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Destroy All Monsters
Word Count: 43,860

Destroy All Monsters
The Short Fiction of Perri Pagonis

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Introduction

The great street poet Charles Bukowski once wrote a short poem entitled “The Insane Have Always Loved Me,” which can be found in his book, *Love is a Dog From Hell*. After having read this nugget of rugged, in-your-face verse, I felt his pearly words etch themselves into my brain with the clean, almost pathological comprehension of a provincial religious devotee.

I imagine if anyone knows about having their artistic works rejected by legitimate publishers in favor of more mass-appeal, vanilla flavored poesy, it would be Mr. Bukowski, who carved out a literary career for himself out of outrageous grim tenacity and hard work. But even after receiving critical kudos and popular acceptance of his poems and prose, his core audience was always *the insane*. I used to work in a book store for many years, so I know what I’m talking about here. No yuppies ever bought titles by Bukowski. Only the fringoids, crackpots and dispossessed would pick up his paperbacks, and they cherished his words like worker ants cherish discarded bits of sandwiches. I mean they adored his stuff.

Many legitimate publishers of horror, science-fiction, and mystery short stories have also rejected my work. Big time guys don’t seem to like my writing too much, talking in their rejection notes about funky narrative voices and other huggermugger that means very little to me. However, due to the Internet and its capability to make anyone with a computer and a web address an e-publisher, my stories have found homes with many small e-zines and publications that simply did not, or could not have existed ten or fifteen years ago. These smaller publishers have editorial personnel who tend to be zealots, fanatics, wild-eyed diehards and extremists of fringe fiction, and they, most of time anyway, tend to like my screeds quite a bit, and often ask me for more, more, more.

So I give it to them when I’m able, and they tell me, “thank you, thank you, thank you, Perri.” And I say to them, “hey, well, thank you, too, because without you guys *nobody* would be reading my stuff. Not dad, not uncle Pete, no one at all.”

Most of these stories have been posted at various Internet e-zines, but some are brand new and waiting to be ripped into by you the consumer, you the fan, you the newbie who stumbled onto this volume for any number of reasons. To those of you who have, by coincidence or intentionally, read my work and derived any pleasure from it, I thank you sincerely. I hope this collection of previously published and new tales will make you sit up and squawk with satisfaction. Because, you see, the insane have always loved me, too, and you're welcome to join in the fun with us anytime.

Be good, keep cool, be nice to your mom-

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August 20, 2003 Athens, Greece

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Bombs Away With Kenneth McRae

On his way home from school a few weeks ago, young Kenneth, age 9, discovered a small crate stocked with Italian Army-issue, fragmentation combat grenades. He'd found the abandoned parcel on a quiet, residential street in Annandale, Virginia, near his own place of academic learning, the newly re-built Samuel Colt Elementary School.

The package had inadvertently fallen off of a Federal Express delivery van, which had been making it's way towards the nearby city of Woodbridge. The FedEx driver had been bringing a gift package of various Wisconsin cheeses to a family who lived on the block near the school, and didn't notice anything unusual when the container of black-market acquired, high explosive materials fell from the truck.

The boy removed the box of weapons to a nearby alley and went home to fetch his red American Flyer wagon and old, now rarely used, Barney the Dinosaur blanket. The youth then returned to the spot of the ballistic devices' concealment and prepped the goods to be transported to a safe hiding place.

He loaded and covered the combustible manifest in the colorful cart, and wheeled the materiel over to the backyard of his home. Then he placed the hand-launched incendiary shells in the corner of his patchwork tree house and began to ruminate about their potential use.

Kenneth inspected the cluster of deadly units in the crate, and cleaned them of the sawdust and packing material which had laid a coating of unwanted particles on their gunmetal black surface. Then after cleansing and polishing the newly acquired assault weapons, he placed the lot of them in his everyday use, Eastpack book bag which he took with him to school each morning.

The busy boy then reached under a drywall bucket which served as an extra chair in his elevated, arboreal abode, and retrieved the current issues of *Hustler* and *Soldier of Fortune* magazines for a bit of well-deserved, personal amusement. He thumbed through the pages of Larry Flynt's libidinous journal with relish for a quarter of an hour or so, ogling the images of the mind-boggling, wanton women in their high-gloss, pictorial spreads.

Afterwards he opened the famous mercenary magazine, and read a reprinted article written by the Cuban guerrilla warfare mastermind, General Alberto Bayo. The literary piece in the gun-jock journal concerned itself with the

tactical positioning of pipe bombs, nail bombs, homemade explosive devices, Molotov cocktails and other incendiary weapons within the grounds of unsuspecting enemy camps. General Bayo, according to the editor of the legionnaire magazine, was an absolute tactical avatar when it came to producing maximum hard-target elimination effects during an ambush assault.

After completing the article, the heavily armed boy waited patiently for the early evening to arrive, occasionally noshing on a few handfuls of Cracker Jack caramel popcorn to while away the time.

Kenneth, by the way, is a radically right-brained individual, and completely detests his mathematics classes at school. Although he has tried his best to understand the seemingly incomprehensible lessons set before him in arithmetic class each day, he was unprepared for that week's chapter test on multiplication and division of fractions and decimals. His apprehension of the quiz grew stronger each day as the time its inevitable administration came closer.

His classmate and sometime girlfriend, Lucy Collins, is unquestionably of the same math-challenged mindset, and was equally unprepared for the upcoming examination of the dreaded integers and their nefarious computational ilk.

After a quick dinner with his family that evening, Kenneth modestly begged away from the table, grabbed his bag full of small European bombs, and rode his Sears brand, three speed bicycle to Lucy's house. Upon his arrival to her place, he politely spoke to the senior Collinses about current events and his school work for a few moments. After the courteous repartee with her parents, he asked if Lucy was available to play outside for an hour or so before evening fell. Soon he and Lucy were on their tandem wheels and heading towards their elementary school with a very specific task in mind.

The perfect, autumn sun was setting against a cloudless sky and a light chill was in the air as the front door of Samuel Colt Elementary school detonated into ragged chunks of smoking wood. Debris from the door frame scattered in every direction as the diminutive guerrillas stormed through the gaping cavity, heading with unyielding tenacity for the mathematics wing of the building.

Upon their arrival to the desired area, live grenades were immediately flushed down the toilets of the men's and women's lavatories, blasting the commodes into mosaics of jagged, teeth-like, porcelain tiles. Water began flooding the halls at an alarming rate, and untold amounts of the murky H₂O began to splash down the stairs towards the first floor.

Lucy Collins watched in clean, giddy awe as the commodes shattered and erupted like live volcanoes, discharging dark water by the gallon in all directions.

Kenneth looked directly at her at this moment, a tad annoyed at her distracted demeanor.

"This is no time to watch the paint dry, Toots," he cautiously said to her. "We still have some, uh... business to attend to here."

“Sorry,” she tweeted back to her friend, “I’m just a perfect air-head sometimes. But tell me Kenny, why are we blowing-up all the toilets in here? I don’t have anything against...you know...toilets in general. It’s just the mathematics and stuff that I don’t like very much.”

“As odd as it sounds my dear,” he rejoined to her, “we’re doing it to buy us some time at a later date. I’ll explain it all to you later; I promise. ”

“Okey-dokey, babe,” his perky girlfriend replied.

The adolescent sweethearts gamboled into their mathematics classroom, and rummaged through the teacher’s desk drawers, finally locating the mimeographed copies of the upcoming test. Kenneth stuffed a handful of the quiz sheets in his backpack and then withdrew several gleaming grenades from within the confines of the sack. He and his paramour then pulled the spoons and detonation pins from the units, hurled them into the room, and scampered down the hall as the deafening report and blast-point concussions atomized the glass in the windows, blew furniture into kindling, and riddled the walls with sharp steel shards.

“We’re gonna blow the math wing of this school back to the friggin’ Stone Age, babe!” Kenny howled to his favorite girl.

“Stone Age! Stone Age! Bam-bam-pow!” She trilled back at him in clean ecstasy.

Down the stairs went the duo of trespassing students, and out of the still smoking front aperture of the building towards their shiny, waiting bicycles.

Both Kenneth and Lucy took the number 11 school bus each morning to their place of learning, and had the same bus deliver them home each afternoon after classes had finished for the day. The fleet of public school busses were parked parallel to one another outside of the building, and ready to pick up the pupils at tomorrow’s regularly scheduled times. Kenny lobbed one of the hot pineapples through an open window of bus 11 and the vessel quickly and loudly erupted into a blue-hot fireball, blasting glass, metal, insulating material, and motor parts into the night sky.

“Ba-boom!” the young arsonist squealed.

“Ba-boom, indeed,” Lucy rejoined to his onomatopoetic outburst.

The pair of them hopped onto their self-propelled rides and began pedaling back towards their street. After a moment, police sirens were heard in the near distance, and sounded as if they were approaching the school yard area at a

breakneck pace. Kenneth saw one of the cruisers coming their way at a greatly accelerated clip and steeled himself for the confrontation.

The officer in the ride hit the brakes of his squad car, and angled the machine so as to cut off the pair's exit from the area. Kenneth reached into his back pack, rolled a final explosive device under the heavy car, and awaited the results.

The automobile's undercarriage and front half literally disintegrated into cornflake-sized fragments. Only the hood of the Detroit-manufactured, high-performance vehicle was left in tact; the engine's bonnet was blown across the road like a paper plate. It whizzed like a martial arts shirokin through the air until it sliced through the front window of a Ford Aerostar mini-van and wedged itself into the instrument cluster next to the driving wheel.

The shatterproof glass of the micro-bus's wind screen practically vaporized into untold thousands of minuscule bits upon impact from the horrific projectile. The officer in the car was hurled from the auto's confines like a cheap G.I. Joe action figure. He tumbled through topiary hedges for many yards, and finally banged his head on a thick tree stump after his landing on the well-manicured suburban lawn. The force of the blow unfortunately eliminated the bulk of his short term memory capability, and all recollection of the events he'd just witnessed on the street.

"Keee-runch!" Lucy said aloud, genuinely impressed with the bomb's sedan-stopping capability and the Frisbee-like action of the law-enforcement automobile's flying hood.

After the evening's events had begun to slow down, the two pupils slowly made their way back towards their block, and said goodnight to one another while standing outside of Lucy's home. Kenneth nervously leaned over to peck his girl gently on the lips before departing. She allowed him the puppy-love kiss, for only a quick second to be sure, and then smilingly replied to his anxious show of affection, "you're so *fresh*," secretly loving his attentions more than she liked to admit.

"You're creamy," Kenneth dreamily replied to her playful admonishment, and drove his bike back to the McRae residence in a haze of heart-tugging sentiment for his girl.

In the morning, on television and radio, it was announced that Annandale's Samuel Colt Elementary School would be closed for one to two months. It would take at least that long for remodeling efforts to be made to the building after the unbelievable acts of desperate, crazed vandalism which had occurred the previous evening.

Regular classes, it was reported, would resume in a week, and be held in make-shift tents, annex buildings and unused public office space until the school could be put back together in a reasonable fashion for daily use.

Kenneth explained to Lucy that the reason for detonating the unfortunate toilets was to close the school for repair for at least a little while, so as to be able to study a bit more for the upcoming math examinations. It was a shame things had to work out this way he told her, but he really saw no other tactical option available in the short-term scenario.

He quoted the famous Cuban general's timeless remark from the *Soldier of Fortune* magazine article to his appreciative girl as a coda to their successful, information gathering sortie. "90% of you will be captured or killed," he told his admiring sweetie, "and 10% of you shall *win*."

"Shazam," she breathlessly replied.

The two of them were able to take the lag-time from class to memorize answers from the mimeographed tests, and get more acquainted with the workings of decimals, fractions and the material to be covered on their unfortunately postponed exam.

When the test was finally given to their class, and returned to the students in the afternoon, both Kenneth and Lucy had nearly aced the difficult quiz. The teacher's remarks on both their papers announced that they were showing marked improvement in ability, industry, and attitude towards their class work and assignments.

"We win again," Lucy said to her smirking fellow.

"We always do," he merrily rejoined, and blew a perfect bubble from his mouth with his Hubba-Bubba cherry flavored gum.

The Devil-rats of Miranda-1 Prime

In the early part of the 27th century A.D., Doctor Alan Trainor, creator of several models of CyberGirl Systems cybernetic call girls, embezzled approximately one hundred and seventy-one billion galactic credits from the Solaris Consumer Products Cartel of Saudi Arabia. The authoritarian business Cartel, at that time, owned fourteen complete industrialized solar systems, and their inhabitants.

He didn't need the money that he stole from the galactic holding group.

He was just a greedy son of a bitch with a powerful computer at his disposal, and when he saw an opportunity to filch an eye-popping amount of space-loot from the huge organization, he did it without batting an eyelash or experiencing one alpha wave of regret in his bulbous forehead.

Which was too bad for him.

Because there are few things as dangerous as having an enraged, bloodthirsty, interplanetary-connected, sovereign debt conglomerate with an army of private moles and licensed bounty hunters at their disposal, ready to track you down and bring their form of lone justice to one who has dipped a hand into their interstellar cookie jar. And the grafting engineer was soon to find out just how merciless their vengeance could be.

Dr. Trainor was apprehended by Solaris Cartel goons at the Neutrino Casino on the vacation planetoid Ipsilon 8C33 within a few weeks of his larcenous activity. He was in the company of several cosmetically perfect silicon space-babe robots at the time of his capture. The beautiful droids were blasted to pieces with ion pulse rifles at the baccarat table by the mercenary men, and the doctor was whisked away from the scene in one of the company's private, low profile rocket planes.

Upon his extradition back to Earth, in the city of Riyadh, he was greeted at the landing pad by Joseph Abdallah Kennedy Jr. III, chief comptroller of the giant Cartel's food and beverage division. He was then taken by land cruiser to the Mecca Hilton's 147th floor, which acted as a weekend retreat for Solaris executives and their various concubines.

However, this time the retreat was not filled with glamorous people and universal power brokers. Only the Chief Executive Officer of the off-planet

financial service group, the feared and dreaded Omar X, and an assortment of the association's most hulking, twisted, alkaline-drooling space thugs were there to greet the now trembling Doctor Trainor.

The suave yet poisonous CEO sat the greedy robotics engineer down at a computer terminal with the assistance of a pair of seven foot tall, 500 pound hirelings. With almost no persuasion from his host, the doctor hacked into the ad hoc account he'd set up for his big pinch, and restored most of the Solaris moneys to their proper accounts.

However, he was short by a few hundred million credits.

He'd had a *real* bad night at the Crap tables on Ipsilon 8C33, and now his poor luck at the gaming resort and poor judgment in fraudulent financial transfers were coming back to avenge him in a most hideous fashion.

Omar X, with a razor blade smile curling up the side of his reptile-like face, remained cool and composed as he decided the earthly fate of the pilfering mastermind. The carbon-ice cold executive gave orders for the thieving genius to be dispatched to the small, spherical Plexiglas bubble on the prison moon Miranda-1 Prime, which the holding group used to store potentially questionable business files from the Universal Taxation Code officers, who travel the known galaxies in search of corporate tax fraud violations.

After seven weeks of flying at light speed in a bulk cruiser through the infinite void of deep space, the doctor was deposited by cartel security droids into the small glass bubble on the small moon's surface for what would seem the rest of his natural days.

But the doctor would not be alone in his new environment.

Not by a long shot.

Because the small moon was populated by a colony of voracious, homicidally-crazed, lion-sized space rats; the terrifying animals which were known throughout the galaxy as *the devil-rats of Miranda-1 Prime*.

As the first few months of his imprisonment wore on his nerves, he would witness the daily assault by the gargantuan rodents on his small plastic bubble with clean horror pasted to his sallow face. The tremendous, saw-toothed beasts would slam their drooling jaws onto the impenetrable plastic windows of the tiny domicile, leaving slathering traces of blood, thick saliva and chipped teeth on the sphere's portal panes.

Time invariably marched on, and months eventually turned into years as the doctor's seemingly interminable sentence continued. Monthly rations of food and water were teleported to his small habitat on the isolated prison moon; but

only enough nourishment was sent with each shipment to keep him barely alive and witnessing the constant barrage of the colossal beasts on his domicile.

After seven agonizing years of imprisonment on Miranda-1 Prime, Omar X, the soon to be retired CEO of off-planet commerce for the Solaris Cartel, decided to send the now mentally faltering engineer a double-edged gift to help ease the loneliness of his imprisonment.

Omar X teleported to the sequestered doctor the hardware and program chips to a newly designed cybernetic prostitute. Not just the works for any old, run-of-the-mill space whore, mind you. He sent him the prototype model components for a Veronica CGS-191. The first programmable pleasure unit with time sensitive, *multiple-personality* capabilities.

Upon arrival of the unit's various contents from the teleporter, the engineer went madly to work assembling the parts and uploading the personality programs into his new companion's system. Within a few days, Doctor Trainor had a world-class, gentleman's magazine quality knockout prancing around the small biosphere with him.

The aging scientist had the pleasure unit perform untold sensual exercises on his shriveling anatomy with her reaction-gages set for great zeal and enthusiasm; and all this went on while the swarms of giant rats continued to pound themselves into the clear walls of their cell day and night. For a short while, the doctor nearly forgot how terrifying his personal situation had become on Miranda-1 Prime, and he was thankful for the short reprieve.

But many things had changed in the microchip, nanotechnology, and applied composition material lines of CyberGirl pleasure units since the Doctor's sentence began seven years ago, and Omar X had truly sent the embezzler a Trojan horse to deal with in his small environment.

The Veronica CGS-191's newly engineered multiple-personality chips were set to gradually shift, over the course of several months, from an unquestioning, gratification-giving space girl, into a nagging, harping, hypercritical virago, hell bent on destroying the last of the isolated man's reasoning faculties, and driving him to total madness in his tiny space dome on the horrific natural satellite.

And that is exactly what happened.

Veronica CGS-191's disposition slowly switched, over the course of a year of so, from a sweet and caring brothel bunny, to that of an acidic and lethal fishwife. After several weeks of enduring her incessant screeches and rants at him for hours a day about personal incompetence and his meager genitalia, the man's mind virtually snapped from the tirades of verbal abuse. Doctor Trainor willfully ripped open the portal of their Plexiglas bubble, and gleefully ran into the huge jaws of the awaiting, ravenous space rats. His cries of happiness and paroxysms of physical joy while being torn to pieces were almost rapturous to hear and witness as the colossal pests severed his various limbs from the trunk of his body.

When the Solaris Cartel got the word from Veronica CGS-191 that the good doctor had merrily sanctioned himself on the planet surface, they began teleporting the comely droid a variety of building equipment supplies and uploaded, via satellite, a new work program for her to self-install and execute.

Shipments arrived daily from the teleporter in Riyadh: electric fencing posts; armored ionization cables; pneumatic drills and compressors came to the bubble on an almost hourly basis. Also, a small trunk of crude, hand held weapons were included in the last delivery from the home office.

When all the supplies had arrived at the bubble, and the space beauty had self-installed her new work program, she was ready to begin her new mission for the giant cartel's economic interests. Armed with nothing but a 36 ounce aluminum baseball bat in one hand and a 100,000 volt Tazer gun in the other, she stepped outside the bubble and into the pack of slaving rats which awaited her outside the domicile's portal.

The horde of giant vermin swarmed upon her like a pack of wild dogs. They madly bit into her soft and supple yet impenetrable vinyl-oxide, epoxy-resin ectoderm flesh, leaving no mark of damage on the showgirl form of the world class beauty. Her hyper-alloy combat chassis and neon-magnesium skeletal frame also easily withstood the barrage from the tremendous beasts.

Then, with a flick of her delicate wrist, scores of bloody rat teeth, freshly dislodged from their owners, began filling the air near the plastic bubble. Veronica CGS-191 flashed her baseball bat with fractal speed at the unsuspecting hulks, killing, maiming, or merely paralyzing them where they began their advances. When the terrified brutes began to retreat, she mercilessly fired the Tazer gun at their fleeing haunches, zapping them with enormous current, and watched them drop, twitch and flop on the ground like helpless epileptics in the throes of a terrible seizure.

Soon dozens of carcasses, some living, some not, surrounded the small Plexiglas dome. Many more of the mindless animals had fled the scene of the cyborg's handiwork to escape into the hills, and now the stunningly beautiful pleasure unit, Veronica CGS-191, stood alone among the heaps of deadly fallen creatures.

In the days and months that followed, the shapely cyborg constructed a large, ranch-like corral in the area near the bubble. She constructed a tall, electrified fence around the perimeter of the area, and garnished the entire structure with innumerable coils of thick razor wire, which were being instantly teleported to her from the home office upon demand.

When the stable yard was completed, the stunning robot would take daily junkets into the hills of Miranda-1 Prime, and return each evening with a paralyzed, or knocked senseless, elephantine rat to place within the holding area's confines. Soon she had dozens of the herded monsters within the pen, and it was time for their domestication exercises to begin.

With bat in hand, the ravishing android would line-up and smash the incisors, canines, pre-molars and molars out from the mouths of the enraged beasts. She would then catapult herself onto one of the hulks' frames and ride

them cowboy-style until they were no longer capable of trying to dislodge her from their backs. After several months of this pacification process, along with the administration of various applied medications from the Cartel's pharmaceutical division, the rats were as tame as water buffalo, and ready to be sold and shipped to underdeveloped planet systems for agrarian and farm use.

Upon hearing the successful news of the Space Rat Pacification program on Miranda-1 Prime, Omar X purchased the various machine patents and copyrights for the cybernetic prostitute model Veronica CGS-191 from the CyberGirl Systems organization for an undisclosed sum of galactic credits.

Within a year, a slew of Space Rat Pacification camps were set up on the distant moon, with an army of the sexy robots in charge of the animals' mollification processes. In short order, the beasts were being sold by the Cartel to farming systems so quickly that the accounting offices could barely keep up with the orders.

The Solaris Cartel, who now owned the exclusive rights to the Veronica CGM-191 android, heavily marketed the sexy machines for their customers' personal pleasure activities *and* home defense purposes. Combined sales of the voluptuous robots and pacified farming rats around the known galaxies more than recouped the hundreds of millions of galactic credits that the home office lost from the embezzling robotics engineer, Doctor Alan Trainor, some nine years before.

Upon his retirement from the Solaris Consumer Products Cartel, Omar X exited the Mecca Hilton with two heartbreakingly beautiful Veronica CGM-191 bodyguard-pleasure units on his arm as a retirement gift from the home office. He was not unhappy to be leaving the job he'd held for so many years as he'd made more galactic credits in his life than he could possibly spend. But, he was even more glad to have retrieved the lost moneys that were stolen from the holding group by Doctor Trainor, as that was a matter of maintaining personal pride and integrity in his business acumen, and not merely an inert exercise in writing off a red mark on the balance sheet.

It Came From the Dumpster

There seems to be a never ending assortment of mangy critters living in the outskirts of western Virginia. The unbecoming beasts are all over the damn place, and practically anyplace you look you see them digging, scuttling and skulking about on peoples' property making a mess of things. Most of the four-legged varmints out there on the road don't do well in the more urban settings, and end up retreating back into the woods after their first taste of human civilization and interstate highway traffic. A good percentage of them become what the kids at Chief Crazy Horse high school call "road pizza" during their first foray onto the freeway's macadam and that's the end of their personal odysseys for all time. However, some of them don't high-tail it back into the fauna, and they start making their way toward the more populated areas in the suburbs.

The more daring beasts try to make a stay of it when they get to a new place, and hang out near the fringe of suburbia to feast off of the contents of dumpsters, trash cans, road detritus and other unsavory stuff you find near the huge parking lots of shopping centers, sports arenas and open carnival grounds. After the corporate limits of Fairfax county, the suburban sprawl which starts at the border of Washington D.C. and heads west through several Virginia boroughs drops off fast, and what you have for many miles after that is a great volume of trees and the occasional strip mall.

The Pierre GT Beauregard outlet mall in Clarke County is practically the last man-made commercial structure to be seen before the terrain clears off into a seemingly limitless verdant landscape. The ensuing distance of forest leads up to the border of West Virginia and then off into the timberland and frontier of the Allegheny Trail.

Among the surplus dry goods stores and second-label clothing shops located at that specific retail complex is a two-level Burger King restaurant, a Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control outlet, better known as a liquor store to people who live outside of the Old Dominion state, and a Rite Aid pharmacy nestled in the far corner of the shopping center. The mall stores all use a battery of army green dumpsters for disposal of their daily trash; the giant garbage containers are located at the far end of the customer parking lot on the fringe of Interstate Highway 81.

Darlene Stevens, a nineteen-year-old mall siren, is a cashier at the Rite Aid pharmacy. It's her duty each day before the store opens to place the full garbage bags from the store onto the pharmacy's hand truck, and wheel the refuse across

the lot and out to the containers for the trash trucks for pick up later in the morning. She singularly loathes this job, and finds it unbecoming and humiliating to her personally as she is training, on-the-job, to become the store pharmacist's customer service assistant.

She has complained to her store manager and occasional Friday night date, Travis Nutter, about the chagrin she experiences each morning as she takes the rubbish out to the bins. Darlene has told him repeatedly that not only is it demeaning for her to be doing this chore, but she has to dodge bottle flies, hornets, sweat bees, dragonflies and other winged insects while tossing the bags into the large containers. Occasionally an errant bug becomes entrapped in the voluminous curls of her hairspray intensive hairdo, and she must swat it out of her locks, causing her enormous disconcertion. Also she says that occasionally she has to scramble away from an annoyed opossum, raccoon, skunk or other four-legged thing that was feasting on some discarded morsel courtesy of the Burger King, and had its meal unceremoniously interrupted by her delivery of the trash bags to the waste repository.

Travis has explained to her that she's got to do this duty because the store opens with only two people. He has to count out the cash drawers and do the morning money deposit at the mall's First Union bank 24-hour depository while she cleans the place before business starts each morning. One cannot have unsightly, full trash cans in the store when it opens at ten o'clock each day. It wouldn't seem professional and hygienic in the larger sense the store manager explained to her. It wouldn't look tidy on the sales floor, and hence is a task which cannot be ignored. The pretty but occasionally selfish clerk ruefully accepts his explanation of her assigned job each morning, and as the days went by at the store, she patiently awaited her chance to pass off the disagreeable office to someone else at a later date.

In the summer months, when business is traditionally slow, many smaller drug companies issue sales contests to retail chains to help boost third-quarter earnings of their over-the-counter products. The Genuflex Weight Conditioning Group, LTD., manufacturer of powdered and liquid protein supplements for championship body builders, was one such organization who issued a sales incentive program to the Rite Aid organization that June.

The pharmaceutical company was trying to push their line of dietary muscle-mass enhancing food supplements, whose trade name boasted the awe inspiring moniker, Ultraderm-Megatone Plus. The protein intensive product guaranteed to add weight, muscle tissue, bone mass, flexibility, cartilage endurance and resistance to free radicals to the user in three months if they followed the proper usage instructions and maintained a personal exercise program.

The prize for the Rite Aid outlet which sold the most Ultraderm-Megatone Plus from June to the end of August would receive a weekend vacation for the entire full-time staff to the Showboat casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and complimentary tickets to see singer Vicki Lawrence in concert during their stay at the beautiful resort.

Travis Nutter jumped from his office seat when he read the memo from his company's corporate headquarters detailing the rules of the sales contest and the description of the grand prize. The thirty-year-old man had never been outside of the Northern Virginia area in his life, and the chance to stay in a real casino, like in the visually voluptuous James Bond movies, and see a live Las Vegas style show by a genuine, gold-record winning, 1970s pop singer was almost more than the young employee could imagine.

As a child, he'd always preferred torch songs and lounge standards over the country music discs his contemporaries at school all listened to with fervor. Instead of purchasing Buck Owens, Dottie West, Conway Twitty and George Jones albums as a youth, he'd have to special order the releases of Engelbert Humperdinck, Tony Bennett, Perry Como and of course, Frank Sinatra from the Sam Goody record shop in Strasburg, and would occasionally receive long looks of incredulity from the clerk who would take his list of records to be requisitioned from the central warehouse.

Travis Nutter, at the moment he finished reading the announcement of the sales contest, became an obsessed man- a man with an unflagging mission. In his mind's eye, he saw his store selling tremendous, world-beating, unheard of amounts of Ultraderm-Megatone Plus to the customers of his store. He became single-mindedly certain that the goopy, liquid supplement that is consumed by steroid-crazed iron-freaks would be his ticket out of the Clarke County doldrums. At least for a while, anyway.

Not only would he have a opportunity to visit the boardwalk of gorgeous Atlantic City, home of Old Blue Eyes, The Chairman of the Board, head rat of the Rat Pack, Frank Sinatra himself, but he'd have a chance to be quite the romantic Don Juan with his paramour Darlene. Perhaps he'd even get the chance to be invited into her complimentary room during their stay there and be the beau he'd always wanted to be with her.

The possibilities for a brief escape from the store and a passionate weekend with his pharmacist's assistant-in-training were limitless.

By the end of the morning, after he'd finished doing the inventory of cold medicines, nasal sprays, laxatives, multi-pack condoms and feminine hygiene sanitary napkins, he'd phoned the Rite Aid corporate office and ordered 200 90-day supply packages, and several display dumps of Ultraderm-Megatone Plus liquid protein muscle mass supplement to be delivered to his store at the Pierre GT Beauregard outlet mall. By the end of the week, the enormous shipment had arrived at his place of business in the shopping center.

At the weekly staff meeting, he practically begged all his full-time employees to aggressively, mercilessly, encourage any patron, whether physically fit or a complete couch potato, to purchase a ninety-day supply of the brawn enhancing liquid protein product. Travis showed them the promotional materials which illustrated the incredible weekend vacation for the winning store, and all

his staff was greatly impressed with dazzling contents of the glossy, three-fold color brochure.

However, by the end of June, despite the manager's great efforts, sales were lagging behind some of the larger Rite Aid stores. By the beginning of July, he was lucky if he sold one unit per day of the sinew intensifying glop to some bulky gym-rat.

Travis was getting desperate to sell more Ultraderm-Megatone Plus. There were only sixty days left to outsell the other local competition pharmacies and things were starting to look bleak. To compound his anxiety, Darlene, the soon-to-be customer service assistant, was becoming more and more coquettish and amorous with him as the month passed, especially when he brought up the subject of their possible weekend in Atlantic City. The store manager was determined not to lose this sales contest for any reason, and as the first week of July passed, he developed a plan in his mind to ensure their pharmacy's victory.

Darlene Stevens also had not been idle during the last several weeks. As the summer months were progressing, she'd found her daily task to wheel the garbage from the store out the dumpsters at the fringe of the parking lot to be completely intolerable. The insects around the bins had tripled in their population, and seemed especially drawn to the scent of her personal cologne and super-hold hairspray. She'd stab at the winged beasts as they dive bombed themselves into her tresses. Then, after tossing the trash bags into the container, she'd sprint away from any and all of the agitated vermin which had found sanctuary near the bins and saw her as some sort of threat to their domain. Darlene was determined to get someone else to do this unsavory chore for her each morning, and she thought she knew just who to start soliciting for the position.

Duffy White was the assistant manager of the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control store at the Pierre GT Beauregard outlet mall. He had the same early work schedule as Darlene, and the two of them would occasionally cross paths while taking the trash out to the giant refuse vessels. She'd noticed the amorous way he'd glance at her while they wheeled their hefty bags full of rubbish out to the bins and knew that if she played her cards right, she'd be able to get him to take over her own trash hauling duties in the mornings. The young manipulative girl was certain that it would only take a date or two, and possibly a meaningless one-nighter at his place to ensure that he would comply with her wishes.

To the chagrin of the mall security staff, Clarke County police, and the Virginia Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Bureau, Duffy White's liquor store had been robbed on two occasions last year, in broad daylight. Because the mall is near an interstate highway, and his shop is located in a corner of the structure, it is an ideal target for larcenists because they can inconspicuously gain entry through a jimmied service door, and then get back out and onto the road in a hurry after the completion of their thieving enterprise.

What scheming Darlene didn't know about her paramilitary-oriented friend Duffy at the time of her planned transfer of trash-hauling duties was that after the second burglary of his business, he began keeping a pair of Uzi automatic

9mm hand held machine guns, a 50,000 volt Taser stun-gun, an assortment of Turkish throwing knives, and a Korean Army issue, long range combat flame thrower in his locker. He kept all the deadly items neatly stored in his personal spare clothing compartment located in the back of the store, just in case his place of business was visited by the local highwaymen for a third time.

The two morning-shift mall employees began running into each other's company more often, as meticulously planned by Darlene. Small talk and laughter was exchanged by the pair of early-bird workers, and soon, an after-work rendezvous for cocktails was arranged. By the middle of July, after a few platonic dates at the TGI Fridays and Applebee's family steak house, the blonde temptress slipped her hand under the table one evening while the two were noshing their chicken fried steaks, and she let him know by manual fondling of his taught package that it would be a good night to do naked things at his apartment.

The next day Duffy was hauling both hand trucks, his store's and the Rite Aid pharmacy's, out to the trash bins and fighting off the winged and turf-based beasts as he threw the plastic sacks full of garbage into the huge, metal containers.

The day that he began taking both pushcarts out to the rubbish bins coincided with the start of Travis Nutter's plan to sell more 90-day units of Ultraderm-Megatone Plus muscle mass supplement. The frantic pharmacy manager's modus operandi to increase sales was simplicity itself. He would simply throw out and conceal a few units of the protein supplement each day in the trash run bags and then mark the units as sold.

Afterwards, he would save paper sales slips from other transactions where the customer left without taking their receipts, and place the money or charge card transaction copy in the Ultraderm-Megatone Plus sales log. This method of creative book-tampering guaranteed him several sales a day, and practically assured his store's victory in the sales contest.

Things seemed to be going well at the mall for the next few weeks: Darlene was juggling her weeknight dates between Duffy and Travis without difficulty, Ultraderm-Megatone Plus sales were way up and their store was leading the chain in the contest. The trash disguising the discarded muscle enhancer was being hauled to the bins in the morning without participation by Darlene or complaint from Duffy. All in all, daily activity was running smoothly at their shopping center.

The tranquillity at the business complex would not last for long.

The first missing persons report from the mall's security office came in the third week of July. Janelle Williams, a junior accountant with the firm Price Waterhouse Sloan, had recently purchased a new NASCAR edition Pontiac Trans Am a few days before her disappearance. She'd decided to do some shopping at the mall during her lunch hour, and parked her new ride at the fringe of the customer lot to ensure that the Marlboro red paint job would not be inadvertently scratched by an opening car door from the parking slip next to her new machine. It was the last time she'd be seen alive by anyone.

Clarke County police found her shredded handbag next to the open door of her gleaming automobile. She'd apparently been abducted with great force, and dragged into the adjoining wooded area which skirts the shoulder of interstate highway 81. What was left of her body was found a few days later on the opposite side of the Pierre GT Beauregard outlet mall, chewed into unrecognizable pieces.

News of the hideous murder put a damper on the good spirits at the discount shopping center. Flyers were put up in all the store windows and surrounding public areas, asking for any clues to help find the abductors and solve the unspeakably brutal crime. But by the beginning of August, after a thorough localized manhunt, there were still no leads in the case.

Duffy White continued his daily trash removal services for Darlene, despite the malaise which had set itself over their place of business because of the horrific slaying of the young junior accountant, Janelle Williams. The liquor store clerk was still unaware that he was taking out gallons of liquid protein supplement to the bins for its surreptitious disposal. He was also unaware that he was feeding a growing army of opossum, coon, stray dogs and other varmints with a growth supplement which had an alarming size-enhancing effect on the creatures.

The larger raccoons, with their almost human manual dexterity, had been hauling the plastic containers of the liquid to their lairs in the woods, opening the caps with their agile paws, and gorging themselves on the sinew producing liquid. Also, they'd been dropping a few containers on their way out of the bins, and the creamy sap would pour out onto the tarmac, for any and all of their quadruped brethren to lap up.

Couple this enormous calorie intake with the discarded protein, cooking oil, and carbohydrate wastes which arrive at the dumpsters each morning courtesy of the Burger King, and you have a combination of nutrition supplements which rapidly adds size and great weight to those who are consuming the food stuff. It also mathematically produces the need to eat more as one's body mass increases.

By the middle of August things began to become more than a little unsettled in the quiet borough. There were multitudes of flyers offering cash rewards for missing house pets posted all over Clarke County. On two of the larger farms in the nearby areas, livestock had been randomly slaughtered, fed upon, and shredded to ribbons, seemingly by a pack of nomadic ravenous animals.

In the third week of August, out of sheer nervousness, Duffy White began taking his personal Colt Commander .45 semiautomatic pistol with him as he made his daily trash run in the morning to the bins. On this Friday morning as he performed his offices, it was blistering hot and humid as he trundled to the great metallic containers. Usually the insects were buzzing, chirping, and clattering with fervor as he approached the garbage receptacles. But this morning, there was a eerie silence which pervaded over the area. He looked around the place, only to see thermal currents rising off of the black tarmac. As he began to toss the rubbish into the bins, he heard what sounded like a deadly, African jungle predator pursuing some equally large prey in the nearby wooded strip.

Leaves and dry brush crashed and snapped. He drew his gun, set the firing pin, and continued to stare intently into the brush. He unmistakably heard two animals, seemingly of a great size, in the heat of mortal combat. After a moment he heard a single shriek of submission, and then the satisfied chewing sounds of a victorious beast began to fill the air. At that moment Duffy pocketed his carbine, abandoned the last few sacks of trash by the dumpster, and quickly began wheeling his hand trucks back to the mall.

When he was approximately half way back to the stores, he turned to look over his shoulder at the strange, unnerving situation he'd just left.

The trash bags he'd left by the side of the containers had disappeared.

When he returned to his liquor store, he telephoned the Virginia Animal Welfare League to report what had happened in the parking lot. He was told that the area was now under the jurisdiction of Clarke County police, and they had no say in how to handle a stray animal situation at an alleged crime scene.

At that moment, Duffy decided to forsake the area where the dumpsters are located for all eternity. He resolved to put the trash bags from his store and the pharmacy in his Jeep Cherokee each day, drive them to the nearby Jesse Ventura elementary school, and leave his refuse in their bins for the County sanitation engineers to pick up.

The last few days of August were a nail-biting experience for all at the Beauregard mall Rite Aid pharmacy. The store was in an even tie with the larger Winchester shopping center store in the Ultraderm-Megatone Plus sales contest. The store was down to their last ten units of the 200 which Travis Nutter had ordered in the beginning of June. On August 31st, he threw out the final bottles of the syrupy food additive, and reported that his store had sold all of their ordered supply.

On September third, after tabulation of the sales reports from all the Northern Virginia Rite Aid branches, Travis Nutter's store had barely edged out the fierce Winchester competitor by a mere three units, 200 to 197.

Upon hearing the news of their narrow victory, the employees of the outlet mall pharmacy went into near hysteria from excitement. Travis and Darlene were practically turning cartwheels from joy, and the manager of the store put on Frank Sinatra's compact disc recording *Songs for Swinging Lovers* on the store public address system for all customers and staff to enjoy.

The corporate headquarters announced that the prize would be awarded to the winning store on September 9th, and the regional Vice President of the Rite Aid pharmacy chain, Bart Darnell Jr. III, would be presenting the award to the victorious branch manager and full-time sales staff.

On September 7th the remains of Jason Acuff, a part-time fry cook at the outlet mall's Burger King restaurant, were found in the customer parking lot, hideously dismembered and thoroughly masticated. He'd been taking the fast food eatery's garbage to the sanitation containers late in the evening after the

business was closed, and his shredded form was discovered by a mall security patrolman shortly after his unsightly retirement.

The Clarke County homicide unit and Virginia State Police, now stunned into full procedural action, put out a statewide manhunt for the twisted maniac now responsible for two grisly murders at the once quiet shopping complex. The unsolved double killing had given the perpetrator a media and television report moniker for quick viewer recognition on local and national news broadcasts. The handle given the unknown psychopathic assailant by the press and various information gathering groups was the aptly titled, "Strip mall Mangler."

Mall management closed all shops for a day of mourning to commemorate the two slain erstwhile employees on September 8th. However, media attention had put the shopping center in the public eye, and many gawkers from all over the Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. area came to ogle the site where the gruesome eliminations had taken place.

Although the shopping center's stores were all closed for business on that day, several entrepreneurial T-shirt makers, lemonade vendors and lunch truck operators came to the parking lot to sell their wares to the morbidly curious horde. One hastily manufactured T-shirt available for purchase depicted on its front a crudely decapitated man holding a large schooner of beer in one hand and a bottle of Jack Daniel's charcoal filtered bourbon in the other. On the back of the garment, in a dripping horror-show letter font, was the heavy-handed tag line, "I got slaughtered at Beauregard Mall."

By nightfall on the 8th the crowd had mostly dissipated, and preparations began for the reopening of the shopping center in the morning. Mall management decided to try and cheer up the employees, shoppers and local folk by having a customer appreciation day staged at the front entrance of the complex in the morning.

Hasty plans were made that evening to have the Chief Crazy Horse high school's marching band, drill team and cheerleaders perform at the event. Midnight calls were made to the various store managers, and it was decided that the Rite Aid's sales contest award would be presented to the store's staff, along with the other scheduled entertainment for the crowd, outside on the shopping center's front promenade when business began the next day at ten o'clock.

It had been several days since Duffy White had used the mall's trash bins to throw out the refuse from his store and the waste from the Rite Aid pharmacy. He'd been taking the bags of garbage to the elementary school and using their containers for the repository of the rubbish before it was hauled off to the landfill in Front Royal. He'd had enough of the neurosis-producing episodes in the vicinity of the mall's trash receptacles to last him a lifetime, and didn't mind the extra effort of removing the bags to the new temporary-need area one bit. The thought of his previous experience there, where he'd heard something that sounded like two rutting tigers in the heat of combat, gave him a case of the goose flesh even to think about what might have been happening in the brush.

In the pre-dawn morning of September 9th, workmen began constructing a raised stage from prefabricated skids, steel rod scaffolding, and 2x4s for the

presentations, speeches, and singing groups which were to be presented to the mall patrons that morning. The construction crews hammered away at the edifice, while local on-air radio celebrities made public service announcements from their sunup programs encouraging people from the area and nearby counties to come join the festivities which were scheduled to be presented in a few hours.

Weary majorettes and cheerleaders from Chief Crazy Horse high school disembarked from their public school bus at this early hour, and began organizing a choreographed routine to entertain the soon to be present crowd. It was decided by consensus that the drill team would march around the perimeter of the customer parking lot, doing dazzling semaphore exercises while the cheer leading squad performed dance routines and created human pyramids for the crowd's delight. The marching band would play a medley of Andrew Lloyd Webber Broadway musical scores while they were parading in front of the podium before the speeches and presentations took place.

After some rehearsal, changes of entertainment personnel, fine tuning and final rehearsal, the entire program was ready to be presented to the crowd at 10:00. It was now 9:30, and the parking lot was half full of people waiting to see the event. Community spirit seemed to be improving after the terrible news which had plagued the mall over the last several days, and people appeared to be genuinely ready to have some fun and try to put their current difficulties out of their minds for a while.

The podium area was also filling up with the local dignitaries and those who would be making presentations and saying healing words to the crowd concerning the two lost mall employees. The regional Vice President of the Rite Aid pharmacy chain, Bart Darnell Jr. III, was glad-handing the crowd and pressing the flesh with mall management personnel, and had the trophy for the winning store from the Ultraderm-Megatone Plus sales contest with him. The Showboat casino travel and room vouchers, plus the entertainment coupons to see Vicki Lawrence in their winner's circle lounge, would arrive at the store via Federal Express courier prior to the scheduled event near the end of October.

At ten o'clock sharp the marching band commenced playing the theme from the special-effect intensive musical, *Cats*. The high school cheerleaders broke into a Radio City Rockette high-kick line, and the drill team began twirling their multicolored flags in perfect unison as they started their march around the perimeter of the parking area. The crowd was enjoying the show, whistling and clapping in appreciation at the synchronized spectacle.

All seemed to be going well until the troupe of marching teenagers reached the area where the battery of trash dumpsters were located on the fringe of the lot. Some rustling in the strip of woods between the macadam and the highway was heard by the parade team leader, and she turned quickly to look in the direction from which the sound was coming.

Then, as if fired from a cannon, a filthy, raccoon, roughly the size of an adult Great Dane and wild from starvation, emerged from the brush and rushed the company of drill team members. The enormous beast tore into the group leader's viscera with its rows of jagged, chipped teeth, and greedily fed upon her

steaming insides while simultaneously lapping up the girl's protein-rich blood like melted Neapolitan ice cream.

Mute awe, then fear, then white panic ripped through the members of the marching ensemble. The parking lot was now three quarters full of cars, and the terrified crew from the high school ran in all directions from the site of the snarling brute's attack on their friend.

As the first shrieks from the children reached the ears of those on the podium, the woods immediately behind the dumpsters seemed to vibrate with electric current. In a split second, more crashing sounds were heard in the brush and trees. Then dozens of tremendous, impossibly large, biblically ravenous opossum, coon, street cats and stray dogs poured from the foliage and began slashing and tearing at anyone or anything that looked even remotely like a protein-based food item.

The animals, some as big as hogs, leapt onto the roofs of the parked cars and began a blitzkrieg surge towards the area where the bulk of the customers were located at the mall's front entrance. Cheer leaders, marching band members and polyester clad customers who were unfortunate enough to be in their path were stampeded, gored, and violently masticated by the voracious, monomaniacal hulks.

As the crowd at the mall's front promenade began to witness the horrific scene in the parking area, they immediately began to flee away from the shopping complex, towards the side of the building, in an attempt to use the fire escape ladders to reach a sanctuary on the roof.

Before only a few people could reach safety, the beasts were pouncing on the retreating throng like a plague of locusts, tearing mouthfuls of flesh from their legs, arms and torsos. However, despite the pandemonium taking place on the macadam, there appeared to be something unusually desperate in the huge critters behavior, almost as if they were running *from* something, as well as making their offensive rush on the mall patrons.

Travis Nutter, Darlene Stevens and Duffy White began their dash from the podium area as the first attacks on the school marching group took place. The front entrance to the mall was still locked from the night before, so Duffy grabbed a steel trash can located by the mall's courtesy bus stop and hurled it through the glass doors of the place. He seized the hands of Travis and Darlene, and they all sprinted to the Alcoholic Beverage Control store in the corner of the mall.

Darlene breathlessly asked him as they ran up hall, "why are we going to liquor store Duff? Shouldn't we be calling the police or something?"

To which he incredulously replied to her question, "because darlin, I think I could use a drink right about now, and also to get a few *personal* items from my locker."

Duffy fumbled with the ring of keys to open the front door of his store while the three of them listened to the wailing of injured patrons outside of the

premises and the continuing attack on the disbelieving crowd from the mutated, famished creatures. At last he found the right latch opener, slammed it into the lock, and pushed the door open with his shoulder.

Upon entry, the three of them galloped towards the rear of the store. Duffy White grabbed a pint bottle of Jim Beam bourbon, ripped the cap from its neck, and took a long draught of the smoky liquor as he barged into the shop's employees only area. He handed the container of black label whisky to Darlene and Travis, and they both gratefully took mammoth swallows of the powerful distillment.

Duffy then unfastened the bolt on his personal locker, examined its contents, and quickly slammed one of the Uzi 9mm machine guns into the unbelieving hands of Travis Nutter. He then grabbed the second deadly Israeli-produced carbine and several clips of reserve ammunition. Darlene stood in mute fascination at the small arsenal he had stashed in his locker alongside of his wind breaker jacket and George Mason University logo T-shirts and baseball caps.

The assistant manager of the liquor store then handed her the electric stun gun, combat flame thrower, and black cloth sack, which was heavy with the weight of the Turkish throwing knives. He then gave Travis the fastest on-the-spot ballistics and firearm operations lesson in Clarke County history, and afterwards showed Darlene how to operate the 50,000 volt Tazer unit and the correct way to hurl the formidable, brushed steel blades at a moving target.

On their way back out to the pandemonium outside in the parking lot, he pocketed another pint of the Jim Beam bourbon, and several more pint bottles of Everclear, 190 proof grain alcohol in the Army surplus jacket he happened to be wearing over his all-cotton, Garth Brooks T-shirt. Then the heavily armed trio headed back out to the front of the building to discover that the biblically-predicted day of the animals was truly upon them.

Several calico house cats, now the size of mountain lions, were perched upon a heap of broken human bodies, lapping up entrails and vital juices with incredible zeal. Coons, skunks and alley dogs, now weighing several hundred pounds each, were in pursuit of anyone in their path, champing into the human flesh they found around them like rations of warm taffy.

One of the enormous felines on the outside tarmac set its sights on Darlene as the three mall employees emerged from the shattered front door of the shopping center. The beast then began a tremendous forward charge towards the blonde cashier. Upon witnessing the savage animal's intent to destroy her and her mates, she reached into the deep sack, removed a two-pound, double edged scimitar with a filigreed, ebony wood octagon handle, and whizzed it with every particle of her strength at the swiftly approaching monster.

The point of the heavy weapon bisected the frontal bone of the animal's forehead directly between the eyes. The blade penetrated the beast's skull up to its abalone inlaid hilt, and the monster crashed onto the pavement, dead as a cement block, and with its irises crossed in clean astonishment.

"Goodnight Irene!" Travis Nutter shouted in the air at witnessing Darlene's successful dispatching effort of the enraged brute. Duffy White told the

two of them that it was not the time for congratulations yet. They had only begun their efforts at the sanctioning of the enormous, man hunting critters who were bringing their merciless law of the jungle to the once tranquil strip mall.

The liquor store clerk slung the Uzi to his hip, set the firing pin, and sprayed a hail of hot lead at a pack of beasts that had closed in on them. The rounds penetrated their dirty hides like anti-aircraft flak, and they fell like wet laundry sacks onto the sidewalk. Travis Nutter followed Duffy's lead assault tactic, and dashed to the side of the mall's entrance where he blasted several 300+ pound opossum and street canines into meat by-products.

Bart Darnell Jr. III, regional Vice President of the Rite Aid corporation, had found sanctuary from the bedlam outside in the confines of his Range Rover sedan. He was flat on the floor in the rear of the vehicle, with an oil cloth draped over his body, to avoid any visual detection from the pack of gargantuan vermin who were now caterwauling and rampaging through the car park.

He used his Nokia 3410 model, three-band, world cellular phone to call not the police, but his close friend of many years, Colonel Mike Thompson, chief weapons designer for the United States Army's elite Delta Force special operations rangers.

After the terrified man described the events which were happening at Beauregard mall, Colonel Thompson told his friend to stay covered, and he would be arriving at the scene shortly with what he termed, "some serious hardware." After the conversation terminated, the career Army weapons specialist sprinted from his office in the basement of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia to the famous building's heliport area on the roof of the structure. He quickly scribbled his name on some release forms, and took off west towards Clarke County in a newly purchased, Black Hawk combat helicopter, with .40 mm machine guns mounted on each side of the fuselage, and prototype French Exocet short range missiles loaded in the rocket launchers. He gave the fighting machine's engine full throttle gas as he lifted off from the pad and estimated he would make the sixty mile trip to the theater of operation in roughly twenty minutes.

The three armed retail clerks were dispatching the huge beasts left and right with 9mm firepower and the deadly throwing knives. They'd retired roughly twenty of the giant menaces with only a few of the beasts still raging through the parking lot creating havoc. However, their grisly work concerning local animal control was not over yet.

Darlene Stevens saw a pair of giant coon who'd cornered Duffy and a girl he'd helped to get away from their grasp moments before. The Uzi which the liquor store clerk was using had run out of ammunition, and was only making empty, metallic clacking sounds as he violently pulled the trigger of the powerful, but now useless gun. They were pinned in a corner vestibule entrance to the mall and the two, leopard-sized vermin were rapidly making their way towards them.

The pretty pharmacy clerk used her deft mental faculties at lightning speed. She ran to the side of the building near where she had been standing, and turned on the utility water spigot to its fullest open position. Then, as the two monsters were ready to strike Duffy and the girl he'd assisted, she opened her

purse and retrieved the brass police whistle all female mall personnel had been issued by the shopping center's management earlier in the year. The incredibly shrill, ear-piercing whistle was designed to halt or bring outside attention to a possible assault or rape situation, if the mall employee felt threatened by a potential assailant.

Darlene blew the instrument with such force that her cheeks violently convexed from the air-pressure her lungs generated. The two beasts turned their heads in bewilderment at the irritating tone, and ceased advancing on the cornered pair. She continued blowing the noise maker until the duo of ravenous coon targeted *her* as their next meal, and began their charge in her direction.

The water was spreading out over the macadam in currents now. The enraged beasts were gaining momentum as they approached Darlene, and were only fifty feet or so away from her and still accelerating towards their intended mark. She continued blowing the whistle like a mad woman to irritate their sensitive ears and make them even more fierce and monomaniacal as they bore down on her.

As the animals' paws touched the far perimeter of the expanding water puddle, she whipped the 50,000 volt stun gun from her bag, steadied her aim, and fired the electrode tip directly into the center of the liquid.

Their cries of pain were deafening as the massive dose of cobalt blue current snaked around their hulking frames delivered from the galvanically charged, fluid conduit. Darlene quickly dropped the Taser gun while the animals tumbled about in electric torment, then grabbed a handful of the precision knives, and whipped them into the flopping beasts' skulls, spines and hearts, dispatching them with deadly accuracy and ease.

Travis Nutter was on the perimeter of the lot, sanctioning the last few giant vermin with his light-weight, hand-tooled machine gun. The first sirens of the Clarke County police cars could be heard in the distance racing towards the scene, and it seemed as though some semblance of order was beginning to present itself to the phenomenal situation at the shopping center.

After a moment the three armed heroes of the shopping complex reunited near the mall's front entrance. Official help in the form of armed troopers and emergency service personnel were arriving post haste, and it seemed that the worst of their problems were at last over. Duffy removed the concealed bottle of Jim Beam bourbon from his jacket pocket, and all three of them inhaled enormous mouthfuls of the sweet corn liquor to calm their nerves and adjust frazzled minds.

After their well deserved victory cocktail, Travis Nutter brought up the conversational topic that the animals, although completely hell-bent in their actions to chew people up and nosh their bodies into pulp, seemed indeed to be running *from* something in their immediate environment. There had been a noticeable, apparent panic-element involved in their mass exodus from the wooded area near the trash dumpsters.

Darlene and Travis both agreed with Duffy's assessment of their erstwhile situation, but had no hypotheses of why things had transpired the way they had. The trio of vigilantes were about to enjoy another round of the Tennessee whisky when they discovered why the beasts had been fleeing the area in such a panic.

From the immediate direction of Jesse Ventura Elementary school, through the wooded area by the berm of interstate highway 81, came enormous crashing and cacophonous emanations. Trees snapped like dry breadsticks and the ground seemed to tremble like a loose, Jell-O gelatin mold at the parking area's fringe.

Then, in an instant, the largest, hungriest raccoon since the end of the Pleistocene period blasted through the brush and entered the parking lot at Pierre GT Beauregard outlet mall. The ravenous vermin was roughly the size of an adult male rhinoceros and exponentially more ferocious than the herbivorous African plains beast.

The giant creature arched its back and let loose a terrifying roar from its lungs. Pinned to several of its railroad-spike like teeth were empty, crushed plastic containers of Ultraderm-Megatone Plus liquid protein supplement.

Duffy White dropped the bottle of bourbon from his hand when the critter let loose its explosive howl, and the glass container shattered into sharp splinters on the macadam by his feet. The three mall employees looked at each other in grim fear, and then attempted to use their remaining reasoning skills to come up with a plan of operation to retire this final, monstrous life form.

A quick inventory of their remaining weaponry painted a bleak picture for the three mall defenders. The Uzis were spent; not a single ammunition cartridge remained to be fired at the great hulk. Ditto the throwing knives. Darlene had used the last of the fierce Islamic cutting instruments while dispatching the pair of stun-gun electrified coon. Duffy had even used all the rounds in his Colt Commander .45 that he'd started carrying in his belt after the second grisly murder had occurred at the mall's parking area. All that remained in their arsenal was the Korean Army combat flame thrower, which had a full tank of gelatinized petroleum fuel ready for field use.

It was decided by quick consensus that the tremendous thing had to be cornered in a no-exit confine, and then incinerated with the fiery napalm. The only place which offered such an environment was the side vestibule mall entrance.

The parking area was free of people now, only a few corpses lay scattered between the rows of still automobiles. Darlene offered to use herself as human bait, to draw the beast's attention towards her, and then do the flame-job with the high-powered torch once the thing was in the desired place. Duffy whispered something in Travis's ears, and the two of them bolted from the front of the shopping center, towards the monster on the other side of the lot.

As the two of them ran toward the bellowing varmint, Duffy removed the few pint bottles of expropriated Everclear grain alcohol from the inside lining of his jacket. When they were within 200 feet or so from the beast, he stopped, tore

a few strips of material from his Garth Brooks T-shirt, and constructed several crude molotov cocktails with the containers of the highly flammable beverage.

With his Zippo brand cigarette lighter he ignited their flowing wicks, handed a pair of the home-made bombs to Travis, and told him to throw them at the animal's hind quarters, to get him moving forward towards the shopping center. The two of them then circled around the agitated aberration and began their attempt at the ambush.

Darlene was at her position by the vestibule, blowing her whistle like mad, shouting, clapping her hands, and doing everything possible to get the attention of the mammoth coon. Duffy and Travis scampered behind the enraged creature and hurled their molotovs at its feet. The catalyzing effect of the cheap explosive devices was greater than either of them had expected it to be.

The incensed colossus took off like a shot in the direction of Darlene as the glass containers holding the flammable distillment exploded near its hind paws. The beast hurtled onto the tops of cars, jeeps, mini-vans and courtesy busses, crushing their roofs, hoods and interiors into scraps on its frenzied charge towards the shrill sound of Darlene's metal whistle.

The pretty cashier looked at the rapidly approaching behemoth, and mouthed a terrified, "holy shit" to herself. Then she took the muzzle of the flame thrower in hand, and attempted to ignite the carbine's pilot light with a safety match, which in turn ignites the gelatinized fuel when it is shot towards its target.

The charging beast was now one hundred feet from the girl, stomping through parked automobiles like cheap paper cups. In her haste to start the pilot light, Darlene dropped the box of safety matches, and they scattered onto the pavement at her feet. In a panic, she tried to grab some of them, but was fumbling badly, and clean terror was beginning to set in to her mind. She cried out in fear and hysteria from the approaching menace, and upon hearing her terrible distress, Duffy and Travis began sprinting towards her spot in an attempt to divert the monster's attention.

The leviathan had now cleared the last line of cars, and was galloping with dreadful intent towards the now paralyzed sales associate. The two other mall employees were too far behind the creature to gain its attention with their voices. Travis cried out in anguish, and Duffy threw his ignited Zippo lighter at the rear of the beast in a last ditch attempt to help Darlene ignite the pilot flame.

To his horrific dismay, the Zippo hit a sodium arc light post on its way to assist the girl and fell helplessly to the ground. Darlene's eyes became wide as saucers as the charging hulk, now a mere fifty feet away from her, bore down mercilessly on her position. However, when the lighter made contact with the steel post, a sharp metallic report occurred, distracting the brute for a fraction of a second. It turned its elephantine head in the direction of the sound to discover its source.

In the near distance, the sound of massive propeller blades beating the air could be heard by the three mall clerks. Colonel Mike Thompson was coming down on the site like a hurricane at near two hundred miles per hour in his Black

Hawk combat helicopter, with the giant beast laser-locked in the missile launcher's targeting cross hairs.

"That is one *big* coon," he laconically said to himself, and opened fire on the immense vermin.

The pair of Exocet short range missiles blasted from their housings under the chopper's fuselage and ripped through the air towards their target. The crazed animal, now only a mere ten feet from Darlene, opened its crocodile-like jaws with zeal as it approached her for its terminal advance. Clarke County and Virginia State Trooper police cars screeched into the lot as the hell-bent, savage beast detonated into crimson, biodegradable particles from the incredible force of the rockets impact.

Darlene was drenched in untold gallons of organic glop from the tremendous explosion, but was crying with joy nonetheless when Duffy and Travis finally made it to the spot where she was standing. The front entrance of Beauregard mall was also coated with fragmentized victuals on over two hundred feet of its eggshell-white painted, entry promenade.

"Popped open like a freakin' baked potato," Colonel Mike Thompson chuckled to himself, and turned his chopper back in the direction of Arlington and the Pentagon's roof heliport.

Clarke County ambulances and service vehicles began pouring into the area to remove bodies, assess damage, and take the three employees to the nearest hospital for treatment and debriefing.

In the days that followed the incredible events at Beauregard mall, many changes occurred in the lives of the three heroes, and a huge corporate scandal was discovered by a New York based, consumer protection watchdog group.

Unknown to the Rite Aid pharmacy corporation, and regional Vice President Bart Darnell Jr. III, the Genuflex Weight Conditioning Group Limited had been experimenting with various experimental growth hormones prior to the two companies agreement to sponsor a Northern Virginia sales contest of the body building product Ultraderm-Megatone Plus.

The Genuflex labs had been surreptitiously creating various, non Food and Drug Administration sanctioned, radically powerful food supplements, designed primarily for fast-working musculature enhancement of malnourished Argentinean cattle and livestock. Their product worked entirely too well on the first animal test group, oftentimes increasing the subject beast's overall body mass an alarming thirty times its normal size in a few weeks, as well as producing the side effect of blinding hunger for protein intake.

Small amounts of the deadly wonder drug had found its way into thousands of the 90-day supply packages of the body building liquid and was discovered by the Genuflex quality control technicians before the product was

shipped to retail stores. However, with this knowledge in hand, the board of directors decided to risk the chance of discovery and sell the product in a desperate attempt to increase third quarter sales, which were lagging far behind market expectations. The board slashed the wholesale price of its product in its east coast warehouses, and created a scheme to dump the tainted goods on the Rite Aid pharmacy chain with the summer sales contest.

The New York based consumer watch-dog group named InfoGuard, found out about the group's plan to get rid of the contaminated product, but too late. Their discovery of the Genuflex cover-up, by the middle of September, could do nothing to help those who'd already taken the supplement. When the news came to the FDA of the company's heinous disregard for human safety, it was decided not to alert the public via the media, as panic would invariably spread throughout the Mid-Atlantic area and the entire pharmaceutical industry. Also the infected people would undoubtedly start coming to them, case by case and with high-profile legal representation, if their body mass began to grow to insupportable proportions.

In an attempt to allay the wrath of federal litigators and the Rite Aid corporation's army of attorneys, The Genuflex Group, as a courtesy, greatly augmented the sales contest rewards to the Beauregard mall employees who'd saved their shopping center and won the grand prize weekend at the Showboat casino. The entire store, including part-time personnel, were treated to the complete top floor of the hotel-casino's complimentary penthouse suites which included twenty-four hour, on-call massage therapists, personal chefs specializing in French provincial cuisine, and a small fleet of chauffeured, vintage Rolls Royce Silver Ghost limousines available to take them anywhere they desired.

On the second night of their stay at the Showboat, after a dazzling performance by singer Vicki Lawrence who featured a medley of Frank Sinatra songs dedicated to Travis Nutter, Darlene did indeed ask the pharmacy manager to spend the evening with her in her suite. She'd never seen the heroic side of the usually quiet man who helped save her life and the lives of others at the mall that horrendous day, and after their time together in Atlantic City, sincere dating became a regular occurrence with the two mall employees.

Duffy White was given a week off of work by his manager at the liquor store, and spent the time writing his experiences down for a news article which he later sold to *Soldier of Fortune* magazine as a front cover feature for the vigilante periodical. On his second day back at the job, he was visited by the young girl he'd rescued from the pair of two-hundred pound, ravenous vermin on the day of their rampaging siege of the shopping complex.

Tammy Sinclair, the young lady he'd saved from the wild beasts, had brought her savior a heartfelt-offering, white sheet cake from the Baskin-Robbins 31 flavors ice cream store, which had the hand-designed image of a discharging Uzi machine gun depicted on the pastry's creamy frosting. The deadly weapon was drawn with various colored icings, rainbow sprinkles, M&Ms and Reese's pieces candies. It was love at second sight for the happy couple, and Duffy moved

into Tammy's split-level condo as her significant-other after only a few weeks of courtship.

Clarke County and Virginia State police closed the homicide cases on the murders of junior accountant Janelle Williams and part-time fry cook Jason Acuff after the zoological assault on Beauregard mall, attributing their untimely demises to random and unfortunate attacks from giant-sized, wild animals.

It was now the end of October in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and the weather was beginning to get chilly in the evenings. The autumn leaves were at their azimuth of color, and people were getting ready for the upcoming holiday season. And throughout the gyms and workout rooms of the Northern Virginia area, weight lifters, body builders, and athletes of all local fall sporting events were getting bigger, stronger, and considerably more hungry.

The Real Bad Clerk

Johnny Burnaway, a mild-mannered suburban slacker, hadn't intended on becoming a ruthless vigilante in his life. But the young, good-natured kid never knew what kind of dangerous thoughts could be generated in his head before he began working in retail sales positions in the stores of Northern Virginia. He didn't know about guerrilla assault tactics, plastic explosives, fiber-optic communication devices or electronic remote-detonators; nothing even vaguely akin to those things. He didn't cotton to the idea of using automatic carbines, asymmetrical weapons and other super-destructive spy-story stuff in his daily routines. That wasn't his idea of fun. Early KISS albums, Budweiser beer, and Pam Anderson-looking calendar girls were much more to his taste.

However, during the first few years of the twenty-first century, Johnny Burnaway came to be known as the psychological salvation of the Old Dominion state's economic Underclass. He became the living, breathing, voice and right bicep of Freedom to thousands of overworked, frazzled retail workers; the terrorized wage-slaves of an economy whose managers and corporate players had reached new heights of greed and indifference towards the financial proles at the bottom of the material pyramid.

Johnny Burnaway's random ballistic sorties and high-explosive detonations against wealthy Overclass department store patrons in the Virginia suburbs, especially in the Fairfax County area, became the stuff of legend. The phantom-like underground clerk struck a chord of pure, crystallized fear into the entire region's contemptuous, haughty consumers.

Whenever the supercilious purchaser saw Johnny's hastily spray painted graffito, "BE GOOD," on the outside of a retail establishment, attitude adjustment invariably ensued. The fastidious military personnel consumers from the Pentagon and Department of Defense became somewhat less detail-specific. The loud and overbearing private sector power-wives oftentimes turned into agreeable, pleasant people. Bloated and demanding executive harpies from Roslyn and old town Alexandria transformed to lenient, smiling purchasers. They could never be sure that they weren't being electronically observed, *scrutinized* as it were, for antagonistic behavior against an unknowing but friendly minimum-wage flunky.

Clerical personnel across Virginia, from Norfolk to Richmond, took up the defensive graffiti campaign. The newly empowered clerks and cashiers spray-painted their icon's ominous warning on the outsides of strip malls, discount outlets and department stores everywhere.

Our Robin Hood-like hero, with a small war chest and an unshakable, iron-clad will, set out to settle the score with the indifferent egoists who make working in a busy shopping center more dangerously neurosis-producing than it already is. The incensed young man went to task against evil like a bloodthirsty school of piranha fish.

The masses of cashiers and inventory shelvees who loved Johnny and his selected “hits” against arrogant retail patrons never knew his real identity. They never knew their idol was an extremely nearsighted, humble sales clerk at the Crown bookstore at Gunpowder mall, outside of Youngblood, Virginia. They only knew him by his nom de guerre; the name he left on the notes at the scenes of his victims’ dispositions. They only knew him as THE REAL BAD CLERK.

Donna T. Ashpool had experienced what she could only describe as a *draconian* morning with her famed industrialist husband, Montgomery; the president and CEO of New Southern Munitions, located outside the corporate limits of Winchester City. According to her spouse, Donna T. could do absolutely nothing right. She’d had a week, seven days, to come up with something to wear to the Professional Golfers Association memorabilia auction being held in Miami the next day.

Montgomery had his bags packed, plane tickets in hand, checkbook waxed and polished, and he was going to bid on Ben Crenshaw’s 1983 autographed 9-iron in person even if he had to drive his vintage Range Rover to Florida himself to do it. Things were not going well according to the perspective of Montgomery Ashpool. Not well at all.

Her husband went into what Donna T. would describe as an “agonizing vituperation” about her voluminous, but seemingly inadequate wardrobe. Invectives flew. He lambasted her lack of insight in selecting outfits, and her inability to purchase anything that made her look like a lady of society, and not some desiccated, fading courtesan.

Montgomery went on to report to her that he had seen some pretty young sales-girls at the EZ-Buy discount store in Manassas the other day, and even they could assemble an outfit with more dash and style than Donna T. He had gone there to purchase their entire inventory of Minoxidil hair growth stimulant. There had been a price misprint in the local newspaper, and he’d duressed the cashier and assistant manager into selling him all the available packages at the misquoted cost. He’d been vicious in his negotiations with the store personnel, and had, at the end of their discussion, saved over 175 dollars on his large-scale purchase. Montgomery was greatly pleased with his rugged, courtroom-like performance and the teeming bounty of his unyielding, yet legally defensible transaction.

“And they’re just *sales-people* in some God-awful stripmall, Donna T.” he blithely commented to his spouse about the comely cashiers. “They know nothing. They have *absolutely* nothing. And by God, my dear, they look a lot more fetching in their polyester-blend, stain-resistant work clothes than you ever did in your endless array of Armani power suits.” Montgomery was sublimely nettled at his sartorially-inept mate. Donna paled, then whitened completely. She barely fluttered back to the love-seat after his verbal hazing.

Montgomery announced he was going to the country club and would be back at 2:00 p.m. Their flight to Florida would leave at 4:00. If Donna could not find something decent to wear to the event he’d been looking forward to for weeks, he would ask his personal secretary, last year’s Miss Virginia pageant

finalist, Linda Lee Palmer to escort him to the Sunshine state. Montgomery obliquely inferred to his wife that Ms. Palmer was “always eager” to assist him when he needed her services.

Montgomery exited the room like a field marshal. He climbed into the driver’s seat of his midnight blue Jensen-Healy roadster, and took off for the club. Donna dissolved into paroxysms of personal mortification, sobbing heavily into the deep velour curtains in the sitting room.

In the daily-use Volvo station wagon heading towards the EZ-Buy discount store, Donna T. Ashpool could only be described as “whetting the blade” for the impending humiliations of their eye-appealing female sales staff. She was driving at a moderate pace and thinking out loud. Her head spun with treachery and green venom.

Donna began to reminisce and talk to herself as if in a reverie. She remembered a conversation she’d had years ago, on the subject of retail personnel department, with a friend whom she had admired for being a demanding shopper. When Donna T. was attending the University of Virginia’s summer tennis camp in the giddy 1980s, she’d heard something from her acquaintance, Trish Davenport, about a foolproof way to get anyone dismissed from a sales position who seemed even mildly insubordinate to her shopping needs.

This was what Miss Davenport imparted to her doubles partner that day when they were taking a break from the clay courts: take several items up to the cashier and charge them to your house account. Then, after the sale, change your mind and have one of the items credited back from your bill. Do this several times until the clerk is parboiled with frustration and ready for deep-frying.

Trish told her friend to step in front of the other people in line and demand to be assisted before them, insisting that she’d been there previously and was merely continuing a sale in progress. When the clerk finally asks you to please take a place in line, throw a czarina-style hissy-fit and *scream* for the manager.

Then lie like a rabid car salesman. Tell the supervisor of the place some real fabricated *whoppers* about what happened during the purchase in the store. Inform the boss that the clerk had been boorish and unmannerly in treating a valued patron; and had even used indecorous language during the discussion. This added fuel to the fire invariably makes the unsuspecting clerk defensive and flustered. The God-fearing shift-manager dismisses the flummoxed employee on the spot, consoles the wounded self-esteem of the customer, and oftentimes give the buyer valuable coupons for savings on merchandise at a later date.

Donna loudly mused, “Trish is a *genius*.” This would be her approach to rectifying the morning’s embarrassment with Montgomery. This blueprint of clean sadism was what she would put into use at the EZ-Buy discount store against the *pretty young things* whom her matrimonial mate had found so terribly alluring the other day. Donna T. Ashpool depressed the accelerator of her shiny Swedish ride with determination. The engine hitched for a moment, wheezed loudly, and then squealed rubber on the hot tarmac as it bolted towards its destination.

Johnny Burnaway and his vigilantes had heard every word of Ms. Ashpool's vocalized plans with their long-range transmitter/receiver and eavesdropping equipment. The munitions crew had paid a visit the Ashpool residence the night before; they'd placed a small microphone and large quantity of C-4 explosive under the back seat of their routine-use automobile after being contacted about Montgomery's unmannerly conduct with the store's cashier concerning the mispriced miracle hair treatment. The guerrilla bomb squad stared at each other in frank amazement after hearing her dreamy malignant spiel.

"It seems our friend Mrs. Ashpool is in need of an etiquette lesson today," our hero gently sniggered to himself, "hmm... such a deliciously byzantine plot. I really hate to hand it to him, but Mr. Ashpool certainly knows how to get his wife motivated for combat against the little guys. *And*, he paid me in advance and supplied the high-grade gelatinite for today's big-bang services himself. Now *that's* self-confidence me buckos. I guess that's why he's the big kahuna at the ballistics factory. Anyway, a deal is a deal, even if it is with a fascist like Montgomery Ashpool. Hasta la vista, my little hausfrau cave snake."

Johnny myopically ogled the remote detonator he was holding in his hand and punched the hilariously big red button in the center of the unit.

Mrs. Ashpool's Volvo exploded into powder.

Montgomery and Linda Lee Palmer entered the honeymoon suite at the Sheraton hotel near Dulles International airport.

The blast from Donna T.'s 'built for safety' European family car could be heard for miles.

Chainsaw Wicca Cheerleaders

The Fairfax Ravens varsity high school football team was abysmally bad in the fall season of 1995; they were completely screwed-up in every facet of the game's planning, development and execution on the playing field that unfortunate year. They'd lost their first three home games that they'd played in that frosty September by scores of 31-0, 21-0, and 45-6. The one touchdown that appeared on their side of the scoreboard in their third contest was a complete accident, as the opposing team's second string running back, while completely hammered on Colt .45 malt liquor and cheap blotter acid, got turned around on an option play and ran into the wrong end zone, unintentionally scoring the Ravens' only points so far that season.

With seven games left to play that year, and five of those contests being on the road, it looked like things were going to go from incredibly bad to incredibly worse for the inept players and their befuddled coaching squad. The one positive thing that had happened with the Ravens football club that semester, the one thing that kept the handful of school and community supporters coming to the games, had nothing to do with the team's players or coaching staff. It was their dazzling cheerleading squad, the cosmetically perfect, mind-bogglingly beautiful, high stepping support group, the Ravenettes, that kept the local people attending the one-sided scoring massacres.

The twelve pompom shaking, baton-twirling, hip-twisting sirens were a joy to watch as they flawlessly performed dance routines, did eye-popping gymnastic feats, and effortlessly bounded into human pyramids for the crowd that had little else to cheer about when the Ravens were on the pitch. The appreciative audience in the stands craned their necks and stood on tip-toe as the resplendent troupe performed, and loudly cheered the choreographic work of the dozen girls, whistling and shouting with glee as they executed their various exercises.

But little did the adoring crowd know that their beloved Ravenettes practiced Pagan ritual, black witchcraft in their free time, and they did this cabalistic activity with great success in its metaphysical application and ensuing results. That is to say, when the troupe was not engaged with their shimmying dance routines or doing their Trigonometry homework.

Calista Taylor, head cheerleader of the Ravenettes, was undoubtedly the most powerful dark arts practitioner of the dozen letter-sweatered wicca, and, ergo, became the one who led their suburban coven in conducting their supernatural activities. Earlier in the year, she'd discovered that three grungy senior classmen, who were majoring in studies like lawnmower repair, masonry and afternoon bong hits, had been sexually harassing some of the freshman Junior Varsity drill team squad after their daily practice sessions.

By consensus, the dozen wicca knockouts cast a punishing spell on the perpetrators, and dispatched a lesser demon from somewhere around the fifth circle of Perdition after the witless trio. One night in late September, during an evening session of drinking and debauchery, the three goons were set upon by an otherworldly devilish visitor. Their housefly-covered carcasses were discovered the next morning hanging upside-down from the rafters of the school's basketball court. The corpses were naked, skinned, eviscerated, toothless, and had meager erections emanating from their garroted mid-sections. The Junior Varsity drill team had no more incidents of harassment, haranguing, or cat-calling from their audiences for the remainder of the '95 season.

But now Calista Taylor and her dangerously cute crew had a new, bigger interest in mind. While the dozen girls were noshing pizzas and drinking cherry cokes at a local Pizza Hut restaurant, it was decided to do something drastic about their feckless football team, the miserable Ravens, and their inability to produce a mark in the win column. It was concluded by the squad that drastic measures needed to be taken in order to reverse the luck of their ineffectual football team.

That meant only one thing for the clutch of fetching sorceresses.

Namely, that there was soon to be some *big* juju activity in suburban Fairfax county for the comely and fair Ravenettes. The girls also knew something extra would be required for a spell of this magnitude to be successful in its application. They would need a good quantity of fresh male blood for this cunning spell to have a chance of success. They would need a willing, sacrificial human guinea pig for this piece of preternatural work to prevail.

They knew just who to pick for the job.

Tim Locke, the caricaturishly-suited, on-field mascot of the Ravens, had particularly adored head cheerleader Calista since they'd attended elementary school together. The small, red-haired teenager would don his enormous, garishly proportioned, Fellini-esgue looking bird costume during the games and hop, scamper, caw, dance, and flap his papier-mâché wings in agitation as the team went through their series of downs on the playing field.

The adoring young man's worship of Calista Taylor was singular in its authenticity. He had no interest in football, or even understood the rules of the game, but did this weekly humiliation only to be near his beloved, pompom waving sweater-girl. When he was approached by several of the Ravenettes to have lunch with the entire cheer leading troupe at the local Taco Bell restaurant that week, he nearly swooned in ecstasy at their invitation, and wildly agreed to dine with them at the southwestern cuisine fast-food eatery.

Tim Locke looked like a high school-aged global power-broker as he walked into the franchise restaurant with no fewer than six pristine, gleaming, mini-skirted cheerleaders on each arm. They placed themselves at a large family

table in the back of the place, and merrily noshed their delicious fajitas, enchiladas, chips, salsa and cherry cokes with zeal and enjoyment.

Calista sat next to the ecstatic Tim while they consumed their repast, casually brushing her hip against his, touching him on the shoulder while speaking to him, and holding his gaze firmly in her eyes as they conversed on various subjects. Her coquettish behavior was driving the young man to near distraction as he chewed on his giant-sized, perfectly-crafted, seven-layer taco.

The topic of the Ravens' dreadful season record came up in conversation near the end of their meal. The stunning girls exhaled a group sigh of disappointment as they chatted about how they'd do anything to help the team score a touchdown, let alone win a game. Calista was now holding Tim's hand in hers and staring deeply into his stunned eyes as she asked him, sotto voce, to please help them with a somewhat unconventional plan to help augment the chances of a Raven's win in the upcoming game. The young man agreed instantly to do anything his heartthrob desired of him, and Calista Taylor breathed a gasp of relief at his acquiescence to her request. The attending Ravenettes squealed and cooed in delight as they welcomed the new, unsuspecting teen into their diabolical ranks.

It was decided by the group to meet that evening at cheerleader Jill Hart's house at 8:00. Her father, Doctor Rick Hart, had a large basement with a variety of entertainments contained within: a ping-pong and snooker table, various video games, and a 50" television were available for the girls to use whenever they decided to convene at the residence for parties or merely to hang-out and talk. Also, Dr. Hart kept various unused pharmaceutical samples and discarded medical supplies in the downstairs utility room of his grandiose home for his own personal purposes.

At eight o'clock sharp, Tim Locke and the Ravenettes appeared at the door of the Hart residence. They were greeted by beautiful Jill, and whisked downstairs to the rumpus room where the preparations would begin for the witless mascot's first bloodletting procedure.

After watching some evening game shows and drinking long neck bottles of Budweiser beer, Calista entered the basement's utility room, and emerged with an intravenous needle, rubber tourniquet and feed tube, and empty blood donor reservoir bag. Soon she was conferring to Tim all of the intimate secrets of their clandestine cheerleading coven, and inferred to the young mascot how it was a true token of esteem for him to be chosen to assist them in their activities. She embraced the trembling boy like an age-old lover, and sensually brushed her lips over his in a soft, gentle kiss. Tim Locke, utterly blinded by his love for Calista Taylor, informed her he was ready for any paranormal exercises the smoldering cabal may have in mind for him.

In short order Tim Locke was spread out on the snooker table with the I.V. tube planted firmly into his arm. The attending Ravenettes all stroked his hair and ran their perfectly manicured hands over his body as Calista casually drained two pints of his Type B blood from his forearm. Afterwards, the dozen girls stripped naked, entered the downstairs Jacuzzi room, and drenched themselves in the rich

sanguinary liquid while chanting and moaning to their various otherworldly masters for a Fairfax team victory.

The Ravens won their first game that Friday, by one point, 7-6, against last year's division champion team, the Lorton Devil-rays. The disbelieving, ecstatic attending supporters who'd come from Fairfax stormed the opponents' field in jubilation as the fourth quarter ended, and carried the players on their shoulders around the pitch in a victory lap. Tim Locke, who was feeling a bit anemic, but still smiling underneath his gigantic bird attire, was passionately embraced by Calista. He was informed by his lovely companion, amid the shouts of joy by his team's fans, that his donating services would indeed be required again next week.

The following Thursday, the love-sick boy was drained a second time by the dozen enchantresses, this time of three pints of his vital juices for their blood-baptizing frenzy. Calista held his head in her hands, and spoke sweet nothings into the pale child's ear as his hemoglobin dripped into the reservoir bag. The following Friday evening, the Ravens miraculously defeated the greatly favored Washington-Lee Generals by one touchdown, with a final score of 35-28.

Tim Locke was unable to attend school for a couple of days because of extreme fatigue. He was incapable of coming to Calista and the Ravenettes' weekly bloodletting session the following Thursday, and the Ravens were clobbered by their division opponents, the Falls Church Jaguars, that Saturday afternoon by a score of 48-3.

But the Ravenettes had not been idle during Tim's absence from their gathering. Calista Taylor and her crew had consulted with their dark masters by use of a Ouija board for confirmation that their victory plans for the team were agreeable and amenable to the whims of their enigmatic messiahs.

The returned cryptic message which was transmitted to them through the board stated, simply, that if the team were to continue to win, a greater offering would be required for tribute in the weeks to come. Not merely a quantity of blood, but amputated limbs and body parts would be needed for the team's good fortune to continue. Calista gasped with disbelief at the communication sent to them through the Ouija. Then the young siren collected herself, gathered up her internal strength, and informed her loving cabal of mysterious seductresses that she would indeed provide them with a spare-parts donor for their black arts practices before the end of the week.

The following Wednesday evening, Calista Taylor showed up at the front door of Tim Locke's house wearing a long, honey colored, ermine faux-fur, which she'd borrowed from her mother's upstairs closet. However, underneath the long, elegant garment, she was packed into a sheer red tube top, white hot pants, and a pair of red, open-toed, stiletto-heeled pumps.

She was roundly welcomed into the house by Tim's parents, and escorted to the young man's room. The beaming mom and dad were absolutely joyous to see that such an attractive young girl had come to call on their son to see how his weakened physical condition was coming along. They left the two teens alone to talk, and then returned to the living room to watch nighttime game shows and drink their favorite decaffeinated beverages in front of the television.

Tim was cross-eyed and mind-boggled when his personal siren peeled off her wrap to reveal the sex-bomb ensemble underneath it. They chatted about his condition, the Ravens' loss last week, and the weekly Ravenettes' meeting at Jill Hart's house for a short while. After a few more minutes of mindless conversation, Calista peeled off what little remaining clothing she had on, walked over to where the boy was seated, picked him up into the air, and body-slammed the lad onto the top mattress of his single bed. She had him undressed in a hot minute, and in short order they were in the throes of a nearly incandescent love-making session.

When the carnal festivities had concluded, she informed Tim of the new, escalated tribute which had to be offered to their mentors in the future if the Ravens had a chance of a continued winning streak this season, and that she'd like him to be the ceremonial donor. At first the boy balked at the idea, having some small amount of self respect remaining in his system, but as he began to beg off of the responsibility, Calista moved down the mattress towards his insistent bulge and began an oral performance on his post that made him nearly swoon in ecstasy. Within moments, Tim Locke was frantically agreeing to all of Calista Taylor's unbelievable requests and then consummated in clean bliss for the second time that evening.

The next night at 8:00, Tim was picked-up by Calista, who was driving her family's mini-van, and taken to the weekly meeting as her date. All the attending Ravenettes were giddy with delight to see Tim back on his feet and returned to their company. The welcome-back party began upon their team mascot's arrival into the den, and all the revelers began knocking back shots of whisky and innumerable pony-neck bottles of beer.

After approximately an hour of hard drinking and levity, Calista and a few of her attending coterie excused themselves from the merriment, and went into the utility room of the Hart's residence to gather up the necessary equipment for the evening's upcoming grisly exercise. They returned to the recreation area with the goods, and a considerably more ominous tone took over the proceedings in the previously cheerful game room.

The diabolically beautiful head cheerleader took her date by the hand and walked him over to the edge of the billiard table. One of the other girls had spread out a clear plastic drop-cloth over the table's felt, and the staging area was now ready for the evening's altar offering to take his position on the platform.

Tim Locke, trembling with perfect dread, took his place on the table and lay down flat on its surface; he had his head facing up and was staring directly into the basement's long fluorescent ceiling lights. His gorgeous date mounted the table after him, and straddled her love slave with her thighs at his midsection. Jill Hart had located a bottle of pain killers among the collected prescriptions in her father's collection, and slipped two pills into Tim's mouth as the rest of the ravishing sweethearts ran their hands over the boy's body and began their otherworldly incantations.

Calista Taylor tied a rubber tourniquet over the boy's left knee to cut off the blood circulation to his lower leg, and rolled the leg of his trousers up as far as

she was able. After a few minutes she took hold of a small, hand-held, Wal-mart brand hacksaw, and began the crude amputation process directly above the young man's patella.

Tim felt nothing as the jagged-toothed blade bit through his skin and began to skim the surface of his femur. The girls continued their moans and wailing as their leader tried to saw through the largest bone in the human anatomy. However, to her tremendous chagrin, the stunning girl had chosen the wrong tool for the job. The thin blade screeched loudly with each pass of her hand, as if it were cutting through fresh green wood, and finally snapped into two pieces after only a few perforations were made into the bone. The incensed wicca released a terrifying cry of exasperation from her failed procedure. She then dismounted her position from the table, and bolted from the proceedings into the Hart's utility room.

She emerged a few seconds later with a Sears brand, 35 horsepower, gasoline operated, hand held chainsaw in her arms, and had a look of exquisite dementia pasted on her flawlessly put-together face.

The impeccably manicured knockout ripped the ignition cable of the powerful tool, and the dirty mechanical saw roared into life, chattering and snorting with high octane fervor. She stared at the gleaming blade for a long second, and then slammed the cutting edge down into the perforation she'd started with the hand saw moments before. The rotating teeth of the machine ate through her victim's skin and bone like so much overcooked spaghetti. The Ravenettes howled like she-devils as the limb detached itself from the remainder of Tim's anatomy, and slowly rolled to the edge of the billiard table's protected surface.

The bloodlust of the coven was now at a fever pitch. A half dozen or so of the teenage wicca grabbed the disembodied member, placed it in a plastic garbage bag, and headed towards the large downstairs hot-tub. Jill Hart and Calista Taylor began tying a second binding tourniquet around the boy's remaining stump, and started crude first-aid treatment on their sacrificial mascot. Tim still felt nothing as the wild proceedings spun through his head as if viewed through a kinescope.

When Tim's bleeding had subsided, the remaining girls joined their sisters in the Jacuzzi room, and drenched themselves in the sweet hemoglobin which they'd collected from their mindless love slave. When the cabal had finished their incantations and blood baptism, they removed the severed appendage and plastic drop cloth to the basement's interior, turned on the natural gas powered fireplace unit to its high setting, and burned the evidence down to its component levels, leaving no incriminating materials or forensic substances to be found.

The Ravens won their next game by an absolute landslide, 82-14 against the hapless Yorktown Patriots. They could do no wrong on the gridiron that chilly Friday night. It was the highest-scoring, one sided victory ever recorded in the history of Virginia high school football competition.

And that is how it went with the Ravens for the next bit of time. Week after week they easily won their contests, but with a smaller final scoring difference each time they played their opponents. In early November, the team had a scheduled bye weekend, and would not play again for eighteen days. The last regular season game was to be played on the Ravens' home field against the highly favored Wakefield Warriors. The Ravens now had a season record of five wins and four losses, which had already beaten all predicted performance expectations for the team. If they could produce a win in their next match, they would be guaranteed a wild card position in the upcoming quarter-final playoff games; and Calista Taylor was going to do everything in her power to try and secure that win for the team.

Tim Locke had been treated at Fairfax hospital for massive blood loss, trauma, and shock on the evening of his left leg's unrefined detachment from his body. The hospital staff had been informed by several members of the Ravenettes, who had arrived with Tim in the emergency room, that several boys from their school had been drinking heavily, taking prescription sedatives, and playing a game of chicken on the local metro system's railroad tracks near the Prince William county power station. In a tragic accident, one of the young man's trouser legs had become ensnared under the rail as a commuter locomotive bore down on his position, and the unfortunate limb was completely sheared from its owner. The girls informed the attending medics that the section of the boy's anatomy could be anywhere within the metro system's railway tracks, or may have been thrown from the engine's grill into the adjoining weeds within the hundreds of miles of surrounding area.

The injured boy had stayed out of school for many days, but Calista came to visit him often while he convalesced at his home. She continued to make the young man feel loved and cared for by the Ravenettes, and endlessly told him how they were all waiting in great anticipation for his return to them. She also took care of any smoldering, carnal desires the boy may have had for her while she was present with him in his small upstairs bedroom.

During Tim's absence from the Thursday meetings at Jill Hart's house, the girls had been busy using their Ouija board to communicate with their supernatural masters. Not surprisingly, it had been commanded by the elders that the Ravenettes needed to offer yet another fresh amputation to them, which would guarantee not merely a playoff position for their team, not the league championship, but the greatly coveted state trophy. When Calista Taylor digested this glorious information dispatched to her from the black forces of the other side, she wildly guaranteed them that they would have their requested offering in short order.

However, Jill Hart, the second most powerful practitioner of their group's alchemy, was beginning to feel tremendous guilt for the needless suffering they'd inflicted on Tim Locke. She intrinsically knew that Calista was ready to carve the young man into bite-sized fragments to selfishly secure victories for the team, and the malaise-filled girl also understood that she was this boy's only hope of getting away from the clutches of their monomaniacal leader.

On the Thursday evening before the final game with Wakefield, Tim was at last able to leave his house with the use of a pair of aluminum crutches. Calista had called him to say that she'd pick him up for their regular weekly meeting, and that she was greatly anticipating his return to the loving Ravenettes. Also, the pathological temptress was fully prepared that night to remove his other leg at the joint with the gas-operated power-saw in an attempt to secure a winning season for her beloved team.

However, shortly before the head Ravenette arrived at her minion's home, Jill Hart whizzed up to his residence in her Dodge coupe, pulled Tim Locke into the passenger's seat of the ride, and whisked him away to the Hart's summer cabin in Calvert County, Maryland, to have a frank discussion with the boy concerning the terribly dangerous situation they had at hand. Once inside the rustically appointed cabin, Jill informed him of her anguish and terrible personal guilt concerning the injustices they'd inflicted on him. She told the lad, in no uncertain terms, that Calista Taylor fully intended to saw off his other wheel with that same big freakin' chainsaw she'd used on him the other evening if he entered the basement with the rest of her twisted squad of wicca.

Jill emotionally informed him that she was afraid he couldn't survive another bloodletting procedure, and begged him to stay away from Calista no matter how much he carnally desired to be with her. They talked into the night about the raving head cheerleader's insensitivity, egotism, and utterly solipsistic behavior; and although Tim Locke hated to admit that the girl he'd worshipped almost his entire natural life was a complete scumbag, he finally came to his senses about the situation, and decided he'd be better off staying outside of her dark sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, back at Jill Hart's residence, the clutch of wicca cheerleaders stood in the cold November air, endlessly ringing the doorbell of the expansive residence. Finally, after nearly an hour of waiting for Jill to arrive home, the girls gave up trying to gain entry, and ruefully concluded that their turncoat sister had absconded with their intended sacrifice. It was finally, sadly resolved by the group that there would be no blood orgy tribute to their masters on this particular night.

Calista Taylor was frenzied with anger at Jill's temerity to kidnap their coven's sacrificial lamb. As she tried to contain her personal rage, small green static sparks would jump from her fingertips, and her usually flawless features became twisted and gnarled with unbridled ire. She swore, at that moment, to exact an unspeakable revenge on her former sorceress companion.

The evening of the final game had at last arrived, and the Ravenettes, save for Jill Hart, were on the pitch performing for the sold-out crowd at Fairfax high school. Tim Locke was still concealed in the Hart's summer home, with doors and windows bolted. He was informed by Jill not to answer the phone or receive any visitors until she'd returned to his place of hiding. She was going to the game, wearing jeans, sweatshirt, and a down coat, to tell the Ravenettes that she'd

had it with their abusive handling of their troupe's incredible power, and was leaving their company permanently

At half time, the Ravens were behind the Wakefield Warriors by one touchdown, by a score of 10-3. However, the close score did not indicate the real situation on the field. The Ravens looked beat-up, disorganized, and completely flat on the playing turf. The Warriors had come close to scoring several other times that night, but had fumbled the ball near the goal line, or had penalties call back scores. At the beginning of the third quarter, the visiting team looked crisp, alive and ready to take the field. The Ravens seemed demoralized and ready to call it a game.

As the match proceeded, the Warriors scored twice again in the third quarter, making their 24-3 lead nearly unbeatable. Calista Taylor was enraged to the point of near apoplexy as her once powerful Ravens performed like drunken clowns on the playing field. Then, as the Ravenettes were performing a dance routine while the Warriors took a regulation time-out, Calista Taylor espied her new nemesis, Jill Hart, from the corner of her eye. The pretty, civilian-clad girl was seated on the far side of the playing field, keeping a cool, keen eye on the icy, vicious head cheerleader.

And then *everything* started to happen.

Calista walked away from the performing troupe, and began crossing the pitch at mid-field, with a look of pure, crystallized psychosis on her face. As she began her slow, measured strides to where Jill Hart was sitting, a cruel smile began to curl up at the edges of her picturesque, perfectly lipsticked mouth. Jill, the second most powerful wicca of the group, was now poised for confrontation with her former sister. She stood up, took a deep breath, steadied herself, and began to walk towards the approaching Calista with the determined paces of an outlaw gunslinger.

The crowd quieted as the two intensely-focused girls kept closing the gap between themselves. Calista began pounding her fist into her open hand while murmuring incantations to herself; electric discharges emanated from her fingers with each contact they made with her sweaty palm. Jill Hart was pulling up the sleeves of her sweatshirt, getting ready for a Virginia-style, down and dirty roadhouse cat-fight with her former friend in an attempt to settle their moral differences concerning Tim Locke for all time.

The two incensed wicca were now thirty feet or so from one another and closing the distance with each pace they took. The stunned silent crowd stood mute as they witnessed the girls prepare for their impending showdown. And while the grim combatants silently approached one another, wild formations of inky black clouds began to collect over the high school, and the game's attendees heard muted thunder start to rumble in the far distance.

Calista Taylor stopped walking, and stared directly at her adversary. The head cheerleader's eyes were now narrow slits of neon-green rage. Jill Hart

continued her advance on the cruel girl, ready to engage her antagonist with fisticuffs and fury. But she never got the chance.

The head Ravenette held out her palm, closed her eyes, and released a massive thunderbolt of ball lightning from her hand. It exploded from her fingertips like a rocket propelled grenade, and then blasted directly into Jill's midsection, knocking the girl twenty feet back from her previous position on the field. The crowd gasped in utter incredulity as she tumbled and flew back from the tremendous electric charge.

The black clouds continued to collect around the playing field, and the thunderclaps were now closing in on the area around the school. Several members of the crowd who had brought video-cameras with them were now getting footage of the unimaginable event which was now being played out before them on the pitch.

Jill Hart, who'd been knocked nearly unconscious by the horrific blow to her body, began wobbling to her feet in a desperate attempt to again confront her powerful nemesis. The injured girl closed her eyes, whispered the libretto to an ancient cabalistic text, and then returned a tremendous salvo of blue-hot current towards her savage aggressor. Calista Taylor reeled from the impact of the projected fireball, and collapsed to one knee on the turf.

Thunder began to sound like cannon fire around the two girls, and lightning started to pitchfork around the playing field from the storm clouds overhead. Still, the two girls blasted one another with their great amounts of channeled current. Jill Hart had been terribly weakened by the first gigantic hit she'd taken from Calista, and now the projections emanating from her hand were merely pulses of depleting energy. Calista absorbed the enervated salvos easily, and began her final approach to sanction the one who'd kidnapped her sacrificial offering.

Calista was now only a few feet from Jill, and was firing at will at her downed adversary. Jill twisted and writhed in clean agony as the charges coiled around her body. The obsessed head cheerleader now stood over her former friend and discharged her ungrounded energy without compassion, releasing salvo after salvo of unregulated juice towards the downed girl.

When it seemed Jill could withstand no more of the attack, several wind funnels of pitch black intensity snaked down from the giant storm cloud, and began to dance and jump around the two girls on the playing surface. Tremendous, tornado-like gusts circled the two injured wicca, and the localized storm now appeared to the viewer like something taken from of the worst parts of the bible. The Wakefield Warriors' terrified players and coaches had seen and experienced enough of the night's unbelievable action, and bolted from the field to the team buses which were waiting for them outside the perimeter of the bleachers.

Many members of the crowd took the lead from the fleeing team. They poured from their seats to the nearby streets and parking lots to get away from the unspeakable elemental conflagration that was taking place on the football field. The storm had now reached its fever pitch, and had concentrated down on the area

where Calista kept Jill pinned to the turf. The sadistic girl had her downed companion flat on her back, and was pouring the hot elemental wattage from her palms into her helpless sister. As Calista Taylor prepared to administer the final, terminating barrage onto her foe, the two of them were surrounded by the unbelievable forces of the surrounding hurricanes. In what seemed like slow motion video footage to the remaining crowd, the two of them were sucked up into the epicenter of the black sky, and were swallowed in the maw of the giant storm cloud which surrounded the area.

As the two girls disappeared from sight, pandemonium broke out at the Fairfax high school football field. The leftover crowd scattered from their seats and ran away from the area like terrified children. Cannonades of thunder and multicolored fireballs emanated from the storm clouds overhead as the playing field and bleachers seemed to be under bombardment from the forces of Nature. Uncontrolled blasts of lightning ripped gigantic ruts into the grassy turf, and the endless rows of aluminum bleachers were detonated into twisted shards from the overpowering force of the lightning's galvanic impact.

After several moments of the phenomenal cyclone's destructive activities, the tempest began to subside. The gale force winds began to diminish, and the once eardrum-shattering thunderclaps receded. Soon, amazingly, within a quarter of an hour of the storm's inception, all was quiet at the now completely abandoned football field.

Within hours of the playing turf's complete decimation, the videotaped, Armageddon-like battle between Calista Taylor and Jill Hart was being broadcast on local and national news stations around the globe. The next morning hundreds of news agency representatives, reporters, journalists, parapsychologists, military personnel, National Guard units, Central Intelligence Agency field agents and just plain gawkers surrounded the smoldering area which had once been a high school athletic field.

CIA operatives had dispatched plain-car units to each of the remaining Ravenettes' homes, and the cheerleaders were taken from their residences to safe houses and grilled by agents concerning the incredible events which had transpired between their two colleagues. The stunned girls cracked easily under the questioning of the intense agents, and all of them confessed to their practices of the dark arts and witchcraft to secure wins for their once hapless football team.

With the assistance of an unnamed internal confederate, a bootlegged copy of the video-taped confessions of the cheerleading squad fell into the hands of an unscrupulous tabloid journalist, a man named Al Sheen, from the *National Weekly Gazette*. He broke the story to his editor in Miami, Florida, and within a day, the entire country was being bombarded with the extraordinary tale of the Chainsaw Wicca Cheerleaders.

In the weeks and months that followed the fiery event at the school, many formerly unknown facts in the Ravenettes case were brought to the public's attention through the media. From an exclusive interview on a local Virginia television channel, a college campus betting bookie came forward and announced that Calista Taylor had come to him after the first few weeks of the football

season, and had bet an eye-popping ten thousand dollars, at 50-to1 odds, that the Fairfax Ravens would win the state high school football championship that year. The young man, who wished to remain unidentified, provided a written bet-receipt for the large transaction, which matched collected samples of the girl's cursive signature, and also had exact matches of her fingerprints on the page. It appeared, on the surface at least, that Calista Taylor's personal motives in her actions with the football team, Tim Locke, and the Ravenettes proved to be nothing more than a desperate attempt to make a tax-free half-million dollars by illegal bookmaking procedures.

However, in an ironic twist of Fate, instant media-celebrity status was heaped upon Tim and the remaining Fairfax cheerleaders after the incredible episode at the playing field. The young man had pressed no legal charges against the remaining girls, sighting his own weakness and poor judgment in his dealings with the late Calista Taylor, and they were free to reap the rewards of mass media interest and attention. They appeared on national talk shows in the United States, did campus speaking tours of universities throughout Europe, and became absolute TV superstars in Japan and the far east.

The injured but still smiling Tim Locke, after finishing a lengthy university guest tour of several Canadian provinces, was contacted by Columbia Motion Picture Studios in Hollywood, California. A made for television, Movie-of-the-Week special of his wild saga was in the initial stages of planning by media executives, and his services were needed as a script advisor. Tim contacted an intellectual properties lawyer in Bel Air, California, one Bill Leonard, B.A., M.A., J.D., shortly after he'd been approached by the studio, and secured all the legal copyrights to his biographical data before signing the deal with Columbia Pictures. His final negotiated payment for his release of the rights to the film making group was a whopping three and a half million dollars.

The remaining Ravenettes were all immediately offered professional cheerleading positions, complete with enormous signing bonuses, by every one of the National Football League's active teams. In their final salary negotiations, the troupe of pretty, yet suspect girls signed multiyear contracts with various west coast franchises for undisclosed sums of cash and a variety of premium payment incentives.

Finally, from the video-taped footage of the fiery combat between Calista Taylor and Jill Hart on their final night on earth, it was decided by the Virginia High School Athletics Board that the Wakefield Warriors had been the first team to abandon the field that evening during the conflagration, and hence, forfeited the game to the Fairfax Ravens, despite being ahead at that point in the match by the score of 24-3. The Ravens ended the year with a six win, four loss record, and qualified for the upcoming wild card game which would be held a few days after the Thanksgiving holiday.

Randy Atlas and the Hairspray Conspiracy

Sometime in 1983-

Randy Atlas, it is safe to say, has lost a considerable amount of his reasoning faculties. The red-haired, plowboy-jeans wearing leviathan was becoming more than a little unglued in the mental health department; he was, in the higher sense of estimating things, damaged goods.

Some people have bad days at the office and can shrug off the chagrin and poor luck in the evening at the corner saloon and be done with it. Other folks have a harrowing week and partake in other measures to relieve stress: they take a day off from work, go to the shore, or ravish some undergraduate Communications major from the local community college to forget their string of bad fate. But Randy Atlas, the mountain man hailing from Front Royal, Virginia, was having a bad year. As the chipmunk-like singers who yodel the theme song to the trendy, post-modern television show "Friends," would giddily remind us, "it hasn't been your day, your week, your month or even your *yee-er*." The mammoth guy's personal life was on the skids in a serious way.

The signs of a serious confrontation at the apartment had been coming on for days. Claudia, his Johnny Ramone-looking girlfriend and roommate, had been mooning over some prettified swain named Brett Sylvester, the lead singer of a local poodle-coiffed lite-metal band called Hairspray Conspiracy. She'd try and drag Randy to The Riot Club every Saturday to see the group profile and prance around the stage playing antiseptic, barre-chord power ballads. Randy despised poseur-rock, and Brett's band was the epitome of affected pomposity.

The Internal Revenue Service had also been after the immense bucolic man. Because of some mathematical hoo-haw that only government accountants can grasp, Mr. Atlas had been asked to cough-up three hundred dollars worth of back taxes for the previous year. "The guys at the IRS are some *bad* hombres," he muttered to himself, "I'd better start working some extra hours at the record store to appease those blood-worms." And Randy was correct in assuming that the people manning that particular government agency were some evil animals. He had every right to believe such a thing. If they could bring down big-time crime bosses and billionaires, they wouldn't have much problem reaming the bank accounts of an assistant manager in a suburban record store. They could snap his back like a Ritz cracker if they so desired.

But what froze his balls worse than anything was that his beautiful Ford Ranger pick-up was beginning to act funny and hitch while in operation. The problem, he surmised, was with the internal electrical system. He was certain of it. More money would be required to repair his baby-blue four wheeler than he had in the bank.

Randy, in his inner heart, believed that money in and of itself was neither a good or bad thing. It simply existed, and some people had more of it than others.

But being flat broke when your only car needs servicing was definitely the financial equivalent of having an icepick rammed through your kidney.

Upon returning home from Red Moon Records one evening, he was greeted by the sight of Claudia and Brett Sylvester's sweat-drenched bodies intertwined on the divan. His girlfriend had assumed the lion-on-a-cheesegrater position on the sofa, and the hair-intensive rock star was kneeling behind her, with his manhood buried deep inside her secret garden. The pair were in the throes of a raucous, squawking union and hadn't heard his entry into the room because they were playing an album on the stereo at high volume. The record they were bodily throbbing to was the L.A. guitar-pop band Journey's opus entitled "Escape." Randy ogled the moaning duo for a moment and caustically mumbled to himself, "I *really* hate Journey," and exited the apartment, leaving the two of them to their own devices.

The assistant manager of the album and tape shop drove his sputtering pick-up back to the store, and spent the evening on the cot in the office. Things had begun to avalanche in the relationship area of the big-boned man's life. To be completely honest, everything had basically gone to smash at this point in time.

As the days passed at work, Randy heard nothing from Claudia. He continued sleeping in the office, and worked many overtime hours for extra cash. Between the feeling of loss and the exhaustion from too many man-hours on the employee clock, Randy was getting a bit snaky. To make things even worse, the playlist of albums to spin on the store's public address system was absolutely dismal. All the bands that he hated the most were on it: Foreigner; Styx; ELO; Boston; Kansas; Chicago; Night Ranger; The Police; Culture Club; and especially Journey, the most wretched, saccharine corn-bomb group ever, headed the selected roster. In an act of open defiance and mental self-preservation, he abandoned the required in-store tunes and spun only his favorite Jethro Tull records from the early 1970s.

Randy began binge-eating, hoping to obtain a sense of mental comfort from his stressful situation. However, The McDonald's food he was stuffing himself with for consolation was slowly poisoning his mind by lipid saturation, and greatly expanding his already monstrous waistline. Claustrophobia was also fraying his nerves. After two weeks of staying in the store night and day, the manager, Scott Free, asked his sizable employee if he'd like to stay in the guest room at his apartment until he could find another suitable residence. Randy barked a defiant "No!" at his boss and continued to play the same side of the record "Living in the Past," at great volume, closing his eyes to assist listening concentration. Then the great event occurred.

At closing-time one night, when Randy was alone in the store, all the members of Hairspray Conspiracy entered the shop. The boys were immaculate in their on-stage finery: buccaneer shirts, spandex pants, striped scarves, studded belts, thin bracelets, and long earrings made them look like Italian runway models. They were looking to buy the new Pat Benatar and Toto cassettes to cover the new singles in their set. Brett Sylvester, his personal albatross, came to the counter with an enigmatic smirk on his face. Before he could open his mouth to ask for

the tapes, Randy drove his fist into the heavily made up cheek bones of the lead singer, knocking him cold. The pretty vocalist collapsed like a flamingo shot by a high-powered rifle.

The other members of the band stood in shock, like disoriented antelope. Randy moved from behind the counter and gave each of them the same hammering treatment. It was almost no challenge for him. The wraith-like, ectomorphic rock stars fell to the ground like cheap Barbie dolls from his powerful blows. After his bit of business with the members of Hairspray Conspiracy, he closed the store, and put the day's receipts in the combination safe in the office. Then he collected the prone frames of the gorgeous players and placed them in the bed of his Ford Ranger pick-up.

The big fellow drove his limping machine into the countryside, and finally arrived at his father's summer getaway cabin in the Shenandoah Mountains. The spiffy musicians were still deep in la-la land when they reached their destination. Randy retrieved a shovel and flashlight from the inside of the residence and began digging shallow graves for the members of the insufferable quartet.

Soon all four of them were buried up to their neck in the rich soil of his family's land, with only their noggins protruding from out of the ground like heads of cauliflower. Randy left his charges for a short while to purchase some Big Macs, fish sandwiches, fries and large soft drinks from the McDonald's back off of the rural route near the farm. When he returned to the boys, his crew was wide awake and staring into the distance like wooden ducks.

He fed the high-calorie junk food to his reluctant wards. Brett Sylvester complained that the sandwiches and beverages were bad for his body, and weren't considered very nutritious by the United States Food and Drug Administration. Randy placed two french fries up the nostrils of the singer until he could not breathe for a moment. When he removed the potato strips from the vocalist's nose, Brett exhaled a long, sharp respiratory gasp and began chewing the proffered foodstuff from the hand of his captor.

The enormous man went into the cabin and retrieved a roll of duck tape and several cloth sacks that his mother places over her roses in the spring months to protect them from late frost. He applied several revolutions of the tacky strip over the mouths of each of his semi-interred guests. Then he placed a burlap bag over each of their heads, and wished them all a good night. Their rehabilitation treatment would begin in the morning. Randy Atlas retired to the cabin where he finished eating several filet-o-fish sandwiches, and drank his large Dr. Pepper in peace.

In the morning, refreshed from a long, uninterrupted night's sleep, Randy drove to the gas station several miles from the cabin and telephoned the record store. He informed Scott Free that he was going to listen to his manager's sage advice; he'd take a couple of days off from work to collect himself and think about what to do with the current situation. Randy Atlas's boss was greatly relieved that his employee would be gone for a while, and told him to enjoy his time off to the fullest. He informed his assistant that he expected to see a new man come back into the store in a few days. The giant employee guaranteed his

friend that he wouldn't even recognize him when he returned to the shop after his sabbatical.

After his telephone conversation, the enormous cashier drove back to his apartment in Front Royal to gather supplies for his reprogramming efforts with the firmly planted members of the band. Claudia was at her day-job at the nail salon when he arrived, so fortunately there would be no big dramatic scene taking place in the living room this morning. He made himself a cup of coffee, and retrieved the following items from the residence: a four-man canvass tent; small electric generator; strobe scope; black light; several black light posters of J.R.R. Tolkien-type monsters; a large boom-box; a mail-order book he'd purchased on hypnotism; and a cheap nylon Halloween devil's costume that was several sizes too small for him. Then he opened the bottom drawer of his dresser and extracted a sheet of the powerful blotter acid known as Red Dragon. He exited the premises, placed all his items in the bed of the truck, and withdrew from the area like a giant phantom.

While returning to the family cabin, Randy also picked up some Egg McMuffins and orange juice from the nearby McDonald's. Finally the Brobdinaggian man stopped at a variety store where he purchased two prerecorded cassette tapes: Jethro Tull's "Thick as a Brick," and Journey's "Captured Live." After completing his purchases he toiled the creaking Ford Ranger back to the cottage in the woods.

The entrenched musicians hadn't moved since he'd last been with them. He removed the canvass sacks from their collapsing hairdos and offered them a delicious, hot breakfast. The boys in the ground had spent most of the morning trying to yell for help through the tape gags while Randy had been away. They were many miles from anywhere and their muffled cries went unheard except by the plainly indifferent local wildlife.

The orange juice felt wonderful going down their raw throats and the McMuffins were also welcome. After their meal, the band in the ground became more talkative and asked Randy what he had planned for them. The ogre-like man said nothing as he began to pitch the tent over the prominent heads of the four rock stars.

Soon the canopy was perfectly set up, and taught enough to bounce coins off of the canvass top. Randy retrieved his strobe scope, black light and fluorescent posters from the truck's flatbed and began decorating the inside of their temporary structure. After half an hour, the inside of the place looked like a 1960s hippie house.

Unbeknown to the members of the band, Randy Atlas had placed a healthy quantity of the Red Dragon hallucinogen into their orange juice containers prior to their ingesting of the sweet drink. It had been about thirty minutes since they'd imbibed the chemicals, and now the four of them were beginning to titter and squeak with laughter.

The captor of the quartet then went to collect his boom-box and generator from the Ranger. He connected the tape player, black light and strobe scope to the power source. After doing so, he went into the cabin to start reading his book on

hypnosis. He returned to his charges after two hours. They were tripping their brains out upon his arrival.

Randy Atlas turned on the black light, and the posters in the shelter took on a fuzzy, almost living presence. Then he turned on the stereo and began playing the intolerable Journey tape. At first it was low, but he incrementally turned up the volume to a quite appreciable level. The members of the band looked glazed, almost like marzipan figures, as the insincere, ersatz music swelled in on them.

Their host then returned to his truck where he changed into his cheap red nylon cape, and plastic devil horns. He took the waxy black make-up crayon that came with the costume and applied the likeness of a widow's peak, mustache, and Van Dyke beard to his face. He returned to the tent, where the four staked musicians were agog with the musical entertainment.

Randy Atlas braced himself, switched on the strobe scope and leapt into the tent bellowing like a walrus. The tiny cape swirled around his enormous frame, and the plastic horns flipped to-and-fro on his head as he danced about the four skulls of his captors. The members of Hairspray Conspiracy began to bawl and gibber like jungle birds.

The huge Beelzebub performed entre chats and clumsy pirouettes in front of the black light posters while the strobe scope made his hulking body visually flicker and flash for the boys in the soil. They began sobbing with terror from the spectacle taking place before them.

Then the inexpensively clad demon got on all fours and began crawling towards the chemically overpowered quartet like a huge reptile, cawing and roaring horrific, uncategorizable sounds as he approached them. Randy Atlas was now inches from the faces of his captors, tweaking every nightmarish, psychedelic fiber in their forebrains.

"I am the great and powerful Oz!" He screamed at the unlucky boys, "Who are *YOU?*," he blared at the paralyzed musicians. They all made strange, guttural mooring sounds at this interrogation. "Do you *like* this music and this place?," he thundered at the mentally-devastated crew. They violently twisted their heads back and forth in a negative response, tears flashing from their eyes as they whipped their necks in agitation. "Well I'm here to tell you they listen to this particular record in Hell all day *everyday!* It never, ever, ever stops. Do you want to go to find out for yourselves how bad it can get? Well do you?," he bellowed at the ravaged poseurs. The group continued their negative bovine utterings, which slowly mutated into a collective braying sound.

Randy turned the volume up to the highest level and rolled around in the dirt in front of the ensemble, occasionally moving up to one of the individual member's faces and booming out a menacing "*broooohahahahahaha!*" After several salvos of this treatment, the members of the band blacked out from pure, crystallized horror. The colossal host went back to his cabin to change out of his discount satanic clothing, remove the make-up from his face, wash-up and continue reading his mail-order book on hypnotic suggestion.

In the early evening he returned to his wards. They were all awake and beginning to come down from the powerful hallucinogenic materials they'd consumed. He gave them all water from his sports bottle and began taking the posters down from the sides of the tent. Then he placed the Jethro Tull cassette in the boom-box, and turned it on low volume. He placed a stool in front of the heads of his rooted guests and began speaking to them in a calm, low tone, telling them to relax and feel the energy in their systems rise from their legs, to the base of the spine, and up to the head. Randy continued his measured, soothing meditative spiel until his audience was in a sleep-like beta wave state.

As Ian Anderson and Martin Barre played groovy 70s renaissance rock in the background, the elephantine host of Hairspray Conspiracy placed post-hypnotic recommendations in their minds concerning musical tastes, correct behavior concerning other people's roommates, and their whereabouts for the past twenty-four hours. He made it plain to the stationary guys that art-rock was in, 80s lite-metal out, and his girlfriend should be left alone. He also planted the suggestion that they'd attended an all-female mud-wrestling tournament in Maryland the night before and had become active participants in the go-go dancer mud pit. The signal for their reawakening would be three snaps of his fingers; then they'd return to their new, readjusted lives, and forget their captive night on the psychedelic rehabilitation farm.

Randy replaced the Tull tape in the boom-box with Journey's live offering. Then he unearthed the four soiled players, placed them and the cassette player in the bed of his truck, and drove them back to the mall where Red Moon Records was located. He went around to the shopping center's loading dock, and placed their soggy, limp bodies on the metal staircase leading to the rear delivery entrance. He held the portable stereo in one hand, and snapped his fingers three times.

The muddy, stained poodle-rockers blossomed into consciousness. They seemed disoriented, and appalled at the style of clothing they wore. The four of them stared at Randy with a completely bewildered look. Then he hit the boom-box's play button, and the contrived FM product-music spewed from the speakers. The four filthy boys held their ears in distress and ran in desperate circles trying to evade the repellent song. Their host turned off the music and began telling them their convenient preconceived alibi.

He informed the fellows that they'd showed up at the store just before closing last night, but the items they wanted had been out of stock. They'd returned to the mall in the early evening of the next day, but, for some inexplicable reason, were covered in mud and acting funny. He had taken them all around to the back end of the arcade to avoid any kind of weird scene with security guards in the mall. The members of the band stared at him and smiled knowingly.

"It was some kind of time on the block in Baltimore last night," Brett Sylvester informed their new friend. "You wouldn't believe the stuff that went down in B-town last evening. Some of those wild women like to wallow and thrash in lime Jell-o for big tips, others tend towards whipped cream, but the ones

we checked out at this one club just seemed to enjoy rolling around in thick mud and body slamming one another. It was tribal. Animalistic. Gnarly in the fullest sense of the word. I wouldn't have believed I could be persuaded to participate in such a tormented activity. But it was so... 'stimulating' I guess is the word." The other members of the band nodded in zombie-like agreement. They thanked Randy for delivering them from a potential wiggly situation inside the store. Then they walked around to the front of the mall, climbed in their van which had been parked all evening by the glass doors, and drove off to do whatever rock stars do during the daylight hours.

Several days after their trip to Randy's farm, the members of Hairspray Conspiracy changed the name of their band to Outrider. They abandoned all their make-up kits, spandex and protein conditioners, proffering to wear flannel, blue jeans, baseball caps and work boots on stage. Their set list changed dramatically as well. Instead of April Wine, Loverboy, Pablo Cruise and Firefall songs, they now jammed-out on King Crimson, Yes, vintage Genesis, Pink Floyd, and covered the entire first side of Jethro Tull's "Aqualung" album. They were in ecstasy while performing these tunes for their audiences. Their happiness was on a cosmic order.

The primarily singles-bar crowd at The Riot Club at first were bewildered, and then became completely unsettled at the new tunes being offered by the band. After two weeks the management at the saloon gave Outrider the boot, and got another group named Tequila Sunrise to keep the patrons humming and dancing to familiar pop-rock hits on the weekends.

Outrider decided to hit the road and play the northeastern states college circuit where all the willowy intellectual kids go to school. They became an instant success at the brainy campuses, and permanently relocated to Massachusetts, the only state in the union where there are more universities than fern bars.

Randy and Claudia were reunited after a month apart from each other. The huge clerk moved back in to the apartment with his girlfriend after many heartfelt conversations, and life resumed its normal course for the couple. Also, Scott Free, the manager of Red Moon records, gave his assistant a salary cash advance to repair his cherished Ford pick-up and get the IRS off his back.

One rainy night while Randy and his girl were driving home from the mall, WSOL radio was doing their three-for-Thursday song set. The disc jockey would play three tunes in a row from the same pop-chart group, and Randy's personal nemesis band Journey was the featured artist of the moment.

He observed Claudia smiling, tapping her foot, and humming along with the music on the airwaves; and she, in turn, noticed his distasteful look in her direction. Randy's mate told him that no matter how much he detested dumb pop music, a lot of people really like it. She said it's OK to let your sensibilities slip once in a while and just get caught-up in some vapid, nonsensical sing-songy fun. Randy stared at his girl with a wry, twisted smile pasted to his red, glistening mouth. He looked diabolical in the blurred headlights of the on coming cars; like a tormented, three-hundred pound El Greco netherworld character driving a baby

blue Ford. The windshield wipers swooped back and forth, pushing the water aside, and keeping a queer, metronomic beat in the truck's cab. At last he spoke up and purred into the ear of his unsuspecting girl, "isn't it pretty to think so, my dear."

The Sonic Rendezvous of David Trowbridge

The rich kids who attend my public high school, either for their family's political or media-profile visibility reasons, are all exactly alike. They are, down to the last of them, sadistic marshmallows with insufferable, egocentric attitudes. And sixteen year old David Trowbridge, the acknowledged leader of their non-inclusive clique, is a singular, plutocratic scumbag who considers himself, and his ilk, human demigods on some higher order of earthly existence.

His self-assurance and certainty of the Trowbridge's elevated status on the world's stage appears to be nothing less than ironclad. Hence, his twisted personal thinking processes have transformed him, in his own mind at least, into an untouchable, mercurial entity, who is somehow above the ordinary folk who happen to inhabit the same geographic land mass as he does.

Which makes this adolescent being, in my personal rating system of the human condition, something of a wretched, solipsistic douche bag.

David's hi-tech wizard father, Dr. Alan Trowbridge, created the technology systems for the slam-bang, over-the-top, particle-beam killer-satellites during the Reagan-era Star Wars defense program; ergo he's what my mom refers to as, "one of the big enchiladas."

Dr. Trowbridge has a forehead approximately the size of full-grown honeydew melon, and anyone who listens to the national news can tell you he is one of the most serious, top secret clearance carrying, sci-fi hombres the Department of Defense has ever had under contract. He's probably as smart as a human being can actually get in this life, but is this man who splits neutron-irradiated protons all day in a government laboratory some kind of fleshly demigod? I suppose it is a minute possibility in the cosmic sense of things, but I don't really think so.

The Trowbridge family is as secretive as the dog star, and appears to like things maintained that way. Each morning a chauffeured car leaves young David at the school's entrance and remains there at the curb, waiting for him to emerge in the afternoon after the final bell has sounded. I'm not any kind of expert in labor management operations, but I'm forced to believe that that kind of service is hard to find these days at any price, no matter who you might happen to be in the global brouhaha.

David, although he is undeservedly over-recognized and overcome with himself, has the ability to act like a reasonably normal person some of the time; or as normal as a teenage multimillionaire who attends an American public school

can be, anyway. He completes his homework, or has it done for him by his dad's minions, and turns in classroom assignments on a regular basis. He tends to be overly polite to the faculty and staff, but is practically invisible in the cafeteria or on school grounds, only associating with his selected coterie of hand-picked buds during class free time.

His sole physiological flaw, and it is a big flaw indeed, is a speech impediment that makes him seem something like an escaped mental patient to the average viewer. He begins each sentence that he speaks with an ultrasonically high-pitched 'eeeeh' sound, that occasionally reminds the disconcerted listener of a shrieking, maniacally over-pressured steam whistle being blown by an industrial air compressor. I feel confident in reporting to you that a more eardrum drilling, nerve-grating sound has never been heard by human ears.

David's seventeenth birthday is coming up soon and he's announced to his people that he is having a gathering at his home to celebrate the occasion. This upcoming event has been the favorite topic of discussion for the nouveau riche kiddies during school lunch periods for the bulk of the week, and has reached a fever pitch of excitement among their exclusive ranks.

The social climber girls in our class are flirting with David like genetically defective farm animals for his attentions, in hopes of gleaning an invitation to the party. However, I've heard from my friend Syd, that he's extremely selective about who comes to the yearly affair, and sometimes only invites a single guest to come to his home.

A couple of days ago, while I was attempting to do some free throws on the basketball court, David walked up behind me and placed his hand solidly on my shoulder. I was mentally unprepared for his sudden touch, and my shot sailed over the net's backboard and accidentally bombed some unsuspecting, junior varsity drill team girls who were playing with their school emblem semaphore flags and multicolored pompoms.

He looked squarely at me, and held my gaze in a firm but cordial manner. His countenance seemed inquisitive but sincere. We'd only talked to each other one time before, something about trading unwanted sandwiches at lunch time, and the situation was becoming a tad uncomfortable; especially for me. The whole personal interaction-thing had a bad vibe to it, and a feeling of dark anxiety seemed to cloud the conversational proceedings.

He inhaled loudly, and began trying to tell me something of interest, but the unfortunate, ear-splitting tone emanated from his mouth like a fuel-injected flute note and made us both jump from fear. It was an unnerving experience; a scene practically on the red-line level of situational bizarreness. He seemed terribly embarrassed by his inability to control the wild fluctuations of his voice,

and crimsoned in personal chagrin from the aggravating outburst from his larynx. Afterwards he gained a bit of control over his vocal apparatus and creaked to me, “come to my party, 2 o’clock Saturday, *please*. I’ll send a driver to pick you up, thanks so much. You’re a friend.”

Genuine shock and surprise from his humble invitation to visit his domicile hit me in the face like a wave of ice water. Then, after a moment of recovery, a sense of absolute curiosity came over me.

Why would he want *me*, a complete nobody, to come to his palatial home?

I could not imagine why he didn't ask some of the red hot uber-babes or steamy cheerleaders to attend this function. They were always on the verge of tearing the clothes off his body, just to get him to smile their way. My fascination grew with each passing hour that afternoon, and before classes were dismissed that day, I stopped him in the hallway, and told him I’d be pleased to be his companion on Saturday for the celebration.

The remainder of the week went by as if it were being played on the slow-motion setting of an antique video-tape player. My formerly unknown name had been instantly picked-up by the school’s upper crust grapevine, and an instant celebrity status had been bestowed upon me for being chosen to attend David’s fete. All the A-team clique members imparted to me that they wanted to have detailed reports of the inside of his home, personal habits, private interests and other accounts of his lifestyle.

I ignored all of their requests like a societal fugitive, and was branded as a stuck-up, non-compliant outsider by the elitist, teen dirtbags. Which, in the larger sense, made me feel like the happiest little party-crasher in the whole U.S.A. I could never in a million years be part of their privileged ranks because of my modest economic situation and immigrant family background. However, I could withhold the delicious information that they so desperately desired, making me a power broker of the first water, with discretionary powers over the dissemination of intelligence data that they could never access themselves. It was a great feeling to experience. There could be no doubt about it.

On that momentous Saturday, the anniversary of the birth date of David Trowbridge, a private, unmarked ambulance arrived outside my house at exactly 2pm. The first thing I saw upon climbing into the ride was a dirty, homeless man strapped to the vehicle’s interior gurney. He was completely unconscious, and his skin was the same bloodless hue as a sheet of notebook paper. As I tried to exit the vehicle, the door was slammed shut by the orderly, and the machine took off like a shot.

The long coach's tires squealed and smoked like demented nightmare machinery as we fishtailed away from the curb and onto the public streets.

The enormous attendant with a face like a hog held me with manacle-like strength with one hand, and informed me to keep quiet, or I'd need to be "put to sleep for a while," like my companion on the gurney. With his other hand, he discreetly pointed to the man on the stretcher with a large hypodermic syringe-loaded, undoubtedly, with high grade sodium pentothal or some other powerful barbiturate. I immediately complied to his request out of sheer panic, fear and bewilderment, as anyone else in my position would have done.

In short order we were at the Trowbridge's voluptuous home and taken to the rear entrance of the estate; the attendant and driver swept me and the poor hobo into its basement like trained SS operatives and slammed the rear door behind us as we were whisked through a series of long, poorly lit halls and connecting rooms.

When we arrived at the final destination, David Trowbridge, the birthday boy himself, was there and waiting for us in the room. He was strapped by the legs, arms and forehead to a stainless steel hospital table, with a look of wanton, lustful anticipation pasted on his face. A fistful of colored wires protruded from a wide gash in his throat. The cables were connected to what looked like an endless series of flashing diodes and radio wave modulation components which were meticulously placed on a second metal cot.

The unfortunate man who was with me in the ambulance was rushed to an adjoining bunk and crude, surgical preparations were made on him for the upcoming procedure. After some few minutes, Dr. Alan Trowbridge, the singular engineering-genius of the satellite-age, swept into the room like a modern-day Viktor Frankenstein. He quickly moved up to an instrument cluster of active controls, threw a console switch, and untold amounts of amperage, wattage, ohms and perfectly directed electricity ripped through the electronic viscera of the baroque-looking apparatus and into the bound man's body. The overhead lights of the place fluttered madly, and several of the long, fluorescent bulbs burst into jagged fragments from the force of the massive, galvanic charge running through them.

I cried out in clean terror as the destitute man's eyes peeled wide open. He began to squeal uncontrollably, like an unsuspecting, electrified animal as the medieval-looking, unspeakable operation took place. The hot wires which had been planted in the side of his neck flopped about like agitated diamondback snakes; thick, gray smoke and the smell of burned hair, flesh and skin permeated the air of the enclosed place. After several agonizing moments of the appalling deed, the patient was disconnected from the infernal device, rushed out from the confines of the room, and taken to another location within their grandiose home.

After roughly one hour, David Trowbridge was awake and speaking to me without any noticeable difficulty. The high-pitched screeches that had once plagued his introductory conversational words had vanished completely. He seemed relaxed and affable, despite the horrific events which had taken place only a short time before. I asked him, while trying to suppress my remaining panic, why I'd been invited to view this incredible horror show in the first place.

My host casually rejoined by saying, "my dad thinks it's always a good idea to have a back-up receiver for my annual voice-modification procedure. Sometimes things, go...well, a bit off track. For instance, that guy's head could have detonated into goulash from all that unregulated current going through it. It's only happened once before though, so the risk to me was minimal. Ergo my friend, we might have needed you for... how shall we say it, replacement parts. But only if things had gotten, you know, out of hand. However, everything's cool now. No problem whatsoever. So, let's put all this business aside and have some cake and ice cream. It's still my birthday party, you know."

Atomic Poultry

Trumpets sounded, majorettes kicked high into the air, and fanfare abounded at the annual large-appliance restaurant trade show at the beautiful Lee Iacocca Convention Center, located in the heart of the casino strip in Las Vegas,

Nevada. Sales representatives hailing from America, the far east, and western Europe were lined-up like worker bees in their display areas, giving hourly informative talks, handing out flyers and promotional gifts, and being as artificially pleasant to the crowd as human beings can be who are trying to sell someone industrial-sized kitchen products.

There were any variety of deep-fryers, kitchen storage units, and automatic dish washing machines to be viewed at the extravaganza, but the display item that was keeping the crowd buzzing and enthralled was a giant-sized, ion pulse powered, convection oven built by the Nagura Electronics Group of Seoul, Korea. The oven was approximately as large as a suburban home's walk-in closet, and was reported to be powerful enough to roast an entire cow in approximately three minutes.

The appreciative horde stood mouth agape as prettily-dressed Nagura sales associates carted in slabs of beef weighing hundreds of pounds and placed them within the confines of the huge hearth. With a flick of a switch the announcer would turn on the powerful kiln, and three minutes later, the perfectly cooked viands would be produced from the oven- succulent, delicious, and ready to be sampled and enjoyed by the demonstration's attendees.

Cleetus Wood, who owned the Woody's Big Chicken family restaurant in Front Royal, Virginia, was one of the guests in attendance who witnessed the amazingly quick food preparation time of the Korean produced mechanism. The impressed fellow mused to himself, *Man, I could cook a whole lotta chickens real-fast with that thang.* And in a few moments, a cash-order was made at the sales booth by Cleetus, and arrangements were made to have one of the units delivered to his eating establishment post haste.

Meanwhile, in the beautiful South American city of Rio de Janeiro, another giant market-specific trade show was taking place. In the famed carnival city, a tremendous agricultural and farming products exhibition was taking place at the 80,000 patron capacity, Holy Trinity soccer stadium. The product not-to-be-missed at this spectacle was a new type of livestock feed grain manufactured by the Argentine chemical firm, New BioLab Consumables.

The corn and wheat hybrid feed that was causing a stir at the event was touted to have ten times the storage life of standard feed. This unheard of shelf-life was made possible because the product had been *neutron-irradiated* at the processing plant before being sent to wholesalers for distribution to individual agro-businesses and private farms. The irradiating process would destroy even the most sub-scopic microbes in the kernel, making it invulnerable to spoilage if the product was properly stored in a cool, dry environment.

Sales were brisk at the New BioLab Consumables order counter, and many orders were placed from private farms in the Mid-Atlantic Area of the United States. In particular, one large private livestock ranch in western Virginia made a mammoth cash purchase, namely, the famed Mosby Livestock and Munitions Group of Winchester City.

But, as with many issues in life and business, mistakes can be made, and the New BioLab Consumables production plant made a *big* error in the treatment

of their new feed grain line prior to its distribution. A new technician at the plant, Lupe Lopez, had set the irradiating treatment processing equipment to the Lower Gamma level, instead of the sterilizing Neutron position, and contaminated the product with hundreds of rotogens of dirty radiation. Fortunately, quality control engineers discovered the problem before the product left the plant.

Hundreds of bushels of the corn-wheat hybrid grain had been mistakenly ionized with the low-level radiation, and had to be destroyed. But, while transporting the tainted product to be burned, many individual sacks had been improperly marked as safe by warehouse personnel, and inadvertently made it back to the processing plant, believed to be fresh feed.

These mismarked sacks of grain invariably made their way to the Mosby Livestock and Munitions Group's order, and were dispatched to their livestock ranch in Front Royal. Within days of the feed's arrival in the Old Dominion State, the product was introduced to the feeding tubes of the poultry division within the ranch's confines.

And chickens started to die from ingesting the toxic grain.

But before they died, they got BIG.

Real big.

Mosby farm managers and owners stood aghast as they witnessed the small birds transform into monolithically large flightless creatures. Some of the fowl had grown to over six feet in length, and had stretched out in their pens, tangled together in grim death throes. Frantic midnight calls were made to genetic engineering companies in the cities of Lorton and Alexandria, and their technicians were dispatched onto the farm's property to witness and examine the enormous, feathery cadavers.

Autopsies were performed on the National Basketball Association-sized birds and an immediate stop was put to any feed, water, or internal atmosphere agent the livestock had been exposed to, but the efforts were too little and too late.

At 5:51 a.m. on the morning the genetic team was dispatched to the Mosby Livestock and Munitions Company's land in Front Royal, one BIG chicken went out of control. All the other winged creatures had grown exponentially larger and died within hours of the introduction of the tainted feed to their systems. But one bird, a creature who's individual phenotype-based genetic coding had naturally shifted by one organic hydrogen atom from C_6H_4 , to C_6H_5 , reacted in an almost volcanic fashion to the newly introduced grain.

The Gamma radiation had interacted with the new phenotype mutation in the fowl's system to produce a gigantic, musculature-enhanced, hyper-aggressive, 9 foot tall flightless gargoyle. The enraged creature broke out of its confines on the farm like a caged Bengal tiger, knocked over the staff of engineers in its confines like so many cheap piñatas, and began a hell-bent rush towards the city of Front Royal and its unsuspecting population.

The newly freed beast squawked in ecstasy as it tore through the thin wire fence around the poultry division and leapt onto the commercial road, running at full clip, toward the shopping district off of Interstate Route 9.

Cleetus Wood, owner of Woody's Big Chicken family restaurant, was driving his Ford Aerostar van on the commercial road towards his establishment, when he heard women screaming, police sirens blaring, and large caliber shots fired from the area to his immediate right. He slammed on the brakes of the vehicle, and stared in mute disbelief as he saw the mammoth bird sprint across the road, followed by scores of Front Royal police with carbines blazing hot lead towards the galloping psychotic animal.

As the glazed man watched the unbelievable proceedings happening before him, he thought to himself, *man I have been around chickens for too damn long.*

After snapping out of his wool gathering session, Cleetus floored the gas pedal of the Aerostar and wheeled his ride into the shopping center where his restaurant was located. To his tremendous consternation, the bird had changed its direction of flight from the flak of the law enforcement officers, and was now heading towards the first few stores of the strip mall where his life's investment, Woody's Big Chicken, stood.

The colossal fowl stomped over dozens of parked automobiles and kicked over 55-gallon capacity galvanized trash cans and United States Postal Service mail boxes in its crazed retreat from the law. As the bird neared the spot where Cleetus stood, the man realized he had the means at his disposal to rid the town of Front Royal of this unspeakable menace for all time, and quickly went to work to make it happen.

He grabbed his son's Sony brand, bass reflex, 2 way speaker system boom-box, from the back of the van, and unlocked and opened wide the double doors to his eatery. Immediately after gaining entry, he dashed to the room's public address system and popped out the inserted audio cassette tape, which advertised meal specials and contests to the patrons of the restaurant while they dined.

In the background of the taped advertisements, the producer had added various barnyard sound effects to add a bucolic garnish to the chicken restaurant's agrarian motif. Cows moored, banjos twanged, and one cacophonous, ear-piercing rooster crow would emanate at the end of the taped information loop, which he'd guaranteed to Cleetus that the customers would not be able to ignore no matter how hard they tried.

The hustling restaurateur heard the wild proceedings coming closer to his establishment, and moved with even more alacrity than he could have imagined to remedy the frantic situation. The desperate fellow ran into the kitchen, swung open the doors of the colossal Nagura convection oven, which had arrived only two days before, and placed the boom-box, with the taped chicken dinner advertisement now in the unit's magazine, into the rear of the giant kiln. He

turned the unit on, cranked the volume to 10, exited the oven, and concealed himself behind a salad fixings preparation counter.

Within seconds the deafening advertisement began, informing everyone within a quarter mile of the family discounts and three and four piece meal specials with choice of cole slaw, french fries or mashed potatoes and a medium-sized beverage for various cost-saving prices. Then, as the nightmarish chase on the street reached the doors of his business, the teeth-achingly loud *cock-a-doodle-do!* blasted from the unit, practically tearing the Japanese boom-box's speaker cones to pieces.

The racing, mammoth bird cocked its head in clean amazement as it sensed another of its kind in the area. It zipped through the open doors of Woody's Big Chicken family restaurant towards the familiar sound. It trampled over tables, chairs, lamps, and a Rockola jukebox in its zeal to reach the kitchen area where the joyous sound was coming from.

The mindless, giant miscreant bolted into the oven only to discover an oversized radio/cassette player screeching about valuable coupons for free coffee refills. Cleetus Wood sprang up from place of concealment, slammed the door of the giant convection oven behind the beast, and turned the incredibly powerful unit on to the Extra-Crispy setting.

The wounded bird died instantly and painlessly as the first searing rays of the ion pulse powered kitchen appliance began roasting its flesh. Its feathers literally disintegrated into nothing within seconds, and in three minutes, the largest chicken dinner in the history of the earth was ready to be served at Woody's Big Chicken family restaurant.

Front Royal police came bounding into the establishment with carbines drawn, but stopped cold from bewilderment as the delicious aroma of roast chicken, done extra-crispy style, wafted through the ravaged restaurant.

The genetic engineers, along with personnel from the Mosby Ranch, came tearing into the place of business immediately after the law enforcement officers arrived, and confiscated the perfectly cooked carcass for examination.

Cleetus Wood, frazzled by the indescribable events but still coherent of mind, offered a free salad from the salad bar and choice of large beverage to all people present for their assistance in corralling and ridding the town of the immense flightless menace.

In the weeks and months that followed the strange events in Front Royal, Cleetus became the small town's equivalent of an international power broker. He organized a cooperative, five-way joint venture capital investment between the Nagura Electronics Group, New BioLab Consumables, Mosby Livestock and Munitions, an unnamed bio-genetics firm from Alexandria, and Woody's Big Chicken family restaurant for everyone's mutual profit.

The savvy restaurateur pieced together a vertical integration schematic where the chicken embryos would be genetically altered with one extra hydrogen atom in their chromosomal coding, and after hatching, would be fed the new rapid-growth grain from Argentina, along with powerful, organic sedatives. They would be bred for consumption and processed on the Mosby ranch in Front Royal.

Nagura Electronics would supply the convection ovens to the newly franchised Woody's Big Chicken nationwide family restaurant chain, which rightfully claimed to offer their patrons the largest portions of chicken ever seen for the lowest prices imaginable.

The merger of the five private interests turned out to be amazingly profitable for all concerned parties, and Cleetus Wood retired from active participation in his stores activities. He went hunting in the fall months, joined a local book club, and hand-restored a Marlboro red, 1972 Mustang 302 convertible in his spare time. He never ate another piece of chicken again in his life, and never missed it for a moment.

Frank the Fireman is a Suburban Cannibal

Captain Frank Munch of the world famous Fairfax County Fire Department's hook and ladder rescue squad cooks and eats other peoples' flesh in his spare time. He does so because he gets quite hungry, like everyone else does, and he just happens to adore the taste of hickory-smoked, barbecued human skin.

The twice decorated career fireman does this grim, culinary exercise on a fairly regular basis, with great zeal and appetite, and has not experienced one alpha-wave of regret for his deeds in his long history of noshing on the local population of northern Virginia. And, of course, as any gourmand of any culinary style will tell you, young and fresh produce is always the most savory viand to prepare for one's repasts.

In the evenings, after the completion of his duties at the firehouse, and volunteering for an hour or so at the elementary school with their early-start reading program, he stalks the streets of the local counties like a ghoul looking for lost or abandoned children. He then whisks the unfortunate waifs away in his sedan for quick vivisection, cold storage, or, on evenings when he is absolutely ravenous, immediate consumption.

Frank keeps his grisly larder on the top floor of an abandoned chemical warehouse near the merchant marine docks in Alexandria. He uses a gasoline powered field generator to power a family sized, Sears and Roebuck brand, double door refrigerator, which even has an ice cube maker built into the front of the unit for quick dispensing of crushed ice, cubes, or cold water. This fine appliance helps to keep his expertly butchered cutlets of the populace nice and cool, and, of course, prevents unwanted spoilage of the coveted fillets. He also has a Westinghouse electric Bar-B-Q spit; several cases of Texas Pete brand hot sauce, Kraft Bar-B-Q sauce, and a Sony bass-reflex, portable stereo system in his frightful lair of fleshly mastication and ingestion.

On the beautifully engineered hi-fi set, he endlessly plays the overly moody music from the Romantic era; he especially likes the work of the remarkably neurasthenic composer Robert Schumann for some inexplicable reason. He closes his eyes and nearly swoons in ecstasy to the waves of minor key chamber music while basting the arms, legs and briskets of his victims with seasonings and spicy bottled sauces as they delicately roast to succulent perfection over the glowing red heating element of the flawlessly engineered electric spit.

So that's Frank's story in a nutshell. He's a completely psychopathic space-shot who puts out fires for a living, eats kids during his free hours, and listens to sad piano music from a hundred and some years ago in an empty warehouse by the wharf.

Tim Bond is a seven-year-old mathematical genius who still wears a Barney the Dinosaur T-shirt to school. He's a cute kid, too, considering that he's a mega-IQ'd, digit-crunching, turbo-brained tot. But, unfortunately, he's a 100% complete mute. Tim Bond can't even say the word "bug" from his small voice box of

unused vocal cords. Not even if he desperately wanted to say such an everyday colloquialized term could he bleat it from his flawed little larynx. That's why Frank effortlessly scooped him up off the street one afternoon as he walked from the local public library to the playground near his home.

Frank Munch, in a near delirium of gastronomic happiness after abducting tiny Tim from his neighborhood, licked his chops like a rabid hyena as he sprinted up the stairs of his warehouse sanctuary, transporting his bound and gagged culinary prize in a fireman's carry position over his shoulders.

Once inside his lair, he began to prepare his gleaming autopsy table for the child's recipe-specific dismemberment: thigh meat for extra-hot chili con carne, rib meat for Memphis style bar-b-cue sandwiches etc.

As the famished public servant raised the blade to make the first incisions into Timmy's thoracic regions, Frank's Nokia model 3330 cellular phone sounded. He was needed at the firehouse immediately. There was a big electrical fire happening at a power station in nearby Arlington county, and his personal expertise in that specific area of pyrotechnology was required for extinguishing it with skill and alacrity.

He sighed deeply at his interrupted activity, but duty called, and he was, after all, a dedicated fireman. He sprinted from his place of operation to his sedan, and raced to the firehouse to join his colleagues in getting to the scene of the blaze. However, in his haste to exit the premises, he didn't re-secure the ropes which bound Timmy's hands and legs. In the hours while the child was alone in the locked warehouse, he managed to untie himself from his bindings, and wandered about the dusty shelves of the place collecting various plastic containers of chemicals and compounds.

After locating ancient phials of ammonium and potassium nitrate, calcium carbonate, sulfur, and a flask of nearly crystallized glycerin, he carefully combined the agents in the base of a rusted steel trashcan. Then he discovered and added to the vessel several small bags of corroded lug nuts, penny nails, brads, and even a box of office staples for projectiles. Tim Bond, in his warehouse confinement, had knowingly and lovingly formed a crude mixture of the substance known as trinitrotoluol or TNT, and was quite eager to test the newly minted explosive on his host for the evening, Captain Frank Munch.

This particular mix of elements and hard target projectiles which Timmy had thrown together generated the explosive equivalent of an air-launched gravity bomb with an approximate two-ton destructive capability. He placed a bit more of the hastily concocted incendiary salve on top of the flak, and admired his

personal handiwork for a few moments, as any seven-year-old kid would have done.

He then dragged, shoved, pushed and kicked the heavy container full of shrapnel and high explosives by the locked front door of his place of imprisonment, and patiently waited for his captor's return. When voracious Frank came roaring back into the warehouse, now so famished he could barely see straight, Timmy, from his perched position in the roof rafters, dropped a flaming rag into the ballistically prepped canister. The flesh-eating fireman, along with about half of the warehouse, detonated into a perfect monsoon of blue-hot thermal currents.

Tim Bond held on for dear life as a good percentage of the place disintegrated into crude, saw-toothed fragments. Then, after a few moments, he left his place of concealment to get away from the tremendous heat and thick, choking smoke. He was a bit frazzled by the events of the day, but managed to shimmy down the one remaining wall of the structure and get away from the four alarm blaze which now consumed the erstwhile building.

He then removed his handkerchief from his pocket, and began cleaning off the grime and machine oil from his face and hands, which he'd accrued during his hasty work with the compounds and the air born effluvia from the tremendous blast of his explosive device. He walked a few hundred feet from the fire, sat down on a plastic dairy crate, which had been blown several hundred feet into the air only moments before, and calmly waited for the local fire squad to come and extinguish the localized conflagration.

Gunpowder Honeymoon

Colonel Mike "Cannonball" Thompson is the senior weapons designer for the United States Army's Delta Force special operations service. His office is located in a top-secret subbasement of the Department of Defense's Pentagon building, which is located in Arlington, Virginia, not Washington, D.C., as so many people are led to believe by uninformed multimedia groups and witless Hollywood film directors.

He's served his country for over twenty-five years in his engineering specialty, annually creating more and more advanced tactical and defense weapons for the D-force's armed sorties around the globe. He is well respected and admired by the military rangers who protect America's national interests, and has received written commendations and personal thanks for his work from four United States Presidents. Also, for your information, Colonel Thompson has just brutally slain his adulterous wife and her young lover.

I mean he really made a mess out of them.

Here are some details for you about how their untimely retirements came about. He'd met Kathy, the erstwhile Mrs. Thompson, several months ago at the celebration of his twenty-sixth year of service with the DOD. She had been working as a bartender with a catering company, contracted by his office, for a luncheon at the Arlington Sheraton hotel on Columbia Pike.

During the course of the meal that afternoon, they'd shared repartee, and discovered that they had similar interests in sports, travel, movies, etc. There appeared to be some attraction between the two of them, so telephone numbers were exchanged, and in the course of a month, dating became a fairly regular event with the couple. What the two of them discovered during their short courtship time was that they both greatly liked to attend parties, cocktail hours, and social gatherings of almost any sort.

Mike Thompson and Kathy were both voracious social animals and were frequent attendees at weekend soirees at the officers club and at colleagues' private homes. However, Kathy didn't know that Mike's bon vivant behavior could take on a deadly, psychopathic twist when placed in uncompromising, anxiety producing situations. Especially where the mettle of his sensitive male ego and virility were concerned.

Kathy, at the time of her somewhat sudden wedding with Mike, was exactly fifteen years younger than her new husband. She was considered to be a very attractive, almost stunning woman by all who met her. However, she also had the reputation of being a serial flirt with almost any man she came across in a social setting.

The career engineer was age forty-five when he decided to tie the knot with her, and should have had the foresight to understand that marriage with a younger, vivacious woman who enjoyed her sensual powers over men would lead to trouble down the road.

However, the Colonel was still in the throes of new love with his young girl, and as they exchanged vows at their public ceremony, he was oblivious to the warning signs of infidelity that his wizened years were trying to impart to him. Within a few months after their nuptials had been made, his suppressed fears of her unfaithfulness were realized in full.

His personal assistant at the Pentagon, Private Tim Hurt, was a twenty-six year old bar-wolf who frequented the M Street strip of Georgetown pick-up saloons on a nightly basis. He'd been sending the sensual vibe out to the

colonel's wife whenever the three of them happened to meet outside of the work place, and, to the chagrin of Cannonball Thompson, she was returning his flirtatious inferences in kind. It was something of an irritation to the new husband at first, but he let the indiscreet episodes slide, believing it to be merely the playful banter of two younger people who found themselves in the same circle of company.

Because the colonel holds the highest document clearance issued by the Army, and is constantly handling the most sensitive defense information materials, his home, car and office are rigged with various surveillance devices. Some of the units are as small as a ten cent piece, and have been placed in his residence to monitor his at-home living space for criminal break-in or potential security breaches.

Kathy and Private Hurt were unaware of the phalanx of detection devices which had been placed in the Thompson residence, and hence, over the last several weeks, the colonel had been able to obtain photographic, forensic, and audio-taped evidence of their passionate afternoon liaisons in the bedroom of the couples' newly purchased Old Town Alexandria colonial style house.

He did not let them know of his clandestine information gathering procedures over this period of time, and patiently waited for his opportunity to introduce them to his own personal form of military justice.

Over the past eighteen months, the Delta Force engineers had been working on a nearly indestructible, titanium-based, kevlar body armor capable of withstanding a direct hit from a .50mm machine gun round. The full-body kevlar suit is in the final stages of development, and is designed for the most high-risk infiltration and rescue assignments into heavily armed, enemy encampments. The almost impenetrable protective covering is currently ready for preliminary laboratory testing on its tensile strength and resistance to armor piercing flak.

Although the material is designed to withstand the penetration from the impact of an enormous round, the Delta Force operative would undoubtedly sustain broken limbs and serious internal injuries if targeted and directly hit with the high-velocity slug fired from the massive assault carbine.

The sentiment of Delta Force command is that if the operative were injured by a .50mm shell during a sortie, the other rangers on the mission would be able to bring their downed comrade to safety after their planned objective had been met and the specialty-troops began to retreat from the area .

The U.S. Army firing range and weapons testing facility is located behind the network of Navy Annex buildings on Columbia Pike in Arlington, only a mile or so from the Department of Defense Headquarters. It contains firing ranges of many sizes, and an indoor tactical assault training area, which can be configured into desert, city, wooded or polar conditions, depending on what mission the rangers are training for. Along with a stunning variety of other carbines available for use at the training site, .50mm machine guns are mounted on cement blocks at either end of the staging area.

Colonel Thompson has round-the-clock clearance at the facility, and is able to access its arsenal and laboratory even when there is only minimal security

on duty at the site. On the night before the dispensation of his drastic penalty to his wife and Private Hurt, he'd emptied all the .50s at the site except one, and had issued a command to the range directors to have the training area arranged to look like a downtown pedestrian sidewalk.

The next afternoon, the date which marked the Thompson's three-month wedding anniversary, the colonel invited Private Hurt over to their home for dinner to celebrate the happy occasion with them. At first the young assistant tried to beg away from the situation, inferring that he'd made a previous commitment and simply couldn't cancel it. Soon however, after the colonel began making oblique references to career promotions and salary increases, the young man jumped at the opportunity to come to his home that evening to participate in the dining activities.

Tim Hurt even began thinking that if he could get the old man sloppy drunk and put to bed early enough, then he and the voluptuous Mrs. Kathy Thompson might be able to organize a carnal rendezvous in the walk-in linen closet for a quick love-making session before he exited their home for the evening.

Before leaving work that afternoon Colonel Thompson stopped by the Pentagon pharmaceutical dispensary and conveniently lifted several oral doses of the barbiturate Phenobarbital, a phial of the liquid amphetamine Methadrine, a handful of ½ cc hypodermic needles, and a sealed container of butyl nitrate, which is an inhalant used when a heart attack patient needs to have arteries dilated to enormous size to continue blood circulation during a cardiac event.

The Thompsons were in gay spirits when their guest arrived sharply at 7:00 pm for dinner that evening. Kathy was radiant in a printed sun dress, and the Colonel was decked out in a polo shirt and chinos, ready for an evening of good company and good food.

Private Hurt had brought along a bottle of Herradura tequila for the occasion, and offered to prepare the first round of margaritas in the kitchen blender for all the present company. Colonel Thompson forbade the young man to do any work in the kitchen while he was a guest in their home. He suggested that he and Kathy to go to the patio and chat for a few minutes, while he made his specialty "Cannonball" cocktails for all of them.

When the two clandestine lovers exited to the yard, they casually touched hands and brushed their hips against one another as they walked side by side. At the same time, as the colonel was administering the phenobarbital to their colorful drinks, he noticed their surreptitious, non-verbal show of affection, and smirked merrily to himself at their unskillful folly.

The early evening was beautiful over the Potomac river, and the stars were just beginning to come out, when Kathy and Private Hurt collapsed in unconscious heaps onto the patio floor. Mike Thompson pensively sipped his tequila for a half hour or so, watching the two of them lie there on the ceramic tiles like a pair of roadkill raccoons. Then, when night had completely overtaken the city, he drove his Chevrolet Suburban truck to the rear alley of his home,

removed the prone bodies to its spacious rear payload area, and covered them with drop cloths.

He then started the truck's engine, clicked on the radio to the local country music station WKIX, and whistled along with The Judds as they sang their remake of the classic song, *Working in a Coal Mine*. He nonchalantly tooted his sport utility vehicle towards Interstate Highway 395 and the DOD firing range and tactical assault training area, where his plan to rectify the pair's lurid indiscretion against him would take place.

The young sentry at the gate of the complex snapped to attention upon seeing the security passes and windshield stickers designating the colonel's top-of-the-line security clearance. The colonel informed the young man he'd be going to his office for a few moments, and then entering the assault training area to work with some of the mounted guns; shots would be fired at random times, and no need for alarm or alerting the premises' security patrols would be required.

Colonel Thompson parked his truck by the range, went to his office to retrieve two of the prototype kevlar body armor suits and a few personal items, and returned to the firing complex. He carefully removed the two limp bodies from the rear of the van and placed them in the center of the tactical facility, which now looked like the downtown area of any metropolitan city. The engineer placed them both in a sitting position on a replica of a park bench, designed with care and precision by the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and began dressing them in the cumbersome, bulletproof suits.

The bulky, but incredibly light weight armor slipped on easily over the two unconscious lovers. Soon they resembled a pair of sleeping, South American armor-plated beetles, or patched-together RoboCop units sitting side by side on the long seat.

The man then removed two of the capped hypodermic needles, which had been filled earlier with the expropriated methedrine, and injected the powerful amphetamine into each of them at the small exposed area of skin located at the ankle of the suit. Then he gamboled out of the training facility, locked the entryway to the staging area, and made his way to the upper gun deck which looked down into the mimetic theater of operation.

Tim Hurt and Kathy's recovery from their Mickey Finn cocktails took only a few minutes as the high potency accelerant raced through their blood streams, and brought them back to a semblance of their normal selves.

At first they were groggy, and stared in semiconscious disbelief at the almost theatrical, bulky helmet and plates which adorned their arms, legs and mid-sections. Because of the incredulous, almost surreal situation he found himself in, Private Hurt, out of sheer nervousness and disorientation began to laugh aloud at his newly discovered, difficult circumstances. He was joined by Kathy in the anxious guffaws in only a few seconds. After a moment, the two of them stood up from the bench and almost doubled over from laughing fits at viewing each other in their angularly-constructed, balloon-like ensembles. They used each other for support, and were beginning to take the kevlar arm units off of their shoulders

when the bench they'd been sitting on exploded into match sticks from the impact of a .50mm round.

During the couples' recovery from their doses of Phenobarbital, Mike Thompson had ascended to the area where he'd armed the big .50 mm machine gun the night before. He'd zeroed the couple in the crosshairs of the carbine's laser scope and waited for them to regain their sense of bearing before beginning his fiery barrage of unimaginably powerful flak on the two adulterers.

As a garnish to his upcoming administration of justice, the rapidly dysfunctioning colonel placed a small, conical paper party cap on his head, and secured it squarely to his pate with the attached elastic band. He'd retrieved the fun trifle from his office prior to his delivery of Kathy and Private Hurt to the tactical assault space. The hats had been used as party favors several months ago from his offices' celebration marking his 26th anniversary of service with the DOD. Printed on the surface of the triangular headpiece, in neat curlicue lettering, was the phrase, "shit happens when you party naked!"

When Cannonball Thompson noticed the couple beginning to stir from their slumbers on the ersatz park bench, he took a long swig from the half pint of the Jack Daniel's charcoal filtered bourbon he had in his pants pocket, and then retrieved the small bottle of filched butyl nitrate, courtesy of the Pentagon's military pharmacy, from inside the lining of his jacket. His head was still spinning from the first mouthful of Tennessee whisky as he unscrewed the cap of the cardiac medicine and inhaled a mammoth lungful of the muscle engorging drug.

In half a second, his thoracic cavity bulged-out from his shirtfront like a weather balloon as the vapors opened his bronchial tubes to an incredible size. The colonel's eyes appeared to the viewer to become whizzing, neon spirals of light, and his head felt as if it had been filled to capacity with discount propane.

He roared into the air, "I love the smell of *BEUWWT* in the morning baby!" and fired the .50 wide of his intended mark, which had been Private Hurt, and vaporized the particleboard seat which the couple had been sitting on.

The flight survival mechanism kicked into full gear for the intended targets, as Tim and Kathy began galloping away from the smoking debris that was once a replica seating unit. Within seconds, more rounds thundered from the enormous weapon, and the downtown scenery which had been so meticulously placed in the facility the night before detonated into fragments from the intense fusillade being administered by the wildly medicated, now completely psychopathic, Colonel Mike Thompson.

The soft targets dove and scuttled behind make-shift store fronts, parked automobiles and any other form of cover as the large caliber slugs blasted the props into unrecognizable scraps. Colonel Thompson drained the contents of the Jack Daniel's bottle in one swallow, threw it over his shoulder, and intently targeted Private Hurt, who was trying to sprint to one of the locked doors of the training facility.

The engineer lined the fleeing fornicator in the cross hairs, and fired a round which hit his mark directly in the rib cage. Private Hurt let out an enormous “pwoooosh” from his lungs as the slug slammed into his body shielding. More rounds were fired and each bullet that found its mark viciously spun the helpless adulterer in circles; the targeted philanderer looked not unlike a captive laboratory rat who’d been prankishly placed in a high-speed centrifuge and set on the unit’s highest RPM designation.

After his impressive disposition of his personal assistant, the man known as “Cannonball” Thompson sighted his terrified spouse in the smoking gun’s laser sight. His wife looked at him agog, in uncomprehending awe, at how badly mistaken she’d been about his ability to discover her secret affair with Tim, and then take his revenge out in such a savage, yet thoroughly original manner.

She turned to face him, not running from the situation anymore. Kathy Thompson, wife of a decorated Army Colonel, stood in the middle of the decimated tactical training area. She stared at him intently through the visor of the bullet proof helmet. She looked at the strange man she’d married, who still wore the conical party hat slightly askew on his head, and was inhaling another administration of mind-rattling butyl nitrate. Kathy smiled nervously at him, trying to appear to have some small amount of control in the situation.

“Mike,” she anxiously called up to him.

“Yo, babe!” he crowed back down to her.

“Mike...stop this...” she stammered, “Please.... I...love you.”

“Tell it to Elvis, Trixie,” he merrily rejoined.

As Kathy was about to try and continue their fractured conversation, Mike Thompson set the .50 mm gun on full-automatic ammunition feed, lock-sighted her in the scope and pulled the trigger of the mammoth firearm.

Kathy Thompson literally flew seventy feet through the air and would have continued her flight if she hadn’t collided with the far wall of the assault training area and crashed back onto the floor. There was not a single bone in her body which had not been shattered by the powerful assault, including the very small incus, malleus and stapes bones which are located in one’s inner ear areas.

“Wooooo...gotcha,” Mike twittered to no one in particular.

Colonel Thompson scampered down to the floor of the facility to examine the condition of his wife and dinner guest for the evening. They were history, it could not be denied. However, he was elated to see that the kevlar suits they’d been wearing had not been even remotely penetrated by the machine gun rounds which had contacted them.

Over the course of the next hour or so, the wired weapons engineer removed the bodies to the Pentagon's classified document disintegration room. The small room is located over a 2000 degree furnace which runs night and day for the disposal of top secret documents which are received and read only on a need-to-know basis. The information is then immediately destroyed in the white-hot kiln to remove the chance of it being seen by anyone but the intended eyes-only viewer.

The only difficulty with the transportation of the bodies to the disintegration room was the awkward way in which they flopped to-and-fro on the colonel's shoulders when he handled each of them in a fireman's carry position. The skeletal framework of both victims had been so radically compromised that the bodies themselves were not unlike, half-filled, undulating sacks of congealing oatmeal on the man's shoulders, making their portability and management difficult to the point of frustration for the anxious soldier.

However, after a while, the colonel managed to get them to their destination. He placed them in the desired launching positions, removed the housing of the disintegration unit's feed tube which leads to the furnace, and slipped his wife's and Private Hurt's loose, pliable forms down the shoot into the awaiting inferno. Then he screwed the cover cleanly back onto the document destruction unit and tidied the room a bit before exiting its confines. Colonel Thompson then left the tactical facility and snapped a clean salute to the same young sentry who had admitted him into the complex earlier in the evening.

Over the next few days, police investigations began concerning the disappearances of Kathy Thompson and Private Tim Hurt. The investigating military and federal officers were led to believe, by testimony from Colonel Thompson, that the two of them may have run off together to Mexico in a lover's haste. He cited that the two of them both liked margarita cocktails very much, and Mexico would be an obvious choice of sanctuary for tequila-loving, adulterous outlaws such as themselves, if that indeed was the operational scenario.

After some months the police investigation was called off because of the complete lack of physical or even circumstantial evidence concerning the disappearance of the two young adults. They appeared to have utterly vanished without a trace or a clue to their whereabouts. The FBI also stated that the case was closed as far as they were concerned.

Colonel Thompson's research and development continued with the kevlar body armor, and he received a healthy cash bonus upon the project's completion. Also, he accepted thanks from the fifth United States President he'd worked under for his unflagging commitment to keeping the world safe for democracy, and his devotion to the Army's elite Delta Force rangers.

At the celebration party of his 27th year of service with the DOD, at the Twin Bridges Marriott Hotel in Roslyn, he met a flirty cocktail waitress named Nancy who thought he was an intelligent, attractive man for his age and the two of them exchanged phone numbers. He was practically gibbering with excitement when she called the next day to arrange a date.

Days of Bullet-ball

The reptilian goons' nonagonally shaped, 14-mile long space cruiser landed on Interstate highway 395 in Richmond, Virginia, on Sunday, June 6, 2173. Gecko-like shock troopers entered the city's capitol building by kicking down the steel-reinforced doors and blasting all security personnel with hand held particle beam weapons. Upon entering the governor's office, the seven foot tall, militarily trained, bipedal lizards' demands were simple.

They wanted Virginia.

All of it.

Now.

News spread across the airwaves at fractal speed of the alien invasion of the Old Dominion State. The Military and National Guard's plasma-torpedo strikes against the colossal ship proved to be useless, as shots fired from their puny conventional weapons bounced off the exterior hull of the vessel like so many half-masticated peppermint candies. The leader of the reptilian attack foray, Major Lathe Rictus, announced from the steps of the captured building that a television announcement would be made in the evening concerning the secession of Virginia from the remainder of the United States of America.

Magnus-10, the home planet of the invading beasts, is a hegemonic, blood-sport gaming colony that assaults and subjugates militarily inferior worlds for the purpose of using their populations for entertainment and gaming events. However, the Magnusarian Government had come under close scrutiny by the Pangalactic Gaming Commission in recent months for going over their yearly allotment of off-planet take-overs. Therefore, the invading troops now only occupy a section of a chosen planet they wish to enslave. And in this particular case, the Commonwealth of Virginia was chosen for annexation from the rest of the globe because of its abundance of marginally educated, aggressive citizenry, with a predisposition towards violent behavior.

At eleven p.m. eastern standard time, Major Rictus appeared on all television networks with his demand to annex the commonwealth. A show of force was deemed necessary by the Magnusarian leader to demonstrate how serious he was in his ultimatum of state surrender. At exactly 11:15 p.m. a neon pink-hot fireball flashed out of the hull of their parked space cruiser and .31 seconds later, Earth's moon detonated into golf ball sized fragments. Virginia's secession from the union was ratified by all forty-nine sister states and U.S. Territories at 9:10 a.m. the following morning.

Within hours, the Magnusarian space cruiser placed a large, impenetrable, Lucite dome over the geographic boundaries of the Commonwealth, the erstwhile land of American royalty. Citizens were herded to make-shift camps in the southern part of the state, near the North Carolina border, for sport-specific preparation and training. All ages, sizes and shapes of citizens were shepherded into the encampments for game processing.

All existing sports complexes, college stadiums, playground sites, and arenas were structurally modified for the upcoming gladiatorial games, which would be televised back to Magnus-10 for their citizenry's entertainment. The lizard population on the home planet were not biased in their thirst for viewing blood-sports, and watching televised programs of senior citizens or children fighting to the death was a common pass time for the gargantuan serpents.

The gaming and staging areas for the competitions were modified with electrified grids across their floors and walls. If participants chose to resist against subjugation or partaking in the enforced games, hot alternating current would be sent through the playing field's wires and blinding pain would snake its way up the legs of all contestants on the field.

The games were brutal in their applications: ten senior citizens with acetylene flame-throwers would be pitted against five epileptic teenagers with

gasoline powered chain saws in savage bouts of survival. Housewives armed with machetes and kitchen knives would be thrown into combat with bank accountants equipped with blunt spears and trash can lids for shields. When non-compliance to the contests appeared in the weary combatants, the white hot juice was released through the grids, and the jolted participants would continue their fighting to the death.

However, the game that the Magnus-10 population was ravenous for, the contest they would wait all week in slaving anticipation of viewing, was the game known as bullet-ball- a game similar to English Rugby, except reptilian sharpshooters with large caliber hunting rifles try to assassinate the active players as they move across the field.

The rules of the game were simplicity itself. When a team scores a goal, the other team loses a player, permanently. The few survivors of each contest are allowed the privilege of reproducing with a comely female of their selection at the end of the tournament, to ensure the continuation and quality of the games for years to come.

Only the biggest and the best college and professional male athletes were conscripted for bullet-ball, and the pristine physical specimens were treated with kid gloves by their handlers. The bullet-ball games were held in the newly modified Richmond Coliseum, which was located in the center of the capital city. It was a weekly event that was never missed by any of the invading lizard force who were able to attend the ghastly contest. All 20,000 venue seats were filled every time a match was held in the huge arena, and the games were wildly supported by the loudly hissing, jaw-clacking, scaly horde of interstellar aggressors.

Joe Mason, a football halfback and robotics student at Virginia Commonwealth University had been selected for the bullet-ball games upon being viewed by the big reptiles. His 6'2" inch frame, muscle corded arms, and granite torso had impressed the BB-team selecting group, and he was sent off to the specialized training camp without a second thought.

But Joe Mason was a man with a mission in his life, and the Magnusarian invaders could never have imagined the complexity of the resistance plot which would be devised and implemented by the brawny, flaxen-haired halfback.

Within days of his arrival into the bullet-ball camp, he began to send encrypted messages for game-sabotage assistance by manually overriding underground telephone lines and Morse coding notes to fellow Virginia-sympathizer confederates who lived out of state. His calls went primarily to his friend Nathan Williams at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Cybernetic Research.

Hastily coded instructions by Joe Mason informed his lifelong friend that his time may be limited in the bullet-ball games, and that many young men would die before his contest-undermining plan came to fruition; but with MIT's robotics team's assistance, Virginia, in her finest hour of withstanding a hostile occupation, could have a chance of blasting the assault-force of terrible lizards straight into the black maw of Kingdom Come.

In the weeks that followed, Joe Mason watched and participated with horror as scores of bullet-ball players unwillingly played the gruesome game, with the outcome of the matches inevitably the same. Reptilian sharpshooters would perch in the corners of the arena and snipe at the terrified, electrically prodded participants. The players would score goals and collapse into mentally-spent heaps as they were spared an immediate bullet in the head.

The opposing team members would then completely subliminate when a score was made against them; usually one of the older men would volunteer to go face the awaiting reptilian firing squad, which was stationed in a corner of the game's staging area. And on, and on, and on the slaughter went.

While the blood-games were continuing on earth with fantastic program ratings on Magnus-10, Nathan Williams and the MIT Cyber-jocks were working day and night on Joe Mason's fifth column plan of attack, known to those working on the project as *Operation Bombshell*.

The robotics team, working from microfiche photographs of a late twentieth century gentlemen's magazine entitled *Playboy*, prepared a dozen of the most singularly voluptuous, eye-popping, built-for-pleasure, female androids ever created in a New England cryonics laboratory.

After their assembly-line manufacturing was completed, the newly-minted, silicon-based, super-models' arms, legs, and perfectly defined busts were stuffed to the brim with lead-shielded, weapons grade, enriched Plutonium-238 and the remote control apparatus to detonate the very dirty radioactive material from a distance of hundreds of miles. The highly illegal fissionary substance was located and acquired over the now hardly used Internet by a guest-matriculant Canadian exchange student spending a semester in Massachusetts.

Public announcements were made to the enslaved Virginians, and young women desiring to be mated with the bullet-ball champions could volunteer to be viewed for consideration by the players after the tournament championship which would occur in a few days. Nathan Williams was sent an encoded message by Joe Mason loyalists to get the smoldering androids to Richmond post haste. However, the Commonwealth had been sealed off with the synthetic dome, and had remote sentries posted every hundred yards for ensured security. Entry into or out of the state was nearly impossible.

However, through an elaborate underground railroad system and series of safe-houses organized by the MIT Cartography and Urban Planning departments, the dozen big haired, mini-skirted knockouts with nuclear weapons for tits, emerged through sewer grates outside of the Richmond Division of Motor Vehicles on the day of the bullet-ball championship game. Word was dispatched to Joe Mason of the pretty robots arrival, and he tearfully thanked all his MIT Partisan Irregulars for their hard work and sacrifice in his great state's hour of profound need.

The line of excited lizards stretched for blocks around the Richmond Coliseum, as they wildly anticipated the upcoming death match. They snapped at one another in agitation and flicked their pointed tails like nervous cats in expectation of an especially gory, action-packed contest.

The twelve gorgeous automatons moved as one towards the gates of the stadium, and they demurely asked to be placed on the roster for procreative consideration by the bullet-ball champs. The security officer at the door was nearly stunned into silence by their collective radiance, and he, an invading reptile, almost found himself amorously aroused by the sweet-smelling, doe-eyed silicon enchantresses. He personally escorted the belles to VIP front row seats at center field. The girls' etiquette and protocol programs instantly reacted to the social situation with giggles, blushing, and batting of the eyelids in appreciation of the large gecko's proffered kindness.

At last the hour had arrived, and the final bullet ball game was about to begin. Joe Mason and the other conscripted players were in the waiting area, and Joe informed them, that though this may be their final hour of life, the lizards had a big surprise waiting for them real soon. The men made their tearful, nervous good-byes to one another, and then were herded out onto the field for the final game.

Nearly half of the reptile invading force was on-hand to watch the match. 20,000 wild geckos were standing on the tips of their webbed claws, gnashing at the air, and swatting one another with their hooked talons. But then, suddenly, all became eerily quiet in the massive arena. From out of the main entrance of the stadium emerged their glorious commander, Major Lathe Rictus, surrounded by his personal escorts and traveling entourage. The highly-decorated reptile took a seat next to the dozen cosmetically perfect androids, and smiled openly at them, revealing unlimited rows of small, jagged, incisors.

The famed military officer rose to his feet, held his right claw high in the air and hissed aloud to the horde, "let the game begin!"

The attending throng hissed and cawed like frenzied snakes as the buzzer sounded and the game started. Sniper fire roared from the corners of the stadium, and the participants began running for their lives to score points which could only hope to sustain their earthly existence for another thirty minutes or so.

As the cruel spectacle started in Richmond, Nathan Williams and the Virginia Loyalist Irregulars from MIT, began their work to hack into the transmission beam which broadcast the game back to the population on Magnus-10. The television beam was sent by satellite from Richmond to Boston because the central Massachusetts television station had a more powerful transmitter with which to power the signal to the lizard populated planet.

The team of tech-boys manually broke into the transmitting circuitry and began to adjust the frequency to a split-screen format by use of a purloined video-phone, which they had borrowed for all eternity from the WGBH public television system a few days before. The Loyalists watched the game in horror through a remote monitor, and witnessed the competing men being shot to pieces by snipers, tearing at one another to stop a score from occurring, or being zapped by hot current when the action slowed down for even a few seconds.

Nathan Williams and his friends worked faster than they ever imagined they could to modify the signal to split-screen format while the bloody event raged on.

On the playing field, after twenty minutes of gaming time, only a handful of players remained standing. The field was an abattoir of carnage. Some of the remaining players simply gave up, and stood stock still with their arms spread wide, awaiting the terminal round through the brain.

However, Joe Mason, a man who had made his appointment with destiny some time ago, was ready for the penultimate act of his life. He took the game ball in his bloodied hands, and threw it directly into the back of his team's net, scoring an instant goal for the opposing squad. This form of cocksure suicide had never been witnessed by the attending reptiles before, and they quieted as they awaited the certain sniper fire to ensue.

They did not wait long for the expected gunshots. A hot round went through the young robotics student's chest, and Joe Mason fell to the ground, writhing in clean agony. He began crawling towards the VIP seats at center field, where Lathe Rictus and the androids sat watching the hideous exhibition. The snipers were now having fun with the badly injured man; like sadistic cats toying with a dying mouse. They fired blazing slugs through his arms and legs; they decimated his knees and elbows with unrestrained zeal, yet the determined man, through sheer will power, kept moving towards the Magnusarian Major. Dozens of rounds continued to penetrate Joe's ravaged body, but he at last made it to the spot where the military autocrat was perched with his coterie of companions.

The reptilian commander smiled to himself as the spent, bloodied man attempted to climb up the short fence which stood between them. Lathe Rictus, always ready to execute a show of steel-fisted force to a population at any time, removed his ceremonial dagger from the sheath on his gold-braided belt, grabbed the dying man by a shank of his hair, and held the blade tight against Joe's throat. An evil smirk appeared on the gecko's thin lips as he began to slowly cut the man's neck across the windpipe.

Joe Mason, in his final human act on planet earth, screamed into the air, "now, Nathan buddy, do it now!"

The MIT boys had completed the up-link and split screen connection to Magnus-10 as soon as Joe had made it to the area in front of the Major's seat. Then, in a flash, the startled millions of viewers on the lizard planet were witnessing the sporting event on one side of their screen, and a wiry haired, t-shirted, robotics student on the other.

Nathan Williams calmly looked into the video-phone transmitting his image to the enslaving planet and serenely said to the televised population, "sic semper tyrannis, you cold-blooded douche bags," and flipped the switch that tripped the twelve androids' remote detonators.

The dozen knock-outs stood-up as one, and ripped-off their designer chemises to reveal large, tattooed confederate flags on their flawless silicon

breasts. Then, like an enraged chorus of satanic harpies, they screeched in ear-piercing, nearly ultra-sonic cries, “don’t you dare mess with Virginia, baby!” and detonated into twelve perfect atomic hurricanes.

The Richmond Coliseum, every lizard in it, and the area for fifty miles around the structure literally liquefied for one split second, then flash-burned to the component level, and afterwards, any remaining molecules of matter were simply obliterated into searing thermal currents of absolute nothingness. Nothing survived the explosion within a seventy mile radius of the coliseum, not even bacteria. The geography around the blast site became nothing less than a molten wasteland of blue-black glass. However, unbelievably, the Lucite dome over Virginia contained the heat and massive concussions from tremendous blast, and no radiation or fallout was shed on neighboring states.

The remaining thousands of Magnusarian lizards who were stationed in other parts of the state, and not in attendance at the coliseum, were lynched, hung, clubbed and burned at the stake by the newly empowered Virginians from all over the region after they’d heard the news of the successful sabotage efforts of Joe Mason. Within a few days of the blast, not a single reptile invader was alive and breathing Earth’s rich oxygen in the Commonwealth.

Nuclear winter set in to the northern section of the state within days of the explosion. However, there had been minimal loss of human life in that area, because the enslaved population had been moved south to erstwhile military training areas weeks before. After a short while, the remaining population of Virginians had been transported through connecting interstate sewer systems outside the confines of the impenetrable bubble, and into the adjoining areas of Maryland and the District of Columbia for medical treatment and relocation.

The late Joe Mason, Nathan Williams, the MIT Virginia Loyalists and Partisan Irregulars, and the MIT Cartography and Urban Planning divisions were presented with the Congressional Medal of Honor by the President of the United States shortly after their successful sabotaging efforts of the invading force. Ticker tape parades and grand festivals were held for the surviving heroes in every American city from coast to coast.

But in the far reaches of space, after witnessing the devastating explosion on their video screens, the Magnus-10 military brass made immediate calls to the Pangalactic Gaming Commission, griping about the wasted personnel, destroyed transportation units, and valuable materiel lost in the conflagration, but received no pity or special privileges for alternate planetary occupations from the supervising council.

The reptilian gaming comptrollers on the now mentally devastated colony loudly complained to the military leaders that the cost of planetary invasion was becoming simply too astronomical to sustain, and any attempts at colonizing sections of the United States was considered too risky an investment at this point in time. It is true, the games were always more thrilling to watch when dynamic, assertive contestants participated in the events, but the Virginians had proved to be too hostile to be successfully restrained, even by an aggressive occupying martial presence. It was decided by the Magnus-10 internal banking committee

that in the future, it would be more cost effective to leave America, and particularly the southern states of that country alone, and allow them tend to their own affairs as best their underdeveloped minds were capable of doing.

The Dirtiest Blonde in Town

In October of the year 2000, anyone who read the local tabloids, watched the evening news, or frequented the most high profile discotheques, nightclubs and dining spots in the Washington, D.C. area knew the name of Omar Ghibran, the flamboyant Chief Executive Officer of Iran's newly chartered Darius Petroleum Cartel. His passion for bon vivant life, beautiful women, fine food and all night drinking parties were the stuff of conversation at posh café spots and office water fountains alike throughout the town.

One of his favorite on-call darlings from the Blue Horizon Escort Service on Florida Avenue N.W. was a leggy, bleached blonde, early twenty-something year old girl named Patricia Ambrose, real name Cynthia Allen Berg, formerly of Norfolk, Virginia. Mr. Ghibran had telephoned her employer at Blue Horizon for her services at least twice a week for the previous 3 months preceding my agency's involvement in the matter of trying to discover the current whereabouts of Ms. Ambrose.

Patricia "Trish" Ambrose was the daughter of Ross and Camille Berg. Dr. Ross Berg, a successful plastic surgeon specializing in zygomatic reconstruction, was in private practice at the Norfolk Doctors Building on Decatur Street, which is located near the downtown area of the port city. His wife, Camille, did charitable work for the well-known actor Paul Newman's Make a Wish Foundation and the Rockefeller Clinic for the Aging in New York City.

Trish Ambrose had had a wealthy but often tumultuous upbringing in her home town. She'd attended prestigious private academies as a youth: the Davenport School, and Montclair Preparatory School, but had been asked to leave

each of the learning places because of unruly behavior, chronic absenteeism, and occasional incidents of theft and physical attacks on other classmates.

At the age of nineteen, in her senior year of high school, Ms. Ambrose left the Montclair institute for good a few hours before she was to be escorted by police from the dormitory building on charges of assault on her roommate. She went to her home address, emptied out her belongings from the Berg household, and took one suitcase of clothing with her to on the metroliner commuter train from Norfolk to Union Station in Washington, D.C. The problematic young woman was determined to make her way in the world as a top-dollar escort for the international business crowd that was always coming into the nation's capital to lobby congress for favors or solicit other corporate firms for their companies private interests.

However, during her first few weeks of freelance escorting, wealthy clients were few and far between as she began her career as a society courtesan. Although she was young and quite pretty, her complete ignorance of social graces, amenities, basic etiquette and customer protocol kept her out of the high-profile escort service agencies, who were looking for somewhat more refined and cultured females to entertain their wealthy, globally connected clients.

Finally, during the Christmas holidays of that year, she received a call from the Blue Horizon service for temporary placement with their business. The service had been booked solid for work the entire week preceding the holiday, and they needed a girl immediately for a private party being held in the famous Willard Hotel on 14th Street, N.W. Her guaranteed payment, through Blue Horizon, for attending the function that evening would be three hundred dollars, and she jumped like a hungry bum at the chance to make the quick money. On that evening she met Omar Ghibran of the Darius Petroleum Cartel at the historic building. Upon her introduction to the international business tycoon, he handed her a five thousand dollar gratuity merely for being on time for the affair and nicely dressed for the evening. Trish Ambrose nearly passed-out at being handed the enormous gratuity, and knew, at that moment, she'd found her mark and ticket to the big time.

Omar Ghibran had clawed his way to the top of the petroleum business over the last twenty-five years, starting as an oil well outrigger in his late teens. He'd made himself available to his employers for a variety of indecorous activities including strong-arm jobs, theft of competitors tax and expense records, and personal bodyguard services. His successful participation in these matters brought him into great favor by the industrial entrepreneurs he worked for, and after several years he was brought into the elite inner circle of power brokers, and given a chance to participate in their global moneymaking networks.

Ghibran had liked Trish Ambrose instantly, feeling an immediate connection to her scrappy behavior, peroxide good looks, and raw ambition to meet the powerful men of the world. The two of them clung to one another like old lovers during the party at the Willard, and at the end of the evening, it was Trish Ambrose who seduced her client for the night in an upstairs suite for a passionate, carnal rendezvous.

In the weeks that followed, Omar contacted Blue Horizon Escorts at least twice a week for Trish's services. Finally after their fifth date, he asked her to leave the agency and accompany him to Tehran for a protracted stay in the oil-producing country's capital city. It was the invitation she'd been waiting for since her introduction to the powerful mogul. She coquettishly declined his offer at first, sighting her need to work independently and be self-sufficient, but after some mild coaxing by the love-struck tycoon, and his inferences that her lifetime economic interests would be easily taken care of, she agreed to accompany him to his homeland to service his personal needs.

Upon her entry into the Arab country, she was introduced to a phalanx of Darius Cartel executives and innumerable tribal sheiks, all of whom found the Virginia temptress quite fetching and seductive. One young comptroller, a handsome, twenty-seven year old rake named Mohammed Aziz, found Trish Ambrose particularly charming, and pressed himself into her company whenever he found an opportunity.

In the weeks that followed, great times and great intrigue followed Omar Ghibran and Trish Ambrose wherever they went in the famed Islamic city. In Tehran's after hours private clubs the new couple were an attending staple: they drank endlessly with their coterie; formed innumerable business contacts; made scads of international telecommunications and long-distance phone calls; and gambled tens of thousands of dollars away each night without a whit of concern for the expenses they were accruing at the establishments. All of these outlandish expenses and outstanding debts would be paid off at the end of the evening with a flourish and enormous gratuity by the resplendent, irrepressible CEO.

However, Trish Ambrose, to the increasing concern of Omar Ghibran, was becoming an unstoppable serial flirt with the dozens of powerful middle-eastern men who found her western good-looks and brassy personality impossible to resist. Tensions built to a fever-pitch between the couple over the course of a few weeks, and Mohammed Aziz, the young comptroller of the Darius Group, was routinely provoking this rift between the two of them with misinformation, subterfuge, and outright lies about each other's activities.

In short order, after a violent argument with Ghibran concerning her contemptuous behavior at the Star of India club, Trish formed a romantic alliance with Mohammed Aziz in the wake of her difficulties with her benefactor. However, within days of the inception of their new erotic liaison, news of Trish's infidelity was discovered by the powerful CEO's army of personal moles, spooks, and field agents.

Ms. Ambrose, after she'd been confronted by her tempestuous patron and shown photographic evidence of her unfaithfulness, was cast into the street by her former lover. Arrangements were made by the cartel for her hasty extradition back to the United States after her humiliation of their flamboyant business leader. Aziz was fired instantly from his position with the petroleum group, but he soon found other employment with a Liberian international merchant marine group based near the Kuwaiti border on the Persian Gulf.

On the day that Trish Ambrose was escorted to her commercial passenger carrier by cartel goons for departure from the country, she and Aziz made plans to meet in New York city in late January to discuss their future together. The disgraced couple were discussing the possibility of cohabitation in the United States, and would need to make arrangements concerning his applications for immigration green card and impending American citizenship.

Which would never happen for the young, thieving Arab.

Because Trish Ambrose had selflessly embezzled, grafted, and frauded from both Ghibran's and Aziz's corporate bank accounts, approximately eight-hundred and fifty thousand dollars during her month long stay in Tehran, and had no intention of ever dealing with anyone from the middle east ever again. Ms. Ambrose had had the money transferred to various personal accounts in the Mid-Atlantic region of the States, with the help of a few Iranian confederates whom she'd met while on the party circuit with Ghibran. Each of the accomplices had had great personal grievances and bad business dealings in the past with the egotistical tycoon, and were eager to exact revenge and retribution on him in any way they were able.

Upon Trish's arrival back to Virginia, she disappeared completely from society; back in Iran, Mohammed Aziz was furious and lathering at being duped by the beautiful, filching siren after he'd heard nothing from her for two weeks.

I was contacted by an anonymous source on February 14th, Valentine's day 2001, at my business office in North Arlington, Virginia. My name is John Heat, and I'm a licensed private investigator of missing persons.

During the anonymous phone call, I was asked to find out any information concerning the whereabouts of a former call girl named Patricia Ambrose who worked out of upper Northwest Washington, D.C. My fee, I was told, for making a few calls would be the unheard of sum of ten thousand dollars in cash. Because I happen to like money, I instantly accepted the terms of the caller, and told him to have the legal tender delivered at five p.m. that afternoon at my office. At four thirty p.m. that day, a Federal Express delivery was made to my agency. The money, in its entirety, was there in non-sequentially marked one hundred dollar bills. There was also a sheet of notebook paper with a Richmond area code telephone number scribbled on it within the stacks of c-notes.

At 5:15 that afternoon I dialed the number written on the torn page and spoke with a man who claimed to represent an out-of-country client who was interested in locating Patricia Ambrose. I was asked to drive to the state capital that evening to have an in-real-life conversation with him about what I'd learned of her whereabouts. Our contact place would be a roadhouse bar called The Anaconda Room which is located directly off of Interstate Highway 395 at the city's northern corporate limits. The man described his physical features to me, identified himself only as a Mr. White, and said we would rendezvous at the front bar of the club at eleven p.m.

During my telephone safari on the location of Trish Ambrose, I'd discovered through an incredibly loquacious secretary at a private unnamed escort service, that she'd had an on-again, off-again, abusive love relationship with her former greaseball pimp, one Dominic DeMarco of Falls Church, Virginia, and if she were to be found, he'd be the one who would know where she's located.

I found Mr. DeMarco's address through a street contact who owed me a great personal favor, and at seven p.m. that evening, I parked my car at the end of the street where he lived and began reconnoitering the area, looking for any trace of Ms. Ambrose. Within half an hour I was using field glasses to look through the windows of her pimp's shared row house, and discovered the girl there, in the living room. She'd been beat-up bad, and had a few dark hematoma on her legs and neck. She seemed to be on a medication of some sort, perhaps Talwin or Percocets, because she stared with utter vacuity at a blank television set for some time without a whit of reaction to anything happening in her environment.

That evening, after a two hour ride to Richmond in bad traffic, I located the Anaconda Room, which was my contact point for meeting Mr. White. I was half an hour early for our rendezvous, but he was there waiting for me upon my entrance into the noisy roadhouse. He seemed out of place sitting there among the Harley-Davidson crowd who frequented the bar. He was a well-dressed business man in his middle years. He wore a well-tailored Brooks Brothers suit, a powder blue collar shirt and donned a vintage Longines wristwatch under his left sleeve cuff. He was definitely, as far as I could see, not a habitu  of the raucous blues club. As I entered the room, he got up from his spot at the bar and greeted me before I could get to where he was seated.

Upon introducing himself, and buying me a bourbon on the rocks, he began plying me for the information concerning the Ambrose girl's location. As the Rockola jukebox pounded out loud roots-rock standards, I told him what I knew about the girl's colorful past and her present whereabouts. Upon hearing that the infamous Trish Ambrose was indeed in the area, he released a palpable sigh of relief, drained his glass of bourbon, and ordered another round for us both.

After some bit of time drinking, belching, and making small talk, he looked at me straight in the eye, and asked me, without flinching, what I thought an average human life was worth in this day and age. I told him, after recovering from the suddenness of his question, that I thought it was worth a good amount, considering the need for transplant organs, rare blood types, medical research, etc. He chuckled at my na vet , and told me it wasn't worth a white rat's ass, at least not in his estimation of things anyway, and Trish Ambrose was merely taking up space in the world that could be better put to use by someone else.

As the evening progressed he began to get sloppy drunk. I mean like blotto. I counted seven more shots of bourbon that he downed, and I had no idea how much he'd swilled before I'd arrived at the Anaconda Room. At about 1:30 a.m. he told me, through a series of hiccups and slurs, that the ten grand I'd made today should be considered a retainer, and if I'd like to make a quick 90 thousand extra, then I should do my best to make Trish Ambrose a homicide statistic by the end of the week. As he gathered his wallet to pay for his evening's libations, I

noticed his billfold was stuffed to near breaking point with one hundred, five hundred, and one thousand dollar bills. He paid, gave the roadhouse-honey bartender a fifty dollar gratuity for the evening, and wearily got up to leave the drinking establishment. The peculiar fellow told me to call him tomorrow afternoon, and he stumbled out of the door to a waiting private car with driver, and disappeared from the club's parking lot.

While driving back to Arlington that evening, I pondered his offer for a while, and then decided that 90 large was too great a sum of money for me to ignore for contracting my professional services. Considering what I do for a living doesn't make me a great pile of money, and I'm in private enterprise like everyone else in this town, I didn't have to think too hard about accepting his offer. Make no mistake, I had no interest in killing Trish Ambrose or anybody else. I didn't know her and couldn't have cared less about her activities. She looked like she was doing a fine job of slowly killing herself with medications and sadistic lovers, but I did have an interest in making 90K for a leisurely few days work. I called Mr. White at 2:00 p.m. on February 15th, and cleverly worded my acceptance over the phone in the upcoming bit of business to retire Trish Ambrose from the rest of humanity.

My research on her past began in earnest that afternoon, and I spent the next few hours on the phone, calling in old favors from city hall flunkies, street hustlers, ex-cons, ex-flops, and anyone I could think of who'd know anything about the poor little rich girl with a taste for graft and masochism. By seven p.m. that night, I'd learned as much about Dr. Ross and Camille Berg, the Darius Cartel, Omar Ghibran, and Mohammed Aziz as I needed to know to put the pieces together concerning the probable identification of the unnamed client of my newfound friend Mr. White.

I spent the next day going over potential strategies for confronting Patricia Ambrose and possibly her tough-guy lover Dominic DeMarco, and how to collect the 90 thou from Mr. White without harming either of them. Over a plate of scrambled eggs and a ham steak at the Broiler restaurant on Columbia Pike, I pieced together a loose plan of action and decided that it needed to be implemented that evening. Ambrose was undoubtedly looking over her shoulder every moment when not zoned on whatever narcotics she was dosing herself with, and would probably be changing residences soon to avoid hired guys like me from trying to blow her head off for a big, quick payoff from a pissed-off middle-eastern client.

I returned to my apartment on Randolph Street, gathered my pocket sized pepper spray canister and Colt Commander .45 semiautomatic pistol, for which I had no license, and two seven-shot clips of blank ammunition. At 8:00 p.m. that evening I got behind the wheel of my car and drove to the Falls Church address of Dominic DeMarco. Not unexpectedly, the two codependent lovers were having a tremendous argument upon my arrival at the scene. DeMarco had her tightly in his grasp, and shook her like a dime store scarecrow as he bellowed aloud about her not handing him a specific sum of money that she'd owed him from months before. Although she twisted and screeched against his manhandling of her body,

a certain look of pathological pleasure adorned the face of Ambrose as her lover roughed her up and spat insults at her.

I collected myself for action and exited the car. Then I stepped from my ride with the engine still running, walked up the small path to the front steps, and loudly knocked on the front door of their residence like an incensed neighbor might have done. In a fraction of a second, DeMarco ripped open the door of the place to see who would so insolently bang the portal of his home. As he prepared to tell me to get lost, I sprayed him directly in the eyes with the pepper gas. A tirade of profanities in various languages filled the room as he grabbed his face and began swatting his fists ineffectively in my direction. Trish Ambrose watched the scene unfold before her with total incomprehension for a split second, but then clicked into action herself.

As she made to escape through the back door, I fired several ear-splitting rounds from the Colt Commander in her direction. Both she and DeMarco immediately froze in place from hearing the large pistol's tremendous reports. Then, after a hot second, the frenzied Italian pimp who was still blinded by the mace, collected himself and made towards my direction with murderous swipes from a stiletto which he'd felt for, discovered, and then extracted from his hip pocket. I stomped towards the fleeing Ambrose, grabbed her by the belt of her jeans, and began pulling her with all my strength towards the front door of the house. She spat in my eyes and twisted like an angry animal until I fired another shot into the air and then placed the muzzle of the carbine against the left temple of her forehead; I then pulled back the hammer of the handgun and waited for a tick to see how she'd react to having a large caliber revolver pointed directly at the center of her larcenous gray matter.

She immediately became compliant to my demands, and we both bolted from the living room, and down the stairs to my waiting car. I threw her into the ride through the driver's side door and began getting into the ride myself. As I entered the car, DeMarco's switchblade came whizzing through the air and implanted itself into the canvass top of my automobile a few inches from my face. I dived into the sedan and floored the gas pedal of the heavy machine. The all-weather tires smoked and screeched like a rail dragster as we zigzagged away from the curb and the approaching, demonically furious Dominic DeMarco.

On the ride to Norfolk, I'd informed Ms. Ambrose, who'd become completely sullen and sublimated, that if I'd have wanted to kill her in the erstwhile lodging she'd be dead by now, so it was best that she just relax and listen to my story. I introduced myself as John Heat, private investigator, and showed her my license and business card, to which she paid little attention. I explained my business situation with the mysterious Mr. White, and told her most of what I knew about her past association with the various prominent members of Iran's Darius cartel. A piqued interest came to her facial features when I mentioned the names of her former Arab paramours.

“I’ll double what this guy White is giving you if you just let me out of this car now and forget you ever saw me,” she said with a crack whore smile curling up her lip.

And I responded to her kind offer by saying, “you’re going to give me roughly 200K just for leisurely stopping this ride and letting you off on the corner. I don’t think so Miss Berg, or Ambrose, or whatever it is that you want to be called. You only skimmed about 850 dimes from your rich pals, and you want to hand me over about one quarter of everything you’ve got on earth to let you go from the confines of my sedan? Unh-unh. It doesn’t wash. And frankly Miss, and please excuse my straight forward language in this matter, I think you’re full of shit for telling me such rat-bag lie. So why don’t you listen to what I’m going to tell you, and maybe we can both get out of this situation with our scalps intact.”

As we drove towards the Virginia Beach area I told my driving companion most of what I’d patched together from my various contacts. I’d informed her that I’d spoken with her father the surgeon, and he was ready to try and make a reconciliation with her, and help her any way he could. I didn’t, however, mention to the medical man during the course of our conversation that his little jewel had skimmed about 850 bills from an autocratic Arab businessman who happened to be a former leg-breaker for his oil company and its various interests.

She was listless and morose and knew she was up the proverbial drainage ditch without a paddle, so she just listened and nodded without enthusiasm while I rambled on about her indecorous use of people; dangerous masochistic behavior; problematic drug abuse; and effortless forging of fraudulent checks for her self-serving personal profit.

We stopped at a Motel 6 about fifty miles from Norfolk for the evening, and I informed her, after having a pizza and some beers delivered to the room, that she’d have to be handcuffed to the bedpost until morning because I was one hundred per cent certain I’d never see her again if I fell asleep for even one minute while we were together in the room. Trish Ambrose, at hearing the word “handcuffs” got a vulpine smile at the corners of her knife-like mouth. On her own volition, she slowly undressed down to her bra and panties, and compliantly let me take her by the wrist and cuff it to the bed’s steel frame after she’d laid down on the mattress. Not a whit of complaint or agitation came from her as I pocketed the key in my sports coat and moved away from her. As I casually examined her cute figure, I could see many more bruises and small cuts on her taut skin in the hard light of the room. It made me realize just how nuts this little tart really was when it came to recreational activities.

I took off my jacket and shoes, and prepared to go to sleep for a few hours in the room’s big easy chair facing the color TV. The ancient set, a Panasonic twenty-incher from the early 70s, undoubtedly had the worst picture reception of any unit I’ve ever watched in my life.

“You liked that, didn’t you” she said as I tried to close my eyes.

“What are you talking about?” I responded.

“Roughing me up, throwing me in the car, slapping on the cuffs, acting all butch around Dominic. I kind of liked it myself.

“Sure. Whatever. Go to sleep.”

She was a good liar, one of the best I’d ever heard. She kittenishly moved about on the bed a purred to me, “I want you over here Mr. Heat. I like you...even if you are a dick for hire. Listen lover, if you can find it in your heart to let me go in the morning, I’ll be your personal four-on-the-floor plaything all night. You can do anything to me that you want if it makes you feel good. Anything at all. Omar used to give me 5K every time I made him blast his jam in our bed, so, as you can imagine, I made him blast it quite often. I used to do this escort shit for a living you know; I know what I’m doing when it comes to pleasing a man. I’m just asking you to think about it John, because, to be honest, you look like you haven’t been laid in over a year and could use a little female companionship.”

That got my attention all right. In the worst kind of way it got my full concentration on the subject. It got my attention because Trish Ambrose knew what she was talking about. I hadn’t been laid in a year. At least. And it was starting to wear on my nerves in a serious kind of way.

I’d always had a thing for peroxide blondes with dirty faces, and this little twisted waif here was as dirty and blonde and reptilian as they got. So I thought about her offer, and after a few minutes I went over to where she lay, stripped off her remaining lace, and banged her good and proper right there on the starched sheets of her single bed. I did this extremely gratifying carnal act for several reasons. The first was because I liked the way she looked, bruises, cuts and all. Call me what you will, but I like that kind of slapped-around look on a woman. Also, I was randy as the proverbial six-dicked animal and hadn’t shot my fireworks in a long-ass time, which my intuitive roommate had picked-up on in half a tick. And lastly, to be honest, I knew I’d probably never see her again after the next few days, so it really didn’t matter what I did to her. Because, trying to look at the thing objectively, I know I’m not the nicest guy in the world, and this had been an opportunity to release a little sap without any kind of strings attached on my part.

I sat down in the easy chair after our full and frank exchange of views, lit a cigarette, and told her I’d let her go first thing in the morning. Which was a complete lie, but who really gives a damn about that.

We started to leave the Motel 6 around nine o'clock the next morning. In our room, I'd left the cuffs on her when I went to check out at the front desk, and then we exited through a tradesman's entrance in the rear of the building. As I walked her to my sedan, she hissed insults and threats at me the entire way, as she was obviously not used to being denied something she desired after she'd put her world class erotic skills to use to achieve it.

Within an hour we were pulling into the driveway of her childhood home, the personal residence of Dr. Ross Berg and his trophy wife, Camille, the charity fund raiser. We exited the car, but before we could get to the front door, Camille Berg emerged from the house, with a look of clean disgust pasted to her cosmetically perfect features. She moved faster than I'd imagined she could, and in a tick she was directly in front of her skanky daughter; she then back-handed the young call girl across the bridgework with an audible crack. The incensed society wife let a wave of insults fly from her mouth, and spat at her daughter's feet before she turned to re-enter the house. Spit, I've noticed, seems to be something that the Berg family has in spades.

Ross Berg emerged from the front door within seconds of his wife's theatrical episode on their front lawn. He immediately moved us both over to his parked automobile, and we drove in haste to the Doctor's Building on Decatur Street where his private office and surgical procedure room was located.

During the ride, I informed Dr. Berg of the threat made on his daughter's life concerning her larcenous activity with Aziz and Ghibran. He remained calm and stoic as I informed him about being contacted by Mr. White and his offer to have her eliminated for a one hundred thousand dollar bounty. Ross Berg didn't even bother to rebuff my statements, or infer that I was a cheap con-man trying to skim some dough off of him for saving his girl's life. He listened to me prattle on about the dangers Cynthia was in as though her were listening to a patient talk about having one's epidermal irritations treated with cortisone ointments. I imagine, in the larger sense of things, he knew what a waste of skin his troublesome issue had turned out to be, and was merely taking this current dilemma in stride.

After we'd arrived at his office, we spent the remainder of the day making plans on how to correct the predicament Cynthia Berg had gotten herself into. She paid little attention to us as we made and rejected various options concerning her earthly fate. Instead, she found the television vastly entertaining, and watched mindless, cardboard TV dramas while we two discussed the matter at hand.

By the end of the day, Dr. Berg had called in several favors from old friends including the Norfolk police department; the county record hall; and the Mantle Funeral Home in nearby Yorktown, Virginia. That night, under the cover of darkness, Cynthia Berg was placed in the Norfolk adult detention center under a Jane Doe name, and she remained there for the next twenty-four hours. A forged death certificate was created by the county coroner and the Mantle funeral director for the detained Ms. Berg, with cause of death being described as severe head trauma, and a new birth certificate and new name was generated for her from the county records office.

Cynthia Allen Berg, formerly Patricia Ambrose, soon to be known as Janet Duke, remained in the holding cell until her father and I arrived to retrieve her the next day. Upon our entry into her cubicle, as prescribed by her father, two enormous orderlies rushed into the room and held down the hissing, twisting shrew while the doctor injected her with a generous dose of sodium pentothal, knocking her out cold within seconds of its administration into her bloodstream. She was removed by private ambulance to the doctor's home within moments of her being rendered unconscious.

The doctor and I drove in silence to his residence, and the ambulance was waiting for us in the driveway upon our arrival. Camille Berg was standing in the doorway of her home; she was smoking a cork-tipped cigarette from a short holder, and glaring at the parked service vehicle like the angel of death might stare at roadkill on the street. Dr. Berg exited the car, gave the ambulance driver some large bills as a gratuity, and had his daughter's limp frame removed from the gurney and into the back seat of my ride. Next he walked up to me, gave me several certified copies of the forged death certificate and her new birth certificate, and told me to take her to New York city, or someplace where she could get lost easily. He said he was finished with her for good, and that our bit of business here was over as far as he could see. I agreed to his request, shook his hand, and slipped out of the driveway with his unconscious daughter in the back of my car.

I didn't go to New York. Or anyplace like it.

I started heading back to the block where my flick knife throwing buddy Dominic DeMarco lived in Falls Church. About an hour into the ride, the newly minted Janet Duke began to wake up from the industrial strength mickey that her father had administered some time before. Although she was groggy and disoriented, she reacted quickly to her new surroundings and began to screech at me to let her out of the car. I'd had about enough of this girl for one lifetime, and as she was loudly telling me my genetic lineage came from endless acts of family incest, I elbowed her in the chops, hard. That shut her up for a while. The next time she addressed me, I was referred to as "Mr. Heat."

I pulled up to the block where her bulldog pimp DeMarco lived, and pressed her new birth certificate into her hand.

"Take this and start a new life, girlie," I said to her. "Get the bank money you skimmed from your rag-head pals while you still have your old I.D.'s and then burn them. Go be Janet Duke somewhere else. The longer you stay in town, the more chance you have of becoming a grim statistic. I'm giving Mr. White a copy of your death certificate as proof that your a soil additive, and hopefully collect 90 large for my contracted services. Now get out of my car, and with any luck we'll never see each other again."

"You're really a first class jerk, you know that, Heat?" She seethed through the set of teeth I'd loosened for her a short while ago.

“Right. Seeya.”

She got out of the ride, slammed the door, and defiantly walked up the block to DeMarco’s row house. I watched her ass as she moved up the street with the gait of a muscular feline animal. She had a nice ass. I’d miss that ass for sure, but that’s about the only part of her that I was certain to miss.

A few days later I was sitting in the Anaconda Room with Mr. White. I delivered the death certificate to him, and the payoff was made without a hitch. He was undoubtedly one weird son of a bitch who gets a little too involved with some very heavy people, but he was punctual and gave me every penny of our agreed sum. I never found out if it was Ghibran or Aziz who paid to have her iced and I didn’t care. All I knew is that girl, the freshly coined Janet Duke, would be looking over her shoulder for a long time to come. I told him not to contact me anymore for any reason, and he gladly agreed to my request while knocking back shot after shot of top shelf bourbon in the noisy, dark Virginia roadhouse.

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