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Perri Pagonis

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Arlington, Virginia is a real place. Skyline Mall is real, too, now boasting no fewer than 12 movie theaters. Shirlington is real beyond belief. But the characters and events of this story are fictitious, and any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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This is for the patrons and staff of the Shirlington Branch Public Library

2700 South Arlington Mill Road, Arlington, Virginia

May the plumbing be flawless one day

Epigraph (optional)

Raw power honey, just won't quit

Iggy Pop

Table of Contents (optional)

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Preface (optional)

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Acknowledgments (optional)

Many thanks to the great Washington D.C. Area writers George Pelecanos, Mark Opsasnick, and Dr. David R. Williams for their assistance and encouragement in my literary pursuits. Also, thanks to Ron and Susan Kaye for harboring my Marshall Amplifier and Stratocaster at their home while I'm away from Arlington. Finally, my sincere appreciation goes to television legend Dick Dyszel for keeping Creature Feature alive and kicking on the Internet.

P-Man

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One

Call me P-Man. I work in the B. Dalton Bookseller store at Skyline Mall, located in Bailey's Cross Roads, Virginia. The reason I work there is because I was fired from the Penguin Feather record shop in Vienna, Virginia a few months ago. They fired me because I thought I saw a gargoyle wearing a trenchcoat standing behind the front counter of the store during a particularly busy morning of sales. I described the demon in detail to the store manager after the incident, hoping for some friendly consolation. I was sent packing that afternoon.

I live with my mom in an apartment in Shirlington, Virginia. Shirlington is a subsection of Arlington, Virginia. It's a standard issue suburb you'd find anywhere. I have a few pals, mostly from the book store. My favorite bands are Jimi Hendrix, Iggy Pop, The Rolling Stones, and Pink Floyd. My favorite movie is "Eraserhead."

Sometimes I have a girlfriend, sometimes I don't. Mostly I don't. I used to have plenty, but something's happened to my perspective of women: they all seem to look the same, talk the same, act the same. Lately, they all want information from me that will answer universal enigmas, and pacify their anxious lives. They want me to clear up their mysterious feelings of unfulfillment in a few pithy sentences. I can't do it. They seem nonplused at first; then they end up marrying insurance agents.

I served my first few days at B. Dalton's being trained by the store manager. His name was Mr. Mike. I'd seen him many times as a customer at Penguin Feather. He was always buying imported albums by the most intense metal bands in the world: Celtic Frost, Saxon, Man-O'-War, and Venom. Venom was the most insane band ever. All their songs sounded like the end of humanity. Mr. Mike was thrilled.

Mr. Mike showed me around the small store to familiarize me with its arrangement. The History section was indexed chronologically. The top left part of the bookshelf was the B.C. stuff, and the bottom right was the current events. "Where would that put the third Crusade, approximately?," he asked. I told him I didn't know about the Crusades, or how many there were, or what they were for. He wasn't sure either.

Cookbooks were easy; all alphabetical by author. Ditto Sports, ditto Fiction. Psychology and Business had subsections that all essentially meant insanity or greed. Then came the computer books. Mr. Mike looked apprehensive as we approached them. "Computer books make me sick" he said. He told me that they're separated by language, or machine, or application, and all sorts of huffer mugger that made no sense at all. However they made lots of money for the store, so they were important. Donna, the assistant manager, was in charge of shelving the computer books.

He showed me how to work the cash register. I've worked lots of cash registers before. I've had a lot of jobs in retail. The machines from the 1970s are the best because the buttons are bigger and they're usually orange colored, like a Howard Johnson's restaurant counter. Everything in B. Dalton's is orange: bookshelves, display cases, magazine racks, even the little plastic pins you stick in the pegboard to announce store sales and post best seller lists. The cash register was an NCR 2800 from 1977. It was so orange.

Employees have to wear a name tag at all times while on the sales floor. They were out of them when I showed up that morning. Most of the employees forget to take their tags off after work and just wear them everywhere they go. There was only one orange I.D. badge available for me to wear. On it was printed the name, Debbie.

Skyline mall is pretty cool as far as malls go. It's not one of those mega-deals like Tysons Corners or White Flint. It has the standard mall stores: Hallmark, One Hour Photo, a drug store, a Safeway, but it's also got a few great mutation shops: Waxie Maxie Records, Mother Nature's health food store that sells organic amphetamines, Scoops ice cream parlor, and a fern bar called The Pawnshop. There are lots of office buildings around Skyline, and the bar bunnies go pouring in there at 5 o'clock every weekday. But the best thing about the mall is the Skyline 6 Theaters. They get all the dreck. Every monster, psychotic murderer, cheap gangster, action-schlock, or vampire one-weeker that Hollywood tossed out to the

multiplex-pinheads of America ended up there. I was an established patron, and always purchased discount 10-pack tickets. You paid 25 dollars for ten movies, and got in free when you bought the pack. It was a good deal. A volume thing.

The store was located right across the hall from where the movies let out. Most of the time it was quiet, but on weekends, when they released the mob, the place became crazy with consumers who'd just been bam-bam-powered by Charles Bronson, or Chuck Norris, or Jason the psycho. Sometimes it got out of hand. Especially when the Jason people arrived. He really gets the gore hounds worked up.

Mr. Mike was a closet gore hound. I had come out a long time ago. He told me more banal stuff about the store as time passed, and I asked him about all the vinyl he used to buy at the record store. I could see he really wanted to talk about movies and metal bands, but he had to do this official stuff first. I let him go on about store coupons, and sale books, and gift items and he finally finished. He asked me if I had any questions. I asked him if he knew that Motorhead was doing the sound track for the new Dario Argento zombie movie. He looked nervous.

"Really?," he said. He paused a second and continued, "they're some vicious little monkeys, P-Man. Sometimes, when I listen to them, I almost burst from sonic compression."

"Holy smoke," I replied.

Debbie, Pink, and Donna came in at 12 O'clock. Debbie and Pink were sales people, and Donna was the Assistant Manager. Debbie had to work on sending return books to the publishers, so she was busy in the back of the store. That meant I could keep wearing her name badge for some time. Pink was Mr. Mike's pal. He was good at organizing things. He could fit more inventory on the store shelves than anyone. He said it had to do with particle stress and dynamic tension. He'd been to a lot of YES concerts.

Donna had interviewed me for this job. Her sister Fawn was the Assistant Manager of the record store I'd been fired from. Fawn had liked me, and helped me get hired at the book store. Donna wanted to like me, but had difficulty with the concept. I was an agreeable person, but had too many holes in my work history. She believed mysterious, inexplicable things were afoot with me.

Donna took over the helm from Mr. Mike at noon, and I was going to go over to Scoops for an ice cream on my lunch break. My manager asked if he could tag along. He said they make good Dr. Pepper floats. We were heading down the hall, when we saw a gaggle of corporate bar bunnies walking towards us

with aluminum foil pie plates in their hands. It was a strange sight. Then we saw more people with pie plates walking out of the Safeway at the end of the hall. We got within scoping range of them and noticed their containers were full of lettuce, and other stuff. One of the secretaries saw us cruising her plate and said “the Safeway’s gone California cuisine. They’ve just opened a salad bar.”

I said “what?”

“You know,” she said, “you make it yourself. They’ve got about a hundred things you can pile on to it. And then they weigh it. It’s like 3 dollars a pound.”

She moved closer to me and said in a low voice, “they’ve even got little corns. They look just like an ear of corn, but they’re really, really tiny.” Mr. Mike had never heard of a salad bar. Neither had I.

We went into the Safeway and saw lots of mall people in line with aluminum plates. They were standing around a large cafeteria trough with lots of stainless steel compartments containing healthy foodstuff. I was skeptical. I didn’t know what most of the things were in the salad bar. I saw the little corns. They really did look like little ears of corn. It was the first day they’d opened the salad bar, and business was booming. It looked like a good place to meet skinny women. The place was crawling with them. Mr. Mike really wanted to get some salad, and said we could split one. I said OK, but still wanted to get a Dr. Pepper float.

Mr. Mike was a whiz at the bar. He got a little bit of every thing, except beets and boiled eggs. “I hate beets” he said, “beets and cold eggs.” They had chopped-up eggs in one of the containers at the salad bar. We went right past them. Finally we got to the containers with the salad dressing. They were all the color of house paint. Mr. Mike got a ladle of each kind. When we were finished, our plate looked like a Jackson Pollock painting from far away, or a Monet up close. Mr. Mike paid for the stuff and got our plastic forks. Then we joined the plate carrying crowd in the mall and cruised to Scoops. A very nice, abundant lady made my float: two scoops vanilla ice cream, cherry syrup, and Dr. Pepper to the top of the big paper cup. I’m a pepper.

We went back to the store. Donna and Debbie went wacko when they saw our salad. They were ecstatic to know they now had a salad option for lunch at Skyline Mall. We went into the office, and Mr. Mike got out his Far Side coffee mug. I poured half my float into it. We placed the salad between us and dug in with our plastic forks. After a few bites we slowed down.

Mr. Mike said the salad tasted “nutritious.”

“I’m glad it’s got a lot of dressing on it.” I rejoined.

We choked down most of our lunch and then delighted in our Dr. Pepper float. We agreed to visit Skyline Pizza sometime soon.

I finished the day ringing up sales and making a display pyramid of Jackie Collins’s *Hollywood Wives* trade paperback books. It’s number one on the fiction charts. My pyramid was beautiful. I glared at people who removed stress point units. Mr. Mike was filling the magazine rack with new journals and he brought me a copy of Fangoria to look at while standing behind the cash register. I had never seen Fangoria before. It’s a magazine about how they do special effects in monster movies. The ickier, the better. The cover had a picture of a huge, mutant-looking eyeball in mid-explosion with a .45 slug whizzing through it. The banner across the top of the cover said, “Special Zombie Issue.” Mr. Mike said they get lots of magazines like that. I was delighted.

I took my wallet out of my pocket to buy it. Mr. Mike said “no, no, no, you have earned this tome young Jedi.” He tore the cover off and gave me the rest of the pages. I was shocked. He said it was something called a “strip.” You can get lots of strips when you work in a book store. Some free mass market paperbacks too. This is good, but not extraordinary news. I read a book about as often as the country changes Presidents. At the end of my shift Mr. Mike said we have a big day ahead of us tomorrow, so be sure to come in on time in the morning. I didn’t ask him what was so special. I was too busy looking at color photos of cheerleader zombies in my new Fangoria magazine.

It takes me about a half an hour to walk home from the bookstore. I get home before my mom does, so I start making dinner and watch TV. Channel 20 is my favorite station. They always show Star Treks, or Untouchables, or ultra-cheese movies in the afternoons. Saturday nights are the best, with The Count Gore DeVol’s Creature Feature at 11:30 p.m. The Count is the coolest; his jokes are so deliciously insufferable, and his make-up is imbecilic. The set of his crypt looks like something from an elementary school talent show. The man is a schlock-genius of the anti-culture.

I think this is a good night for tuna casserole. We have one really good kitchen knife that I got from the Kitchen Bazaar at Seven Corners Mall a few weeks ago. It’s a beast. In the kitchen, the onions and green peppers have no chance as I chop them up like a culinary Norman Bates. I don’t mind using

Safeway brand mushroom soup instead of a national brand for the casserole, but I insist on solid white tuna for the filling. Chunk light tuna is cat food. Maybe worse. I also like to use medium egg noodles for this dish. Big noodles look funky. Little ones turn to mush. Safeway brand grated cheese is OK to use, too. I pop the whole mess in the oven at 350 degrees for half an hour. It's a done deal.

I've done my kitchen duty, put in a full 8 hours at B. Dalton Bookseller, and now it's happy hour. I crack a 16-ounce can of Budweiser and look at my Fangoria magazine. I turn the TV on and listen to the Flintstones argue about where to spend their Summer vacation. The magazine is incredible. Such detail about how to make someone's arm look like it's really falling off their body. And the stuff you can order: fake brains, eyes, tongues, vampire teeth, dancing rubber skeletons, snakes, newts, orcs, balrogs, you name it.

Mom takes the 7A bus from Crystal City and gets home right around 6:30 p.m. She works for the American Association of Retired Persons. She does something on the administrative end of things. She says government jobs are hard to describe. I've learned to leave that topic alone. Mom is glad I work in the bookstore. She says nicer people come in there than in the record store I used to work in. She's never been there on a Saturday. I fix her a whiskey and soda and show her my new magazine. She says "that's nice." Then we watch the news and game shows and have dinner. We've got a good living arrangement.

I told my mom about the "strips" at the bookstore. Mr. Mike said that you can get some free paperbacks and other stuff; all you have to do is tear off the cover. She told me she'd like some romance novels if they're free of charge. Some Stephen King books, too, if available. I'd ask Mr. Mike. He knows everything about "strips."

The next morning it was me, Mr. Mike, and Pink who opened the store. We have to get there an hour before opening to clean up after the customers from the night before. They'd just had their forebrains stir-fried by action movies, and felt like clowning around in a bookstore afterwards. The place was torn-up. It almost always looked that way in the mornings. Donna was really good at cosmetic surgery, and could have the shop looking OK in little time, but things had to be hidden behind doors, in hallways, under the acoustic tiles in the ceiling, anywhere there was a free centimeter of space. But Donna wasn't there this morning. It was just us fellows.

We met outside the store at 9:00 a.m. and went and got Cokes from the soda machine at the Safeway. Then we unlocked the store and went into the office in back. There had been a huge shipment from United Parcel Service the night before, and in the room were tons of empty boxes, foam peanuts, and shredded papers. Mr. Mike said “leapin’ lizards.” There were so many boxes, I could not see over the top of them. Mr. Mike and Pink plowed through them and got to the office desk. “It is time to perform the folding space ceremony and X-9000 probe launch,” Mr. Mike said. Pink understood. I was still new at this.

Pink opened the desk and produced three single blade carpet knives. Mr. Mike turned on the radio to DC/101 and we listened to The Greaseman go wild doing his delayed- stress Vietnam veteran schtick. In the monologue, the Metro Center subway station was fraggged, gassed, sprayed with automatic weapon fire, and finally pulverized by Sidewinder missiles from Tomcat fighter planes. The Grease screaming “ha-ba-do-ga-ga!” all the way. Pink handed me a carpet knife and saluted like Sergeant Rock. I returned the gesture. He said, “prep the X-9000, kid.”

Mr. Mike and Pink knew their stuff. They cut the tape down the perforations of the empty boxes, and they folded down to almost nothing. I followed suit. There were enough empties to keep us going for some time. Soon we had a pile of broken down boxes about three feet high. Then we got the Hefty bags out of the mondo trash cans at both ends of the store. There were also old displays, and tons of useless promotional stuff to go out to the dumpster. We had a lot of trash.

The X-9000, I discovered, was the secret agent name for store’s hand cart. It was just big enough to carry four good-sized U-Haul boxes. It had a sticker on one of the handles. The sticker said, “Know The Enemy.” Mr. Mike liked to pile the trash up as high as possible on the hand cart. He’d use a folded box for a foundational wedge, and keep building the heap higher, and then place another wedge until it was a mammoth payload. He’d pile it up so high we had to use duct tape to keep the whole shebang from falling over. Our manager said it saved time to only do one trash run. He just liked to build the manifest up to the sky for personal, insane kicks. He looked like a gnome when he was working on it.

It took two people to take the trash from the store to the dumpster. The mall’s loading dock was located down the end of the middle corridor, and across from Skyline Realty. It took two people because the glass doors that led to the loading dock pulled open. It was a physical impossibility to hold the door

open while navigating the wildly overloaded X-9000 through the portal. Pink wants to come with us to the dumpster to gape at gorgeous Christine the Realtor. We begin our exodus from the store, Mr. Mike leading the way. I'm navigating the X-9000 and inching along. Pink is hopping around behind me.

Mr. Mike locks the store and we start down the hall. He gets about 5 feet in front of me and starts doing the airport runway navigator routine with his hands. Pink is bracing the payload with one hand. The trash is shifting its bulk with every vibration from the wheels. It does not look good for us. After a minute, a stress point in the foundation collapses, and Mr. Mike has to make a save to keep it from crashing down in front of the Central Fidelity Bank. The litter has become self-aware, and is finding its own level. Now all three of us are holding different sections of the heaving mass. I'm afraid to move the X-9000 for fear of complete breakdown. At this moment, Rick the Security Guard arrives.

Rick does damage control to the sagging bags and cardboard, then goes to hold the glass doors for us to pass through. Tina, the cashier from 1-Hour Photo, walks into the hall to watch our progress and shout encouragement. I'd seen Tina a bunch of times when I'd come to the movies at Skyline. She's a total art school babe, with a body like porn goddess Annette Haven.

The trash crew proceeds slowly. Mr. Mike and Pink are spread out like spiders over the Hefty bags and mounted junk. As we approach the doors, Rick is trying to keep us calm and locked-on on our task. He says "no problem, no problem, chief, you're doing good." We reach Skyline Realty and the glass doors. If we get through, the dumpster is just through a metal service door on the left. Christine the Realtor is watching our progress. She's pressing her breasts and nose against the store window, and holding a bottle of Perrier water with a rainbow colored straw in it. I don't tell this to Pink.

Rick has the doors pulled out as far as possible. There is not a millimeter of extra space to slip the X-9000 through. The trash bags and boxes and junk screech and clunk as we coax the whole mess through the portal. We're half way through and it's looking optimistic for the first time. We're going to make it. Then nothing. No movement. We're stuck in the middle of the door frame. I jiggle and shimmy and things start slipping again. One of the corners of the cardboard foundational support is just about one inch too wide for the door. Any movement in any direction will cause implosion. We all stare at the door, the X-9000, and the cardboard wedge.

Rick asks me if I can hold the door open with my foot. It's a stretch, but do-able. He reaches in his pocket and removes an immaculate Swiss Army knife. I notice that it even has the magnifying glass attachment. He picks through the blades, and finds the little wood saw. He goes to work on the oversized cardboard foundation. The X-9000 trembles like a fragile flower. The saw goes, grnk, grnk, grnk, as it decimates the material. All eyes are on Rick. Christine the Realtor has moved out into the hall.

The cardboard corner is cleanly removed. Rick clicks the blade back into the knife's magazine one-handed. I push the dolly slightly and there is resistance, but there is movement as well. We're locomoting. The payload squeaks through the door like one of Hannibal's fabled elephants and almost falls apart after entering the loading zone. From there, we easily maneuver through the huge service doors and get to the dumpster. 1-Hour Photo Tina whoops like an amazon. We can hear her in the garage.

Rick helps us throw all the stuff into an enormous dumpster that also has trash compacting capabilities. That's a bonus. We get everything tossed in and Mr. Mike pushes the red button on the loading dock's circuit board. The dumpster slowly crushes everything in it to little pieces. We wheel the X-9000 out of the loading dock and back into the mall. At the end of the hall, Tina is spinning in circles and chanting Queen's victory anthem "We Will Rock You."

Mr. Mike tells Rick to come by the store later this morning for a good citizen award, courtesy of B. Dalton Bookseller. As we pass Skyline Realty, Christine is back at her terminal, reading a Self magazine. Tina has abandoned her post outside 1-Hour Photos and runs up to us. She demands that I give her a ride on the X-9000. No problem, senorita. She calls us the "Load Warriors." We wheel her back to the photography store. She runs inside and gets some coupons for free film developing and gives them to Rick. He's the man of the hour.

There are lots of office buildings which connect via endless tunnels to Skyline Mall. The mall stores and all the offices use the same dumpster for their trash. Near the end of the week, there's always tons of stuff placed by it for Garcia Trash Removal to carry away: old chairs, shaky desks, hundreds of folders, dividers, notebooks from conferences, etc. This time there was a huge, World War II looking desk by the dumpster. Pink was checking out the drawers and condition of the wood while the rest of us were unloading the X-9000. Pink wanted the desk. I know this because Pink is a scientist. Science-guys need big desks, and this one was mega-sized. He could leave charts, and triple-beam scales and dead frogs on it

and still have room to spread out the Sunday comics. He had scribbled a note on one of the abandoned legal pads and left it on top of the desk.

The note: September 25, 198_, Garcia Trash Removal Service, please do not remove this desk. This is my big desk. I am a scientist. Thank you, Pink from B. Dalton.

Back at the store, we just had time to vacuum and count out the cash drawers before opening at 10:00 a.m. I got an attack of the kookies and placed an orange B. Dalton Bookseller paper bag on my head to do the vacuuming. It looked like I was wearing a wizard's hat. Mr. Mike dragged his boom-box out into the aisle and played a Blue Oyster Cult tape at full blast for incentive to hurry-up. Pink and Mr. Mike put bags on their heads too, and we looked like druids running around before opening the store. At 9:59 we finished, took our bags off, and put our name tags on.

During the day, Pink solicited our help to get the big desk over to his house. He wanted to get it over there tomorrow, because he didn't know if the Garcia Trash Removal people would pay attention to his note. Tomorrow was Saturday; the store's big day, with all the movie people swarming in the shop like butterflies after the shows let out. Mr. Mike was dubious. He knew Donna could handle the store with no problem, but he liked to be there because it did get nuts from time to time. Debbie would be there too. She's cool under fire. However, having only two people in the store was cutting it thin. We finally decided to start with the desk at 9:00 a.m. and then we'd all come in to work at noon. Donna and Debbie would only have to tough it out for two hours in the morning, and the movies didn't start until 12:30.

It was a Friday morning and that is great because we get paid on Fridays. It is also great because the new movies start at Skyline 6 Theaters. It looks like a monster-free weekend this time. That's OK because the manager of the theaters, Manager Tom, has let us in on a little secret. Next to Mr. Mike, Manager Tom is the coolest person at Skyline Mall. He always brings us great promotional glop for the walls of the office. He lets us sneak in the twilight movies for free sometimes, if it's not too full. We've got lots of pictures from "Mad Max" and "The Shining" and "Star Trek" pasted up everywhere because of him. We give him lots of stripped books and magazines. We've got a little barter system going and everyone is happy.

Manager Tom's secret is this- he's thinking of starting Midnight Cult Movie Night at Skyline on Fridays. He wants me, Pink, and Mr. Mike to be on the selection committee for the movies they'll show.

He's talked to lots of mutant children who run around the mall after the films are over, and they all said they'd come see 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' 10-20 times each if it played there. It also seems his staff is just dying to dress up like Frankie and Magenta and Riff and do the Time Warp dance at the theater. We decide to conference later next week at Skyline Pizza. This is a serious issue.

Rick comes by later in the morning to ask how we are after our morning predicament with the trash bags. Mr. Mike thanks him again for his quick thinking at the loading area. He asks Rick what his astrological sign might be. Rick's chest puffs out a little. "You know I'm a Leo," he said. Mr. Mike goes into the office and brings out a box full of zodiac pamphlets, paperbacks, mini-posters, and postcards. The store had received a package of promotional weirdness from a love-child press in San Francisco, specializing in palmistry, eastern philosophy, astrological hoo-haw, The I-Ching, and rune stone reading. We dump the contents on the counter by the cash register and look for Leo-based material. We paw through books with covers that look like Jimi Hendrix's "Axis: Bold as Love" album, and see mass market books with every other sign except Leo. Finally we find one. The cover has a Boris Vallejo air-brush picture of a Lion perched on a mountain top, looking beatifically down towards a Tolkienesque village. The banner across the top: Persons born under the sign of Leo are MASTERS of their domain. Mr. Mike handed Rick the book. Rick the Security Guard was overjoyed.

I asked Mr. Mike about stripped books. He said the chain always buys too many books and has to send a lot of them back. The publishers give them credit for the covers they send back against future purchases. Books weigh plenty, and cost a lot to ship, so the publisher just wants proof of the unit being returned. I asked him what happens to the books without the covers. He said they threw them away. I nearly passed out, and asked him if I could take some of the romance strips home for my mom.

"All you can carry" he said.

"There's a new Stephen King paperback in the racks," I said, how about that one?

"Take it with my blessing Master Luke," he rejoined.

I said, "but Mr. Mike, if you just mail the covers back, and throw the pages out doesn't that make the book..."

"Worthless," he said, "you got it big guy."

It was a big day for strips. The Romance Section gets new series stuff every month so the old ones go right into the dumpster. All the Harlequins, Avons, Tempests, etc. get the old heave-ho. I got an orange B. Dalton Bookseller shopping bag and loaded up the loot, with big Steve King going on top. Pink got my address and said he'd pick me up in his pal's truck at 8:30 a.m. tomorrow. At 5:00 o'clock we both went down to the loading dock to make sure his baby grand desk was still there. It was, along with tons of other stuff the offices and stores were throwing away. The waste this one little place on earth produces is amazing. Pink was still nervous about his new prize being taken. He had looked in a Spanish-English dictionary during the day and found the Spanish word for "trash." The word is "basura." He had taken a promotional poster for a Robin Cook novel, and on the reverse side had written "BASURA" in huge black letters with a magic marker. Then he had drawn a large red circle around the word with a diagonal line going through the letters. He pulled a roll of tape from his pocket and secured the sign to the desk. Pink had done all he could to protect his booty.

We walked back through the mall to the Route 7 entrance. The bar bunnies were starting to file in to The Pawnshop for Friday night cordials. Christine the Realtor was having a chardonnay with Rex the Tennis Instructor from Skyline Racquet and Health Club. Pink was getting a ride from a university chum, but promised to bring some good refreshments for the festivities tomorrow morning. I looked like a genius walking home that day, with a bag of books that must have weighed 20 pounds.

I stopped by the Route 7 McDonald's on the way home. Me and mom have a Friday night junk food party a couple of times a month. There is nothing better than a pay Friday with Big Macs, Budweisers, and REALLY bad TV programs. My mom is in love with Tom Selleck on Magnum P.I.. You can never say anything bad about Tom when she's around. She gets mad. After mom watches Tom, she allows me to turn the TV to channel 20 to watch Charlie's Angels and Twilight Zone reruns. I'm in love with Jaelyn Smith's navel. When she wears a halter top, I become a gibbering baboon.

I'm walking down Route 7 and about to turn on 28th Street to walk into Shirlington. I've got these big bags with me and they're not too heavy, but kind of a drag to deal with. I hear a throbbing disco beat and tires screeching. I turn around. It's my pal David. David is wild. He bought an old Chevette and didn't like the color, so he bought about 10 cans of fluorescent orange and pink spray paint and gave his car a make-over. It actually glows in the dark now. He calls his machine the Photon Torpedo. David's

favorite, all-time album is Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Welcome to the Pleasure Dome." Not only did he buy the album for his house, and cassette for his car, but he bought an extra album to keep IN his car. He did this so when he went to friends' houses, and they didn't have FGTH, he could get his back-up copy in case of emergency.

David pulls up to where I'm standing. He says something that sounds like "mayo" but it's hard to tell what he's saying with the music so loud. I gesture for him to turn it down. He complies and says "do you want some mayo for all that damn McDonald's food?" He opens the passenger door and I get in, wrestling with my bags of romance novels and hamburgers.

He tears up the hill and over to Abingdon Street. David was on his way to Ramparts when he saw me wobbling around on Route 7. Ramparts is a great bar on Fern Street where they have drink and food specials every night. David will go to any bar on earth: strait, gay, country and western, rock and roll, Hindu, epileptic, Harley-Davidson, polyester, Cro-Magnon, you name it. As long as there's someone to talk to, Foster's lager beer, and salted snacks, he's happy as a mollusk. It's 25 cent chili-dog night at Ramparts. David wanted to get there before the Summer league softball masses overwhelm the place.

I'd met David at Louie's Rock City in January. It was a battle-of-the-bands night, and every one of the groups played the same endless covers by Black Sabbath, AC/DC, Bad Company, and Foreigner. I had gone to the bathroom and saw David sitting cross-legged on an overturned trash can, smoking a long-stemmed hobbit-looking pipe. He looked like he should have been sitting under a giant mushroom. He offered me his bowl and said, "I can't listen to another band play 'Problem Child' tonight. I just can't." We became pals after that.

David turns left on 31st Street and starts some monologue about The Ramones coming to the Bayou in Georgetown. I tell him I have to check finances and get a ride and all the other junk that happens when you don't have much fundage or a car. He understands. He wheels the Photon Torpedo up to the apartment. I ask him if he'd like some romance novels. Maybe for his mom.

He said "It couldn't hurt. I don't know how anyone can read that shit. All the women have black hair and green eyes. All the guys are mallet heads." I agreed. I gave him some books and a McDonald's apple pie. They'd just re-heated them when I came in, so the filling was still hot like a spent-fuel rod. He promised not to wolf it down. I thanked him for the ride and urged him to use discretion when it came to

the amount of chili-dogs he chose to consume. If he was going to try and get lucky tonight, flatulence could be a potential embarrassment.

I go inside the apartment, turn on the tube, leave the food in the kitchen, and put mom's truckload of literature by the sofa. McDonald's food re-heats really well; 20 minutes at 325 degrees does it every time. On the TV, Captain Kirk is making-out with some bikini space-babe. I think I've seen this one before. Then an ad comes on for the Saturday night Creature Feature with your host The Count Gore DeVol. Oh my God. This week's movie is "Destroy All Monsters." The greatest, all-time, Japanese monster movie. This is too great. I jump around like a firecracker.

Mom comes home and looks tired. She plops down on the sofa and takes her shoes off in the same motion. That is her trick. I immediately go to the kitchen, make a scotch and soda, and bring some french fries out for noshing with her apéritif.

"I love junk food Friday," she said, "what did you get?" She started on the fries instantly.

"We're having the surf and turf tonight," I said.

Mom adores the surf and turf, which means fish sandwiches, Big Macs, fries, and apple pies. Mom always says I get too much food, but we eat all of it every time. If I don't get a couple of extra pies, she frets.

I told her that David had given me a ride home. Mom likes David. She thinks he's cute. One time he came by to see me, but I wasn't home. He stayed and talked to mom for a while. She asked him if he'd like something to eat, and they made sandwiches together in the kitchen. Mom remembered that he liked mayonnaise very much.

She said, "the one who likes lots of mayonnaise?"

"The very same," I said.

I reached in my pocket and got my paycheck. I sign it over to mom every Friday, and she gives me 25 dollars to operate on for the week. We're saving money for lots of things that we need: a car, a color TV, and a VCR. When we do the grocery shopping it's a drag for her to have to carry packages up the hill from the Fresh Value Market. We usually get a taxi, but sometimes they're not around and we have to wait for a while until one shows up. She says we look indigent. I know she hates that. I usually get a few bags of stuff during the week and just schlep it up the hill myself. Mom really wants a car.

I really want a color TV. We have a 13" black and white RCA. I would do anything for a 19" color Zenith, and a Beta Max VCR. I went into an Erol's video store at Seven Corners Mall once, and the sign on the wall said they had over 1700 titles to choose from. The Horror Section was bigger than our living room. If we had a tape machine, I might never leave the house again.

Listen- sometimes people tell me they think I'm smart. They say "oh, you're so smart." I tell them I watch a lot of television. Almost all of life's questions are answered in television programs. The masses don't seem to realize that we can all be extremely intelligent people if we just watch more TV. Imagine how brainy the world would be if everyone had a TV and a VCR.

Because I operate on a 25 dollar weekly budget, I'm always looking for bargains, coupons, specials, anything to save a buck. The Goodwill Store on Four Mile Run Drive is a salvation. Especially for clothes. New clothes cost a lot. The only problem with the thrift shop is that I'm an average-built guy. The normal sized stuff goes in a heartbeat. If I were a dwarf or mega-sized offensive lineman I'd be in clover. The store gets their shipment on Thursday afternoons. If I'm off that day I walk over there and loom over the guys as they unload the stuff. Once, I got a brand new pair of black, size 9, Chuck Taylor high-top sneakers with a Tweety Bird iron-on over the ankle for 1 dollar. That was the all-time day.

I tell mom that I've got to go down to the 7-11 for some beer. They have Budweiser 12-packs for \$6.99 and a coupon you can send in and get 2 dollars back from Anheuser-Busch. This is a one-week only deal. You snooze, you loose. It's only about a ten minute walk from the apartment. I fix mom another scotch and soda and I'm off. She turns the TV to the news before I leave. News is boring. Give me The Addams Family any day.

Outside in the driveway kids are driving their Big-Wheel bikes into each other and blasting everybody with "Return of the Jedi" plastic zap guns. I take a short-cut behind Abingdon Elementary School and behind some townhouses. The town houses are part of a development called Fairlington. They're expensive. I had a Summer job a few years ago jazzing them up to be re-sold as condo-units. A lot of people who work for the U.S. Government in D.C. live there. Most of them are real assholes.

I get to the 7-11 and it's the usual Friday evening craziness. It's pay Friday for the construction crews, so they are buying cases of Heineken, Red Man chewing tobacco, Trojan condoms, and pocketfuls of Swisher sweet cigars. A few Fairlington trophy wives are in line too, buying chardonnay, the new Time

magazine, and L'eggs panty hose. I go to the back of the store where the refrigerator is located, and get my Bud 12-pack and 2 dollar rebate coupon. This is a great deal. The king of beers, and a 2-buck kickback.

I get in line with my brews and in front of me is a guy who looks like all the people in the band Molly Hatchet. He's got a case of Schlitz, two bumpers of Olde English 800 malt liquor, a jar of petroleum jelly, and a Hustler magazine. The line is pretty slow so I ask him, "where's the party tonight?" He tells me it's his little brother's birthday, 16 today, and the guys from the construction site are taking him out to get his tree trimmed. I told him that on my 16th birthday my friend Mark snuck me into Good Guys on Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown. "Classiest go-go girls in D.C." I said. He said Good Guys was too rich for his blood. He preferred Benny's Rebel Room or The Gold Rush on 14th Street downtown. His little brother liked Asian chicks, and Benny's was just packed with them.

He saw me looking at the Hustler and Vaseline. He said his little bro' sometimes overdid it with the booze. The magazine and jelly were in case he had performance difficulties with the girl they had lined-up for him later tonight. "Good idea," I said. I told him he might want to buy some aspirin too, if there was so much partying on the docket this evening. He believed that was good thinking, and bought one of those little 10-tablet packs of Anacin when we got to the cash register. On the way out he handed me a Schlitz, and thanked me for my good advice.

Ah, a Schlitz for the walk back, and all for some chatter and helpful hints. I cruise back through Fairlington and get home in a jiffy. Mom has discovered the load of literature and has the Stephen King book peeled open. The book is titled *Christine*. Mom greets me and says big Steve has already knocked off a couple of people in the first chapter of the book. I tell her I know a person at the mall named Christine who could teach Steve a couple of things.

Mom has also been going through the series romance stuff and has her material picked out for the next few weeks. I told her that all of those books would have gone in the trash if I hadn't brought them home. Mom doesn't like waste either, and says it's a shame. She says she'll take the rest of them to her office and let the girls take what they want.

I go out to the kitchen and fire up the oven to 325 degrees. I put all the McDonald's food on two big pizza pans and slide them in the machine. In 20 minutes, the munch begins. I go back out to talk to mom, but big Steve has sucked her in. She's twirling a strand of hair with one hand and riveted to the pages

of *Christine*. I go to the kitchen and crack open two Budweisers. I'm a straight-from-the-can kind of guy. Mom prefers a glass. I leave mom's drink in front of her and retire to my room, also known as The Bohemian Love Pad. I go to my boom-box and tape collection, pick out Iggy Pop's "The Idiot," and turn the volume up just a little, not to disturb mom. It's time to stare at my poster of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark for a while, and then read my Fangoria magazine to learn about zombie nurses until dinner is ready .

We have a great munch. Mom's apéritifs have done the job, and she's noshing like a college freshman. I'm big on condiments like extra pickles and ketchup, so it's off to the refrigerator to customize my Big Mac to personal specifications. Mom knocks off her fish sandwich, Big Mac, fries, and beer. She burps contentedly. Mom rarely burps. It's a good sign. It's almost 8:00 o'clock and that means it's time for her to ogle Tom Selleck. I take all the trash out to the kitchen and get the apple pies. Mom is quivering in anticipation. Apple pie and Tom. This is as good as it gets for her. We watch all of Magnum P.I. and mom knows that means it's schlock-TV time for her mutant son. She gets her Steven King novel and tells me good-night. I tell her Pink, my pal from work, is coming by in the morning so I can help him move an abandoned desk from the loading dock at Skyline. "That's nice," she says, "say 'hi' to him for me, and don't hurt your backs doing macho-man things."

Charlie's Angels and Twilight Zone are on the schedule for tonight; both episodes were excellent. Many close-ups of Jaclyn Smith looking distressed, and many wardrobe changes. No blood, some Kate Jackson Kung-Fu, 3 halter tops. In Twilight Zone, William Shatner gets ultra-neurotic at a road side diner, with a fortune telling machine called the Mystic Seer. He's trapped in the headlights of discovering his own fate. He's wiggled, gaga, out to lunch with curiosity. He finally pulls out of it, but it's close. Oh so close.

I straighten out the living room and take the trash downstairs, then check on mom and she's out cold. I turn the light off in her room and get ready for the morning. It promises to be wild with Pink's new desk, work, making dinner, and then "Destroy All Monsters" in the evening.

That night I dream of old girlfriends from jr. high school. I can only remember their faces when I'm dreaming. It used to be so easy talking to girls and hanging out and just being myself. About 6-7 years ago, all that changed. They didn't seem to care about quality of character anymore. It didn't matter what kind of a guy you were; their affection depended on how much monetary or material glurp you could generate at your place of business. It depended on what you could "get." And they only seemed to care

about guys who could “get” a lot. I dreamed about my Summer girlfriend Kathy. She used to wear a stars and stripes bikini at the Jelleff’s Boys Club pool and bring her red Panasonic radio with her. We used to go sit in the bleachers by the baseball diamond and make out. Kathy said she loved me because I was cute, and crazy, and took her to the movies sometimes. I think about her so much. Why do these things slowly disintegrate and invariably fall apart? That’s one question my TV programs haven’t answered.

My brown Panasonic clock-radio wakes me up at 7:30 a.m. I have it set on DC/101 and Van Halen’s version of “You Really Got Me” rattles me off the mattress. I pad into the kitchen for the obligatory instant coffee. I get my favorite, and only coffee mug from the kitchen cabinet. Mom bought a few “nice” coffee cups when we moved in, but I need a serious mug. I found mine at the Goodwill shop on one of my junkets. It’s a large, white thing, big enough to plant a geranium in. On it is printed: Ward, I’m worried about the Beaver.

I make my coffee and tear open a package of Safeway brand, chocolate sprinkle Pop-Tarts, then turn on Channel 20 with the volume really low and watch a little bit of Fantastic 4 cartoons before showering. An ad comes on the join the Channel 20 Club for prizes and trips and such stuff. The problem is you have to be 12 or under to become a member. I’m in my twenties. Drag. The man in charge of all the goings on in the Channel 20 Club is Captain 20. He’s dressed up like Mr. Spock on Star Trek, pointy ears and everything. Any devoted TV watcher knows that Captain 20 is the same fellow who gets to be The Count Gore DeVol on Creature Feature on Saturday nights. Some guys have all the luck.

I shower and get dressed and wait for Pink to come and collect me. Mom is still in La-La land so I close the door to the living room and sit like a robot on the sofa for a few minutes. I walk over to the window and bend the venetian blinds to see what kind of day it is outside, and see Pink driving a Subaru Brat pick-up truck real slow, looking at house numbers. The truck is painted green, and on the side door is printed: George Mason University Security. I dodder outside the door and wave to my bud. He smiles like a moldy pumpkin. I think he’s slightly medicated. I gambol up to the truck and jump in.

It seems Pink has borrowed a few items from school to help him move his way-too-big desk. Not only does he have the truck, but he’s also been to the Nursing Division to relieve them of several containers of nitrous oxide. Then he visited the Meteorology lab to borrow a couple of small unbreakable balloons. Finally he hit the Science Department Faculty Lounge and brought their seltzer water maker and two large

cups of fresh coffee for us. How can Pink obtain the use of such diverse and valuable university equipment? Because he is a nice guy, and because he is a scientist.

Pink cranks down the window of The Brat and motors off. He's brought his cassette player with him and is listening to his favorite tape, Frank Zappa's "Hot Rats." He points to the drink holder with the Styrofoam cup on the passenger's door and says "good coffee." Then he snorts and cracks himself up. I see lots of little nitrous containers in a bag on the floor boards. I asked him if he's sampled any of the product already. "Maybe a couple," he said, and hee-hawed some more. Pink is the happiest man alive.

Pink wheels The Brat on to Route 7, and pulls into Skyline Mall parking lot. There are only a few cars around, mostly outside the Safeway. He cracks the seltzer water gun and drops a nitrous container in the chamber, then slips a balloon over the nozzle and twists the handle. The nitrous blows up the balloon just as nice as you please. Pink looks like Victor Frankenstein right about now. He hands me the balloon. I put the end up to my mouth and slowly breathe in the nitrous. It tastes sweet like liquid caramel, and cold. It expands in my lungs like a frosty bong-hit, then slowly moves up to my head. Zappa sounds like some demented wah-wah pedal freight train coming down the mountain. BA-WOWN-WOWN-WOWN-WOWN. I think of Pink saying "good coffee" and burst out ho-ho-hoing myself. Pink gives me a crazy look and says "brouhaha." I open the window and hang out of it for a few minutes wracked with unqualified hysteria.

We both do one more charge of nitrous and drink the complimentary coffees, then drive The Brat up to the mall entrance and get out to see if Mr. Mike is in the store yet. We almost collapse getting out of the truck. Our legs are Silly Putty and we walk down the hall like a couple of Gumbys. Mr. Mike is in the store. He's sitting cross-legged on the Sale table, reading a Washington City Paper. The only reason any of us look at City Paper is to see the David Lynch comic, "Angriest Dog in the World." Mr. Mike cuts it out and tapes it to the back of the office door each week. Sometimes, when things are going crazy in the store we say "rrrrrrr" to each other. Just like the angriest dog in the world.

Mr. Mike unlocks the glass sliding door and lets us in. He looks at us and says "you're all wasted puppies." Pink tells him it's been a nitrous intensive morning, and there's plenty left in the truck. Mr. Mike said we'd better get going. Before exiting, we all look at our favorite comic. It's weird as hell, per usual, with the enraged little dog tugging away at his tether. I always feel slightly light-headed after looking at

“Angriest Dog in the World.” Today is no exception. Just as we’re leaving Donna and Debbie show up to do the store pre-opening stuff. Donna looks at us funny and shakes her head. She tells Mr. Mike to be careful this morning with these two chimpanzees. “We’ll all be together at noon, doing retail acrobatics, and thwarting disasters,” Mr. Mike assures her.

Our Manager wants some nitrous. He’s bounding along towards the parking lot and wearing a toothy smile. Me and Pink are mentally back together and could use a re-charge. We get to The Brat and pile in. It’s a tiny truck, and we look like clowns all crammed in the front. Pink preps a laughing gas balloon for our boss. Mr. Mike is spastic with expectation. We watch him suck down the gas from the balloon, and his tee-heeing starts instantly. Soon we’re all a bunch of gassed-up moronic wombats tooling around in the Security truck, trying to find our way through parking tunnels to the loading dock.

We drive in circles for a while and finally see the mega-dumpster. We get closer and see the Garcia gang has already been here, and they’ve cleaned up the whole enormous pile of junk that was on the loading dock yesterday. Pink’s big desk is the only item on the landing. It looks like the Parthenon sitting there. Pink is noticeably relieved. Mr. Mike says “gnarly,” and cracks himself up some more. We back The Brat up to the edge of the platform and scamper out.

Pink’s big universal NO BASURA sign is still on the desk. One of the Garcia crew has left a note for Pink in the same format: NO PROBLEM. Pink gets his measuring tape out and does calculations. He’s measured his door at home and knows it’s going to be a tight fit, but he’s confident he can get it in his room. Remember, he’s a scientist. Pink’s scientist-girlfriend, known to us as Mrs. Floyd, is stationed at his place with measuring tape. She’s awaiting calls that will confirm or deny the unit’s entrance to his home.

His final forecast for the desk’s successful entry is questionable. No matter how he tries to work the geometry, it’s still several inches too large in any direction. He calls Mrs. Floyd from the pay phone in the mall. They calculate and confirm and deny each others numbers. Pink finally says to hell with it, and we’re going to try and get it in anyway. Mrs. Floyd says she’ll make lemonade for us.

We go back to the loading dock and try and maneuver the desk to the edge of the platform. It’s just moveable, like a Westinghouse stove. Between the three of us we get it in the truck with plenty of grunting. Disaster potential is high. The Brat is seriously weighed down in the back, and Pink secures the

payload with nylon cord. Then the crew climbs in the cab and try to find our way out of the garage. We look like extra guys in a Cheech and Chong movie.

Pink lives near the mall in Falls Church. We cruise on Route 7 West and fortunately his house is downhill. Mr. Mike dons his clip-on shades. Pink turns up "Hot Rats." I slip a nitrous cartridge into the soda gun and instead of letting the gas into a balloon, just spray it around in the truck's cab. We all start tee-heeing. It's 10:30 on a Saturday morning.

At Pink's place, we drive right up on the lawn and loop around to the back door of the house. Mrs. Floyd opens the door for us from inside. Pink's "lab" is down at the end of the hall. Mrs. Floyd says we look goofy like the McDonald's Hamburgler-guys. That cracked us up for a while. Pink prepared a balloon-cocktail for Mrs. Floyd and soon she was helpless like us. She tied her tape measure around her head like Hendrix.

Pink got his Black and Decker drill from the tool shed and Mrs. Floyd looked nervous. He said he couldn't deal with numbers any more and put the screwdriver attachment on the drill. He proceeded to take the back door off its hinges. I placed another nitrous cartridge in the soda gun and filled a balloon, then danced around like Madonna and blasted everyone with euphoria-gas. Mrs. Floyd began crying from happiness. She left us to prepare lemonade.

Pink got the door off and we all moved it aside, then got the desk off The Brat and turned it so the legs would go in sideways. We got about three-quarters of the way through and stopped dead. One corner was just about 1/2 of an inch too wide, no matter how we shoved, or cajoled, or shimmied, it would not go through. It was maddening. It was SO close. Mrs. Floyd arrived with a pitcher of lemonade. We took a break to strategize. We were flummoxed.

We had our drinks and reminisced about Rick the Security Guard when we were in the exact same situation yesterday. Pink quickly added that he didn't want to do any permanent editing with a saw on his new baby. A thought struck Mrs. Floyd. She told us to hold on and she bounded into the kitchen. Pink's lady returned with an economy-sized spray can of Lemon Pledge furniture polish. She told us to try one more time and she'd spray the stress points of the desk and door frame and lube them up special. "It'll pop through like a wiggly baby," she said. We had nothing to lose.

We got the thing up and wriggled it like mad in the aperture. Mrs. Floyd was spraying everywhere and pushing with her shoulder when she wasn't running around to either side of the action. She literally put her back against the desk and pushed with her legs. We heard the wood creak and screech and it eked through the frame and inched into the house. Mrs. Floyd was quick and sprayed the flat surface of the desk and entire door frame, then told us to bump and grind it like mad until we get to the back legs. After a few minutes of insane shifting we got to the rear legs. We lifted the entire unit up and into the house. Then we all got behind the desk, just like offensive line of the Redskins, and pushed the beast into the lab.

Pink set it upright in the corner. There were a few scratches on the surface, but nothing too evil. Mrs. Floyd brought a roll of paper towels and we wiped the Lemon Pledge off of the desk. Now it looked real shiny, like new, with Lemon Pledge. We didn't have time to celebrate. It was close to 11:30 and we had to get back to the store to start work. Oh, God. I'm spent now. What'll I look like in 8 hours. Pink does the necessary bye-byes to Mrs. Floyd and we're back in The Brat, then he peels out like Steve McQueen and we're back out on Route 7 in a few minutes. There's only one nitrous cartridge left in the bag and we do an obligatory group balloon-hit. That's it, that's all. We're as medicated as we're going to get this morning. Mr. Mike said, "Lemon Pledge." We all snorted.

Back at Skyline Mall, the parking lot is getting full. We all look kind of scuzzy after our garage safaris, workouts, and gas treatments. We get to B. Dalton and it's not too bad; just the usual Saturday customer traffic before the movies start. Debbie is at the cash register and Donna is shelving new stock. They both look at us and hoot. Debbie says we look like feral dingoes from Australia. Donna says we look like aboriginal white men. It's still a few minutes before we have to clock-in, so it's off to the Skyline Mall bathrooms to re-make and re-model ourselves.

The cold water feels great on our faces. The nitrous has reduced us to mere husks of real men. Still we press on, tucking our shirt tails in, and neatly combing and parting our hair. We put our orange B. Dalton Bookseller name tags on and return to the store ready for action. The lines for the 12:30 movies have already started growing at Skyline 6 Theaters. The store starts filling up with teens, divorcees, technos, jocks, rednecks, baby carriages, half-wits, and the usual movie crowd who have time to kill before the shows start.

I'm stationed at the second cash register with Debbie. I love working with her. She's funny and counts out the customers' change backwards like they do in banks. It always confuses them. Pink, Mr. Mike, and Donna put away the tons of stock that came from UPS the other night. What they can't find space for, they hide in the office ceiling, on top of removable acoustic tiles. From the canopy of any store on the first floor, you can access the entire mall through the air conditioning system, like they always do in 1960s espionage movies.

For a couple of hours everything is great. We're all going on leftover adrenaline from the morning weirdness. Then around 3 O'clock I start powering down. Mr. Mike and Pink are in the same condition. When our lunch breaks come we go into the office and sleep at Mr. Mike's desk for 30 minutes each. It's just enough of a re-charge to keep going. Donna is maternal towards us and buys us coffee from The Pawnshop carry-out counter. They have a blend called "Black Death" that is guaranteed to produce insomnia in healthy people. She buys us 3 large "Black Deaths."

On the sales floor, Pink starts babbling. He's talking about crafting one's metabolism with non-prescription drugs. He says it's incredible what the FDA will allow on the shelves of our pharmacies. If he felt like it he could make nerve gas, and bombs, and all kinds of gruesome things with stuff you can get anytime at any drug store in the country. His eyes have become dots. The "Black Death" has taken effect. Mr. Mike's price sticker gun sounds like a machine running. He's putting prices on *Barbara Cartland's Romance Cookbook*. All the entrees are a pink chiffon color in the photographs. Even the chicken. We must have received 50 of them. I'm a blur at the cash register. I've finished transactions before I know I've started them. It's the coffee, man. That's good coffee.

At 5 O'clock the part-time night crew comes in. They stay until the store closes at 9:00. I only know them casually. Donna usually has them sending returns to publishers and shelving stock. I'm always at the cash register. It's the only thing they feel comfortable about me doing. That, and making pyramids out of overstock hardback books. I call mom and ask her if she can make dinner tonight. I'm usually home around 5:30, but with the morning hoo-haw, I have to work until 8:00.

She says it's no problem. It seems mom had a taste for some fried chicken tonight, so she took out some Perdue thighs this morning to defrost. She wanted to know if fried chicken, potato salad, and greens would be alright for dinner. Would it! Oh my God. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I told her I'd be

home around 8:30. She said she'd put everything in the refrigerator and we'd have dinner together. My Mother said she had to go because *Christine* was so good she had to get back to it.

People were filing out of Clint Eastwood's "Tightrope" movie and into the store like crickets. And here comes Manager Tom! He's come to spread cheer and talk cool to us. Manager Tom has brought us a very hush-hush, secret surprise. It's a one-sheet poster of a film that is going to be released soon. It's called "Nightmare on Elm Street." He says the inside word is that this movie is going to be the greatest thing ever. Endless flying heads, bimbos galore, razorgloves, fire ax chases, everything. And it doesn't let up one bit from start to finish. Total release, man. Total. Manager Tom said it was so good that Skyline 6 couldn't get it. It's going to be unrated and too intense for regular mall people. They'd explode on contact. Places like The Arlington Theater, The Centre, The State, or The Buckingham would probably take a chance with it. He handed Mr. Mike the rolled-up poster and said, "something for your office."

Manager Tom hung out and shot the shit for a while. It was getting close to 8:00 and I was ready to leave an hour ago. We made plans to have a power-lunch at Skyline Pizza on Monday to discuss possibilities for Cult Movie Friday at the mall. Pink volunteered to keep the minutes. I said I'd provide atmosphere. Mr. Mike said he'd bring a bunch of old stripped Fangoria and Cinefex magazines that we could do our research with. Pink got excited when he heard the word "research." Manager Tom had assembled his Think Tank. He is a natural leader. Me, Pink, and Mr. Mike said goodbye to everyone at 8:00 and left the store. Mr. Mike just got a new BetaMax video and tonight he's going to catch up on his Roger Corman movies. He bounced away like Bigfoot.

Pink offered to give me a ride home in The Brat. He didn't have to get it back to George Mason until tomorrow morning. He said working part-time in the Science Department really had its advantages. When we got to the truck we picked out all the spent nitrous containers from inside the cab and threw them out by the Safeway. There were quite a few. He'd ratholed one last cartridge in his pocket for the ride home. We blew up one last balloon and split it. It was the perfect end to a day of retail.

He dropped me off outside the apartment. It was only a few minutes past 8:00. Man, cars really save you a lot of time. I asked him to come in and meet mom. We don't get much company. I told him I have most of a 12-pack of Budweiser in the refrigerator, and it's cold. He said he could only stay a short while, as Mrs. Floyd was expecting him soon. Pink and I are in agreement; Budweiser is the king of beers.

We're outside the apartment and my key chain accidentally bangs against the door and makes a metallic TOK. I hear a startled "EEEE!" from inside. We quickly open the door and run inside to see what's happened. It seems mom was at a particularly grisly segment of *Christine* and the sharp report of my key chain scared the bejabbers out of her. I ask her if she's sure she still wants to buy a car. Yes, she's sure, just not an old one. I introduce Pink to mom and they're compatible, then go in the kitchen and get two Buds. Mom has a fresh cocktail in front of her. Big Steve King has done his number on my mother. Pink sits on the floor like an Indian Chief and tells mom the story of moving the desk from the loading dock to his house, minus the cosmic refreshments. Mom likes adventure stories. When he told her about the Lemon Pledge she almost choked.

My friend stays a little while and says he's got to go get Mrs. Floyd. They've got tickets to see John Hartford at the Birchmere in Alexandria and he wants to get a table near the stage. He thanks me again for everything. We're both off on Sunday, so we'll see each other Monday at work, and at Manager Tom's brain trust meeting at Skyline Pizza. We walk out to The Brat and he says he should stop at 7-11 for some more coffee. Pink's on impulse power now. He toots the horn and motors off towards Route 7.

It's time to eat! Inside the apartment mom has already got the chicken and greens re-heating in the oven. She takes the potato salad out of the refrigerator and we both take a big spoonful. Mmmm, oh yes, lots of onion and pickles. I set up the TV trays in the living room and get two beers. Mom's beverage goes in a glass because she's a lady. It's Saturday night, so I use the stemware. That makes it more like eating in a restaurant. We turn on the TV and it's a detective movie with David Jansen. How totally great. Mom loves David. She says he's a real man. Mom has the plates piled high with chicken, greens, and potatoes. We get to our tables and dig in; it is so good. We eat, and talk, and watch David chase bad guys. I take it easy with my mother and it's a grand time.

My duty is to wash the dishes and take out the trash after dinner. Mom is too engrossed in the movie to do anything else. That's cool. She works in some horrid office all week doing mindless, robotic, bullshit 8 hours a day. She can take it easy for a long time as far as I'm concerned. After David saves the day, mom is ready for sleep. We watch a little bit of the 11 O'clock news and she retires to her room with *Christine*. She asks me if I'm going to watch monster movies tonight. I inform her that the all-time

Japanese monster movie comes on in 30 minutes. She asks me to please use the earphone on the TV. She doesn't mind the sounds of regular films, but the screaming in monster movies makes her nervous.

I'm really tired, but I must prepare to view "Destroy All Monsters." I get the earplug from the chest of drawers and the TV guide. I read the blurb in the movie column and it has a two star rating, was made in 1968, and is in color. Two stars?! Fools! That reviewer probably likes Barbra Streisand movies. My black-and-white TV handicap is a drag, but does not diminish the movie's weirdness factor one iota. I get a piece of paper and pen from my room and start to scribble down names of movies we might use for Cult Movie Friday.

Finally it's 11:30. The Count Gore DeVol comes out of his coffin with the Vampirella poster taped to the lid, and starts prattling off bad jokes. I burn into the kitchen for a Budweiser and get back to the TV in a few seconds, then jack in the earphone and the movie starts. The force field has disintegrated around Monster Island. The monsters can run free and cause pandemonium at will. They must be stopped. There's your plot.

Channel 20 always shows about 100 commercials during the Creature Feature breaks so I have lots of time to write down movie titles for Manager Tom. It shouldn't be a problem to come up with a good calendar of stuff. The movie ends with the monsters safely back where they started from. Tokyo is saved. The Count comes on at the end of the program to tell his audience that next week's movie will be "Astro-zombies," starring Tura Satana.

He gets back into his coffin and the organ music starts up. Another salvo of commercials kicks in: big-titted girls in negligees begging guys to call them at 976-something, WWF Wrestling at Capital Centre, correspondence colleges, Ginsu knives that cut tomatoes and tin cans, U.S. Army Reserves, ambulance-chaser lawyers, all the plebeian-junk. I get one final idea for Cult Movie Friday and scribble it down on top of the page of movie titles. I turn off all the lights and go to check on mom. She's out for the night. I go into the Bohemian Love Pad, get into bed, and fall asleep in about a minute thinking about Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, and 1-Hour Photo Tina. It has been a very good day.

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Two

The next week at work, Pink tells me he passed-out at the John Hartford show at the Birchmere. They had gotten their table up close, but he'd had too much nitrous, beer, and exercise during the day. Mrs. Floyd told him that John Hartford dedicated a song to him while he was doing a face-press on their table, but Pink didn't remember it. Mrs. Floyd drove The Brat home that night.

The first few days of the week are usually slow at the mall, and B. Dalton Bookseller is no exception. The merchants do everything to get people in the stores during weekdays: drink and food specials at The Pawnshop, discount movies at Skyline 6, contests, coupons, in-store promotions, give-aways, all sorts of gimcrackery. B. Dalton Bookseller did a tricky little promotion during the week that only succeeded in getting a lot of people frustrated. Mr. Mike told us that the regional manager had taken out an ad in the Washington Post. The ad said that the Northern Virginia stores were giving away free word processors during the week. The big kahuna himself had called the store earlier to give Mr. Mike the skinny on the advertisement. We all said "wow."

B. Dalton loves to sell computer books because they're expensive and need updating constantly. The word processor giveaway was bait to get the technos and cybergeeks into the store. They buy quantities of stuff regardless of sales. The sham with this promotion was when the customer asks for the free word processor you give them a number 2 pencil and a pretty smile.

Mr. Mike took 10 dollars out of petty cash and dispatched me to Grant's Office Supply down the hall for a 100-count box of pencils, now called word processors, for the high-tech 1980s. We put them by the cash registers and waited for the unsuspecting computer-types. We thought the whole thing was stupid, but we're just sales-peons. No one listens to us. We finished the morning pre-opening routine and started

business at 10:00. As expected, a couple of the office building regulars were outside the door waiting for us to begin the day, advertisement in hand. They were really bummed-out when I handed them their prizes. They thought we were wankers. They bought some other stuff, because they're always buying stuff, but the whole thing felt bush league.

I asked Mr. Mike what he'd watched on his video player on Saturday night. He said he'd seen "Death Race 2000," and "Cannonball," two of the great mid-1970s David Carradine pictures for Roger Corman's New World Productions. I told him I was more than a little envious of his machine. He said we could do a video party at my apartment one night and ask the "Dalton Gang" over. He'd bring his VCR and his portable color TV.

On Sunday he'd gone to a record show at the Tysons Corners Marriott. There were scores of record dealers who brought all their choice stuff to the show: picture disks, T-shirts, backstage passes, bootleg recordings, concert photos, autographs, imports, the works. I used to go to lots of them when I worked at Penguin Feather and got some great Iggy and Led Zeppelin bootleg tapes. Bootlegs are what the real connoisseurs go for at the record shows. Unauthorized recordings are the only way to hear what bands really sound like. Records from the big companies all sound so sterile and quality controlled compared to a reasonably clean tape from a fan's recorder or the club's mixing board. However, you've got to be careful. If a dealer won't let you listen to a cassette before you buy, it's probably a dog, or so distorted you can't listen to it.

The genuine audio nut-jobs bring a Sony Walkman with them to check out the tape on their own machine. Also, you can forward and reverse the cassette to make sure it's not just ten minutes of guitar noise and a whole lot of blank tape.

Mr. Mike was no amateur at the record shows. He had his tape player in hand, but also bought lots of vinyl. He'd gotten a book from the store which rated the best bootlegs from hundreds of artists. He had all kinds of great stuff, mostly metal, but other things: Stones, Hoople, Queen, Bowie, etc. His taste in metal was extreme: Baron Rojo, Cloven Hoof, Merciful Fate, Plasmatics, Slayer, and always Venom. He'd get a few real nuggets at the shows, go home to his headphones, and sonically blow his brains out.

He said there was another show next Sunday at the Falls Church Community Center, and if I wanted to go, he'd pick me up. I said that sounded like fun. I didn't have piles of disposable income, but

kind of missed being around all the groovy rock stuff like when I worked in the record store. I hadn't been to a show in a while, and Mr. Mike was the perfect guy to go with.

It was getting close to lunch time, when Donna and Debbie come in to the store. Today is a special day. Today is the Manager Tom/Skyline Pizza/Cult Movie Friday brainstorm session. I'd spent my Sunday helping mom around the house, watching Tarzan and Superman movies on Channel 20, grocery shopping at Fresh Value Market, and making notes about the possible films to play at Skyline 6. I have two full pages of movie titles stuffed in my pocket, and an idea about how to assemble the whole circus.

I'm at the cash register at the front of the store. Mr. Mike emerges from the back with a book bag full of old movie magazines. Not just Fangoria, but others: Cinefantastique, Starlog, Cinefex, and FX. He's also got a couple of trade paper backs that list lots of schlock masterpieces, and a book about the director Russ Meyer.

Pink finishes another round of intense shelving. He can fit more books into the shelves and display areas than David Copperfield, the fluffy-haired magician. Even Mr. Mike can't match his skill in accommodating the stock on the sales floor. No one can figure out how he does it. Pink says it's a "Boolean" thing. He also said something about "collapsing molecules."

Manager Tom comes in the store and tells me he's ordered the extra-large, Skyline Supreme at Skyline Pizza. Of course, it's courtesy of the theater for our consulting services, and it will be ready in a few minutes. Free lunch. This is show biz, man. Mr. Mike makes sure Donna and Debbie are prepped with extra change in case it gets busy during our pow-wow. He tells Donna we might be a while longer than our allotted 30 minute lunch break, and she's got no problem with that. She understands the importance of this meeting.

Me, Pink, Mr. Mike, and Manager Tom walk down the hall to Skyline Pizza. Tina from 1-Hour Photo sees us and says we look like the "most-wanted men" at the post office. Tina is so cool it is paralyzing. She's so fairy tale Joan Jett-looking. On her T-shirt is printed: Don't Let's Play Games. She's wearing a dime store tiara and has a small, temporary tattoo of a heart applied to her cheek.

Tina could be the girl of my dreams. However, I think she's dating rough-boy Mitch from Waxie Maxie's, but I'm not sure. He hangs out at 1-Hour Photo a lot, and I don't think I've ever seen him with a

camera. We pass Villayphone Jewelers on the way to lunch. Except for the two Asian ladies who run the place, I've never seen one person in there, ever.

We get to Skyline Pizza and the lunch crowd is starting to come in. Pink and I grab a four-seater booth, while Manager Tom and Mr. Mike get our big pie. Pink gets out a George Mason University notebook and fine point Flair marker. He opens the cover and writes the date and underneath, re: Cult Movie Friday, Skyline Mall, Bailey's Cross Roads, Virginia. Then he writes all our names in the corner, and the time, which was 12:08 p.m.

Manager Tom comes to the table with a pizza the size of Costa Rica and Mr. Mike has a large pitcher of Dr. Pepper, paper cups, 50 napkins stuffed in his shirt pocket, and a bunch of knives and forks. I don't think I've ever used a knife and fork to eat pizza, but I didn't say anything. Pink loves to put the red pepper and extra grated cheese they have at the tables on the pie. I think it's a great inspiration. The idea passed with Manager Tom and Mr. Mike, too. We shake and shake all the condiments on top of it, and our lunch is now customized. We are so ready to eat: 4 guys, 1 pizza, no waiting.

Soon our meal is practically decimated. Skyline Pizza is one of the few places on earth where the pie actually looks like the pretty picture they have in the menu. They are so deluxe, and the Supreme is just too good to describe. There are so many pepperonis, olives, green peppers, and Italian sausage on it. It is cinematic. It is so gorgeous.

Listen: There are so many nice things in this world. Just look at this pie and these nutty mallboys to share it with. I wish I knew why great numbers of people seem so unhappy most of the time. During our feeding frenzy, no one was cheerless at our table. Not even a little. Guys and pizza have a special relationship that few women seem to understand. There is no seduction involved. It's all conquest. Search and destroy. Kill, kill, kill. Nosh, nosh, eat.

Pink pours us out another round of Dr. Pepper and we're ready to get to the nitty-gritty. Manager Tom gives us the bare bones of his idea. The last shows at Skyline 6 start at 9:30 or 10:00 every day of the week depending on the length of the film. After they've cleaned up from the last show, he let's the night crew go home. For the Midnight Movies, he's got to have at least one employee on the clock for each screening room, and he's going to pay them double time for staying late. He wants six cheese-bomb films that don't cost much to rent. "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" is the only one he's sure he wants to show.

The Georgetown kiddies are still going to the Cerberus Theater to see “Rocky Horror” after the Key stopped doing midnight shows a little while ago. He thinks the teenagers in the ‘burbs would come to Skyline to party on Friday nights if they had incentive. Manager Tom looked at us and said, “gentlemen, the floor is open.”

Pink said he liked whiz-bang science fiction movies. Mr. Mike said he liked road-kill and monster movies. They both started peeling off names of films that would be great to show. Manager Tom nodded his head often and said, ‘uh-huh, uh-huh, yeah.” Pink wrote down names of movies. I waited for the first round of enthusiastic craziness to subside. I waited for my moment. When the fellows were quiet, I took Pink’s Flair marker and drew a yin-yang on the page with the meeting’s minutes.

I said, “boys, we need to be unified on this matter. We’re shooting from the hip. It confuses the audience to just have this movie or that movie whenever, without any rhyme or reason. Lack of a clear target waters down consumer interest.”

I paused for effect, and said, “Manager Tom, you need theme rooms.”

Pink nodded his head like a Zen master. Mr. Mike’s eyes dilated and danced. Manager Tom burped, looked contented, and said, “please go on.” I told him he had six theaters to fill and Midnight Movies only brought out a select audience. “One had to target them carefully,” I said, ““Rocky Horror” would pull in mutant kids no problem. They can dress-up, and act funny, and throw rice. You could do a Kung-Fu Theater, Rock and Roll Circus, Surf and Drag Room, Bucket of Blood Palace, and finally, a monster room. We could call it Monster Island. You could also do special theme events like Debbie Harry appreciation night, or cheerleader night. Things like that.”

Manager Tom was speechless. After a moment he said to me, “you are the son I never had.” Pink said I’d been born to do this stuff. Mr. Mike looked like he’d been teleported.

Now I was ready to release my second big idea. I told Manager Tom that for this event to really get noticed he’d have to do some advertising. I volunteered to put flyers up in store windows and on car windshields at Skyline. Manager Tom told me he could probably get the guys who write for the Washington Post Weekend section to do an article about Bailey’s Cross Roads becoming a kitsch-culture attraction. Pink said he could put flyers up at George Mason University, and Mr. Mike suggested we make handbills and put them in the customers’ bags at the book store.

Now for the kicker, now for the big enchilada. I looked at all my pals sitting around the Formica four-seater. I told them for this bird to really fly, we'd have to grab the mutant community by the cojones. We had to let them know that this new addition to the Skyline 6 entertainment menu had credibility. Manager Tom was now leaning over the table and hung on my every word.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

"Manager Tom," I said, "we need star-power to promote this event. We need The Count Gore DeVol."

There was a hushed reverence around the table when I mentioned The Count's name. We sat in a kind of stupor for a minute, weighing all the information.

Mr. Mike said, "that's intense."

Pink said, "I need a cigarette."

Manager Tom said, "I think we've got enough to get started here."

The meeting adjourned with him saying he would contact Channel 20 during the week, and the Dalton Gang should start working on a make-up flyer to distribute. Dates and features to be added when things are finalized. We should pick out a movie for each theme room and give him a list as soon as possible. Cult Movie Friday looks like a go-project.

We walk back down the hall towards Skyline 6 and the book store. Tina is helping a customer in 1-Hour Photo, but is still able to throw a paper airplane at us as we cruise by. She has her boom-box on the counter and is listening to David Bowie's "Let's Dance" album. Tina is an art babe. This means she's in love with David Bowie, as all art babes are in love with him. We get to B. Dalton and see a few construction guys going in and out of the vacant store next to us. That parcel has been empty since I got here. Mr. Mike said it used to be a deluxe shoe store that went under when Shoe-Town moved into the huge corner space by the drug store. There's a large sign in the corner of the place, and lots of shelves and display cases being positioned around inside. We stare at the sign in disbelief, and ask one of the men if the information is correct. He says it is, and they'll be opening in a few days. The sign says: Mallworld Video Store.

We get back to B. Dalton and tell Donna and Debbie the movie news. They're happy for us, but don't seem super worked-up about it. Debbie said she'd go to a movie at midnight to see Mel Gibson, but

that's it. And it can't be any of that weird car-crash, sado-stuff from Australia. It's got to be something nice. I don't think Debbie will be coming to Cult Movie Friday very often. Donna likes Mel too, but she says he can wear all the leather and destroy as many cars as he wants.

Donna said a few people came in at lunch time with the "free word processor" ad and were miffed with the pencils. They didn't see the humor in it. Debbie said it was lame publicity. We all said "uh-huh." Debbie and Donna were about to go to lunch. We fellows were clocked back in, and in our appropriate store positions. That means Mr. Mike and Pink shelving books forever, and me at the cash register. The girls were going to Mother Nature's health food store down the hall, near the Bread and Chocolate Bakery. Mother Nature's is a crazy place. They sell lots of herbal supplements that speed you up, make you horny, or achieve any number of desired physiological results. On the walls they have lots of dried and canned produce that are pesticide, ion, chlorine, and microbe free. In the back they've opened a small restaurant that sells avocado and sprout sandwiches, whey soup, and other very healthy things to eat. I've been there exactly one time.

Office Building Gary, one of the regular customers, comes in and starts asking me about best sellers, what's good to read, and other book stuff. Gary looks very conservative, but he's not. Not one bit. He works in the Skyline 2 Office Building. It's down one of those endless halls that lead to Skyline Towers, and beyond. He's always coming by the store, sometimes twice a day. Gary can read a whole paperback in one day. He's decimated the Shirlington Library's Fiction Section and just comes down to Dalton to be near books. He says he can only read chillers, slashers, and thrillers. He wants to know what chillers and slashers are new and exciting.

I tell Gary that I hate to disappoint him, but I really don't read much of anything. I watch a lot of TV, and go to the movies as often as possible. Books never really made it with me. They give me headaches. I told him I read a Stephen King novel every once in a while. He's the only author I know anything about. Gary was not pleased with my answer, and was about to let me know just how displeased he was.

The man said I had no excuse to be so blasé about reading. He said I had the best opportunity on earth to expand my mind working in this store. Just watching TV programs is shameful. I told him that in high school the books in English classes were so boring I couldn't stand it. Sometimes I started crying

attempting to read Faulkner, and Hardy, and any of those Bronte people. I could never finish them. They were so tedious, and dull, and monotonous I wanted to die. I told him my theory of entertainment in one sentence. I had nothing against any book, or movie, or play. It just can't be BORING.

Office Building Gary nodded in agreement. "That's a pithy statement," he said. He told me I felt exactly the same way. I didn't expect him to say that. He asked me if I thought all the books we had in the store were boring. I told him I didn't know because I'd pretty much given up reading completely after high school. Gary said he was going back to his office to make me a required reading list. He said if I found any of the books on his list boring I was a complete basket case and didn't deserve to live. I told him fine. I also told him "Basket Case" is a pretty great monster movie, and it wasn't boring for one minute.

It's kind of slow in the afternoon, so I take my papers with all the movie titles out of my pocket, and start to divide them into theme theater categories. There's a lot of crossover potential. I call out names of movies to Mr. Mike and Pink on the sales floor and they help me make the classifications. Would "The Blob" go in Monster Island or Bucket of Blood? Would "Faster Pussycat, Kill, Kill" go in Surf and Drag, or Kung-Fu theater? We got piles of movie names for all the 6 theaters, but how to choose the ones for opening night? We all had our favorites. There would have to be some sort of eliminating process. There would have to be something democratic involved.

Donna and Debbie return from Mother Nature's and have more exciting mall news. Yet another new store will be opening soon. It's down near Scoops and it's called Hi Jinx Toys. They met the manager and some other fellows who were bringing boxes of inventory inside. His name is Jim. The girls said he likes to talk about toys. All they said was "hi," and he started jabbering about all the great games and gewgaws they were going to sell. They said he gets excited quickly and talks a lot, sort of like Redskins quarterback Joe Theismann during an interview. He seemed nice in spite of his enthusiasm. I'll have to talk to Tina about this. She always has the inside information on mall activity. What a day at Skyline. What a busy day.

It picks up a little around 3:00 and we sell a pile of kiddie books to some school teacher who has a tax free card. Later, a couple of technos come in and buy a bunch of computer language books called C+, or C++, or D-Base +, or C+++, or D-Based C+ , or something that only makes sense to them. Finally a couple of senior ladies come in and buy a copy of every series romance for the month. They were ecstatic. They

told me they were going to The Pawnshop for Margaritas and Happy Hour snacks. They tottered off down the hall with huge bags of romance novels.

The night crew comes in at 5:00 and I'm a happy guy. It has been a great day. Pink has borrowed Mrs. Floyd's Toyota and offers me a ride home. In a car it takes like 3 minutes to get to my place. Cars really are something. Mr. Mike tells me to look at my calendar and see when would be a good night for the Dalton Gang's video party. I told him I'd have to clear it with my mom. He understood. We say goodbye to Donna and Debbie and take off down the hall toward the parking lot.

Man, it is great to be going home. The bar bunnies are starting to migrate towards The Pawnshop. We're almost to the mall entrance when Tina comes running up to us. She's off at 5:00 too, and saw us about to blow this place for the evening. She's heard the buzz from the crew at Skyline 6 Theaters and wants to know if the Cult Movie Friday thing is for real or not. I told her it looked good, but no specific dates had been set. I was hoping it would be near Halloween, but I couldn't be sure. She said her pals had told her it was my idea to have all the theme rooms, and to try and get Count Gore to come to the opening. She said, "you're a smartie." I almost told her I watch a lot of TV, but thought of Gary, and he wouldn't have approved of it. She let us know she'd be there for sure. "The Count is too cool," she said. I thanked her for being so supportive, and said I'd see her tomorrow. I wanted to get the information on the new stores that were opening. We spun around to leave and walked a few paces. I felt a sharp tug on my belt loop and turned about. It was Tina standing behind me. "Made you look," she said.

Me and Pink walked past Scoops, Skyline Florist, and Shoe-Town to the parking lot.

"Dude," Pink said, "I think Tina likes you. I'm pretty sure of it. When they do the 'made you look' thing, it's serious."

"Dude," I said, "I could ask for nothing more."

Pink said I should ask her to go to Scoops at lunch time or something lame like that, to get to know her. I told him I was afraid to do it. I'd been ogling her forever and liked her so much, but after my last botched-romance a couple of years ago, I was flat-out of self-respect and confidence. I let him know that if she shot me down, I might just jump off Key Bridge wearing a sailor suit. Pink told me that was a drastic measure.

We talked some more. I told him about my few semi-serious girlfriends over the years, and how the works get screwed-up every time. “I don’t understand women anymore, Pink, I just don’t. Up until a few years ago everything was great. Now they ask me these psychotic questions about the intrinsic meaning of things. They want answers like bam-bam-pow. When I can’t tell them what they want to hear, they run off to guys with lots of hair and big bank accounts. I have neither. I can’t compete with the hair-people.” Pink said he didn’t think Tina gave a damn about hair and bank accounts. He also thought she had a pretty good handle on the meaning of life. Pink is a scientist, so I listen to his advice.

This is the advice Pink gave me: he said in the past, I’d probably surrendered myself too quickly, and told the girls how much I liked them too soon. I’d either scared them off, or given them too much relationship-leverage, and they couldn’t resist using their sadistic female energies on me. He said dating is an art form of theater and timing. Especially in the early stages of the game. If you tell a girl you love her prematurely, she’ll drop you in a tick.

Pink continued, and told me if you’re both going to a show or party or something, don’t be too quick to offer to take her. Say you might meet her there, but it’s not a sure thing. But absolutely do not ignore her. It’s a weird balancing act, like a cheesy salesman keeping his foot in the door.

I told him I thought Tina was already going out with poster-boy Mitch from Waxie Maxie’s. He’s always at her store. Mitch is Mr. Singles Bar. He’s a dead ringer for swarthy Sam Elliott. What chance would I have against someone like that? Pink could be pragmatic.

He said, “well, duh-, ask her if she’s dating him.”

“OK,” I mumbled, “I will talk to Tina tomorrow and proceed with caution. There is too much at stake for folly.”

The ride home takes minutes, and Pink drops me off outside the apartment. I thank him for all his good advice, and ask him if he got his desk set up for science-action yet. “Yeah, buddy,” he replied, “I look like Bobbie Oppenheimer down in the lab.” He was a happy savant. I said I’d see him tomorrow, and got out of his ride, then climbed the steps to our place and waved goodbye, already thinking about dinner.

A few weeks ago, mom showed me how to make these great Salisbury steaks with hamburger, canned mushrooms, and cream of mushroom soup. You make the whole mixture in one pan. You prepare some rice and green peas on the oven’s back burners and you’ve got dinner, baby.

I start prepping the stuff for our meal and begin thinking about Tina. I am so afraid I'll make an asshole of myself talking to her. She's a Dionysian runway model, genuinely nice to people, and serene for days. It's unnerving to think that such a complex creature actually exists. I mean, Jesus, she looks like a REAL rock star and wears 1970s hip-hugger jeans and rhinestone tiaras to work. Yet there she is processing 35 millimeter film and selling point-and-shoot cameras.

I bring my boom-box into the kitchen and listen to Led Zeppelin's "Physical Graffiti" tape while chopping onions for the repast. I start thinking about how we can choose the films for the first night of Cult Movie Friday without anyone getting their feelings hurt. It won't be easy. Mom is always good for practical answers when it comes to dealing with people. I've learned not to be afraid to ask her for advice. For many years I wouldn't talk to anyone about anything that was troubling me, and just flopped around making one asinine decision after another.

I'm frying up the burgers and making the creamy glop for the sauce. The rice is cooking, and so are the peas. A little bit of sugar and mint go well in green peas. I put the whole burger-sauce-mushroom creation on the back burner for twenty minutes on low flame, set the timer, and turn off the Leds playing 'Trampled Under Foot,' then go out to the living room and turn on Channel 20.

David Carradine's 'Kung Fu' is back in syndication. It's the very beginning of the program, where they show Caine doing all sorts of meditations and board-busting craziness. They show old blind Master Po hitting perfect bullseyes with his throwing stars to the disbelief of the freshman Kung Fu class. I get an idea for work and write it down on the pad by the chair.

Mom comes in the door and doesn't look as wiped out as usual from a day at the office. I blaze in the kitchen and make a scotch and soda for her. We have this routine down cold. Mom has some good news. She'd taken the extra romance novels I'd brought home to work with her, and the girls devoured them. The office ladies told mom to tell me I was a good son, and a good boy. Mom was really pleased with the Salisbury steak option for dinner this evening. I told her about my day at Skyline: the big, delicious pizza, the new stores, Tina playing cutsie with me, and Pink passing out at the Birchmere.

Mom pricked up her ears when she heard about Tina. She said she'd like to see me get a girl friend and at least think about settling down. She believes I spend too much time listening to rock music

and watching monster movies. I told her if I had a girl friend, I'd probably take her to see some monster movies. Mom said to take things one step at a time.

The timer buzzes in the kitchen. That means it's time to turn everything off that's cooking on the stove. I go back out to the living room and turn on the news for mom to watch while she's having her cocktail, then return to the Bohemian Love Pad and look for my tournament shirokin. I'd been in Georgetown a few years ago and Sunny's Surplus Store was having an inventory blow-out sale. They had a bunch of dirt cheap martial arts hoo-haw out for liquidation. The sale table had rubber nunchukas for practice, and bootleg samurai swords with really bargain basement dragon stickers on them. The tournament throwing stars, and larger shirokins were in a box that had a sign on it which read: Bruce Lee Lives! 3 for \$5! I bought one. My shirokin, because it is a tournament shirokin, has 6 points, instead of 5. It weighs 7 ounces, instead of the usual 5. It's made for championship competition. It's a serious shirokin.

My thinking was, instead of putting the names of movies in a hat and drawing a winner, or picking straws to see whose movies go for the first Cult Movie night, we can blindfold someone and have them chuck the shirokin at the office cork board with the name of the films tacked to the siding. The shirokin is used in honor of our theme room, Kung Fu Theater. I dig around in my closet, and find it in the box with old love letters, photographs, and trinkets that I use to torture myself when I'm feeling cruddy. It's in the red felt case with triple-stroke lightning bolts embossed on the top. I put it by my Panasonic clock radio to be sure to see it in the morning.

I go talk to mom, hang out, and shoot the shit for a while before we eat. She says she can't get over how much the girls liked the stripped romance novels. I told her that the store throws out at least that much stuff every month, not including other bulk things that are considered too expensive to mail back to the publisher. And we're just one little store. Imagine how much the whole chain throws out every few weeks. Mom said she hopes it gets re-cycled or something that doesn't hurt the environment. I didn't have any information on that subject.

Mr. Mike said I could bring her strips every month, and she can re-distribute them. Maybe the office girls can take some, and re-distribute them to their friends so there would be minimal waste and lots of people reading stuff they like. Mom opined it might get to the point where people didn't buy the

romance novels at all, but just waited for the strips. I said I didn't care. Economic issues are chicken feed in the macrocosmic scheme of things.

I set up the TV trays and dish up the Salisbury steaks and rice and peas. It is so yummy. We watch re-runs of "Barney Miller" and "Night Court" and they're really funny. Then a game show, and then the feature movie. It's a Sean Connery, James Bond film called "Diamonds are Forever." Mom almost flips. Every woman on Earth loves Sean. And as we all know, Sean is the ONLY James Bond there ever was. As a bonus, it's got Jill St. John as the Bond-babe. Older women are OK with me, and Jill's equipment in this flick gets the P-Man seal of approval.

After dinner I take all the stuff out to the kitchen, and do the dishes in between the commercials of the movie. Mom calls me when the story starts up again and we watch until the next round of ads. It takes a few intervals, but everything gets cleaned up and put away before the show is half over. We finish watching Sean and mom is ready to hit the hay. Me too. I've got a lot to think about. Tomorrow is one-on-one with Tina day. I'm going to ask her to go with me to Scoops for a Dr. Pepper float, and ask about Mitch. Please God, don't let me be a dork. Mom goes off to her room and turns her light out. I get into bed and fall asleep thinking about being James Bond-cool with Princess Tina of Skyline Mall.

In the morning, I'm already nervous about the day ahead. I make tea in my "worried about the Beaver" mug, and have my favorite Safeway chocolate pop-tarts for breakfast. The Beatles' "Abbey Road" album is great to hear when mellowing out becomes necessary. Now is the time. I go to my bureau and get my black plastic Walk-Man.

Food issues begin to cloud my mind. I need to start taking my lunch with me to work. I've got my old Fireball XL5 lunch box, and could carry it in my book bag so I don't look like a total jackass. I could be sandwich-man for a while. They can call me sandwich-man. I listen to the first side of the Beatles tape. "Come Together" always makes me feel better about the world's situation. Then I grab my shirokin and head for the door.

It's starting to get cold in the mornings. I've begun wearing my DC/101 silver baseball jacket for the walk to work. The jacket was another incredible find at the thrift shop on Four Mile Run. I walk down 28th Street to get to Route 7. It's going to be some kind of great day. October is the coolest month: leaves changing colors, wood smoke in the air, at least a couple of monster movies get released, and everyone's

getting ready for Halloween. Blue Oyster Cult and Bauhaus albums always have more zing to them when the Pagan holidays approach.

At the store, Mr. Mike and Pink are already counting out the cash drawers for the morning. I hang my jacket and start prepping the X-9000. There's nowhere near as much trash today as when we had our debacle a few days ago. After the stuff is loaded on the hand truck, Pink walks with me down the hall to the dumpster. We both peep into Skyline Realty to see what Christine might be wearing, but she's not at her desk. She's been doing the corporate-bombshell look lately.

Pink holds the glass doors open and we both cruise through and get to the loading dock. There's nothing good to scavenge today. Near the end of the week, things really pick up. I tell Pink I've braced myself for action with Tina. I'm going over to 1-Hour Photo this morning to ask her if she wants to get an ice cream at lunch time. He says that's a good move. All girls love ice cream. It's a glandular thing with them.

We get back to the store and vacuum and sweep-up before opening at 10:00. I tell Pink and Mr. Mike about my idea with the shirokin and the movie titles. Mr. Mike says it sounds "ceremonial." Pink says it "has potential." I go to my jacket and produce my tournament weapon in its red felt box. Mr. Mike and Pink both say "ooooh." My proposal is that we get Debbie to be the spear chucker because she has almost no interest in these mindless matters. She thinks the whole movie-thing is goofy. It's a cinch she'll do it. Debbie loves attention. We all decide to propose the deal to Donna and Debbie this afternoon and do the actual sacrament at 5:00 when the night crew is in to cover the sales floor.

Around 11:00 that morning Pink starts nudging me to go talk to Tina while I'm still stoked on the idea. I am in a state of trepidation, and really out of practice talking to women. I'm nervous, and when one is nervous, anything can happen. Pink gets behind the cash register and pushes me out the door and into the hall of Skyline Mall. He's right. I have to go do this thing. I'll chew my arm off if I don't at least try to talk to her. 1-Hour Photo awaits.

I'm locked-up. Can't budge. I close my eyes and think of Sean Connery talking cool to all the babes in the casino last night. He didn't actually say that much to them, but what he did say was right on target. They melted in his hands like Crisco. I start down the hall, slowly.

The cash register of 1-Hour Photo is in the front window. It's the first thing you see when approaching the store. Tina's ringing up a sale. I conspicuously wait around while she does the transaction. She's cut her hair a little since yesterday, so she's got bangs down to her eyebrows. She's done a serious eyeliner job this morning and is wearing a white T-shirt. Her black leather pants are down around the crack of her porcelain ass: a complete Chrissie Hynde make-over. She looks perfect. I look like a clerk in a book store.

After the sale is finished, I walk into 1-Hour Photo. Tina looked at me, placed her head about 1 inch from mine, and opened her mouth. "Do I have any Chinese food on my teeth?" she said. I peered in to her mouth and didn't see any deposits of spring rolls or snow peas. It looked OK from my vantage point. She said she woke up really late this morning and noshed some left over egg rolls for breakfast, while getting ready for work. She hadn't had time for a complete dental inspection before opening the store. Then she said, "so what's up this morning, Monster Boy?" She wasn't wearing a bra. That's what was up this morning. I couldn't say anything. I stood there, looked like a spazz, and tried to think of what Pink, or Sean Connery, or Hendrix, or anyone who had a clue about women would say.

"You cut your hair," I finally blurted out. "It's beautiful. Really Pretenders-looking." She leaned over the counter and kissed me. That's when I passed-out, sort-of. I had to hold on to the front display cabinet for balance, and planted both feet firmly on the ground, but felt completely unstable. Finally I just sat on the floor like an Indian Chief and held my head for a minute. She ran around the counter and knelt down to see if I was OK. Tina put her hand on my forehead and made female-healing sounds. When I looked a little better she held her fingers in front of my eyes and asked me how many were up. I answered all her queries correctly except one.

Another small wave of dizziness came and passed. She was examining me like a bug. At last I said, "Tina, do you like ice cream?" She said she liked every kind of ice cream except mint chocolate-chip. "Do you like Dr. Pepper?" I asked. She said Sprite was her favorite, but Dr. Pepper is really good. "Do you like cherry syrup?" She said she liked cherry syrup a lot. Sometimes she even put it on donuts. "Tina," I continued, "would you like to go to Scoops with me at lunch time for a creamy Dr. Pepper float?"

She said she would go on one condition. "What's that?" I asked. Tina said she gets really hungry at lunch time, and could we please split a foot-long Sky-Dog along with the float. She said she likes

mustard, neon relish, and onions on her Sky-Dog. That was acceptable with me. She helped me up to my feet and straightened my collar. She hugged me and asked if 12 o'clock was a good time to get together. Any time was a fine time. Even at noon, Zulu-time. I don't care.

She still held on to me after helping me up. It was like she was actually hugging me. I didn't know what to do. More intolerable indecision. If I embrace her back, and it's unwanted, I'm busted and she'll know I like her. I can't take this kind of pressure anymore. After what seems like an hour, I put my arms around her and locked by fingers behind her back. It looked like we were doing an American Bandstand slow-drag dance in the doorway of 1-Hour Photo. After a minute I said I had to get back to the store, and I'd see her at noon. She brushed her lips over mine like Sandra Dee and said she'd be waiting. My mallgirl put her forehead against mine and smiled like a cat.

"Tina," I said, "you are the Queen of Skyline Mall."

"I know," she replied.

I tried hard to walk straight down the hall and not zigzag or wobble. I got back to the store and Pink and Mr. Mike were waiting by the cash register for the news. Mr. Mike said I looked "frazzled." Pink intrinsically knew the outcome of our lunch date.

"You did it, didn't you?," he said, "I bet it was easy. She's been dying to talk to you. Donna said she comes in the store sometimes when you're not here and asks about the brown-haired, moviegoer guy."

"I am emotionally drained," I replied, "but yes, you can call me the Ice Cream Man, for we are going to Scoops at noon."

"Lord be praised," said Mr. Mike.

I'm at the cash register for the rest of the morning ringing up a few sales, and telephoning people whose special order books have come in to the store. Mr. Mike calls them "special odor books." Just before noon the phone rings and Pink picks up the line. It's for me. It's Photon Torpedo David. He said he was at Ramparts last night and drove by the Centre Theater on Quaker Lane on the way home. They're doing a John Carpenter film festival. Saturday night there's a double feature for 2 dollars: "Escape From New York," and "Assault on Precinct 13." And if that weren't enough incentive, on Saturday, Ramparts, which is right next to the Centre, is doing 50 cent draft beers, and a FREE make-your-own taco bar. David really knows how to speak my language. "David," I said, "that's sounds so great. Let me talk to mom. I

have to make dinner and take care of stuff at home in the evenings, but I'll see what I can do and call you tonight. Thanks for calling me." David said goodbye; then he said he wanted me to keep something in mind.

"What do you want me to remember?," I asked.

"Frankie Say Relax," he said.

Donna and Debbie come in the store at 12:00. I'm just about ready to go collect Tina, and try not to act like a mongoloid around her. Pink tells the girls of my Valentino moves on Tina this morning, and our lunch date at Scoops. The girls high-five each other and whoop. Donna tells me what a complete cornflake-head I've been concerning the girl of my fancy. She said, "Tina's been practically rolling in the dirt to get you to notice her. You could probably ask her to go throw rocks at cars with you and she'd do it." I told Donna I was afraid to talk to Tina because she's so cool and beautiful, and I'm so, like, vanilla-flavored. Donna said, "dude, get over it. Now go over there, and make us proud." Then she added, "I shouldn't have to tell you this shit. Go!"

I tell the crew I'm off to do romantic things at the ice cream parlor, and inform Debbie that we have some extra-curricular activities planned for later this afternoon. She asked me if it was one of those weird, insane asylum-things I think up sometimes and try and to get people involved in. Like when you guys put the paper bags on your heads in the mornings. I said it was sort of like that, but really fun; "and you're the center of all the action, Debbie, just like Kathleen Turner in 'Jewel of the Nile'."

"Really?," she said.

"Really," I shot back.

"It's not something creepy?" she asked.

"No way," I rejoined.

"Maybe I'll do it, but no promises," she said.

Debbie was in my power. She was helpless to deny my wishes.

All the Dalton Gang shout encouragement as I make a left out of the store and down the hall to 1-Hour Photo. I'm thinking: Frankie Say Relax, Frankie Say Relax. How did David know to tell me such appropriate information? Maybe he's an Obi man. He's got the right car for the job.

Tina is waiting for me outside of the store. She gallops up to me and hooks her arm through mine. “You’re one minute late, Bunky. It’s gonna cost you.” I told her I’d made my will, and paid off all my debts. I’m ready for oblivion at any time. She informed me that I’m cute when I say things like “oblivion.”

Tina said she was so hungry she could eat matte finish photographs. We get to Scoops and we’re just ahead of the lunch crowd. I’ve got 10 dollars in my pocket, so the sky’s the limit as far as lunch goes. We go up to the counter to order, and it’s the same lady who made my float the other day. Today she has a name tag on. Her name is Edna. She is completely 1950s-looking: hair net, wire rim glasses, pink soda fountain dress, white apron, chewing gum. Edna winks at me and chats with Tina. Tina, I discover, is a habitu  at Scoops.

Edna says, “let me guess, two Dr. Pepper floats and a Sky-Dog.”

Tina says, “We’ll have one large Dr. Pepper float, two straws, and a Sky-Dog Deluxe with the works.”

“Wow,” I said. “What’s a Sky-Dog Deluxe?”

Tina told me it was a Sky-Dog with all the toppings and a big bag of chips.

Edna said, “in a jiffy.”

We got a table while our order was being prepared. Scoops has vintage wire wrought caf  chairs and tables. They’ve also got a cheap 1970s mirror ball hanging from the ceiling that they light up on Friday and Saturday nights for the movie crowds. I hold Tina’s chair for her as she sits down.

“You’re such a little psycho,” she said. I told her I wasn’t raised right. Tina starts talking about the photo store and mall stuff. I’m getting nervous because I want to ask her about Mitch. She looks at me. She says I’ve got that look again. Like before I swooned-away this morning at the photo store. We both sat and looked at each other for a second. Then I just spurted out, “Tina, are you dating Mitch? He’s always at your store talking his cool talk and looking like a movie star. I know it’s not really my business, but I’d like to know if you want to tell me.”

She was silent, knitted her plucked eyebrows, and cocked her head. Then she said, “Mitch from the record store?” I nodded. “That bonehead,” she barked, “he’s got some idea that he’s a stud-god. He’s like this fern bar player who’s in love with my sister, Terri. She’s a bartender at Joe Theismann’s Restaurant up the street.” Tina said he’s always asking about what Terri did on her day off, and what she

liked, and all that kind of blather. He even hit around the idea once that they should all get together and do hot-tub things some weekend.” She continued, “he’s empty calories, man. All skull.”

I told Tina I’d been afraid to talk to her at the mall, although I’d wanted to for some time. She said it was cool. She enjoyed the challenge of wearing a guy down until he finally crawls up to her. Edna brings the ice cream float, mega-sized hot dog, and Utz Potato Chips bag to our table. She put the check face down in front of me. Our waitress went back to the counter and changed the radio station from the all news programs, to the oldies station and turned up the volume.

They were playing the Shangri La’s doing “Be my Baby.” Tina took the plastic knife and cut the Sky-Dog in half. She literally attacked the potato chip bag, and emptied the contents out between us on the plastic tray. She lifted her half of the dog and took a huge bite, eyes closed to assist concentration, and made sounds that burst with pleasure. I did the same. It was a fine Sky-Dog Edna has prepared for us. We both went for the chips with zeal.

I asked her what’s the story with the new video store and toy store opening up soon. She said she had limited information, but the video store was supposed to have the regular Hollywood stuff, and lots of alternative, and adult titles. It was part of a small chain that only rented retail space in local malls. They hoped to get a lot of rentals from people who live in Skyline Towers. You can go all the way from the mall to the apartment buildings, garages, and offices and never leave the complex. They think they have a captive audience.

The toy store is different. Word has it that it’s just a tax shelter for some rich guy. He’s given Jim, the manager, full authority to do whatever he wants with it. “He’s got the right guy,” she said, “I met him the other day. Jim’s like a mad scientist with toys. I think he’s really going to get some great stuff. He must have 500 catalogs he’s ordered from. It should be cool.”

We talked about how great it would be if Skyline actually became a fun, interesting place, and not just another strip mall with a fern bar attached to it. We got the Dr. Pepper float and placed it between us. We sank our straws into the foam and took long sips. It was so sweet, and so cold. Our heads were inches apart, and my date was unabashedly playing footsie with me. Tina did that tasty cat smile of hers again. The oldies station started playing The Flamingoes’ “I Only Have Eyes for You,” the ultimate, all-time, 50’s make-out song.

“I LOVE this song,” she cried out. Then the whole scene started swirling like one of those absurd stripped romance novels I take home to mom. It was really stupefying, but not unenjoyable. I can’t really define the sensation; but I sensed some sort of wiggling in the galactic terra firma. Some kind of paranormal whoopsie-thing was occurring at the Scoops ice cream parlor. It felt like we were in a 1950s teen-movie, and I was the Sal Mineo-guy and she was Natalie Wood. We sat at the obligatory malt shop near the obligatory high school. Edna was looking at us, and crying a little.

A lot of people were looking towards our table. Mostly they were looking at Tina. I was just the guy she was with. “Edna’s really sentimental,” Tina said, “I think it’s sweet.” Then she said, “let’s really give her something to go on about.” I asked her what she meant. “Let’s do a *REAL* slow two-step for the bored lunch people,” she chirped, “I’ll be the lithium sweater-girl.” That stopped me. She beamed anticipation. I didn’t know what to do, again.

“Tina,” I finally said, “I’m a guy. A white guy who works in a suburban shopping mall. I don’t know how to dance. Really. Not even a one-step.”

“You danced with me this morning,” she said, a little hurt.

I told her I didn’t move my feet at all when I held her earlier. She said, “just hold me, and kind of move back and forth. If I make tiny, little steps, just follow them, exactly.” I told her this is like some nutty saccharine fantasy that amateur choreographers have.

“You’re right,” she said, “it is nutty and ridiculous. And soon the moment will be over. Life is short, P-Man, so why don’t you just play it out and have some fun for once. To be honest, you look like you could use some fun in your life” Tina,” I said, “you are my eyes.”

We got up from our table, she put her arms around my neck, and rested her head on my shoulder. I clasped my hands behind her back, like this morning, and laced my fingers together. I was feeling unbelievably self-conscious, and heard hushed, startled sounds from other tables. “Frankie Say Relax,” is today’s mantra. Tina is as relaxed as a forkful of spaghetti. I hear Edna crying with slightly more conviction now. We are definitely the center of attention at Scoops Ice Cream Parlor this afternoon.

I’m thinking I can do this thing: keep it together, keep Tina happy, don’t wig-out. Another couple of minutes or so, no problem. Then Destiny throws a curve ball at us. One of the other waitresses behind the counter turns the overhead lights down with the dimmer switch, and clicks on the mirror ball

light. It's now dark, and the light from the ball makes lazy polka dots all over the inside of the room. Tina brushes her mouth against my neck. It's official, we've become an MTV couple; a living cover of a "Young Love" serial novel.

There is nothing else to do but surrender to the situation. I pull Tina close to me and follow her little, tiny steps as best I can. The song is so great; 50s make-out songs are just Pantheon-of-Love material. She feels good next to me. Her hair and skin smell like honey. Scoops is absolutely silent except for the radio. My date is like some angelic ladybug sent to save me from my awkward solitude. She seems so much larger than life, like a metaphysical airline hostess.

The song winds down and Edna's guttural honking breaks the silence in the restaurant. The waitress turns the lights back up and the mirror ball off. Some of the women in Scoops have dreamy expressions on their mits.

Tina looks up and kisses me. It feels like she's pouring her soul into my thoracic cavity. Edna is practically wailing in the kitchen. We disengage after a moment. The oldies station has started to play Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti." I look at Tina and she points to the front of the store. Donna and Debbie are in the doorway with big-ass, I-told-you-so, Rottweiler-smiles on their faces. One of Donna's pals from Shoe-Town called B. Dalton during our performance to tell them to come and see the act. We sit back down at our table and collect ourselves. We languorously finish our ice cream float. She said I didn't do half-bad for a book store clerk. I told her she was a dangerously cute-but-suspect, photo-store employee.

I look at the check and the words "paid in full" are printed on it. I show it to Tina, and we go over to the cash register and ask Edna what's going on. She said, between breaths, that just before we came to the store, "a Mr. Pink from B. Dalton called and said you two would be coming in a minute. He wanted to buy you two your lunch. I was skeptical, but he put Mike on the line. I've known Mr. Mike a long time, so I knew everything was kosher." Then she looked at me for a second and added, "most guys won't do something spontaneous like that. You hold on to this one, Tina. He's a strudel." Tina told her my training was still in the early stages.

It was time to go back to the store. Tina writes her telephone number on a napkin and gives it to me. I do the same. We've achieved telephone number calling-status. As we were walking down the hall I

said, "Tina, did you feel something while we were dancing? Like some kind of Twilight Zone hocus-pocus, while the song was playing?"

Tina asked me how long it had been since I'd had a date or a girlfriend. I told her it was humiliating to say. She said she thought as much. "Dude," she said, "there's no juju involved in it. When you're with somebody you really like, you just feel good. You've got to learn to relax. Your muscles were so tight I thought you were going to eject out of the ice cream store."

I told her thanks for coming to lunch; I'd never done anything quite like that before, and I'd never forget our date today. She said, "you bet your ass you won't forget it." She flash-kissed me outside the store and said "call me tonight, Monster Boy."

Wow. That's two calls to make in one night: David and Tina. This is turning into the big kahuna of social days for me. My usual output is about two calls a month. I might need to write this stuff down. I get back to the store and thank Pink for his contribution to my romantic exploits and general nutrition. The whole bill came to about 4 dollars. Not a bone-crusher. Donna and Debbie want details about the date from the store's new love-god. Everything that happened. They want a vicarious thrill at my expense. The girls asks me if Tina gave me her phone number. I produce the napkin from my pocket. The girls say "ooooh." All the Dalton Gang agree that I had a very successful first rendezvous with Tina. Now comes the hard part. Now comes the relationship maintenance-thing.

The afternoon goes well. There's steady traffic at the cash register, and Pink, Donna, and Mr. Mike are making a huge Halloween book display in the front window. They've got all kinds of paper skeletons, and black cats, and pumpkin cut-out stuff to drape over the books and display stands. Pink wants to put a tension wire around the inside of the store and have a battery operated ghost fly around the aisles. Mr. Mike says maybe, but it depends on how much shelving and returning he'll have to do in the next couple of weeks. Holiday books have started coming in the store like big tuna.

Later in the afternoon, I tell Debbie about her role in the movie selection process, and inform her it's an honor to be chosen to chuck the shirokin. Mr. Mike and Pink had notified her earlier of the ceremonial procedures and she said she'd do it, until it got creepy. Then forget it.

"You realize you'll have to be blindfolded, placed on a stand, and wield a deadly martial arts instrument" I said.

“Are there any animals or bugs involved in this thing, at ANY time?,” she asked.

“Animal and bug free,” I replied.

“OK,” she said, “but you guys just watch it. And I want Donna there when all this madness is going on.” She was loving this. She was ready to bust with delight.

At 5:00 Tina comes by the store and blows air-kisses at me through the window. Donna and I are standing together at the cash register. “That girl’s got it bad,” she said. “For the life of me I don’t know why,” I replied, “but I’m not going to question my good fortune. I’m just going to play it out. Frankie Say Relax.” Donna said that was the most intelligent thing she’d ever heard me say. The night crew comes in and we all say our hellos. Donna has them programmed so they don’t even have to ask what to do anymore: shelve, returns, cash register.

Most of the full-time Dalton Gang collect in the office for the film selection process. Mr. Mike has taken the remainder of the Robin Cook promotional posters and written the names of the potential films on the back of them. There are 5 posters, one for each theme theater besides “Rocky Horror.” The cork board in the corner of the office has been cleared of everything, and Debbie’s step stand is about 10 feet from the board. When Mr. Mike was at lunch he bought some Gonesh incense from the Safeway. He lights a couple of sticks and props them into a crack in the office boom-box. He picks through his box of cassettes and finds a Kitaro tape. He drops it in and hits the play button. Big drums go boom-ba-boom-ba-boom. I have the shirokin in it’s red felt box. Mr. Mike tacks the first Robin Cook poster to the cork board. Donna is cracking up. Everything is ready except Pink and Debbie are still outside on the sales floor.

I’m going out of the office door to collect Pink and Debbie The Chucker. I almost run into Pink. He’s got Debbie blindfolded with a piece of black felt from the Halloween displays. She’s got the work gloves on from Mr. Mike’s office tool box. He navigates her through the office to the step stand, and helps her get situated on it. Debbie calls out to Donna to make sure she’s nearby. Donna assures her she’s there to protect if things get crazy. There’s not much ventilation in the office and the incense is getting thick. The drumming has become hypnotic and Kitaro’s guitar/synth stuff sounds like a woman wailing in the forest.

I produce the shirokin and hand it to Pink. He puts it in Debbie’s hand and tells her to throw it straight at the wall. Straight-at-the-wall. Debbie said the shirokin felt funny. The thought it was going to

be like a ball or something. Pink reminded her that it's an honor to be selected as The Chucker, and she shouldn't question ceremony procedures. Debbie said "oh, OK." Pink told her again, to throw it just like a Frisbee, directly at the wall. Debbie looked ready. She was testing the weight of the weapon in her hand. Pink walked over to the light switch and began flashing the overheads. The music throbbed; the incense was burning in our nostrils. The tension was nearly unbearable.

Debbie hurled the instrument at the cork board. It clipped the upper corner of the paper and went THOK as it embedded itself in the soft material.

"Did I do it? Did I do it?," Debbie cried.

"Perfect," said Mr. Mike. Debbie whooped.

"I want to do it again," she said.

"Patience, young Chucker," Mr. Mike said, "we have to replace the target." "Hurry," Debbie urged him. Pink was ahead of the game and had the second poster and push pins ready. The next poster was up in a tick. Debbie warmed up her arm and whizzed the star at the wall. The blades cut the poster like rice paper.

"A very palpable hit, Debbaroo," said Pink.

"I rule!," Debbie barked.

We were waiting for Pink to replace the target. Debbie's arm was hot, and things were going great. Pink said it was time to get "Boolean." "That's a science-thing, isn't it?," Debbie said. She seemed bummed-out. Pink said to place the final three posters in a random pattern on top of each other pinned to the wall. One blade would choose three movies simultaneously. It was efficient, and absolutely impartial. We all agreed to let Pink do his math-thing with the posters. He had them up in a kind of overlapping snowflake-pattern. It looked like a pinwheel. "I just want to throw the Frisbee," Debbie said.

She was about to throw the blade when one of the night crew stuck his head in the office. "Um, is everything OK in here. We smelled smoke and thought we heard someone yelling." Mr. Mike told the young man that everything was fine; he said what was going on here was part of a management training program. He told the young man thanks, and to keep thinking positive thoughts. The youth disappeared from the door. "He broke my momentum," Debbie said, "I was just hitting my stride. I hate him." Mr. Mike told Debbie that The Chucker's job was not always an easy one, and that many people did not

understand its significance. Debbie said she supposed he was right about that. Pink repositioned the still blindfolded Debbie to the center of the step stand.

Debbie warmed up once, twice, and let fly a Chris Evert backhand-chuck that dead-center cut through all three posters with ease. “I think you’re going to be Chucker-for-life at B. Dalton Skyline.” Donna said. Debbie removed the blindfold and said it was time to talk about giving her a raise. Pink takes the posters down and says we’ll tabulate the results tomorrow morning. We all start chanting Deb-bie, Deb-bie, Deb-bie. Mr. Mike and Pink grab her off the step stand and hoist her up on their shoulders. She’s squealing with exultation. We all jitterbug out of the office and onto the sales floor. We carry Debbie for a victory lap around store chanting the Tod Browning mantra “one of us, one of us, one of us...”

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Three

I get home about 30 minutes after our procession with Debbie, head straight for the kitchen, and crack open a Bud. I’ve decided it’s going to be super club sandwich night at the apartment. That means lots of bacon. My boom-box is still in the kitchen from last night’s session; so I blaze into the Bohemian Love Pad to pick a tape to play while frying up the rashers. Oh yes, ZZ Top’s “Eliminator.” I’m singing “Sharp Dressed Man,” to myself already. When my time comes to be an old white geezer, I want to be cool and funky like ZZ Top. Black guys have no problem being hip when they’re older. Just look at B.B. King and John Lee Hooker and Dizzie Gillespie. They just radiate serenity. Tina would never have to tell them to relax.

I go back to the kitchen and eject the Leds from the machine in favor of the little ol’ band from Texas. My fingers pop in the tape and hit the play button. The boogie begins. I get the big pan from the

cupboard and put it on the range, then open the refrigerator and get all the great sandwich stuff for our munch: bacon, sliced deli ham, tomatoes, lettuce, mayo, (call David later) wheat bread, potato chips, and pickles. I open the packet of bacon and start placing the strips in the pan, intent on cooking the entire half pound. Mom must have a couple of pieces to nosh before the meal. Bacon is like opium for her.

12 slices of bread are required for four sandwiches. It seems like a lot, but the middle layer makes the club sandwich visually stunning. I plug in our two-slice toaster and begin the beguine with the bread. That machine is going to get hot soon. The thermostat will freak out after two or three intervals and start ejecting the slices after about 4 seconds of toasting action. Fortunately, there's time to let it cool off after a few runs. I keep the bacon moving while it sizzles and turn it over with hot dog tongs. Forks don't secure the rasher to my satisfaction. I wash and slice tomatoes in between my duties with the bacon and toast like a sandwich-making toreador.

Mom comes in the door and she's smiling. She smells bacon. I buzz over to her to say "howdy," and get back to the kitchen to make her scotch and soda. It's time to get some more hooch and beer. Bradlee Shopping Center will be on the agenda this weekend. I'll call the liquor store and see what's on sale, then pass the booze options on the mom-unit. The first few rashers are ready for the paper towel treatment. Mom's drink goes on the table in front of her. She says it's a really nice Fall day out today. She had lunch outside with some of the girls. My day had been perfect; absolutely everything was groovy about it. One of the best days ever. She asked me about Tina today at the mall. She remembered that name. Mom wants information.

Sandwich-prep time. I do the mayo slathering and tomato placement on the toast. The bacon on the paper towels has cooled and ready for mom to sample. She's been waiting for her bacon treat. She bites into a long piece and shuts her eyes to enjoy the experience. I tell her we're having deluxe club sandwiches for dinner tonight. She's stoked. Mom says club sandwiches are delicious and elegant. It's that middle layer. She likes the middle layer.

I'm back in the kitchen washing lettuce and popping the last pieces of bread in the spastic toaster, creating beautiful sandwiches at a brisk pace with the tasty ingredients. The bacon is all ready, the bread has been toasted to a perfect ferric hue. The last of the deluxe club sandwiches is ready for the serving tray. A mountain of chips goes in the middle. Side one of "Eliminator" finishes and the automatic-off button

clicks on the boom-box. The pan goes in the refrigerator, the chef grabs a Bud, and leaves the kitchen to talk to mom. Her eyes are still shut while she blissfully chews bacon snacks.

Mom wants to watch the news, so it shall be. Here's my news: not only did I see Tina at the mall, but we had lunch at Scoops, and she gave me her phone number with instructions to call this evening.

Mom stops in mid-chew.

"You had a date?," she asked.

"With a mallbabe," I rejoined.

Mom said she couldn't remember my last date. She asked me to please try and be normal around this girl, and not talk about beasts, and psychotic weirdness, and Jimi Hendrix until I've known her for a little while.

My mom wants to know everything. I tell her that Tina has black hair, and a slim, perfectly proportioned body. World class architecture. She is really beautiful and arty and fun. She works in the camera store at Skyline, and she really seems to like me, although I'm curious why. She could go out with anyone she wanted. "But there's something else about her," I said, "there's like some kind of strange magnetic grooviness that she emanates. Some ineffable-buzz kind of quality. It's like an atmospheric pressure drop before a storm. It's weird, no explanation to it." I told mom that Pink begged me to take it slow at first, and not scare her off with too much attention, but not to ignore her either. Mom said that I should listen to Pink carefully.

I bring the sandwiches out to the living room. We're just doing paper plate action tonight. No formalities with the TV trays. I ask mom if it's OK to have a reprieve from kitchen duties on Saturday. Mayonnaise David called and wants to go up to the Centre on Saturday night, and then to Ramparts. I also tell her that Mr. Mike said he'd come by on Sunday afternoon. There's a record show at Falls Church Community Center and he said he'd give me a ride. Mom said it was important to get out with my pals more often. She said I'd become kind of creepy just hanging out in my room with the headphones on, or going to bizarre movies in Arlington.

We finish the sandwiches and check out the TV program to see what's on for tonight's viewing activity: game shows, The Love Boat, Dallas. It's a good night to make some phone calls. The dinner stuff gets cleared from the living room, and the kitchen clean-up begins. Most everything just gets bagged-and-

tagged and thrown into the refrigerator. The trash goes downstairs and tonight's munch is finished. The Bohemian Love Pad is prepped to make my calls.

David first. He's easy to talk to. He answers after a couple of rings. "Torpedo Man, Monster Boy here," I say. David said he was just checking out the Washington City Paper to see what bars had the best drink and food specials tonight. I told him to try the Key Hole Inn on Wilson Boulevard. "They have a chili mac with salsa and chips for 3 dollars that can't be beat. Not only that, but the Cook looks exactly like a young Elvis. He's really nice, too. I gave him a 2 dollar tip once, and he started blushing like Porky Pig."

Saturday night at the Centre was a go-project with me if he was still game. I'd never seen "Assault on Precinct 13." David assured me no disappointments would occur. He told me that the double-feature started at 7:00 and ended at 10:30. Then we could go to Ramparts and eat free tacos and drink cheap beer until we choked. David knows me too well. He said he'd pick me up at 6:30 at the apartment. I told him mom would want to say hi and catch-up with him for a few minutes. "She still talks about the time you guys made lunch together," I said. David said he had to go because he was actually starving to death, and time was not on his side.

It was time to call Tina. Why does it cause so much anxiety? She's done everything to let me know she wants my attention. It's so weird. I want to be with her so much, but I'm terrified about acting retarded for no reason. Jesus, man, get a grip. Just do it. I get the napkin with her number out of my pocket and dial. A female voice answers. I ask if this is Tina, or her famous sister. It's the famous sister, Terri, on the line. She asks me if I'm a friend of Tina's from the mall, the one from the book store. When I confirm my employment at B. Dalton Bookseller, Terri goes into a monologue.

She informs me that Tina has talked about ab-so-lute-ly nothing else but how much she thinks of me. She's making fantasy plans of things for us to do. Terri wants to know what I've done to her sister. She hasn't acted this way since she fell for Rod Stewart when she was 10. I inform Terri that I'm as bewildered as she is about her sister's attraction to me. I tell her I'm an average-Joe. However, the attention Tina gives me is wonderful. She tells me that Tina has had an eclectic assortment of boyfriends over the years. It really didn't matter what they looked like, as long as she felt some sort of psychic connection with them. Connection was all she cared about, and she tried to connect with a lot of people. Terri told me to keep doing whatever I was doing with her sister. It was working.

The big sister called her little sister to the phone. Tina gets on the line and says, “hi Bunky, I was thinking of you.” I told her Terri informed me of her adolescent infatuation with Rod the Mod. Tina said Terri was dead meat after this call was finished. My first few words of conversation were a repeat of what a great day I had with her. We shot the shit about things at Skyline for a few minutes. Then she asked me what I was doing this weekend.

A lot of things went through my mind: Pink, and his advice to play it cool at first, and mom telling me to do exactly what Pink suggested. I told her that Saturday was booked going to the movies with my pal David, and on Sunday, a record show with Mr. Mike from B. Dalton. “What about Friday,” she said. I told her that a couple of times a month, mom and Bunky do a junk food Friday. We get some McDonald’s burgers or Popeyes chicken or something and have a calorie fest. She wanted to know if we were doing our junk food-thing this Friday. She wasn’t taking the bait to stop.

I told her I wasn’t sure if we were going to do our junk-munch or not. She said she knew what I was doing. She knew I was trying to keep cool for the first little bit of time around her so I don’t look pathetic and needy. She said it wasn’t necessary, and wanted me to come around and see her. “You won’t look over-anxious or geeky,” she said, “I’d love to get together.” She said why don’t I break my fried-food date with mom, just this once, and come over to her house on Friday after work. We could make a Chinese dinner. She even had a wok, and she was getting good at her stir-fry technique. I told her it was risky. She said she’d hold the line while I asked my mother for a rain check.

Mom was watching Morgan Fairchild and James Brolin rekindle old flames on The Love Boat. I interrupted her viewing and told her Tina was on the phone. We both knew I was going to be out on Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, but she wants to know if...

“Go,” mom said. “Please, just go. But try to be cool and don’t scare her with your movie-babble too soon. It sounds like she’s really got it for you. So proceed cautiously, or she’ll run away like a March hare, just like the others.”

I thank mom for her heavy-handed advice, and return to the phone. Before I could say anything into the receiver, Tina informed me we could buy the ingredients at the Safeway and then hike over to her house. Her house was about a 5 minute walk from the mall. I asked her how she knew mom had agreed to fend for herself on Friday. Tina said I had to be kidding her; everybody likes to have a night off once in a

while, and she could give me a ride home in the evening when Terri brought the car home. We had a real date planned. It was a go-project.

After the call, me and mom watch some tube together. She wants to know if we'd made a engagement for Friday. The plan was to go over to Tina's house after work and make Chinese food in her wok. I told mom I'd do some grocery shopping for us tomorrow at Skyline Safeway, and call up the liquor store to see what's on sale in the spirits department. Mom said I was a nice guy, and it was good for me to be getting a girlfriend again. She used that word. The G-word. Scary stuff.

After my mother finishes viewing her programs, we get ready to pack it in for the night. I get my back pack and put it on the front door knob so not to forget it in the morning. I can stock up with Safeway stuff and cart a load home before dinner tomorrow. Mom has finished *Christine* and is working on her batch of romance novels. She says it's better to read serial romance instead of Big Steve right before going to bed. She's packed away reading in her room. I go in to the Bohemian Love Pad, remove my regular-guy togs, and slip between the covers for my well deserved nocturnal snooze.

That night's dream was about being back in high school: no girlfriends, or even a date during those three years. I was in observation-mode, watching the cosmetically perfect, A-team people with particular interest. Their physical movements and actions seemed different from the rest of the student population. They turned their entire body when looking around, as if each moment were a photographic opportunity. Every word they spoke sounded like it had been scripted. Their dialogues were a potpourri of aphorisms and cardboard clichés. They flashed lots of teeth, and picturesquely tossed their hair about. It was unbelievable. It was like an Aaron Spelling TV program. In my dream I was trying to communicate with these living dolls, but to no advantage. They bobbed about like Fellini-movie mannequins, and were oblivious to me.

I dream-walked over to the KB Cinema 7 Theater which was a few blocks from the school, and produced money from my pocket which was oversized and comic book-looking. The movie being shown was Brian De Palma's treatment of Stephen King's novel *Carrie*. The heroine, Carrie White, unassuming Sissy Spacek in real life, takes it on the chin from the A-team cliques, and endures endless humiliations and pranks from her peers. The tormentors finally went one step to far, drenching her with a bucket of blood, drained from a poleaxed stockyard pig. Carrie snapped, and released her telekinetic powers against the

antagonists, turning that year's senior dance into prom spam. That's when I knew the movie houses were my true home.

In the morning I get ready for work in a flash. A club sandwich is left over from last night, so that's breakfast. I make some tea in my Beaver mug and nosh a few Oreos, too. I'm out the door with my DC/101 jacket on, and empty book bag flapping behind me. I'm making a mental list of things to get at the Safeway in the afternoon: stuff mom can make without too much fuss. She likes steaks. Steaks for sure. And baked potatoes. Anyone can make baked potatoes. I'll get some canned vegetables, and Pepperidge Farm Gingerbread Men cookies, too. She'll go wild with those things.

I get to work and I'm stoked. Mr. Mike and Pink have Debbie's skewered Robin Cook posters and are summing up the results. I knock on the glass, and Mr. Mike lets me in. He says Debbie really picked some winners with her martial arts skills. Pink says some of the data is questionable. My point of view: we're past the point of academic repartee. Mr. Mike gets his notebook and begins making a memo for Manager Tom. The selection is complete. The results are in. The winners: "Mad Monkey Kung Fu," "Jimi Hendrix's Rainbow Bridge," "The Fearless Vampire Killers," "The Blob," and "Viva Las Vegas." A visual and auditory feast. We all look at the memo.

"This is good stuff," said Mr. Mike.

"Bitchin'" Pink rejoined.

We do the morning routine and get the store ready to rock at 10 O'clock. Mr. Mike and Pink do the X-9000, while I vacuum the floor. Lately, I've got a specific orange paper bag to wear on my head while vacuuming. It's in the special orders box. It fits my skull perfectly. I took a magic marker and wrote "Do Not Wash," on it in large letters. Mr. Mike thought that was a hoot. Pink said it's a shame I never went to college. My cash drawer is counted-out and placed in the NCR 2800 cash register. I'm ready to sell books and book accessories.

Mr. Mike and Pink come back from the dumpster with the X-9000. We slide open the glass doors and open the store. Mr. Mike calls Manager Tom from the phone located by my cash register. He says the selection committee has decided what movies will be shown on kick-off night of Cult Movie Friday at Skyline Mall. Manager Tom says he'll be right over.

Some business people with immaculate clothing come into the store. They want to buy several hardback copies each of *In Search of Excellence*, *Theory Z Management*, *The Art of War*, *Megatrends*, *The One-minute Manager*, and *Eat to Win*. The lead guy says things to the others and they nod approval and write things down in Day Runner note books. The whole sale is over 400 dollars. He doesn't flinch. He hands me an American Express Platinum Card, and the charge goes through instantly. On the way out of the store, he tells me to have a winning day.

After a while, Office Building Gary comes into the shop. He says he's got my required reading list ready. He sees the new Dean Koontz paperback in the mass market stands and grabs one. He loves Dean Koontz because he never knows if it's going to be a chiller, slasher, thriller, or any combination of the three. He says he put together my list from conversations we'd had about the movies and bands I liked. He told me it's hard to re-start reading if you hadn't done it for a while. But if you get rolling, you can't stop. He seemed genuine in his concern for my development. When I rang up his paperback, I used my employee number and gave him a discount. He gave me the note like he was handing me the keys to Air Force One. On his way out, he told me I was worth saving.

His note said he'd picked out lots of titles but he was afraid the sheer volume of the thing might scare me off. Finally he just picked a handful of high octane authors he was sure would spin my wheels. He told me to pick up anything by the writers listed below. He said Arlington County Central Library had a service that sent books to other branches, so I could order books to come to the Shirlington Library and not have to spend a dime for this great enlightenment. Then he'd printed the names: Frederick Exley, Hunter Thompson, Henry Miller, William Burroughs, Harry Crews, and Charles Bukowski. He said these guys were like dynamite, and had the capacity to change people's lives forever, like your beloved Roger Corman, and Jimi Hendrix, and Iggy Pop. He said he envied me the experience, and signed-off his note, "keep cool, be good, your pal, Office Building Gary."

Wow, what a really wild thing for him to do. Why would he give a damn about what I like or how I entertain myself? I hope he's not a Scientologist. I guess I'll find out soon enough. Anyway, it was nice of him, whatever his motivations might be. I'd never heard of any one of the guys on the list. I get my wallet out of my pocket, fold the note, and place it in the slots where credit cards would go if one had credit

cards. It's going to be a good day because here comes Manager Tom bopping into the store, ready to talk cult movies at Skyline. He has news.

I call Mr. Mike on the intercom and he comes out of the office. Pink was on the sales floor shelving books, so they both migrate to the front counter. Mr. Mike gives Manager Tom the movie memo. "Excellent," he purrs. Manager Tom says that he has to call TransAmerica Entertainment to see if these titles are available, but they've got just about everything you can imagine. He folds the memo and pockets it. "Boys," he says, "I have news. I mean hang-on-to-your-hat kind of news." "I've been in touch with channel 20, and have information about personal appearances by The Count."

Manager Tom has cauterized our attention to him. "The station is willing to trade promotion for an appearance," he said. "We have to print and distribute 1000 flyers, and make the theaters amenable to Channel 20 promotional gear at his appearance. That means putting up posters and having booths with give-aways and stuff. The Count is going to be out of town the next 2 weeks," he continued. "He's already taped the next few Creature Features and Channel 20 Club segments. The station has agreed to a 1 hour appearance on Friday, October 30. That means, me buckos, that The Count. Count Gore DeVol, will be here when Halloween arrives at midnight on Saturday."

"Oh-My-God," I said.

"Skyline has finally arrived," Pink blurted.

Mr. Mike looked pale. It was too much for him.

"This is so intense I can't take it," I said. "Manager Tom, you're really sure this is happening. This will be one of the highlights of my life. Please don't toy with me." Manager Tom assured all of us that he would not jerk our chains when it came such important matters. "The Count will be here," he said with confidence. "I'm Manager Tom, and you have my word on it." Count Gore DeVol, on Halloween, and the first Cult Movie Friday all at once. There's something cosmic going on here. Something larger than we mortals can comprehend.

It was three weeks until Halloween. Manager Tom said we should start getting the flyers ready for distribution as soon as possible. I volunteered to come up with a prototype, and if committee approved, we'd get it printed up early next week. Manager Tom called us the Cult Commandos. We were his

animals. “This is a threshold moment,” he said. He shook our hands and left the store with his head held up like a monarch.

During the morning I was at the front counter ringing up sales and making a shopping list for the Safeway. Lunch time is the best hour to strike, and save some time in the evening. When it got slow around 10:30, I called the Bradlee Shopping Center Liquor Store and got the skinny on sale Scotch. Mom likes Johnny Walker Red, but we’re tightening our belts and putting as much into the car fund as possible for the next little while. The closest approximation to Johnny is a second label blend called Scoresby. It’s not bad, and costs about half of what Big J. goes for. They’ve got half-gallons on sale for 20 dollars. That’s all I need to hear.

After calling the liquor store, I start to talk to Pink about courtship ritual stuff. Advice is required. I told him about calling Tina last night and trying to be cool and aloof, but she’d systematically boxed me in to a dinner date at her house tomorrow. Pink said she was one aggressive female, and sometimes you’re not in control of a situation, no matter how much you prepare for it. He said at these times it is best to embrace nothingness, and sprinkle yourself into the void.

He asked me point blank if I liked this girl, like possibly becoming a for-real relationship partner, or was it just a peek-a-boo thing. I hesitated.

“I guess I really like her,” I said, “she’s different. Really different. Like ‘Sabrina the Leather Pants Witch’ different. She knows things. She looks straight into your reptile brain when she talks to you. It’s a trip.”

Pink said he knew what I meant.

“It’s hard to take your eyes off of her when she’s around,” he went on, “she’s like one of those vampire-wives Count Dracula keeps locked up in his castle. When you’re in their space it’s difficult to ignore them.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

Pink went on to tell me of an Asian custom that he employed in his dating repertoire with Mrs. Floyd. He said American guys can be mallet heads when it comes to romance-etiquette with females. He told me to spend a couple of bucks at the Hallmark store and buy her a fuzzy, stuffed animal-thing with big eyes, and a card. The smaller the animal, and the bigger the eyes, the better. He said the Asian guys he

knew at George Mason always bought their dates small gifts after they'd gone out once or twice. Women love that stuff, and the Asian guys play them like violins. He added that Asian men usually get their moneys' worth in almost any situation.

It's getting close to noon, and I start to get ready to go to the Safeway. Tina appears in the doorway, and comes into the store. My God, she's got a dress on. And a blouse, not a T-shirt. Something's up. She bounces up to the counter, grabs my shirt, and pulls me over the top to her mouth for a quick dental cleaning.

"You are of solid Amazon-stock," I tell her.

"I'm a nut," she said, correcting me.

She says she can't stay long. Mustapha, her store manager, gave her a paid day off to go to a trade show in Crystal City. She's supposed to get price catalogs and information about picture frames, photo albums, instamatic cameras, and all sorts of photo-store glop to order for the Christmas season.

I told her I had big news about the Cult Movie event coming up. She told me to save the important announcement for our date tomorrow. She was acting all wiggly. She had a big paper bag in her hand. "I've got something for you," she gushed, "some presents." Tina gave me a sideways glance. She reached in her bag and pulled out a black baseball cap. Stitched on the front of the cap was an image of an 8-ball with a fuse burning on top. She told me it was for my walks to work in the morning. Tina said it was getting chilly outside, and I didn't have much in the way of hair. She didn't want me catching a cold. "Put it on, put it on," she urged. I did as instructed. "Oh yes, it's definitely you," she chirped.

She reached in her bag and pulled out a small black velvet box. She opened it and handed me a framed photo of herself. It was taken with black and white film. It looked like the person who had taken the picture had caught her off guard. She had a surprised, joyous smile for the photographer. She had been reading a book, and still had it in her hand. She had closed the cover somewhat so you could see the title and author's name on the front. The book was called *Car*, and the author was Harry Crews. She had written an inscription on the bottom of the photo. It said, "Yo, P-Man, Every Picture Tells a Story, Kisses, Tina."

She said she had to motor. She'd see me tomorrow at work and then we'd do wok action for dinner in the evening. This time, instead of pulling me over the tabletop, she walked around behind the

counter to where I was standing, put her arms around my neck and smooched my cheek. She said, in a very audible voice, "I can't wait until our date. We'll have a ball. And in case you're wondering, you ARE going to get lucky tomorrow night."

We were all three standing there: me, Pink, and Tina, behind the sales counter. A small line had formed in front of the cash register. She scooted off from behind the sales area and blew arena-rock air-kisses to all of us as she left the store. "This is off the charts," Pink said. Then he told me to forget the fuzzy animal-thing from Hallmark.

I clock out for lunch break and go up the hall to the Safeway. I've got my book bag with me for maximum grocery-toting efficiency. A lot of people are in the Safeway at the salad bar, but not nearly as many as when it first started. The aisle- cruising begins: some rib-eyes, baking spuds, and cans of greens. In the frozen foods section, Stouffer's French Bread Pizzas are 2 for 3 dollars. Oh yes. Now some Pop-Tarts, soda water, and a bumper of Budweiser for myself because I'm a fine young grocery bag schlepper.

I get to the cashier, take out my wallet, and use one of the blank, signed checks mom gives me to go shopping. All the grocery store courtesy cards are my responsibility. The check is filled out pronto, and the cashier gives me a tubercular smile. Soon I'm bagged and tagged and look like a mountain man with his back pack full of supplies walking back towards B. Dalton Bookseller.

I'm hungry and I don't want salad. I don't want Mother Nature's food, Skyline Pizza, or carry-out from The Pawnshop. To hell with it. The drug store has Snickers bars and Yoo-hoo sodas. Then tonight we'll get moussaka from the Atlantis Restaurant at Bradlee. Why not get a Greek salad, too. It's almost Friday.

Jesus, Tina really blew my head off with that show of affection at the store. My God, I can't remember the last time I bumped the la-la with a girl. Please don't let me fuck this up. If tomorrow really is my lucky day, I'll die if I have performance difficulties. Anxiety looms; just go with the flow and hope for the best. Pink is right, sometimes all the planning in the world doesn't mean a damn thing.

The drug store is ahead. I'm cruising down the hall looking in windows and here's something new. The window of Hi Jinx Toys has a sign with goopy skulls and black cats with their backs in hackles painted on it: Grand Opening Friday! Bring the Kids! If you dare... In the window a guy is doing shelving and displays and running around. The front of the store has some great stuff in it: mini-scale models of

Godzilla, Darth Vader, The Alien, The Bell X-1 Jet Airplane, plastic pumpkins with glow sticks in them, lava lamps, strobe lights, plastic frogs, bugs, lizards, lawn flamingoes, chattering teeth, fuzzy dice, the whole gamut of schlock. The man inside sees me admiring his stuff and opens the door. He says he recognizes me from the bookstore, and introduces himself as Jim. He's tall and looks obsessed, just like Donna and Debbie had described him. Not scary, just obsessed.

I tell him he's got some primo stuff in the window. He says the owner has given him complete control to order whatever he thinks will sell, so he just orders his favorite personal stuff. He figures if he likes it, everybody likes it. I told him that was kind of like a Transcendentalist thing. "Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense." Ralph Emerson said that. It was the only thing I remembered from high school. He said I must be smart from working in a book store. I told him he was absolutely correct.

We talk for a while about the Cult Movie Friday coming up. He freaks when he hears The Count will be here. I ask him if we could put a flyer in his window advertising the event. He says no problem; he'll even help me put flyers under car wiper blades in the parking lot. He was hooked. Jim tells me that the new video store is going to be opening tomorrow as well. He was sure they'd put some advertising in their window, along with a lot of other mall merchants. I tell him it's important for me to go eat and put my bag down or I'll hurt my back, and next week we'll get together. Jim says, "see ya book-dude."

I'm forging ahead towards the pharmacy and pass Skyline Pizza, Hallmark, Skyline Florist, and Waxie Maxie's. The video store looks nice, with lots of weird VHS and Beta titles in the window. "Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS," "Ilsa, Harem-Keeper of the Oil Sheiks," "The Disco Godfather," "The Green Slime." This is Cult Movie Friday material if there ever was any. It's a lock to stop in tomorrow and spread the word about The Count's impending visit. It's strange to admit, because it might jinx the whole mess, but Skyline's becoming kind of a cool place.

Someone's knocking on the glass window across the hall. It's Edna. She's gesturing at me to come into Scoops. It looks like something's up in the ice cream store. When I get in there, my bag goes down. This thing is becoming ridiculous. Edna's got news. She's been given the thumbs-up by Scoops management to augment the hot dog menu. It seems the foot-long Sky-Dog is such a hit that they've

decided to diversify the dog department. She's radiant. She knows Tina and I love to eat, so she wants me to try a new creation she's come up with.

I finally put my bag down and pull up a wrought iron café chair. To let her know I'm serious about my job as taste-tester, a paper napkin goes into my collar like a bib. It looks goofy, like it's time for Floyd the Barber to cut my hair and tell me stories. Edna presents me with her creation. It's a regular size hot dog with french fries stuffed in the crevice of the bun. It's got Dijon mustard, onions, melted cheese, and bacon bits on top. She calls it The Frog Dog. She got the idea when she went to New Orleans last year, and one of the restaurants she visited had a French Fry Poor Boy sandwich, with onions and bacon. She puts her creation in front of me, eyes brimming with positive expectation.

Thank you God, this is so much cooler than a Snickers for lunch. The sandwich fits my mouth perfectly. Edna is practically sitting in my lap, with her peepers laser locked on my lips. My teeth go down into the dog. The bun, toppings, and casing of the weiner surrender themselves to me. I close my eyes to focus all attention on the taste-medley. After a moment of consideration, I look at Edna. She seems suspended in the air, like a piñata, and unable to suppress her curiosity.

"Well?, well?," she pants.

"This may be, Edna, the ultimate hot dog experience," I tell her.

Edna is forced to cling to the café table for fear of blacking out from joy.

"Get this man a Dr. Pepper!," Edna urges a young lady behind the soda fountain. I take a second bite of Edna's masterpiece.

"Yes, definitely, my dear, this is a keeper," I tell her.

"You think The Frog Dog is good enough to go on the everyday menu?," she inquired.

I told her that her dog was a bona fide hit, and could go on the menu this afternoon, if need be. But although certain pundits might enjoy her word play with the sandwich, she might want to change the name to The Eiffel Tower Dog, or the Brigitte Bardot or something like that. Some French people have a habit of getting worked up over little things, and can be quite prissy about semantics at times.

"Really?," she asked.

"I've seen it happen," I rejoined.

My mind drifts in big, fluffy clouds while noshing my Eiffel Tower Dog and quaffing my Dr. Pepper. Edna starts a conversation. I tell her that this dog could be just the beginning of a Scoops renaissance: “you could put sweet red pepper and pickle on a sausage and have a Sputnik Dog, or put chili with beans and onions on one and make an Atomic Chihuahua, or have a chicken dog with health food toppings and call it The Blonde Surfer-Dude. The variations are almost limitless.” Edna writes down all my ideas and says Tina is the luckiest girl in the mall. There’s that name again. As soon as I hear it, I get self-conscious. There goes my gourmand savoir faire.

I thank the Scoops crew for the great munch and head back to B. Dalton. What a productive lunch break. Those business people this morning would have approved of my industry. Back in the store, the book bag comes off, and the frozen foods go in our office refrigerator. There are things in there that are indescribable. Pink does some of his science experiments in the store, and leaves them around for later observation.

I get back to the front counter and admire my new hat and picture. Right after lunch it gets slow around 3 :00. My job, when it’s not busy, is to straighten things and call people to tell them their special order books are in. Everything looks straight to me. It looks like all the special order people have been called, too. Tina’s picture goes up on the cash register. Debbie walks by me on the way to the jakes and says, “awwww, amore.” I show her my gift cap and fit it on my head for her to check out. Debbie asks me how many children Tina and I are going to have. I told her between 10 and 15. She said that was gross.

The local phone book is under the cash register where we keep the paper bags and cleaning stuff. The blue pages are all the County Government and service numbers. L is for Libraries: Aurora Hills, Central, Cherrydale, Columbia Pike, Shirlington,, etc. I call the number for Central and ask if they transfer books from one location to the other. The library lady asked me if I was an Arlington resident and held a current library card. I asked her “does Rod Stewart like blonde women?” She said she believed he did.

We started talking fun stuff on the phone. It was dull at the library that day as well. The subject of Harry Crews came up, and did they had a title called *Car*. She flipped through her card catalog and said it was in. It hadn’t been checked out for a while. We talked some more about library policy and loan times and it could be sent to Shirlington branch tomorrow. I told her a friend had recommended some authors for me to read, but none of them rang a bell. She asked me who were some of the others. The Charles

Bukowski name came to mind. She looked him up and said he had about 20 titles available, but his books were almost always checked out. She started reading off the titles and they sounded kind of sad and funny. She said there's one here called *Love is a dog From Hell*, and it's not checked out. She told me she'd send that title too.

I keep my hat on during the afternoon, and think about what a seismic weekend this is going to be: a pay Friday, a real date, a science-fiction double feature, and a record show. This must be what it's like to be a member of Grand Funk Railroad.

I take out a big paper bag and start drawing a prototype flyer that I can work on at home, etching my best blood-dripping horror movie letters to spell out Cult Movie Friday at Skyline Mall. The names of the movies, the date and time, and The Count Gore DeVol must be accommodated on the page: some spider webs, go-go girls, instruments of decapitation, electric guitars, and karate dudes need to be incorporated as well. It can be done. This is one inspired mallboy.

The afternoon picks up some. Pink and Mr. Mike have been doing returns like mad. Some moms and kids come in and buy Halloween books off the display stand. I told them a real vampire was going to be here in a few weeks to bite mall people. The kids said, "oooh," the moms looked annoyed. Just before 5:00, Rick the Security Guard comes in to say hello. We talk and laugh about mall stuff, and he's informed about The Count coming here in a few weeks; there might be several hundred people in the shopping center at midnight on Halloween. Rick thanked me for the mallrat-update. He'd talk to Skyline Mall Management and get a couple of guards on duty that night. He said suburban kids were nice until they get into groups at strip malls. Then they turn into video-game playing psychopaths.

After my chat with Rick, preparations begin for going home. I pocket my photo of Tina-poo, and go to the back of the store to get my groceries. Just check out my new cap, silver jacket, and expertly packed book bag. Ah, total image-perfection. Pink and Mr. Mike have reached 100% burnout with the returns, and are sitting on top of the receiving tables, drinking sodas.

Mr. Mike told us not to remove certain acoustic tiles from the right corner of the ceiling. He's hiding inventory, and things were precariously placed up there. The whole area above his desk was to be considered no-mans-land. Things could collapse, fall through the tiles, destroy everyone, and break their

bones and molars. He said in January, the store could send back unlimited stuff, but from now through Christmas, we could just do survival returns, and had to find space for as much crap as possible.

I tell everyone goodbye and head towards Route 7. What a wild few days it's been at the store. Up the street towards Shirlington, I hear a car horn beeping at me. It must be a small car because instead of going honk-honk, it goes bip-bip. Holy Sheep Shit, it's Tina. She's driving a racing-green colored, MG Midget, possibly the most unsafe car to ever reach production. "Nice hat, Nature Boy. Want a ride?" I looked for a space to throw my book bag in her machine but there was none. I got in the car, bag on my knees. She still had on her "nice" clothes from the trade show. To cap it all off, she was wearing a pair of very trendy, Velvet Underground-looking, Lou Reed shades.

Tina told me she'd just dropped off all the things she'd collected from the show to work, and was just cruising around being retarded for a while. I said if she were going past Shirlington and Bradlee, I'd really appreciate a lift. I have to drop this stuff off, go to the liquor store, and then get some carry-out for dinner. She reached over and squeezed my face with her hand, so it mooshed my cheeks together. My mit looked like a fish or a duck or something. She started jiggling my kisser back and forth in her hand saying "you are so cute when you're doing nice things for people." I nodded thanks, and pointed towards 28th Street.

We head up the hill and I tell her I'm concerned about her new look. She said not to worry, she was just doing the Brenda Starr thing for one day. She'd be back in jeans and T-shirts tomorrow without a doubt. I was afraid she was turning into a Republican. She did a toothy snarl and said, "don't say that kind of stuff to me, Bunky. Not even as a joke." We headed up Abingdon Street to 31st Street, and pulled up in front of our building. I got out of the car and she was behind me in a flash. I said I'd just be a minute, putting stuff away, and then we could go to Bradlee Shopping Center; it wouldn't take very long. She wouldn't hear it. She wanted to check out the apartment.

I tried to let her know that mom and I are modest people, almost like Mennonites when it came to possessions and decor and things like that. She said I didn't have to be embarrassed around her. She understood economics. Everything was cool. Everything. We climb the stairs and I open the door for her. She prances inside and says "hi, mom." Good night, Irene! My mom had come home early from work.

Mom chirps, “hello, I bet you’re Tina!” This can’t be happening. Two inquisitive females at once. It’s martini time for Nature Boy.

Mom is sitting on the sofa. She said all the hot shots in her office had left early for prepare for some meeting, so she followed suit and took a couple of hours annual leave. She deserves it. Tina and mom are introduced, and my babe tell her we work close to each other at the mall. T-Girl sits down next to my mother and says, “your son has invited me to dinner. I know it’s sudden, but I think we could get some really good carry-out up the street. I just got paid today, so I’ve got piles of money. I’m going to give him a lift up to the shopping center to get some stuff. Is that OK with you, mom?”

Tina got “the poison look” from me. This was not on the agenda for tonight. I told mom Tina has a charming way of overpowering her company, and maybe we’d get moussaka and a Greek salad from Atlantis for tonight. Mom said that Tina’s company and Greek food would be fine. I go to the kitchen and unpack my book bag and put things away. Mom and Tina start the information exchange instantly. It took less than 1 second for them to start talking 100 miles per hour. They go at it for a few minutes, and then Tina tells her we’re off to get dinner, and be back in a jiffy. I take 40 dollars from our house money box, and tell mom the news from the liquor store. Scoresby is on sale for 20 dollars a half gallon. She tells me I’m so cheap it’s scary. Tina fixes mom a scotch and soda before we take off, and finishes off the dregs in the bottle with a desperado-swig.

We get outside the apartment and Tina hands me the keys to the Midget. “Drive,” she said. I tell her it’s been a few years since my last Grand Prix tournament, let alone operating a regular machine. “You’re point being?,” she said. One’s legs go way down in front in an MG Midget. God, it feels wonderful to be behind the wheel of a car again. A sports car. A dangerous sports car with a beautiful girl in it. I fire up the engine, slip into first, and release the clutch. The little green car flies out of the driveway and on to 31st Street.

Tina clicks on the radio and The Young Rascals’ “Good Lovin’” is going full bore on DC/101. Tina cranks the volume and shakes her hair 1960s go-go style. Her haunches are pumping on the leather seats and she’s drumming the dashboard. She leans back and lets out a euphoric thunderclap of laughter and shouts out “God, I feel so GOOD!”

We boogie up the street to the shopping plaza, but just when it's time to turn, I decide to stay on the road for a small cruise. Just a couple of minutes. I don't get to drive an MG very often. Tina doesn't say a word. She knows this is too great for me. We buzz down Braddock Road to Beauregard Street and head back on Seminary Road to Bradlee Shopping Center.

I tell Tina that was pretty fast maneuvering getting herself in the apartment door and invited to dinner in about 30 seconds. She said that's what I get for calling her a Republican. Besides, she said mom looked like she could use some company. Especially female company. Someone she can talk too. Tina said she seems lonely, and she's right. Mom doesn't have a lot of pals, and it was nice of her to give my mother some time to girl talk.

We pull into the parking lot and head for the liquor store. I try to hand Tina the car keys, but she tells me to hold on to them. Upon our entering, the crew of the liquor store all yell, "P-Man!" Tina is introduced to the guys. They are all extremely deferential to her with their Virginia gentleman manners. They call her "Miss Tina," or "P-Man's lady friend." We get the scotch and Andy, the assistant manager, tells Miss Tina that I'm good at saving money. That's a real quality for a young man to have. "He's real nice to folks too," he added. I told my friend he sounded like a United Way spokesman.

Tina thanked him for trying to sell my good points to her. She asked the guys if they liked my new hat, and told them she gave it to me this morning. The guys said I looked like a real player, a ladies man. I told them I needed a drink. Now. We paid for the Scoresby and Tina hooks her arm through mine as we walk out. The fellows touch palms and yell "aww, shucks, you take Miss Tina home now, P-Man, she got some work for you, baby."

I ask Tina if she can go anyplace and not cause a riot. "No," she said, "I can't. I used to be a Gabor sister." We go next door to the Giant Food. I haven't looked at the beer specials here this week, so the sale items are a mystery. Please be Budweiser. I can't drink Miller. It tastes like formaldehyde. We go back to the beer and wine section and Tina takes a bottle of Korbel Brut champagne from the refrigerator. Heinekens are \$5.99 a six pack. That's not bad, but I need volume. Oh yes, Killian's Red for \$7.99 a twelve-pack. Limit one per customer. We have a winner. Tina wants to give the champagne to mom as a gift. Alcohol never goes to waste in our house.

We get in line to pay and Tina gets carded. I sneak a peek at her license. She's 22 years old and born on November 27th. Wait. That can't be right. That's a consecrated day. That day is acknowledged world-wide with religious zeal. That day is Jimi Hendrix's birthday. Sometimes Thanksgiving and his birthday fall on the same day. Which makes perfect sense in the larger scheme of things. That's the day one only listens to WHFS because they play his best stuff: imported recordings, weird B-sides, interviews, impossible to find studio jams. Hendrix and Tina, same day. This means even more cosmic slop is going on with my irrepressible friend than I imagined. She's a bra-less voodoo child.

The cashier bags the Killian's, we go to the MG, and put our stuff in the lunch box sized trunk. We head back towards the stores and The Atlantis Restaurant, and order three servings of moussaka and a Greek salad to go from the lady at the cash register. I tell Tina that they put some cinnamon and sugar in the moussaka's meat filling here. That makes it extra delicious. When you put cinnamon and sugar in chili without beans, it becomes Cincinnati-style chili. I learned that from the Hard Times Café on Wilson Boulevard. They make mind-crushing chili. My date becomes a comedian for a minute, and wants to know why Harvard hadn't recruited me before I graduated from high school.

Tina wants to split a beer with me while we wait. No problem with that. T-girl wants to know what day my birthday falls on. She saw me looking at her license and says fair is fair when it comes to anniversary-information.

"It's in December," I tell her, "December 18th. I'll be 26 years old in about two months."

"Oh my God," she said, "we're both in the sign of Sagittarius. That's a fire sign. We're really good for each other in the astrological sense. Very compatible. But if we get pissed off, look out. It's Atom-bomb city when we melt down."

Then Tina says she likes older, wiser men, like me. I didn't have a clever answer for her this time.

I tell Tina that I don't melt down very often, and keep myself as medicated as possible with The King of Beers, and a few of the minions of beers. It mellows me out just fine. She says she likes to get laced once in a while too, but she's not a booze artist. She says when people drink too much or overdo it with drugs, it's because something fundamental is missing from their lives. Usually it's because they don't have anyone to love, and trust, and believe in. Once you've got that, then the other things just sort of take care of themselves. I said that her optimism was endearing.

Our order came up, and we got out cheap for 12 dollars. On the way back to the Midget, I asked her if she knew her birthday was on the same day as James Marshall Hendrix. She said of course she knew. She'd gone to The Woodlawn School in North Arlington for her last two years of high school. It has a great Arts program. His birthday is like a festival there. I told her my birthday was on the same day as one of my guitar heroes, Keith Richards, of the Rolling Stones. My man Iggy Pop dedicated his biography *I Need More* to Keith. He called him his all-time hero. That's how cool Keith Richards is.

"They had the same girlfriend," Tina said.

I said, "what?"

"Hendrix and Keith," she continued, "her name was Linda something. I guess she had a thing for guitar slinger Sagittarius men. I bet she whipped some booty on those two boys. Face it, Bunky, we're star-crossed whether you believe it or not. We're supposed to be together. Even your man James Marshall Hendrix is trying to tell you so."

"Can I drive the car back to the apartment?," I asked.

"I don't know, CAN you?," She replied.

"May I drive the car back to the apartment?," I corrected myself.

"Yes you may," she rejoined.

We tool home on Quaker Lane and cruise through North Fairlington to get back to Shirlington. Some zealous Halloween families already have pumpkins out on their doorsteps. We get back inside our place and mom is watching the news and looking at the TV Guide for tonight's program menu. Tina reaches in her bag and presents mom with the champagne. She says she wanted to get her something nice for having her over on such short notice.

"Oh, champagne!," mom said. My Lord it's been years since I've had any."

"Well, open it," Tina urged. "Don't even think about it, just do it and enjoy it. Better yet, get Nature Boy to open it for us, and be sure to use the good glasses. It's no fun unless you make a fuss."

They both looked at me as if to say "well, what are you waiting for?" I was powerless in their grasp.

I went into the kitchen to put away the beer and scotch. I left the carry-out on the stove. As soon as I left them, their speed-of-light conversation started again. It didn't even sound like people talking. It

sounded like a beehive out there. I opened the champagne and brought in our best looking, clean, everyday stem ware glasses. We pour the wine and mom says we need to make a toast. She's really happy, like I haven't seen in a long time. "Let's drink to just being alive," Tina said, "just being happy here and now."

I sit there for a few minutes watching the two of them jabber like weather satellites. I'm completely unneeded, so I go into the kitchen and start dishing up the moussaka and salad. There's one Budweiser left, and many Killian's, but they're not ice cold yet. The Bud gets the nod. The dinner stuff is prepped on the plates, and the flatware is ready to go. The TV trays are ready for action, too. All I need is a break in their communication-activity to get the meal started. It might be a few minutes. I sit on our kitchen chair, drink my frosty malt beverage, and ruminate.

So Tina says we're star-crossed and compelled by fate to be together. That's stretching things a little. She's even trying to emotionally blackmail me by using Jimi Hendrix as a pawn in her game. It doesn't matter. It's nice having her around. Mom hasn't been this animated since I took her to the cat show at Thomas Jefferson Junior High School in the Spring.

I stick my head out of the kitchen and ask if "les girls" are ready for their Mediterranean feast. They never heard me. They didn't answer. They just kept talking. I get mom's TV tray and place it in front of her, then bring in their plates and set them down. Tina's plate goes on the coffee table. Next the flatware, and my plate, which goes next to Tina's. I refill their glasses with the remaining champagne and sit down like an Indian Chief on the floor next to T-Girl's chair. They're completely surprised when the see dinner has magically appeared after they've finished gassing.

Mom turns to me and says, "Tina tells me it embarrasses you, when she kisses you in public. Why is that?"

"Jesus Christ," I mewl, "isn't there any topic women don't feel compelled to talk about with each other?"

"No," Tina said, "there isn't. You should know that."

"I had a feeling this insanity would happen," I said, "two babes at once is too much. You're biologically impelled to question men about emotional glop when we're outnumbered. It's not fair. It's not ethical. It's downright Communist of you."

I tell their inquiring minds that Tina's attention is appreciated to no end, but it's still new to me, so consider the current time a transition period. "Now please let's eat," I beg them, "I'm dippy from hunger."

The meal is really good. Mom and Tina do their champagne and nosh moussaka and make contented sounds. We watch TV and hang-out. It's a great, laid-back time for all of us. And minimal dishes. Thank you, Jesus. Mom starts telling Tina about how good I am at saving money, and finding bargains, and stretching a dollar. Tina says she's heard that one before. "We've got about 3000 dollars saved for a down payment on a car," she continues, "we both put a good chunk of our paychecks each week in the fund. When we get 4000, I'm going to start looking at those Dodge K-cars. I've heard they're really dependable, and come with a great long-term warranty." Tina says her MG Midget spends a lot of time at the garage of Rosenthal Imports on Glebe Road, so she knows what she means about being dependable.

I clear off the plates and fold the TV tray. Time for the tactical 5-minute kitchen-clean assault. Mom and Tina continue their conversation in the living room as I get everything put away. Just when the cleaning is done, Tina comes in the kitchen and says she wants to see my room. She wants to see where all my deep thinking takes place. I tell her it's a typical guy's room. No big deal. Kind of sparse. Not Oriental, just sparse. She's not taking the bait. Tina cannot dissuaded once she's locked on to something.

She grabs my hand and yanks me into the room next to the kitchen, which happens to be my room. She does her high-density, visual sweep of the place and targets my Elvira, Mistress of the Dark poster. This cannot be good. Tina closes in on the poster and studies it like a devotee.

"She has really beautiful, full breasts," my date said, "she's gorgeous."

She turned and looked at me.

"Do you like women with big boobs?" she continued, and started walking back in my direction.

"It's not what I'd call a handicap in most cases," I replied, and backed up.

"Do you like my tits?," she asked.

She reached out and grabbed my shoulders. Then she slid her arms down my spine and into my back pockets.

"Tina," I said, "you are a structurally perfect object of worship. There's absolutely nothing about you I don't like."

She said that was the right answer.

She backed me against the wall, went on her knees, and had me unzipped and in her mouth in a tick. She went leisurely and gently with the instrument, taking long strokes, and smiling up at me from time to time. She breathed slowly, relaxed her muscles, and pressed my entire length into her throat. It was a heavenly experience, no doubt, but sheer will power forced me to break the spell for a moment.

“Tina,” I whispered, “oh my God, listen babe, oh Jesus, it’s not that I’m against being orally raped in my room while staring at a poster of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, but my mother isn’t 15 feet from here, with the door open, reading a TV Guide.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, interrupting her work, “I don’t.”

Tina continued her exercises on me while I’m trying to suppress groans of unbearable ecstasy from escaping my mouth. After a few minutes, I put my hand on her shoulder and squeezed hard to let her know that the inevitable was approaching, fast. This only serves to increase her piston action on me. I’m overpowered by her movements and can withhold no longer. I release, full force, and my eyeballs feel like they’ve sunken into my cheeks. My midsection’s infrastructure nearly collapses from gratification. Tina takes it all in. Like a champion. She zips me back up and kisses me. I tell her she still has a small amount of evidence on her cheek. She wipes it off with her index finger and licks it clean. “Needs more cinnamon,” she whispered.

We come back out to the living room. I’m limping, slightly. “We’re you two kissing in there?,” mom asks. “He’s so shy about displays of affection,” mom said. “You teach him Tina, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” Tina said she’d do her best, but couldn’t promise miracles.

Tina said she had to get going. Tomorrow was a work day, and she wanted to get some things accomplished in her photography dark room at home. She also had to go get her sister, Terri, from Joe Theismann’s Restaurant in a little while. She went over to where mom was sitting on the sofa and affectionately hugged her. Mom embraced her right back, with genuine feeling. My mother said she couldn’t remember when we’d had such a good time when company had come over. Tina said she’d come by now and again to make sure I don’t become a completely isolated geek-monster. Mom said she appreciated the concern. She said I had the capacity to become a geek-monster from time to time.

I blazed into my room for a second, then walked Tina out to the Midget. She asked me what I was doing tomorrow night. I told her I had a date with Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, “we’re going bowling,” I

said. "Break it. Joan will understand," she replied. I thanked her for being so cool with mom, and for her world class musical skills on the central forelimb.

"Tina," I said, "although my back is to the apartment, I'm sure my mother is looking at us out of the window. Will you look over my shoulder, and confirm this for me."

She told me my hunch was right.

"Then you may kiss me, gently," I said.

"Oh, may I?," she asked. "I thought you were like Mr. Spazz when it comes to touchy-stuff outside of maximum security cells."

I asked Tina to assume the puckering position.

"Finally," she said, "it's about time you came to your senses."

She puts her arms around my shoulders and gives me a real Hollywood style lip-lock. Good stuff. I reach under my T-shirt and into my pants' seat, and unfold the sheet of legal sized, notebook paper I'd stuffed back there before taking Tina to her car. In my room I had taken my giant red magic marker and written a message in huge block letters on the paper I was holding in my hand. I turn Tina around in mid-smooch, so her back is now facing the window and mom. I drape the paper over Tina's back with my right hand. On the paper is printed: BOND, JAMES BOND.

We finish up our lip-lock, and T-Girl notices the note in my hand. I look up into the apartment window and mom's head is down, with her hand over her eyes. She's shaking her noggin with a "he's hopeless" kind of expression to it. Tina grabs the note from my hand and looks mildly demented. "You are such a fucking crackpot!," she howled, "I've never met such a unsophisticated, nonsensical human being." Then she added, "I think I'm falling in love with you."

Tina says she'll see me tomorrow and tears off in The Midget. I go back inside and mom says, "good evening, Mr. Bond." Mom tells me that the movie on Channel 20 tonight is "The Odd Couple." One of the all-time greats. The mom-unit tells me what a nice time she had talking with Tina and just relaxing. She said she thought it was goofy when I remarked there was something "extra" about Tina when I'd described her earlier. But, she said she really felt some sort of wild charisma going on when they were talking. Something joyous. She felt revived during their discussions. She paused and then looked me straight in the eyes. "You should marry that girl," she said, "she's the best thing that could happen to you."

We watch Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon do their hilarious routines and it's the perfect way to end the night. The koo-koo Pigeon sisters crack me up every time. After the movie mom tells me goodnight, and she really appreciates all the legwork I've been doing lately. "Maybe we'll have a car by Christmas," she said. She also told me how lucky I was to have met Tina, and to please try and be normal around her, as much as I'm able. I get into bed and think about how tomorrow is supposed to be my lucky day. So many things to consider in the next little while. It's a lot better than being bored. I go to sleep that night dreaming of sports cars and Tina's relaxed throat muscles. Tina say relax.

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Four

It's Friday morning. I have Friday night on my mind while making my ablutions and appealing wardrobe selections. It's a payday, which is the second greatest feeling in the world. For the morning nosh: Greek salad, instant coffee, and Pop Tarts. I'm not a slave to traditional breakfast foods. Final wardrobe selections: black Levi's corduroys, black shirt, and black, high top, Chuck Taylor sneakers with the Tweety Bird iron-ons, for my big night. With Tina's gift hat and my silver jacket, I'll look like Billy Zoom from the L.A. band X.

Mom tells me to have a good time tonight, and say hi to Tina for her. Soon I'm out of the door and walking down 31st Street towards Abingdon. It'll be necessary to stop by the new video store this morning and drop the word about The Count. We'll see what kind of reaction ensues. Maybe a chance will present itself to work on the flyer if it gets slow. Drawing is fun, but no one would label me an artist. My scribbling specialties: yin-yangs, stick men, and my name. That's about it. Maybe Tina could be conscripted for some illustration work. She went to Woodlawn. That must be good for something.

After lunch a visit to Hi Jinx Toys will be in order. Jim must have all kinds of cosmic hoo-haw worth checking out. Try and keep Tina contact to a minimum today until 5:00. Build the suspense. Create the mystery. That kind of stuff. It feels really good outside this morning. There's nothing like releasing a little sap the night before, to make the world seem like nicer territory. Skyline Mall is dead ahead. What a strange, yet beautiful, cookie-cutter kind of place.

Pink and Mr. Mike already have piles of boxes ready for the UPS driver to take away. We do the morning routines and the place is ready at 10:00 for the book reading public of Bailey's Cross Roads. A Federal Express courier brings in the pay checks and hands them to me. I sign his receipt log and take the bounty back to Mr. Mike. Pink is absent-mindedly tossing my shirokin into the cork board on my arrival in the office. He claps his hands like a lower primate when he's given his envelope.

Later on, Pink takes my place at the cash register and I go down to Mallworld Video to see what kind of grand opening fanfare they've got going on. It's not what you'd call a shindig happening there. There are 2 guys in the store. One of them is an anemic, frail-egoed, Juliard type sitting at the cash register. He's reading a book by someone named Michel Foucault. It's called *Discipline and Punish*. He looks like he's in pain. He's got a name tag. It says he's Tobin. The other guy is a portly, red-haired, customer service type. He's doing displays, talking on the phone, setting order, and smiling robotically. His name tag reads Jack. I'll talk to Jack.

Jack tells me it's been a busy morning, although I'm the only customer in the store. He tells me about membership fees. It's 25 dollars for a lifetime membership, or 10 dollars annually. He said they carry all ratings, from G to XXX, and they're going to emphasize new Hollywood releases, boutique titles, and keep minimum back log of the regular dreck. Jack likes the mutation flicks like any thinking man, and hopes that the mall kiddies will rent the weird stuff from him that they can't get at the huge Erol's video chain. He orders lots of things from specialty video companies on the west coast, and took me in the back of the store where he'd just finished doing a display of XXX Traci Lords videos. Her movie "Kinky Business," was highlighted in the center, surrounded by "Stud Hunters," "Black Throat," "Talk Dirty to Me Part III," and "Boys Don't Know What Gets me Hot." It was an eye-popping display.

Manager Jack said they were getting new stock all the time. I asked him if he had any Annette Haven titles. "Oh, yes," he said, "we do Annette here." I told him as soon as we get a VCR in our

apartment, he'd have a new member. We talked some more about the store. Tobin's family was the major contributor to the Mallworld Video chain. Tobin was going to film school in the spring. He only liked cinema verite, silent films, and documentaries. He was here pretty much for atmosphere. Jack took care of all the store functions. We talked about Cult Movie Friday coming up and he said it was no problem to put some flyers in the window.

He didn't get gaga or spastic about the upcoming event. He's a video guy, not a movie jock. A pure basement dweller. Jack said to come around and hang out anytime. We could talk trash movies and hunt for titles he could order for the store. Maybe come up with promotion stuff. He walked me up to the front of the store. I said goodbye, and thanks for the information. Jack said "Bye now." Tobin said, "adieu."

Back at the store, Pink wants the skinny on Mallworld. "Give it a 7 out of 10, with potential to grow," I said, "they've got the right idea, but no bam-bam-pow as far as hyping the store and promotional ideas go. The guy at the cash register is some sullen, furball art-thing. The other guy is the brains of the outfit. He looks like he should advertise Log Cabin maple syrup. Fairly nice fellow, and seems to have his shit together. They've got a good Porn section, too. Traci Lords rules."

Pink thanks me for the update, and goes back to his work on the Halloween display. He's got the go ahead from Mr. Mike to set up a rig-job monorail track around the front window. He's going to put a battery operated ghost on a runner to whiz back and forth over the Halloween table. Pink wanted to set a runner around the whole store, but Mr. Mike said the battery unit might clobber some poodle wife on the head, and the law suits would be more than he could handle. Pink said he understood.

It slows down, per usual around 11:00 and it's time to work on my prototype flyer in detail. It's got all sorts of poorly scrawled images and information spliced together in classic angst-ridden, collage-art fashion. It looks like all the flyers for the bands who play The 9:30 Club. Help is required, and I want a technical assistant. I'll whine to Tina tonight for support and appeal to her maternal nature.

Pink has the monorail suspended by wires under the acoustic tiles in the ceiling, and is doing trial runs of his galloping ghost. He's drilled a hole in a tennis ball and attached curtain runners to it. Then he harnessed it to the wire track. The battery unit is on top of the harness. He's placed a long white handkerchief over the top of the whole unit, with a spooky face painted on the area covering the ball. When

the model goes blazing back and forth, it has all this material flapping around behind it. It looks great, and makes high end zinging noises like the razorball in "Phantasm" as its flies from one end to the other.

The phone rings and I answer the call. It's for me. I'm always nervous when receiving a phone call. It's never Deborah Harry or Jamie Lee Curtis. It's usually someone from my barn storming days whom I'd rather not talk to anymore, or someone who wants to put the touch on me for something. This time, my paranoia is unnecessary. It's the Shirlington Library. My books have been dispatched from the Central Branch lickety-split. I gave the lady at Central my work phone number for a contact on the transfer slip. The librarian at Shirlington says she'll hold my books for two weeks. I tell her she's a peach. "Oh, you and your ways," she says.

At noon Donna and Debbie come in and I'm ready to go cash my check and see what goes on at Hi Jinx Toys. Donna said she looked in the door of Mallworld Video and saw the guy at the cash register. She said he looked like a spider plant. There were only a couple of people in the place, and it didn't look like business was booming. I told her about my conversation with Jack. He was the guy you wanted to see to if you need anything from them. She thanked me for the information, and said she'd probably stick with Erol's Video because they've got more of the things she likes. She said she didn't have a great need to see "Varsity Pompom Hookers." She was being narrow minded, and needed a fresh perspective on things.

Central Fidelity Bank is right down the hall. That's where Mr. Mike does the store's commercial deposits and makes oodles of change for the cash registers. The tellers are trained to react with a complete laissez-faire attitude when they see a B. Dalton paycheck. One could be a gorilla wielding a scimitar with no identification and they'd cash his check in a nanosecond. A B. Dalton check is a sure thing. I pocket my loot and head down the hall to the toy store because it's got to be more animated than the video place. Mallworld needs a few MTV-babes on crystal meth and some cheap tequila. That would spruce things up.

There's a gaggle of kids outside the toy store, and they're whooping it up like jailbirds. They've all got balloons, and their faces have been painted like clowns, animals, and the various members of the rock band KISS. I walk into the store and Jim is wearing a Gumby costume. His mom is in the store, doing the free face painting and blowing up the balloons from a helium canister. She's dressed like Raggedy Ann, and ecstatically happy. It's hard to walk in the Gumby costume, so Jim jumps over to greet me. The store

has a good number of customers, and they all have merchandise in their hands, ready to buy. Things look pretty groovy at Hi Jinx Toys.

Jim tells me that they've done great business today. He'd put an ad up in Skyline Racquet and Health Club. The spa ladies, after their aroma therapy and Tai Chi classes, brought their issues in for some goodies. Mr. Mike calls them "the spazz ladies." He thinks that's a riot. Jim introduces me to his mother. She is nice to the point of prostration, and asks me if I'd like my face painted.

"It's free," she said.

"How about a tattoo?," I ask, "I have to go back to work in a bit, and it might not look so good returning to the store looking like Paul Stanley."

I roll my sleeve up to my bicep and ask her if she can draw Betty Boop. "Betty Boop in a sailor suit, please" I request. She says it'll take a few minutes. She has to get some fine point markers. Jim bounces back behind the cash register to make a few sales. He jumps back with a box of Dunkin' Donuts he's been passing out to the big kids this morning. Oh, yes, free food. Thank you. He even had a raspberry jelly roll left over. This is great. Gumby is giving me donuts for lunch, while Raggedy Ann is drawing tattoos on my arm during lunch break.

Jim tells me he has some news for me, and not to leave until we've had a chance to talk. He hops back behind the register to ring up more sales. One of the wives is buying a giant sized Tigger doll from Jim's Winnie the Pooh display. Her issue bleats, "Tigger-doll, Tigger-doll, Tigger-doll." The wife smiles wanly. She's undoubtedly medicated.

Jim's mom starts a conversation with me while she's etching on my arm with her Flair fine points. We concur that Jim has found his niche as far as employment goes. He's so happy he's effervescing behind the cash machine. She said they'd lived in the area a long time. Before even Northern Virginia Community College was built in 1965. This place used to be a small air field, and she used to take Jim to the air strip when he was micro to watch the Pipers and Cessnas come and go. Now it's malls and gas stations and fast food.

"What can you do?," she said.

"Make lemonade," I replied.

She said I seemed like a sensible fellow. She'd been talking to Gumby too long.

I asked her how she knew about the members of KISS. I'd never seen a face painter do their images before on unsuspecting kids. She said Jim had been gaga about the band when he was a teenager. He had all the records and posters and gimmickry they sold. He used to be a different KISS-guy for Halloween parties over the years. She did his make-up. If it didn't look just right he'd fret, so she got good at doing it. She said she even liked one of their songs. It was a love song called "Beth." She said the rest of their music just sounded like seismic disturbances. I told her that every woman on earth likes that song. "Girls just like love songs," she said, "that's pretty much the long and the short of it."

There's a break at the register, and Jim bounds over to where we're sitting. He's opened a fresh box of donuts, all glazed, and offers me one. His mom finishes her work on my arm. My Betty Boop is pretty damn impressive. It looks just like the buxom, squeaky character. I mean, you would know it's the Boopster. You wouldn't say "uh, what is that?" I thank her so much. She seems delighted to be doing such esthetically pleasing things for people. She's got real talent. Jim said she should be a cosmetologist to the local celebrities or something. "Bring 'em on down," she rejoined.

Jim is panting to tell me his information. He's been on the phone to innumerable places over the last few weeks ordering inventory for the store. He's been calling merchandise warehouses to see what kind of overstock they've got that he can take off their hands cheap. Especially weird little stuff: plastic wiggly worms, spring-loaded jumping hamburgers, fake goofy teeth, and such things. He said there are lots of warehouses in Paramus, New Jersey. He doesn't know why, but Paramus really seems to breed novelty warehouses.

He's found a place that has a massive overstock of plastic vampire teeth. "They're selling their overstock for 2 cents per unit," he said, "but the minimum order is 500. You've got to pay the postage, too. UPS ground delivery charges about 3 dollars for a package that size and weight. It takes about 2 days to get here. That means you could have 500 sets of vampire teeth to give away when The Count comes on October 30. It would be 10 dollars for the merchandise and the shipping cost. For about 13 dollars, you could have a great promotional giveaway. You could announce it on your flyer. "Free Vampire Teeth for First 500 Patrons." It would be fantastic."

"Gumby, you're a genius," I said. I told him it was Manager Tom's final decision, but it really did sound like a grand idea. And cheap! Oh yes. Lots of bang for the buck. I'm heading down towards

Skyline 6 Theaters right now, and I'll ask him about it in a few minutes. I thank them both for all the hospitality and fun, and tell them I'll be in touch soon, one way or the other. They tell me to come by any time. "We're kindred spirits," Jim's mom says. Gumby and Raggedy Ann wave to me as I walk out of the door.

Down the hall and towards the movies, that's my new direction. What an outstanding idea Jim has. This is world class stuff. Edna from Scoops is coming up the hall in the other direction. She waves and stops to tell me something. She asks me if I'd gone by her front window today. There's something I should see hanging in there. I told her I was on my way to see Manager Tom at the movies, and had some news about the Cult Movie night that could prove to be momentous stuff. Edna urged me to go by Scoops sometime today. I gave her my word. She can count on me. I continued down the hall and said goodbye to her. She smiled and said "au revoir, P-Man."

What could Edna be talking about? The suspense is gnawing at me. It's detour time past Skyline 6 Theaters and down the hall to Scoops. There's a sign in the window. It's a large piece of poster board with hand drawings on it: French flags, berets, long loaves of bread, wheels of cheese, wine bottles, coquettish looking ladies with hair falling over one eye, muscular men with thin mustaches in horizontally striped shirts. Written on the sign:

Ooh-la-la

Try Edna's Eiffel Tower Dogue

Only \$1.50

The Haute Dogue at Skyline Mall

I now know what it feels like to be "big time." I was the one who tasted the prototype Eiffel Tower Dogue and directly made it a go-project. I was also an integral part of the Research and Development and Marketing teams. This is a big day for me. Resume material. One day I'll have a resume, and this activity will be on it. On to Skyline 6 Theaters.

Manager Tom and an underling are putting up one sheet posters in the brass frames in the lobby. He greets me with warmth. I'm his Cult Commando leader. I tell him there's some news from Hi Jinx Toys. He says he wants to get my opinion on something and steers me in the direction of the concession

area. He wants to try and sell nacho chips with jalapenos and Conquesa dip, along with the popcorn, hot dogs, sodas, and candy already on their menu. He's heard it's big on the west coast.

Their concession supplier has sent them the equipment and supplies to prepare 200 orders as a test market. Then it's Manager Tom's call whether to keep it on the menu or chuck it. He asks if I'd like to be part of the tasting survey. I told him I was born for this job.

He's got his early afternoon employees crowded around the Conquesa dip pot. It's like a fondue pot, only bigger and more industrial looking. The nachos come in big 10 gallon bags. They look like little stucco tiles. Manager Tom stirs the cheese mixture with the stainless steel ladle and aromatic steam curls up from its center. The underlings all say "ooh." One of the minions preps the paper tray with a sheet of wax paper and a generous handful of the corn chips. Manager Tom ladles the sauce on to the chips, and it flows down their ridges in slow, velvety waves. Another one of the crew takes a skewer and lances a few jalapeno slices from a jar, and arranges them on top of the heap. It is one picturesque dish of mall nachos.

The tray is placed before me, and the crew scrutinizes my every move. I tell them that their creation definitely has "eye appeal." The group makes affirmative sounds. I get close and take a deep breath of the hot topping. "An excellent nose, a very playful bouquet," I add. I lift one of the chips and the Conquesa dip makes mozzarella-like strings as it is pulled away from the others. "Good texture, too," I tell them. More affirmative sounds ensue. At last I bite into the chip and it has the solid crunch I like, and then the creamy convergence of sauce against corn meal, vying for taste supremacy. Excellent. "It finishes well, for a domestic chip. Manager Tom, with a little chili sauce from the hot dog toppings, and some Safeway sour cream, I'd say you can safely add this to your menu." Their relief was palpable. "I love this guy!" he screeched.

The crew went back to their routine duties, and Manager Tom escorted me into his office. I was munching my nachos, and telling him I'd been over to the new toy store. It's a hit. The main man, Jim, is like Franken-toy-guy. He's making that place so cool it's unreal. Then I told him about the warehouse in Paramus, New Jersey that had the overstock vampire teeth. I recounted the unbelievably low cost per unit and shipping. It would make the Cult Friday kick-off a Grade-Z masterpiece.

At that moment, a young lady named Kelly appeared in the doorway. She had an interview with Manager Tom to be a part-time ticket window clerk at Skyline 6 Theaters. Kelly was on the gymnastics

team at T.C. Williams High School. She was also a majorette and taking a correspondence cosmetology course from the Touch of Class Institute of Pierre, South Dakota. Kelly had spirit, determination, and legs.

I stood up and Manager Tom introduced us. Kelly said, "good afternoon, gentlemen."

"That's the kind of courtesy I like to see Kelly, just beautiful" he said, "sit down, please."

Manager Tom told Kelly that sometimes, one has to make split second decisions that have a lasting impact on those around you. He explained the situation with Cult Movie Friday, the vampire teeth, the cost involved, and the marketing strategy. He leaned over his desk and said, "Kelly, if you were in my position, would you order the plastic teeth from Paramus, New Jersey for 10 dollars, plus 3 dollars shipping?" There was silence. Kelly adjusted herself in her seat, and cleared her throat.

"Manager Tom," she said, "I won't pretend to understand the film industry business. However, I think I could be an efficient, hard working, part-time employee for you. But if you want lots of people running around your theater looking like vampires, and you can get 500 sets of fake teeth for 13 dollars, I'd go for it, and wouldn't look back."

Her honesty was paralyzing. We sat in a stupor for a few seconds. Manager Tom looked at me. "P-Man," he said, "it's a go-project." Kelly whooped.

I excused myself so he could continue the interview with his potential employee. The man said he'd get in touch with Jim at Hi Jinx toys to do the financial end of things. I told him the flyer was my project this weekend and he'd have something by Monday. I informed Kelly it was nice meeting her, and said goodbye to them both. Manager Tom smiled broadly, "Monday it is, then," he said. Kelly waved to me. "Bye," she chirped.

I cruise back into the store just as my lunch break comes to an end, and get back behind the register to ring up sales from the Friday lunch crowd. Lots of people have gathered around Pink's galloping ghost and watch it whiz back and forth over the Halloween display table. Pink is trying not to act happy with himself, but it's not possible. Donna calls him "our little Tom Edison." Debbie calls him "The Brainiac-man from Fairfax." Mr. Mike says "it's profound."

The afternoon is not too slow. On Fridays people just seem to be in better moods. They buy little things for themselves they feel they don't deserve on a Tuesday. The UPS driver comes and doesn't deliver a mountain of stuff like he's been doing lately. We're all relieved. He takes all our returns and Mr. Mike

looks like he's just been issued a stay of execution. We all talk and have fun, work on mass market paperback displays, and make pyramids with the best seller hardbacks. The subject of my date with Tina comes up. Donna and Debbie are locked on to me.

They say that the first few dates are pivotal in a relationship, and tell me to please say as little as possible during the time I'm with her. There's plenty of time for her to find out what a nut-job I really am. They seem sincere and tell me that if I play my cards right, I might just have a girlfriend on my hands. A real, nice, smart, sexy, crazy, cool babe to call my own. They beg me not to blow it. Keep your mouth shut, they insist. I nod agreement.

Around 5:00 I start getting the shakes about my big date, and start examining myself for wardrobe and cosmetic flaws. I adjust my short hair and manually cleanse my eyelids of eye-boogers, check my wallet for cash, and adjust male body parts for maximum comfort. I am not a relaxed man. The B. Dalton night crew comes filtering in, and Tina will be following them shortly.

Mr. Mike showed me a book the other day by a guy called Baba Ram Das. It's called *Be Here Now*. It's a book from the 1960s, and supposed to help mellow you out when emotional disturbance is banging on the door. My manager said Mr. Baba wants us all to live in the moment. It doesn't mean go sucker wild, and sell the farm to gypsies. It's OK to make plans, and be organized and together, but LIVE in the moment. Fully experience every minute of life. I'll try anything. "Be here now, be cool now, be here and cool now," I repeat to myself.

Tina comes skipping into the store like Dorothy from Kansas. Her beauty is devastating. She's the quintessential long, lean, black-haired art-babe. God's best work. She's got a black leather mini-skirt on, with a white T-shirt that almost reaches the top of her navel. On the T-shirt is a multi-color silk screen of Betty, Veronica, and Archie from the Archie comic books. The two girls are competing for his attention, and they're kissing his cheeks in tandem. Their man has a imbecilic grin on his face, and his eye sockets have become identical red hearts. Tina's footwear is the most crippling thing about her ensemble, however. She's got on black, hi top Chuck Taylor sneakers. Just like mine. Except no Tweety Bird. Her jean jacket was slung over her shoulder, like Sinatra does for publicity photos. Why is fate testing my resolve so much? I'm only a bookstore clerk for God's sake.

“Hey Fishbait,” she said, “wanna date?” She wrinkled her nose, and adjusted her T-shirt. No bra, again.

“I guess it couldn’t damage anything,” I rejoin.

I gape at her for a few seconds and add, “God Tina, you look so, so...”

“Fetching,” Pink interposed with immaculate timing.

“Exactly,” I agreed, “as fetching as a man can take without breaking something,” I finish.

Tina informed us that this garb was her “hot date” outfit. She said it never failed her when she was chasing guys she liked. Pink and I nodded like trained porpoises. She walked behind the front counter and rolled her hip against mine.

“Ready to go?,” she asked.

I said, “uh, yeah,” then asked her, “Tina, do you own a bra?”

She said her sister Terri had a lot of them, and she borrowed one whenever she needed it. “Terri has slightly bigger boobs than I do, but it’s no big deal,” she told me.

“That’s what I thought,” I replied.

I go to the office, clock out, and get my hat and jacket. Donna and Debbie ask if Tina is here. I confirm her presence, and they run out to the front for a quick consultation before we leave. They’re probably going to tell her to keep the conversation very simple and direct. Try not to confuse him with anything too mentally taxing. Just yes-and-no questions. That would be best. I can practically hear it now. I return to the front and the three girls are talking faster than jet engines. Pink, Mr. Mike, and I stand transfixed.

Tina produces a grocery list of oriental goodies for our trip to the Safeway. We say goodbye to everyone and start down the hall towards the supermarket. They wave at us like we’re being shipped to Korea. “Donna and Debbie really love you,” Tina said. “It’s a weird kind of love, like the love you have for an emotionally handicapped child or something. They want you to be happy, even though they don’t understand you too well. They think we’d be good together.” I told Tina I was gone from the counter for less than a minute.

“How is it possible that you touched on so many subjects in that short a time?,” I asked.

“Speed, baby, speed,” she said, and handed me the grocery list.

We get to the Safeway and I get a hand basket. Tina puts her arm through mine and says, “oh, this is so 1950s. The strong man with the grocery list carrying the things, and the housewife with the recipes. I feel like June Cleaver, or Donna Reed, or both of them.”

“June Cleaver didn’t have a wok,” I tell her.

“Don’t be negative,” she said, “June just didn’t use a wok. Ward would have said it was ‘frivolous,’ and smiled at her naiveté. Then he would have gone to the living room and read the newspaper.”

“He did read the paper a lot,” I agreed.

We go to the meat department to get chicken breasts. Tina says she gets the regular breasts and then cuts the bone out herself. It’s a lot cheaper than buying the pre-packed boneless stuff. She thought I’d appreciate the tip in home economics.

“Tina,” I said, “I like chicken a lot. Young, tender, moist, chicken. Mmmmm. I don’t mind *boning* some chicken now and then. I really don’t.”

“You’re disgusting,” she rejoined, enjoying the risqué nonsense to no end.

“At least I’m honest,” I answered.

Then we were off to the produce section. Tina is a storm at the vegetable bins: snow peas, bean sprouts, shallots, fresh mushrooms, red and green peppers, ginger root, and peanuts all go in the basket. She says she has sesame oil, horseradish, rice, and soy sauce at home. “Of course you do,” I replied.

Finally we hit the beer and wine section. Tina goes straight for the Korbel Brut Champagne. I go for the Budweisers. It’s Friday, and it’s the first date I’ve had in years. I don’t care what they cost. Our basket is getting full and we head to the cashier. “Have you got condoms?,” she asked. She made this inquiry without a particle of embarrassment. It was like she was asking me for a stick of gum. Fear galvanizes my body.

“Condoms?,” I say under my breath.

“Price of admission,” she replies, “I thought you’d appreciate the movie metaphor.”

I look at Tina for a second, and cock my head. “You’re serious, aren’t you?,” I ask, “I mean, we’re going to become REALLY good friends tonight. Like bam-bam-pow friends.”

“Yup,” she said.

“Tina,” I continue, “last night’s pastime in my room was incredible. I thought I was going to pass-out it felt so good. But I’m really out of practice with women and…” She put her hand over my lips.

“Didn’t Donna and Debbie tell you not to put your foot in your mouth?,” she asked. I nodded agreement.

“Didn’t they tell you to say as little as possible and just play it cool?,” she went on. I nodded a second time, emphatically. She took her hand away from my mouth and said, “don’t worry about the Beaver.”

We get to the pharmacy area and buy a 10-pack of Trojan, ribbed-for-her-pleasure, latex condoms. Tina began a monologue at the contraceptive display section. She said that she didn’t want to have children until she was ready to do it right. She wanted to finish her Photography degree at Northern Virginia Community College, and get a job with a newspaper or magazine in the area, before she thought about a family. She also said there were some nasty-ass diseases out there, and latex was the only sure thing when it came to protection. She finished her spiel, and appeared to be satisfied with her pronouncement.

We get in line and up to the cashier. It’s the same lady who rang me up the other day. My situation has improved dramatically since then: gorgeous gal, champagne, vegetables, chicken, condoms. The possibilities are limitless. She rings up the stuff and it comes to 35 dollars. Tina reaches for her wallet. I stop her hand in mid-motion and say, “you get the next one, babe. This night is on Nature Boy.” “God, you are going to get SO lucky tonight,” she said. I pay for the groceries. The cashier says we might also want a pack of cigarettes. Tina shakes her head to indicate “no.” “Too raspy,” she said.

We gather up all our bags and head out of the Safeway. Tina and Terri’s place is across Route 7, and straight down George Mason Drive one block. Turn left and you’re on Forest Drive. That’s her street. She lives within visual range of Wakefield High School, which is at the intersection of Chesterfield Street and George Mason. That’s where her sister and I went to high school. Tina went to Wakefield for one year, and then transferred to Woodlawn to be arty. It was best for the world that she attended Woodlawn. Wakefield was not ready for 3 years of her.

Tina tells me Terri had been a varsity cheerleader for a couple of years at school. She wanted to know if I remembered her. I told her all cheerleaders look the same to me. “I didn’t attend a lot of school

functions,” I said, “it wasn’t that I wanted to be anti-social or anything. It just wasn’t a good idea in the larger sense. I was pretty geeked-out in high school.”

Tina said I should have gone to Woodlawn. I informed her I didn’t really have any latent talents which could have been developed at that time. “art and music and movies are great,” I said, “ but I’m not arty. I don’t dance, sing, play an instrument, draw, or write. I just pretty much hang out.” Tina said that about a third of the kids at Woodlawn had really exceptional minds, a third were good con-men, and a third were medicated yo-yos, with some hybrids of all three thrown in the mix. “You’d have fit right in,” she told me.

Then she told me I was more of an artist than anyone she’d ever met at school.

I said, “what?”

“You’re passionate about things,” she continued, “I don’t mean just quick to show emotion, like limp-wristed art-boys. It’s in your marrow. You surrender yourself completely to things you love, and not many people can do that. They’re too self-conscious, and can’t become a selfless part of the swarm because it terrifies them.”

“How do you know all this secret information?,” I asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” she said.

We walk up Forest Drive and over to Tina’s place. It’s a typical, robin’s egg blue, South Arlington salt box. Well maintained. Fairly new paint job. Tidy. Anonymous looking houses are the best. Low profile rules. The Midget is in the driveway. The lights are on inside the house and the stereo is on. Terri is getting ready to go bar tend at Joe Theismann’s Restaurant. Tina unlocks the door and we step inside.

Terri is looking in the living room mirror and adjusting her flamingo-print necktie. She has tight black nylon slacks, and a white collar shirt on for work. She turns her upper body like a super-model and smiles, revealing a biologically impossible number of perfect, white teeth. She has deep chestnut colored hair, cut shoulder length, and parted on the side. Her green eyes are a perfect match of Tina’s. She is ravishing. I can see why record store Mitch loses his corn over her.

“Hi P-Man,” she said, “so you’re the stud-god whose got Tina going wacko around here.” Her voice was as modulated as a broadcast journalist, but without a trace of conceit or haughtiness. “Hi,” I said.

“You just called me a stud-god, didn’t you?” I asked her. She smiled and shook her head affirmatively.

“Tina just called me an artist when we were outside,” I continued.

I told Terri I just got paid from the bookstore today, too. “Two beautiful women say nice things to me on the same day, and I have some money in my pocket. This never happens to me. I don’t know if I can take it.” Terri looked at Tina and said, “I see what you mean T. He’s nice, but needs some adjusting.” Tina nodded agreement. “He’s a challenge,” she said.

Terri told me to come by Joe Theismann’s Restaurant any time. Any pal of her sister’s was aces with her. Tina took my grocery bags and headed to the kitchen. I told Terri that her sister had touted her cheerleading skills from the Wakefield days. I said I thought we’d gone there about the same time, and informed her it was OK if she didn’t remember me. I sort of didn’t remember myself from back then.

She went upstairs, got her senior yearbook, and returned. Her nylon slacks made a swish-swish sound when she walked. I was hoping for static sparks, but no luck. She asked me what clubs, or sports teams, or awards I’d won that year. “Maybe we should forget this,” I uttered, “I wasn’t what you might have called the life blood of the school. I was really undercover. Like subterranean.” I’d been in 11th grade when she graduated.

“What was your home room?” she asked.

“I don’t remember,” I replied.

We thumbed through the group pictures of the 11th grade home rooms and found my classroom photo. “I remember you!” she said. You were the guy who was always on the second floor, hanging-out in Mr. Bill’s room at lunch time. You were there all the time. What was so special about his class room?” she looked really interested.

“He had a TV,” I said. “He let me watch it while he graded papers. I like to watch TV quite a bit.”

“Oh,” she said, “no tabloid stuff or scandals? ”

“Sorry,” I said, “just cartoons and repeats of ‘Happy Days’ and ‘Laverne and Shirley.’”

“Ho-hum,” she said.

Tina returns to the living room and says “chop-chop, Fishbait. Kitchen duty time. I may be your love slave, but I’m not the sous chef, you are.”

I turned to Terri and said, "I have a love slave."

"You're good," she replied.

Terri said she was working until 1 O'clock and then she had to clean the bar for tomorrow's morning shift, so she'd be home around 2:30. She said if she heard any groaning or animal noises coming from the basement, she was going to ignore them and go straight upstairs. Tina told Terri she was the best sister in the whole U.S.A.

Terri gamboled out of the house, fired up the Midget, and headed up Forest Drive towards Route 7. Tina positioned herself offensive lineman-style, and pushed me like a piece of furniture into the kitchen. She had all the Safeway produce in the sink, ready to be washed. She'd put the rice on, and set the timer. The wok was positioned on the kitchen counter, unplugged. Tina said she would bone the chicken because she didn't want me to get over stimulated before dinner. My job was to take any vegetable, run water over it, and chop it into bite-sized pieces. Tina went to the living room and changed the radio station from DC/101 to the jazz station WDCU. They were playing Chet Baker songs from his Paris years.

I was cleaning and chopping and Tina was boning the bird. I go to the refrigerator and open two Budweisers. I hand one to her and she started talking about her family. Tina's mom and dad had divorced a few years ago. Her mother had remarried last year to a guy who lived in Middleburg, Virginia. They entertained a lot and traveled all the time. The new hubby wanted a housewife and an attractive companion, and that suited her fine. She said her mom had left because her father was such an intense workaholic. Her mom needed lots of attention and dad was inextricably attached to his business.

Her father had started a computer software business a little while ago. His software helped subscription businesses maintain and integrate various mailing lists and it had done well. He spent so much time in New York, that he bought an apartment outside of Manhattan, and gave the Arlington house and the MG Midget to his two girls. Tina said he comes home every few months to make sure they haven't turned into geishas.

She said that Terri took the upstairs for herself and the ground floor was their common area. They tried to keep it in order together. Tina said the upstairs was like an operating room. Not a particle of dust anywhere, and everything placed just-ever-so in display cases and bureaus. She said her sister didn't just clean the rooms, but fumigated, sanitized, and sandblasted them. It was unbelievable. Tina had taken the

basement for herself, and used the downstairs guest room for a photography dark room. She said she liked the basement. It was primitive and earthy and that's what she favored. They shared the car. Tina could walk to work, and Joe Theismann's was only a couple of minutes drive away, so there wasn't a lot of competition for it.

"And the thing of it is," she said, "is that we actually like each other. You'd think we'd be arguing about shit all the time, but she really respects me and my space, and I do likewise. Terri is really an angel."

"Easy on the eyes, too," I said.

"Enough talk from you, Fishbait," she clucked, "now chop them onions."

Tina plugged in the wok and drizzled the sesame oil around its perimeter. She dumped the chicken and ginger root into the bowl and it sizzled and smelled delicious. "Oooh," I said. Tina joined me and said, "oooh" also. She swished the pieces around in the bowl with a chop stick. She said you do the meat first because it takes longer to cook. The vegetables are done in a snap. I had done pretty well decimating them into bite sized chunks. After a few minutes she dumped the chicken onto a big plate. She splashed more sesame oil into the wok and began tossing handfuls of vegetables in it. The wok made noises like sploosh, splam, pop, when the food hit the hot oil.

She was a cartoon alchemist at the cauldron stirring in soy sauce and spices and lashing all the contents with her chop stick. She was in creation ecstasy. A she-demon with her wok. She dumped the bounty on top of the chicken pieces, turned, and headed downstairs into the basement. She told me to grab the rice, which had been turned off and sitting on the back burner of the stove, and follow her into the cellar.

"And don't forget the champagne and glasses, Bunky," she hollered, "it's no fun unless you make a fuss."

I asked her how she expected me to carry a sauce pan, bottle of champagne, and stemware glasses all at once.

"You're the guy," she continued, "you figure it out. I'm starving, and I'm a prima donna, and I want champagne, and lots of attention and I want it now."

I collected the required items, and proceeded down the stairs, one at a time.

Tina's basement looked like the back of The Who's "Who's Next" album: lots of wine bottles with candles in them, lighting fixtures on strings, and tables with her camera stuff on them. There were

middle-eastern tapestries on the walls and floor. Her bed was a Queen-sized thing with a Victorian brass headboard. There were scarves draped everywhere, brass incense burners, ceramic vessels of different sizes, and framed photos of family and friends all around. There was a huge work table in one corner that had a computer and several folding chairs around it. That's where she deposited the Chinese munchies. I wobbled over to the table and put my things down carefully.

She bolted up the stairs and got two plates with Asian dragons printed on them, and two sets of enamel chopsticks. I knew my job was to open the champagne. If it wasn't open soon, she'd start acting funny and talking about peoples' emotions. Anything but that. She was dishing the rice on to the plates. I twisted the cork and enticed the Korbel bottle open without spilling a drop. It went TOOP! "And you said you didn't have any talent," Tina chirped. I poured the wine into her glass up to the rim. "Light some candles, Romeo. Seduce me," she commanded, "I swear, guys can be such boneheads when it comes to luring a babe into their web."

I take a book of matches with Joe Theismann's Restaurant printed on it, and cruise around the room lighting the candlesticks. Chet Baker's trumpet is wafting down the stairs from the living room, and the musty scent of old incense is in the air. She dims some of the overhead bulbs, and the candlelight makes fluttery patterns on the walls. Tina has dished up the meal in ceremonial fashion and has the champagne placed before our dinner plates. God I can't believe I'm doing more romance novel stuff. It's corny as hell, but it appears to have its advantages.

"Hurry," she said, "my stomach's going rowr-rowr. I need protein."

"You are always hungry," I said, "how do you stay so thin and velvety looking?"

"Will power, baby," she answered, "and Black Death coffee from The Pawnshop."

We sit down and Tina works her chopsticks like hedge clippers. She is fast and deadly accurate. I'm nowhere near as skilled with them, and proceed slowly, but with a good degree of success. She's on her second serving before I'm halfway done with mine. She eats like a rhino. It's fun to watch her nosh. The Safeway-produced, Asian meal is luscious. My fun-fact lesson for tonight: ginger root is the ingredient that makes Chinese food taste like Chinese food. Tina finishes her second plate and looks contented. "God I love to eat," she blurted.

We sip our champagne after dinner and I spring my request for help with the Cult Movie Friday flyer. I take the paper from my pocket and show her my ideas for the layout. I told her I was a conceptual genius, but needed help with applications.

“This?,” she said, “is this all? It’s easy. We can do it in ten minutes with the Commodore 64.”

She pointed to the computer in front of us.

“Really,” I said apprehensively, “I’ve never used a real computer before. Only cash registers that beep when you make mistakes.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I am your eyes.”

We cleared the dishes and took all the dinner stuff upstairs. She put aluminum foil around the leftovers and placed them in the refrigerator. Tina ran water over the dirty plates, and then affected a deep southern accent. “I won’t even think about that today, I’ll think about that tomorrow.”

“Won’t Terri spazz about the mess?,” I asked.

“She’ll live,” my date said, “remember, it’s on the middle floor, our common area. It’s a give and take thing on ground level. Upstairs it’s her incubator, downstairs it’s Castle Dracula.”

We go back down to the basement and she flicks on the Commodore 64. I’m doodling yin-yangs on my paper because I’m comfortable and adept at drawing them. Stick men, too. Stick men with ray guns are my best doodle. I look over at Tina and she’s setting up the computer to create documents. She fingers a strand of hair behind her ear, and is gazing at the monitor. The carbon blue light from the screen only increases her phantasmal beauty. It plays off the flecks in her green eyes like a mirror ball.

Soon she’s typing stuff on the keyboard and I’m watching. It’s amazing. There’s a font that looks like dripping horror movie letters. She puts Cult Movie Friday at Skyline 6 Theaters!! as a banner across the top. I tell her the names of the theme theaters, and the movies playing there. The date and time: Midnight, October 30th. Then: Special Guest, In-Person, Channel 20’s Count Gore DeVol! It looks so professional. It would have taken me hours to do something half as nice. “Wait,” she said, “now comes the cool part,” she did some keystroke things and a series of little clip-art pictures came down on the screen. She inserted images on the document: screeching mag wheels, machine guns, skulls with pirate hats, stars going supernova, army guys, Doberman pincers, Sears catalog-looking bras, fighter planes, and a Tarzan-looking guy chucking a spear. It was dazzling.

I told Tina the news about Manager Tom, Jim at Hi Jinx Toys, and the plastic vampire teeth from New Jersey. She said I was the Chuck Barris of Skyline Mall. “You have to put in the flyer ‘Free Vampire Teeth for first 500 Patrons,’” I urged, “it’s the perfect garnish for The Count’s appearance.” She did as instructed, edited the page for a minute, and printed off a copy for me. It was like a genie had given me a wish. “This is it!” I said, “this is the thing, Jack. We can’t lose.” I folded the paper and put it in my back pocket.

Tina put her hand on my thigh and said, “you can thank me in bed.” Panic. Raw panic seizes my loins. She reaches in the pocket of her leather mini-skirt and produces one of the newly purchased Trojan condoms. “Ready to try me on for size?,” she whispered. My stomach felt like a bag of crocodiles. I turned to look at her in the blue light of the computer. She was smiling and running her hand up and down along my arm. It took me a long time to say anything. I was wiggling bad.

“Tina,” I said, “I’m more than a little freaked-out about our situation. I’m going to be honest and 100 per cent up front with you. I like you a lot. I mean really a lot. I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“Then what’s wrong?,” she asked.

“Listen,” I continued, “I’ve had a couple of girlfriends before, and I monumentally blew-it with them. I wasn’t trying to be stupid; things just constantly seemed to get fucked-up when we were together. I don’t think I know how to be a normal guy, let alone a boyfriend.”

“Can’t you just relax around me?,” she went on, “you can’t even look at me sometimes you’re so edgy.”

“Tina,” I said, “I’m afraid things are going to go great for a while and then crack-up with us. I don’t know if I can handle losing someone I really like, and not even knowing why things are going to smash. I think I’m just hopeless in relationships.”

That pissed her off. I should have listened to Donna and Debbie’s keep-your-mouth-shut advice.

She brought her fist down on the table and the computer vibrated from the impact. “Get up!,” she snapped, “right now.” I did what she said. If she’d told me to set fire to the curtains I would have done it. She grabbed me by the shoulders and held me at arms length. Her eyes burned into mine like microwave beams. “I don’t know what’s happened to you before,” she said, “all I know is that you’re desperate to touch and love someone and you won’t let yourself do it.”

She stepped back, and slowly pulled off her T-shirt. The candlelight made lazy, glowing currents over her skin. She smelled like champagne and ginger. Her beauty was almost unbearable. "Touch me," she said, "just touch me. It's OK." I touched the swell of her breast, her shoulder, her face. "God," she said, "you're absolutely starved for some affection. Whatever happened in your past is one thing, but I'm here. Right here, right now. Please, just drop your guard. Call off the dogs and let me into your life. I will not try and hurt you for any reason."

She went on, "you were like a ghost the first time you held me in the camera store. I never felt anything so isolated. You scared me." She held me like a lost kid in a department store. "I want you to kiss me," she murmured, "kiss my lips, and eyelids, and nipples, and stomach. Gorge yourself on me; eat me alive if you want to. Just love me until you've burned out every bit of fear you have about losing me."

We held each other for a long minute. She stroked the back of my head and said in a hushed voice, "I adore you, you're my baby." I slipped my arm under her haunch, hoisted her up, and carried her to the bed. Sean Connery would have approved.

We were asleep when Terri came back home around 2:30. I had crawled out of bed after our full and frank exchange of views, and blown out the candles. We stayed asleep until 7:00, and both had to be at work in a couple of hours.

"Wow, Betty Boop!," she said, "I didn't notice her last night. So, are you still terrified of losing Miss Tina this morning, P-man?"

"Maybe a little," I said, "but not nearly as much."

T-Girl shakes me and gets me out of bed. She's naked and running around the basement. It is a joy to behold.

Tina puts my pants on and runs upstairs to make coffee. She forgot to put on a top. I guess it's no big deal. In a few minutes she comes down with a tray. It's got a box of fig newtons and two cups of strong, black java. She sits next to me on the bed and told me that after an initial case of performance anxiety, I receive a more than passing grade for last night's activities.

"After you got revved up, I thought you were going to dislocate something," she said.

"I feel different today," I said, "I'm like, Jerry Falwell renewed. I can't believe how good I feel, I just can't. I haven't felt like this in ages." Tina laughed and jumped in my lap.

“That’s pussy-power baby,” she said, “isn’t it great?”

I drank the coffee, noshed newtons, and hinted that we needed to get on track if we were going to get to work. I needed to get home and change clothes. Tina suggested we take a shower together, only because it’s easier for her if someone else scrubs her back. “We’ve got an open box of raincoats, too,” she chirped. I consented, because Tina’s personal hygiene is important when greeting the public at 1-Hour Photo.

After a lengthy, fulfilling shower, my pants are back on their owner, and I’m ready to go home and change clothes for work. Tina dries her hair with the hand held blow-dryer, and tries to jump into her black leather pants simultaneously. I provide my body as support to brace herself while dressing. She puts on a standard-issue white T-shirt, and grabs her jean jacket.

“No tiara today?,” I ask. “it’s Saturday. You could be Queen Tina Saturday at the store.”

“Great idea,” she said.

She went to her dresser and put her crown and Velvet Underground shades on, We were out the door, headed for the Midget. Tina tosses me the keys, and we fire up the machine. I look like a plumbing convention guy leaving a the house with a questionable Windsor-family member. We cruise up Forest Drive to Route 7, and then head east towards Shirlington.

“Tina,” I ask, “was that an example of being Sagittarius pissed-off last night when I started blabbering and you slammed your computer desk?” She smirked an evil smirk.

“That,” she said, “was nothing. I was just fed-up with you denying yourself the nicest thing life has to offer. I’ve tried every way I know to show you that I care about you, and you always play it off as some kind of deficiency on your part. I was just miffed at your lack of confidence. I’m glad you came to your senses. I was getting worried.”

“Thanks,” I said.

She wasn’t finished. “You told me,” she continued, “that you’d had some girlfriends before, but the relationships went to shit and you didn’t know why. Did you ever think, even once, that THEY might have been the ones with the problems. If you’re just being yourself, and that’s not good enough for them, it’s their fucking dilemma, not yours.”

“They were the ones who always gave me the boot when the alliance came to an end,” I returned. “They were sort of flighty things, some of them, but they seemed nice enough. I always thought I wasn’t providing enough stimulation for them just going to movies and doing domestic stuff. It’s difficult to tell what’s going on in a woman’s mind. Who knows.”

“You need a real girlfriend P-Man,” she said, “it’ll change your life.”

We get to Shirlington and cruise up to the apartment. Tina says she wants to come in and say hi to mom. I look down a few parking spaces and see the green George Mason University Security, Subaru Brat. Pink’s got to be here, and inside the apartment. What the hell. I look at Tina. “Things are not as they seem in Shirlington,” I tell her. She says that will be the title of my first horror novel.

We flash out of the Midget and gambol up the stairs of the building. I get up to the door and hear mom’s and Pink’s voices. They’re laughing and carrying on. We open the door and bolt inside. Pink has our TV set turned around and is connecting wires in the back of the chassis. Mom is sitting on the sofa watching Pink work. Next to the TV is a BetaMax VCR. Oh my God.

“Good Morning Mr. Bond,” mom says, “you’ve brought Princess Diana with you. We weren’t expecting royalty *and* Her Majesty’s Secret Service this morning.”

“Don’t alert the media,” Tina says, “I’ve come to Arlington to help the children.”

Mom said Pink knocked on the door about 20 minutes ago, and introduced himself as a friend of mine. He knew all about you, and B. Dalton, and Tina. He had this video machine with him and said I’d be interested in it. She remembered him from the time I’d helped him with the mega-desk.

“Am I interested in it!,” I barked, “Pink what have you done? I love you, man!” Pink told us that the GMU Science Department was getting rid of their old VCRs that had wire remote controls, in favor of the new, high-tech wireless remote controls. This one had never been used. “It was still in the box, but it was outdated remote control-wise,” he said. “They were going to give it to some Virginia charity along with about 25 other units. I asked if I could buy it for a friend of mine. The department hemmed and hawed and finally broke down. You owe me 10 dollars.” Tina supported me when my legs collapsed.

“I think I’m going to pass out,” I said. “The mall-people love you Bunky,” Tina rejoined, “you better get used to it.” I told mom I’d already spent my weekly 25 dollar paycheck allotment, plus a bit

more, on my date last night, without a scintilla of regret. “The car fund is our major priority” I continued, “and I don’t want to be a slag when it comes to putting money into the till.” Mom told me to shut my yap.

She told me I was lucky as hell to have friends like Pink and Tina and to stop beating myself up about money all the time. Tina walked over to the sofa and kissed her when she said that. Pink said that the 10 dollar payment could be waived for a foot-long Sky-dog at Scoops sometime. “I LOVE Sky-Dogs!” Princess Diana whooped.

I went into The Bohemian Love Pad to change my clothes. Tina, at home in any environment, went into the kitchen to make tea for everyone. I reach in my jacket pocket. I still have her framed photo with me. I place it on top of my clock radio, and change my outfit with Clark Kent speed to join my crew in the living room. Pink finishes the connections on the TV and video unit. We watch cartoons for a few minutes, drink Earl Grey tea, and talk about mall stuff.

Mom asks Tina if we had a nice time last night. Tina said it was “terrific, exciting, fun, and educational for both parties.” Mom told Tina to please forgive me if I started babbling or acted funny at any time last night. Mom told her I was a nice guy, and after the introductory period, could be fairly together when I tried. Tina said she’d slap me around if I got crazy.

It was getting close to 9:00 and we all had to get to the mall. Mom told Queen Tina and Pink to come by any time and talk or watch a video. She added that if they brought a movie with them, they would have to work the remote control, because she was sure never to figure it out. I told mom I’d be home as quickly as possible after work because Mayonnaise David was coming by to pick me up around 7:00 for movies at the Centre.

Tina hugged mom and said she’d be back to talk sometime. Pink winds up the wire from the VCR remote and places it on top of the unit. We all go out the door and say goodbye to mom. She’s looking at the newspaper and smiling. I jump in The Midget with royalty-girl in the passenger seat. Pink backs The Brat out of the lot and we all head out of the driveway and to the mall for a retail Saturday.

The day goes by quickly. After the morning prep-stuff and steady sales at the cash register, the movie patrons swell into the store when the shows have ended. Donna and Debbie say I look different this morning, like I’ve just come back from a week at the beach or something. They say it’s even-money odds that Tina has the same atmospherically goofy look on her face, too. More people come in the store to look

at Pink's orbiting ghost, than they do to buy books. He's really come up with a winner display. At lunch time I go to Scoops and buy him a Sky-Dog Deluxe, and a giant Dr. Pepper.

I told Edna that Pink had bought me a VCR from the college for cheap, and even installed it for me this morning. She said videos were the greatest thing ever invented, and when she retires she's going to buy one and watch Elvis movies everyday. Sundays included. I told her "Viva Las Vegas" would be playing here in a few weeks, but the show was at midnight. She said she'd be there, and the performance time didn't matter. The King on the big screen was worth losing some sleep over.

I take Pink his Sky-Dog feast in the store's office, and he's overwhelmed. "You don't know what you've done for me, man," I tell him, "I've wanted one of those machines for a while. This is but one, small hot dog I offer you, Mr. Pink. I am now your Ninja, silent assassin, personal animal. Command me."

"Have a good time at the movies tonight," he said, "oh, yeah, and make Tina pregnant sometime before you die."

Tina comes in the store during the afternoon, bouncing a red tennis ball. She says that she and Terri are driving out to Middleburg tonight to hang-out with their mother and step-father. Then they're going to drive into Fredericksburg to have dinner at Sammy T.'s Restaurant. They'll drive back tomorrow morning because Terri has the Sunday afternoon shift at Theismann's. That means lots of beer-drinking football dudes watching projection TVs. That means many good tips from malt-beverage monsters.

Donna and Debbie stop shelving books and come for their debriefing of last night's events. Tina is right. Girls will talk about anything. They get the high-speed skinny: shopping at the Safeway, Chinese food, the after dinner activities, the morning activities, and tea with mother. All this exchange in under a minute of conversation time.

"It was a good night; I mean ALL night, wasn't it?," Debbie asks.

Tina shakes her head enthusiastically.

"You stud-muffin!," Debbie hoots.

"He even helps with the dishes," Tina chirped.

Donna and Debbie both said "oohh."

Tina walked behind the front counter and said she'd see me on Monday. She said it was OK to actually spend a couple of bucks tonight at the movies for popcorn, and maybe even buy some potato skins

at Ramparts. She held my hands 1950s malt shop style. “I love you,” she said. It was a tough moment. Debbie and Donna were perched next to us waiting for me to come up with something pithy to say. Tina was looking at me with anticipation. I paused and could think of no reply worth delivering.

“Tina,” I eventually said, “the only thing I’ve ever really loved; I mean lost it for, completely, without a thought about looking back is ‘American Bandstand.’ When I was a kid, if I didn’t see it every Saturday, I’d go nuts. And the way I feel about you, right now, is pretty damn close to how I feel about that wonderful Dick Clark production.”

“That’s a good start, Bunky,” she said. She kissed me and left the store, waving to her people. Donna and Debbie made squeaky girl-sounds to each other as she exited.

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Five

So I’m a stud-muffin, a stud-god, an artist, have a love slave, been compared to Rod Stewart on the desirability scale, and get to drive a British sports car around Arlington these days. I hadn’t had a date in over two years before last night.

Mallworld Video is my obligatory stop after work to tell Jack he’ll shortly have a new member at his store. My new Beta-Max machine is going to need some mutation-tapes soon. In our conversation, I tell him he should talk to Jim down at Hi Jinx Toys about some promotions for the shop; he seems to have some great ideas for getting people in the store.

I get a blank video tape from their accessories counter, my first ever, the cherry-popper. Jack’s got competition tonight in deviant-entertainment world. Count Gore DeVol is showing “Astro Zombies,” on Creature Feature tonight.

“A ridiculous gem,” he said, “I’ve already got my machine cued up to record Tura’s tomatoes.”

“I’ve never tried to record a TV broadcast on video before,” I asked him, “is it difficult?”

“You get used to it,” he replied.

I get home after my evening walk down Route 7 from the mall, and find mom sitting on the sofa. She’s reading one of her stripped romance novels and nibbling one of my Safeway brand, chocolate sprinkle Pop-Tarts. She said she’d been afraid to turn on the TV today. She didn’t know if there was something special about operating it, now that it was tricked-out with a VCR. She didn’t want to break anything. I told her you just turned it on like before. “You do it,” she said. I walked over to the TV set, and it looked the same as this morning. I turned it on and everything was jolly. Jack Tripper and Larry were at the Regal Beagle ogling the nymphomaniac bar bunnies on “Three’s Company.” Mom looked happy.

The subject of dinner came up. She’d been sniffing at the Stouffer’s French Bread Pizzas earlier, and said they look fine for tonight; some of the canned spinach with lemon would be good too. She’s already got a scotch and soda in front of her, so it’s kitchen prep time for the pizzas. The orange Stouffer’s boxes are the same color as everything in B. Dalton Bookseller stores. It’s an instant recognition thing for me. This is SO easy: open the pizza box, fling the units on the pan, place in oven. The spinach only takes a couple of minutes to prepare, so that’s no big shakes. The kitchen timer is set for 35 minutes. Mom is primed for the pies.

David is supposed to come by in about half an hour. I ask mom if it’s OK to play with the VCR and figure out how to record a program. She likes watching “Three’s Company,” but this is a science experiment that could benefit all of us. We’ve got to see if we’re ready for the high-technology environment. She says it’s fine. Mom talks while I play with the instruction manual, the blank tape, and the machine. My Mother said that she really enjoyed the visit from Pink and Tina this morning, and thought about it most of the day. She hopes the romance works out with me and Tina. She likes her, and feels a connection to her unbridled spirit. I asked her how she knew there was a romance brewing. She told me not to be stupid; we’d obviously had a slam-bang time of it last night, and it was about time I’d found someone to share my life with.

Back to my new toy. After many tries, the clock is set on the LCD display. The switch is set to VCR: the start time, finish time, channel, tape speed, day, month, year, epoch, dynasty, geologic age, and

final apocalyptic Big Bang Time are set for recording tonight's movie. I make sure to turn the entire unit off, and Bingo! John Ritter re-appears on the screen, smiling his hand-in-the-cookie-jar smile, as always. I sincerely hope it is not this difficult to play the tape after you record it. That couldn't be possible. No one would own these things if that were true.

The timer sounds in the kitchen and mom's pies are done. I go in and remove them from the oven, and the pepperonis are sizzling. They go tsssst. The pan goes on top of the stove, and mom's greens are ready for the heat treatment: 1 saucepan, 1 can opener, 1 stove burner, 1 lemon, 1 guy with an IQ above 50. The instructions on the back of the Safeway brand spinach can are impossible to botch: open can, heat product in saucepan, serve. I was born for this job.

I follow the instructions to the best of my ability, and add the lemon juice with care. In a few minutes, we have reached completion. Tin foil is placed over mom's pies, and the cover goes on the saucepan with the greens. I'm a done Sous chef? Chef? Cook? Kitchen-guy? Something. Who knows?

There's a knock at the door. It's got to be David. I answer the tapping, and it's no disappointment. It's the man himself. He walks in and surveys the living room. "Hello David," mom says. Mom likes to talk to my friend. She thinks he's from the moon.

"Hi," David says. He gives her the Eddie Haskell treatment and continues, "you're looking especially lovely today, Mrs. Cleaver."

"That's very nice of you to say, David," mom replies, loving his inane banter. I ask our guest if he might like a Killian's Red before we take off for the John Carpenter double feature.

"That's a big 10-4, Vern. Know what I mean?" he says like the insufferable Ernest P. Worrell in the Tysons Toyota commercials.

I fix mom another cocktail, and get 2 Killian's from the ice box.

"A VCR," David says, "you're moving up in the world. Next you'll get a watch that uses a battery."

"No way," I say, "batteries have to be replaced. Not cost effective."

"I stand corrected," he said.

"Someone has a new girlfriend," mom chimed into the conversation.

“Oh, really,” David rejoined, “did Joan Jett finally answer your love letters? No, it’s that Annette person.”

“Who’s Annette?” mom asked.

“Someone in the movies,” I tell her quickly.

“Oh,” she said.

“My son and his new girl, Tina is her name, had a date last night,” she went on, “and didn’t get home until this morning. They were just glowing when they came in.”

“So P-Man’s got himself a Chiquita Banana,” David warbled, “that’s nice. She must really like some gonzo-shit to hang out with you, brother.”

“She’s beautiful, too,” mom continued, “and smart. And don’t say ‘shit’ David, it’s not nice.”

“Mom’s in love with her,” I tell him.

I give mom the remainder of the cash from my pay check minus 10 dollars for tonight and tomorrow’s fun. Mom says not to worry about the car fund for another minute. “We’re ahead of schedule, we’ve been saving so much. Closing in on the 4000 dollar mark.” I tell David I’m buying the Jumbo-Tub-O’-Corn at the Centre for us tonight. That should last us through both features. David says men like me are legends in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor.

David says goodbye to mom, and promises he’ll come over and watch “Gone with the Wind” with her on the VCR, if they can make sandwiches again like they did before.

Mom says, “oh David, you’re a ladies’ man.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cleaver,” he replies.

“Have a good time at the movies,” mom says as we close the door and go out to The Photon Torpedo.

“Your mom is a wild woman,” David tells me.

“I know,” I told him, “She’s one of the coolest. I wish I could do more stuff for her. I wish I actually had a job skill so we didn’t have to live like gypsies.”

“You guys are fine,” David said, “be thankful for what you’ve got. You have a roof, and plenty to eat, warm clothes. You’re healthy, and now you’ve got a little rump roast chasing your bones around Arlington. It sounds pretty good to me.”

We fire up David's famous ride and cruise through Fairlington to Quaker Lane. The Centre is only a couple of minutes away. David looks for an optimal place to park his machine. He likes to park directly under street lamps, because the fluorescent paint soaks up the light, and at night his car glows like a UFO. We park on Fern Street, directly across from the theater.

The Centre must have been really grand at one time. It looks like it was constructed in the late 1940's when movie houses were palaces: It has a balcony, tiled floors, chandeliers, art deco lights, two curved stair cases on either side of the foyer, and floor to ceiling mirrors behind the concession area. Outside it has white columns, stained glass in the front doors, and a convex ticket booth extending from the entrance. You can almost see shadows of Tyrone Power and Veronica Lake attending a premiere at the Centre.

It's not as grand as it used to be. Nothing has been maintained for years, and it's run down. There are holes in the stairs with orange construction cones sticking out of them, and one of the balustrades is completely torn out. The balcony has been closed for months. The men's room is ka-put. Everyone uses the ladies' sandbox. It's another victim of the hydra-headed multiplex-monsters. With some work, it could be made into a really fun, trash-palace. With a lot of work, it could be restored and turned into a historical preservation site. That won't happen though. It'll just keep falling into disrepair, and finally get bulldozed into junk. The lot will be sold, and it will probably get turned into turned a 24-hour pharmacy, another 7-11, or worse, a parking lot for a car dealership. This might be a good time to use Mr. Mike's *Be Here Now* idea of living in the moment. I'm with my pal David, in an old, faded glory theater, about to get my brains scrambled by John Carpenter. That's a good deal. That is what I will think about.

There are a lot of people at the Centre tonight. I recognize some of the patrons. They're the movie mutant kids who hang out at the mall. They're complete spazz-oids for anything with blood, babes, and psychos in it. I know how they feel. They're embracing their weirdness and don't want to be like other people. They're kooks and they revel and stomp and hoot in the fringe of society. They're hooked on the profane celluloid and they love it because it's a high-speed monorail into the land of taboo. Let the good times roll.

We buy our tickets, and get in line for the concessions. It smells like they didn't burn the corn tonight. At the concession stand, I order the Jumbo-Tub-O'-Corn and almost get some sodas when David tells me that's not necessary and taps his jacket pockets.

"I hope you like Dr. Pepper," he says.

"You are SO undercover and cool, David," I say, "You should work for the SPECTRE or THRUSH conspiracies."

"Open Channel D," he replied, "I need to speak with Waverly at Mother's."

There's still a few minutes before "Assault on Precinct 13," starts so we sit on the stairs under the "Balcony Closed" sign, nosh corn, and talk stuff. I tell David about the Cult Movie Friday that is coming to Skyline in a few weeks. He sits up straight, and wants complete information. I let him know that Count Gore DeVol will be there on inauguration night, October 30th.

"Are you telling me the truth?," he asked.

"I would never lie about something this important," I replied.

"This is some serious shit," he said, "I love that man. He's the best corny TV-vampire ever, and yes, I do remember Sir Graves Ghastly from Channel 9. He was good, but couldn't ham it up like the Count."

"What about Elvira?" I ask him.

"Apples and oranges, man," he said. "I'd watch Elvira make sandwiches at The Subway Shop. She's like a babe AND a TV-vampire. Her Transylvania-thing is almost secondary. She could easily be Elvira the beach bunny, or Elvira, a country girl who can't say no, or Elvira, Kung-Fu hooker. She has too many options open to her. The Count could only be The Count. He's the genuine article, man. Solid gold."

The lights were going down in the theater, and we go inside. Sitting up front is preferable for monster, special effects, and sci-fi movies. The back row is OK if I have to sit through a romantic-comedy and have a babe with me, and nowhere near the theater is best if a Barbra Streisand movie is playing there. David is like me. He likes to get his money's worth. We sit near the front for maximum visual overload. We put the tub of corn on the seat between us. During the coming attractions, David pops open the Dr. Peppers. We're strapped-in. It's show time.

The movie is fantastic: Guns, bad guys, suspense up the wazoo, and the obligatory synth-bleep soundtrack. David was dead-on correct about this one. Sometimes John Carpenter can come up short. “Dark Star” didn’t do it for me. “Christine” was just OK. John C. usually hits the mark, though. A big thumbs-up for this motion picture. I asked David how he found out about this movie. He said he read about it in a Stephen King book called *Danse Macabre*. It was one of Peter Straub’s favorites. A book by Stephen King. I should have known. That guy is everywhere.

“Escape From New York” is the second feature. I’ve seen this one before. A guaranteed rocket ride. Adrenaline city. How can you lose: Adrienne Barbeau, Donald Pleasance, Isaac Hayes, Ernest Borgnine, and Lee Van Cleef are in supporting roles. Oh my, the mondo corn-tub is getting low. That should tell you how mind-crunching these movies are. One becomes a nosing, frazzled, reflex-arc thing while viewing them. Completely selfless corn consumption. Like an electrified cow with a salt lick.

Snake Pliskin saves the day, rescues U.S. President Donald Pleasance from scuzzy New York psychopaths, and gets to be a macho bad-guy in the process. I’m spent. I need beer, free tacos, and to ogle some suburban bar bunnies. The Jumbo- Tub-O’-Corn is history. There’s sludgy butter-glurp on the bottom of the tub. I can’t believe how delicious this man-made, petroleum based shortening tastes. I write my name on the bottom of the tub in the congealing muck. It slowly slides back into itself, leaving little flecks of corn hull suspended in the crude substance. This stuff cannot be good for my body.

We leave the theater and head over to Ramparts. David is equally blown away by all the visual craziness we’ve just experienced. He’s ready for some malt beverages and a serious, low-cost nosh. The management there hires waitresses and bartenders who are maternal, giving, types. They like to feed people who don’t have a lot of money. It’s like a community service. I tell David that he could not have picked a better entertainment for tonight. “I am one forebrain-scrambled puppy,” I tell him.

Ramparts is always busy on Saturday nights. The Make-Your-Own-Taco bar is looking good right about now. David finds us a booth in the back near the TVs and we order two Bud drafts. We go over to the table with all the taco fixings and the aroma is so great. Chili. Mmmmm. We pile on: soft taco shells, ground beef, guacamole, red beans, sour cream, grated cheese, lettuce, tomato, jalapenos, and El Diablo de la Muerte hot sauce. We wobble back to our table and begin constructing our south of the border feast.

I've wrapped up a good looking taco and about to take a bite. I've almost finished my first draft beer. At 50 cents per glass, I can have, maybe 3 of these and not break the bank. I see someone waving at us. It's Jody, my just favorite bartender. She's gesturing to me to come over to the bar. She's got the phone in her hand.

"P-Man," she says, "It's been a long time, daddy-o. Listen, you've got a call. It's a girl."

"Yow," I say.

She hands me the receiver and before I can say "hello," Tina is asking me how was the movie. I tell her this is an unexpected, but welcome call, and say that a couple of road-kill movies and David's company are all one needs for world class entertainment.

Tina told me she was at her mother's place. "Can you spell b-o-r-i-n-g?," she asked. "Middleburg is one unexciting place if you don't ride a horse or own a vineyard. Terri and I are just being polite with mom and getting ready to blow this pop-stand and go to Fredericksburg. We're going to pick-up college boys at Mary Washington University and teach them the Kamasutra."

"What's that?," I ask.

"The art of Asian love-making," she replies.

"Be sure and use latex," I tell her.

She said she did a phone charge with Jody, and bought us a pitcher of Margaritas to have with our low-budget tacos.

"Really?," I said, "wow, Tina, that is so over-the-top. It's like something your former sister Zsa Zsa Gabor would do."

She said it was no big thing to do for her boyfriend. I had to let that moniker sink in.

"You said boyfriend, didn't you," I asked.

"Yup," she said.

"So I'm your boyfriend?," I inquired.

"Right. Like I am your girlfriend, and you are my boyfriend, and we make-out in front of Algebra class," she responded.

"I think," I said, "I can live with that."

"You better," she said, "those Margaritas weren't cheap."

I tell Tina thanks for the relationship update, and the wonderful beverages. I look over at our table. Jody has delivered the pitcher to our table and David appears to be a glass ahead of me already. Tina says Terri has managed to tactfully escape from mom and step-dad and they need to leave now. She said to have a good time, and we'd see each other Monday at the mall. I give the receiver back to Jody to hang up. "That's love," she said, "when a girl calls long distance to order her boyfriend some boat drinks, it's a heavy deal."

Back at our table there's a Margarita waiting for me. "That chick's lost her grip over you, man," David said. The tequila haze was starting to spread on his face.

"Does she have a sister?," he continued.

"Only about the most drag-your-dick-in-the-dirt, knock-out you've ever seen," I reply, "and she's nice. I can't take it when they're gorgeous AND nice. If you're gorgeous, you should at least be something of a bitch. Then the guys who can't have them can complain that they're just ice queens or power-snobs or whatever. It's not fair when you don't have something to gripe about."

David concurred with me.

The conversation continued. We were both kind of bummed-out that the Centre had started to crumble so heinously. We started telling each other about the dates we'd taken there over the years. I'd taken Trish from my neighborhood to see "The Exorcist" when it had its 5 year theater re-release in 1978. "It was the easiest make-out I ever had, after that," I told him, "she was scared shitless and needed comforting. I was a little shaky myself after that one. That thing was intense." David said he'd taken a girl to see "Alien" when it first came out. She was so frightened that they spent half the movie in the lobby, looking through the little glass windows in the doors, seeing if it was safe to go back inside during the non-psychotic, non-chestbusting moments. He had to go back the next night to see what he missed.

We went on that way for a while: talking our stuff, being our cool selves, drinking Margaritas, and noshing tacos. Then David got an illuminated look on his face. A "been to the mountaintop" kind of look. He said he had an idea for the Cult Movie Friday event. Something that would really add some fireworks to the affair. He said it was kind of a Hollywood-thing, but definitely a concept that was worth investigating.

"What?, What?, you're killing me," I said, "tell."

He said that the glass doors at Skyline Mall opened wide, like saloon doors.

“They’re big enough to fit a car through,” he opined, “aren’t they P-Man?”

“I guess so,” I said, getting a little nervous.

“What if The Count arrived in a tricked-out car,” he said, “like a Munsters-looking car, with his personal chauffeur. We could call him Fang. They could ride from the parking lot, through the doors, and straight down the hall of Skyline to the lobby of the theaters. It would be some kind of entrance. It would be, P-Man, the ultimate Gore DeVol experience.”

“I guess it would be,” I rejoined, “it would be a real Kodak moment.”

“What are you trying to say, David?,” I asked, “you’re starting to scare me.”

“I want to drive The Count into Skyline on October 30th,” he said, “I want to do it, man. I want a piece of the action, and to transform The Photon Torpedo into The Count’s mall-cruiser ride. I’ll call it “The Blood Vessel.” That would be the perfect name for his machine; and I want to be his faithful attendant, Fang.”

“David,” I said, “That is marketing genius. That’s the kind of campy, balls-to-the-wall spirit that makes this country so great. Real William Castle stuff. You should work in a cheap casino. But do you really want to chop The P-Torpedo just for one night’s work?”

He said it has had a lot of spray can paint jobs since he’s had it. He could graffiti “The Blood Vessel” and “Channel 20” and “Gore DeVol” all over it. Then he could hand paint: skulls, bats, coffins, wolves, full moons, tombstones, zombies, rats, bloody hatchets, voodoo dolls, and anything else he could think of on it. He could rig up some Styrofoam and paper mache extensions to the Chevette’s body and make it a real garish, vulgar, cheese machine. It would be the crowning event of his life in Arlington.

I told him it was a long-shot, but I’d ask Manager Tom about it during the week.

“Channel 20 said they were trading the Count’s appearance for local promotional work from the mall,” I said, “The Blood Vessel would be about the most extravagant promotional scheme I could think of.”

“Dude,” he said, “this has got to happen. I’m telling you, there are cosmic forces at work here. We may never get another opportunity to mastermind such a tawdry pile of baloney.”

David was in heaven. It was all playing out before him, like the dream sequences in art-house films.

We finished our Margaritas and tacos. David was going off about all the modifications and spray painting required to transform his P-Torpedo into The Count Drag-u-la, or Blood Vessel, or Sin-E-Cruiser, or Type-A Eliminator, or Street Vamp, or whatever his idea of the minute was. He was stoked. Those are the people who make things happen, so let them go wild.

We get ready to go, and Jody brings us the bill.

“Ready to peel-out?” she asked.

We confirmed our readiness. The damage was only a few dollars thanks to Tina’s financial support. David pays for the whole thing, and gives our bartender a couple of dollars tip.

“Buy yourself a steak,” he told Jody.

He handed her another 1 dollar bill and said, “a rib eye.”

“Wow,” she said, “you guys are so boss.”

“Jody,” I said, “you are absolutely trapped in 60s car culture.”

“Isn’t it bitchin’, P-Man?,” she cackled.

“Yeah, baby, I guess it is,” I said.

We step outside Ramparts and head up Fern Street where the Photon Torpedo is parked. It has been directly under a street lamp for several hours and it’s glowing like a neon sign. David tells me to wait on the corner. He wants me to see something cool. He goes over to his car and jumps in. After he starts it up, he looks around to make sure no one is coming in either direction on the street. He guns the engine and the machine takes off like a shot. The fluorescent paint has sucked up so much light that the car leaves a trail like a meteor. The Photon Torpedo looks like an orange streamer of curved light bolting up to the corner where I’m standing. He pulls the car up to me and asks, “How are your corneas doing?”

“Burned to a crisp,” I tell him, “just like National Lampoon’s Blind Bob after he looks at Deirdre Callahan.”

“Or stares into an arc-welder,” he rejoins.

We cruise through Fairlington and he lets me off at the apartment. I tell him I’ll be in touch about his automotive extravaganza, but no promises about the outcome. He says he’s confident about the whole thing, and will start making plans for batwing modifications on The P-Torpedo tomorrow.

“This is our destiny, babe,” he said, “this is supposed to happen. We are but the chessmen in a much larger game.”

“You are such a space-potato,” I tell him.

“That, I am,” he said.

Inside the apartment all is serene. Mom is conked out in her bed. The VCR’s little red light is on. The word RECORD is illuminated where the time is usually displayed. The instructions said that’s a good thing. I go in The Bohemian Love Pad and write down some of David’s tequila-babbling about the car and driver idea for Cult Movie Friday. I stare at my photo of Tina, and remind myself to go by the Library on Monday to pick up my Harry Crews and Charles Bukowski books. I’ll be reading books soon. I am dubious about this idea.

I have to make myself believe something, as impossible as it seems. As I sit here in my room, half-in-the-bag from tequila and adrenaline movies, I am convinced that Tina loves me. No more brushing it off; no more funny ha-ha. She loves me. I believe it. What scares me is knowing that if I hang-out with her and have as much fun, and sex, and good times as we’ve had the last week, I’m going to fall hard for her, if I haven’t already. I’m her boyfriend now. It’s official from our Middleburg phone call. I’m going to be wide open for psychological games, mental torture, catty bullshit, and emotional blackmail. Conversely, I’ll also have someone I absolutely adore to share the good times and life’s little victories with. I’ve missed that so much over the last few years. It’s a chance I’ll have to take because I believe, I really believe, she wants to be with me.

Getting ready for bed, I hang my clothes up in the closet, and straighten my room a bit, “because the path to enlightenment, Grasshopper, comes from the sweeping of leaves.” Master Po told that to the young-guy Caine at the Shaolin Monastery during one of Kwai Chang’s endless questioning sessions on the TV program, “Kung Fu.” Little Caine always came back with some retort to the instructor like, “but master, how can I be one with the world, when the world is not one with itself?,” or some rhetorical glurp. Master Po would only smile wanly and spread his hands. “Rake more leaves, boy,” is what I imagine he was thinking.

This evening’s strange dream includes the members of KISS. In my nocturnal imaginings, they came to the Centre Theater and played a concert, but the place was only half-full of people. They got upset

at the conditions of their dressing rooms, and of the place itself. For some reason, Manager Tom was the boss of the Centre. When he told them to go screw themselves, they stormed off having hissy-fits. The band's bassist, Gene Simmons, came back the next day in an El Dorado Cadillac. He had his batwing make-up on, and one of his lawyers with him. Gene had purchased the theater in the evening for twice what the competition was willing to pay. He rented a construction truck equipped with a wrecking ball, and spent the afternoon demolishing the place. He was ecstatic.

I sleep like a worm in a tequila bottle until around 9 O'clock. When I wake up mom is in the living room reading the Sunday Washington Post. I fix an instant coffee and nosh some leftover Stouffer's French Bread Pizza. I'm a dude. That means I can eat pizza hot or cold. No problemo. I go inside and sit next to mom. She wants to know how the movie was, how her friend David is doing, and if anything groovy happened at Ramparts. It was a great time all around; the movies were dynamite, which means she would have hated them.

"Then," I told her, "Tina called the bar from Middleburg right after we got there. We chatted for a few minutes. She phone charged a pitcher of Margaritas for us. Cuervo Gold Tequila, no less. She wasn't kidding around."

"So are you guys a couple yet?," she asked.

"I guess we are," I replied.

"That's nice," mom said. She looked relieved. "She'll be good for you," she continued, "you already seem a bit less neurotic than usual."

"Thanks," I said.

Mom said she'd had some toast, and a bunch of the Pepperidge Farm Ginger Bread Men with her coffee this morning, so breakfast was a done deal. I go over to the new, exciting, beautiful, seductive VCR. I consult the manual to see how I've done at recording Creature Feature last night. Now let's see if the tape has anything on it. The regime: set TV to "on" position, rewind tape, set the recorder mode to TV, set channel selector to 3, depress play button, and hope unit was not assembled on a Monday. Nothing happens. Blank screen. The void. A few seconds later: little fuzzy things, blips, clusters of hairball-looking objects, Rorschach splats.

Then it happens. It's the big-titted 976-BABE girls in their dental floss bikinis, and half-gram total weight negligees just begging me to call them. Then an ad for Pizza Hut, then Lincoln Technical Institute. Then it's the familiar set of The Count's catacomb, and old Johann Sebastian's Toccata in G starts to play. The cheesy wolf howl audio-clips get mixed in, and the coffin lid opens. It's the man. Oh yes, It's The Count. We have achieved home video status.

Mom is excited. "Is that the video-thing doing that? Is that what it's supposed to do?" she asked.

"You got it babe," I told her, "we're in video-land. We are watching a video tape in our home. We are so big-time it's scary."

I tell mom we can join the video club up at Skyline and I can bring all kinds of things home to watch. We don't have to be slaves to the whims of TV programmers anymore. We have options.

"Do they have nice movies up at the mall?" she asked, "the ones where people don't get crushed or eaten?"

"I suppose so," I answered.

Mom said she wanted me to bring home some Sean Connery movies. It didn't matter which ones, as long as it was Sean. Patrick McGoohan, David Jansen, and William Holden tapes were OK too, but Sean was definitely first. No question there. I stopped the machine before "Astro Zombies" started. I needed to be in the proper state of mind to watch it. This was not the time or place to indulge myself.

There was still a lot of unused tape left on the video. The cassette could record 4 hours worth of programs. The movie had only taken 2 hours. I told mom we could tape Johnny Carson at night and watch him in the evenings. We could never stay up late enough to watch him on weekdays. Now he can come to us.

"Johnny?," she said, "Johnny Carson? Do you mean it can record TV shows, and not just movies?"

"Anything that's on TV," I told her, "you can record whatever you want, and watch it whenever you want."

That information made her very happy. She took the TV section of the Post and started to examine it.

The phone rang and I got it. It was Mr. Mike. We did the hellos and he said he wanted to come by around noon to pick me up. The record show started at 1 p.m. and he wanted to get there early to pick

through the good stuff. Timing is everything at record shows. I told him that was fine. I let him know I'd recorded my first movie from the TV and it looked groovy. He said he had a bunch of Beta tapes I could borrow and watch.

"This is so great," I said, "so many bad movies, so little time."

"Look out all you country people," Mr. Mike said.

I get washed and dressed, dick around, and do nothing of worth until Mr. Mike comes at noon. Mom says hi to him, and we all talk about the store, the upcoming Cult Friday Movies, and what's going on at the mall. He checks out my new VCR. "Top loader," he confirms, "wire remote, 2 tape heads, 2-event, 7 day memory. A bit long in the tooth, but an outstanding value at 10 dollars." I thanked him for his expert appraisal of the merchandise. He said it wasn't much of a challenge.

Mr. Mike says the traffic on Route 7 is light, but will be picking up soon when all the church people are finished with their Sunday groveling routines. He wants to take off soon, so we don't get into that knot of cars around Carlin Springs Road going west. That's where St. Luke's and St. Katherine's flocks come pouring out onto the street around 12:30. "They must be avoided," he said, "they're like crazed insects trying to get home to their TVs before the Redskins game starts at 1 p.m. I concur. We need to get going.

Mom tells Mr. Mike to come over and talk any time. He says that if her lame-brain son could get his act together, the Dalton Gang will come over for a video party. Now that we've got the machine up and running, he'll bring his portable color TV over and we'll have ourselves a time. Mom says she'll crack the whip and get me going on that project.

I tell mom my estimated return time, and she tells me to have fun and don't worry about fixing dinner. She'll try and whip up something later. My mother tells Mr. Mike she's serious about him coming by to visit. Not only does he promise to come by; but he'll throw a few stripped romance novels into the bargain. She tells Mr. Mike he's a nice guy, and a gentleman. Mr. Mike says, "holy macaroni."

We leave the apartment and get into Mr. Mike's ride. I've got the flyer Tina made for the Cult Movie night in my pocket and show it to him. He says the information is accurate, and the graphic layout is lively and eye-engaging. He thinks Manager Tom will be thrilled, and then tells me that the store has

been doing unusually good sales the last few days. He thinks it's because of Pink's flying phantom zooming over the display table in the window.

"People are so strange," he said, "the main office spent thousands of dollars for that advertisement in the Post with that 'Free Word Processor' garbage. They had a whole Promotions Department and unlimited resources at their disposal, and the chain actually lost money compared to the 1-year-prior performance charts. Pink takes a tennis ball, a battery, a handkerchief, and a wire, and makes a flying puppet. This week the store is way ahead of last year. It's hard to say what people will go for."

"I know why we're way ahead," I replied, "it's because Pink's an inspired madman doing what he believes in his heart is the right thing, and the people in the Promotions Department are a bunch of pandering, spineless, douche bags who walk the corporate line, and don't want to do anything that rocks the boat."

Mr. Mike said, "I think dating Tina is going to be good for you."

We cruise up Route 7, past my favorite landmarks: Skyline Mall, Joe Theismann's Restaurant, Culmore Shopping Center, Penguin Feather Records, many churches and gas stations (Tina calls this stretch of road Gasoline Alley), 7 Corners Mall, Koons Ford, Pistone's Restaurant, Syms Clothing, and finally to Washington Street. The Falls Church Community Center is a block south on Park Place. There are a good amount of cars in the parking lot. Mr. Mike puts his game face on. We park his ride and he gets his Walkman, earphones, and bootleg price guide from the trunk of the car, and puts them in his book bag.

We get to the front door and the entrance fee is 2 dollars. That's exactly how much money I have in my pocket. Drag. Mr. Mike pulls two pieces of newspaper from his shirt pocket. He's cut out two coupons from the Washington City Paper, which are good for free admission to the show.

"That rant-sheet is finally good for something besides the comics," he said.

"You're the ultimate, Mr. Mike," I said, "it cannot be denied."

We get in the door and the place is buzzing with people. All the dealers have their big display boards up, with all their grooviness taped to them for the vinyl-homos to stare at flirtatiously. A few of the local record stores have sent people with overstock and imports to try and sell. It's all regular inventory stuff they've got. No illegal recordings or contraband. All the heavy metal rivet heads go straight for the dependable independent guys, and their precious bootlegs. Mr. Mike is a blur at the bootleg cassettes that

have come in from England's Castle Donnington and Rainbow metal festivals. He quickly listens to and buys some tapes: Ulrich Roth, Samson, Ore, Iron Maiden, and Thunderstick go in his bag.

We scamper over to another table. Mr. Mike recognizes this dealer. A knowing nod passes between them. The vendor produces a sealed record bag from under the table. Mr. Mike hands him 40 dollars and the exchange is made with Ninja speed and silence. We leave that table and Mr. Mike is gibbering in ecstasy.

"What? What is it? What's in the bag?," I ask, "I'm dying, man, tell me."

Mr. Mike looked nervously from side to side, like a Peter Lorre character.

"Motorschool," he said.

Motorhead and Girlschool had done some over-the-top studio jams together a while ago and released an EP and some UK singles. Nothing was issued in America. Mr. Mike now had a vinyl copy of the complete studio recordings in his hand. I thought he was going to soil himself in the Falls Church Community Center.

We walk around and check out the vendors tables. Mr. Mike slowly calms down as we scrutinize the rest of the show. He's made his coup de grace purchase. He was pumped. Nothing could top that undercover victory. I look around at the stuff but nothing really blows my skirts up. I see all the discs that would have sent me into a panic a few years ago, but the thrill is gone. I still love to listen to my favorite bands and bop around, but the intrinsic need to own absolutely everything they've ever released is finished. I'm sure I'll find other things to go crazy for as life progresses, but 12 inch Japanese-disco-promo-fuchsia vinyl-T.REX-B-side singles are a thing of the past for me.

We finish looking at all the vendors tables and go to sit in the parking lot. I tell Mr. Mike this is the first time I'd ever gone to a show and not purchased anything. I told him with my remaining 2 dollars, I'd buy him a beer at Joe Theismann's Restaurant, if he'd buy me one. He said that was a great idea. Then he handed me a bag.

"I couldn't resist," he said.

"What's this?," I asked him.

"I bought it," he continued, "when you were distracted, and gaping at the Marilyn Chambers and Seka picture discs."

I opened the package. It was a black T-shirt. On the front were huge, red, block letters. They spelled out: RAW POWER HONEY, JUST WON'T QUIT.

“Mr. Mike,” I said, “this is the finest garment I’ve ever owned, except for the hat Tina gave me last week, and that’s only because she’s my girlfriend now.”

Mr. Mike said he understood, and it was OK to be a close second to Tina.

I peel off my old shirt and put on the new one. I feel closer to Iggy already. We walk over to Mr. Mike’s ride and cruise back down Route 7 East to Bailey’s Cross Roads. The traffic has dwindled down to nothing. The proles are watching the Redskins and everyone else can go where they please without too many cars on the street. We pull into the shopping center where Joe Theismann’s Restaurant sits. This bar is where a lot of mid-level management, corporate salesmen, burned-out jocks, and people who use too much hairspray and cologne come to tell each other how much money they have, get smashed on boat drinks, eat protein, and pick-up college air-heads who want to be sports broadcasters.

The place is getting full. A couple of guys are leaving with their dates just as we come in, and we grab two seats at the bar. Terri is working behind the counter with another bartender. They are both cosmetically perfect service machines, running on autopilot. She sees me and comes over to us. I ask her how the Fredericksburg-scene was last night. “Tina told me you were going to pick-up bewildered college sophomores and teach them the way of the world.” She said it was fun and she’d show me the hardcore Polaroids from the blood-orgy next time I was at the house. “Thanks,” I said.

Terri brought us two Budweiser draughts.

“How did you know this is what we wanted?,” I asked her.

“You’re guys,” she said, “there’s a football game on TV, and you’re in a sports bar. What else would I bring you? Chardonnay? Galliano Spritzers?”

“You win,” I said.

I asked her how Tina was doing today. She said when she left the house she was playing with the computer and doing things in her dark room. Then she asked me if I’d seen Mitch from the record store in the bar this afternoon.

“He’s here?,” I asked her.

“He’s always here,” she replied.

“Tina informed me he had it bad for you,” I said, “and wasn’t afraid to pursue his interest.”

Terri said he wasn’t a bad guy, just sleazy and full of shit.

“Have you seen his new appearance?,” she asked me.

I told her I hadn’t seen him at the mall in a while.

“He looks like the newest member of A Flock of Seagulls, or any of those big haired, Tinker-toy bands from England,” she said.

“The last time I saw him,” I said, “he looked like a Burt Reynolds wannabe: moustache, leather jacket, longish hair, 3-day growth of beard, the steely glint of an outlaw in his eye, the whole 9 yards.”

“Well times have changed,” she said, suppressing her laughter. She nodded her head in his direction, down at the far end of the bar. There he was with his puffy buccaneer shirt, parachute pants, clean shaven face, Jiffy-Pop mane, discreet eyeliner, and 1 long earring. He looked out of place in Joe Theismann’s Restaurant.

“I swear,” she said, “next time he’ll do his hair in a mohawk.”

He saw us looking at him. We waved, and he came over to our end of the bar. He was drinking Chardonnay.

“P-Man and Mr. Mike,” he said, “how much money have you lost on these turkeys this year?,” he asked us, pointing to the Redskins on the TV.

“Not enough to sell the Porsche,” I tell him.

That stunned him, but only momentarily. He went on for a moment telling us the virtues of betting on the Dallas Cowboys.

Then he said, “I hear you and Tina are surfing the sheets these days. She is one fine lookin’ motor-scooter of a girl.” Terri stepped away from us at this point. Mitch came up close to me and said, “you know she dated half the town when she was in high school. She could get into night clubs in D.C. and went out with guys in their 20’s when she was still a junior. She was in Georgetown every weekend; a regular at Winston’s, Crazy Horse, Scandals, Desperadoes, everywhere. She was a hot ticket with an itch to scratch for a few years. I remember it well.”

“So what?,” I ask him, “is there a reason you’re telling me all this?”

Mitch looked puzzled.

“Is there a reason?, he asked incredulously, “you’re girlfriend was passed around by every saloon-wolf in the area, and you don’t want to know? Don’t you care if she’s a used piece of tail? That she’d throw herself at anyone who would even bother to talk to her?”

I took a long draught of my beer. Mr. Mike looked nervous, but I smiled at him to let him know everything was cool. Cooler than it had ever been.

“Mitch,” I said, “if I thought, even for a minute, that Tina wanted to get banged by some guy, I’d help her get him. If she wanted to fuck every player on the Redskins I’d give them directions to her house. And do you know why I’d do it? Because she’s given herself to me. She adores me. She loves me with every particle of her body. Of this I’m sure. The more guys she’s popped only makes me greater in her estimation, because they are meaningless bugs to her now. They are without an atom of significance.”

I take a breath and continue my lecture to hair-boy. “Everybody gets an itch they want scratched. Everybody. The guys she’s been with are nothing, I mean nothing more than drones, worker bees, blind machines, that served one function only. They were match sticks to be used and disposed of. She is the greatest thing that’s ever happened in this world, and nothing, especially some South Arlington bar fly, can blemish how much I care about her.”

“You’re nuts,” he said, and walked back to the end of the counter where he started a conversation with some peroxidized Communications major.

“That was beautiful,” Mr. Mike said, and then burped.

We finished our beers and Terri put another two in front of us. “Gentlemen,” she said, “these are on me, and your bill is paid.” She looked at me with insane gratitude, like I’d just pulled her from a burning car. “I heard what you said to Mitch,” she continued, “if Tina had been here listening to you defend her, she’d be grateful to the point of tears. You’re going to be good for her.” Then she said, “You guys are going to be fantastic together.” Mr. Mike said, “yes-sir-eee-bob.”

Mr. Mike and I stay a little while longer, finish our free beer, and watch the Redskins poleax the Cowboys at Texas Stadium. I reach in my pocket and get my 2 dollars and put them under my glass. Mr. Mike produces a fiver and slips it under his. I tell Mr. Mike that’s a good tip he’s leaving. “She has nice tomatoes,” he said. “Mr. Mike,” I replied, “F. Lee Bailey could not argue against that.”

Terri says goodbye to us and we go out to the parking lot. Mr. Mike is wiggly. He wants to listen to his new tapes and Motorschool bootleg. We cruise way down Route 7 East and pass Skyline Mall. We both are getting a case of the Sunday-before-work-blues. I tell him that soon they'll be lots of groovy stuff to keep us interested in life at B. Dalton's. Maybe the UPS shipments will stay to a minimum. Then we can juggle the store inventory and not have to hide books in the ceiling, under tables, piled up at the end of shelves, or make mountains of needless displays all over the place. "Hope springs eternal," Mr. Mike said.

We drive through Fairlington and my manager lets me off at the apartment. I thank him so much for the great T-shirt and fun in Falls Church. He says he'll see me tomorrow and we'll start getting the store in ship shape. I tell him I want a full report on Fast Eddie Clark's guitar playing on the Motorschool boot. He waves goodbye, tools up the driveway, and is finally out of sight. What a cool boss. What a great day.

I go in to the apartment and mom is in the kitchen. I go to greet her and she's working on dinner. She said it was such a nice day outside that she felt inspired and walked down to the Fresh Value Market to get some things. She bought some Stouffer's Creamed Chipped Beef, canned artichokes, mushrooms, and wild rice. She's prepared the packaged sauce and vegetables in a stewpot. It smells fantastic. "I put some sherry in it, too," she said, "just like Julia Childs." I told her Julia never seemed afraid of the sherry bottle on her program.

Mom said she's been feeling better than usual the last couple of days. Her arthritis hasn't been bothering her as much. I tell her she's thinking about the car we're going to get soon, and can't control her urge to buzz around the neighborhood. She says that's part of it. Also having some people over and talking and acting like a human being instead of a complete shut-in helps a lot too. Mom looks at my T-shirt. "I don't understand what your shirt is trying to tell me," she said. I told her Mr. Mike bought it for me today at the record show. "Then it's OK," she said.

Mom turns off the burner where the sauce is heating, and starts preparing the wild rice. She gets it going and I fix her a cocktail, and get myself a Killian's Red. She sets the kitchen timer for 20 minutes and we go into the living room to our standard positions: mom-sofa, me-chair next to sofa. I tell her Mr. Mike was acting like a circus monkey at the record show: running around from table to table, eyeballing the merchandise at warp-5 speed, and picking out the nuggets like a champion. She said he reminded her of Harpo Marx from the Marx Brothers movies, with all his great, kooky, physical comedy and energy.

“Except,” she said, “for that klaxon horn he used to carry around. Mr. Mike doesn’t have one of those, or does he?”

“No way,” I said.

“That’s good,” she replied.

The phone rings. I get nervous. I hate phone calls. Always trouble. I answer the infernal machine. Relief. It’s Tina, Queen of Skyline Mall. I’m OK now.

“Hi, Smiler,” she said.

“Tina,” I replied, “I do not believe you are over your infatuation with Rod Stewart. ‘Smiler,’ ‘Every Picture Tells a Story,’ ‘Gasoline Alley,’ you’re consciously or subconsciously dropping the names of Faces albums in your writing and conversation.”

“Ooh la la,” she said.

“I give up,” I answered.

“Terri called me a few minutes ago,” she said, “she told me you guys were at Theismann’s, and you shot Mitch down like Billy the Kid when he was talking about my colorful past. That’s the nicest thing anyone has done for me in a long time. Thank you.”

“Um, no problem.” I said, “he was just being a jerk. All mouth. No big deal. I used to be so jealous of him when I thought you were his girlfriend. He’s a good-looking guy and I thought ‘oh Christ, what chance do I have of dating you against someone like that?’”

“He’s a slimy toad,” she replied, “listen, I’ve got news. I called Channel 20 today and talked to an intern there. I told him I worked at Skyline Mall, and asked if they had any promotional pictures of The Count available for me to xerox and use for the Cult Movie flyer. They had piles of them, so I drove down to the studio and got some. Then I took the flyer we made the other night and added his likeness to it. And then, Bunky, I made a whole new flyer with the same information with The Count’s face as a background and the text on top of it. We can sock-it-to-the-public with a different flyer for the next two weeks, and then use both of them for the final week before the event.”

“Tina,” I said, “I think it’s safe to say that I love you at this particular moment.”

“You bet your ass you do,” she rejoined.

I told Tina to take the flyers to Manager Tom tomorrow morning so he can send them out for the big xeroxing job. Tina said she wanted to get together sometime this week so she could thank me with her own personal touch for defending her against detractors. She said she'd see me tomorrow at work, and to start mentally preparing tonight for a public display of affection at the mall in the morning.

Mom has started getting things ready for the meal. The timer has sounded for the rice, and the cream gravy mixture is steaming in the big saucepan. Mom looks almost like Tina did the other night at her wok, stirring the ingredients, with her nose only inches from the pot. I go over to where she's working and smell the steam.

"Oooh," I say.

"Oooh?," mom asks.

"Smells good," I say.

"Ah," mom says.

I set the TV tables and put the flatware, paper napkins, and drinks on them. Mom has finished preparing the plates and I take them out to the living room. It's Sunday evening so that means "Murder, She Wrote," is on Channel 9, after the 4 O'clock football game. Mom comes in, sits on the sofa, and adjusts the TV tray in front of her. I turn on the set and Angela Lansbury is doing ladylike investigations with her perky assistants who won't rest until justice is served.

Mom's pilaf is a hit. It meets all the requirements I have for a perfect meal: tasty, filling, minimal clean-up, enough leftover for breakfast in the morning, and under 10 dollars. We nosh our great dinner and watch Angela eliminate the potential bad-guys down to the one you never suspect.

Mom tells me she's so glad I've had a good weekend and have some nice friends to hang-out with. She says she knows they're good for me because I haven't been so completely preoccupied with bullshit TV shows, staying locked-up in my room, weird monsters, chainsaws, decapitated people, and senseless bludgeoning of dumb teenagers. The bizarre thing is, she's right.

The kitchen clean-up is practically nothing. Wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am stuff. I take the trash downstairs and dinner is history. Mom says she's kind of pooped from her walk this afternoon and is going to go to bed early. We've both got work tomorrow, and she wants to stay unconscious as long as possible before she has to go there. I completely understand.

Mom said she almost forgot to tell me she bought a package of bologna, a tomato, and sliced bread, so I could make myself a sandwich to take to work for lunch, and stop existing off of candy bars and other peoples' generosity. I give her the "Dennis the Menace" TV show treatment and say, "jeeppers, you're just swell Mrs. Wilson."

"Maybe Tina can get you to start acting like a normal person," she said, "and not some gooney bird from the television shows. I know I can't do it. You're nuts. Nice. Friendly. Clean. But nuts." I told her that was the second time today someone called me nuts, but it was nicer when she called me that name. The other guy, Mitch, was being icky when he called me nuts.

She goes in her room and gets ready to sleep. I go to my room, get the earphones from my Walkman, and return to the living room. I make sure mom is tucked in and has romance novels to help her pass-out. She packed away. It's video time for Bunky. I lock the front door, and turn off the living room lights. I turn my new machine on, set the remote control to TV on the VCR, turn the selector to Channel 3, plug in the headphones, hit the play button, and hope all is groovy with my recording of "Astro Zombies."

Tura Satana, Russ Meyer's favorite actress after Kitten Natividad, really camps it up in this movie. It looks like it was filmed at a Motel 6. It's got wind up robots, plastic guns, push-up bras, and dialogue like the gangsters use in the Flintstones cartoons. It's one of those films that you realize you're wasting precious moments of life watching, yet are unable to tear yourself away from the inanity of the whole thing.

It was a long 90 minutes, but after viewing "Astro Zombies," one has the bragging rights to say you sat through the whole thing, although you're not sure why. I turn off all the machines and get ready to go to sleep. It should be easy after today's activities. I hang my new T-shirt and jeans, and kick off my Chuck Taylor high-tops. I take a final look at my Tina photo, thank the Maker that she loves me, and turn off the lights.

In bed I think about all the stuff that will go on tomorrow: talking with Manager Tom about David's psychotic car idea, join the video club and rent a Sean Connery movie, see Tina, help Mr. Mike get the store in order, make bologna sandwiches, find my lunch box, and tape Johnny Carson for mom. And to think I used to be a boring guy.

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Six

I get up from bed, do my morning stuff at the apartment, and mentally prepare to be mauled with affection by Tina. Also I devise my business proposal for Manager Tom about David's motor-mania idea. The more one thinks about it, the more absurd "The Blood Vessel" sounds, but at the same time it seems so perfect for the occasion. It's like having Freddie Mercury sing Elvis Presley songs at the Super Bowl half-time show: nothing is too big, gaudy, insane, overdone, gratuitously flashy, or completely out of proportion on the empty-calorie fun scale.

Breakfast consists of warmed-up, left-over pilaf and instant coffee. Bologna sandwiches will be good for lunch. It's important to apply the mustard on one slice of the bread, and the mayonnaise and tomato slices on the other. The name for this creation is the Dijonaise wrap. I should tell Edna at Scoops about this idea.

I take the rice out of the oven and nosh while looking in the closet for my Fireball XL5 lunchbox. I've had it since second grade. FBXL5 was my favorite show when I was little. It was about puppets in space. All the characters walked like monkeys. The lead female puppet, Venus, looked like Carol Wayne from the 1960s-70s TV game shows. The matching thermos belonging to the box broke during the first week I owned it. There was milk in it when it smashed. It was gross.

I had a James Bond lunchbox before that one. It had pictures on it from the movie "Thunderball": submarines, an Aston-Martin automobile, chesty babes, and a detailed illustration of the Walther PPK automatic pistol were printed all over it. It was stolen by an upper classman, probably in the sixth grade at the time. Bond, James Bond.

My spaceship lunchbox is behind my Flexible Flyer snow sled. It's got some photos and old love letters in it. I keep old love letters because their supply is not what you'd call plentiful. The contents of the box goes back in the closet and the sandwich container goes with me in the kitchen for a quick clean up. Soon I'm ready to hit Route 7 and walk to the mall for a day of retail dementia.

I get my baseball hat and silver jacket, put my lunchbox in my bookbag, and start out the door. 10 dollars from the house money goes with me to buy a membership at the video store this morning. Soon mom will have Sean Connery tapes to ogle, and she'll be happy. I have to remember to stop by Shirlington Library tonight to pick-up my books. Wow. Books. What a concept.

It looks nice outside today. I'll listen to my Walk-man on the way to work: walk, walking, to walk. They did that verb-thing in Latin class a lot. It's all I remember from my lessons, except "cave canem" which means "beware of the dog." Now for the audio cassette selection. Arrrgh, so many choices. The perfect "going to the mall" music is required: Talking heads, too academic. ZZ Top, too crunchy. It's too early for the Stones. I'm not wasted enough for Hendrix. Some vintage Pink Floyd, perhaps. Yes, yes, "Obscured by Clouds" will do nicely.

I'm heading down the street and the atmospheric David Gilmore guitar breaks make me feel deliciously rubbery. What a wonderful soundtrack for walking down a commercial road to a suburban shopping center. I get to work and feel like I've just been bopped around in a cosmic pillow-fight. Pink Floyd has that effect on me. Mr. Mike and Pink are in the store, just hanging-out. They're listening to The Greaseman on DC/101, and yukking it up. My lunchbox goes in the office refrigerator.

Mr. Mike said, "I bet the thermos is broken."

Pink said, "I believe that's a safe bet, Mr. Mike."

I told them they were both cornflake heads.

Mr. Mike tells me his Motorschool boot is overpowering on some songs, a little flabby elsewhere, but on the whole enormously ax-worthy. He said Lemmy Kilmister's vocals, which always sound like road-rash, are particularly gnarly on this recording. Kelly Johnson, the singer/guitarist from Girlschool, picks up his lyric-slack nicely. Pink listens to us go on about guitar player nonsense. Then he tells us that all the metal guitarists on earth are a bunch of lunatic prima donnas compared to Frank Zappa. Who could argue?

Time to get the vacuum cleaner and Hoover the sales floor. I get my “DO NOT WASH” bag/hat from the special orders file, place it securely on my head, and begin my char duties. The Amish have their hats and I’ve got mine. I Hoover the area around the Halloween book display, turn on the galloping ghost’s battery pack, and watch it whiz around the table. It’s such a neat little flying popple. More fun than my Slinky-toy Dachshund. Mr. Mike and Pink take the X-9000 to the loading dock with the trash bags, and then count out the money for my cash register drawer. Soon we’re ready to open the sliding doors and let the wild, ape-like consumers of Arlington into the store.

At 10 O’clock, just after opening, Manager Tom comes into the shop. He walks behind the sales counter, and hugs me like a lost relative. My pal says Tina was over at his office a few minutes ago and presented him with the flyers for Cult Movie Friday.

“They’re like goddam Pablo Picassos,” he said, “I’ve never seen anything so nice. I’m going to frame one of each and put them in the lobby. That’s how goddam gorgeous they are.”

“Goddam,” I said.

Pink heard us talking and said “you’re goddam right, Manager Tom” from behind one of the book shelves. Mr. Mike picked up the chorus from where he was standing near the office. “Goddam nice flyers,” he said.

Manager Tom said he was sending them out to a copy shop this morning to get 500 of each printed up. They should be ready by around lunch time today. Then we can strategize about where and how to distribute our propaganda. Pink said he’d pin some up on the bulletin boards at George Mason. I told him a lot of the mall merchants were willing to put them up in their windows. We all agreed that we really needed to target the audience for this. To put flyers in customer’s bags at the bookstore would not reach the intended audience effectively. We need to think this one out like smart-guys.

Manager Tom was gushing with pride. The think-tank effectiveness of his Cult Commandos was simmering now. It was the perfect moment to introduce the subject of David’s wild-ride idea.

“Manager Tom,” I said, “I need to talk to you mano y mano. Serious stuff.”

“You can tell me anything, P-Man,” he replied, “you’re the team leader of the Cult Commandos. I value your manic insight. Tell me what’s troubling you, my swain.”

I told Manager Tom the whole story: David, The Photon Torpedo, the car’s voodoo paint job, the ride’s access from the parking lot to the theaters, The Count’s man-servant Fang, the promotional tie-in to

Channel 20, The Blood Vessel with styrofoam customizing, the batwing modifications, the glitz, the glamour, the complete freak-show element. And all of this spectacle 100% free of charge to Skyline Theaters.

Manager Tom looked stunned. He finally gazed up at me and said, “what kind of extraordinary man are you? What has brought you to me? How can you keep coming up with so many crazy things to do for this event? I really want to know?”

“I’m just a mallboy who lives with his mom,” I said, “I like to watch dumb movies and have fun with my friends. Sometimes life gives you a chance to really pull out the stops and have a roaring good time. I believe this Count Gore-thing is one of those opportunities in a lifetime. It’s a Be Here Now, Frankie Say Relax, Don’t Worry About the Beaver moment. Tina, Pink, David, and Mr. Mike have taught me a lot about genuine camaraderie in the last little bit of time, and I just want this thing to be as cool, as much fun, and as memorable as possible for all of us.”

“I’ll call Channel 20 later this morning” he said, “I’ll tell them we’ve hit the motherlode of promotional trade.”

The morning goes by like lightning. Lots of sales for a Monday. Pink and Mr. Mike are shelving new stock and simultaneously deleting as many extra copies of overstock as possible for returns. They’re weeding extra titles out of the shelves a section at a time. By the end of the morning the area around the Business and Psychology sections look great. Lots of moms and kiddies stop in to look at Pink’s flying revenant.

At noon Debbie and Donna come in to the store. Manager Tom had stopped them in the hall. The printing job had come in, and he and gave each of them several copies of the flyers. They gave a few to me. What great, detailed, illustration work. Tina went completely gonzo with the clip art, fonts, and photos. They are masterpieces of suburban derangement. I told the girls I was going up towards Mallworld Video, Hi Jinx Toys, and Scoops during my lunch break. I’d give them these masterworks for their windows. “Great idea, Ace!” Donna said. Ouch! A cynical dig from the assistant manager. An obligatory sparring match is in order now.

I told her that her heartthrob, Tom Cruise, would one day become involved in L. Ron Hubbard’s Church of Scientology. He was actually that naive and gullible.

“Take that back,” she said.

“No way ,” I replied, “that’s what you get for saying saucy, Rice Crispies-headed things to your chattel servitude minions.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“OK, we’re pals again,” I replied. But I didn’t take back what I said about Tom C’s choice of mentors.

I go back to the office and clock out for lunch, grab my sandwiches, and go out into the mall’s hallway towards the video store. I plop down on one of the hall benches and nosh. My sandwiches are so great. The perfect proportions of bologna to tomato, mustard to mayonnaise, salt to pepper. And just cold enough to add an al dente texture to the bread, without over-resistance to the chewing experience. After ingesting the sandwich-units, Mallworld is my first stop.

Jack isn’t in the store, so I do business with Tobin. He’s reading a book called *120 Days of Sodom* by the Marquis de Sade. It’s a big book. It must be detailed. Tobin tells me about the memberships, rental rates, and the standard fluff you go through with any club that wants your money. I go to the drama section and get the video called “Outland.” It’s the perfect movie for mom and me to watch together. Sean Connery in outer space. She gets her man; I get ray guns. Everybody wins. Tobin takes my 10 dollars for a 1-year membership. He tells me the tape is due back in two days.

I ask him if he could put a flyer in the window, advertising the Cult Movie night; Jack had said it was OK for me to bring this ad to him. Tobin looked at the flyer like he was trying to see through the paper.

“What’s this for again?,” he asked.

“The window,” I said. He looked at the flyer a second time, concentrating even harder than before on the text.

“I haven’t seen any of these movies,” he said, “why are you giving this to me?”

“It’s for Jack,” I said, “could you pass it along to him?”

“Of course,” he said.

I thanked him for his help and left the store shaking my head.

“Bon amusement,” he said as I exited.

I went into Scoops and passed a flyer to Edna. She went in the back of store, fetched the scotch tape, and put the flyer up next to the Edna's Eiffel Tower Dogue sign. I asked her how the international menu was doing for the store.

"Tres bien," she said.

"Edna," I said, "you are a cultural force of nature."

"Merci, P-Man," she replied, "and say 'bonjour' to Tina for me when you see her."

She was enjoying this fractured language exchange tremendously. I asked her if she was still serious about coming to the opening night to see "Viva Las Vegas."

"Absolument," she replied.

That broke the floodgates. She cracked herself up completely with that burned-out French rejoinder. She could only wave goodbye as I left Scoops to go to the toy store.

At Hi Jinx Toys, Jim is working on an enormous Lego buiding block model of something that looks like the legs of a man or a robot. I ask him what he's trying to make.

"You can't tell?," he said, "It's The Count Gore DeVol."

"Wow," I answered, "Jim, that's incredible, but you'll need a million of those little black Legos for that project."

"No problem there," he answered.

I handed him a flyer and he had it placed in the window in half a tick. "Let me know when you're going to flyer the parking lot," he said, "it's a lot easier when two people have a single purpose."

"You're on my A-list, Jim," I replied, "no doubt about it."

Out in the mall I notice something funny. A lot of the stores already have flyers for the Cult Movie Friday event in their windows: Hallmark, Mother Nature's, Safeway has two in their window, Pawnshop carry-out, the pharmacy. It seems I have a silent partner this business, and I'll just bet she wears rhinestone tiaras, leather pants, and no bra to work.

I get back to the store and put my video tape next to my jacket, then go back up to the front counter. Mr. Mike, Manager Tom, and Tina are standing by the cash register. Manager Tom looks like he's had a religious experience. Mr. Mike looks zoned as well. Tina sees me coming, canters over to my spot, and catapults herself on top of me. The force of her affection knocks us back into the History section.

A copy of Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* plops on to the floor. She hugs me and says, "you're a genius, Monster Boy."

"Thanks, Tina," I gasp.

Manager Tom walked towards me, hand outstretched. I shook his hand and said "what's up?"

"He loved it," Manger Tom said, "he loved every bit of it. I called the Channel 20 office and told them your idea. They called The Count and within the hour they called me back saying he thought the whole thing was a big, tacky, wonderful concept, and he can't wait to do the promotion." Then Manager Tom said, "I think I need a drink."

"Actually, Manager Tom," I replied, "It was my friend David's idea for the vampire motorcar. Also it wasn't my notion for the free plastic teeth. That one was the inspiration of Jim who works down the hall at the toy store. You know, the guy you paid for getting the cheap choppers."

"It doesn't matter," he said, "you're the power broker, you're the wheel, P-Man. They come to you because they believe in your practical insanity. It's a gift you've got, believe me."

Manager Tom said to get in touch with David ASAP and give him the go-ahead on the Blood Vessel-ride. Then he asked me to please have David call him soon, so they can go over battle plans for the event. Manager Tom was still stunned, but becoming more aware of the situation. He was getting pumped. He walked around the front of the store rubbing his hands together and saying "yes, yes" like a mad scientist. He was the happiest man at Skyline Mall.

The flyers for the event were stacked up by the phone books. Manager Tom had been talking to Tina in his office before I came into the store from my lunch break. Tina had told him the best way to target the cult movie weirdoes was to hit the high school parking lots: Wakefield, Washington-Lee, Yorktown, and especially Woodlawn were crawling with little psychopaths who feed off of bizarre films. Hit them with flyers the first two weeks. Then flyer Skyline Mall parking lot, and Northern Virginia Community College's Alexandria Campus parking lot the last week. She said you're bound to hit every nut-job movie geek in the area that way.

We were standing around talking stuff, when Tina asked me what day was our date night this week. I told her I hadn't thought about it. "Well, think now," she said, "I want to thank you for standing up for me yesterday. I want to thank you...you know...naked."

“Whoa,” Manager Tom wheezed, “time for me to go make some popcorn.” Mr. Mike told her the Intimacy titles were on the bottom shelf of the Psychology section.

“How about tomorrow night,” I answered.

Tina said she’d take 100 flyers for distribution with her tonight. She knew a neighborhood Wakefield student who’d probably be glad to flyer the school parking lot tomorrow and next week for the event. She thought he had some pals who went to Washington-Lee who could do the same in their school lot. I asked her how she was so sure they would do this work for her. “I’m 22,” she said, “they’re like 16-17. I’m the neighborhood siren. You should hear the stories they make up about how they’ve ravished me in every conceivable sex-position. They’ll do anything I ask them to do. It makes them look like studs to hang around with me.”

“You’re a man-eater,” I tell her.

I inform Tina that I’m flat broke until payday. I’m tapped out from putting money in the car fund, and our date the other night put me way over budget for a while. After mom puts the down payment on a car, more cash flow would be available to run around with, but these are the lean-and-mean days right now. She said that was no problem. I’d paid for the last date, and she was up to foot the bill. She asked me if I’d ever been to Starvin’ Marvin’s Pizza in the Lincolnia Shopping Center. “Oh my God, you’re kidding me,” I replied, “you do Starvin’ Marvin’s? That is about the finest pie known to man. Are you saying you’re taking me there?” She nodded affirmatively, like Mr. Ed the talking horse.

The phone rings. It’s for me. The fear. It’s mom from work. Mom never calls unless it’s important. She said the girls from the office were doing a birthday dinner for the big boss in her division at AARP. They were all going to La Nicoise on Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown. She hadn’t been there in years and thought she might like to go. She wanted to know if it was OK with me to get dinner on my own.

I motion to Tina to come over to the phone. She puts her ear on the other side of the receiver. Mom continues, telling me one of her office mates can give her a ride home. She knows this is unexpected, but...

Tina takes the phone, “I’ll feed your son, mom. Don’t you worry. I’ll make him big and strong. You won’t recognize him when I’m through with his skinny butt.”

They chat while I ring up sales at the cash register. Mr. Mike appears from the office after a few minutes, with a B. Dalton Bookseller name tag for Tina, her name Dymotaped to it. Tina hangs the phone up and tells me that mom is going to party with her friends tonight, and that our pizza engagement has been moved up to this evening. “Yes, Miss Tina,” I say.

The situation is so weird. Tina pins her name tag over her tit, and begins straightening out the mess in the special orders section. She’s completely at home behind the cash register of a store she doesn’t work in, telling people what books she likes and speaking about anything that comes to her mind. She’s like a talking Yoda-doll from “The Empire Strikes Back” movie. She’s always the same. No posturing. Never freaked by the people around her.

After Tina leaves, the rest of the afternoon flies by. Pink and Mr. Mike are uncluttering the shelves book by book, and more and more people come in buying titles off of the Halloween display. At 5:00 the night crew comes in and I get ready to take off, already fantasizing about Tina running around the basement just wearing a head band. This is going to be a great night.

My date sweeps into the store to collect me. She’s got a bag from Mallworld Video with her, too. She said she joined the club on the first day because she felt sorry for Jack. There was no business going on in the place, and he was stuck there with moody Tobin. She thought she’d throw some money at him to cheer him up. I go in the office and collect my jacket, hat, lunchbox, and backpack. The Sean Connery video goes in the pack. I’m glad the tape is good for two days because we don’t waste rentals in our small Shirlington apartment. No way.

Tina and I say goodnight to all our pals and boogie out to the parking lot. I’m about to walk over towards Route 7, when Tina pulls me in the direction on her car. She had driven to work. She lives 5 walking minutes from the mall.

“You drove to work?,” I asked.

“It was cold this morning,” she said.

She threw me the keys and said “thrill me, Nature Boy.” She said we kind of needed to hurry because Terri needed to be at work at 7:00 tonight. We had to pick-up the pizza and get home in time for her to get to Joe Theismann’s Restaurant.

“I need to make one quick detour,” I said.

“I told you to thrill me, kiddo, now’s your chance,” she shot back.

The Midget buzzes like a fighter plane as we cruise down Route 7 towards Shirlington. I turn on Dinwiddie Street, next to Wakefield High School, and cruise down to Walter Reed Drive. After a couple of lights, we merge on to Arlington Mill Road. The library is on the right. I park the machine outside the entrance, open the door, and keep the motor running.

“Keep her warm, kitten,” I tell Tina.

“No problem, Mr. Bond,” she answers. Tina puts her dark glasses on while I run into the library.

My books are on the “hold” shelf. They’re bound together with a rubber band. An index card with my name on it is underneath the taut elastic. I get my library card out of my wallet. I’ve used it once before a few years ago to borrow some Creem and Circus magazines from the Young Adult section. The lady writes down my numbers, hands me the books, and tells me they’re due back in 3 weeks. Then she asks me if I’m registered to vote in Arlington. If not, she can register me now. It only takes a few minutes.

“Miss,” I said, “I’ve got a black-haired, super model wearing Lou Reed sunglasses sitting in an MG Midget with the motor running, waiting for me. She wants to buy me a pizza and then make love to me for defending her name in a sports bar yesterday. I don’t believe I can register to vote at this particular moment.”

“I understand,” she said, “maybe when you return your books you can register. It’s your duty as a citizen to cast your vote.”

“I promise I’ll do it,” I said.

“Thank you for using your public library,” she replied.

I burn out to the car. Tina has the radio on, and is head-bopping to some blues riff. I put the books in her lap and hit the gas. We’re on our way back up Walter Reed Drive to Beauregard Street in Alexandria. Starvin’ Marvin’s is a few miles up the road. It’s like being in a Steve McQueen movie, except we’re getting pizza instead of stolen diamonds or ballistic missile launch codes.

“*Car*, oh wow,” she said. “It’s like my favorite. I knew you’d want to read it after I gave you the subliminal seduction photo. Harry Crews is just the ultimate.” She paused. “You know I didn’t give you that picture by accident, don’t you Bunky. I wanted to increase your mental bandwidth.”

“I figured there was some secret agenda involved,” I said.

“The guy in that book reminded me of you,” she continued, “ he was a nice, kind, guy who had zero social skills. He wanted to be liked, but was misunderstood, and messed up relationships a lot of the time. He got so fed up with people, life, jobs, and society, he just lost his grip and tried to eat a car, piece by piece.”

“He tried to EAT a car?,” I asked.

“Yup,” she said, “the only person who really loved him was a former cheerleader who used to let the guys bang her senseless in the back seat of their rides. The car became something like a symbol of her own self-loathing. She and the car-eating guy became codependent nut-jobs while he was trying to nosh the machine down to nothing.”

“He tried to EAT a car?,” I repeated.

“Yes, yes, eat the car, e-a-t the car,” she replied. “He couldn’t do it though,” she went on, “he chomped down a good bit of it, but it started to make him sick. He got really ill and had to stop. That’s you babe. You’re trying to do everything by yourself: taking care of your mom, working, trying to find out who you are, trying to figure out what the hell to do with yourself, and you won’t let anyone help you. You’re just going to get sick and be miserable if you don’t let some people into your life. Believe me, I know.”

“Well, Tina, I think you’re absolutely correct in your assessment of my situation,” I replied, “but I think I’m off to a good start correcting that nasty problem. I’ve got a girlfriend now, a REAL girlfriend, who calls me long distance when I’m hanging out at fern bars to buy me boat drinks. She lets me drive her car, gets me pizza, taught me to dance, (kind of) and wants to thank me while she’s naked for saying ‘boo’ to some hair-bozo who called her ‘easy’ at a saloon in Falls Church. Isn’t that a satisfactory beginning to help cure one’s self-destruction blues, Tina of South Arlington?”

“Drive faster, Bunky,” she said, “I’m getting horny.”

We tear up Beaugard Street and in a minute we’re opposite Landmark Shopping Center. Starvin’ Marvin’s is across from the mall, off Little River Turnpike. We flame into the restaurant and order a double-cheese, double mushroom, large pie to go. “I’ve been here before,” I said, “and this is their finest creation. You must believe me.”

“Mushrooms are psychedelic little suckers, and a natural aphrodisiac,” she replied.

“You’re psychedelic,” I told her.

“I’m not psychedelic,” she corrected me, “I’m nuts.”

Tina orders a beer, and we do the 2-player game on the Rolling Stones pinball machine while we wait. We sip our brew and she slaughters me in our match. She says you have to become one with the machine. Don’t fight it, or try to overpower it. Do the ebb and flow with it.

“It’s just a pinball machine,” I said.

“Your head’s not there yet, P-Man, but you’re on the right path,” she told me, “soon, if you keep hanging out with me, which you ARE going to do, you’ll do the cosmic connection with everything around you. Then watch out. Then it’ll be, as you like to say, a ‘bam-bam-pow’ state of affairs.”

Our pie is ready in a record 12 minutes. Thank you, thank you. Tina pays for the food and we’re out the door and back to The Midget. T-Girl opens the trunk and places the pie strategically against the few articles back there. She throws her video bag, flyers, my backpack, and books in there, too. The Midget doesn’t have enough room in the passenger area for an extra pack of cigarettes. It’s like driving a hand grenade.

We burn back down Beauregard Street to Route 7, and turn right on Forest Drive. I pull up in front of Tina and Terri’s place. We are so ahead of schedule. We are so together.

“Not a bad piece of driving, Mr. Bond,” she chirped.

“The Aston-Martin needs attention, Q,” I said, “I noticed a frequency hiccup in the telemetry.”

“You are such a dork,” she responded.

We unload The Midget’s trunk and head inside. Terri has her work clothes on, and is selecting accessories. She sees the pizza box, and zooms in. “Starvin’ Marvin’s!,” she said, “Mmmmm, oh, Tina, you didn’t tell me P-Man was a gentleman, AND a gourmet.”

“He’s a good driver, too,” she said, “but his pinball game needs work.”

“That’s your department, Tina-poo,” Terri replied.

Terri gets paper plates and beers from the kitchen. We all sit around the dining room and nosh the pie. It is too great to describe. We all make happy sounds like: “ooh,” and “mmmmm,” and “yum, yum,” and “slurp-munch.” There is no conversation. We are psychically cemented to our pizza slices.

After we’ve had our fill, Terri goes for a south-western motif with her jewelry accessories for bartending tonight. Her necktie is black and has wild cacti of every description printed on it. She goes for

earrings that look like cloisonné chili-peppers, and finishes her look with silver and lapis-lazuli American Indian rings and bracelets. She's ready to fight the cowboys. Tina and I have been watching her accessorize with appreciation. Her decisions were made by elimination and careful planning. They were not accidental. She turns to me and asks, "how do I look?"

Danger. I'm on the spot. This is a threshold moment. I have to look cool, casual, and witty in front of Tina's sister. "Handsome than Jane Russell stretched-out on a Hollywood haystack," I say.

"Your boyfriend can spend the night anytime he wants," Terri said to Tina.

"Thanks, she replied, "I like sex."

Terri tells us to have a good time and to try not to break anything downstairs tonight. She'll be home in the early morning. She bops out the door to The Midget, and in a tick she's out of sight and driving on Route 7. I help Tina throw out paper plates, spent napkins, and empty beer cans. The remaining pie goes in the refrigerator. I get a beer before Tina closes the door of the icebox, and place it over one of her nipples to get the raised effect through her T-shirt. She giggles like Betty Rubble on The Flintstones. It works every time.

"I've got a surprise for you downstairs," she said, "c'mon." She grabbed her Mallworld Video bag and took my hand, leading me down into Castle Dracula. As we were walking into her room, she asked me what costume I was planning to wear for Halloween this year. We get over to her bed and sit down on the mattress, sharing the beer I brought with me. I told her I hadn't really been doing Halloween for the last few years, just handing out pennies to the kids who come to the door.

"It's a lot cheaper than giving candy," I told her, "I did the math."

"You're hopeless," she said.

"Well I'm going to be a cheerleader," she continued. "Terri gave me her old Wakefield Warriors cheerleading outfit. It was the last year they were using them, before they got the new, tricked-out, hot-pants. The school let that year's squad keep their uniforms." She paused for a second, and got an illuminated look.

"I know what you could be," she said.

"Adam Ant?," I responded.

"No wise-ass," she snapped.

“Listen,” she continued, “I could be the naïve, young, freshman cheerleader who has just arrived from Winchester, or Front Royal, or one of those insane Virginia cow towns. What could my name be? Jennifer? Kelly?”

“How about Becky,” I said.

“Yes, yes, Becky!,” she confirmed, “that’s perfect. And you could be the evil, sadistic, drill team coach with a thing for raw talent. You could wear your black jeans, T-shirt, cap, and I’ll even let you borrow my Lou Reed sunglasses, as you’re so fond of calling them. You could even put a dog collar on me. You could be power-sado man. It would be bitchin’.” Tina told me to finish the beer, and she scampered over to her closet.

She pulled out the cheerleader outfit and skipped into the bathroom. My girlfriend likes costumes. She returned in a few minutes, packed into the green and white Wakefield Warriors cheerleading uniform. Except instead of the saddle shoes and ankle socks, she wore black, stiletto high heels.

“Cheerleaders can’t wear spike heels on the field,” I told her, “they’ll sink into to the dirt. Then you can’t jump around and stuff.”

“Don’t be negative,” she said, “besides, I told you I was the young, naïve freshman, Becky.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” I replied.

“We need to get you into character if you’re going to be the sadistic drill team coach,” she mused.

“How will we do that?,” I asked her.

“I think,” she said, “that you’re going to have to tie me to the bed. I think that’ll have to happen.”

She took a few scarves that were draped around her room and crawled on to the mattress.

“You’re upset with me,” she said, “and you feel you must discipline me for my choice of footwear.”

“Hmm. I see. Yes,” I answered, “I’m beginning to understand the situation. You’ve been slacking-off. No sense of pride in you.”

She pulled her letter sweater over her boobs. No support garments. I take the scarves and tie them to either end of the brass head board railing, then I bind her wrists with the slack.

“You’re not going to hurt me, are you Mr. Drill Team Instructor?,” she whimpered.

“Silence freshman!” I snapped at her. “You know the penalty for unauthorized spike heels while in uniform.”

“Oh no, not that,” she mewled, “anything but that Mr. Drill Team Instructor.”

“You know the rules, Becky,” I said, “I just enforce them.”

“It’s not fair,” she mewled, “just one thing before you discipline me, Sir. Please, I mean please, don’t use that terrible French Tickler on me. Oh, Jesus, don’t use the one that’s in the top drawer of my bureau on the left side under my address book. God, don’t use THAT on me. It would be merciless.”

I shake my head with a pitying look on my face. “Freshman,” I say, “not only have you violated the spike heel rule of the Wakefield Warriors Cheerleading Squad, but you obviously haven’t read the updates of the disciplinary codes. French Ticklers are EXACTLY the punishment for high heel violations!”

“Oh, nooooo, it can’t be,” she wailed.

In the bureau, the feared sex toy was located where she had indicated, along with the condoms. Becky is testing the strength of my binding knots on the head board. “Escape is impossible,” I tell her. She’s breathing hard. Her breasts are heaving, and a mist of perspiration is on her stomach. I take the waistband of her miniskirt in both hands and slowly slide it down over her hips, and off entirely. She stares hungrily at me, nipples erect, cheerleading sweater around her neck.

“Was high school ever like this, Nature Boy?,” she asked.

“Not even once,” I tell her, and a thorough disciplinary action ensues.

After Tina’s sentence is carried out, I untie her from the half-mast, and we lounge around on her bed. She turns her radio to WDCU for the jazz programs. After a while of mellowing out to Sonny Rollins’ music, she thinks she may need further correctional actions. The spike heel violation was a serious one. She wanted to pay her debt to society back in full. I was kind of spent, but would do what I could. Tina said she had something that might help me enforce a few correctional codes.

She jumps out of bed like Bugs Bunny and goes to get the video tape she brought home from the mall. She pops it in her VCR and turns the TV on. She gallops back to bed with the wireless remote in her hand. She’s fast forwarding through the coming attractions to get to the main feature. She hits the play button. Poorly mixed melodramatic music comes from the speakers. The screen is hot pink, then swirls into sky blue, then sunburst orange. Text finally flashes on the screen:

Annette Haven and John Leslie in SEX WORLD.

“It’s a small mall that we work in kiddo,” she said, “word gets around. I wanted to see who my competition was.”

“I don’t actually know Annette Haven,” I told her, “I just appreciate her skills as an actress in American cinema.”

“I thought you liked to watch her screw,” she replied.

“That too,” I said.

Tina and I watch Annette and John for a while. Tina is fascinated by Annette’s energetic performance.

“So that’s Annette Haven?, she asked.”

“In the flesh,” I replied.

“Jesus, she’s beautiful. One more beer and I’d go down on her,” she chirped.

SEX WORLD is a remarkably stimulating film. I want to commit great portions of it to memory. Soon I’m ready to enforce justice on even the smallest infraction of The Wakefield Warriors Cheerleading Squad code of conduct, and violations abound in Tina’s basement.

After several corrections of Tina’s behavior, we’re both pooped. She lays in bed wrapped around me like a snake. I listen to her breathing, and hear her heart whisper in her chest. It feels right. I’ve got a feeling I’m going to be with T-Girl for a while to come. We’re yin and yang, and my big fear has been confronted and swept away. I’m falling hard for her and I like it. It’s commitment-city. It’s the big L. I’m sure of it.

After that night with her, time starts to fly by at home and work. I call David the next morning from work and give him the thumb’s-up on The Blood Vessel project.

“It’s a go-project?,” he asked. You’re not shitting me?”

“David,” I said, “it is a total, 100%, off-the-charts, God-Lord-King, go-project, baby.”

I gave him Manager Tom’s phone number, and told him I’d be in touch soon for updates on the modifications for The Photon Torpedo. David said I was cooler than Jesus for putting this movie-car-vampire deal together. I told him that was an exaggeration, but thanked him anyway.

Tina takes more flyers from the store in the following days, and says that she's conscripted a couple of guys from Yorktown and Woodlawn High Schools to flyer their parking lots. Her neighbor who goes to Wakefield had spread the word about the films, and the fellows had volunteered to do their schools. I asked her how she gets high school guys, the most notorious slackers on earth, to do these labor-intensive projects for her. "I kiss them," she said. That blind-sided me.

"High school is an evil place," she continued, "the pretty people get all the attention and dates, and the rest of the kids just deal with the frustration of being ignored. The guy in my neighborhood is a real troll. No social skills, no great looks, but nice. A little bit like you. When I talked to him, and gave him a kiss for helping me, I thought he was going to shit himself from happiness. He wanted to know if there was anything else I wanted, needed, thought I might need, etc."

"You're an evil sex-goddess," I told her, "you know that don't you?"

"There's nothing evil about it," she shot back, "when I told my neighbor that I wanted to flyer the other high schools in the area, he said he'd call a couple of his friends. They were at my house in 30 minutes wanting to help. We've got 80 per cent of the advertising done for the Cult Movie night, and all I had to do was smooch a few teenagers who were dying of loneliness. I don't think that's so awful."

She gave me a serious look.

"OK, OK," I said, "you're not an evil goddess, but you are a practical goddess who can see a good opportunity when it knocks."

"I can live with that," she said.

"Are you going to lip-lock them next week too," I asked, "when we do the second wave of flyer-ing?"

"Of course," she said, "that's part of the deal."

"So this is like your kiss-army!?", I barked, "Tina's Kiss-Army that does her bidding and gets paid in ersatz affection?"

"It's not ersatz affection," she snipped at me. They're guys who need to feel good about themselves. Don't you feel good when you kiss me? Those little weirdoes are going to remember me as something great that happened to them for the rest of their lives. Let me ask you something. When you

were in high school, wouldn't you have given anything to put your arms around a real woman, and felt her responding to you? Liking you? Laughing at your jokes? Even for one minute?"

She had me there.

"Tina," I growled, "you are my girlfriend, and I'd trust you with my life. I think it's amazing that you can conjure up a labor force and make things easier for us on the advertising end this Cult Movie gaga. However, I don't have to like how you do it."

We were having our first argument, and it really sucked.

"Keep hanging out with me," she said, "just 'stay with me', and one day nothing will be able to bother you again. We're going to be so great together. I promise you."

I steamed for a few minutes, and then got over my tiff with Tina, the kissing bandit. I put my arm around her and we held each other for a while. Then I started to talk to her, almost in a whisper.

"Tina," I said.

"What?," she asked.

"I love you, and I'm sorry I got angry at you," I told her.

"I know, baby," she replied.

"Tina," I repeated.

"Mm-hmm," she said.

"If it's possible, please try and stop using the titles of Rod Stewart songs in our conversations."

"I can't do that," she answered.

"OK," I said, "I was just making sure."

Mom and I finally watched the Sean Connery video "Outland," together and it was great for her. Lots of close ups of the emoting Sean: He did concerned, outraged, miffed, nonplused, amused, mildly agitated, giddy, inquisitive, pensive, and occasionally at peace with the world. No laser guns, however. A few decent space ships, and a couple of space babes. No spandex. No big hair. It was a cool time anyway. Whenever I can make mom happy, even for a few minutes, I've accomplished something.

We start taping The Johnny Carson Show at night and watch it during dinner in the evenings. Mom is delighted with the VCR. She asks me to tape things and she doesn't watch them most of the time; but she likes the idea that the service is available and operational.

I bring up the idea of having the video party at our apartment on Friday, and mom thinks that is a wonderful thought. She wants to know if Mr. Mike would be coming. She likes Mr. Mike a lot. I told her that not only was he coming, but he was bringing his portable color TV so we could watch videos like they do in Hollywood, California. Mom said Mr. Mike was a guy from the “old school,” and they were the kind of men she liked.

I asked her if she thought I was from the old school. “Sometimes,” she said, “but it’s hard to tell with you.” I inquired if Rod Stewart was from that particular academy.

“No,” she said.

“How about Tom Selleck?,” I asked.

“Better,” she said.

“Jason Robards, Richard Widmark?”

“Much better,” she answered.

“Sean, “Bond, James Bond,” Connery?”

“Now you’re talking!” she said.

When I return the Sean-tape to Mallworld Video, Jack wants to know if Tina enjoyed her first rental from the “back of the store.” Jesus, it really is a small mall we work in.

“She was ecstatic,” I told him, “you don’t get to see architecture like Annette’s everyday.”

“She is a seriously aesthetic piece of celluloid-tail,” Jack rejoined.

“I think Tina’s falling in love with her, too,” I told him, “we fast forwarded SEX WORLD to all the Annette scenes in the video. Tina was glued to the set while she performed.”

“Maybe Tina can learn a few things from watching the pros,” he chuckled.

“Jack, you have no idea how right you are,” I replied.

At work I tell Mr. Mike I’ve finally got my butt in gear about the video party. Friday is fine with mom, and I’ll even supply the Jiffy-Pop popcorn. We make a flyer with magic markers and put it by the time-card clock. By the end of the day, the A-team has RSVP’d in style. Donna, Debbie, Mr. Mike, and Pink will be there. Debbie wants to know if we’re going to show stupid movies, or nice, regular movies starring guys like William Hurt and Kevin Kline. “Probably the normal ones,” I told her. It was a lie.

I invited Jim from Hi Jinx Toys when I saw him in the hall. He said he'd love to watch some video weirdness with us. I called David and asked him to come too, informing him that there would be snacks and single women at the function.

"What should I wear," he asked.

"Smart but casual," I replied. I asked him if he'd started the new paint job on the P-Torpedo. All he could say was, "it's going to be a monster, P-man. This is going to be big."

Tina came by the store to talk girl-stuff with Debbie and Donna during the week. When I asked Tina what she was doing Friday, she looked puzzled. "That's date-night," she said, "we're going on a date." Donna and Debbie nodded their heads in agreement.

"But we hadn't made any plans," I said, "what date are you talking about?"

"Friday, date-night, all over the world," she said.

"I'm still not following you," I said. The girls looked at me like I was a broken office machine.

"You are my boyfriend," she said, "is that correct?"

"Affirmative," I said.

"Do you like having a girlfriend?," she asked.

"It's groovy," I responded.

"Well having a girlfriend means you take her out on Friday night," she said, "that's a rule." I looked at Debbie and Donna.

"Is that a rule?," I asked them.

"The eleventh commandment," Donna said.

"Are you guys just making this up?," I inquired.

Debbie asked me if I'd ever had a girlfriend before. I told her I'd had a couple of them, but never for long.

"Want to know why you didn't have them very long?," she asked.

"The Friday night-thing?," I responded.

"You got it, babe," she said.

I asked Tina if she wanted to come over to the apartment and watch videos on our Friday night date. I told her it would just be us and about 6-7 other people if that was OK. She said Donna and Debbie

had told her about the party earlier, and she was just waiting to see how long it would take me to come around and ask her. I told her I was still new at this boyfriend-thing, and was sorry about the oversight.

“No Annette videos for you for a week,” she said.

I was stunned.

“You’re a tyrannical despot,” I told her.

“Next time you won’t forget to ask me out,” she chirped.

Tina took me by the arm and walked me back into the store where we could talk. She smiled and hugged me and looked delighted.

“Dude,” she said, “you’re getting better. You’re becoming a person again. A while ago you would never have had people over for a party.”

“A while ago I didn’t have a VCR,” I told her.

“What did I tell you about being negative?,” she asked.

“Don’t do the negative-thing,” I answered.

“Right,” she said, “you used to only leave the house to go see movies where some guy blows peoples’ brains out everywhere, or monster films where they eat the goopy intestines of teen gang-leaders. Now you do other stuff, too. You’re really improving.”

“But I still like those movies,” I told her.

“Yeah,” she said, “but it’s not ALL you like. Don’t you enjoy having pals? Having me around? Making love to me? Don’t you feel more connected to things around you? Aren’t you happier than you’ve been in a long time?”

“OK, OK, you win,” I told her, “you’re beautiful, and cool, and smart as hell, and right about freakin’ everything, and sometimes you’re scary because you know things before they happen; but I don’t care, because I’m off-the-charts, sold-the-farm crazy about you. What else do you want me to say?”

“Tell me I’m The Queen of Skyline Mall,” she said.

“Tina,” I said, “you are mall royalty from the word ‘go.’”

“Then I rescind your sentence banning you from Annette Haven videos,” she cooed, “you may watch them, with me, at your convenience, my faithful, retail subject.”

“You are a generous queen, with really, really great legs,” I told her.

“Coin of the realm,” she replied.

After Tina exited, I told Debbie and Donna that my pal David, and Hi Jinx Toys Jim were going to be at the party.

“What’s David like?,” Debbie asked.

“David is a remarkable man,” I told her, “he can talk to anybody about anything, at length. He is as comfortable in the gardens of the Taj Mahal as he is in the Grey Hound Bus Station in North East D.C. He’s funny, nice-looking, likes to eat, and has a car that turns different colors. It’s like a mood-car.”

I didn’t tell her he was a first class nut-job.

On Friday, Mr. Mike brings his TV to the store and keeps it in his car during the day. I’d gone to the Safeway earlier in the week and bought 4 Jiffy-Pop popcorn pans, and a 3-litre bottle of Gallo Chablis for the attitude-adjustment hour. Mom has been excited all week and is looking forward to a huge dose of social interaction tonight. She’ll get to talk to David and Mr. Mike in the same evening. That’s big shakes for her.

There was much secret agenda at the mall that Friday. Donna, Debbie, and Tina got together during the afternoon and ordered a party Deli-platter from the Safeway: Genoa ham, salami, mortadella, prosciutto, sliced Swiss cheese, gouda, provolone, cherry tomatoes, celery, carrots, french onion dip, black and green olives, pickles, miniature loaves of rye and pumpernickel bread, and Halloween motif crackers that look like smiling pumpkins were placed everywhere on it. Pink bought a case of cold, cold, Heineken. “They were on sale,” he told me. He knows I’m a Bud-man, and was trying to appease me.

Mr. Mike asked me what my mom likes to drink. “Besides Johnny Walker Red, Korbel Champagne has been her favorite lately,” I told him. So Mr. Mike bought 2 bottles of Brut for mom, and a package of plastic cups that had drawings of goofy ghosts with crooked teeth. “I couldn’t resist,” he said.

Donna had gone to Hi Jinx Toys after lunch and told Jim about the party upgrade. He brought a bag of tricks with him into the store: orange and black party streamers, paper skeletons, confetti that looks like little black cats, pumpkin candles, plastic vampire teeth, wind-up jumping eyeballs, and fake spider webs with built-in plastic spiders. Things were getting out of hand. Control, I need control. I had to call mom.

I telephone my mother at work. She actually sounds happy when she picks up the receiver. I tell her that my pals have tied me to the quarter mast, and decided to turn the video party into something more extravagant. "Really," she said, "how extravagant?" I told her the girls have bought a ton of food, Pink and Mr. Mike have bought beer and champagne, and Jim has brought Halloween decorations that would impress the concert pianist Liberace. "That's how extravagant," I told her.

"Do I have to cook or clean anything?," she asked.

"You have a complete reprieve from kitchen duties tonight," I told her.

"Then let the good times roll," she told me.

I hang up the telephone and wonder how on earth things have become so great over the last little bit of time. Not so long ago my life was just like one of those bizarre monster movies that I like, only I wasn't the sexy teenager being stalked by some evil force. I was just some stupid 'extra' in the background: man with hat, or man reading magazine, or man buying hot dog. When the director said "cut," I'd get my check and go home and be "man with hat." Things aren't that mind-numbingly awful anymore.

I know there are things in life that are completely out of my control, and I accept that premise freely. If having a few friends, living in the moment, and being loved by someone is the catalyst for all my current good fortune, then I shout from the rooftops, "Be Here Now, Frankie Say Relax, and Don't Worry About the Beaver!"

I was ruminating about how the day could possibly improve after so much good will and attention had been shown me. I ring up a few sales, and watch Mr. Mike and Pink pick through volumes of books like Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes, looking for anything they can return to the publisher. Then the Federal Express Messenger comes into the store. Holy bankbook, Batman, it's payday. I open the envelope and hand everyone their checks.

I get everyone to sign their drafts and take them to Central Fidelity Bank to get cash for my pals. When I return, and hand them their envelopes with the money, they become happy-units. Pink barks like a Mastiff. At 5:00 we all get ready to convoy over to the apartment for the TV-video-Halloween-extravaganza. Mr. Mike buzzes out of the store for a few minutes and returns with a Mallworld Video bag. He shows me his selections for the evening: the Hammer Films classics, "Horror of Dracula," and "The

Mummy.” Two of Christopher Lee’s finest moments. I told Mr. Mike he was an impresario of video-entertainment. “Koo-koo Bitchin” he replied.

Tina comes in the store and says she’ll ride with Debbie and Donna to my spot. They’ve got to get the party platter from the grocery store. We’ve got the drinks in the store refrigerator. Pink, Mr. Mike and I will go in Mr. Mike’s sedan. Jim can follow us in his ride. We have food, booze, babes, videos, and wind-up jumping eyeballs. It’s party time.

Mr. Mike leaves the store in the care of the night crew, and we walk out to the parking lot with the precious liquids and party decorations. Pink has put a cone-shaped, paper Halloween hat on his head. It has a picture of a black cat with its back in hackles. Jim is juggling a few disembodied plastic fingers, with life-like blood painted on them. Mr. Mike told Jim he’d never get a girlfriend if he kept playing around with giggly, rubber body parts. Jim said, “life is about choices, Mr. Mike. And I choose prosthetics.”

We all get in Mr. Mike’s sedan, and give Jim a ride to his car on the other side of the parking lot. After a moment, he’s following us down Route 7. In just a few minutes we’re pulling up in front of the apartment. Jim sidles up next to us in the driveway. We all get out and head over to my place. While we’re getting the TV, beer, and wine from the trunk of the car, Jim starts putting cone hats on the rest of us. He’s also got a life-size paper skeleton he’s playing with like a kite. We begin walking up the stairs to the flat. At this moment, David arrives in the semi-completed “Blood Vessel.”

We all walk over to David’s ride to see his progress. He’s raised the suspension on the rear wheels of the Chevette, so it looks like a micro-sized, funny-car racer. We congregate around the car’s hood. It has an enormous, hand-painted, labor-of-love portrait of The Count Gore DeVol done in black, white, silver, dark blue, and red against the car’s neon orange color. David says he’s getting his graffiti artist friend, Lee, to come and work on the rest of the paint job next weekend.

“David,” I say, “that is an incredible likeness of The Count.

“It took a couple of days to do it,” he said, “I passed out once doing the detail work. I’m going to leave the garage door open next time.”

Jim puts a cone-hat on David.

We march inside and the case of Heineken is open before the apartment’s door is closed. Jim has his bag of party nonsense open and starts taping paper wolfmen, bats, and skulls to the wall. I go to the

Bohemian Love Pad and get my boom-box. The perfect Halloween party music is required. Ah, Blue Oyster Cult's "On Your Feet or on Your Knees," recorded live in 1975, a vintage BOC year. I bring the machine into the living room, plug it in, and hit the play button. The intro to "The Subhuman," starts to play. We all say "oooh."

The girls are at the door. Tina and Donna are carrying the party platter. It's the size of a Hechinger's tool shed. Tina looked at me, kissed me, and said she wanted a hat, too. Jim pointed to his bag and soon everyone had the appropriate head gear on. Tina sets the tray down, and gallops into the kitchen to get the 3 liter Chablis bottle and Mr. Mike's goofy-ghost plastic cups. Girls always go for wine. Guys drink beer. I ask Tina why that happens.

"Bloat factor," she told me.

"Gotcha," I said.

Tina clears the coffee table and arranges the platter, plastic forks, napkins, and cups for everyone. Debbie and David start making curly streamers with the black and orange paper, and tape long, looping, twisty ribbons across the room. Pink has gotten into the jumping eyeballs and is winding them up and letting them hop around the living room. Mr. Mike has stretched out several yards of fake spider webs, and is turning our window sill into something from "Castle of Frankenstein." Jim goes back to his bag after taping lots of paper monsters, devils, maniacs, ghosts, blood-drenched ball-peen hammers, snakes, rats, hockey masks, and hand saws to the wall, and starts throwing everyone their very own plastic vampire teeth.

Pink puts the phony dentures in his mouth and says, "look I'm from England." David brings the trash can out from the kitchen and places it in the corner of the living room. The second and third rounds of Heinekens and draughts of wine are in full swing. The empty bottles go in the trash can and make klink, klank, klinking noises. Tina has stealthed into my room and removed my "Elvira, Mistress of the Dark" poster and is taping it up over the VCR where Mr. Mike has placed the color TV. When she's finished she comes and sits on the arm of the easy chair I'm settled in.

"Isn't this great?," she asked me through her synthetic choppers.

"Words fail me," I replied.

"I think Debbie really likes David," she told me.

"How can you tell?," I asked.

“He’s single, nice-looking, can actually speak without saying ‘duh,’ has a car, and he’s funny. What else do you want?”

“He’s completely crazy,” I told her.

“Who isn’t,” she rejoined, “it doesn’t matter. They like each other. It’s such a miracle when you meet someone who makes you happy. Look at him. He’s being ‘Mr. Guy,’ for her.”

David was indeed being “Mr. Guy.” He was telling her stories with his chest pumped-up, becoming all the characters, acting out their movements, and Debbie was in gaga-ville with the whole thing.

Tina turned off some lights, and on the boom-box, Blue Oyster Cult started to play Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild.” Tina grabbed my hand and started jumping around Pogo-dance style in the middle of the living room floor. There was nothing to do but follow her lead. David and Debbie started jitterbugging along with us, and soon all of us were acting like complete Grand-mal retards, spazzing around on the floor with cone-hats on our heads, and plastic teeth hanging out of our mouths. At this pivotal moment, my mother comes in the front door of the apartment.

“Born to be Wild,” was the last song on the tape, and the cassette clicked to a finish. My mom stood in the doorway, and looked at us like we’d landed in her living room on the X-15 rocket plane. A smile was turning up at the corners of her mouth. “We just got paid,” Mr. Mike said.

Mom was glad to see everybody, especially David and Mr. Mike. We turned the lights back up, and I got a bottle of champagne open for her. She sat on the sofa and greeted everybody. We all sat around the party platter and noshed and talked. Mom had never met most of the people, so she had plenty of stuff to ask them. She liked the decorations. Jim told her they cost next to nothing when you buy them in volume. Mom said she thought I’d be interested in the volume discount information.

After we had all consumed way too much party food, beer, and wine, Pink connected the color TV to the VCR. Tina turned the lights back down and Jim lit some of the pumpkin candles. Donna, the most responsible person in the room, went to the kitchen and prepared the Jiffy-Pop for the movie. People were getting kind of groggy so we skipped “The Mummy” and went straight to “Horror of Dracula.” Debbie said she thought we were going to watch a Kevin Kline movie. Mr. Mike said that he thought Kevin was in this movie but he was only 2 years old at the time.

“That’s not completely fair, Mr. Mike,” she said.

“He’s in there,” he told her, “but you have to look for him.”

Pink does his juju with the remote and the screen comes on. Oh, my God. Color TV. How totally beautiful. The Hammer Group horror films have a way of including sweeping, panoramic, Technicolor landscapes, seascapes, cloudscapes, moonscapes, and streetscapes in them. Anything you can “scape” over, they do it, and then go straight for the cleavage shots of Ingrid Pitt and Barbara Steele. Everybody likes the movie. We all warn the dumb people in the castle to watch out for Christopher Lee, but they don’t listen to us. They’re as good as drained.

Peter Cushing is the best Professor Van Helsing ever. I ask mom if he’s old school. “Totally,” she said. So the good guys chase The Count around various European “scapes” and finally he gets microwaved by the sunshine in a gothic castle staircase. He’ll be back. He’s resilient.

Everybody is great at helping clean up the apartment before they leave. Soon all the paper things are off the walls, the left-over munchies are in the refrigerator, and the trash is taken downstairs. “Many hands make light work, Grasshopper,” Master Po would undoubtedly remind us. Pink re-connects the black-and-white set to the VCR. Mr. Mike cracks open the second bottle of champagne, and we all have a drink before its time to head home.

Mom tells everyone how much she’s enjoyed having them over. She’s had a drop too much wine and stimulation today, and tears up a little. Tina sits next to her and they talk the secret, healing language of women for a while. Jim tells me he hasn’t had this good a time since the KISS: Destroyer Tour in 1976. David and Debbie secretly exchange phone numbers when they’re sure no one’s looking. Donna tells me I’ve risen a notch in her personal estimation. I thanked her, and told her I was taking her advice, and saying as little as possible these days.

I thank Mr. Mike and Pink for their contributions to the Dalton Gang’s unofficial Halloween bash. I help the guys carry the TV out to the car and hang-out with them for a few minutes. They tell me things seem to be improving at the store. The returns are going well. No one from the front office is bitching about why we’re sending back old inventory; we’re selling Halloween books at a good clip, and everyone is getting stoked about The Count coming to the mall.

“Just Be Here Now, Mr. Mike,” I said.

“Be Here Now, P-Man,” he replied.

"I be sick of this shit," Pink said, putting a finish to the blathering.

The girls, Jim, and David come out to the parking lot. David shows Debbie the picture of The Count he painted on the hood of his car.

"Wow, you're cool," Debbie told him.

"Yes baby, I am," David replied.

Tina hooks her arm through mine and kisses me goodnight.

"You guys are such pornstars," David told us.

Tina looked at Debbie.

"It's a small mall we work in," Debbie chirped.

The crew all get in their rides. They wave hands, beep horns, flash headlights at each other, and disappear onto 31st Street.

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Seven

After the party, mom talks with me for a while before we go to sleep. I give her the paycheck money and keep my 25 dollars. My mother says we can start doing some serious car shopping soon. Unfortunately, neither of us knows anything about buying, or researching prices for one. She knows she wants a Dodge K-car. That's it. That's all she knows. She likes Lee Iacocca from the Chrysler commercials. He's old school; that's for sure.

I tell her I'll start looking in the Washington Post classifieds and ask some pals at work about the car buying procedures. Pink will be a good resource. Mom tells me she thinks things are becoming more

psychologically tolerable around the house lately. She likes all my friends and says I'm not acting as eccentric as I had been the last year or so. I told her I hadn't been myself since Farrah Fawcett left the "Charlie's Angels" TV program.

That night my dreams featured Tina fellating me while wearing her plastic tiara and vampire teeth. When my inevitable climax arrived, the runoff dribbled down her cheeks and onto her breasts. It burned her hooters like napalm. She apparently loved the sensation, and laughed like a playful dolphin.

The next week at work, I do lunch with Queen Tina several times. I've been bringing sandwiches with me, and we get cookies or ice cream and sit on the benches near Skyline Racquet and Health Club. We watch the poodle wives bounce around in their Danskin tops and leg warmers. I've been reading *Car* and *Love is a dog From Hell* when I get a chance. They are absolute rocket-rides. Now *these* are great books! These guys write about the cool shit: sex, cars, drugs, psychos, guns, weirdness, voodoo, cigarettes, bad-guys and completely evil bad- girls. This is the stuff of my wildest dreams.

If I had known such books existed in my younger years, I might actually have become a success at something. We never read anything remotely interesting in high school. How do they pick the books for us to read in our educational system? It's not possible that they're chosen to keep students awake. Reading most of the required English texts is like experiencing the final moments of euthanasia.

I bring *Love is a dog From Hell* with me at lunch time and recite to Tina these incredible poems like: "girls in pantyhose," "the insane always loved me," "huge ear rings," "cockroach," and "she came out of the bathroom." They are all jawbusters, completely in-your-face, eat-this, funhouse-crazy. Tina tells me I should do something nice for Office Building Gary. He's the guy who decided my mind was worth cultivating, for reasons that are entirely his own. I told her I hadn't seen him for a while. But when I do, I'll give him a big, red, lollipop.

My girlfriend tells me she had a great time at the impromptu Halloween party, but we didn't get a chance to perform complete physicals on each other. She wants a physical examination soon. She wants to play Doctor. Now I'm informed she's becoming Nurse Tina. I told her I'm agreeable to being her physician, and aware that our Fridays are booked throughout eternity.

"Isn't that right?" I ask.

"That's correct, Bunky," she replied.

“Why don’t we schedule an appointment for your exam on Friday after work?,” I ask her, “it’ll give you time to find a nurse’s uniform and cap. I like the cap.”

“I have a short white uniform dress,” she said, almost too small to wear. I’d just be bursting out of it.”

I told her I was a forgiving kind of guy. If she couldn’t scare up a nurse’s uniform, I was agreeable to other options: power-secretary Tina, college-girl Tina, Malibu Tina, Tina of the wild frontier, sci-fi action figure Tina, Tina of the SS, Empress Tina of Arlingtonia, or country-girl in the haystack Tina. Anything except disco Tina, or horseback riding Tina.

“I like the nurse-thing the best,” she said, “I like to make people feel achingly good.”

She asked me about mom. Tina said she noticed that she had a hard time moving around at the party.

“She has good days and bad days with her arthritis,” I told her, “and that’s one of the reasons we want to get a car soon. Her legs and back give her problems, and she can’t move around so easily anymore. She misses her freedom and mobility.”

“How old is your mom?,” she asked.

“In her mid-60s,” I told her, “I’d really like to do something nice for her sometime soon. She wants me to be a success at something in life, and I think I’m really disappointing her. I don’t know what the hell to do.”

Women have a strange, intrinsic healing power about them which gets doled out at birth, and Tina turned hers on me full-blast.

She held me and said, “you’re doing everything you can for her. I hope if I ever have a son, he’s a lot like you. You’re a joy to her, although sometimes it might not seem that way. I know at times she seems miserable and you don’t know how to help her, but imagine if you weren’t there. What would it be like for her then? She’s lonely, and in pain sometimes. If you weren’t there, it would be unbearable for her. You’re the kindest guy I know.”

“Tina,” I said, “this is the reason I need a girl in my life. I don’t know who to talk to about this stuff. I try and make decisions that will benefit everyone and things constantly fucking blow-up in my face. Mom wants me to find someone to share my life with, and I can’t leave her with her ailments. Also I’m no

Donald Trump when it comes to pulling down great sums of cash. It just seems like I'm fucked no matter what I do."

Tina pulled me closer and said, "listen, as long as you have one person, just one, at the end of the day to tell you you're great, and that they love you, you can make it. Sometimes the world seems like it's trying to crush the life out of you; and I've learned some things in my experience: you can't make it alone; you've got to trust a few people and let them help you. Listen, babe, I love you. I love you so much I can start crying at how lucky I am to have found you. I'm here whenever you need me. I'm your girl."

"Nurse Tina, Queen of Skyline Mall," I said, "the Annette Haven devotee, X-rated cheerleader, pizza noshing, champagne swigging, slow dancing, June Cleaver imitating, sports-car driving, bra-less, Joan Jett clone of South Arlington is my girl? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yup," she said.

"OK," I said, "then you've got a date for Friday."

During the week Tina comes into the store and takes more flyers for the second wave of advertising at the local high schools. Her kiss-army now comes to the mall to pick up their ads. The teen reptiles line up in front of 1-Hour Photo, receive their materials, and get smoldering lip-locks from my girlfriend. I'm more than a little glad this is the last wave of ads, no matter how much Tina claims she does it to build their self-esteem.

Jim has run into some snags with his Lego life-size model of The Count Gore DeVol. The arms get too heavy and fall off, scattering Legos everywhere each time one drops. The legs are fine. The chest is fine. He's used lots of white, red, and blue bricks to form The Count's tunic and collar. But the arms are a challenge. I ask him if it's possible to make the arms look like they're in his pockets, so they'll appear like lumps coming out of his sides, instead of long heavy limbs.

"It's an option," he said, "however, I want it to be realistic. The Count never has his hands in his pockets on TV."

"True, true," I said.

"Maybe you could run some support wire over his shoulders and down through the arms," I mentioned, "Pink did something like that with his flying revenant over the Halloween display at the book

store. He's got support wires under the acoustic tiles in the ceiling and under the monorail track. I bet he could help you out."

Jim said if he ever quits the toy store, he wants to come work at B. Dalton and be smart like us book-people. I told him to be unusually careful in what he wished for.

Later in the week mom and I are watching Johnny Carson on the VCR and the phone rings. I answer it with my usual trepidation. A professional sounding male voice inquires if this is our residence. He wants to speak to mom, if she's available. I ask him who's calling and he tells me "Tony from Springfield Dodge." I tell mom who it is and she's apprehensive. "A car salesman?," she asks. She tells me to get on the phone in my room and listen to the conversation.

Tony, we find out, is one of Terri's regular customers at Joe Theismann's restaurant. The information of our intent to get a K-car has daisy-chained itself from mom, to me, to Tina, to Terri, to Tony from Springfield Dodge. Tony knows everything about us: we have a good down payment ready, mom works for the U.S. Government, there are two incomes in the house, our ages for insurance purposes, and can quote us AARP Credit Union car loan rates.

Tony tells us he's got a demonstrator car, last year's model, available. It's got air conditioning, automatic transmission, AM/FM radio, tinted glass, and the endless other things car salesmen say about their rides. Because it's a demonstrator, and 1 year old, they've got to get rid of it, for a new sexy demo-car. It's got 3,000 miles on the odometer, but carries the warranty of a new car from Dodge. This year's model of the same car costs 9000 dollars. The demonstrator he's telling us about costs \$6000. If we had a down payment of, say, \$4000, the interest rate on the Credit Union \$2000 loan would be minimal, and we could do payments for 2 years for about a 100 dollars a month. He said he knew we had difficulty getting over to the dealership, so he'd be glad to drive it over for her to see.

I run into the living room and tell mom to let Tony do his thing. Terri wouldn't have given our number to him if she thought he was some evil shitbag. Terri is organized and accurate. Besides, he's saving us a lot of footwork. Mom takes his telephone number and says she'll check into the loan from the credit union tomorrow at work. Tony said to give him a call as soon as we could about the loan status. Mom told Tony thanks for calling. She said he had a sweet voice, and sounded like a nice man.

"So Tina's been busy, busy, busy," mom said to me.

“Tina’s always busy, busy, busy,” I replied, “she’s like the Goddard Space Center of information at the mall. She can talk faster than a particle-beam weapon, about anything.”

“She’s got our best interest in mind,” mom said, “she’s a real friend, she loves you, and she’s just crazy enough to keep you from getting bored.”

“She likes to dress up in different costumes and run around the basement of her house,” I told mom.

“You see,” she said, “she’s perfect for you.”

I get a call from David later in the week. He says he needs some help with the modifications of the Blood Vessel, and maybe I could come by and help him out on Sunday. His friend Lee will be by on Saturday to finish the paint job. David wants to go to the Annandale Foam Center to buy bulk foam rubber for the car’s cosmetic upgrade.

“There’s a place called the ‘Annandale Foam Center?,’ I asked, “there’s an actual place with that name?”

“It’s a real David Lynch kind of warehouse, P-Man,” he said, “you’d love it.”

“This country has no future,” I chirped.

I told him I’d ask Tina to come with us. She had to see this place called the “foam center.” I was sure she’d want to bring one of her cameras for the event.

The next evening mom tells me she’s talked to the credit union, and the loan is no problem. The interest rate is low, just like Tony mentioned, and the payments on a two-year note will be 110 dollars a month. Then she said she called one of the technicians at the Shirlington Texaco on Quincy Street. She spoke to “a nice young man,” and he told her the Dodge K-series was as dependable an American car as you could get. He said with the options and warranty, 6000 dollars was an excellent price to pay for the automobile.

She had called Tony from the office, and he’d bring the car by tonight. If we liked it, she could write a check to the credit union tomorrow and they’d pay Springfield Dodge the full amount. Mom looked at me with nutty anticipation.

“We might have a new car tomorrow,” she said, “I’ve never owned a new car before. My father had a new Model “T” Ford when we lived in Garden City, New Jersey in the 20s, and that’s been it. We’ve

always had second hand junkers, bombers, and wrecks to drive after that. Did Tony say what color it was?" she asked, "I don't remember him saying."

"White," I said.

"That's good. White's nice," she replied.

"Tina won't like it," I told her, "she'll want it metallic green, with green windows, and green wheels."

"Tina will get over her disappointment," mom said.

Tony comes by at the appointed time. He's a salesman, but not completely satanic. He calls mom "Madame" and me "Sir." We tell him it's OK to drop the formal titles. Tony says that's fine with him. He takes us out to the parking lot where the white Dodge K-car is parked. It is the single most rectangular car ever produced. It looks like a mega-sized white brick with four seats. Mom sits in the passenger side and Tony gets behind the wheel. I sit in the back.

Tony takes us for a ride along Interstate Highway 395-South and we get off at the Duke Street East exit. He goes at different speeds, and tells us the virtues of the car. It feels remarkably smooth. "It's a Dodge," Tony says. He goes back down Duke to Jordan Street, left on Seminary Road, and right on Beauregard, back to Route 7. Tony tells us that because no drivers will be under 25 years old, the insurance is going to be pretty low. Maybe \$400 a year. He gave us the name of his insurance agent at State Farm. He said she's a good egg.

Mom wants to know about Tina's sister.

"Terri?," he said, "I'd marry her in a heartbeat. I'm not the most organized guy in the world, and she's not only beautiful and whip-crack smart, but she knows where EVERYTHING is located in her life." I confirm Tony's statement.

"She's unusually together," I tell mom, "a place for everything, and everything in it's place, and that's that. Finita la musica. It's close to an insect-mentality she has about arrangement."

Mom asks us if Terri is as pretty as Tina. Tony and I exchange glances. "Two different species," Tony says, "Terri is like a Playboy centerfold. Every molecule is sanitized and catalogued. She's nice. She likes order; but she's not a Heinrich Himmler control freak. Tina is the pagan fertility-goddess. She's all

hormones, and instinct, and living in the minute. But she's together, too." Mom tells Tony that I'm Tina's new boyfriend. He seems impressed, for a salesman.

Tony says he's only met her once, up at Joe Theismann's Restaurant, but she was impossible to forget.

"She was hanging out with some friends," he told us, "but you couldn't take your eyes off her. It's like her beauty starts in the center of her body and radiates out like a furnace."

Mom said, "that's her, all right. I think she's a remarkable young lady." When my mom says that about anybody, they are on the A-list. Tony wheels the machine up to the house and mom asks him to come into the house for a coffee or soda pop, and to talk cars.

We all walk inside the apartment. Mom and Tony sit down on the sofa and start reminiscing about rides they've owned in the past: all the good and bad memories they had about them. I go in the kitchen and bring out three plastic cups and a liter of Coca-Cola, then pour the soda and watch the fizzy, carbonation subside on all our drinks. After a minute, mom puts her hand on Tony's knee and tells him,

"Tony, I'm an old lady, and my son and I have saved and scratched for months to get money for a car. I want you to tell me, honestly, if this is a good automobile for us. We're not going to drive it across the country 10 times. All our friends and interests are in the area. If you we're going to buy a car for your mother, would you buy this one?"

Mom's honesty and straight-forwardness had a stunning effect on both of us. "Ma'am," Tony said, "the service technicians at Springfield Dodge have given this car excellent care for one year. It was our K-car demonstrator. If the demonstrator car didn't work well, no one would have bought the other cars off the lot. It's been garage kept, and driven a few miles several times a week for the year we've had it. My mother drives an El Dorado Cadillac, so I'm not sure she'd be interested in the Dodge Series K-car, but if I were looking for a car myself, for \$6000, I'd buy this one without hesitation. My commission will be 150 dollars from the dealership. I'm telling you that up front. That's all I'd get for selling this car. That, and maybe Terri will send a complimentary rum and tonic my way at Theismann's. That's the long and the short of it ma'am."

Mom told Tony we'd take the car.

The sense of relief in the room was unmistakable. We finished our sodas and talked about Terri the bartender, The Redskins, Ronald Reagan, and other frivolities. Mom said she'd make the arrangements with the AARP Credit Union tomorrow. Tony said he'd call them in the morning and bring the car, keys, and literature by in the evening. He told us to make sure to call State Farm Insurance right after calling the credit union. He can't leave the car with us unless we're insured. Mom told Tony he was sharp as a tack in his profession.

The next day at work I stop by Hi Jinx Toys at lunch time. Jim has completed the Lego sculpture of The Count Gore DeVol, except for the problem with arms. He's done a fine job. Lots of Lego detail. The Count's head looks like a housetop because the manufacturers haven't marketed round Legos yet. They're all square or rectangular. It doesn't matter. It's The Count. You can tell. I ask Jim about his dilemma with the arms. He says he's going to talk to Pink today for structural advice. I told him Pink loves mechanical challenges.

Back in the store I tell our technical specialist about Jim's difficulty with his Lego statue. Pink asks me to specify exactly what the problem is. I relay the information to him. He said, "does Hi Jinx Toys sell erector sets?" I told him that was a certainty. "I have a plan," Pink said, "a child could do it." Then, like the mad scientist he is, he put his hands on his hips, threw his head back, and laughed.

At home that night, Tony brings our new car to us. He's got an associate from Springfield Dodge with him. They drove two cars over, so Tony could get a ride back to the dealership after the delivery. They come in the apartment and give us: hundreds of pages of Dodge K-car literature, plastic bags with carbon papers in them, a service record, a red folder, a complimentary pen, two sets of car keys, and a booklet of valuable coupons that will save us hundreds of dollars at participating local businesses. Tony was quick to tell us that Joe Theismann's Restaurant has a 2-for-the-price-of-one entree coupon in the booklet.

Mom thanks Tony and his minion for being so nice and helping us finally get our automobile. Mom is so maternal towards them that they both hug her before exiting. Tony leaves his business card and tells us to call him if the car even thinks about acting funny. They say goodbye to us and go out the door. Mom goes to the window and waves to them as they get in their ride. They wave back to us like old war buddies.

I ask mom if she'd like a cocktail, and she tells me I'm a mind reader. I fix her a scotch and soda and I get a beer. Mom just sits in a stupor for a while, then breaks down with the tears.

"I can't believe we did it," she sniffed, "you saved so much money. You bought your clothes at that awful thrift-place, and ate Pop-tarts instead of human food for so long. I hope it's all been worthwhile for us."

"It's cool mom, don't worry, I like Pop-tarts," I told her, "and of course it was worth it. 'We're mobile, baby,' as Tina would say."

We finish our drinks and I ask her if she might want to go for a ride in her NEW CAR. "You drive," she said, "I'm too nervous." We finish our cocktails and head for the K-car.

We get to the new machine and it shines like a knife. I open the door for mom and she slides in slowly. I run around the other side and get in behind the wheel. We struggle with the seat belts and get mom's adjusted after a few minutes. I turn the ignition key and the engine starts instantly, and it's so quiet. We look at each other and smile. Mom says "oh, what a nice, calm sound." We turn on the radio and it's all drivel on the pre-set buttons: soft rock, news, classical music, Jesus-stations, easy listening. I must re-set the pre-sets tomorrow.

We start the car out of the driveway and fiddle with the radio dial. We're moving in our new car. Mom looks teleported. She cranks open the window as the machine cruises down 31st Street, and the cool October air breezes into the car. The wind is blowing mom's hair around and she doesn't seem to mind. She's got her eyes closed and she's enjoying the first few minutes of the new ride. I get blips on the radio as I flip from station to station and then mom hears something and looks excited. "That was Frank!," she said, "turn it back to the last station." It was Frank Sinatra on the radio. Mr. Old School himself. I didn't even have to ask mom about his school-status. He's the chairman of that particular clan.

"Oh, I love Frank Sinatra," she said. Frank was singing the song "The Summer Wind." I turned the volume up a notch, and mom was humming the tune as we drove up Quaker Lane. She slid back in her seat to enjoy the whole experience: The new machine, Frank, the smells of October in the air, and a sense of accomplishment that one feels too rarely in life. I drove around the neighborhood for a while waving to neighbors and checking out Halloween decorations on the houses. Mom looks younger than she did an hour ago.

After a few laps around the neighborhood, I asked mom if she was hungry.

“Where should we go to eat?” she said, “my treat.”

“I know the perfect place,” I told her.

We turn on Fern Street and park in the First American Bank parking lot. Don’t park in the Town and Country Realtors lot next to it. They tow without reservation. I help mom with her safety belt and we go into Rampart’s Restaurant, “The Best Neighborhood Bar in Alexandria, as voted by the readers of Washingtonian Magazine,” I told her. Mom thanked me for the update of their local ranking.

I help mom inside and we find a booth out of the line of fire from the jukebox. The special tonight is absolutely designed for my mother. The w.a.s.p.-iest meal imaginable: pork chop, baked potato, broccoli, brown gravy, Parker House rolls. For dessert: French vanilla ice cream and pound cake. She’s in heaven. I love this bar.

I think mom has been observing Tina’s eating habits. She goes for her chop like a National Geographic animal. I’ll have to be careful if I ever go out with both of them to a restaurant. I’ll need to find one of those all-you-can-eat places. Mom noshes and talks and laughs. The meal is fantastic, as usual. I’ve never had a bad forkful of food at Ramparts. She finishes everything on her plate, and dessert. When we leave she makes me go to the Peoples Drug Store on the corner and get a Peter Paul Mounds candy bar. She was emphatic that I not get an Almond Joy. “I want dark chocolate and coconut,” she said.

Back to the K-car, and mom gets back in the passenger seat. We cruise down Quaker Lane to the 395 interchange and get off on Quincy Street. This time I do a sneaky James Bond thing and turn on to Randolph Street and drive behind the Best and Company to their huge parking area. We drive to the far corner of the lot, and I stop the car. I tell mom she should drive around the car park and get used to the machine. She hadn’t driven in a few years and was hesitant to try. However, she knew it was a good idea. I told her I’d felt kind of itchy about driving until a little while ago. But after Queen Tina demanded that I drive her around in the MG Midget, it was great, and I started to enjoy it again.

“She’s an angel,” mom said.

“She might be,” I rejoined.

Mom slid over to the driver's side and I got out and ran over to the passenger door. I showed mom how the turn indicators and wind shield wipers work. It's easy to get them confused. Mom looks ready. She drops the shifter into drive and the car creeps along.

"Oooh," she said, "we're moving!"

"Yes, yes, you're doing great," I said, "now try to turn."

Mom turned the wind shield wipers on, but corrected her mistake in a second. She turned the flashers on and moved towards the parking lot exit.

"You're so cool," I yelled, "drive up Randolph Street."

Mom turned right on to Randolph Street like a champion and headed for 31st Street. I turned on the radio. They were playing Smokey Robinson's "Ooh Baby Baby." Mom smiled like young Lauren Bacall.

She picked up speed and headed for the intersection of Randolph and 31st. She turned on the right turn indicator, and came to a full stop before the stop sign, just as the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles Handbook stipulates. We started up the hill. This hill was her personal albatross for years. As her arthritis progressed, she experienced more and more difficulty walking back home from the Fresh Value Market.

"We're driving up the hill, man!," I whooped, "it can't fuck with you anymore, babe!"

"You're damn right, sonny" she said, and punched the gas. The K-car flew up the incline with mom laughing like a Baroness behind the wheel.

After we get back to the apartment, mom hugs me and says things are going to be better now that we're able to go places. She said she wouldn't mind it if I gave her a couple of driving lessons behind the Best and Company before she starts driving to work again. I told her it was no problem. Everybody learns to drive, or reacquaints themselves with driving, at the Best and Company parking lot. She said until she feels comfortable taking the car to Crystal City, why don't I drive it to work for the next few days. Oh my God. I hadn't even thought about that. I can DRIVE to work. Mama mia, things are going to be better.

I go to sleep that evening and dream that "Elvira, Mistress of the Dark," jumped out of the poster on my wall, kissed me on the cheek, and leapt out of the window of my room. Now that I've seen her, at

least subconsciously, from the front and back, I can tell you she looks just as good entering a room as she does exiting one.

What an amazing week. A new car, dinner at Ramparts, great books, and now it's Friday. Payday. And that means a date with Nurse Tina, sexual healer of bookstore clerks. I get up early in the morning and drive down to the Fresh Value Market and buy mom a steak, champagne, artichokes, and French bread for her dinner tonight. Mom thanks me to no end, and tells me to have a great time with Princess-T this evening. I told her what Tina said about the Friday-forever date-commandment, and asked mom if that was a real rule, or was it just a mallgirl rule. She said she wasn't sure, but it sounded like a GOOD rule, whoever came up with it.

I get my hat and jacket and library books, then kiss mom goodbye. I gallop to the K-car, fire it up Batman-style, and drive up 31st Street. While driving, it becomes necessary to reset the pre-set buttons on the radio. Goodbye: soft rock, salvation station, creepy news guy, 101 strings, and Sir Nevil Mariner conducting The Academy of St. Martin in the Field. Hello: Rock and roll-DC/101, Home Grown Radio-WHFS, New Jazz-WDCU, Soul-WHUR, and Old School Jazz-WPFW. How anyone can listen to soft rock, I'll never know.

I get a great idea while I'm driving up Route 7, and cruise past the mall and turn on to Forest Drive. I get out in front of Tina's house and ring the door bell. She opens the door and has a toothbrush in her mouth. "Nice toothbrush, Bunky," I say, "wanna ride?" I point to the K-car. Tina says something like "mgoooosh" and toothpaste foam goes flying from her mit. She stuffs the toothbrush in her jeans pocket and flies into my arms. We're making-out on her front lawn with cavity-fighting glop dripping from our mouths. I guess we are pornstars after all.

Tina dashes in the house and I start to wipe Colgate, or Crest, or Safeway brand dentrifice off of my face. Terri comes down the stairs and out to the driveway in a matching royal blue velour robe and bedroom slippers. She apologized to me for not having any make-up on. I told her not to black out from shame.

"Oh my God," she said, "you really did it. Tony, wow, Tony said he'd called you guys but that was it. Oh, I'm so happy for you." She hugged me. I still had white goop on my mouth. She didn't care.

“I bet your mom is delighted,” she chirped. Even without make-up, she was so beautiful in the morning light I couldn’t answer her right away. She had so many perfect teeth. Like a dinosaur.

Tina skittered out of the house wearing hip-hugger jeans, white T-shirt, sunglasses, and a nurse’s cap. She had a camera with her. The lens was as protracted as a Tokemaster bong. She started clicking off pictures of me and Terri.

“Stand by the car,” she said, “do weird things, make love to the camera.”

I ran over to the ride, lay on the ground, and put my head in front the tires.

“That’s great,” Tina barked, “Terri, sit on the hood, show some skin,” she encouraged.

“You guys belong in St. Elizabeth’s,” Terri said, “I’ll sit on the hood, but that’s all.”

Tina got several photos of me looking like a road-kill. Terri sat on the hood of the ride and fixed her hair.

“Show me those pretty legs,” Tina yelled.

“I don’t believe I’m doing this,” Terri said.

She crossed her legs and opened her robe to reveal two structurally perfect, waxed, shaved, moisturized, world-class pins.

“Pucker-up for me, baby,” Tina chattered, “do the Marilyn Monroe thing.”

Terri air-kissed the camera, and the invisible adoring crowd.

“Now get some of me and Terri,” she told me.

She handed me the camera and said all I had to do was push the shutter button. All the light, film speed, and distance settings were fine. She sat on the hood with Terri and hugged her. I got several shots of them.

“Now” she said, “on the count of three I’m going to kiss Terri all hot and slurpy-like and pull my shirt up like a dirty girl. You don’t want to miss this. OK?”

“My crazy, horny, nympho-sister,” Terri said, and shook her head like a corrections officer.

Tina counted off, “One, Two, Three!”

Tina kissed her sister and pulled Terri’s robe apart to expose two remarkably firm, perky, 33-Cs. The camera clicked in perfect synchronization to her unveiling.

“Oh you weasel!” Terri shouted, “I’m going to make you eat dirt!” She snatched her robe up around her front and chased Tina around the yard. The camera was getting photos of it all.

“Oh, Terri, your tits are so gorgeous!” Tina yelled, “they get me so hot and bothered!” and she scampered away from her sister’s grasp. “You can’t beat me up when I’m telling you how sweet your boobs are!”

Terri gave up her pursuit, and told Tina to have a good day at the mall. She was going back to bed. It was too early to beat-up her baby sister. Terri asked me to say hello to mom for her and went into the house.

“I got some great photos of the hot pursuit,” I told Tina.

“You’re a strudel,” she said.

Tina goes in the house, grabs her purse, and jumps in the K-car with me. She says she can develop the film at work and torment Terri for weeks with the scandalous photos. I told her I might like a copy of the one with Terri’s compromised wardrobe. “Maybe,” Tina said.

I reminded her this was the last day of flyering the various parking lots and her help had been incredible. Jim and I would finish doing the Skyline parking lot today at lunch time. There were only about 100 left to distribute.

“I’ve got it covered,” she said, “one of my little stallions is coming to finish the job after school lets out today.”

“Are you paying him in estrogen?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, and wrinkled her nose at me.

“You really are the neighborhood Joan Collins,” I told her. “I like the nurse’s cap it makes you look like a professional.”

“Terri said I looked like an escaped mental patient,” she said, “I got it last night at the Drug Fair. A whole nurse’s costume. They’ve got all their Halloween stuff out in the Seasonal aisle. You’d love it. Jim would blast his jam.”

“You bought a nurse’s outfit for our date tonight?” I asked.

“Yup,” she said, “it’s tiny, like for 12-year olds. You shouldn’t have any trouble tearing it off me.”

“Why would I tear it off you?” I asked.

“Because that’s what The Wolfman does when he’s freaking out on moonbeams and beer and hormones,” she said.

“You got me a Wolfman costume from the Drug Fair?” I asked.

“Yup,” she said, “make-up too.”

I told Tina about David and the Annandale Foam Center safari on Sunday. She said she’d bring the camera and help us buy the structural extensions for *The Blood Vessel*. She couldn’t believe there was a place that only sold different kinds of synthetic foam.

“Sounds wiggly,” she said.

“No doubt,” I rejoined.

We get to the mall and Tina gives me a real kiss goodbye. “You’ve still got a little toothpaste on your cheek” she said, and licked it off me like a cat cleaning one of her kittens. “Tastes like chicken,” she chirped. She tells me she’ll come by the store at 5:00 and then we’ll go wild at her house, go out, and do some weird craziness tonight. I tell her “okey-dokey,” then park the car on the absolute fringe of the lot, next to a light pole. One million people will have to be at Skyline before someone parks next to me.

At work I tell everyone about the new ride and they’re happy-kids. Mr. Mike buys me a paperback copy of Hunter Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, as a new car gift. He says it’ll make me want to drive fast. Pink comes in the store just at opening time, and wants to take us to Hi Jinx Toys to show us something. He says that he’s created his masterpiece. Mr. Mike looks at me. We both want to see what’s going on. He scribbles a “Back in 5 minutes” sign and tapes in to the glass door. Then we leave the store and lock up the entrance.

The 3 of us cruise down the hall to the toy store and find Jim in a state of technical ecstasy. The Count Gore DeVol statue is not only complete, it’s animated. Jim and Pink got together for a couple of hours after work yesterday, and created a Lego-erector set cyborg. They had removed The Count’s upper body, and placed 2 small DC motors that come with the deluxe Testor’s Erector Sets, into the statue’s cavity. Then they attached support beams from the building sets to The Count’s arms and neck. Pink then connected a pulley on each arm, and attached their belts to the spindle on the DC motor. So when you turn one of the motors on, The Count raises his arms like a bat about to take off in flight.

It gets better. The second DC motor was attached to the Count's Lego-housetop looking head. When that motor is activated the Count's head spins around 360 degrees in slow motion. When both motors are on, The Count looks like he's completely freaking out. The battery packs for the motors are mounted on The Count's back under his nylon Collegeville Costumes Dracula Cape.

They placed the whole statue on a wheeled platform, and now The Count is not only capable of doing Aerobic Exorcises, but he's mobile to boot. Jim had both motors on when we arrived, and was watching the creation buzz and whir, and do its thing. He was gaga with the whole shebang.

We just stood there, watching Jim watch The Count. It wouldn't have been right to disturb him at that moment. Mr. Mike finally said "ahem." Jim turned to look at us. "It's alive," he said, "alive." Pink went into detail about the workings and structural specs of the new creation but I didn't understand anything he said. The crew let him talk until he seemed sufficiently unburdened. We turned The Count's battery pack off and wheeled him into the window display area of the store. He looked perfect next to all the Halloween items Jim had in there. His mom had made a sign at home with cardboard and magic markers, and he placed it at the foot of his Lego model: The Count Gore DeVol will be at Skyline 6 Theaters on Friday October 30th for Cult Movie Madness!!

We tell our friend we need to get back to the store, but it was a trip seeing his labor of love come to life. I tell him I'll notify Tina to come take some pictures of his work for the history books. Back at the store, Pink turns on his flying revenant over the display area and watches it flip around for a minute. He tells us he loves direct current. Batteries have more to say to Pink than they do to me or Mr. Mike.

In the morning the Federal Express courier brings us our paychecks. I pass them out to Mr. Mike and Pink. Our manager puts the rest of them in the combination safe in the office. I take a bathroom break around 11:00 and go to Central Fidelity Bank to get my check cashed. I make an illegal stop at 1-Hour Photo and tell Tina about Jim's Lego-robot thing, and leave the remainder of the flyers for her miniature Romeo to disburse this afternoon. She says she hasn't developed Terri's boob-shots yet, so she'll get some pictures of the statue and then develop the whole roll. She told me I'm adorable when I'm jealous of 15-year olds.

At noon Donna and Debbie come in the store. They want to know what Tina and I are doing tonight. I told them I learned my lesson about Friday evenings, and we're doing costume rehearsal for

Halloween and probably getting dinner somewhere. They asked me what was meant by costume rehearsal. I told them it was a complicated matter. They informed me I looked different to them lately; I didn't look like I was going to jump out of my skin half the time, anymore.

"My face has cleared up some too," I chirped, "so what does that tell you?"

"Happy hormones?," they answered.

"And a 24-hour private nurse," I told them. They didn't understand me.

"Just wait," I said.

At 5:00 Tina comes in the store with the developed photos from the morning hoo-haw. I am not a photographer, but for whatever reason, I got a great shot of Terri's tomatoes. Some of the photos of her murderous pursuit of Tina were sidesplitting as well. Donna and Debbie ask Tina about her nurses' hat. She tells them I like the nurse-costume thing, and it is her duty, as my love-slave, to perform for me.

"Yeah," I told them, "perform and stuff."

Donna and Debbie huddle for a second.

"Um, Tina," they say, "as a love-slave, you have certain requirements you can demand of your dominator. Is P-Man, how shall we say, a well-endowed male?" Tina didn't hesitate a second.

"Like a T-Rex," she said.

Debbie's lip trembled. Donna developed a tic in her right eyelid.

We leave the store and blow air-kisses to everyone. On the way down the hall I thank Tina for the slight size-exaggeration of my manhood to the girls. "You don't get anywhere without advertising," she said, "I'm selling the sizzle AND the steak to them." We stop at Hi Jinx Toys and give Jim the photos of his Lego icon. He gets all wiggly and tells us how cool we are, and how great this mall is, and all kinds of subjective stuff. He puts one of the pictures next to the cash register and one in the window next to the Cult Movie sign.

Jim said he saw a bunch of flyers on the windshields of cars in the parking lot today. He said he thought we were going to do that job the last couple of weeks, but I never came around to get him. "Don't ask," I said. Tina made purring, Eartha Kitt noises.

"We're needed at the hospital," Tina said.

"Yes, nurse," I rejoin.

We tell Jim we'll see him soon and take off for the parking lot.

"I need protein," Tina said, "I'm powering down. Need-food-now. Do something: get me nourishment. You're the guy and it's your duty to feed me."

We get to the K-car and there's not a car for a quarter mile around it.

"You said something about steaks a minute ago," I said.

"Yes, yes," she answered, "big steaks, juicy steaks, big, juicy steaks."

"Well," I said, "it is a pay Friday. And you are my hungry love-slave."

"Yes," she answered, "hungry love-slave."

"So," I continued, "I guess The Steak and Ale on Seminary Road would be a good place for us to go."

Tina howled like a coyote.

"But first," I told her, "I need to make one stop."

"You're a baneful man," she said.

"5 minutes, then you can roll around in all the protein you want," I told her.

"Make it 3 minutes," she rejoined, "I think I'm melting."

I dropped the K-car into drive and headed down Route 7 East, towards The Shirlington Library. We turn off Route 7 to Walter Reed Drive. Then make a right on Arlington Mill Road. We're there in almost no time. Tina is making wounded animal noises. She says she's lost the feeling in her arms from hunger. "Hurry, P-man," she says, "you're my only hope." I park the K-car in the lot, get my books out of the back, and run inside the library. As I leave my titles on the Return table, the librarian sees me, and recognizes me from last week. "Are you ready to register to vote, sir?" she asks.

"Ma'am," I say, "I'm in something of a hurry. I've got my arty-nymphomaniac girlfriend in my mother's new Dodge K-car in the parking lot. She hasn't eaten since lunch and tells me she's actually losing consciousness from lack of nutrition. She's partially dressed-up like a nurse so we can play 'Werewolves in the Hospital' tonight, and if I don't get some food in her soon, she's not going to be a responsive love-slave. At this moment, I don't believe I can take the time to do it."

“It’s your duty as a citizen of Arlington County to vote in the November elections, as you well know, Sir,” she said with clean contempt for me. This is an awful situation. I promised her I would register last time I was here. Tina is probably chewing the ticking from the car seats by now.

“How long will it take?,” I ask her.

“About 2 minutes,” she said.

“Make it 90 seconds, and you’ve got a deal,” I replied.

“Let’s light this candle,” she answered.

I pulled my wallet from my pocket and gave her my driver’s license. She scribbled down all the information, and asked me to check yes or no in two boxes on the form: if I’m registered to vote in States other than Virginia, and if I’d committed any felonies in Virginia the authorities weren’t aware of. I checked the “No” box for both, then signed the form. She told me my registration card would be mailed to me in a few days. She was happy now. “Thank you for using your public library,” she said, “now go feed your sex-pot girlfriend.”

I flame out of the place, and find Tina lying on the hood of the K-car.

“I want to be buried in Texas,” she groaned, “that’s where cowgirls go to die.”

“Get in the car,” I told her, “you’ll be noshing your salad in 10 minutes.” Tina leapt up and into the passenger’s seat in a tick. We burn out of the parking lot, up Arlington Mill Road, and over to the Interstate 395 South ramp. We bolt down the highway one exit to the Seminary Road turn off, and park at the Steak and Ale, next to Southern Towers Apartments. The whole trip took 3 minutes.

Tina rips the car door open and sprints up to the door of Steak and Ale. She’s eating peanuts at the bar when I get to the entrance. She looks obsessed. The bartender asks her what she’d like to drink and leaves the peanut refill bag on the counter for her. Tina has ordered two Margaritas for us. We take them to a booth and soon we’ve got our plates for the salad bar. She piles up every item available at the table: beets, cold eggs, rotini, fried egg noodles, pickles, spinach, Mexican corn, carrots, greens, tomatoes, and a grayish mixture of something I could only describe as being Asian or Slavic in origin. Tina told me it was called Tofu. I had no response to that information.

A perky young girl-thing brought us some bread, and took our food order: Steaks, medium. Potatoes, baked. Margaritas, more. She didn’t need to write it down. Tina vaporized her salad and first

Margarita. She was about to hit the salad bar again, when our order came to the table. My date had a Kaiser roll in her mouth when the food arrived. She tried to say thank you to our waitress, but it just sounded like gagging.

There was little conversation during dinner. Tina's concentration was on her plate. The food was remarkably good. Steak and Ale has never let me down in the protein preparation department. Tina slows down her caloric intake, and soon she's her lovable self again. She plays footsie with me under the table and says she's getting anxious for a wardrobe change, and a chance to practice her thespian skills at home.

I pay for dinner and don't worry about spending too much dough. Mom and Tina have succeeded somewhat in getting me out of Scrooge McDuck mode. Old habits die hard, but I didn't freak leaving our perky girl a 30 per cent tip. Not completely, anyway. Waddling back to the K-car, Tina says she wants to go to the 7-11 at Southern Towers. We drive over and she jumps out while I idle the machine at the curb. She comes back with a six-pack of Heineken Dark beer. "For Oktoberfest," she said, "and turbo-charging my horny Wolfman."

While cruising back to her place, we turn on the radio. The Rolling Stones' "Undercover of the Night," thumps out of the K-car's speakers. The windows are down and the smell of wood smoke is in the air as we pull onto Forest Drive. Tina asks me what the K in K-car stands for. I tell her the K is for Kitty. Like the Kitty-Car Eartha Kitt used to drive when she was Cat Woman on the Batman TV show. "I like," she said. Then she asked me what kind of cars did Lee Merriweather and Julie Newmar drive when they played the role of Gotham City's feline felon.

"Jaguars," I told her.

"Makes sense," she rejoined.

Terri has taken The Midget to Joe Theismann's Restaurant, and we've got the house to ourselves. We put a few beers in the refrigerator, and take the rest downstairs to Castle Dracula. Tina has a sudden attack of passion as we get down to the basement. She takes my hand, drags me to her bed, and we make-out like young mandrills. My jeans almost combust with friction from my date's hand action. She breaks our kiss and looks at me. "I've got something to tell you," she said, "it's kind of important." Danger. Flashing lights. Trepidation.

She pulls me up so we're sitting on the bed. Tina puts her forehead against mine and takes a deep breath. "We won't need to use the condoms anymore, unless you want to use them" she said, "I've started taking birth control pills." I didn't know what to say. I just stayed in my position, knowing further explication was inevitable.

"Do you remember when I told you about latex and diseases and all that stuff a while ago?" she asked.

"Of course," I answered, "and you're right, there's a lot of things you can catch out there, besides the chance of getting pregnant."

"Well," she continued, "I used to party a lot, and banged piles of guys. I was stupid in high school, and up until a couple of years ago I did a lot of unprotected sex. I've been checked endless times for every kind of sexually transmitted thing you can get, and I don't have anything. That's certain. I'm really lucky."

"Thank God," I tell her, "I want to have you around a long time. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you with me."

I continued, "my past isn't quite as colorful. I can tell you with complete assurance that I don't have any sexually transmitted weirdness, unless you can get things from yourself. The last few years have been pretty slow in the romance department for me."

"P-Man," she said, "what I'm saying is I want to be monogamous with you. I don't want to go looking for other guys anymore. I've found you. Now, tell me, honestly, do you want to be with me? Just Tina? Nobody else while we're together?"

"How can you even ask me that," I replied, "of course, you're it, babe, who else is there?" She hugged me like I'd caught her from falling off a building.

"Besides," I said, "Joan Jett's on tour, and Annette Haven never calls me back. I'm your guy if you'll take me."

"You said the right thing, Bunky," she told me, and kissed me softly. Then she got a wicked smile on her face. "And now," she said, "it's fun time."

She slips away from me for a minute, turns the radio to WDCU, and goes to her closet. She pulls two boxes down from the top shelf, also known as the Wardrobe Department. The boxes contain our nutty apparel for the evening. They are prefabricated nylon outfits from the Collegeville Costume Company.

The same company that made the ersatz Halloween getups when I was a kid: pirate, ballerina, ghost, vampire, members of The Beatles, hobo, witch, gorilla, etc. They came in three sizes: too small, medium, and large. The large ones could fit a young teenager. They were like shiny pajamas, and all came with paper masks that had elastic strings stapled to them. Tina's box said, "Nurse" on the top of it. Mine said, "Wolfman, The" in the same spot.

"I've made a few modifications to the costumes, Bunky," she said, "try yours on." Tina went into the bathroom, her dressing room, to change into pornstar care-giver. I took the garment out of its container. She had done some altering all right. It was shredded. The seams had been cut and there was a good sized hole where the crotch used to be. The mask was in fine shape, though. At the bottom of the box was the make-up kit Tina bought from the Drug Fair. It was just a bunch of oil crayons that washed off with warm water. I opened them, went over to the mirror, and started drawing whiskers, snout, and, lycanthropic features around my eyes.

Tina emerged from the bathroom. Besides her nurse's cap and sunglasses, she wore a white bra, (borrowed from Terri), white sash mini-skirt, knee-pads, and white Chuck Taylor high-top sneakers. The mini-skirt came down approximately 1 centimeter from her crotch. No panty lines were visible to ruin the cinematic effect.

"I had to shred my nurse's costume just to get the material to make this skirt," she said, "you like?"

"I like this hospital very much," I rejoined.

"Nice make-up job, but you haven't put on your costume," she said.

"I'm not really sure how to do it," I answered.

"I see I'm going to have to get you in character again," she chirped.

Tina came over to the bed and told me about the scene we were going to enact. I could not believe what I was hearing.

"You're Lon Chaney Jr.," she said, "the 1940s guy who played The Wolfman in the movies. What was the character's name?"

"Talbot, Lawrence Talbot," I answered.

"That's it," she said, "Mr. Talbot knows what's going to happen tonight at sundown. He's going to turn into that nasty old werewolf and eat peoples' livers and spleens. He doesn't want to do it though. He

thinks its wrong to nosh people up, so he's come to The London Institute of Psychiatry to beg me to help him."

"And you are?," I asked.

"You Bozo," she said, "I'm Head Nurse Tina, chief clinician of The London Institute."

"It makes perfect sense now," I replied.

She continued, "You've persuaded me to help you with your terrible problem, Mr. Talbot. We've got to get you out of your street clothes and into your institutional outfit. When you transform and get big and hairy, the clothes we've prepared for you won't rip because they're already trashed."

Tina helps me undress and it is wonderful. She unzips, unbuttons, pulls, tugs, and massages me in her attempt to save the people of London from its evil menace. In a few minutes she helps me on with the Osterized garment. I feel ridiculous, but Tina is delighted.

"Hurry," she said, "the moon is almost up!"

"Yes," I replied, "I feel so strange, so homicidal, help me Nurse Tina."

"Quick!," she shouted "to the bed, I'll get the restraining devices!"

We gallop to the bed. Tina grabs some of the scarves she has draped everywhere and ties them to the brass headboard of her bed. She binds my arms with the extra length of material. My loins are mightily enflamed, and Tina's T-Rex is at full attention and jutting through my costume like a javelin. "The transformation has started!," she cried, "we bound him just in time. The city is saved for one more evening! Thank God for British scientific methods!"

Tina crawls up from the foot of the bed and demonstrates why she's the Head Nurse of the Institute. Then she moves her body up to my groin and lowers herself slowly down on top of me. She moves in microscopic increments, so that the slightest friction is bringing overpowering spasms of pleasure to both of us. She whispers luscious obscenities in my ear, and when we're both ready to black out from ecstasy, we consummate in oceanic waves.

After my session with Nurse Tina, I'm unshackled from the bedpost. We lay in repose on her bed and start talking stuff. I get up and wash the monster make-up off my face, go up stairs, and bring us a couple of Heinekens. Upon returning, Tina has the bottle opener ready for me. That little occurrence gets me thinking about all the times she seems to know what's going to happen previous to the event. I start

contemplating about how she can talk to people she's never met, and make intimate, personal connections with them. She understands their lives, dreams, ambitions, everything, in no time.

I open the beers, hand her one, and crawl back under the sheet next to her. Before I can ask her about her weird foresight she says, "you know, baby, sometimes I get flashes in my mind. I know you've wanted to ask me about it before. It's not like a big juju scary-thing, just little pictures in my head. And lots of times they're completely wrong, but most of the time they're on target."

She puts her arm around me and we listen to Miles Davis play "Sketches of Spain" on the radio.

She continues her talk, "I knew I was going to meet you one day. I used to see you up at Skyline going to the movies with your discount-pack tickets, and eating those God-awful Pop-Tarts. But the first time I saw you I got a hit. I knew that you were emotionally wrecked, but understood that once you had a friend, or a lover, or someone you cared for, you'd do anything for them. Unconditionally. It was written all over you. You always tried to look like you weren't watching me when you'd pass by the store. It was cute. Then you started working at the book shop, and I knew I'd get to know you."

She went on, "the time we did that goofy slow dance at the ice cream store, you had a vision that we were in a 1950s movie. That's when I knew you had a little extrasensory gift, too. Maybe not as much as I've got, but a touch. Then tonight when I tied you up, you were fantasizing that we were in a porn film. And that's great. It means you're getting some self-confidence back. You want people to look at you. Those incidents are like the Yin and Yang in our relationship. It's the nice, clean, Barbie Doll stuff that we do at Scoops, and the down-and-dirty Annette Haven action that we dig in Castle Dracula. It's all the same thing, just different parts of the unified experience."

"I saw a gargyle wearing a trench coat in a record store once, too," I said.

"That's more than a little freaked-out, Bunky," she replied.

"Do you know what I'm thinking right now?," I asked her.

"Yup," she said, "and the best part of it is, we don't need latex anymore."

In the morning Tina fixes me coffee before I take off for home. We get up early and sit on her back porch with a blanket around us and talk. She tells me about weird times she's had with her supersensory flashes, and other stuff about growing up. Then we start cataloguing all the groovy activity we've done together: making love in weird costumes, going to Scoops, me getting jealous of her kiss-army

boys, driving The Midget around, Starvin' Marvin's, playing pinball, the impromptu Halloween party, porn videos, taking photos of her sister's tits, and other trifles.

"Isn't it hokey," she said, "if you read this nonsense in a novel, you'd think it was the most pathetic dreck out there, but we lived it, and some of it was corny, but all of it was great."

She put her head on my shoulder, and said, "life really is a cheap romance novel, P-Man, and I can't get enough of its plain ordinary happiness in my life."

I get ready to take off and tell her we'll probably meet at the mall today. Saturday is our wicked sales day. If not, I'll call her up Sunday morning to make arrangements for our trip to the Annandale Foam Center with David. I tell her to be sure and take her pill this morning, and take off.

At home, mom is still in bed. I wash, change clothes, leave her a note, and drive the K-car to Skyline Mall. The day goes by like a flash. I'm at the cash register all morning. Then in the afternoon, I'm working back-up cashier and bagging merchandise for customers. Donna and Debbie have given me a new name, and start calling me P-Rex at work instead of Dude, Bunky, Clyde, Ace, and other endearments they have for me.

At 5:00 I clock out and go to the Safeway and buy several bags of groceries to take to the apartment. All the heavy stuff that was so hard to carry up the hill from The Fresh Value Market now whisks home in the K-car: soda water, beer, wine, soft drinks, big frozen birds, rump roasts, our *serious* potable refreshments, and other vertebrae-damaging stuff all go in the ride's spacious trunk and home to 31st Street. Mom and I spend the evening together, and she's really glad to have me at home. We make a mondo chicken dinner with all the trimmings, watch dumb TV, gossip, talk about the new car and the trips we'll take, and clean-up the kitchen together. But our home feels different now. There's an element of hope in the air, and it is an extremely welcome change.

On Sunday morning I call David and Tina to get organized for our safari. I telephone Mr. D. and he tells me about The Foam Center. He's been there before with his mother. It's on Little River Turnpike, near Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus. They went there to get replacement stuffing for a couple of sofa cushions. His mom had accidentally incinerated the spongy inserts while trying to dry clean them. He said it was kind of like a Purgatorial Sesame Street place. They had lots of

styrofoam and foam rubber products in different shapes and dimensions: pellets, granules, grains, specks, circular, rectangular, rhomboid, triangular, star-shaped, polygon-specific, and bulk. They sell lots of bulk.

He said Corrine and Alton, the owners, were agreeable people who knew a lot about foam. My man said he had the dimensions for the batwing extensions of The Blood Vessel calculated, and Alton could cut the material to his specs. It was the same way they made replacement inserts for the cushions of their sofa. Alton had enough foam to make a rubber office building, David told me.

I call Tina after I talk with David. She's bummed because she didn't see me on Saturday. She said she wasted a perfectly good birth control pill, in hopes of having sex with me another day. I told her it builds character to do without for a while. She said it doesn't build character. She said it doesn't do shit for anyone except make them grouchy. Tina may have a point. I told her our plans were to pick her up at 1:00 in the K-car, and then off to Annandale.

"I like foam," she said, "they make bouncy boulders out of it in Hollywood."

"That's right," I rejoined, "they do."

David comes by the apartment in the former P-Torpedo around 12:30. The Blood Vessel make-over is complete. It is glorious. His friend Lee spared no spray paint on the make-over. David's detailed picture of The Count was still on the hood, and the sides were painted in Block-Puff letters: Count Gore DeVol, on one side, and Channel 20 Club on the other. Lee had then done glowing, green vulpine eyes around the headlights, and flickering flame around the Chevette's rocker panels. It was a Big Daddy Roth paint job to the max. David and I shoot the shit for a minute, then he places a tarp over the car.

"We've got to be undercover," he said, "until Friday."

"Gotcha," I replied.

We take the K-car down Route 7 to Forest Drive, and up to Tina's house. She's waiting for us on the doorstep, big-ass camera in hand. My babe runs up to the car and kisses the windshield. She looks like a Triffid-plant pasted to the glass.

"I love your girlfriend," David said.

"It's never boring," I reply.

Tina jumps in the front seat and kisses both of us.

"Hi, Annette," David says."

“Hi, foam-boy,” she replies.

We start down Route 7 to the 395-South on-ramp, then get on the highway and head towards Annandale. Tina cranks the radio on DC/101. They’re playing David Bowie’s “David Live” album. We bop up the road to the 495-Beltway interchange, pass the Braddock Road exit, and get off the highway. The Annandale Foam Center is just past the College on the left. It is a really “Eraserhead” looking place. It’s a big, rectangular warehouse with a hand-painted sign on the front. We park the K-car, get out, and Tina takes our picture underneath their business banner. We go in and there are endless shapes and sizes of prefabricated foam inserts for boxes, shipping material, insulation, etc. They look like spongy Lego blocks, only on a Godzilla-sized scale.

David finds Alton, and they exchange hellos. Alton remembers him from the time he cut new cushions for his mother. He said “high-test gas and foam rubber rarely mix. That’s a Foam Center joke.” David shows him the blueprints for the extensions and Alton is impressed. Tina takes a Cult Movie Night flyer from her purse and gives it to him. He says he doesn’t go to movies very often, but he’ll try to come. He says he likes Elvis. If he were to go to a movie at Skyline, he’d see the Elvis movie. “Me too,” Tina rejoined.

Alton takes us to the bulk foam area of the warehouse. This area is much more fun than the other. This one has different colored foam sheets. “Oooh,” Tina said, when she saw all the colors. She took pictures of all of us against the rainbow of foam background. Alton waved at the camera, while Tina shot the pictures.

“Do you have black foam rubber in blocks?” David asked.

“Yup,” Alton said.

“Can you cut some like I have detailed on the paper?” David continued.

“I believe I can,” Alton replied.

“Then let’s do this thing,” David chirped.

David and Alton went to the back where there was a table saw looking instrument. Alton took a large block of foam rubber and in a few minutes, had a black, spongy isosceles triangle in his hand. It had a pyramid base, that gradually tapered into a curved shark fin.

“Perfect,” David cooed.

“Thank you,” Alton rejoined.”

He repeated the procedure and David had his batwing modifications for The Blood Vessel in hand.

“You’re going to put these on your car?,” Alton asked.

“With rubber cement and duck tape,” David answered.

“You’re a funny man,” Alton told him.

“A regular Jan Murray,” David replied.

David paid Corrine at the front of the store and we went out to the K-car. The batwings fit nicely in the back seat, with some mooshing of the springy material. We cruise back to Arlington on the highway and listen to WHUR. Back at my place, David uncovers the nearly complete Blood Vessel. Tina goes wild photographing him in front of his machine. He looks like he’s won the monster car rally. He’s pumped. The crew puts the wings in the Chevette and close the door. They’re cramped, but foam rubber is a forgiving substance. D-Man tells us thanks for all the help, and we’ll see him Friday for the big do. He tears off in his weird car. “He’s clinical,” Tina said, “but nice.”

Tina says she wants to come in and see mom. We get to the door and go inside. She’s on the sofa looking at recipes clipped from The Washington Post.

“Oh, Tina,” she said, “how nice to have some company. “Did you have a nice time with David?”

“He’s something else,” Tina replied.

“I love him,” mom rejoined, “he likes to show off for the girls. It’s fun to watch him operate.”

“That’s true,” I said, “Debbie likes it when he performs for her, too.”

Mom and Tina do their accelerated talking and I go get beers for all of us. They chatter and chirp and I go into the Bohemian Love Pad to let them do their girl-things in private. After a half hour Tina comes in and tells me it’s safe to come out. She says goodbye to mom and promises to come back soon. I take Arlington Royalty back to Forest Drive. On the way back Tina says mom looks better, but still seems lonely.

“I think I’m going to make her my next Fairy Godmother project,” she said.

“Okey-dokey,” I reply.

We pull up to her driveway, go inside the house, and down to Castle Dracula. This Sunday afternoon, there was no waste of birth control pills.

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Eight

On Monday morning, I'm already a jumping-bean maniac looking forward to Cult Movie Friday at Skyline Mall. Fortunately, the obligatory work week goes by like a shot. I bring mom a few Sean Connery videos and we watch them together. We get into a mid-career Sean loop and see the films: "Wind and the Lion," "Man who Would be King," and "Robin and Marion." Mom stays riveted to the living room sofa during these performances.

Once, when it was obvious she wanted to use the ladies room, her squirming looked like St. Vitus Dance. I asked her why she wouldn't go to the bathroom. She said she didn't want to miss any of the performance. When I showed her how to use the pause button on the wire remote, she thought the machine was broken. I made Sean start and stop several times at my will, just to show her we had complete control over his actions. She told me to stop it. It wasn't nice what I was doing to the machine, or to her favorite movie star. Mom went to the powder room, and when she was situated again, the movie began where we'd left it, not missing a second of the story. "That's a nice machine," she said.

Also, a couple of times during the week, we drove the K-car down to the Best and Company parking lot. My Mother tooled around the huge macadam area and cruised around Shirlington. She likes to beep the horn at squirrels and birds when we drive around. She enjoys watching them scatter. "Squirrels are dumb," she tells me.

At The Fresh Value Market, mom becomes grocery store royalty. We buy any heavy item we want and take it to the car. She's in ecstasy. In the middle of the week, she starts driving the car to work. She's

arranged for a parking space in her office building. When I get home after the first night she's tried it, mom tells me she's never taking public transportation again.

At the mall, everyone is stoked about the Friday event coming up. In mid-week, Jim comes running into B. Dalton's with a look of religious fanaticism on his face.

"P-Man," he blurts, "a reporter from The Washington Post was at Hi Jinx. He asked me questions about the store and if he could use my name in an article about the mall."

"Mama mia," I replied, "I think Manager Tom has been burning up the phone lines."

Jim continued, "the Post-guy said they're doing a piece about the mall in connection with the movie-thing on Friday. Dude, we're like media-guys. Stars and shit!"

"I need a Pop-Tart," I rejoined, "any flavor will do."

Later in the day, Tina, Manager Tom, and Edna from Scoops all come in the store with similar stories. They all look like they've been to the mountain top. Manager Tom confirmed that he had been blitzing The Post's Weekend Section staff for some press about his movie project. After lots of phone run around, The Post decided to make The Midnight Cult Movie event the lead story in their Weekend Magazine this Friday.

Tina had been over at Scoops when the reporter came into the restaurant. He'd talked to both Edna and my girlfriend about the campy names for their hot dog creations. Edna went on at length about crafting each sandwich with a particular theme in mind: a geographic location, an historical event, a celebrity name, and other sandwich-metaphor stuff. Edna introduced Tina to the reporter as a connoisseur of the various hot dogs at Scoops, and said her insights and critiques would be invaluable to the article. Tina talked to the interviewer non-stop for 30 minutes.

The reporter had come to the mall with a photographer. Tina got names of contacts for photography jobs, and the Post's address to send her portfolio for employment consideration. While they were talking, Manager Tom and Jim were wheeling the life-size Lego-model of The Count Gore DeVol down the hall from Hi Jinx Toys to Skyline 6 Theaters. They had come up with a cooperative business arrangement: The Count would reside in the concession area of the multiplex, and would have a sign that read: Welcome Count Gore! Model created by Jim at Hi Jinx Toys, your alternative toy store at Skyline Mall. Technical Assistant, Mr. Pink, courtesy of B. Dalton Bookseller.

Once the model was placed in the lobby, the photographer came and got photos of the creation with Manager Tom, Tina, Edna, The Post reporter, Kelly the part-time cashier, and Jim posing with the plastic-brick statue. Tina whispered something to Manager Tom. He disappeared into his office and emerged a minute later with a pillow-case sized polyurethane bag. In the bag were 500 units of white plastic vampire teeth. He distributed a pair to everyone and a new set of group photos were taken with the crew prominently displaying the goofy canines. Tina, Jim, and Kelly totally ham it up for the photographer, and do hokey reanimated corpse poses.

The photographer and reporter say they have to talk to some other store owners and get some photos, but they'll surely use lots of the material they got from the bicuspid-group for the article. They confirm everyone's name and the businesses they work in, and take off down the hall.

Manager Tom tells me he's been in touch with David, and The Blood Vessel is ready and operational. He'll have it at the mall parking lot at 11:00 on Friday night. Rick the security guard has been put on alert, and there will be extra guards on duty in the evening. Channel 20 will be sending their Promotion Department people by in the afternoon to set up information booths and give away propaganda and toys to shopping center patrons. He's arranged with Skyline Mall's stereo store, Audio Buys, to set up a public address system in the corner of the lobby for The Count to greet his legion of koo-kooos after he's delivered to us by his chauffeur, Fang, in the monster-car. "Everything's lined-up, P-Man," he said, "let's dance this mess around on Friday."

I wake up on the morning of Cult Movie Madness, and I cannot believe it's finally come about. So much insanity has gone into this mega-sized ball of corn. I blaze over to our front door and get The Washington Post, which mom has delivered every day. I flame through the sections and get to the Weekend Magazine. There's always that pesky Circuit City ad snaked around the cover so you've just got to see how cheap their microwave ovens are. I wrestle off their price information and look at the cover of the magazine.

It's got a smiley-pumpkin that some rich kid in Rockville, Maryland drew in his little-genius art class. Per usual. I blaze through the pages and stop dead at the On-The-Town feature. Oh my God. It's Manager Tom, Tina, Kelly, Edna, Jim, and the Post reporter, with teeth the size of Crayola crayons coming

out of their mouths. They're all centered around The Count Gore model and whooping it up like real country Hoe-heads. The headline, in enormous block type reads: Trash it up at Skyline Mall!

I run around the living room and go spastic. I sprint into mom's room to show her the photo. She's half awake, says it's nice, and promises to look at it later. Now just some coffee would be wonderful. I go in the kitchen and put the water on for both our coffees, and rip the top off of a box of fresh Pop-Tarts. I nosh my sugary breakfast food, and greedily read the article.

It has lots of question and answer repartee with Manager Tom about the Cult movies being played at Skyline 6. He said he believed that the suburban kids who went to D.C. every weekend for alternative entertainment now had an option to stay in Northern Virginia for their kitsch-fun. He wanted to offer them the campy-chic amusements of Georgetown at a reasonable price, and make the area more artistically engaging for all the community. He would offer several hokey-gems each week, especially "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" for the kids who want something other than the typical multiplex entertainment. He worked Count Gore's, and Channel 20's name into the interview twice, and emphasized that The Count would be at Skyline 6 Theaters at 11:30 tonight to inaugurate Cult Movie Fridays at Skyline Mall.

The article went on to say that the mall not only featured nutty films on Fridays, but a new video store had opened that specialized in "boutique titles." That's Manager Jack's term for monster and porn movies. The reporter talked to the cashier at Mother Nature's Health Food Store, and Jim from Hi Jinx Toys. Jim was mentioned by name in the article and said that this mall was ready to explode with creative people and great stores. The movie-event was just the attention-getter the shopping center needed to make people aware of this pseudo-intellectual trash-palace.

The article closed with a mention about Edna at Scoops. She'd jazzed up the soda fountain menu with designer-hot dogs. The reporter and the photographer on this assignment both gave outstanding marks to The Sputnik-dog with sweet, red peppers, and Edna's Eiffel Tower Dogue, formerly the Frog-dog, with its tres bon toppings. The little-teeny writing at the bottom of the page repeated that The Count Gore DeVol would be at Skyline 6 Theaters tonight at 11:30. Free plastic fangs would be given to the first 500 movie patrons..

I put the paper down, because the teapot is screeching on the stove, and make 2 cups of instant coffee with cream and sugar. I take mom's cup to her room, but she's gone back to sleep. I put it by her

clock and run back into the living room. My enthusiasm has overtaken me. I call Tina at home. She picks it up on the first ring and whoops. She says she's seen the article, and we're going to be stars in Japan. She's already cut the photo from the paper, and she's looking for frames downstairs to mount the picture from *The Weekend Magazine*.

I tell Tina that even though this is a monumental day in my life, I haven't forgotten that it's Friday. I know what our plans are for later tonight, but I just wanted to tell her officially that I hadn't forgotten the Friday-date-for-all-eternity-rule. She said I was a good little weasel for getting out of indemnity trouble so quickly. Then, she said she had an extra-special surprise for us tonight. She knew this was going to be a big affair, so she made some extra special goodies for us to nosh at the movies this evening.

"I made some Betty Crocker brownies for us," she said, "just like my mentor June Cleaver. But *these* brownies have a super-secret ingredient."

"Do you mean a certain horticultural supplement, maybe from Colombia, South America, which is definitely not Juan Valdez brand coffee?," I asked.

"Si Señor," she replied.

I told Tina I'd see her soon. She said she'd drive *The Midget* to the mall, and then we could fool around at her house after work. She needs to go home to transform into Halloween Porn-babe Cheerleader to cruise around at the movies tonight. She told me to wear my Evil Drill-Team Dominator clothes, meaning black T-shirt, jeans, and cap, to the store. I told her I had the absolute perfect shirt for the occasion. She'd love it.

I wash, dress, and check on mom, who is now having some coffee. I tell her I'll be at Tina's after work, and then at the movies tonight. Mom, per usual, tells me to have a good time, and kiss Tina for her. Before taking off, I show mom the picture of the mall gang from the newspaper. She says Tina looks like a strange kind of jungle-cat with the plastic teeth in her mouth. Then she put the Weekend section down and looked at the front page of *The Post*.

On the way to work, everything is ducky. There's a slight breeze, and all the pumpkins are out on the front porches. Scores of them. It's almost the best day of the best month of the year. I get near the mall and it almost seems like a different place. Sometimes when something big is going to happen, familiar

things look more vivid, exaggerated, and intense than they do when you see them every other day. Today Skyline Mall looked like The Emerald City of Oz.

At the store, Mr. Mike has cut out the article from the newspaper and taped it to the shop's glass door. Pink has his flying revenant buzzing over the display table. Inside we listen to The Greaseman on DC/101, drink sodas, and talk about tonight's event. Pink says he's absolutely going to see Hendrix in "Rainbow Bridge." Mr. Mike says he's torn between "Rocky Horror" and "Fearless Vampire Killers." He says it depends if there's more sexy-vampire children attending one or the other. I told the fellows I'm sure Tina will want to see Elvis drive pastel-colored sports cars and make-out with bikini-girl Ann-Margaret. They say I'm whipped by my new girlfriend. They're literally correct, and I'm starting to like it.

The morning passes by at a good pace. The Fed Ex guys bring the pay checks, which always reduces tension in the store. Just before lunch time, the first wave of Channel 20 folk start collecting around Skyline 6 Theaters. They've got collapsible information booths with their logo painted all over them. The Promo people are all peroxided, hair-sprayed, big-teeth types. The kind of people who are always in The Pawnshop or Joe Theismann's Restaurant.

The guys from Audio Buys are setting up the P.A. system in the far corner of the lobby by the Missile Command and Ms. Pac-Man video games. Tina comes in the store before lunch and admires my "RAW POWER HONEY, JUST WON'T QUIT T-shirt. She says I look butch. That's the look for me. I'll have to take her word for it. I'm told by my girlfriend to be ready at 5:00 tonight for wardrobe consultation and candy shopping. She wants to get piles of sugary snacks for the Trick-or-Treaters tomorrow.

Tina asks me what movie we're going to see tonight. I told her that I was sure she'd want to see Big E do his thing in Las Vegas. She said that's correct, but maybe Manager Tom would let us sneak into "Rocky Horror" for a few minutes to see the kids do their ritual mimicry ceremony under the screen. I said that if I had a choice I'd see the Hendrix movie, because he's like our spiritual guide, but Elvis will do in a pinch.

Tina told me she'd sampled her batch of brownies last night, and watching and listening to The Jimi Hendrix Experience while under their influence, could be more than the average human can tolerate. She informed me that she was still a bit crispy from its effects even now. "Message received," I replied.

In the later afternoon, I slip out of the store to get my check cashed at Central Fidelity bank. Tina shows up at 5:00 and she's buzzy with anticipation about tonight. We make plans with Pink, Mr. Mike, Donna, and Debbie, to meet back at the store at 9:00 this evening. We'll go to The Pawnshop for a drink, and then do The Count Gore DeVol experience, and the cult movies.

Debbie and Donna tell us not to damage Tina's bed frame with unnecessary tension, and wave goodbye as we cruise down the hall to the Safeway. At the store, Tina gets a shopping cart and we go to the candy aisle. She asks for my help in selecting the best Halloween treats. There are so many options. Some are better than others.

"Help," she said, this is your area of expertise.

"Yes baby, it is," I rejoin.

"In the chocolate mini-bar department," I tell her, "you can't beat the little Almond Joys. The kind with just one almond on top. That's as good as it gets. Never get the grocery store brand lollipops when Dum-Dums are available. When you get the bag, look to see if there's a good amount of the pineapple flavored ones in it. Avoid Smarties and Sweet Tarts if possible. They taste like corn syrup Alka-seltzer. Buy the mini-rolls of Life Savers if you've got to go that route. Tropical Fruit flavors, if available. Bubble gum is a complete judgment call. I'm a traditionalist; I admit that freely. Bazooka Joe has never let me down. However Beechnut and Wrigley's now offer some kinds of whiz-bang, high-tech things that have flavored glurp in the center, and they squirt all over your mouth when you chew them."

Tina looked at me with admiration.

"You're a smartie," she said, "but I have to get the gum that shoots in your mouth. I hope you understand."

"Completely," I rejoined.

We fill our basket with all the recommended candies and head towards the produce section. Tina picks out a huge, round pumpkin and brings it to the basket. The cart makes a sound like a cymbal crash when she drops it in. "Oops," she said, "I'm an air-head." We go to the deli section and get pastrami, cheese, pickles, olives, and french bread for our eclectic dinner. On our way to the cash register, Tina picks up a can of Redi-Whip whipped cream. "For dessert," she whispered to me.

We get in the line of our usual cashier. We're pals now. She examines our purchases as she runs them through the price scanner. The total is 25 dollars, and this time we split the bill. It's official; we're a grocery store couple now. The cashier asks "no condoms tonight?" Tina tosses her head back, and does her best Scarlet O'Hara break-down voice.

"I'm barren," she mewled.

"I wish I were, too," the cashier rejoined.

We wheel the cart out of the Safeway. Tina gives me the MG's keys and points in the direction of The Midget. "Prease to get car," she said. I find it, and drive the machine to where she's standing at the curb. We put all the stuff except the pumpkin in the trunk. There's no where else to put the gourd except in Tina's lap for the ride back to Forest Drive. We get adjusted in the ride, and head towards Route 7.

"Hurry," she said, "this thing is like a mastodon on me. I don't feel pretty."

"Yes, ma'am," I reply.

We roll the pumpkin into the house just like Lucy and Linus on "The Charlie Brown Halloween Special," then go back to the car to get all our other stuff and bring it inside. Tina has the packages from the deli open before we can close the door. T-Girl's got all of it spread out on the living room table. She's puts a hunk of french bread in her mouth, and goes to the kitchen. My babe brings out a bottle of Gallo White Grenache wine, whatever Modesto-blend that might be. She turns on the radio and we eat all the delicacies with our fingers. I sit on the pumpkin and make micro-pastrami sandwiches while Tina stabs olives and pickles with a festive toothpick, and feeds them to me. We drink the White Grenache out of leftover cups from last week's impromptu Halloween party.

After we're sated, Tina brings out some old newspapers and we prepare to disembowel the huge gourd. Tina gets a big knife, little knife, and a pencil. She makes an outline on the skin of the fruit. She likes lots of little teeth and a cross-eyed look for the face. I plunge the big knife into the top, and cut a nearly perfect circle, then yank the cap off by the vine stem, and start pulling out yards of goop, seeds, and vegetative string-things. Tina disappears for a moment, and returns with a deck of playing cards.

"Wanna play Strip-Blackjack?," she asks. I never have a clever answer ready when I really need one.

"I'm kind of busy right now toots," I replied, "and my hands are full of orange mucous."

“That’s OK,” she said, “I’ll play your hand for you. You just watch.”

“There’s no challenge in that,” I said, “I can’t decide to stay or take new cards.”

“Those are the house rules, Mr. Bond,” she said, “I’m sorry.”

Within 30 minutes I’m stark naked. Tina is wearing my new black T-shirt and cap. It’s humiliating. However the pumpkin is looking great. I’m almost finished with the detail work on the teeth. Tina goes in the kitchen and comes out with a handful of neon green glow-sticks. She leans next to me and snaps the phosphorescent do-jobbers. They shine like radio-active Tootsie-rolls. We toss them into the cavity of the jack-o-lantern and replace the cap. The face of our creation gives off an eerie bog-like incandescence.

The pumpkin had about 10 pounds of reproductive slop in its gut. I’ve done a great job of keeping it on the newspaper drop-sheet on the floor. When I cut pumpkins, I always give myself a large radius of the Sports and Business sections for the fallout. I turn around to put the small knife on the table and look at Tina. She’s stripped off every shred of clothing and is walking towards me like a demented Mother Nature.

My mid-section is heating up, and Tina’s T-Rex is more than a little aroused. I’m standing over a large quantity of pumpkin intestine with a radically engorged male member on display. Tina goes on her knees, splashing into the middle of the pumpkin slime and gathers a handful. Then she grabs my handle and begins, what I would have to term, a pagan-ritual hand-job. The viscosity is beyond description.

Soon we’re on the floor rolling like livestock in the slick mess. I enter Tina several times and nearly swoon from the gratification. I’ve got to retract to let things cool off until we’re both ready to complete the job. We slide over each other like freshly hatched reptiles on the living room floor. Tina gets up for a second and walks over to the dining table. She returns with the can of whipped cream.

She falls back down on top of me and we’re back in the pile of organic slop. Tina shakes the can, and it slips from her fingers, then grabs it again and pops the top off. She gets up on her knees and sprays a blob of the sweet froth over each nipple. Then she jabs the nozzle into her crotch and blasts a stream of cream into it. T-Girl tosses the can aside and offers herself up to me. I stare at her whipped topping bikini for a second.

“Pie a la mode?,” I pant.

“Flavor of the month,” she moans.

We tear into each other like primitives. I greedily consume the dairy product from all its places of application. We join for a final time and when the inevitable climax arrived we both thought we were blacking-out from satisfaction.

We lay in the muck like spent dinosaurs for a few minutes before we try and shower or clean the floor.

“That was a wild ride,” Tina said.

“You got it, babe,” I replied.

We slowly get up and walk downstairs to Castle Dracula where we shower for at least 20 minutes getting pumpkin goop and seeds out of our most intimate areas. After we’re shampooed and sanitized, we towel off and lay in Tina’s bed for a while. We do absolutely nothing that requires energy.

We slink upstairs to clean the living room. My extra-wide berth of newspaper turned out to be most fortuitous for the early evening events. We only had to pick up a couple of handfuls of pumpkin seeds from the window sill, stairs, dining table, front hall and front door. I got my clothes back on from our fixed game of Blackjack, and we returned downstairs to transform Tina into the All-American cheerleading sweetheart.

It is such a power-trip being dressed in black clothing, while discussing the fine points of accessorizing a high school cheerleading outfit with a beautiful, naked woman. We discuss make-up and bauble options for her costume. After some debate, we decide to go for our first choice: Traditional rah-rah outfit, black spike heels, black shades, spiked dog-collar. Tina searches her bureau and finds some gold lame gloves that go to her elbow. That’s the final touch: Garbo as drill team masochist.

Tina is incapable of wearing undergarments of any description. She jumps into her Wakefield Warriors turf-green mini-skirt and white sweater-girl top with the mega-sized “W” over the tits. She clips on her dog collar and tells me she went through a brief period of Sex Pistols worship, and bought the collar on a whim. T-Girl sits on her bed to put on her heels and has to spread her legs to get leverage. I get a wonderful voyeuristic alley-shot of her private parts. I tell her it’s a cinch for people to check out her nether regions. “That’s why I’m the Head Cheerleader AND The Head Nurse,” she replied.

We climb the stairs to the kitchen. Tina opens the refrigerator and takes out her pan of turbo-charged brownies. There’s an almost metaphysical atmosphere around her euphoric pastries. Then we take

a few plastic bags and put several handfuls of the Halloween candy in them. We're not going to arrive at the store empty handed. Before we leave, Tina runs downstairs and bring 2 cameras up with her. One, a Nikon, has a timer. The other, a Canon AE-1, has just been loaded with film. Tina sets the timer-camera on the living room table, makes technical adjustments, and runs up to me. She drags me in front of our mondo-glowing pumpkin and pulls me down to its level. "Look at the camera and try to smile, Fishbait," she said. The camera went off just as Tina plopped into my lap. "I'm a Post-modern Mouseketeer!," she cackled.

We drag the giant jack-o-lantern onto the front porch. Then we get our candy, camera, Tina's purse, and mind-expanding snacks. We lock the front door and head for The Midget. I fire-up the tiny car and Arlington's sexiest head-case couple zoom up Forest Drive. My date is wearing her groovy dark glasses, and I'm positive she can't see anything.

"I thought you were going to let me wear your Euro-tech shades tonight," I asked her.

"I changed my mind," she chirped, " these glasses are part of my total-field image. They're integral to my cheerleader-as-erotic-goddess ensemble. However, I'll let you wear them in the movie theater. I won't need them there. Besides your supposed to be all butch and rough and tough."

"Can I have an Almond Joy?," I asked.

She gave me a disappointed look.

"OK, *may* I have an Almond Joy?," I corrected myself.

She looked much happier now.

"Yes, you may," she replied.

We tool The Midget into Skyline Mall parking lot. A lot of the stores close at 9:00 but the movies bring in piles of people up until the last shows begin. The parking lot was unusually full. We park on the fringe of the lot, grab our many goodies, and head for the entrance.

Mr. Mike was just sliding the glass doors of B.Dalton's closed when we arrived. He let us in, and after the closing procedures and putting the day's receipts in the combination safe, we all settled down in the office for a while. Pink, Debbie, Mr. Mike, and Donna were all impressed with Tina's outfit. When she turned around and flipped her skirt up, revealing her silky rump, Pink developed a rapid-fire cough. Mr. Mike looked like his cage had been rattled with a fire ax. "Nice box," Donna commented.

Mr. Mike and Pink had not been idle during the day. They'd gone to the Safeway and bought a case of Lowenbrau dark beer for the event. Tina opened the candy bags and spread the booty over the return-books table. I pocket a few choice morsels, knowing that I'll soon develop an appetite. Then she uncovered the brownies.

"This is not your father's Oldsmobile," I told the crew, "These brownies get the Bob Marley Seal of Approval for Transcendence. The secret ingredient cannot be divulged for security reasons, however I am at liberty to say that after ingesting one of Tina's sizzlin' brownies, listening to certain Pink Floyd albums becomes an experience of biblical proportion." They dove onto the pan.

Pink turned on the radio and we all opened beers and sat around talking stuff, waiting for The Count to come to Skyline. Around 10:00 someone begins knocking on the glass doors of B.Dalton Bookseller. Three figures stand outside the door. Mr. Mike, Pink, and I go to see what's up. The brownies are starting to work wonders on our book-people heads.

We get to the door and see Manager Tom, David, and a third person holding a suitcase. He seems to be joking and having fun with our pals. We let everyone in and shut the doors. David is dressed in the most five-and-dime vampire costume imaginable. He's wearing the 2-cent plastic teeth, and has drawn a widow's peak with black oil-crayons on his forehead. Manager Tom turns to the unknown man and tells him we're the guys who were instrumental in putting the whole Cult Movie medicine show together. The man holds his hand out to me and asks "Are you P-Man?" I confirmed my weird name. "Hi," he said, "I'm The Count." My inferior sphincter undulated.

The Count was so cool I couldn't take it. I started talking gibberish at light speed. Then I ran into the store's office and stammered out, "The Count Gore DeVol is in the store! By the magazine stand! No shit! Go!" Donna, Debbie, and Tina stampeded past me like wild Palominos. We all talked waffle to The Count for a minute, then took him into the office. We offered him a Lowenbrau, but he said he'd just like a soft drink if we had one. Mr. Mike produced his personal stash of Dr. Peppers from underneath the desk and got a paper cup and ice from the store refrigerator. The Count asked if the candies on the table were for public consumption. We told him to please help himself. The famous TV vampire went for the little Almond Joys.

"Aren't they great?," I asked him.

“The best Halloween candy ever, P-man” he replied.

The brownies were starting to kick in with everyone, and we started talking nonsense and laughing almost without provocation. The Count opened his suitcase and showed us his make-up kit, cape, and black clothing. He handed me his cloak and said, “try it on.” It was like he presented me with the Gutenberg Bible. I swept the garment over my shoulder and made bad jokes with a thick, eastern European accent. The office went wild.

Debbie had moved next to David and they were talking sweet-stuff to each other. David said we all HAD to come out to the parking lot to see the completed Blood Vessel. It was out on the edge of the parking lot, with a tarp over it. The Count and Manager Tom confirmed that David had gone the extra mile in creating The Count’s ride. I gave our guest his cape and thanked him endlessly for the loan. Manager Tom asked if Skyline Mall’s honored visitor could change clothes in the bookstore’s office, and then we could take him out the service doors to David’s car in the parking lot for his big entrance. Mr. Mike said he’d have to lock the two of them in the store for a few minutes while we went out to see David’s ride. They both said that was no problem. The rest of us all trundled out to the store’s front door, heads buzzing with brownie-power. We stepped outside into the mall, and locked the glass doors.

Debbie tells Tina she loves her costume, and wants to wear something fun for tonight, too. Donna agrees and says we all need to jazz up for the event. We cruise down the hall and see several “Rocky Horror” kids dressed up for the movie in their black Danskins, garish make-up, and platform shoes. Just when we get to the entrance, we see Jim from the toy store. We tell him we’re going to check out David’s bat-winged, monster-car, and his presence is required.

Debbie asked Jim if he’s got any chintzy masks or cheap Halloween stuff she can buy for tonight. Jim says he’s got what we need, and more. We make a detour to Hi Jinx Toys and he opens the store for us. Our pal produces paper masks, fake blood, witches hats, nylon ghost sheets with pre-cut eye-holes, and cheap sunglasses. Soon everyone is decked-out in 3rd grade-looking costumes. Jim says we can pay him on Monday, when the Halloween stuff gets marked down to half price. Now we really look like “The Charlie Brown Halloween Special” characters. We leave the toy store and Jim locks up. The crew heads out to the parking lot like bargain-basement half-wits.

Our gang weaves through the lines of cars. David has parked his baby close to Tina's ride. The mild breeze is blowing the tarp of The Blood Vessel around. We all stand around the machine while David-as-Fang unties the lashings. He asks me for some help to lift the tarp gently over the car's spongy, flapping fins. We pull the cover off together and The Count's automobile is revealed to us. Herman Munster, eat your heart out.

The foam wings are mounted to the Chevette's roof in a V-shape. It looks like the entire compact car is about to take off for Falls Church City. The block-lettering paint job that David's friend Lee had done is beautiful. David has hand painted lots of ghoulish detail in-between the letters: cats, rats, bats, and evil spiders on the front and rear fenders. The hatchback of the car has been painted in dripping monster movie type: Fang's Ride /R.I.P. It looks like he's jacked the rear suspension up a notch or two since I've last seen him.

Finally, Fang the man-servant had gone to the Circuit City store on Columbia Pike. He'd found several large styrofoam inserts in their dumpster from shipping boxes of display model merchandise. He'd sculpted them into enormous canine dentures and fastened them with coat hanger-wire under the grille of the car. The Blood Vessel now has wings AND saber-teeth.

Women are not good at concealing their love when it gushes up in them. Debbie almost tackled David with a bear hug, and told him he could be almost as cool as Mel Gibson if he'd just paint his car some normal color like blue or black after tonight's event. He told Debbie he was fond of her too, but a monochromatic car is something he's not ready to commit to yet. Debbie looked sad behind her harlequin mask for a second. David put his arm around her.

"Debbie-pooh?," he said.

"Yes," she sniffed."

"Frankie say relax," he purred.

We tie the cover back on David's ride and head back to the bookstore. Debbie and David seem to already have made up and are walking arm in arm. Tina jumps on my shoulders and demands a piggy back ride. I warn her that she's going to be doing some serious advertising if her skirt is even close to flipping up. She said on Devil's Night she can do anything she wants. Besides, the cool air tickles her bush.

Inside, the mall is getting crowded. Lots of people have bought advance tickets and are walking around with their funny plastic teeth in their mouths. Even more “Rocky Horror” kids are zooming about the place: Frankie, Riff, Magenta, Little Nell, and Eddie clones are bopping in the halls noshing popcorn, hot dogs, and nacho chips. We’re blending with the environment in our dime store costumes.

We get close to the store and see Edna from Scoops. She’s wearing a LOUD tropical-print shirt and has her hair slicked back in a DA. For a finishing touch she’s wearing several plastic leis around her neck. Tina hugs her and we start talking. “I’m doing ‘Elvis Goes Hawaiian’ for the movie tonight,” Edna tells us. T-Girl tells her that we’ve going to see “Viva Las Vegas” as well. The ladies talk stuff for a few minutes and we part. “We’ll see you in a little bit, when The Count does his thing in the lobby,” Tina yelled to her.

Mr. Mike fumbles with the sliding-door keys for a bit and starts giggling. Pink and David help him out and we all get back in the store. We lope back to the office and we immediately know something is not right. Manager Tom is sitting in Mr. Mike’s chair with a glazed, imbecilic smirk on his face. The Count is sitting on the return table in his vampire clothes, but hasn’t done his ghoulish make-up yet. His eyes are fuscia, and he has the beatific look of someone being tutored by a swami. I look at the brownie pan. Tina’s treats have been noshed from existence.

Our two guests come out of their wool-gathering sessions and try to speak coherently to us. We tell Manager Tom that it looks like business is booming at Skyline 6. The Count’s appearance in 30 minutes looks like a guaranteed smash-hit. He tells us our hero has to be in the car at 11:20, because that’s when he told Rick and the other security guys to prop open the mall entrance, and clear people to the sides of the hall for the car to come in. At 11:25 he’s told Kelly to start playing his cassette of Link Wray’s “Batman” on the public address system. Then after the entrance, he can tell some jokes, act nutty, and pack it in.

The Count tells us he’s fine and tries to put on his make-up, but he misses his intended areas, and his face looks striped and spotted like a desert jackal. David asks me what on earth is going on. “Everyone seems wasted,” he said. I told him the story of Tina’s magic brownies and he’s pissed because he didn’t get any. “There were plenty when we left,” I said, “the boys must have been hungry.” Jim pulls me aside and says he’s got an idea. I tell him I’ll listen to anything at this point.

He says his mom is at home and she does make-up better than anyone he knows. Their house is only about a minute away. If he can get a ride over, he'll bring her to the mall and she can do his cosmetic job pronto. David hears our plan and says he'll go with Jim and get her.

"You're going to drive the batcar over there?," I ask him.

"I am The Count's man-servant, Fang," he replied, "my master needs my help."

Debbie began shedding tears of happiness for no apparent reason.

Jim calls his house and preps his mother for her role in saving the day at Cult Movie Friday. Mr. Mike is trying to get our guest to drink Dr. Pepper and rehearse the jokes for his big appearance. Our man says he's fine although he is slurring some vowels and occasionally zones into a brown study. Mr. Mike lets David and Jim out of the store, and they sprint to the parking lot. Then our store manager goes across the hall to The Pawnshop restaurant and gets 6 extra large Black-Death coffees for his wilting crew.

He returns with a cardboard tray full of hi-test java. Donna is asleep on top of the office desk. Manager Tom is sitting like the statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial Building. Pink sits like an Indian on the floor making origami figures out of Almond Joy wrappers. Tina is comforting The Count, and Debbie is transfixed with her image, looking at her reflection in a pocket mirror. Mr. Mike doles out the rocket-fuel caffeine drinks to us. Tina and I share one. We don't seem to be as zapped as the rest of our friends. We're veterans of the psychic wars.

There's no talking in the office as we try to regain our composure through legal, liquid amphetamines. The radio is the only sound. DC/101 is playing some Eagles/Jackson Browne ballad-glurp. Mr. Mike takes an mammoth swig of his Black Death coffee and announces that we've got to get our butts in gear. He fingers through the audio cassettes on his desk and pulls out Motorhead's "Ace of Spades" tape. He clicks it into the machine, hits the play button, and cranks the volume. Fast Eddie Clark's famous guitar riff feels like a nail going through our heads.

Everyone becomes instantly animated. We huddle around The Count to see how he's doing. He looks better. Tina is healing him with good will and hormones. There's a hammering knock on the glass doors. Mr. Mike and I flame out to the front of the store and let David, Jim, and Jim's mother into the store. She says she's never been in a car like David's before, or gotten to the mall so quickly in her life.

We whisk our make-up artist to the office and she looks at The Count's supplies. "This'll be a cinch," she said, "he uses good stuff." We get a chair and place it in front of our man. Jim's mom sits down and puts the case with the cosmetics in her lap. She asks us politely if we could please turn the music down. We give her one of the flyers tacked to the wall as a model and in a few minutes The Count's visage is completed. We all walk around the office with him telling him to practice his lines. We're such boobs. This guy has been doing this schtick for years. He's a pro, a natural, a man doing what God intended him to do. He doesn't need a script. It's written on his DNA.

It's hard to believe but we're actually a few minutes ahead of the scheduled performance time. David says he's going to the parking lot to prep The Blood Vessel. He's got a signal set up with Rick the security guard. They've both got flashlights, and at 11:20, when he props the doors open for the car, he'll flag us. Mr. Mike lets David out of the store and locks the door.

The Count thanks Jim's mother so much for helping, and apologizes for being a little out of it. He said he hadn't felt that enlightened since Alvin Lee's performance at the Woodstock festival. Jim's mom asked us if we'd like our faces painted for the evening. She loves to face paint. I turn to Tina. "I'll be Paul Stanley if you'll be Paul Stanley," I said. Tina nods enthusiastically. We walk over to her.

"2 Paul Stanleys to go, please," I request.

"Ladies first," Jim's mom rejoined.

In moments we look like leftovers from the "Dressed to Kill" tour.

Manager Tom has finished his coffee, and is recovering nicely. He says we've got to get to the car NOW. The Count agrees. It's showtime. Donna offers him her ghost costume sheet, so he can get through the parking lot unnoticed. We all get up, finish our brain-rattling beverages, and head out to the front of the store. Many thanks go to Jim's mom. Manager Tom tells her if she'd like to stay for a movie, it would be his privilege to give complimentary passes to both her and Jim. She wouldn't mind seeing the Elvis movie, if Jim didn't have other plans. Jim said he'd be glad to take her.

He turned to me and asked, "what IS it about Elvis and older women?"

"Ask Tina," I said.

We all march out of the store with The Count under a glow-in-the-dark sheet with pre-cut eye-holes. The crew slips through rows of parked cars and gets to the fringe, where the batcar awaits. The

famous vampire is in a fine mood. He's just got a case of the head-buzzers left over from his atomic brownie-intake and Black Death antidote. He's laughing and telling us he hasn't had this good a time at a promotion since The Redskinettes' tour bus over-heated at the Channel 20 studio last Christmas.

David gets out of the car and opens the door for The Count. Our hero removes his sheet-disguise with a flourish. We all gasp. He's blossomed. He's in character. He's ready to camp it up and tell bad jokes. This is as good as it gets. He gets in the ride and says in his inimitable corny voice, "Tay-kuh me to my pee-pul, Fang,"

"Oh, yes, master," David replies.

He shuts the door and the foam batwings giggle from the vibrations.

Our gang sees the flashlight pulses from Rick across the parking lot. David signals back and the Blood Vessel moves towards the door. We all run towards the entrance ahead of the car and tell our pals we'll see them inside. Rick and another guard have opened both swinging doors to their limits. The hall has been marked off with police-line tape and orange construction cones. People are lined up on either side like mackerels. The lobby of Skyline 6 Theaters is full of fans as well. Almost all of them have 2-cent plastic vampire teeth in their mouths.

When the car gets to the entrance of the mall at 11:25, Kelly the part-time cashier inserts her audio cassette tape of "Batman" into the public address console and hits the play button. Link Wray's slashing guitar brings the fans to life. David and The Count drive through the entrance and turn right at the flower shop towards the theaters. Rick the Security Guard is walking next to the car. The crowd is slapping the ride, playing with the batwings, and high-fiving our vampire-champion. He's in ecstasy. The Blood Vessel creeps down the hall towards the movies. David is milking the moment for all it's worth. The blood-pumping rock is making people jump around and dance. David and our un-dead celebrity bounce in their seats and drum the dashboard.

Tina and I have staked out a spot in the back of the crowd to watch the show. She's got her AE-1 camera and is taking pictures of the car's slow progression towards the theaters, and getting crowd shots of all the colorful kids. The car arrives at Skyline 6 Theaters. It turns left into the lobby and up to the stand with the public address system. The fans are ready to apoplexy. They're swarmed around the ride and can't contain themselves. They cheer like wild peons at the gladiatorial games.

The Blood Vessel stops. Link Wray and the Raymen's tape is halted. The engine is shut off. A long minute passes. Then both The Count and David emerge from the fantastic machine. An eerie silence replaces the cheering of a moment before. They walk up the one step to the public address system. David stands respectfully behind his master. The Count steps up to the microphone and says, "greetings, mortals." The crowd goes insane.

Gore DeVol is blazing like a rhinestone evangelist. He' lifted his cape above his head like the Lego-model on the platform with him. He walks around the plastic brick structure and pretends to bite its neck. The crowd gibbers and swells like a scene from "Planet of the Apes." He thanks everyone for coming to the mall for some real entertainment, and starts his trade-mark one-liners from Transyl-Vegas:

"What kind of cars do vampires drive?," he asks his followers.

"Gremlins!," he barks.

"Why do vampires bite more people between 5pm-7pm?," he taunts us.

"Happy Hour!," he squawks in ecstasy.

"What is every vampire's favorite song?," he beckons.

He throws his hands over his head and screeches "You're so Vein!"

He was glorious. And he went on like that for 15 minutes. He slaughtered the Skyline crowd like little spotted puppies, and finished the routine with his famous closing line from Creature Feature, "may all your blood be warm." Then he and his faithful man-servant Fang descended the one stair and returned to The Blood Vessel. David started his machine and turned on the car's flashers. Kelly the cashier rewound the cassette tape in the public address console, and repeated the "Batman" theme for the Count's exit. David backed the car slowly through the lobby, and into the hall. He turned the vehicle in the direction they came, and inched through the masses to the mall entrance.

The monster-car went over the small ramp from the sidewalk to the parking lot. The batwings jiggled. Then the colorful 4-wheeler went through the regular mall-exit traffic lanes, made a left turn on to Route 7 West, and disappeared into the evening traffic.

The crowd around the lobby started to break-up. People were going into the theaters to get set for the films. Many folks were still in line to buy tickets for the performances, and plenty of other mall weirdoes were just walking around deciding what to do with themselves for the rest of the evening. Tina

and I see Mr. Mike in the crowd and get a photo of him looking zoned. We run up to my manager and start to talk about the movies.

Pink has disappeared into the theater to see the Hendrix movie. Donna and Debbie have removed their costumes and gone to The Pawnshop to meet normal men. Jim and his mom have gone into the concession area to get some popcorn and snacks. Manager Tom left us to take a nap in his office.

We're standing outside the movies and start walking towards the bookstore. Office Building Gary appears out of the crowd. He doesn't recognize me because now I'm Paul Stanley of the rock super-group KISS. So is Tina. She's also a cheerleader. I touch his shoulder and he looks bewildered. Then the realization of my true identity washes over his face and he's relaxed again. We talk for a minute and I thank him for his book recommendations. I told him I'd read a couple of the authors he'd suggested, and although it wasn't a religion-shifting experience, it was a good ride. He told me to keep at it, and said it's not an easy job for an author to join Jimi Hendrix in someone's artistic pantheon.

Tina asked me if I had any leftover candy in my pockets. She was getting an appetite for some strange reason. I'd been brilliant earlier, and stashed a handful of snacks. I reached in my pocket and pulled out several Dum-Dum suckers and small rolls of Lifesavers. I passed the goodies out to everyone. Office Building Gary said he'd loved Dum-Dums when he was a kid.

"Pineapple?," I asked.

"Wild Cherry," he rejoined.

And as Fate had decreed, I gave him a red lollipop for his unerring faith in my ability to read. He thanked me in earnest, and said he'd see us soon at the store. He said he was going to see "Fearless Vampire Killers," tonight. He likes Roman Polanski movies. That makes him a smartie. He waved to us and took off down the hall.

After Gary leaves, we talk stuff for a while with Mr. Mike. We've stopped migrating and stand in front of the B. Dalton store. He'd like to come with us to whatever movie we'd like to see. We tell him we'd be glad to have him join us for Elvis appreciation night. We should have thought of inviting him earlier, but we were reviving a TV-vampire from his narcoleptic reverie. The crew starts walking back towards the movies when Tina grabs my arm. She looks weird in spite of her make-up and clothing. "I think I saw something move in the store," she said, "really."

We all paste our noses to the glass. Mr. Mike looks pale. The light in the office is on. We always turn everything off in the store before leaving. That's the company policy. However, it's hard to remember if we'd done everything according to Hoyle, because of the effects of the evening's various refreshments. Mr. Mike gets the store keys out of his pocket, unlocks the door, and slides it open.

Tina tells us she saw a shadow by the office door. We all go in the store and close the door behind us. We don't hear or see anything, but keep walking towards the office. Things don't feel right. I'm waiting for one of Tina's psychic flashes to tell us what's up, but no such luck tonight. We get right up to the doorway and look inside. My eyeballs freeze like they've been dropped in liquid nitrogen.

A man in slapped-together "Rocky Horror" gear is standing on Mr. Mike's desk, struggling with the large acoustic tiles over it. The combination safe is open and the Visa and Mastercard receipts are thrown about the floor, along with the paychecks for the part-time employees. Ho-Lee Shit!

We stand and look at him for a long second. None of us move from raw fear, confusion, inexperience, and melt-down brownies in our system. He sees us and his system gets a super-charged adrenaline-blast. He makes ear-splitting, raspy wind-pipe noises like Wez in "The Road Warrior," and pushes up on the acoustic tiles to get into the mall's air-conditioning and heating service bays. From one store he can access anywhere on the mall's first floor. He pushes again like a locomotive and several boxes of Martha Stewart Holiday entertaining books fall on his head and shoulders. He tumbles off the desk and crashes onto the floor.

Mr. Mike yells at him to get out of the store. He's up in a nanosecond and heading for us like a fullback. I'm standing in the doorway, in the middle between Mr. Mike and Tina. The Rocky-man crunches into me with his shoulder and sends me flying into the Religion section. A large bookcase absorbs my fall and a gross of Robert Schuller paperbacks avalanche down.

Mr. Bad-guy scrambles past me and gets to the sliding door. He has trouble getting it open. Mr. Mike has run into the office and is calling security, or the police, or someone wearing a crisp uniform. I look around from my position on the floor and see Tina. It looks like she's grown in stature. She's puffed-up like a pan of Jiffy-Pop popcorn. Her eyes are slits, like an enraged Czarina. She steps into the office for a second, and rips my shirokin from the cork board. It has been stuck there for weeks; I'd never taken it home from the movie selection ceremony.

She emerges from the office and pursues our uninvited guest. She moves with comic book character speed; like an actress in a videotape with the machine set on fast forward. The man has the door open and is bolting down the hall towards the entrance of Skyline Towers. If he gets in there, he's gone; those halls go on forever. Tina moves up to the glass doors, winds up, and wings the throwing star like Nolan Ryan at her target.

Although I was lying on the floor, and just been hammered into a bunch of hardback Bibles, it looked as though the weapon was weaving through the people in the hall, and gaining speed as it approached the perpetrator. It was heading right for his shoulder blades. Tina's going to kill a "Rocky Horror" cat burglar with my shirokin, I thought. The whizzing star of death was inches away from the man when it dropped like a sinker-ball, and buried itself in the heel of his shoe. He tripped, and sprawled out in front of Skyline Realty, howling like an animal.

Tina walked down the hall like Marlon Brando towards the fallen man. She stood over him and seemed to swell from the shoulders. She roared a long, atonal, inhuman noise at him, and finally vocalized- "DON'T you DARE hurt my boyfriend, you DICK!" She looked like Christopher Lee, about to snap Renfield's neck. Her eyes were emerald neon points, and her teeth were bared, ready for war.

The Rocky-man looked terrified. He was on the floor with a martial arts implement of war embedded in his foot, looking up the skirt of a panty-less, demonically enraged cheerleader, wearing KISS make-up. It looked like she was about to shred his intestines when Rick the Security Guard moved her aside, pinned the man's hands behind his back, and put his plastic cuffs on the unfortunate weirdo.

Mr. Mike flamed out of the office, checked if I was OK, and we both ran over to where Tina and Rick were standing. Rick said the Fairfax Police would be here in minutes. Tina was reeling, and looked 100% snafu. I held her for a minute, just making sure she was in one piece. I'd never been so scared in my life.

She asked me if I was OK. I told her I was swell, except I'd be spending too much time in the near future re-shelving The Reverend Billy Graham's books in the store. Finally, I asked her if that's what she meant by being Sagittarius-style pissed-off. "You got it, Bunky," she whispered, and collapsed in Mr. Mike's arms.

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Epilogue

We missed the movies that night. The Fairfax County Police came in 2 cruisers and took Rocky-man, me, Tina, and Mr. Mike to their station on Braddock Road. We spend a couple of hours going over what happened with different officers. After questioning everyone, it was deduced that the man had slipped in to the store when Mr. Mike had gone to get coffee for us when we were resurrecting The Count for his appearance. He'd hid in the store waiting for us to leave, and B. Dalton was going to be one of several stops he'd planned to make through the air-conditioning bays. He'd picked tonight to do his rounds because he could dress like the "Rocky Horror" kids and be undercover.

While we were waiting for the police to come to the mall, Randy had plucked the shirokin from the man's foot and told Mr. Mike to get rid of it. The perpetrator screamed he would sue all of us for assault with a deadly weapon. However, at the station, when he removed his footwear, the skin was unbroken, with just a white blemish where the tine of the throwing-star had touched his heel.

Mr. Mike went through the procedures of prosecution. Fairfax Police called B. Dalton Booksellers corporate offices in Minnesota and notified them of a safe break-in at store 381. No employees were hurt in the event, the perpetrator had been apprehended, and all stolen cash receipts were recovered at the scene of the crime. They told the corporate people we gave the police our full cooperation in the arrest proceedings. We'd been good little weasels.

The Police gave us a ride back to Skyline Mall. The movies were just ending and Mr. Mike drove Jim and his mom home in his sedan. My manager told me to take Saturday off. He was going to call the

Assistant Manager from the Seven Corners B. Dalton, and ask if he could take his shift at the store in the morning. Tina said she was going to take the day off as well. "Crime fighters need their rest," she said.

Tina and I went to her house in The Midget, washed our remaining make-up off, and slept until noon the next day. I called mom and told her our comic book story. She almost started bawling on the phone. "You're *sure* you're alright?," she kept asking. Tina took the receiver and assured mom I was in fine shape. She told my mother she'd protect me from the criminal element at Skyline Mall. Mom thanked her for that assurance. Tina called 1-Hour Photo to tell them the news. Moustapha the Manager said he would "keel" anyone who tried to damage his Tina. He said he'd see her Monday and to just take it easy.

It was Halloween, so after lounging around the house, we looked at the newspaper. "Nightmare on Elm Street" finally made it to the Arlington Theater on Columbia Pike. It squeaked by the high sheriff film rating crew with an R rating. We went to the afternoon show. It was really spooky. Like, holy smoke is this spooky. I was glad there was still sunlight outside when we left.

Tina said she'd had it with being a cheerleader for a while, but still wanted to dress-up tonight when the trick-or-treaters come by. I didn't want to expend any energy. I told her why don't we be Ward and June Cleaver. All we would need are our regular clothes. Tina got inspired and went through her closets and found the perfect, chiffon green, 1950's housewife outfit. She completed the ensemble with a small handbag, white gloves, seed pearls, and 2-cent plastic vampire teeth. We received the little goblins for hours that night, passing out way too many Almond Joys and Dum-Dums, with Tina as the perfect Halloween hostess. If only I'd had a meerschaum between my teeth like SubGenius J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, the image would have been complete.

After David and The Count had finished electrifying the crowd at Skyline Mall, they'd gone to Joe Theismann's restaurant in full vampire gear. We got the news from Terri who was tending bar. Everybody loved him, and he hammed it up for the crowd with his jokes and one-liners. Then they both sat down to chicken-fried steaks, buffalo wings, cornbread, blueberry flavored iced-tea, and two helpings of key lime pie.

David and Debbie became an official couple the next week. The fate of The Blood Vessel was a dilemma. Debbie wanted him to have a normal car. David wanted a Hollywood ride. The compromise was ingenious. David took thick masking tape, and criss-crossed it over the car in several spots. He papered the

windows and spray painted the body a deep, ultra-gloss black. When the paint dried he removed the tape strips and The Blood Vessel now looked like a flashy Eddie Van Halen guitar. He called it his 5150 ride. I asked him what that meant. My man told me that's the name Van Halen uses for their recording studio. It's a code used by the Los Angeles County Police Department. I asked him what the code stood for. "Escaped mental patient," he replied.

The next week at the mall, T-Girl, Mr. Mike, and I are cult heroes. All our friends come to see us, and want to hear about Wonder Woman Tina, the one-girl army. She loves it. She can go on endlessly about the minutia of the event. Also, during the week, my voter registration card from Arlington County came in the mail. In the same day's postal delivery I got a check from the Anheuser-Busch corporate offices for 2 dollars, and a thank you note for participating in their rebate campaign.

The only sour note was when Mitch came by the store to disingenuously congratulate me for my part in the apprehension of a bad-guy. He'd changed his look again, to Jamaican Rastaman. He wore a dashiki, and had his straight hair in white-boy cornrows. He'd brought a promotional album of the new KISS record for me to see. It was called "Animalize." He smiled like a reptile as he handed it to me. On the front cover was a picture of some shredded cheetah skin and the band's famous logo. Then I looked at the back picture. The four of them were in the photo, doing serious guitar-posturing. They had no make-up on. Not even eyeliner. It hurt to look at them. I gulped like a lung-fish.

"Looks like your boys have given up their look, P-Man," he said.

"They'll put it back on," I yipped, "you watch. Now they're just regular guys with fuchsia guitars, before they were demi-gods of the world's subconscious. What would you rather be?"

Mitch left the store smirking at my naïveté.

Finally that week Tina and Edna come into the bookstore. Edna hugs me and says she's never met 2 mallkids she loves more than Tina and myself. She wants to name a designer hotdog for the Scoops menu after us, and needs name suggestions. We huddle for a few minutes and reject a couple of ideas. The final selection is called Tina's T-Rex. It will be a foot-long dog with sweet onions, cheese, and Cincinnati-style chili with extra cinnamon.

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About the Author(s) (optional)

Perri Pagonis worked in the B.Dalton Bookseller store at Skyline Mall, Bailey's Cross Roads, Virginia, during the early 1980s, and graduated from Wakefield High School in 1977. He has also been employed as a substitute high school teacher, office temporary employee, mail clerk, junior college adjunct lecturer, and cashier at various retail establishments in the Northern Virginia area. He sincerely believes that working with people is overrated.

If you have similar difficulties with respectable employment, happen to look like Joan Jett or Annette Haven, and wish to discuss minutia of this work, please contact him at the e-mail address below. Also, if you're just fed up with everything, look like a regular person, and want to send him weird stuff, that's OK too.

Perri say relax.

E-mail: iwasateenagewerewolf@yahoo.com

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