when I was home that I decided what I was going to do. I got the courage and walked across the street where Anna and her friends were. I went up to Anna and kissed her right on the lips. We looked at each other and smiled and everyone around us went “Ooh.” I conquered my worst fear and went back home in peace.

The Downses were a Catholic family and that meant they were very strict. They had to be. With so many members living in a small brick house in Chicago, they all had to mind their mother. The mother was never very happy, it seemed, but she knew how to make those kids mind. They would sleep four to a room. All the houses on our block were three-bedroom houses. They all had duties to fulfill in order to keep their houses clean and livable. The father was a man who went to work at the General Electric factory. The Downses kids would brag about their father saying how he was stronger than our father. I remember the father having a very big stomach and would always go to the bar after every night of work. They would ask me questions like, “Why does your dad always hold his ears when a loud car drives by? Or “If a cat walked across the road, would your dad think it was making too much of a sound?”

But of course, the real culprits in all this hostility as always were the Fleets. I remember the hedges between our yard and theirs was a constant center of argument, and Mr. Fleet would complain that he wanted the hedges cut. My father would cut the hedges for him, but he would never be satisfied and ask him to cut it again and again. Finally, my mother who was always an understanding and good-hearted woman would tell my father, “Why don’t you just cut the hedges all down?” So that’s what he did. Helen Fleet was always a fairly friendly woman who had to put up with the husband she had. I remember actually going to her front door one time when Mr. Fleet wasn’t there, and she would ask me, “Would you like to come inside and play with our toys and games? We have a lot of them here.” I remember telling her no and walking away.

It was in the afternoon on a Saturday and the Downses were playing baseball in the street. The older brothers were even there. After a while, it was obvious that they were having a little too much fun for their own good. As usual, mean man Fleet was sitting in his lawn chair, looking around, making sure no one was stepping on his lawn. His son Bobbie, always blindly obedient to his father, had to run to buy some groceries for his mother. The oldest brother of the Downses tried to catch a high ball thrown at him but missed and tripped and fell on no one else’s lawn but the Fleets. Everyone playing in the street didn’t even notice the fact that Jimmy had landed in the Fleets’s front yard. Everyone was laughing at Jimmy’s predicament while Jimmy was lying smiling faceup on the lawn with his arms and legs stretched out before him.

Apparently he hadn’t realized that he was on the Fleets lawn. Then from what I can remember, Mr. Fleet waved at Bobbie Fleet who had just come back from the store. Bobbie and Mr. Fleet both bodily picked up Jimmy by the lapels and shouted down his throat with their faces up against Jimmy’s face. Jimmy had nothing but stark terror in his eyes. His eyeballs were almost popping out from the fear that the Fleets had just injected into him. He stood while Bobbie held him by the collar and threatened him with obscenities and vulgarities.

When it was over, I remember the general feeling of shock and dismay that everyone in the neighborhood had over this violent episode on our street. Everyone had to go to sleep at night knowing two very bad men just had their day of triumph. Jimmy wasn’t the only one who felt that his pride had just been shredded. Everyone in the neighborhood felt it. At points, it seemed an exciting thing to watch while at other points we felt a slight disruption in the fabric of our lives. We felt that something had just been lost. We were content to live out our lives here and finished the day staring at the gray leaf embroidery.



GONZO

He moved into our barracks room one night. The motor pool needed a new mechanic for our brigade. In the army, we were having to share three per room. The boy that moved in was a tall black-haired man of Italian descent. He had dark skin and was a son in a family of nine children. The first night he moved in, we talked all night about his family and other things. He told me he was the black sheep of the family and the only one that had trouble in school with his rebellious nature.

The first night we talked, he mentioned many things about New York that I thought was too despicable to mention here. He also explained how different his other brothers and sisters were from him. They were all squeaky clean kids with A and B grades. I immediately liked Gonzo because of his general attitude of rebelliousness against the way his public schools would run him through some kind of shredder. He was always the one who would get into some kind of trouble with the school. He was very proud of his brothers and sisters though. They did well and were living happy normal lives. He told me he seemed to be the one who was always getting in trouble though. He joined the Army for the same reason I did—to grow up and become a mature adult.

He was a tall fellow with dark skin and black hair and a long face. He told me about the things he and his gang did to one boy. They felt they had to straighten him out because he had a masturbation problem. He was caught masturbating in a bathroom stall, so the boys hovered around it and eventually tied him to the toilet. They felt it was necessary to do this to solve his self-indulgence.

Gonzo knew a lot of things about New York that I still don't understand how he knew and found out. He was in some gang and

that might have something to do with it. He was a very disorderly person which was the way all those guys were in the motor pool. Their rooms were atrocious messes, but the section sergeants weren't overly concerned about this.

I had another roommate named Eric. He was Polish with light-brown hair and a good build. He had a sense of humor and could say something funny on his feet at any time. He could be very indecent and obnoxious as well. He also had somewhat of a crude style about him, but he also was very happy and bright around other people. I remember one night I woke up and heard him crying and sobbing over and over again. I never heard any guy cry like that before. I would think that life wasn't always very great for Eric.

I remember one time Eric bought an old automobile from some friend. It was a bluish gray '62 Ford with a white top. Eric really liked that car, and we would go out driving every Sunday night to the Taco Bell in Wahiawa. Wahiawa was the nearest town to the barracks. We always loved doing that every Sunday. I remember one night in Wahiawa we stopped at a red light and waited when two cars came rushing through and crashed when they tried to brake and turn at the same time. One skidded at the turn and collided into Eric's car. Eric was distraught as you could imagine. I remember him getting out of the car and standing by the curb. He sat with his elbows on his lap. The damage to the car wasn't all that bad, but for a car collector like Eric, it was everything. I told him, "It's no big deal, Eric. You can get that fixed."

He said, "No, man, when something like that happens, there's really nothing you can do."

We all went to the Northshore with the car too. Me, Eric, and Gonzo would pile into the car on a weekend and go to the beach and relax with a beer or two. It was better than nothing. Eric would always find something to aggravate us with. He would pinch us in the arm and laugh one of his loud, crazy laughs. Whenever he laughed, his mouth would be wide-open. Sometimes the laugh was more of a cackle than a real laugh. Eric's humor would go to the workplace as well with the sergeant in the admin office, laughing with him as well. He would joke with the officers but usually to no avail.

On summer afternoons in Wahiawa, some of us had to clean the barracks floor and hallways. The barracks were big, white stone buildings with the red stripes of the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division emblazoned on it. In the hallways, the red stripes were painted and waxed on the almost cardboard-like walls that separated the rooms. There were guys in our barracks that would party and drink almost every night. One big guy left a hole in the wall where he had punched it. He would come into my room and flip a towel at me, leaving a welt on my leg. He tried again and again until, eventually, I took a chair and held it up to fight back at him. I remember my eyes being blazing mad, and I was able to fight him out of my room.

Another character we all knew was Breen. A new recruit Breen had light-brown hair and was very fat. Breen talked in a deliberately wispy voice and would come to our barracks room bragging about his special treatment. His demeanor was almost comical. Me and roommate Eric would make fun of Breen's wispy voice and would call out to him across the barracks floor, "Breeeen! Breeeen!"

I worked up in the offices of administration as a colonel's secretary. I had one black friend named Perkins. Perkins was a good guy who handled material for the upper offices. He operated a computer similar to the one I had. A tan-colored IBM word processor made of a textured metal, I would use it to type the colonel's military letters and invitations. I would be under a great deal of pressure to get some forms that involved a secret clearance and in the beginning did not have an easy go of it. I had an officer in charge over me named LT Portman. He would always get after me for not getting the documents done in time. LT Portman was a little uptight and nervous. He always had problems controlling his nerves when he was in the office.

When I went upstairs, I would do work with Perkins. Perkins would be behind me, telling me of plans to write screenplays. I got along fine with Perkins the whole time I was with him in the office. We would talk about our families and how different our lives were. He would laugh at my jokes whenever I would say something funny. Perkins always had a lot of work to do. He was constantly typing things for his department.

I had another friend named Jeff. Jeff was a quirky character who worked in intelligence and had the normal psychosis a man his age would in the field. He always had a nervous insane laugh about him. Jeff had brown hair, a square boxer's build and slightly dark skin. Jeff was the guy who would get ganged up on by the other kids in his high school. One time in our brigade, Jeff had to stay with some of the other straights overnight in an infantry exercise. The guys had a picture made of him sleeping with one of their private parts next to his face. The next morning the guy that had the idea to do this woke up with beef stew in his boots. Jeff was considered a hero among a great deal of us other recruits.

One time in Waikiki, we spent the night partying and drinking at clubs until a person near us in one of the clubs stole my wallet. Jeff walked back into the club and said, "All right, whoever took my friend's wallet, I don't want to have any problems from you. I just want you to give the wallet back." Jeff was never looked upon as the local hero in our brigade. Other friends in my company would say to me uneasily, "Oh, man, what is it that you like about him." I had the general feeling they were jealous of him for some reason. Jeff was a marathon runner and ran in the Hawaiian marathon every year. We even took our bikes around the island of Oahu along the coast. I remember it took us all day to climb the twists and turns and hills along the coast.

I had somewhat of a problem turning in all my gear when I left the service. They were supposed to give me a full week of time to organize my count, but a field endeavor came up. I was called out to it and ended up having only two days to sign paperwork and leave the service. I had discovered near the last couple of hours that I didn't have my sleeping bag. The first person I went to was Gonzo. I begged Gonzo to help me out on this, and he nodded his head and I knew he would do it. Eric was not around at this time as usual, but to this day, I still don't know who stole my sleeping bag. I assumed Gonzo had to get himself involved in a little theft, but I never questioned Gonzo's ethics.

We talked all night about what we were going to do in the future when we left the Army. Gonzo wanted to start a painting business. He



DICK WENDT'S WORKSHOP

very much believed in going against what the authority had to offer him. The motor pool would give the mechanics many hours, sometimes going on until the night. Gonzo wouldn't come back to the barracks until eleven. He left the motor pool one night and came back at five. He was obviously fed up with the long hours and wanted some kind of break. I thought what he did was good, and I was almost proud of it. He really was protesting the pressure that was put on the motor pool troops.

He didn't seem to have a problem getting girls either. He came back to the barracks one night flipping his thumb, which was some kind of thing these guys would do whenever they scored. He made some hits on this girl and was very successful in going home with her. The girl was dressed in some kind of leopard-skin dress.

I very much wanted to go out and do things like that too. One night when we were in Hawaii, we went. The place was on the North Shore, secluded away from Waikiki and other places. It was a very beautiful night with a view of the palm trees although I am fairly certain that I could not see the ocean from where I was at. We all piled in a car and went at evening. A bunch of guys introduced me to the drinks they were serving. They had Long Island teas of which I didn't understand the potency at the time. I remember sitting at the table liking very much the drinks I had and staring at the girls opposite me.

I was thinking about them and how they could never be the girls for me. These girls were only here for the ride. They would look around coldly, but I sensed a warmth in them. One girl had a brown-tanned body. I found myself lovestruck by her presence. As I continued to drink the teas, I found my overconfidence would be my downfall. The night faded into blue and black as the shades of evening enveloped around me. I drank one after the other until the blackness engulfed me. The next thing I remember was, they were dragging me into the bathroom and putting me at the toilet. I threw up in the toilet and heard them laughing.

The total amount of Long Island teas was counted by me as seven. I remember one lone presence in the room pick me up and take me to the car that we were in. My next memory was waking up with my head in Gonzo's lap. As I rested my head, I felt a calm, slow empathy embody my spirit.

We moved to the small town of St. Charles from a suburb of Chicago called Calumet Park. My father had enough of the rigors of the city, so we settled in a small town where he could still do his work as a draftsman. We stayed at the Tic Toc Motel for a week while my dad drove the truck with our possessions in it from my grandfather's farm in Tennessee. I remember eating baloney and peanut butter sandwiches for a week at the Tic Toc Motel, and it took a little time to adjust to the small town, but the schools were fine and we attended a local church eventually.

The house we lived in we paid rent for. My mother never liked the house because of its setup of rooms. You had to walk through a bedroom to get to another bedroom, and the doorway was just a drape rather than a door. We all were satisfied because the lawn in the back was large. My mother told me that the lawn was the reason they got the house. They wanted something big for us to play in.

We almost always ate at home, and only once in a blue moon would we get soft drinks. I guess that's why we were all thin kids. We ate good, but my mother didn't splurge on things. We were happy for the most part as we always had music to listen to and my older brothers followed the sports games and collected cards, but we never got the toys and the gumballs out of the machines. Only the special kids did.

It was through our church that my dad befriended a man known as Dick Wendt. Dick Wendt was a tall, thin man with a long face and what is known as a lantern jaw. He was very proper and reserved in his ways and owned a small home in a neighborhood near ours. He had a wife, but no children and no pets. What was different about

his house was, in the basement, he had a full workshop. There were lathes, woodcutters, sanders, casters, and so on.

Apparently, as an upstanding member of his church, he felt it was his calling in life to teach the young men of the town good values and strong work ethics. When we were told of Dick Wendt's workshop and how we would spend one night out of the week to visit there, we went reluctantly but tried to hide our disinterest.

The first night in the main workshop room, Mr. Wendt set down the rules of the workshop. One rule was to be sure to clean the painting brushes thoroughly. To determine if they're clean, you could open the thistles up and look inside and see if there was any paint in them. He went out of his way to explain this to us. There were also rules on cleanup and horseplay.

Dick Wendt was employed as a company's photographer, I would find out later on. I wondered how he got a job like that. It sounded like some kind of do-nothing job that he got because of privilege. He probably was a good photographer, but I always wondered about things like that.

When I first went into the workshop, I was told about the lathe and how to make a candlestick holder out of wood. The sanding was actually the hardest part and I didn't have the patience as much for it, but I was proud of my creation when I put the wood gloss on. I remember taking it home to my mother. It reminded me of the time I had to learn how to play a recorder. It was made of wood too.

Dick Wendt tried to teach me how to make a homemade ham radio. No phallic symbolism there. I had a hard time getting the wires around the cardboard toilet paper roll, so I was unable to get it to work. Dick Wendt told us he made a successful ham radio though. He claimed it picked up a religious choir and his mother hear it one night while in bed and thought she was in heaven.

I do remember one act of discipline that Dick Wendt performed on me. It was near the end of the night, and he took me into the main workshop area. He showed me the paintbrushes that I had used earlier and the thistles that had not been washed thoroughly enough. He then gave me three slow swats on my behind with a long arc of his arm.

"I hope that will teach you to clean the paintbrushes thoroughly." Dick Wendt's discipline was enforced!

Before the night was over, Dick Wendt would take us upstairs to his kitchen, and in a cupboard above the sink, he had his collection of tea. He would hold me up to view the cupboard of teas and have me pick one for us to drink for the night. I remember picking one that was Oriental, and Dick Wendt told me that that one may be a little too strong but I insisted.

In the common room, he served the tea in his china. As he handed me the cup of tea, he asked me how many sugar cubes I wanted. I answered, "Five."

He replied, "You will have two."

We continued to visit his house a couple more times and my brother ended up making a plaster dog. It wasn't painted well, but Dick Wendt didn't say anything critical. I considered the whole experience not as rewarding as maybe my parents would like it to be, but we tolerated it and received our supposed education on good work ethics and values.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirk Andersen was born in Chicago, Illinois, but his family moved to Athens, Tennessee, when he was twelve years old. He graduated from McMinn County High School without getting into too much trouble. He did a two-year stint in the US Army and then attended college at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for four years with a major in journalism before dropping out. He currently lives in Athens, Tennessee, with his ninety-one-year-old mother and autistic brother with the author's collection of seven hundred board games. Besides having a hobby in reading books and writing, he designs board games as well.