



WHAT THE FUCK'S BEEN GOIN' ON?

Has it been three months already? Well, not really; there is a bit of time dilation involved with producing this zine, since I have to have it complete and ready to go to the printer a loooong time before it needs to ship out. Last issue was very late, due to my general incompetence, so this time I was determined to be on time. As a result, here I am writing this more than a month, most probably, before you actually get it. It's a form of time-travel, actually, a poor-man's version of relativity manipulation. Heck, I may be dead by the time you read this. In fact, if I keep this up long enough and you keep buying issues from me, eventually it is almost guaranteed that you will be reading my words after I am dead. Depressing, perhaps, unless you consider the possibility that after my demise from liver failure I will simply take up residence in your home as a poltergeist, opening beers and leaving them all over the place.

Welcome, Grace Quinn Vita. Despite my clearly conveyed feelings on the matter—conveyed with an imperial assumption that they would be paid attention to—Jeof and Misty Vita, core members of *The Inner Swine* Inner Circle (TISIC) went ahead and had a daughter, Grace. TIS Legal Counsel The Duchess and I joined TIS Security Chief Ken West and members of the Vita



family at the hospital, waiting for the big moment, but Misty had embarked on a glorious fifty-seven day labor or something like that. We huddled in the squalid waiting room, trying hard to entertain ourselves, and Jeof would go check on his wife, returning some moments later with deep scratches along his torso and a dazed, somewhat frightened look on his face.

You want how much for this baby?

“It's okay,” he would say. “She's drugged now.”

Your Humble Editor and The Duchess attempt to purchase Grace for use as slave labor in TIS manufacturing.

We were sent home some time around midnight, and Grace Vita emerged around two in the morning once she'd been assured

that the freaks had been cleared out of the immediate area. As expected, the baby is unbelievably attractive and probably represents a new evolutionary stage for mankind, and I look forward to being her cowering servant when the Alphas eventually take over the world. My only chance is to bribe her shamelessly while she's a child, before her powers mature. In the meantime, she will be taught to fold and staple zines.

What else? Well, we saw a few short stories published (*Watch the World Die* on www.fromtheasylum.com, *Ring the Changes in Danger City* published by The Contemporary Press, and *The Script* in **Bare Bone #7**, published by Raw Dog Screaming Press) and intend to do a reading in support of **Danger City** in May we'll probably talk about in the next issue, and The Duchess and I celebrated our second wedding anniversary in style. We survived many adventures we can't write about due to NDAs signed with the government. And we did precious little else.

Congrats to our dear old friends Jeof and Misty! Now: Read.

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Obtenez loin de moi, vous chien bourgeois!

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Everybody's talkin' at me...



Here's what they're saying about ME:

The Die (Free, Red Roach Press, PO Box 764, College Park, MD 20740; www.redroachpress.blogspot.com; redroachpress.tripod.com; redroachpress@yahoo.com) reviewed TIS 10(2) in their latest issue: “. . . *In a nut shell: lots o' writing for a scant two bucks. This is my kind of zine. . . and feel free to send me small liquor in the mail, too.*”

Send me a letter with my name in it and I guarantee publication.

JEFF SEZ: Stealing my ideas, eh? Bastards.

Christoph Meyer sent us **28 Pages Lovingly Bound with Twine**#11 (\$2/trade, Christoph Meyer, PO Box 106, Danville, OH 43014), along with a nice note: “. . . *Over the four years that I've been publishing my zine, I've tried around 27,000 twine knots and have thus become a sincere twine aficionado. In order to express my deep love of twine I had some pins made that stated I heart Twine. My wife, Lisa, had affixed one of these pins to her coat, and one day I noticed that, as a practical joke, someone had clandestinely placed a letter "S" over the "T" in Twine. It then occurred to me that this transformed pin would be a perfect [pin] for you, so I am sending [it] to you along with a recent issue of my fanzine and a little comic.*”



JEFF SEZ: This is fantastic. If only I can convince Christoph to make about 499,999 more of these, I'll begin selling them for \$1 apiece and soon be rich. In the meantime, why not send Christoph some cash and encourage him to hire children and relatives to manufacture pins for me.

Eric Lyden sent us the newest **Fish with Legs**#9 (no price listed, Eric Lyden, 224 Moraine Street, Brockton, MA 02301-3664; ericfishlegs@aol.com) along with this amusing note: “*So how is it that the bottle of airline booze I sent you doesn't warrant a mention in the new TIS? I realize you had to make room for the guy who wrote the fascinating missive that repeats your name ad nauseum, but I just assumed that helping get you drunk beats stroking your ego any day. I guess I don't know you anymore. I thought you were an alcoholic with a big ego. Turns out you're an egotist with an alcohol problem. Live and learn. . .*”

JEFF SEZ: I'd just like to point out that there was not even one mention of my name in that letter, which is just a shame.

David Gypsy Breier sent me my contributor copies of **Xerography Debt** #16 (\$3, POB 963, Havre de Grace, MD 21078; www.leekinginc.com), and I was overjoyed to find she'd reviewed TIS twice in its hallowed pages. Here's the best of the two: “*I must admit, Jeff's It Means it's Wank column has given me some performance anxiety. I want to write witty, original things about The Inner Swine*

the likes of which have never been said before. Unfortunately, the flu stole my ability to be witty or think beyond the concept of 'I wonder how long I will have to lay on the couch before I die?' In fact, I'm about 50 germ cells from drooling and grunting. I wish Jeff and I better luck next time.

"This issue is political in nature, rather, it is completely apolitical. In the world of zines, where everyone has a cause or injustice that winds the little motor in his or her heart, Jeff's political nihilism is like reading a treatise on how the sun actually revolves around the earth. Possibly the funniest piece is his description of the bid for power going on in the third-floor restroom of his office building."

JEFF SEZ: God bless *Xerography Debt*, which not only publishes me, but reviews TIS like clockwork. Send them some money and good wishes, and tell 'em it's because I am your master and told you to do so.

Old friend **DB Pedlar** honored me with a 'brief missive': *"Keeping in the spirit of your brief note, after successfully reading The Inner Swine to its completion (the Swine survived several rounds of my reading rotation, which we covered in the past and will not rehash here), I thought I would write you a brief letter. . .I'm sorry, but unless you provided some real incentive to celebrate, plus write the words and design a card specifically for me, I doubt I will celebrate Swine Day or any other holiday you may come up with. Go ahead and smite me. . .As to Mr. Mute and holiday singing. . . it is my firm belief that any song entitled or features the lyric, Silent Night should be unlawful to sing or played at home or in public during evening hours. . .I could go on and on, but since this is a brief missive I will end here and tell you that I enjoyed the read as usual."*

Rock on.

Andy Hernandez sent us the latest disturbing pictures of his son: *"Hey Jeff, we just got the March issue and Julien (who will be 3 in May) won't even let me get near it. Maybe those red eyes aren't just from the camera flash !!"*



JEFF SEZ: This has got to count as child abuse in some states. Won't

someone please think of the children???

Long time fan **Motel Todd** sent us an email: *“Well just sitting here in The Lone Star State having a brew watching the apocalypse. My signs for the apocalypse are: 1) Sushi Bars in Texas - no one even heard of sushi here until about 2 years ago. I think the green paste (forget the name) sold it. Texans like any food that causes sweating and possible cardiac arrest. That's why we have 12 aisles of hot sauce here in every grocery store. 2) It snowed south of Fort Worth in March; it hasn't snowed in Texas in March since the last Ice Age, and 3) Jeff Foxworthy has become the Poster Child of Southern Culture. Thanks for including me in the last two issues. My vote is for Jeff Sommers to be Over Lord of Thunderdome so he can provide all his legions of worshippers with cheap gasoline.”*

JEFF SOMERS SEZ: I will find this Jeff Sommers, who must be some sort of evil doppelganger, and challenge him to a fight to the death!

Proofreader and occasional nemesis **Karen Accavallo** sent us a note, or at least we think she did, since the email address referred to someone named Big Americans: *“. . . I just re-read your Germinus Rex & the germ warriors article from way back. This is honestly the funniest thing I have ever read - pure genius. Even better than the TIS line of Hallmark cards. Even better than Goofus and Gallant, one of which I believe you still owe me. Get on that.”*

JEFF SEZ: I am a fucking genius.

Noticing a worrying amount of silence in the mailing list, I sent out notices with some issues last time out warning that if I didn't hear from people, I'd stop mailing them the Swine. This has nothing to do with money; I just don't want to waste time and postage on people who toss the magazine into the garbage or who moved out of their apartment two years ago and never bothered to tell me. So all I asked was for a note of encouragement, and some people, bless 'em, responded. Usually sarcastically, but still.

Don Boring wrote *“Jeff, after a review of the spring issue and much pondering I decided that yes, I will stay subscribed to your paper. I sent in two years subscription about a year ago and sent you ten little bottles of booze a while back so I guess I am good til the fall of this year or the spring of next at which time I will send you another 10 spot. (Can't remember which president is on that one.)”*

JEFF SEZ: There is nothing more embarrassing than begging for encouragement from a paid subscriber, so I had Don killed.

Ronald C. Tobin wrote *“Hi, Jeff! Got the latest TIS, looks great as usual, thanks for the two mentions of THE THOUGHT as well.*

Yes, please do keep me on the mailing list for THE INNER SWINE. It is one of my favorite zines and I certainly do want to see issues in the future. I will review this issue in the new THOUGHT that I am working on now.

Take care and be well (or get drunk, whichever suits you)”

JEFF SEZ: Drunk jokes? I don't find them funny, and had Ronald killed.

Randall Graves wrote: *“Mr. Mute, um, thought to me and let me*

know that you're trying to kick my ass off of the Inner Swine guest list. Fuck That! I'm a little piggy, here's my snout. Oink oink oink, oink oink oink!!!"

JEFF SEZ: That was disturbing. He lives.

Well, that was it for my mailbag this time around. We now rejoin *The Inner Swine* Volume 11, issue 2, already in progress.

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MONKEYS COULD DO IT

Writing Just Ain't That Hard

by Jeff Somers

I am entirely convinced that my entire life was shaped by a severe blow to the head.

You could, in fact, divide my childhood into two broad sections: Pre Blow to the Head (PBH) and After Blow to the Head (ABH). Jeff during the PBH period was an athletic (if not particularly coordinated) kid who liked to run races and spent most of his time outside. Jeff during the ABH period, which is ongoing, pretty much assumes that all physical activity ends with broken bones, and thus prefers to sit inside, mushrooms growing along his back, and gets winded simply by getting up to retrieve another beer from the fridge. I also started writing almost immediately after the advent of the ABH period.

JEFF BEFORE	JEFF TODAY
	

The dividing line between the two is striking, and is easily pinned to the aforementioned head trauma. I grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey, which is an urban area where the kids mainly played in the streets for wont of open spaces—well, for wont of open spaces where you wouldn't get mugged almost continuously. The street outside my house was our playground—we played *everything* there. Stickball, touch football, games we made up involving bottlecaps and superstition. The weirdest part about my earlier childhood is not the physical activity and general outdoorsy lifestyle—though that *is* bizarre—but rather the fact that I was, during that period, pretty much the leader of the kids in my neighborhood. No, *really*. I was the main organizer, I won most of the races—I was the straw that stirred the drink, babies. No, *really*.

And then came the head trauma, and everything changed.

It was a hot day in summer, and one the neighborhood patriarchs took pity on us kids, our sneakers sticking to the melted asphalt, and opened up the hydrant outside my house. Suddenly there was a swarm of children, of all ages, from all around the area, running and screaming through the cool water. I enjoyed about fifteen minutes of this, and then some fat, huge goon of a kid rammed into me, knocking me over. I hit my head against the curb and that's all she wrote: Concussion, a trip to the hospital, and I emerged the next day frail, introspective, and a writer.

It was just like that. I woke up that morning a normal, active kid and woke up the next day a boozy writer, and it's been like that ever since—but then, I haven't had any head traumas recently. If I suffer one more concussion, I might emerge a circus clown, or a scientist, or perhaps even a male model. Who knows? The implications of all this are clear: Anyone can write. All it takes is some brain damage.

I'm Gonna be a Monkey! Monkey, Monkey, Monkey!



That is, actually, very close to my own belief concerning this thing called writing. I've been writing since I was a kid, fairly seriously since freshman year of high school, and I've piled up a lot of words on top of each other, some of which have pleased others enough to be paid for and published. Huzzah for me. Some people assume that writing sure must be hard work, since it involves, you know, words, and grammar, and an attention span slightly higher than a lump of spam. These people are wrong. Writing is easy. Anyone can write. A *monkey* could do it.

There are also writers in this world who feel the need to make writing into a more manly or professional activity, because, you know, people who write or otherwise make their living through words are kind of poofy and quite possibly communists. These types in general try to make writing sound harder and more difficult than it really is in order to assuage their shrinking egos, but it's all bullshit: Trust me, a *monkey*.



WRITING IS EASY

First off, *writing is easy*. No, really. Of course, there is a difference between Shakespeare and most other writers—we can't all be artistic geniuses, though naturally I am. But you don't have to be an artistic genius, because there is plenty of other value to be found in writing, even the most workmanlike, uninspiring writing. If you can laboriously place words next to each other to form coherent sentences, which in turn form a coherent narrative of some sort, then *bam*—you're writing, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Of course, there is always the question of what to write *about*, and a lot of people are fond of self-deprecatingly announcing that they have nothing interesting to say, or that their lives are boring. The dirty little secret of writing, of course, is that *everyone's* life is boring, and *no one* has anything to write about, really. We make shit up. There's no law that says you have to write exactly what you did yesterday (unless you write on a Blog, where apparently you're *only* allowed to write about what you did yesterday) and that sort of writing is usually, in my opinion, kind of boring. You need to spice up real life with some imagination, take the mundane grind of your existence and somehow transform it into something interesting—heck, that's what I do. So a lack of anything interesting happening in your life is really no handicap at all—just imagine what your life would be like if it *were* interesting, and go from there.

Now, if you have no desire to write, if you've never felt the tug of a creative urge, or walked out of a movie thinking, *shit, I could do that better*, then go with god, you're reading the wrong essay. My point here is not that everyone *should* be writing—lordy, no. My point, rather, is that if you want to write, you certainly can, and don't believe anyone who tells you you need experience, tools, or amorphous talent to write. Baby, you may not be able to write *well*, but you can write a story, or a book, or whatever, and if you put some effort into it, it will have some value—people may enjoy it, or learn from it, or maybe it's only value will be your own satisfaction and enlightenment—but that is nothing to sneeze at.



WRITING DOES NOT REQUIRE THAT YOU WRESTLE RHINOCERI

As I said, some writers are secretly ashamed that their living or avocation involves sitting quietly with writing implements, instead of, I don't know, killing people with their bare hands or making millions in stock deals. Poor souls, they try to macho up the act of writing, or make it sound complex and demanding, as if they were

rhino hunters on the plains of Africa, or corporate executives with advanced degrees, when in fact they are simply humans using a combination of phonetic sounds—phonetic sounds most of us learn at a very young age—and written symbols for those sounds. Face it, writing is not a very demanding activity. Unless you count the boozing, which ages you prematurely—don't I know it!

As far as I know, the only time writing is a dangerous, macho activity requiring tremendous personal fortitude and skill is when you're living in an oppressive dictatorship that dislikes what you write about and seeks to murder people who engage in dangerous creative pursuits. Despite whiny hyperbole to the contrary, we don't live in such a state. The only hardship writers undertake is the scorn and derision of their peers, most of whom regard the ability to write coherent sentences as a form of witchcraft that frightens them, and the only physical danger you're usually in while writing is a constant threat of paper cuts. Granted, paper cuts can be quite debilitating; I lost most of 1997 to recovering from a disastrous set of paper cuts inflicted on me after an equally disastrous shelf unit collapse, in which six metric tons of typing paper buried me for over six hours. But if *paper cuts* is your worst fear, you are simply not engaged in a high-stress lifestyle.

Trust me: Next time someone tries to convince you that writing involves lots of soul-scathing experiences, leaving them exhausted both emotionally and physically, remind them that what they actually do is sit on their ass all day drinking something pleasant and *making shit up*. And if your soul gets scathed after an energetic edit of your work, you are what scientists term a *pansy*. I don't care if you're James Joyce reincarnated, being edited is unpleasant and sometimes combative, but it is never, ever, adventurous or soul-scathing.

This I know to be true because of the Universal Law of Me, which states that *my experience and conclusion is, by assumption, everybody's experience and conclusion, natch*. I also know this to be true because about three years ago I purchased a monkey, named him Brutus, trained him, and every issue since June 2002 has been written exclusively by that monkey. This very article was written by Brutus and lightly edited by myself before being sent to the TIS Production Offices for processing by various Carnies and Grifters hired over the years. Normally I'm only vaguely aware of what's actually appearing in an issue of TIS, scanning most articles that come from Brutus just to make sure no overt insults against me have been included, or promises of free liquor to readers or anything like that. I do some blurry damage control and otherwise let Brutus do his thing.

So you see: Writing is easy! All you need is one well-trained and limber monkey, something to write with, and a complete disregard for both paper cuts and monkey feces. If you can't afford a high-quality monkey, you can always try to cheap out and buy a used

monkey from a testing facility, but primates of this quality generally only write paperback pornography and soap opera fan fiction, so your mileage may vary.

The Inner Swine: Monkeys and paper cuts.

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Ceci n'est Pas Une Pipe

Learn to Love the Obfuscating Jargon, My Beautiful Babies

by Jeff Somers



Never say we're not literal

AS IS MY HABIT, I woke up the day after Saint Patrick's Day in an unfamiliar public restroom, being rather rudely prodded by a sodden mop wielded by an unhappy Indian gentleman. For a change, I still possessed my pants, but this gift was bestowed upon me with a terrible price, for I soon realized I did not have anything else—wallet, shoes, shirt, *anything*. I climbed to my bare feet and turned to study myself in the mirror, momentarily weakened by a sudden urge to pass out and vomit simultaneously. Then I caught sight of myself in the mirror, and realized, to my horror, that some puckish member of *The Inner Swine* Inner Circle (Jeof Vita's ears are likely burning right about now) had painted words on my chest and stomach in bright green paint.

Sweating freely as my body sorted out just how badly it needed to jettison whatever was clawing its way up my throat, I turned to the Indian gentleman, who, mission accomplished, was mopping up the area I'd recently occupied.

"What does this say?!?" I demanded.

He glanced at me, and then back down at his work.

"Tell me what this says!" I demanded.

"I cannot understand what it is you are saying!" the Indian gentleman snapped. "You are speaking gibberish." He glanced at me, down at my chest, then back at my face. "By the way, did you know someone has written *DO NOT FEED OR GIVE ALCOHOL TO THIS MAN* on you?"

I whipped around and stared at myself in the mirror. With this hint from my Indian friend, I could make out the mysterious words written on me. I was immediately filled with anger. And shame, but mainly anger, because the bastards had dared to use words—sacred words!—against me.

"Get out," I growled.

"Sir, I am not done cleaning up after your unfortunate presence in this lavatory!"

"Trust me," I said, looking at him. "You don't want to be here now."

He studied my green face, the general shape of my physical form, and glanced at the spot on the floor where I'd laid all night, and then nodded.

"I understand. I will go on break now."

With that, he turned and ran, and probably saved his life, since I did not make it into a stall in time.

Dehydrated and shivering, I managed to sneak out to a public phone and summon TIS Security Chief Ken West.

“Come alone,” I wept. “I can’t stand the shame.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll be there after lunch.”

I passed a few instructive hours in the restroom attempting to erase the words from my body, but they were painted on in a resistant ink and all I succeeded at was irritating my sensitive skin. Eventually, when foot traffic to the restroom began to pick up, I hid in one of the stalls, entertaining myself by trying to categorize my hangover using a highly scientific system I’d developed years before. After careful analysis of my symptoms, I decided my hangover could be classified as *Soylent Mark Two*, which was the highest on the scale I’d ever personally witnessed. By my previous reckonings, with a category that high I ought to be dead, and possibly spontaneously combustible.

As I sat there wondering at the miracle of my continued existence, Ken West kicked the stall door in, took two quick digital photographs of me, and then stepped aside to admit The Duchess, who immediately dragged me out by the ear, silent. The silence was the worst. I swore I’d have my revenge on Ken, but he ignored me, as always.

LANGUAGE can be a very dangerous thing, as this anecdote shows. Granted, the anecdote shows any number of things: The danger of alcohol abuse, the dangers of leaving yourself unconscious and vulnerable in a public restroom, the dangers of putting your trust into a mercurial and mysterious man like Ken West. But the main point is the power of language: It has the power to both create and communicate and to destroy, utterly, completely destroy. And also, as my anecdote shows, to humiliate.

What my anecdote does not show, because I am incompetent, is the curious power and role that *jargon* plays in our daily lives. What, you had no idea this essay had to do with jargon? My goodness, it’s in the title! Do I have to do everything for you? Creating logical intros to these essays is just one thing I refuse to do for you bunch of kneebiters.

Jargon is a curious sub-set of language. It really serves two purposes: On the one hand, it exists to aid communication and clarify complex knowledge—but on another, possibly more important level, it exists to obfuscate and separate, to keep the undesirables out of whatever group we’re part of. Keeping the undesirables out being a very popular human pastime, especially once you consider the fact that most people consider almost everyone aside from themselves to be undesirable.

Humans are a tribal creature—fully aware of our soft, ponderous and unbalanced bodies, we huddle together in the dim hope that the nasty things we share this world with can’t possibly eat *all* of us. But we’re kind of an *uncomfortable* tribal creature, you ask me; most people can take the whole tribal thing only so far, and try to keep their distance from anyone not squarely in the tribe. We’re all pretty fond of demonizing those who are separate from us. Sometimes that’s people in another

country, thousands of miles away. Sometimes that's the guy across the hall in 3G. Everyone likes to keep the weirdos out.

Back in the day, you kept the weirdos out by beating them about the head and neck when they got too close. Today, we're civilized, and beating strangers around the head and neck is widely considered bad form—so we've been forced to find other, less violent ways of distancing the Others. Language, trusty friend of the civilized savage, has once again come to the rescue, via what I term Obfuscating Jargon.

OBFUSCATING JARGON

Jargon, of course, serves a legitimate purpose: It allows for more precise language, saving everyone time and energy. After all, if you're a computer programmer, it's certainly better to say you're writing a program instead of saying you're writing an algorithmic list of electronic instructions. They both might mean the same thing, ultimately, but one is simpler and conveys all the necessary details concisely and efficiently. Words are about communication, and jargon is simply a way of increasing the accuracy and speed of communication—it's a subset of language, one that can be safely ignored unless you need to communicate with people inside that subset.

Obfuscating Jargon is simply jargon that is designed, at least on one level, to restrict access to the group of people who understand the jargon. Those without the right phrasebook will be lost, confused, and thus excluded, all without having to do any beating about the head and neck. You see it every day, if only you know what to look for, because just about every organization or group of humans utilizes the technique on a daily basis. It's got a long history, too: When the Normans conquered England back in 1066, their use of French as the official language of the court—while completely natural, since they were, after all, French—was Obfuscating Jargon, in a sense. For hundreds of years the only people who could navigate the English Court were people who could speak French. Everyone else was excluded.

Latin has always been a popular OJ, as well. From centuries ago when the Church used it as the Magic Language used by priests to cow the swarming masses, to the present day where a passing knowledge of Latin is required for many scientific, medical, and legal arenas.

But OJ is not limited to dead languages; just about every discrete group of people has jargon defending them from punters like you. The police, engineers, the military, *everyone*. Even kids have OJ these days, in the form of L337 Sp34K and the insipid texting dialect—perfect examples of OJ, as they evolved mainly as ways of communicating without letting parents or other outsiders easily understand what was being said. I work in publishing, and we have our own OJ in effect. Consider, for example, if you overheard me say something like this:

ME: The goddamned AE is letting the authors make globals throughout in *blues*, and I'm supposed to hold the ship date.

COWORKER: Wait a second, weren't you fired last week?

ME: (Throws down smoke bomb.) You'll never get me out of there!
NEVER! Muhahaha!

Unless you're familiar with the publishing industry, you probably have no idea what I'm talking about up there, and that's the point. I *could* say, instead, "The employee who signed the book contract with the editor of the book is allowing the authors to make corrections, which affect every single page of the book—which the compositor of the book will charge us for—in the voucher proofs shipped from the printer (which is of course the second-most-expensive stage to make corrections in), and despite this expensive and time-consuming decision I'm supposed to make sure the book ships from the printer to the warehouse on the date decided on eight months ago when the book was launched into production" and everyone in the room would have a pretty clear idea of what was going on. But jargon allows me to boil a wordy sentence down to a concise statement, *plus* it allows me to exclude everyone who isn't in publishing in some capacity.

In part, some of this OJ is useful in order to weed out unskilled people and identify duffers who aren't really in your profession. In another part, it sharpens communication by condensing phrases into single words that have complex definitions. At least most jargon has these dual purposes of communication *and* exclusion—some jargon is purely OJ, and exists purely to exclude people, like the aforementioned teenaged slang that has, in different forms for decades, worked to exclude both adults *and* other kids, kids from different neighborhoods or different social strata, or simply kids with different sensibilities and interests.

Even zining has its own jargon, you know. People talk about perzines, digest-size, trades-accepted, and DIY, and if you're not familiar with the terms it can be just as confusing as legal or medical jargon. As a matter of fact, wouldn't it be fun to invent your own jargon for your everyday life that only you and your intimates understood? It sure would, especially when your suspicious and nosy neighbors drop a dime with Homeland Security on you and you get nabbed with a PATRIOT act warrant and spend the next five years held without bail or a hearing in some dank prison! Whoo, that would be hilarious!

W00t! Pwned!

This issue of The Inner Swine was created using
100% open source software.

You may not care (which begs the question of why you're reading this, then) but I have been trying to get away from proprietary software for some time now. This issue of TIS used no proprietary software at all. It was written in/laid out in **Open Office 1.1.3**, the images were manipulated in **The Gimp 2.2.4**, the postscript was generated natively in Open Office, and the PDF creation and manipulation was done through **psutils**. The majority of the work was done in the **Mandrake 10.1** operating system, though some work was done in Windows XP when circumstances made it necessary. This software cost me no money, and I did not have to agree to any restrictive license terms as with most software. That rocks.



Luddites Rejoice!

Writing as the Last Cheap Art Form

by Jeff Somers



*You will bow before
Mangor*

PIGS, I'm no Luddite. I love technology and gadgets, and firmly believe that someday—hopefully very soon, for my sake—we will live for centuries if not forever, and be masters of the universe, all through our manipulation of the basic forces of the cosmos. I can't wait until my robot body arrives, along with a team of scientists to extract my brain and insert it into its bulletproof glass skull, where it will throb and pulse with evil genius, forever. I will call myself *Mangor* and rule the world! Unless, of course, *everyone* gets their brain implanted into a robot body and I'll be as equal as ever, a horrible thought.

Anyway, I love me some technology. Which is interesting, really, since I work in an art form or medium that is, today, the least reliant on technology: The written word.

Oh, there is plenty of technology designed for or adapted by writers. You've got your computers, your word processors, your blogging applications, your photocopiers and POD publishers, etc. There's a metric ton of electronics out there you can personally own that will help you create your works and distribute them. But the joy of it is, you don't actually *need* any of that stuff. You can write your words and distribute them to the waiting world with nothing more complex than a stub of pencil, a piece of paper, and maybe some glue. You might need some technological help if you want to *mass-produce* your work and get it out to millions—or even thousands—of people, but fundamentally anyone can write something, produce a few copies, and get it out there, all without any help from microchips or even electricity.

Other art forms don't enjoy this kind of Luddite-friendly status. Film? Good luck trying to make a movie without at least 1930s-era technology, folks, not to mention the cooperation of lots of other people, Ace. Painting or sculpture or the like? Yes, you can create in a technology-free environment, but getting the art out to masses of people is problematic—how do you effectively reproduce a painting or a sculpture without technology? Music straddles both sides, I think; On the one hand you can write a song and distribute simply by performing it on a busy street corner in Times Square, giving

everyone who passes by a mental copy—you could even augment this by handing out printed scores or tablatures. But to effectively mass-produce your *version* of the song, you need lots and lots of expensive technology.

Not so with writing.

Writin'

First of all, you can write without any technology at all beyond the rather humble hunk of charcoal and some markable surface. Granted, nice clean bleached paper and a handy #2 pencil require an advanced industrial world to produce in quantity, but people have been writing for thousands of years, so let's assume you could write the next great novel even if you had to do so with a briquette and some homemade paper. You don't need anything else to *create*. You don't need expensive and complex instruments, you don't need difficult-to-acquire ingredients. All you need is a marker of some sort and something to mark.

Second, you don't need any rare and special training. Some might argue about this, but I reject all such arguments. You need a basic education, yes; you need to learn grammar and vocabulary and how to write the language—all skills most moderately intelligent people acquire by the time they're adults. Once you have those basic skills, you do not need any other training—you can refine your skill simply by practice and by reading other writers. Read enough books, imitate them enough in your own writing, and a style and a polish will emerge.

Okay, so you can sit down and write a story or novel or poem or drama without the need for rarefied equipment or training. This by itself makes writing the most accessible and least-intimidating art form in the world. Add to this the subtle but important distinction that writing requires zero cooperation between you and other people, and the fact that it can be practiced and perfect in complete privacy and anonymity, and you have an art form that *anyone in the world can practice*, without limitation or restriction. Almost no other art form can boast the same. You don't need a host of technicians to cooperate with you in order to create, as you do with film. You don't need skilled craftsmen to create your instruments, as you do with music. You sit down with a stub of pencil and some paper and write.

There is, however, a third and most important distinction here. When you write something, you do not necessarily require an industry and resources to distribute your work.

Of course, an industry with huge resources is required for large-scale distribution. If you want your book to be available worldwide, it will take money and muscle. That's not the point, the point is that you do not need money and muscle to distribute your writing on a *small-scale*. You can print your own books and get them out there with a minimum of cost, unlike just about any other art form. Heck, if you have the time and insane dedication, you can print your own

books with a manual typewriter, some glue, and a few simple tools you can either make yourself or purchase from a place like **www.gigabooks.net** for a total cost of about \$200. Not cheap, no, but not exactly a multi-million dollar company. A few hundred bucks and you're pressing your own books, which you can then hawk in any way you wish.

Few, if any, other art forms or even forms of communication, offer this combination of ease-of-entry and ease-of-distribution. If the cost of binding your own books is too much, you can dispense with it and distribute your words in some other format—such as a photocopied zine like the one you're holding in your hands right now. Each issue of *The Inner Swine* costs me \$1.13 to create and about \$1.06 to mail, depending on how many I mail and where they're going to and what postal service I choose to utilize; I could also mail 150 of them for about \$13, which works out to about \$0.09 a copy. But I pay a little more for certain perks—color card stock covers, for example. If I switched to white paper covers, the cost per issue drops to \$0.98.

And that's specific to my zine and its design. Let's say you decide to make your zine letter-sized and small enough to fit into a standard #10 envelope so you can mail it out first-class at \$0.37 apiece. So let's say ten letter-sized sheets, double-sided and folded, copying costs about \$0.31 per issue. So now for a grand total of \$0.68 an issue you're getting your work—a nicely-designed publication created, say, on an old donated computer in a free word processor like Open Office, or maybe typed up on an old manual typewriter—out to 500 people or businesses. And even that could be improved on, with some creativity. Granted, 500 copies created and mailed out individually thus costs \$340, a chunk of change many people can't spare, especially if you're working on consignment or simply seeking to distribute for free, looking at a total loss of that money. Cut the number of pages in half, then. Drop the print run. The point is not that you can self-publish for free, the point is you can distribute your work easily, and cheaply.

Add in the Internet, and things get easier and cheaper. Create a free web site, access it using a free Internet Service Provider like NetZero, and you can post novel-length creations to the Internet where people can read them for free. The Internet isn't very well-suited to other art forms, as it was invented as a textual communication system—it handles text very, very well; it handles other media very, very mediocrely. Granted, there is no guarantee that anyone will actually read your work on the Internet, but it's out there, and it's out there without the need for the cooperation of a lot of other people, without a lot of expense, without a lot of training. Writing remains, plain and simple, the easiest art form to engage in and get out there.

Which is good for me, since I am frail and easily distracted, meaning that I could never cut it as an artist in another medium. Far too much work, schooling, studying, and practice. As a writer I just follow a simpler formula:

1. Get drunk
2. Feel sorry for myself
3. Write down whatever occurs to me
4. ?
5. Profit!

Rock on.

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Isaiah Wicksy, author of BABY ON THE WALKER



BLONDS, BOURBON, AND USED BOOKS

The Jeff Somers Story

by Jeff Somers



*Perverse? Me? Just
misunderstood.*

I'M OFTEN a perverse person, among many other undesirable personality traits. There is, of course, the foul language, the predilection towards drunkenness, the way I'm super nice to your face and then super mean to you under cover of pseudonyms and humor in the pages of this zine. And, certainly, there is the odor. But perversity is my defining characteristic, I think. I will almost always argue with you for no better reason than a firm belief that *everyone* ought to be argued with, a firm belief that everyone should be opposed, at least a little. And I often do things simply because someone, somewhere—or an *imagined* someone, somewhere—does not want me to do it.

Added into this, it must be admitted, is an almost delusional sense of monetary value. I don't know who to blame, exactly, but somehow I was raised to be one of the cheapest bastards you'll ever encounter. Which isn't to say I don't spend money—or even, often enough, give it away (generally to bartenders in the form of drunken, affectionate tips). It just means that I live my life in a continual state of apoplectic outrage at how much things cost. I seem to have absorbed the prices of things when I was about five years old and lost the ability to adjust for changing times, if I ever had it. So, when baseball cards cost more than thirty cents, when movies cost more than five bucks, when albums cost more than ten bucks, well, I am always amazed, even though this has been a slow, obvious process, one you'd think I'd have noticed a long time ago. I'm *also* the sort of person, though, who can fail to notice the most obvious things for breathtaking lengths of time. The end result of all this is: I am constantly outraged at how much things cost, and my perversity forces me to spend a lot of energy and time in avoiding paying full price for a large spread of items. Somewhere, deep in my mottled, dusty underbrain, I am trying to make the prices of the world remain at 1976 levels.

The only thing saving me from a quick trip into an institution is the comfortable number of things that either didn't exist in 1976, or which I had no use for at that tender age, and thus never noted the price of. While this disturbing and intractable requirement can rear its ugly head at any time, really, it most often rears up, claws and teeth, when I am in the presence of books.

And this is where it gets really crazy, because, ostensibly at least, my

goal in this world is to sell you all some fucking books. Which makes the fact that I personally refuse to pay full price for new books kind of embarrassing.



*Hmmmn... this
one looks
interesting... and
so cheap!*

USED BOOKS. Ah, how I love them. I'd gladly travel miles in order to pay fifty cents for a book, and I'll also gladly wait years before buying a book in order to buy it used. Partly, this is just a love of books: Their feel, their look, the culture around them. Used bookstores are my favorite places to spend some time; there is an eternal, still quality to them. Time has little power there, as books and writers from long ago, long forgotten, remain there. It's not just the prices that make me love used bookstores; it's the atmosphere, the love of forgotten lore, if you will. Books I never knew existed are still on their shelves, and often the only reasonable way you can acquire them is by hunting them down in used bookstores.

Of course, *price* is a concern.

When I was a kid and underwent my startling transformation from normal, active kid to doughy, geeky obsessive reader, paperback books (mostly science-fiction and fantasy, I'm ashamed to say) cost \$2.95 or so, depending—maybe \$3.95. Thus, in my mind, paperback books should *still* cost \$2—\$4, and no more. Surprisingly, I don't have the strong urge to bum down bookstores, burning buildings down being my usual release for the rages that sweep through me when the universe fails to comply with my wishes. No, instead of burning down every Barnes and Noble in the world, I satisfy myself by simply never buying any books there. If I think books should cost less than five bucks, I go where the books *do* cost less—used bookstores, the vanishing species. Books for four bucks? How about books for *one buck*. How about books for twenty-five cents. How about a pile of unsorted paperbacks for fucking free?

Now, if you don't suffer from book-lust, like I do, this probably means nothing to you. For me, though, a pile of free books might as well be a fresh bottle of single malt, left unattended somewhere, its cap unsealed. Except after reading all the free books I don't find myself in a strange public restroom, pantsless, screaming about Blue Meanies.

I could go on and on about why I love used books, how I still possess every book I've ever read and intend to keep doing so until I die, how I *do* contemplate burning down the fucking *spa* they built in the place Bleecker Street Books used to occupy because the World's Greatest Used Bookstore should never be replaced by a fucking *spa*, but I shall refrain. Because, lest my rambling and shotty prose deceive you, bubba, the point of this essay is not how much I love used books, or how cheap I am, it's about the embarrassing fact that I refuse steadfastly to pay full price for a book, when I want everyone *else* to buy my books—when I next convince some ~~sucker~~ genius to publish me—at full price. More than full price, if I can convince someone.

I can see the following scenario happening:

ME: (squinting through bourbon fumes) Wazzah?

FAN: I think you're a genius. But I'm not going to buy your book here at the signing, because it costs \$74! I'll find it at a used bookstore, and I wonder if you'd still sign that copy?

ME: EAT FIST, HIPPIE!

FAN: (gurgling through bloody, broken teeth) But. . .But. . .I read you love used books? How can you be such a hypocrite?

ME: Ack, me writin' career's ruined. Back to the drinkin'!

Now, it can't surprise anyone who regularly reads this zine that I'm a hypocrite, a problem drinker, and dangerously violent. But there are only about a dozen of you, so the whole wide world remains a potential customer for my books. Shaming them all into paying full price for my words will be that much more difficult when it gets out that *I* wouldn't pay full price for my book, and often advise people as much. This calls for a complex and expensive disinformation campaign, that, sadly, begins with killing everyone on my mailing list. Unless someone has a better idea.

I'll probably deal with this the way I deal with all the seemingly intractable contradictions in my thinking: Ignore it completely, using advanced DoubleThink techniques to get by. I will sincerely and equally believe that no one should pay full price for books *and* that you should pay full price for my books. You'd think this kind of thing would make my head explode, but you'd be wrong.

In Due Course

In my pocket, a chunk of grey Manhattan air
carefully collected in a mason jar on a hot day
in hazy Times Square amidst nuts and traffic
it swirls and storms inside the glass
in my pocket

In my mind, I am pushing people into traffic
a glance to either side, a count of heartbeats
and then a violent shove, sending them sailing
in front of trucks. I walk away, looking back only
in my mind

In my shoe, a piece of glass that sinks deeply
with every step, soaking my sock and shoe
with blood and making me wince with each
step, and I get weaker and weaker, unable to feel my toes
in my shoe.



HAIRCUT AND AN ATTITUDE

Writing as Lifestyle Choice

by Jeff Somers

ANNOUNCING

THE INNER SWINESCHOOL OF THE WRITING

You Can Make a Real Living by Selling Your Writing! No, really!

Jeff Somers Shows You How.

Picture this: You're walking through the cashier's line at your local **liquor** store, just about to leave with another wagon-load full of **sweet, life-sustaining booze**.

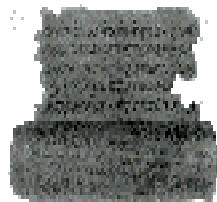
You glance over at the register to pay and a slick magazine cover catches your eye.

You pick up the magazine (eyeing the cashier nervously because you've already been **banned** from this store once for theft, and you're not at all sure your fake mustache has really fooled anyone), and whaddya know? It turns out the article you wrote a few months ago on the **Shame** of Adult Alcohol-Induced Bedwetting is published in this issue -- and you proudly show your byline to the girl at the register as you **stuff** the last three copies of the magazine on the stand down your pants. Maybe you'll give one of those copies to your ex-boss.

You can afford to do that, of course, because you got paid for that article months ago. In fact, you got paid almost \$2000 for that article. You turn to tell the cashier this, but she's turned into a soul-eating demon and you can feel the familiar bite of a straight-jacket on your wrists.

It's happening again.

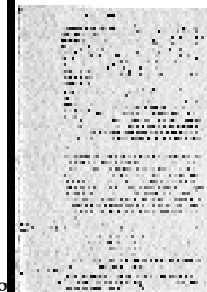
I didn't actually write the above—I added some fun touches, but the bulk of it was lifted from www.jennaglatzer.com/freelance_writer.htm, which



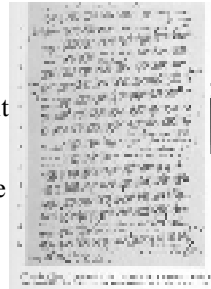
is just one of many web sites that propose to sell you a book that will teach you how to make a living as a writer. A simple Google search will turn up dozens of such sites, all of which employ the classic huckster scam of intimating that the only thing standing between you and riches is some secret information the Illuminati or some such shit has conspired to keep from you. Ms. Glatzer offers to sell you that crucial information for a mere \$14 on her web site, which is nice of her, since one would think that making a fortune selling her writing to a word-hungry world would eat up a lot of her time—but I digress.



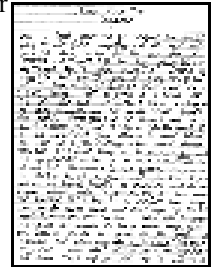
It isn't easy selling your writing today. It isn't impossible, either, but making a consistent and sufficient living purely from your words is not that easy. Pay scales are low, so even if you manage to sell stories and articles consistently, chances are at the end of the day you haven't made nearly as much money as you would have from a Day Job. On the other hand, there are hundreds of publications out there, each staffed by writers, each eagerly paying freelancers—obviously *somebody* is making a living writing.



If you're me, of course, the idea of making a living writing the dreck that generally appears in magazines and newspapers is horrifying. I'd rather slit my wrists than write some of the fatuous bullshit that appears in something like *Maxim* or *Entertainment Weekly*, and other types of paid-writing—advertising, for instance—would make me want to punish myself a great deal *before* I slit my wrists. Sure, you can make a living writing if you're willing to write about bullshit, and serve a market tailored for morons. But what if you're that sad, pathetic species, the *fiction writer*? Oy vey, get over yourself: You will be poor always. Because even if you manage to get paid for a story, you will not be paid well. Or often.

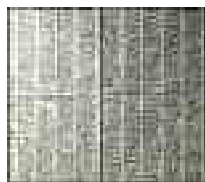


The last short story I sold netted me \$25. The most I've ever made on a single short story was \$250. The most I ever made for a writing project period was \$1600. These examples span a good ten years, and trust me, there aren't that many of them. If I had to rely on my writing career for sustenance, I'd be dead by now. I choose to think this is not



because I am a piss poor writer, or because I lack whatever secret people like Jenna Glatzer want to sell me. I rather think this is just the nature of the beast, and the majority of fiction writers have starved to death

ignominiously since time immemorable, and good riddance, since the world needs fewer bombastic assholes who think their inner thoughts should be required reading at the world's universities, trust me. *Trust me: I am* one of those bombastic assholes, and the world needs fewer of me, not more.



I sometimes think the financial hardships of writers is just part of nature's plan, thinning the herd of useless appendages.

Of course, there are writers who earn their livings from writing, and some actually earn incredible livings from their writing. Bully for them. It proves nothing, as there are also people who make a good living performing stage magic, and I doubt anyone would encourage you to go into that field when you're graduating college. Besides, if there wasn't at least the public possibility of earning a living writing, people like me wouldn't waste our broke-ass time trying to ply the trade. We'd just scribble into our notebooks until we couldn't take it any more, grab up some guns and some Kevlar, and go out like all the other quiet loners. No, we all think there's maybe a slim possibility of earning some money at this writing gig, and that's part of our motivation.



The real problem is this: Because writing isn't really a practical *career* any more, in the sense that your chances of earning a living, and the effort-in-to-money-out ratio is pathetic, it has ceased to be a career, a profession, and become a lifestyle choice. In other words, *a writer* is no longer the answer to the question *What do you do?* It's become the answer to the question *What are you?*



Let's face it, every somewhat literate gub dressed in a thrift-shop corduroy blazer and wire-frame glasses who can put together a sentence thinks they're a writer. The world is crawling with people who wrote a few short stories in high school, or doodle in a notebook from time to time, or who simply have an outline of The Great American Novel in their heads. The world is crawling with people who consider themselves writers even though they have never sold a word, and possibly never *written* a word. No one goes around claiming to be a carpenter, for example: You either work as one or you don't. Being a writer, though, is as much about fashion as it is about your activities. Writer has, to a certain extent, become a role people play for effect.



This doesn't stop people like Your Humble Editor here from claiming



the title, even if it is tarnished with sticky Trustafarian fingerprints. First of all, there is no other title I can lay claim to. If I didn't write and occasionally publish, people wouldn't know what the fuck I did with my time, because, sadly, "drinking" is still not accepted as either vocation or avocation, and tends to get little more than pitying looks when you claim it as an occupation.

The strangest part of this process, of course, is that writing is following the same trail as painting before it: Since it's so hard to make any money from writing, only rich people tend to do it with any success. Aside from the fact that rich folks might have a connection or two that you and I lack, this is partly due to only rich people having the time and wherewithal to devote themselves to writing. I don't begrudge them this; if I were rich I'd do a lot of things I can't do now, like build a secret underwater city and declare war on mankind—but I digress. As a result of all these richies claiming to be writers and getting some attention for it, writing has become a Movie Profession.

A Movie Profession is the sort of job scriptwriters love to give their main characters. A Movie Profession is generally cool, exciting, interesting, requires a fair amount of education, and, within the movie universe at least, apparently requires near-zero effort. Lawyering is a favorite MP, or Professor, and the old favorite Generic Businessman, and you see the actors treating their jobs as delightful clubs they drop into now and then when the storyline requires some context for their character. You get the feeling the scriptwriters don't actually understand that you have to show up for most jobs, even well-paying jobs. And now writer, that favorite of the unimaginative author for lo these many years, has become firmly established as a MP, because the only writers anyone knows of are rich novelists who spend most of their time counting the cash movie studios pay them for the rights to their paperbacks. As a result we have a lot of actors and actresses running around in movies, identified as writers, spending most of their time doing nothing. Writing has become a glamor job. As ridiculous as that sounds to someone who has never made more than \$1600 for a piece of writing.

Oh well, you can't write about this subject without a certain level of rage-infused sputtering creeping in, especially in someone like me, for whom class warfare is instinctual. Someday I hope I am on top of the writing pyramid, gazing down at the struggling *artistes* and burning cash for warmth, at which time I will forget all about *The Inner Swine* and this article. Until then, please send money.



I Thought I Would Write you a Poem

Deep Thoughts on Poetry

by Jeff Somers

A few days ago, someone I barely know handed me a 20-page poem they'd written, asking me to read it and discuss it with him.

This is terrible.

I didn't say the *poem* was terrible, please note; I certainly haven't read it, and don't plan to. I am not a poet. I like to dabble in *poetry*, but it's *my* kind of poetry, which means that it rhymes, is pretty loose concerning rules of structure and grammar, and pleases me and no one else—usually. I enjoy coming up with interestingly formed phrases that sound meaningful and pleasing to the ear. I don't pretend to be a serious poet, and thank goodness, because, let's face it, serious poetry sucks. Don't agree? Who cares? Go spider-walk back to your darkened lair and write some poetry and leave me alone.

I get this kind of *Hey, you're a writer, let's share our deepest writings and spend a few weeks discussing them deeply!* bullshit a lot, sadly. I get it because my modest and quickly-fading-into-the-mists-of-history publishing successes separate me from about 99% of all writers, almost none of whom will ever legitimately publish anything, leaving my small accomplishments in this field a towering lighthouse towards which they steer their waterlogged vessels. Most writers never publish anything, and not necessarily because of talent or a lack thereof; most writers never actually get to the point of submitting anything for publication, and almost none of them self-publish in any real way. The result is this 99% group who have dusty manuscripts in their desk drawers that will never ever see the light of day.

Well, no big deal, it's fine with me if you're going to be timid that way and hope that some future Proto-Ape archeologist discovers your manuscript in a moldering ruin someday and you're hailed as an undiscovered genius. But why bother me about it? More importantly, why bother me with pretentious poetry? If people were thrusting really hot pornography into my hands pro bono, that would be different. But poetry? Especially poetry that is not a limerick or other fun, rhyming example of the genre? One quick glance at anything I've written will show you I slept through most of my education. My writing is anything but laced with classical references and is the last works you'd think needed explanatory footnotes. There's just no reason to think I want to discuss your T.S. Eliot-lite work, unless we count the hubris that you carry around like a pet monkey on your shoulder.

There are, I've heard it said, writers somewhere in the universe who really do like reading other people's work and discussing it with them. Bully for them. I am not them, much as I am not you and share remarkably few of your passions and interests, and do a fairly shitty job of pretending to care about other people who don't immediately interest me—as evidenced by the wide swath of silence that surrounds my workspace at the office. So why do people bring me their work and ask me to read it? There are only a few possible solutions:

1. They are seeking intelligent writerly conversation. Oh boy, am I the wrong guy for this. I *hate* other writers, and I hate talking about writing with them, the bunch of (generally speaking) arrogant, pretentious, boring fucks. There are exceptions to this rule; there are writers I've met who make me *want* to discuss work with them. Really. But this happens so rarely the odds are really against it. I'd like someone to show me where, exactly, I give the impression that I want to talk shop with anyone, so I can change that language, pronto.

And I guess this is what really bothers me about the whole sordid affair: The assumption that I'm interested without being asked. You hand me this stack of papers and I'm supposed to take the time to read the fucking thing, organize my thoughts on it, and then spend time discussing (or, knowing most other writers, *arguing* about) my thoughts on the whole thing. If they'd just ask me, or work it into conversation, I'd make it plenty clear to them that I don't want it, and that would be that.

2. They're arrogant fucks who think they've written the greatest poetry since *The Waste Land* and can't wait for my excited response. You may think I'm kidding, but one of the main reasons I shy away from my fellow wordsmiths is because we're all a bunch of arrogant pricks, at least when it comes to our writing. We *have* to be, bubba. Putting your thoughts on paper and then showing them to the world is a scary thing, and you have to have steel balls to do it, ever, because there's always a chance someone is going to write a vicious review of your work and tear your ego to shreds. The only defense against that, and the paralyzing fear it engenders, is to assume you're a genius and go on from there.

But while this is necessary, it's also damned annoying, and most writers, when they give you something to read, are secretly thinking it'll blow your mind and make you their disciple, it's so good. And if that doesn't happen, they assume your trogdolytic mind didn't 'get' it, and pity you. Trust me, kids; writers are sucky people to hang out with, *especially* if you're another writer.

3. Their writings are the translations of a demon who whispers to them every night, in code, and they show it to everyone because someday The One will see through the obfuscation and reveal himself and make them his Main Acolyte. In which case, I don't think anyone will blame me for pretending I don't see them and just walking past them in pained, awkward silence. Or perhaps accepting their muddied pages out of fear for my life and then burning them ritualistically later on in the evening in order to protect myself from the demon, since I think a lack of belief in demons may not necessarily be a defense against them,

natch. Better safe than sorry when it comes to demons, I always say!

So here I was with this 25-page poem, complete with *footnotes* (shudder) and the strong likelihood that within the next few months I'd be accosted, at some point, by the author, seeking my impressions. I had only three choices:

1. I could read the fucking thing and come up with some half-assed thoughts on it in order to satisfy him.

2. I could pretend to have lost it, and apologize while backing away, and then break into a run and escape.

3. I could come clean and tell him that reading his poem would be more of my life than I had budgeted for attention to him, and walk away.

What to do? I chose #1, because I am a weenie, and then failed to really follow through and ended up more or less doing #2, except instead of pretending to lose it, I pretended to be so honkin' busy I hadn't had a chance to wade through the thing, which he seemed to accept, most probably because he thought he'd written a complex and deep piece of literature that couldn't possibly be absorbed easily. The arrogant little fucker. I went back to playing *Half-Life* at work and reading trashy paperback novels, and all was well with the world again.

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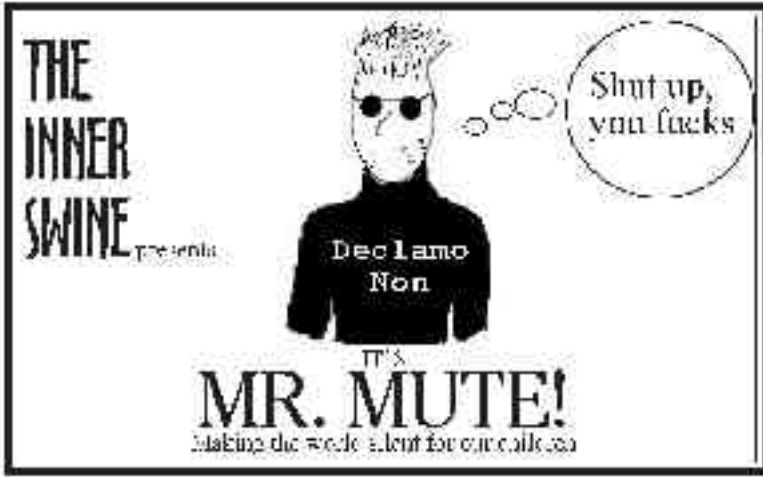
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 <p>Prattling in Pantomime Blogs = Noise</p> <p>Like cockroaches, noise finds a way to survive. Some might take this tenaciousness as a sign that noise has its place in nature, and like other things in nature—life, for instance—noise will find a way. I take it to mean that</p>	<p>you noisy people are like bugs, and need to be exterminated. As my Campaign for Silence continues, silencing the world one bastard at a time, I find that new fronts are constantly opening, requiring attention. Perhaps the most insidious such front is the blog, which might as well be known as nonverbal noise. You chattering monkeys have</p>
<p>finally succeeded in making everything noisy. I salute you.</p> <p>For a very long time, the written word was insulated against noise. It required more effort, more thought, and was more formal by nature, even if you were writing in the vernacular—it required planning and mastery of various skills. Even the most excretable writing had some restraining</p>	<p>form to it, making it tolerable if not desirable. But with the dawning of the blog and the instant-on technology it represents, even the last bastion of silence—the written word—has been compromised. With blogs and their ilk, we have written noise.</p> <p>The problem, of course, is that the preparation part of writing has been removed</p>

from the equation. There was a time when you needed a few things to write something down and communicate it to the world: One, you needed to be literate; two, you needed time; finally, you needed someone else to be willing to spend the money and time to publish you. The Internet has changed all this: Now anyone with the ability to laboriously place letters

side-by-side to form words and words side-by-side to form sentences—rather like a retarded man building a brick wall—can write out their ponderous thoughts and instantly communicate them to the world.

The problem is, most of these thoughts are the equivalent of an obese masked Mexican wrestler locking you in a headlock and screaming at you.

Mr. Mute weilds the Hammer of Justice for all our sakes.



The Internet has always been a haven of stupidity, amatuerishness, and lowbrow, but it, too, usually required some knowledge, some preparation—there was some barrier to its use, however low. Blogging, because it has become a fad, which has caught the insipid imaginations of legions of idiots,

Mr. Mute also wonders why he is dressed in a black unitard. But only briefly.

has spurred the creation of web sites and tools, which make creating a blog as easy as shouting in my ear throughout the entirety of a 7 Train ride on the NYC subway. I really think the bastard who did that the other day does, indeed, have a blog.

You must all be punished. The written word was my last refuge, the final mode of communication I could

approve of. I'm going to have to remove all your fingers—from all of you—in order to make sure blogging stops. This will compromise the forced labor aspect of my Seven-Year Plan, but measures must be taken.

You may think I'll tire and retreat in the face of so much noise, but you are wrong. All that increases is my desire to have you all silenced. Have a nice day!



CIRCUS of the STUPID

Writing Workshops Irritate Your Humble Editor's Sensitive

Skin, Annotated

by Jeff Somers

I, as a rule, do not like other writers, the simpering arrogant bastards. I know writers, I *am* a writer, and let me tell you: We're insufferable. Preoccupied with our own thoughts, jealous and



Now THIS is my kind of writer's workshop.

paranoid about anyone else's creative or financial successes, and, generally, lazy, writers are probably the worst people to get trapped next to on a long trip—*especially* if you're a fellow writer. Non-writers at least can feign complete ignorance, make a few scathing remarks about the state of literature today, and settle in to a tolerable round of inaudible grousing from the writer. Fellow writers can't convincingly claim this level of ignorance, and we're far too lazy to do anything that requires effort, like getting up and walking away. Don't ever underestimate the laziness of a writer; most of us choose to write because it's the only thing we can do without any effort whatsoever. I actually earned an English degree in college simply because I'd already read all the books and knew I could bang out essays on various subjects in a very short period of time, thus allowing me to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in four years without ever actually attending classes or, in fact, learning anything new.

Knowing the species so intimately, I avoid my fellows assiduously. As a matter of fact, the easiest way to lose my interest in your company is to tell me you're a writer, at which time I will stare off into the distance contemptuously and ignore you, forcefully if necessary. Talking to another writer is an awful lot

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Since this is the writing issue, I thought it would be fun to take a typical, lame TIS article and examine its inner workings, its mysteries, its... genius. Let's start with the graphic: New York State Governor George Pataki, Republican Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, and some guy drinking beer. This was the result of five minutes spent on Google.com, searching on "drinking beer". It has nothing to do with the article, probably has a slew of permissions issues, and is, generally, lazy and uninspired zinemaking. Yet somehow, it works!

Notice how I combine apparent disdain for my education with the subtle reminder that I did indeed earn a degree. I am a genius.

My disdain for my fellow writers is pretty well documented, but nothing is too overused or stale for TIS.

like listening to the voices in my head, which really isn't very enjoyable.

I think I learned to hate writers in workshops.

Ah, the writing workshop. In the middle of my college career I was looking for course credits that were even easier and less time-intensive than my usual English ones. Which is to say, course credits I could actually earn while I was asleep. So I took a creative writing class, which seemed perfect as I'd already written several hundred short stories of various quality—what could be easier than selecting a few pages of material every week to submit? Heck, I figured I could literally be asleep for most of the class and still get an “A”. And it worked; I wandered into class twice a week, turned in my writing, gave feedback on other peoples' work and accepted their feedback on mine with a cheerful attitude and almost zero retention, since you can, I am convinced, pretty much dismiss any criticism you receive in such workshops with a wink and a smile. I got easy credits from my creative writing classes and went on my merry way. I did learn two important lessons though: People are assholes, and most criticism is completely useless.

People are assholes: This applies in general to every intelligence in the universe, human and nonhuman alike, but it's particularly true about writers. Give them the chance to put someone down, and they certainly will. Take creative writing classes/workshops: By their very definition people are unsure of their abilities, looking for some guidance—or, in my case, hungover and trembling too much to write anything new and thus coasting by on year-old scribblings that I deemed expendable. By definition, then, the works they are submitting to these classes are probably a little rough, a little hesitant.

This stops no one from savaging every piece submitted to the class with a bloody-toothed enthusiasm that is dismaying.

Some teachers will require that students start off with some positive feedback before lashing into their peers, so there is sometimes a little perfunctory praise. Once the quick, lifeless happy talk is finished with, the real fun of the experience begins when you get to tell the author what you didn't like about their story—which more often than not will

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When I was in High School, I learned how to bang out essays: Five paragraphs. One for the introduction, which ended with a strong thesis statement, three paragraphs supporting your thesis, and a concluding paragraph that reiterated the point. Less formally, I still use this approach: Intro paragraph(s), which end with a bold statement of purpose, then some noodling supporting paragraphs, and finally a lame, humorous conclusion. All that's changed is the addition of pantsless jokes and cussing.

One of the grand traditions of TIS is my ability to make sweeping assumptions about the entire human race. It wouldn't be TIS if I failed to do this in every article. The other grand tradition is joking about my alcohol abuse. Just thinking about liquor is making me tremble.

The title for this piece, BTW, I gleaned from the radio, where one of the DJs uses a soundbite of it. I can't figure out what movie or TV show it comes from, though.

default to what you didn't like about it or would have handled differently. Now, there is value in hearing what people don't like about a story, and there's even value in hearing extremely negative opinions about your work—but the term *constructive criticism* conveys the idea that there ought to be something, um, *constructive* about it. Simply telling you what sucked about your story accomplishes little, aside from priming you to be a real bastard when *their* story comes up for review.

We're writers, after all: Secretly, we think everyone else is a no-talent moron and we disdain your opinions. Trust me. We might love you, adore you, and respect you, but if you say anything about our work we think you're an idiot and stop listening after the third word. Like I said: Assholes. And therefore every writing workshop is filled with assholes.

Criticism is useless: Now, we know this isn't true. I even said the opposite just a few lines ago—but then, I'm a drunken hypocrite, so that's to be expected and/or forgiven. More accurately, I'd say that random criticism offered up by a random collection of people is useless. If I could get William Faulkner, maybe, to read my work and sober up long enough to give me some pointers, I'm sure I'd find a few nuggets of goodness in the pile. But when other slimly published fucktards very similar to myself are my only critical resources, I despair of getting anything worthwhile out of them, because all they want to talk about is how *they* would have written it.

I guess we've all read something or watched an entertainment and walked out thinking we could do better. It's a natural instinct. But it is not useful criticism. Yet this is the majority of the feedback you get in writing workshops—in fact, I'm going to have one of those moments wherein I disdain research, due diligence, and, possibly, logic and just go ahead and make one of those blanket statements I have become so famous for: the overwhelming majority of *all* criticism boils down to how the other person would have done it. You can possibly rework your stories so that the small group of people you're working with approve of them, but what's the point? I could rustle up another group of people who would, on principle, denounce your

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On some level I realize I'm being a pompous ass with all these assumptions, delivered so confidently, so I usually work in either a self-deprecating statement about my stupidity, lack of experience, or pantslessness, or I head off negative reactions by immediately admitting exceptions to my rules, or temporizing my bold statements. It doesn't matter; no one reads this shit anyway.

The middle of the article is usually where things bog down, usually because I forget to be humorous and actually try to make a point (how cute!) and subconsciously start to realize that if I wasn't its author, I would have stopped reading this about a paragraph ago. Once I realize I've reached this point, I start grafting on humorous lines to desperately improve the situation. Sometimes this works. Sometimes, not.

If I needed to make space in the current issue, this would be one of the first articles to get bumped to 11 (3). While squarely on theme, it's a little weak and meandering.

carefully revised work until they'd been allowed to push their thumbs into its soft skin and leave their own marks—essentially making it as much their work as yours.

I can hear you all snickering about how Somers needs to adjust his attitude and embrace a little more criticism in his writing. You bastards will be dealt with.

The fact is, writing workshops, while they could, in theory, be useful, are in fact just ways of learning how *other* people would write a story. Most writers throughout history managed to be creative and write compelling, interesting work without the benefit of a formal learning environment. What you do get from workshops is a hefty dose of assholeism and advice that might gain you praise/good grades within the workshop, but which will not greatly improve your writing. Go buy a six pack of some beer you enjoy, put on some music, turn off the TV, disable your Internet connection, and start working. You'll get more from the beer than you ever will from a writer's workshop, bubba.

Unless the Freaks entertain you. In that case, bring the beer to the workshop and enjoy! Huzzah!

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I am conscious of my own shortcomings. It amazes me that anyone actually reads my zine.

I am listening to "Please Stop Fucking My Mom" by NOFX as I write this.

Always end with a reference to a) freaks, b) booze, c) pantslessness, d) bastards, or e) some mix of the above. Sometimes I manage a more interesting conclusion, but usually I find myself out of things to say and in need of an ending, so I just crufft up a joke and go for it.

Annotation to the Annotations

After all, there's beer to be drunk, you bastards.

That's a meta joke.



FICTION

THE RuLeS of PoLiTe SoCieTy

by Jeff Somers

ReSpEcT tHe SoLeMnItY oF tHe FuCkInG OcCaSiOn

THE Finn contemplated Chester Amix.

In his good black suit, designed and tailored perfectly, The Finn slouched out in the heavy air with his hands in his pockets, his short blonde hair sticking up in odd tufts, his gray eyes hidden behind a pair of expensive sunglasses. He was a man of monochrome, black suit, white shirt, face almost as white. He stood at the edge of the crowd and let the warm, unrelieving wind move around him, while everyone else swayed and fluttered, shifting their weight and fidgeting.

He contemplated Chester Amix, who he'd gone to high school with, who had recently thrown himself off his roof. During a party. With two hundred of his friends watching in dimly horrified, inebriated disbelief. Thrown or tripped, depending on who you asked, though The Finn didn't know how it mattered. Dead was dead, and no matter what the story was, Chester was still a bad-looking corpse in a cheap suit whose funeral was disappointing.

The weather, for one thing. Funerals, he thought, required Pathetic Fallacy. Pouring Rain, scorching California-like sunlight, something dramatic. But the day was simply... typical. Partly cloudy, humid, that stillborn breeze pushing heavy, listless air around.

The people, for another. The Finn thought the turnout was kind of light, and he could tell at a glance that a lot of the people who'd also hung out with Chester in high school weren't in attendance, and those that were acted as if the funeral was eating into their spare time. And the two employees of the cemetery who were going to bury Chester later were leaning up against the small yellow bulldozer not far from the spot, talking loudly about bullshit.

The Finn glared at them, but supposed the impact was weakened by the sunglasses. They took no notice of him.

Turning back to the ceremony, The Finn contemplated The Preservation of Frank Society, standing proudly just behind Frank himself. Frank, as had become usual, looked terrible: Gaunt, pale, thin. Staggered by the hand life had dealt him. The Preservation of Frank Society, population Frank's sister Agnes and her little Monkeyboy, gleamed with bright, chilly health, happy to be alive and have a purpose in life. Agnes' purpose, of course, was the salvation of her brother. Monkeyboy, as far as The Finn could tell, had Agnes as a purpose, and crouched at her feet, gazing up at Ms. DeLay in rapt worship, nodding eagerly at every command, scratching behind his left ear with his foot.

Behind her own sunglasses, Agnes DeLay met The Finn's gaze and they stared at each other for a moment, a beam of pure cold crossing the air between them, bugs and microbes and small birds falling out of the sky dead where they were unlucky enough to fly into it.

After a moment, The Finn looked away, and contemplated his shoes, listening to the sports scores as analyzed by the two workers behind them. Suddenly, he turned without looking up and marched over to where the two men were lounging in their dirty workclothes. He didn't look up until he was within feet of them, and found them eyeing him in silence, a black guy and a

white guy, both big and pot-bellied.

"Fellas," The Finn said with a slight smile, "do you mind keeping it down?"

The two men just looked at him, a tall man in a dandy suit, looking like he could just blow away. "We ain't bothering anybody," the black guy said.

"All I'm saying," The Finn replied, his grin edging upward in volume, "is have some fucking respect for the solemnity of the fucking occasion, okay?"

"And all I'm saying," the black guy said evenly, "is we ain't bothering anybody."

The Finn nodded, and half-turned before pausing, eyes on the ground, to gesture back at them in a casual, nonthreatening way. "You fucks," he said in a low voice. "I'm going to slit your motherfucking throats. Shut the fuck up."

Both men started up suddenly as The Finn turned away.

"What the hell was that?" the black man demanded.

The Finn turned and walked backwards, smiling and spreading his hands. "I'm sure I don't know." And he turned back and resumed his spot at the edge of the mourners. He didn't turn around, and didn't hear anything from behind him. He took his place and became perfectly still, and contemplated The Rat Pack.

The Finn had gone to school with The Rat Pack, and was glad they'd all decided to attend, although he would have chosen better suits for all of them. He was horrified at their appearance; he'd kept in touch with them, but hadn't seen them in the light of day, sober and undistracted, in quite some time. They were melting under the harsh sun of time, turning into their fathers, taking up ungodly amounts of real estate as they spread everywhere.

Frank had been their Joey Bishop: Somewhat droopy, not entirely official, more useful than anything else. Almost an honorary member, after a while.

Standing in front, casual and with permanent smirk, Terry had one hand in his pocket and managed to look at ease, as usual. His one skill, as far as The Finn was concerned, was the ability to be at ease wherever he went.

Behind Terry were Ben and Roger, Roger being Sammy Davis by dint of being black, his dark skin shiny with sweat as he stood very still. Looking dissipated and thinned, yet fat and swollen, thinned in the wrong places and swollen in others, like blueberries on sticklegs.

In the rear, then, as usual, was The Quiet Man, Harry, Gentle Harry, their Peter Lawford: Rich as fuck and possessed of a permatanned faux-sophistication that belied a lazy, rotting bag of bones, a man who had been rubbed smooth years ago and continued to be eroded. The Finn knew Harry was going to be senile before his time, sitting someplace with a warming glass in one hand and a vapid smile on the other, reliving cherished memories of doing nothing, being challenged by nothing.

The Finn studied them, his old friends, his drinking buddies, and wondered where and how it had all gone wrong. These were young men. The Finn settled on studying Ben and Roger, the Blueberries, because it was generally safe to stare at them, since they so rarely met anyone's eyes. It was a simple case of no fucking self-control, he decided. A simple case of being unable to resist temptation, and unable to step forward and meet challenges. Life swarmed over them and they huddled, terrified, in dark places, swelling and thinning, until eventually they burst.

Chester had been one like that, swelling and thinning, rushing towards a bursting day. That Chet had somehow found the originality and energy to climb up onto his roof while a crowd gathered below, music playing, amazed The Finn. He wished he'd attended that party, but he'd long ago tired of Chet's assinine parties, mired as they were in his college years. Who wanted to hang

out with a hundred strangers, fighting for warm beer and screaming to be heard? Besides, parties like that broke rules, and rules were very important to The Finn. Parties like Chet's broke noise statutes, imposed upon neighbors' rights, and generally eroded the bubble of civilization around it.

"Jesus," Terry had said to him in a bar a few weeks before, "you'd be fucking happy if we all walked around in matching jumpsuits with bar codes tattooed on our shaved heads, marching in sync and playing by your rules. Probably while you stood on a reviewing stand in full Nazi uniform."

"No," The Finn answered slowly. "No bar codes. Implanted chips, forcing you to obey."

Terry had laughed, killing off his beer. "I believe it, Theo, I do."

"Know where I can get one of those nazi uniforms? Preferably something that would accentuate my ass."

"Fucking fascist."

"You don't get it," The Finn had struggled through a thick tongue to explain. "Civilization is fragile. Don't believe it? Think about riots. Think about wars, and war crimes. You mentioned Nazis—a bunch of civilized motherfuckers, anyone would have said, until the truth came out. Civilization," he continued, tapping the damp, unsteady top of the table to accentuate each word, "is the voluntary cooperation of millions. We all agree to follow some rules, to agree on certain basics—murder is bad, babies should not be eaten, whatever—and hence, civilization. But it could go any time." He shrugged, giving up. "I just believe in doing my part to preserve it."

Terry raised his emptied glass. "Civilization demands that after a speech like that, you have to buy me a drink."

That was the way it went—no one understood. The Finn didn't mind. He listened to the priest for a moment, droning on and on, and then contemplated the Rat Pack's Ladies Auxiliary. Even sad, depleted men like Terrance, Roger, Ben, and Harry could attract women, The Finn supposed, outrageous as the thought had always seemed, considering the myriad deficiencies the Rat Pack sported, ranging from potbellies to thinning hair, lack of achievement and each other as social equals. Yet, two of them married, and a third in a steady, if doomed, relationship.

Terry's wife was just like Terry, only unbelievably attractive, a tall blonde woman of thirty-four who had Terry's same at-ease manner, the two of them skating through life on an oiled raft of cocktails, witticisms, and everybody else's hate. Clothes hung on her perfectly, and The Finn had long ago trained himself not to stare at her. Annabeth: She had been the main attraction in The Finn's fantasies for fifteen years, and seemed to know it, communicating amused power over him with every green-eyed glance.

Roger had married a shrew. Harsha was a small brown woman with long black hair that reached down to her buttocks, a pelted moustache on her upper lip, and a temper like no one had ever seen before her. No one—everyone, in The Finn's experience, was startled, then annoyed, and finally terrified of Harsha. When Roger had met her, she'd been exotic and smart, and he'd almost wet himself in his rush to secure her via a wedding band. Now, The Finn thought, Roger had the hollow-eyed look of doom.

Harry had a girlfriend. He'd had a girlfriend, in fact, for six years, during which time their relationship had not changed at all. He spent gallons of money on her, which she took in stride as her due, they fought like animals, nasty and mean, they spent weeks not speaking to each other and getting everybody's hopes up and then made up and were sickeningly, fakely sweet to each other for a brief recharging period. Cynthia, who forbade everyone to call her Cindy,

stood next to him smoking a cigarette, hidden behind sunglasses, bored and not worried about showing it.

And, of course, The Finn did not forget Agnes, Agnes DeLay, Frank's sister. She stroked Monkeyboy's pate affectionately, and he kicked his leg out spastically, delighted. The Finn could feel her eyes on him through the dark plastic, like sharp points, focussed quanta of light. He imagined that Monkeyboy's tiny little porcine eyes were glaring at him as well, though he couldn't be sure, since he never looked directly at Monkeyboy.

The priest suddenly raised his voice, and The Finn made an effort to appear dutiful and somber.

"The concensus is," Terry said, pulling The Finn by the arm as everyone strolled from the grave, everyone trying to appear unhurried, unworried about death so near, "that it was a pretty good funeral. Better than one would have expected from that kneebiter Amix."

"Terrance, this is stupid stuff," The Finn said, getting a roll of the eyes in return. "Chet had nothing to do with the composition and execution of his funeral. Chet, as I recall, barely had control over his daily life."

They walked apart from everyone else. The Finn looked around and found the rest of the Rat Pack trailing in a clump of sweaty men, the Ladies Auxiliary behind them chattering in the hushed tones of scraping nylons and perfume clouds, lipstick-stained cigarettes.

"Did you see Frank back there?" Terry asked. "He looks terrible. I feel like we ought to do something for him."

The Finn groaned. "No, don't join the Preservation of Frank Society, please. Terry, I'm serious—Frank's problem, in part, is that Shirley took care of him in every way, and he's lost without her—not her, inparticular, mind you, not her *soul*—but her chores. Her taking care of him." He shook his head. "Agnes is wrong. She should step away and let him figure things out for himself. At this rate, she'll be making his sandwiches and cleaning up after him just until they can all find him another plumpish woman to take over, and the guy will just segue from being mothered by Shirley, to being mothered in a slightly more abrasive way by Agnes, to being mothered by this new, assumedly plump, woman."

"I was thinking in terms of taking him out for drinks, getting him shitfaced, maybe a strip club, wave some tits in his face," Terry said with an arched eyebrow. "But your plan of pretending he isn't there so he can learn some self-reliance is better, I'll admit."

The Finn set his mouth in an unhappy line. "You really think cheap women and booze will solve Frank's problems?"

"Theodore," Terry said happily, "cheap women and booze can solve everybody's problems. But no, seriously: He lost his wife, man. I think an evening of thoughtless fun with his buddies would do the man good. And would also, I might add by way of getting you behind this plan, get him away from Aggy for a few hours, during which we can counter her influence."

The Finn brightened. "That's true. Count me in."

Roger and Ben caught up, hands in pockets, postures identically slouched. "What's the discussion, gents?" Roger asked.

"Hopefully not life and death or anything philosophical, just 'cause it's a funeral, Theo," Ben added.

"No fear, boys," Terry said, gesturing floridly at The Finn. "Our discussion involved liquor and loose women. We think it might be therapeutic for Frank."

"Liquor and loose women?" Roger asked, frowning.

"Strip club. At the very least, a bar where women may theoretically be in

attendance."

Roger and Ben exchanged a glance The Finn interpreted as snivelling fear of their wives. Roger looked back at Terry. "Anna'd let you go to a strip club?"

Terry shrugged. "For a good cause, yes. Actually, she'd probably want to come and I'd have to explain to her that it might retard Frank's healing process if she did."

Roger and Ben exchanged another look. The Finn thought it was cruel the way Terry waved his and his wife's coolness around, bragging about it. He was good-looking, doing well, happy. She was gorgeous, smart, and liberal. The Finn suspected that somewhere inside, Terry knew he was torturing his friends with their relative lack of cool, and enjoyed it.

It also sparked a three-second fantasy involving Annabeth Moder in a strip club, drunken and wanton. The Finn shook himself to dislodge it, glanced at her and the other girls, then back at Terry.

"I don't know, Ter," Roger said slowly, staring down at the ground as if these were the hardest words he'd ever had to speak. "Booze and strippers? Even for Frank, I doubt I could get Harsha to go along."

"Well, Jesus, Rog, you don't *tell* her," Terry admonished. "Tell her it's just us guys. She never needs to know."

Roger turned halfway to glance back at the cabal of women, and The Finn thought he caught a glimpse of the burning red eye of Roger's wife, which never shut, and saw everything.

"Yeah," Roger sighed, his whole flabby body shaking in defeat, unspoken. "Maybe."

Terry winked, lighting a cigarette. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out. Remember: It's for Frank."

The Finn didn't know how he felt about it all, and walked with hands in his pockets, watching the ground scroll by beneath him. On the one hand, infidelity was wrong. On the other, Harsha was . . . wrong. He'd known Terry for a long time, and knew his ways. It amazed him how little they'd all changed over the years. It was like Terry convincing them all to get high before first period—nothing much had changed, except Roger's huge, omnipresent Mother had been replaced—partially—by his diminutive and omnipresent wife.

They reached the cars and there was some confusion as hasty plans were made to gather afterwards, people sorting each other out. The men regrouped with the women, and The Finn leaned back against his car with his arms crossed.

Annabeth came over with Terry in tow and pecked him on the cheek. "Theo," she said with a low-wattage grin. "Come by for dinner tomorrow. I'm actually cooking."

The Finn allowed himself a brief, shy glance at her face: Perfect skin, cheek bones, big blue eyes. Then he looked down at his shoes. "Maybe, if Terry doesn't mind," he said.

"Mind? Fuck, of course I *mind*," Terry said, slapping The Finn on the shoulder. "But I have no hand, with this one. Whatever the wife says, you know."

Roger and Harsha trickled by, Roger shaking The Finn's hand quickly, and Harsha just nodding icily as she passed. The Finn took this to mean he was in her good graces.

The Finn turned from Harsha to find Cynthia barreling down upon him, and opened his mouth to say something, but she breezed past him, ass twitching in irritation, and then Harry was there, cigarette hanging raggedly from the corner of his mouth in a way The Finn liked and decided to steal.

"Sorry about that, Old Man," Harry said laconically, his eyes droopy with the sustained effort of consciousness. "She's in a fucking mood." He took The Finn's hand in his, damp and soft, and pumped it twice before letting it slip away, forgotten. "Let's you and I have a drink sometime soon, yes?"

"Terry's already cooking up something. You'll be hearing from him."

"Capital. I always liked Terrance: A man of action."

Ben slipped by, hands in pockets, smile mysterious, and just nodded at The Finn, who waved cheerfully and then turned to find Frank DeLay at his elbow.

"Hey, The," Frank said, his eyes burning holes of bloodshot in his thin, white face. The Finn thought he looked carefully but incompletely groomed, as if someone else had forced him to sit for an hour and suffer a shaving, which he'd done ungracefully.

The Finn glanced down to find a bony hand, trembling slightly, thrust at him awkwardly. He reached down to shake it, gritting his teeth against the bony feel, the paper skin. "Frankie: How the hell are you?"

"Good, good," Frank said, his eyes wandering behind The Finn as if something really great were happening behind him. Then his eyes shifted back. "Great," he added, without enthusiasm.

The Finn struggled for something meaningful to say, his ears burning in shame. He wanted to talk to Frank, to tell him things, to explain, but the words would not come, and lodged in his throat like dust.

Red-painted nails appeared on Frank's shoulders like rain, and then Agnes DeLay's head snaked around from behind. "Teddy," she said with pursed lips. "How are you?"

The Finn put his hands back in his pockets. "Aggy," he said coolly. "Fine, all things considered." He nodded up the way they had all come. "Alive, at least, and that's something."

Her face scrunched up behind her dark glasses. "Fucking prick. Come on, Frank, we got to go."

Frank's face brightened. "Okay!" he said with crazy, sodden enthusiasm. "Good to see you, Theo!" He pumped The Finn's hand a few times, and shuffled off, Agnes' arm around him, and then he was face to face with Monkeyboy, who held out a mossy hand to him.

"Theo," Monkeyboy said.

The Finn considered not taking the proffered hand, but decided that the Rules of Polite Society demanded it at such a grim occasion, and reluctantly reached out to shake. "Hey, Darryl," he said flatly. "Good to see you."

Monkeyboy grinned, possessed of the curious ability, The Finn thought, to appear toothless even though he was not. "Fuck you, Theodore," he said excitedly. "You're a fucking liar."

The Finn grinned back. "Yes. Yes, I am."

They stood for a moment, grinning at each other, bloody, unhappy grins that no one would mistake for friendliness under any circumstances. Then Monkeyboy nodded and walked off after Agnes and Frank, leaving The Finn leaning against his car. The Finn remained there, responding from time to time to the cacophony of shouts, slammed doors, and honked horns. Finally, he was alone, with just the humid air and the quiet wind for company.

Pushing his hands into his pockets, he pushed off from the car and began walking back into the cemetery. In his head, a song was spooling:

I wanna see the Constitution burn. . . Wanna watch the White House overturned. . . Wanna witness some blue blood bleed fucking red. . .

He walked back up the hill, humming without really realizing it, until the gravesite was back in view, the two workers standing over the grave, getting

ready to fill it in. The Finn moved steadily, without hesitation, plucking up a shovel as he walked and flipping it into the air. he was within five feet of the workers before they noticed him, turning in surprise. The Finn flipped the shovel again and caught it in both hands.

"Hey—" the black one managed to say before The Finn smacked the shovel into his face, knocking him backwards into the grave.

"Jesus!" the other worker shouted as The Finn turned to him, swinging the shovel gently back and forth.

"All I asked," The Finn panted, rearing back with the shovel, "is that you fucking respect the fucking solemnity of the fucking occasion." And he swung hard and hit the worker in the ear. With a grunt, the man went to his knees, blood pouring out of his ear in a thick, sudden sheet coursing down his neck. He slapped a hand to the side of his head and started screaming in a hoarse, insistent bawl, incoherent and monosyllabic.

"Complaining," The Finn spat, "only works in a civilized society, where the rules of conduct are in force. This is apparently a civilization-free zone, so, go fuck yourself."

He swung the shovel again, hitting the screaming man with an uppercut that knocked him end over end into the grave, landing on top of his partner.

The Finn tossed the shovel in after them, looked down for a moment, and then clapped his hands clean and turned away. The song in his head rose in volume and filled his thoughts completely, spilling into his veins and making him feel like he was walking on floating notes, sailing through the heavy air and bobbing along effortlessly. He could sense the heavy, huge tectonic plates of society clicking back into place, kept even and balanced by his own force, his own willpower.

I wanna tar and lynch the KKK. . . I wanna pull and shoot the NRA. . . I wanna pay the lobbyists to kill themselves. . .

When he got back to the car, it was alone in the street. No one else was still around. he stood for a moment, sweating in the logy sun and looked around, watching the orderly process of civilization go on around him: Cars stopping at intersections, people waiting patiently for lights to change or buses to arrive, quiet and peaceful. It was like watching the clicking of clock gears.

After a moment, he got back into his car and started it, turning the radio up loud and pulling away from the curb smoothly, signalling carefully and driving off at exactly the posted speed limit.

TiPpInG YoUr BaRteNdeR iS He LuBrlcaNt of CiViLiZaTiOn

The Finn had gotten his nickname in high school, when a bizarre freshman-year abbreviation system had truncated his name from Theodore Finn to The Finn. On every posted class schedule, assignment roster, syllabus, and program in his four years at Dt. Francis Preparatory School—known as St. Francis There but for the Grace of God Academy—Theodore Finn had been listed as The Finn, and the name quickly spread, and stuck. St. Francis was the sort of stiffly religious institution that encouraged silly nicknames, drunkenness, and deep, burning resentments that lingered like red coals for decades. Ted Finn generally regarded his resentments as the best education he'd gotten at There but for the Grace of God Academy. The rest of it—math, Latin, history, and, of course, religion—had been largely a waste of time, since in his opinion anyone could learn anything they wished by taking a book out of the library.

It was at St. Francis There but for the Grace of God Academy that Ted Finn had developed his theory of and deep abiding belief in The Rules of Polite Society. The first time he'd enforced one of his rules had been in junior year, when he'd been sixteen-and-a-half, fully formed from his slightly mussed blonde hair to his dark, perfectly tailored suit. St. Francis had a dress code, which The Finn had embraced completely and taken to what even some of the priests considered to be disturbing lengths. Perfectly groomed at all times, the camouflaging effect of the dress code requiring everyone to at least resemble him kept him from appearing to be a complete freak, though most of the kids who spoke to The Finn at length usually suspected as much.

It was his friendship with Terry that had saved him from Freakdom.

Terry had emerged from the womb as a brilliant, shining fourteen-year-old with an athletic build, a 3.8 GPA, and smartassed confidence to spare. Everyone liked him, from teachers to girls to his harsh, unimpressed peers. The fact that he did nothing with his charm, his ability, or his popularity only made him more popular: Everyone had an unconscious image of Terry lying in a hammock, swinging gently in the breeze, drinking his parents' liquor, wasting everything the cosmos had given him, and wished they were him, able to squander so much and still have plenty of resources left. Terry was not the most popular kid or the class president; he was stealth cool. He was not the most popular kid or the class president, but no other kid could be unless Terry endorsed them.

Terry and The Finn had sat next to each other in Religion class during their first year at school, at first in stoic silence, uncomfortable male proximity, but later in a just-as-silent war of scrawled pornographic sketches in their notebooks, cryptic but somehow hilarious phrases and one-line jokes. Despite The Finn's fussy suits, rigid manner, and strange, borderline-insulting nickname, Terry liked him and the two became a team, and Ted Finn became Cool by Association.

The Junior Year Rules Enforcement Episode, also known to everyone in The Finn's class as the Amelia Cannert incident, took place at Terry's house. Among his many other blessings, Terry enjoyed parents who went on frequent vacations, leaving their two children—Terry and older sister Nicole—alone and under each other's supervision. The parties were thus frequent and large in scale, with the occasional tragedies, comedies, and injuries to be expected, which is to say fights, sexual conquests of dubious morality and sense, occasional brokne noses and at least four emergency room visits due to alcohol poisoning. Nothing that Terry couldn't handle, with his charmed life and easygoing nature, his unslurring drunk and gosh-shucks manner around adults.

Against such typical happenings, the slight chance of accidental manslaughter that Ted Finn's Rules Enforcement Episode in junior year didn't really panic anyone, not even Amelia Cannert, whom Ted Finn came very close to running over with his car after she did something to offend him. He refused—and continued to refuse, twenty years later—to reveal what her violation had been. Amelia, terrified, refused to even acknowledge the incident. All anyone knew was that Ted Finn had gotten into his old Malibu beater on the front lawn, put the car into gear, and drunkenly crept around the to the back of the house, where Amelia and a few friends stood near the pool. He'd never accelerated; the car coasted and bumped into Amelia, going about four miles an hour—merely knocking her into the pool, unharmed. It didn't take long, however, for the entire universe of St. Francis There but for the Grace of God Academy to translate the incident into *Ted Finn attempted to murder Amelia Cannert*.

Terry, when he arrived from the mysterious interiors of his huge house, had run up to the edge of the pool, where Amelia lay panting and wet on the grass and The Finn sat on the hood of his car, smoking a cigarette impassively, burst into a good-natured guffaw that came very close to convincing everyone that it had all been one huge, bizarre joke.

What ruined the illusion was The Finn glancing up, grinning, and joining in the laughter.

Twenty years later, The Finn spent most of his day angry.

The fucking paper was never on his doorstep like he paid for it. A simple rule: Deliver what you promise. It was never there when he got home at night, either, but that was a more basic rule: Don't fucking steal other people's fucking papers. Stealing was an acknowledged law, so it didn't bother him as much as the unwritten and somewhat ephemeral rule that stated Deliver What You Promise.

The fuckers waiting for the bus crowded around the door like animals, determined to somehow be first on the already-crowded bus. A simple rule: Form a line. Lines were orderly and moved quickly if respected. Mobs were chaos and one step away from fistfights, they slowed everything down. The Finn stood waiting for everything to calm down, refusing to join in the primitive struggle for bus real estate, determined to simply step on last, civilized and unruffled. And then the fuckers filled the bus, and he was left fuming with two other unlucky souls, one of whom spent thirty seconds of everyone's lives breaking other rules by trying ineffectually to force his way onto the bus by sheer willpower.

Walking to his building, the fucking pedestrians pushed past him roughly because they were walking faster. A simple rule: Respect other people's personal space. People were not simply impediments to your glorious rise through the day. Already damp with anger sweat, The Finn stared after each offender until one had to pause at a crosswalk to wait for a break in traffic, impatient and twitchy. The Finn stepped up behind him, the memory of the arm brushing roughly against his own still fresh and burning, and, timing it carefully, faked a stumble and pushed the bastard into the path of an oncoming taxi.

The push was too weak, however, and while it drew a wonderfully awkward squawk from the bastard as he fought for balance with the car bearing down on him, he managed to recover with plenty of time, and turned to glare at The Finn with red, unhappy eyes. The Finn spread his hands in mock-apology and grinned a dirty grin, mud dripping down his chin.

At his office building, the fucking security was unbelievable, but Ted thought it would have been okay if the guards weren't breaking another simple rule: Don't let things go to your head. Give a guy a blue jacket and a walkie-talkie, The Finn was convinced, and you instantly turn him into an asshole. The guards in his building always treated any kind of perceived rudeness or superiority as evidence of Terrorist leanings, and The Finn gritted his teeth and kept his face blank and made it through without too much trouble.

Work didn't bother him much, and the day went by in a blur, hours and hours of nothing, his hands and arms moving, his eyes staring, the usual, meaningless syllables coming to his lips when prompted. His conditioning, he knew, was perfect: Someone said one thing, he said the expected other. Good morning, how are you, fine and you, another day another dollar. He didn't like or dislike anyone at work; they were there. A lot of the younger girls, the interns and secretaries, the new hires, thought Ted Finn was good-looking. A lot of the

things that had made him an uncool kid in high school had mutated to make him a cool adult. He dressed well, and his dedicated ignoring of everything around him was often confused with confidence, with directness, with purpose.

At lunch he went out to a bar a few blocks away and had two whiskeys in soda while he read the newspaper. He didn't eat anything. Smoking cigarettes one after the other, he scanned the newsprint and sipped his drinks and after it was all said and done he left a ten dollar bill on the damp bar.

"Jesus," the old bartender croaked, his voice a thick honey of age and cigarettes. "You sure, buddy?"

The Finn paused to lean back towards the bar, hunkering down as if to pass along secrets.

"I believe," he said seriously, "that the proper tipping of the bartender is the lubricant of civilization. If you shit the bed on the tip, the whole fucking shebang seizes up and that's all she wrote."

For a moment they remained, still and posed: The bartender bug-eyed in panic, mouth open, The Finn seriously frowning, bent down to lean across the bar.

"Well," the bartender finally managed, breaking the spell. "Okay, then."

Walking back to his office, The Finn did minute, subtle dance moves in his shoes, and kept a half-grin of mysterious purpose on his face, hoping to freak people out. Too many people, he thought, went through their daily grind looking miserable, really miserable, and made no effort at all to hide it or mold their public perception. The Finn didn't think that was wise, to let complete strangers read you so completely. Privacy, he thought, was a bastion of order. If you had privacy, you could make sane decisions free from the fear of reprisal, of being thought uncool or unclever. He tried to remember to keep his face mysterious and vaguely ecstatic. He wanted people to think he was delighted by something.

Back at his office, the afternoon drooled by unnoticed, and at the end of it he was surprised to find a neat pile of completed tasks on his desk. It didn't matter. There would be a new pile the next day, and the day after that. It was like tunneling through sand, building a pyramid out of sugar: Endless and an awful lot of people smashed between the huge ton-heavy blocks.

When he got home, sweaty and wilted from the crush and press of millions of people fighting to be the first ones home in front of their TVs, The Finn paused across the street, staring at Frank DeLay sitting on his front steps like a dead flower, stiff and wrinkled. The Finn stopped where he was and stared for a moment. Before he could form any sort of reaction, Frank glanced up through a haze of blue cigarette smoke and waved, the action appearing to exhaust him as he let his hand drop back to hang between his knees as if it was made of lead.

The Finn waved back dumbly and crossed the street.

"Hey, Frank," he said, setting his briefcase on the steps and sitting down next to the other man. "This is a nice surprise."

Frank snorted. "No it isn't, right?" He nodded, looking off away from The Finn. "No one's glad to see me, these days, I know. I'm a fucking pariah."

"Not true," The Finn said, wondering if he was lying, because grief—especially the open-ended, unending grief of Frank DeLay—was repulsive. "We're all just afraid your sister will be lurking nearby."

A pale, thin smile blossomed on Frank's face. "Ah, Aggy's just worried over me. Always has been."

The Finn nodded noncommittally, just to have a response. He looked Frank

over, and thought he was slowly coming apart. His tie had slipped, a bulge appearing where the pin held it together. His white shirt sported a stain of indeterminate origin on the breast pocket. One shirttail had come out of the pants, and his hair had developed a cowlick of impressive proportions, the stiffness and durability of which worried The Finn, as it had every appearance of hair that had not been washed in quite some time.

"How've you been?" Frank asked.

The Finn shrugged. "Fine come on in, Frank. have a drink. No need to sit out here like a bunch of Watchers."

"Watchers?" Frank said as they stood up stiffly, gathering themselves for the long, hard work of walking up to The Finn's apartment.

"Stoop Watchers," The Finn said, pausing to sweep his arm around the block. "They sit on the porches of their homes and the stoops of their buildings, and they watch."

Frank let out a weak, tired laugh. "Watch what?"

"Me," The Finn said, holding open the front door to let Frank through and then leading him to the mailboxes. "You. Everything. They just sit there, staring. There're about five right on this block. Go out in the morning: There they are, watching. Come home at night: There they are." He popped open his mailbox and fished out a few envelopes. He led Frank to the stairs and started up.

"You might say that everyone can do what they like, it's their life, but fuck that. The Watchers are just parasites. They sit and they consume. And what do they consume? Me. You. Everything. They're locusts. I swear, one day I'm going to burn all their goddamned houses down."

Frank let out another weak snort. "What?"

The Finn smiled up at the approaching stairs. "Just kidding, of course."

They finished walking up to The Finn's apartment in silence. The front door opened up into the kitchen, which was bright from the setting sun, tall yellow-silled windows set in two walls. The Finn tossed his keys across the room, where they landed in a small plastic cereal bowl sitting on the counter.

"What'll it be, Mr. DeLay?" The Finn asked. "I've got it all, except Franjelico, which tastes like rancid peanut butter and which you cannot pay me to imbibe."

"Anything," Frank said, looking around the kitchen, hands in pockets as he spun around slowly. "Doesn't matter."

"Scotch it is," Ted boomed, and proceeded to mix drinks with theatrical gusto, tossing glasses in the air and dashing ice everywhere.

"The problem with the Watchers," The Finn continued, "is that they don't contribute. Society is a web of balances, forces working against each other, keeping each other in check. Like friction and acceleration: When you hit the gas on your car, it moves, but friction keeps it from zooming off and smashing into things, right? Same way with society. Opposite and equal forces: We all produce stuff, contribute, to make up for what we take, right? But the Watchers, they don't make anything. They don't contribute. They just *take*."

He turned with two cocktails in hand, his clothes feeling scratchy and hot. Frank was staring out a window at the rooftops of the buildings around them. The Finn took the moment to contemplate Frank, their Joey Bishop. Frank had always had a soggy and limp-wristed way about him: He was vague, The Finn thought, a man of half measures. Frank was never ecstatic, or furious, or suicidal; he was always just Frank, limping along, his moods opaque and his reactions completely predictable.

"Well, here we are," The Finn said, approaching with the drinks. Frank

jumped a little and turned, his eyes red and bright, making The Finn nervous.

"Thanks," Frank said, taking the drink and taking a large gulp immediately and then exploding into hacking coughs.

"Whoa, boy," The Finn laughed, slapping Frank on the back. "Remember your training!"

"Ah, shit," Frank finally said, taking a deep breath and turning back to the window, drink in hand but forgotten. "Fuck, Ted. Sorry. I'm a fucking mess."

The Finn shrugged, staying in character even when Frank wasn't looking at him. His history with the DeLay family had been complex: The damp, wrinkled friendship with Frank, more of a group friendship than an individual bond, Frank being friends with everyone rather than friends with Ted Finn, and then his younger sister, Agnes, small-chested and athletic, young and peppy and horny as hell and The Finn had dated her for three years, which had been two years of unrestrained sex in unlikely places and one year of being screamed at and hated after a momentary indiscretion at a party. The Finn didn't regret that he'd cheated on Agnes—he didn't consider fidelity to be an important Rule—but he regretted that Agnes had found out about it.

Frank had taken both the sister-deflowering and the scumbag-adultery-lite in stride: Neither had seemed to bother him much.

"Listen, Terry thinks you need to get out with the boys, live a little," The Finn said. "We're going to kidnap you and force you to drink spirits and mingle with women of low or no virtue."

"Sounds like my bachelor party," Frank said hollowly. Panic rose up in The Finn's chest.

"Frank, are you crying?"

Frank turned and looked at Ted, eyes shining. He waved his drink around as if making some important nonverbal point. "Ted," he said, voice cracking.

"Ted, I think I killed my wife. I think I killed Shirley."

The Finn sat completely still. He felt frozen, unable to move, only to think, and he contemplated Shirley: He'd hated Shirley. Plump, overconfident, self-involved Shirley: The woman had been a nightmare. Heart pounding, he stared at Frank and fought for control, finally managing to shake his head. "No," he croaked in a voice of smoke and crumbling mortar, "You didn't."

Frank gestured with his drink again, most of the liquid spilling onto the floor. "I wished for it, Teddy. I wished she would die."

The words hung in the air, stale and bitter, and Frank turned back to the window and took a swallow of his cocktail. "We fought," he continued miserably. "I fought with Shirley all the time. We screamed at each other, said terrible things. I wished she would die. I—" He swallowed, twitched, and began crying in force.

The Finn looked away, and stared down at the dusty floor.

"I imagined her funeral, Teddy. I fucking would sit on the bus coming home from work and imagine that she'd died, and I'd imagine being at the funeral, all noble and quiet and grim and fucking emotionally reserved. I *imagined* how I'd play the part."

The Finn just stared at him, cigarette forgotten, drink held slackly, a wave of horror and revulsion carrying him away from everything.

Frank turned his whole body towards him, tears running down his face.

"Ted, I think I killed Shirley. I must have. I *wanted* it."

The Finn shook his head. "No, Frank. You're wrong."

For a moment, they both were quiet, Frank staring out the window, The Finn staring into his glass.

"Well," Frank said suddenly, draining his glass with a cough and wiping his

mouth on his sleeve. "I gotta get going."

The Finn glanced up and evaluated the situation: He wanted nothing more than for Frank to go, but this had obviously been a purposeful visit: A cry for help. He didn't want to send Frank away if Frank really wanted his help, advice, hand-holding, whatever. He owed Frank that much.

"Hey," he said with a grin, "How's Monkeyboy doing? With Agnes?"

Frank's ghostly smile returned. "Don't call him *Monkeyboy*, for god's sake. Darryl's fine. He's fine."

"Why not call him Monkeyboy? He's her little creature, isn't he? Haven't you ever noticed that he does, in fact, resemble a monkey?"

Frank shook his head, the smile fading. "I got nothing against Darryl, Ted," he said, trailing off. "I know. . . I know you and him never got off on the right foot and all, because of Aggy, but. . ."

The Finn considered that to be one of the grossest understatements of his experience. Monkeyboy had succeeded Ted Finn as Agnes DeLay's lover, and considered the poor treatment Agnes had received at the hands of The Finn to be a personal insult of some magnitude. The Finn, on the other hand, was of the opinion that he'd done the hard work of teaching Agnes how to fuck, and now monkeyboy was reaping those rewards. His willingness to express this opinion in mixed company contributed somewhat to their antipathy.

Frank had trailed off again, looking dirty and tired. "Well," he repeated. "I got to go."

The Finn nodded. "Okay, Frankie. Come by any time. Call me, if you want. And like I said, Terry's organizing a night out and all."

They stood there for a moment, terrified. The Frank nodded, and shuffled towards the door. He opened it and paused, hanging off the knob as if he might collapse. He half-turned back to The Finn.

"Ted—"

The Finn put a hand on Frank's shoulder. "You didn't kill Shirley, Frank," he said forcefully.

Frank closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay. Thanks. See ya, Ted."

The Finn watched him step out into the hall, lost and uncertain, and slowly pushed the door shut until it clicked locked. He leaned his forehead against the door and closed his own eyes.

"Because I did."

ReSpeCt tHe MaNhOoD oF YoUr FrIeNdS

"THIS," Terry said, "is a sad, sad state of affairs."

He stood with four glasses held between his hands, a wonder of the immutable laws of physics: Friction and opposing forces, surface tension and air pressure. His elbows were bent comically outward, and he had a cigarette clenched tightly between his teeth as he breathed through his mouth, giving his speech an odd, clenched quality. He leaned down and set the glasses on the chipped wooden table, which immediately shifted its center of gravity to acknowledge the new weight, threatening to send the fresh cocktails skittering to the floor. None of the other four men made any move to save them.

"Fucking table—why in fuck is every table in every bar ancient and malformed?" Terry spat, cigarette bobbing and smoke leaking out of his mouth as he spoke.

The Finn found himself sandwiched between Harry, chain smoking and

seeming to nap, on his left and Roger, nervous at being near so much life-ending sin, on the right. Roger was sweaty and terrified that Harsha would appear, leaping out of a wine glass to screech in triumph at the very moment that he relaxed and let his eyes linger on another woman's anatomy. Harry smoked and drank steadily but expressed little interest in the conversation going on. The Finn felt like he'd been banished to an island where the only possible conversational topic was *Harsha Murders Roger*.

"What time is it, Teddy?" Roger breathed, sucking down a gulp of the fresh beer Terry set before him. "I gotta get home by ten, or Harsha'll kill me."

The Finn didn't look at Roger's sweat-sheened face. He just held out his wristwatch for Roger to inspect.

Frank and Ben were on the outer edges of the booth. Ben was staring avidly at a group of women celebrating a bachelorette party, fifteen thirtyish chicks in their hottiewear, getting hammered, one wearing a bride's veil and a T-shirt that read FREE BLOW JOBS—GETTING MARRIED. The Finn dismissed Ben from his mind, as he often did, because Ben walked around with a neon sign over his head like a thought-bubble, displaying his monosyllabic thoughts to anyone who cared to look. The Finn didn't, since he thought Ben had about ten such thoughts and just ran through them in semi-random order, one after the other. Instead, he contemplated Frank DeLay.

Frank sat slumped down in the booth, the small patch of table in front of him covered in a forest of emptied glasses. To The Finn, he looked like he was melting, some chemical reaction turning him into melted ice and watery Scotch, and him too glassy-eyed and resigned to horror to do anything but stare with wide, unblinking dumb eyes at the world around him. The Finn studied him and wondered if he suspected anything, if he ever wondered about Shirley's death, if he woke up at night panting with a name on the tip of his tongue, a cold certainty that faded as the sun rose, and was forgotten by lunch. He wondered if Agnes crept into Frank's room at night and whispered his name into her brother's ear, gently reminding him that Ted Finn was, after all, an asshole.

The Finn took a bent cigarette from the communal pack of unfiltered, which had somehow found its way onto the table. He lit it, looking away and staring off into the crowd. He contemplated Shirley DeLay grimly.

He hadn't intended to kill her. It hadn't been a plan, but the woman had pushed and pushed and broken every fucking rule that mattered, repeatedly, until he'd felt he didn't have a choice: He'd been lenient because she was Frank's wife, but he couldn't just let her flout the rules forever. That kind of special treatment was an acid on the mortar that held society together. People saw it, they would think they could get away with things, too, especially if they were good-looking women. The Finn had been unusually tolerant of Shirley because, he had to admit, he'd liked her, her cheerful manner, her plump robustness.

But there couldn't be favorites. Corruption was insidious.

The last straw had been when he'd discovered that she'd been behind the rash of minor thefts at parties.

No one knew exactly when it had started, because the things stolen were small and insignificant, and usually weren't missed right away. When they *were* missed, well, it had been a party, after all, and not much effort was put into tracking things down. When everyone finally realized that every time a party was hosted something went missing, no one could possibly say how long it had been going on.

The Finn had been horrified. Although stealing was an obvious rule and he

usually regarded it as outside his purview, this seemed to additionally violate the rule that You Treated Your Host with Respect—a person's home was inviolate, and when you were invited as a guest you were required to act accordingly. The idea that someone they all knew and trusted was breaking that rule made his blood boil, and he was determined to unmask the culprit, assuming at first that it had to be some satellite acquaintance, since he couldn't believe that someone he knew well would do such a thing.

He caught her almost immediately, simply by paying attention. She took an insultingly small number of precautions, simply excusing herself from the main body of the party and finding off-limit rooms to search through quickly. He watched her on two occasions steal useless, worthless things. Things with sentimental value. The second time he was so angry he came close to revealing himself, hidden in the shadows of the doorway, and just hitting her, making her bloody and regretful, pushing her, shamed, into the light of her friends.

But there was the party to consider. Rude, to ruin a party like that. So, he'd followed her. Not sure what he'd do, not sure how to impress upon her the severity of the crime she'd committed—not just the act of stealing, but the small erosion of civilization he'd witnessed.

What had set him off, the last thing he remembered about it, really—or remembered clearly, at any rate—was when she'd taken the worthless plastic ring she'd stolen from Agnes just a few hours earlier and thrown it into the gutter outside their apartment while Frank slept soundly on Agnes' couch upstairs, the party over. The Finn had left a half hour earlier but had hung around, smoking, feeling awake and alert, too much so to just go home. He'd watched Shirley exit the building with a spiking, burning anger, and watched her throw her prize away. Not only had she stolen, not only had she stolen for no reason, but she'd compacted the sin by littering.

He studied Frank, his hands clenched into fists as he thought of it: Her walking along and just tossing it, a small thing, a small piece of the wall between chaos and order. Tossing it aside, littering the world.

So, he'd pushed her in front of a car.

"We," Terry said loudly as he took his seat next to Frank, tapping a cigarette against his palm. The Finn brought himself back to the present with a start.

"We are men," Terry continued, tapping. "We are men freed from our domestic bonds, whatever they happen to be, for one evening. And do we cavort? Cause trouble? Urinate publicly and shed the shackles of respectable society? No. My friends, we sit here sopping up alcohol, scanning the place for Roger's Harpy wife, who might jump out and de-ball us." He threw a sweaty arm around Frank, who wobbled under it as if it were very, very heavy. The Finn had never been fond of Terry's self-indulgent speeches, and he leaned back a little to let his eyes rest on Frank, watching intently for any sign that there was dangerous knowledge there.

"Come on," Terry said desperately, looking from face to face. "We can at least stop drinking like Pussies, can't we?"

Harry cleared his throat magnificently. "Point of order, Mr. Chairman, I never started."

Terry grinned. "The Chair is pleased to recognize Mr. Donneley!"

"Fuck you," Harry replied. "I've said my piece."

"Well said," Terry nodded his head in approval. He popped the packed cigarette into his mouth and tightened his arm roughly around Frank, who started as if from deep introspection. "Our friend needs us. Look at him: He's sinking fast. We need to revive him. Now, due to a certain man's complete fear of his wife, we could not hold tonight's meeting at an appropriately boob-

centered place. We're men: We'll make due." He leaned in closer. "Our friend Ben has located what appears to be the only potential pussy in this lame bar. Ben's always had a distinct talent for the crushingly obvious. Good work, Ben!"

Ben tore his gaze away from the frolicing bachelorettes and blinked at Terry. The Finn thought he looked like a fish: Blinking eyes and puffy cheeks.

"What?" he asked, looking around.

"Never mind, Bennie. The goal is obvious: Let's get Frank laid tonight. Put aside your own petty desires and fears and think only of your friend. The Bride is his. If some of us manage to score with the bridesmaids, all well and good—but keep the ultimate goal in sight."

Frank frowned and seemed to sink into his seat. The Finn imagined runoff pouring off the cheap vinyl seat, pooling on the floor. "Jesus, I don't know, Terry, if I—"

"Don't be silly, of course you can," Terry said happily, releasing Frank and capturing his drink from the table, the unlit cigarette still bobbing up and down in his mouth. "I'm going to buy those ladies a congratulatory drink, and we're not letting you leave without a smile on your face, tonight, Mr. DeLay."

Terry got up, sweaty but excited, drink almost spilling onto the table. "Carry on. I'll be back."

The Finn sat silently, as did everyone else. He looked them over, his friends, The Rat Pack, and thought there was a time coming, very soon now, when he wouldn't see these people any more. Entropy was everywhere, smeared thickly—he knew that better than anyone. The Universe spiraled towards chaos and tiny destruction, and there was no escaping it for any of them.

"Jesus Christ," Frank said weakly, taking a deep swallow from his cocktail, "He isn't serious, is he?"

"Sure is, Champ," Harry said slowly, stretching luxuriously. "Although I think he's being a little disingenuous. I believe he may have his sights on the Bride himself, and is just using you." He nodded. "The bastard."

"He's not really going to bring those girls over here, is he?" Roger asked nervously.

"Rog," Harry sighed, closing his eyes and lighting a cigarette with expert, memorized skill, "I remember back in school you used to be terrified of women. Now you're thirty-five years old, and you're terrified of women. That's a zero-sum rate of emotional growth, you realize. How's that make you feel?"

Roger frowned sweatily. "What do you mean? I'm not afraid of women."

The Finn silently granted Roger the point. The man had had the balls to marry Harsha, a dangerous road to walk. He returned his attention to Frank.

He studied Frank carefully, looking for signs. He didn't see any, but he knew that Frank was a limp, mindless sort of person: Weak. The sort of guy who could feel and think lots of things without being aware of it. Things that would suddenly surface, like bubbles in magma, exploding into the atmosphere and splattering everyone around him. The Finn thought Frank might easily suspect, subconsciously, that there had been something between him and Shirley's death, because The Finn had always been overly annoyed with Shirley. Shirley, who tossed trash into the gutters as she walked. Shirley, who answered her cell phone in movie theaters. Shirley, who went through her life with a cow-like confidence that her own existence was the whole point, of everything. It had been a running joke between everyone how easily Shirley had annoyed The Finn, and how little he did to hide it. Frank, The Finn was reasonably sure, had to know that.

Terry returned to the table, drink sweating in his hand, and slid into the

booth again, pushing up against Frank, who listed slackly this way and that. Terry looked around the table and smiled.

"Things are in motion, lads," he said smugly.

As one, they swiveled their heads to observe the bachelorette party, where a waitress had arrived bearing a huge tray of shot glasses. There was some animated conversation between the bride and another girl and the waitress, who gestured at the men lazily, bored with the whole situation. The Finn didn't blame her. He felt bored, too, with what was coming: Obligatory and awkward introductions, fumbling bullshit, silence, and failure.

"Aw, shit," Roger said despairingly. "I'm a fucking dead man."

"Yes, you are," Terry replied without looking at the black man. "So nothing worse can happen to you, okay?"

The Finn looked up sharply. "Hey leave him the fuck alone, Ter," he said. "He can fucking leave if he fucking wants."

Terry frowned at him. "What's your problem, Ted?"

"You always do this—you invent the rules and lash out at anyone who doesn't want to play. You don't respect the manhood of your friends, you belittle them. Fuck you."

Roger looked from one end of the table to the other with wide, unhappy eyes. "Aw, guys, don't get uptight about it, I was just saying. . ."

"No, he's right," Terry said without looking at Roger. "Ted's absolutely right. I can be a prick." He smiled at The Finn. "I'm sorry."

Roger looked down at his napkin and seemed surprised to find that he'd twisted it up into a tight rope between his hands. "Shit, Ter, no big deal."

Terry and The Finn stared at each other until a delegation from the bachelorette party arrived: The listing, red-faced bride in her lewd T-shirt and a tall, brunette girl dressed in tight black jeans and a tight black T-shirt. They were both attractive girls. The Finn felt a wave of vague disapproval sweep through him, souring everything, though he couldn't put his finger on what, exactly, he disapproved of.

"Hi!" the Bride said with an enthusiastic slur, holding up an empty shot glass. "I hear we owe you a thank-you for the drink!"

Terry turned from The Finn to her, and The Finn was amazed to see his expression transform immediately from cool irritation to charming friendliness as he held up his hands, smiling. "No, no. Just wanted to congratulate you. I'm Terry."

"Hi, Terry!" she enthused. "I'm Stephanie!" They shook hands, and she leaned in close to Terry. "This is my Maid of Honor, Ashley!" she shouted, geaturing vaguely. Ashley looked around the table and waved.

"Good to meet you, Stephanie, Ashley. This is Frank, Roger, Ted, and Ben."

The Bride looked around and nodded, turning back to Terry. "Listen! This is my bachelorette party, right? So I'm supposed to be doing all these lame, embarrassing things that Ashley's cooked up for me, right?"

Terry's grin widened. The Finn lit a cigarette and watched from across the table, interested. He knew that no one was going home with any of these girls that night. He figured that if he knew it, then everyone else must know it, too—so he excused Roger—but wondered what the hell everyone else thought they were going to get out of this.

"Whatever you're leading up to," Terry said, holding his palm up, "it's got to involve this guy here." He pulled Frank close. "This is my pal, Frank, and he's why we're here. We're cheering him up."

"Oh, okay! What for?!"

Terry assumed a grave and serious expression, and The Finn was amazed to

witness the transformation. "He recently lost his wife. The poor guy's been a fucking wreck, and we're just trying to make him feel a little better."

The Bride and her Maid of Honor turned to regard Frank for the first time, their faces suddenly drunkenly sober and serious. The Bride reached out and touched his shoulder.

"Oh my god, that is so sad!" the Bride said loudly and feelingly, with Ashley echoing the sentiment shyly. "How long ago?"

Terry nodded grimly. "About six months. And he's still a wreck."

"Oh, god, you loved her, didn't you?"

The Finn drifted from the conversation, watching Frank's face for any signs or hints. There were none. Frank sat miserably staring up at The Bride, his face blank. The Finn didn't like what Terry was doing, mocking Frank's grief, but didn't think it was worth bothering over, since Frank himself was a semi-voluntary participant. He watched silently as the girls continued to cluck over Frank, slowly drifting back to Terry as Frank stared back at them lifelessly.

"Look at that," Ben said conspiratorially to The Finn. "Not only does he have the hottest wife in the fucking world, the bastard can pick up girls by astral projection of whatever he just used over there."

The Finn nodded. "Astral projection, or a tray of shots."

Ben made a face. "Whatever. Don't you just hate him, sometimes? The fucker, he's got everything." Terry glanced at them, and Ben grinned and held up his glass. "Look at him, a fucking king, and we're his goddamn courtiers."

The Finn thought it was an apt description, in a sense, and turned back to Terry to find him chatting easily with the Bride and her Maid of Honor, leaning back with a cigarette in his hand, his legs crossed, smiling and nodding as the Bride touched his arm and leaned in towards him. Frank had disappeared.

"Hey," The Finn said, interrupting Ben's continuing tirade against the good-looking and charming of the world, "Where'd Frank go?"

Ben paused to give a cursory glance around the bar. "Huh. I don't know, hoss. Maybe Terry's absorbed him, like a fucking vampire."

The Finn nodded absently. As he watched, Terry and the two women got up from the booth and walked slowly, still talking, towards the bar, where the bartender waited, wiping down a section for them.

"Jesus," Roger said feebly. "So much for a boys' night out. I'm going home." But he just stirred the ice in his drink and made no move to leave. After a moment, he shook his head and repeated "Jesus."

The Finn ashed his cigarette. "Excuse me," he murmured, pushing past Ben.

"Now where's he off to?" he heard Roger ask behind him.

At the payphone, The Finn dialed without thinking.

"Hello?"

"It might interest you to know your husband's a fucking prick."

There was a pause. "Theo. Had a few drinks, huh?"

"Beth, you know—"

"I know a lot of things, Theo. I wish you wouldn't call me every time Terry's doing something you don't approve of."

The Finn gripped the receiver tightly, hunched over the phone, his back to the rest of the bar. "You deserve better. That's all. He's here—"

"Don't tell me, Theo. Just don't."

For a moment, The Finn, just stood, gritting his teeth, bunching his jaw muscles. Then all at once, he relaxed. "All right. Sorry. What are you doing."

She sighed. "Drinking wine, listening to old songs I haven't heard in a while, in my underwear." Another pause. "Just waiting for something to happen, I suppose." The Finn thought he detected a note of amusement in her voice, and

he liked it.

"You've got it all figured out, huh, Beth?" he said, grinning and feeling loose again. Smoothed out.

"Do I ever," she replied. He realized there was a slight slur to her voice.

"Have fun, Theo."

He hung up the phone but remained where he was, hunched over, facing the wall, for a moment.

Back at the table, the population had dropped significantly. The Finn stood for a moment, contemplating the limp and shriveled forms of Roger, Ben, and Harry. Harry appeared to be asleep, with a cigarette burning between his fingers, his drink within easy reach. Ben was hunched forward a little, his eyes fixed on the gaggle of women still singing and laughing at the bar. Roger leaned back in the booth, sipping his beer, looking fat and sweaty and miserable, and The Finn figure he wanted to go home and minimize his punishment from Harsha, but was afraid of being made fun of if he left early.

Terry was still at the other end of the bar with the Bride and her Maid of Honor. The Maid was sitting on a stool, or, more accurately The Finn thought, slowly sliding off a stool, a centimeter a minute. The Bride stood with fresh martini in hand, listing slightly in towards Terry, one hand on his thigh for support, her circlet of flowers askew on her blonde head. The Finn felt a burn of anger towards Terry, but swallowed it and continued looking for Frank. When he didn't see him anywhere in the bar, he drifted towards the front door, elbowing his way through the thin crowd. He found Frank outside the bar, smoking and staring at the street with drink in hand, the people and cars crawling by at similar speeds.

"Everything okay, Frankie?"

Frank didn't turn or evince any reaction. He just stared. "Sure, thing, Teddy," he said after a moment, the cigarette bobbing up and down in his mouth. "Everything's fine."

The Finn experienced a moment of clarity and realized that Frank was almost done sliding down a very slippery slope of self-hate and guilt, and would probably kill himself very soon, perhaps that night, or at least try to. The Finn had experienced moments of clarity like that through his whole life, and they had invariably proven to be correct. He did not regard them as psychic moments, or visions of any kind. His best assumption was that they were rare moments where the logical operators of his brain all fired properly for a change and all the subtle evidence the world offered up at any given moment was, unusually, correctly and efficiently processed.

The Finn busied himself with his own cigarette for a few moments, taking his time, stalling as he pondered how to react. On the one hand, he knew that the Rules of Polite Society demanded that he do *something* to prevent Frank's intended course, because human life was precious.

But he hesitated.

He studied Frank out of the corner of his eye. There was no life in him, no excitement; he was an empty sack, sucking in smoke and expelling it back into the world, processed. He was a machine, a mechanical man of pumps and gears, whirring and clicking in the night.

The Finn compared his vision with previous examples of clearheaded prediction. He'd made a bit of money by wagering on a "Termination Pool" at work for a few years, betting on who would get fired. The Finn often startled his peers by betting on people who were considered extreme longshots, his wagers based on the strong, clear feelings he would get. Some of those sudden

realizations had been powerful, hitting him while in a meeting, staring at them while they talked, his brain blank, their words ignored. He would be staring like this, white noise enveloping him, and then the idea would appear clearly in his mind: This person will soon be fired. He would make a wager with his friends, and a few weeks later collect his winnings.

The feeling about Frank was just as clear and strong, as obvious. The Finn wondered if anyone else—Terry, in particular—could see it coming too. If any of them would do anything to prevent it; he doubted it. He thought it was pretty obvious that the only person who would be able to try and save Frank was himself.

"Frank—" he started awkwardly.

"I wonder," Frank said immediately, as if he'd been waiting for a prompt from The Finn, "if I could kill other people with my mind. If I concentrated on them, and just thought about it like I did with Shirley, if they would just crumple up and die."

The Finn stared. He didn't know what to say to that.

"I haven't tried. I've been thinking I should pick a bad person, someone evil, and give it a try. Shouldn't just pick someone at random, should be someone really evil. Do some good for a change, instead of just sitting on my ass, collecting dust, expanding and consuming." He flicked his cigarette away into the night, and turned to face The Finn and lean back against a railing. "Maybe I could just kill myself. Concentrate really hard and drop dead."

The Finn forced a smile. "I think they call that starving yourself to death."

Frank shrugged. "I guess. I guess there's always explanations. No magic, no mystery, just undiscovered facts. Fucking universe. There's nothing to be amazed at any more."

Frank raised his glass and drained it, coughing and sputtering. The Finn realized he was fall-down drunk.

"Fuck it," Frank said, and tossed the glass into the street, where it seemed to just disappear without a sound, sinking into the soupy black asphalt. He looked at The Finn, and for a moment they stared at each other. Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell to the ground with a disturbingly heavy thud, his head against the concrete.

NeVeR FuCk a BuDdY's GiRl

"Is that Frank DeLay?"

The Finn leaned against the doorjam, hands in pockets to show he meant no harm. He could picture Frank's head, lolling back against the headrest in his car. "Can't we leave Frank to the Preservation of Frank Society, and worry about ourselves for a moment?"

Annabeth Wilson shifted her eyes from the car parked sloppily on the curb to Ted Finn, standing before her reeking of cigarettes and bar, sawdust and liquor. "What about the boys' night out, Teddy?"

"I think you should know," The Finn said deliberately, "that your husband is at this moment screwing some bachelorette."

She smiled slightly. "Well, Jesus, you'd better come in. He okay out there?"

The Finn nodded. "Nothing's gonna bother him," he said brightly.

Annabeth was wearing just a bright yellow bathrobe, thin and wrapped tightly around herself. The Finn stepped past her, smelling just soap, and felt dirty. He didn't want to step on her carpets, her floors, rub against her

furniture, her things, her.

"Drink?" she asked, padding past him in bare feet. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"Sure. Whatever."

He stood awkwardly in their living room. He'd been in the room a hundred times before, but felt like he didn't know what to do with himself, where to put his feet, what part of the room to occupy. He felt like the air was thick, holding him in place. When she returned with a tumbler of Scotch, he watched helplessly as she approached, and summoned all his remaining energy to raise his arm to take the glass.

"Thanks," he murmured, staring down into it.

She threw herself onto the couch, looking cool and comfortable and gorgeous. "I hope you're not here to seduce me, Teddy," she said lightly. "I'm not in the mood for sex tonight."

"Your husband is," The Finn said darkly, swirling his drink around in its glass.

"Don't be an asshole, Teddy," she said sharply. "I know Terry pretty well. He's capable of a lot of things, being a huge ass among them, but he'd never actually cheat on me. So just drop it."

The Finn held up his hands in surrender, holding his glass between thumb and forefinger in a display of coordination that amazed him, since he was finding it difficult to stay upright.

"What's up with Frankie?"

The Finn reflected that Annabeth always diminutized names, a suddenly obvious habit that seemed portentous, heavy with hidden meaning. "Nothing," he said, forcing himself into motion in order to avoid a disastrous loss of balance—just like riding a bike, he thought, you're falling constantly and never hit the ground. "There is nothing wrong with Frankie."

"Okay. Sit down, Teddy." "Tell me what's up. What's on your mind."

The Finn paused in his directionless movement and stood for a moment staring down at his shoes. Annabeth watched him, a nervous smile creeping across her face. Then he whirled and sat down on the coffee table, leaning forward, his face just inches from hers.

"Anna," he said breathlessly, "you're the only one, you know that?" He smiled crookedly, and her own smile turned more natural.

"The only on what?"

He snorted. "Who doesn't break the rules."

She kept smiling, but drew her feet up under the thin material of her robe. "You should stay here tonight, silly man. You're a little drunk." She arched her eyebrow humorously. "Isn't drunk driving against a few rules?"

He slumped. "It's hard, Anna."

"Stay here. Sleep on the couch with my husband. I'll call Agnes and have her come gather her brother."

"Bad idea," he said listlessly. "Aggy hates me. And she'll bring Monkeyboy."

"His name's Darryl, and maybe she wouldn't hate you so much if you didn't call him that. Come on, she can collect Frankie and you can sleep this one off."

The Finn reached out and caught her arm as she moved to get off the couch. "No. I'll take him home."

"You shouldn't drive, Teddy."

He nodded. "I know." He stood up, but she caught his hand, and he stopped.

"Okay," she said, "I won't call Agnes. I promise. Bring Frank in here, and you can both sleep on the couch, and my husband can sleep on the floor,

okay?" She stared up at him. "I really, really don't want you to drive like this. You look fucked up. I'm worried about you."

The Finn blinked. "I can't. I have to...bring Frank home." He smiled, a terrible, loose collection of skin on his face. "The Preservation of Frank Society wouldn't approve. There would be sanctions."

"Come on, Teddy,"

But he broke away from her restraining hand and started for the door. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. I...I don't know what I thought I was doing."

She didn't get up. "Sure you didn't."

He shut the door behind him with a soft, gentle click.

In the car, driving, the streetlights played games on his face.

"Well, what should we do with you, then, Mr. DeLay?" he said blurrily, glancing at Frank's shifting, lolling form. "Want to go to your sisters'? See what she thinks of all this?"

Frank's head rolled from side to side, his mouth slackly open.

"Didn't think so, and who can blame you?" The Finn said. "Your sister's a shrew, buddy boy." He swerved the car a little to get back in his lane, frowning at the betrayal of the car. "No offense. Okay, maybe you want to go back to your place?"

Frank's body shifted with the inertia, his arms limp at his side.

"Right—depressing. All by yourself, reminders of Shirley all around you. I understand." The Finn sighed dramatically. "Frank, the world's no fucking good, you know that? Of course you do. Look who I'm asking. The fucking world, it's in a state of conflict, all the time. You're born, and the world around you is fighting. Good versus evil, chaos versus order—whatever. Just names, just labels. The point is, there are two sides and you have to choose one. Some of us choose order. Some of us choose chaos. You dig me, Frankie?"

Frank said nothing, and didn't move.

"Of course you do. *You're* on my side, Frank. I've always known that. In a passive way, maybe, a non-acting role. But on my side. You at least haven't been eroding order. You follow the rules, Frank. I appreciate that. I think it's important that I tell you that, so you know."

A passing car honked its horn once, and the driver shouted "Lights!" as he passed. The Finn peered at his dashboard and realized it was dark. Without watching the road, he squinted down and fumbled until he found the switch for his headlights. Flicking them on, he looked up triumphantly, realized he'd drifted into the oncoming lane, and frowned again as he corrected himself, glaring into the steering wheel, searching for the source of this mechanical failure.

"You see, Frank," he went on after a moment, running his free hand over his face tiredly, "it's like this: A healthy society polices itself. That's why we don't need Thought Police or any bullshit like that. If you're walking down the street and you see some old woman being mugged, you do something about it—maybe you don't, okay, maybe you don't jump in and get into a fight with this fucking maniac mugging her, fine, sure, but you do something. *Something*, right? You call the cops. You make some noise, let the fucker know he's being watched. You get it? Society polices itself, people do what they can. It's like that. When order is threatened by chaos, when the fucking rules are being broken, people have to step in, make some noise."

The Finn squinted at the oncoming yellow lane markers, his eyes puffy. "But that's the problem. We're not healthy any more. No one's making noise. There's fucking chaos everywhere, and no one cares. Or is willing to do anything about

it. Chaos creeps in closer, order retreats a little. Until we're just begging to be left alone in our little pools of order, our little tiny spots of light. Please, please just leave us alone, let us follow *these* rules, leave us to *this* way. Fuck that." He swallowed. "We've got to fight back. I've been fighting my whole life. I kid myself that I've made a difference."

He took a turn too fast, tires screeching, a hubcab spinning off into the night. The car righted itself and he accelerated. Frank's body leaned hard into the door, limp, and then righted itself as well.

"But fuck it, who am I kidding, Frankie? I punish people, that's all. I punish them for breaking the rules." His hands tightened on the steering wheel, growing white. "And I've fucking broken the rules, huh?"

The Finn continued to pause between each statement as if waiting for a response from Frank.

"You break the rules, you get punished, right? Break the rules, get punished. I broke the fucking rules, so I guess I should get punished."

He turned his head to look at Frank, and pushed his foot down onto the accelerator. The car leaped forward and fishtailed a little on the slick street. The Finn stared straight ahead, where the street ended in a blank grey wall several blocks away.

"Look at this, Frank!" The Finn suddenly shouted. "Who'd have thought it'd be you and me, huh?"

The Finn thought of everything, all at once. He thought of Terry, getting blitzed back at the bar, his friends shamefully forgotten as he tried to ruin some poor girl's bachelorette party. He thought of Roger and Ben, sitting at the table like ghosts, barely there. He thought of Harry, who would probably wake up at that same table, alone, prodded out of the closing bar by a waitress or bouncer. He thought of Agnes, scowling her way through life. He thought of her Monkeyboy. He thought of Anna. And Shirley, and Harsha. He thought of people he'd punished, people he'd even killed.

The wall approached, and The Finn kept his eyes open.

THE END

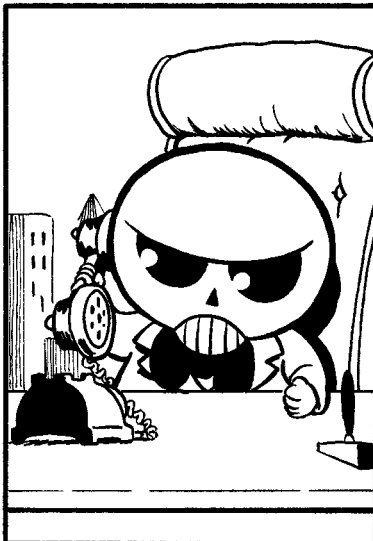
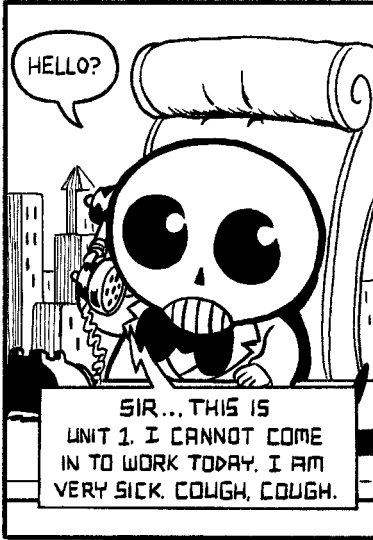


MY DRIVER'S LICENSE PHOTO AND THE CRAZY MAN IN THE PICTURE

You do not, let me assure you, attain the level of grungy insanity on display in my most recent driver's license photos (the 2005 version is shown here). It takes a certain commitment to *not grooming*, a certain commitment to *staring into the camera with the piercing 1000-yard stare of the crazy*. I walked into the DMV that day feeling like a normal, responsible citizen: Productive, law-abiding, the sort of fellow you don't mind riding public transport with. After being handed my own person *Dorian Grey* photo I was tempted to just sit down on the curb and start drinking engine coolant, as this is obviously my unavoidable destiny. Having seen photos of some of my fellow zine publishers (most disturbingly *Fish with Legs'* Eric Lyden) I have to wonder if this is just how zine people *look*. Wouldn't surprise anyone, I shouldn't think.

THE MIGHTY SKULLBOY ARMY

by Jacob Chabot 2005



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In a perfect world, everyone would be legally required to wear these. And make them.

NO FUTURE

The Next Issue, Sort-of Anticipated

Another issue over already? SO much to do, so little time. I think the time has come to stop pretending this zine is about anything aside from my glorious inner monologue, so the theme of the next issue will be *minutiae*, which will allow me to ramble on about just about anything and stay within the confines of my self-inflicted theme. For a change. Be prepared, people! There will be navel-gazing! There will be solipsism! *There will be many references to Jeff in the third person!* You've been warned.

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