



## WHAT THE FUCK'S BEEN GOIN' ON?

Not too much happened over the last few months, sadly. Nothing much happens to me at all, which is by design, as I definitely regard *Interesting Times* as a curse. I like a good drink, a good book, and a clean house. Everything else is a pain in the ass.

My next novel, *The Eternal Prison* (third in the Avery Cates series) will be out at end of August/beginning of September. You should go to Amazon.com and preorder it immediately. I can't explain why, just do it. Do it for King and Country. I suppose I'm the King in that statement, but to be honest I'm a bit muddled about it myself. Let's just say you've agreed to purchase ten copies of the book and let it drift, okay?

In the meantime, I'm working on novel #4 in the series, plus of course all my other usual writing projects. Aside from this zine, which is 20,000 words of original Jersey writing every three months (although—see below) I do a lot of fiction writing, most of which goes nowhere. The Duchess and I took a trip to Florence for our anniversary, which was a lot of fun, and I came within percentage points of being able to say I can play *Johnny B Goode* by Chuck Berry on the guitar—soclose. This is not gripping stuff.

My little hometown had a bitter mayoral election as well. I don't vote, as y'all know well; I consider the American system of government so perfect it does not require my input. Sadly, no one seems to know this in Hoboken, so I had to deal with an endless parade of jackasses with clipboards trying to convince me that a thirty-second conversation with them was all I needed as far as political education went. Some of these motherfuckers had the balls to roll their eyes when I told them otherwise. I think next election cycle I will simply knee them in the groin when they speak to me, and let the cards fall where they may.

**BI-ANNUAL:** Friends, *The Inner Swine* is going bi-annual. There will be no issue in September, and the December issue will be a double-issue, combined 15(3) and 15(4). Next year we'll have two double-sized issues. Same amount of Jeffness, just less frequently. This is because the last time I sat in a room folding and stapling hundreds of these issues, I went mad for a while and ended up wearing a soiled bedsheet and declaring I was Emperor Jeffus of Hoboken.

I am not a strong man, and all this folding and stapling has got to be lessened. I'm too damn cheap to hire someone to do it for me, so instead I'll just do it less frequently.

So, to recap: You're still getting ~240 pages of TIS every year. It'll just be in 2 issues instead of 4. Got it? Any questions, you know where I am. And now. . . *The Inner Swine* 15(2), already in progress.

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*Obtenez loin de moi, vous chien bourgeois!*

Volume 15, Number 2, June 2009



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*The Inner Swine* Volume 15, Issue 2 (ISSN: 1527-7704). Magazine published June, June, September, and December by Oinking Sow, Inc. © 2009 by Jeff Somers. (There is no company, really) Individual subscription rates: \$5.00 (cheap!) per year in U.S.; \$6.00 (cheap!) per year foreign including Canada. Single Copy \$2.00 (cheap!) but stop teasing me, you're never going to order a subscription, *you heartless bastards*. Free trades are absolutely entertained, send me something, and I will mail you treats. Checks payable to Jeff Somers, Editor. Address submissions and correspondence to Jeff Somers, *The Inner Swine*, POB 3024, Hoboken, NJ 07030, mreditor@innerswine.com. But let's face it, when was the last time we published anything not written by me or one of my cronies? Other people's pimply writing gives me hives. Still, all submissions or requests for Guidelines (there are no guidelines, though) must be accompanied by S.A.S.E. Loie Vita (left) has appeared in my living room three times so far, fleeing her parents, and who can blame her?

# Everybody's talkin' at me...

## Here's what they're saying about ME:

We received the latest issue of **Zine World** and Tom reviewed issue 14(2): *"Each issue gets good, better, and best. . .The rants are self-effacing, perceptive, and way funny. . .overall this is one of the most notable and likable zines going. Recommended!"*



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

Wow, never thought the term *likable* would be used in conjunction with my ill-informed and cranky blatherings. I'll take it!

The prolific Robert J. Zani sent me two letters from which I will quote randomly and incompletely: *"I received TIS for December 2008, but not until Feb. 5. Either you are back on the TDCJ shit list or Twisted Sister in the mail room has you in her sights. Take your pick. Lucky you. Every 5-6 issues you turn out a classic. TIS 14(4) December 2008 is that issue. Excellent."*

Thanks, Robert. I also reproduce here the "Monastery Caskets" ad Robert sent, which made me laugh uproariously:

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Loyal reader **Rich Vierling** sent me a really nice note: *“Thanks so much for the latest Inner Swine (Vol 15 #1). The writing. . .really made me chuckle. Usually funny stuff, even more so in this recession. . .er, depression. As a writer, i can really dig your thoughts on the written word. Best wishes to you and yours. Keep The Inner Swine going strong because it always brings a smile. And we all need that right now.”*

Shucks. I am a great man.

New reader Jason Edwards sent us this email: *“A few minutes ago I reached page 36 of Inner Swine volume 14, issue 4 December 2008. This was the latest issue that I could find at Bulldog News in Seattle. And there on page 36 was an advertisement that told me: if I buy a perfectbound book I would get a lifetime subscription to TIS, plus a free copy of Lifers and The Freaks are Winning!*

*“My fingers were tapping away at the url window and fishing out my credit card before my mind even had a chance to react. All that goodness for the price two Baker's at Morton's on Sixth? How could I not?*

*“Wanted to let you know. Now. It may turn out that, reading an old issue, the offer no longer stands. I'll have to accept that. I'm still getting volumes 1-3.*

*“And even if you send me back a profanity-laden response impugning my greediness, I still can't hardly wait for the Eternal Prison.*

*“Okay, that's enough faboiness for one day. I have to go do a pub run now. 5 miles, 8 pints.*

*“And then I'm going to read 'a meek and thankful heart.’”*

The offer still stands, and Jason got his swag. Although we are almost out of Freaks books, so I may have to amend the offer soon. Is it possible there are enough TIS fans to have depleted our stockpiles of Freaks books? Apparently so.

Ken Bausert sent me **The Ken Chronicles** #11 (\$2, 2140 Erma Drive, East Meadow, NY 11554-1120; passscribe@aol.com) along with a note: *“Hope you and The Duchess are doing well. The latest issue. . .is enclosed: hope you enjoy. I give a little mention of your TIS within this issue so maybe I'll help get YOU new subscribers.*

*“Hey, you may have to rework your boilerplate. The part where it says 'you're never going to order a subscription, you heartless bastards.' There's a new musical group called The Heartless Bastards. . .I heard their stuff and it's really good; but here you are chastising them for not subscribing to your zine. . .ummm, well, I thought it was funny.*

*“And, am I the only one who wonders what happened to Mr. Mute? That was one of my favorite features. Did someone finally do him in?”*

First of all, I *do* chastise everyone in the universe who is not a TIS

subscriber, so I will not be changing the boilerplate. That band can send me \$5 if it bugs them. Second of all, Mr. Mute is on vacation because I can't think of anything more to do with him. He may come back if I think of something really cool to do with him. Some might say I've never done anything cool with him before, so why start now? But those people are: Bastards.

New reader Andrew Conde sent me **Tenebrous Thaumaturgy #2** (Andrew Conde, GCDC, 2120 East B Street, Torrington MY 82240) and this note after I sent him my books: *"I am stupid, idiotic and self-destructive to a suicidal extent. In four days, I read "The Freaks are Winning", "Lifers", "The Electric Church", and "The Digital Plague". Did I gouge out my eyes? Lose my lunch? Have bowel problems?<sup>1</sup> No! Aside from mental issues remedied by electroshock therapy courtesy of a guard's taser, I suffer only the occasional bout of envy/hero worship. Maybe it's a tumor<sup>2</sup>. Maybe I just love your writing. . .How can I show my appreciation?. . .Maybe I should have sent a gallon of hooch brewed from potato peels and fruit cocktail<sup>3</sup> but the guards checked my 'hiding spot'. Sometimes I put stuff there so they feel useful. . ."*

Naturally a note like that predisposes me to lurve anything that person sent. I love Andrew. He is a genius of rare perception. Actually, I'd recommend his zine; it's interesting and filled with words, like zines ought to be, and well worth the effort to get one.

Old friend **DB Pedlar** sent me an actual letter, as is his wont. I used to be a big letter writer, just as I used to talk on the phone constantly, but not so much these days. DB writes: *" . . .I finished reading The Digital Plague and enjoyed the read. I really liked Keith Hayes' cover design which was extremely complemented by Jae Lee's illustration.*

*"I tend not to read sci-fi books that cater to maiming and mayhem, warlords on the rampage, brain or blood sucking creatures (animal, semi-human, or mechanical), scary creatures (same as preceding) that go bump in the twilight or later, etc. I like my sci-fi reading to be on the humorous side (big surprise, huh?).*

*"Avery Cates provided enough humor and sarcasm to keep me intrigued with the character and turning the page. The antagonists complimented the Avery Cates character. I even missed one or two of the minor supporting characters when their life came to a sudden end. Overall, an excellent job on the development of all the characters. . ."*

[DB then goes into some detail about plot points he didn't buy or didn't like, which is fine. I've answered him in a private letter, but won't bore you with it here.]

*" . . .According to the latest issue of the Swine, I'm guilty of reason*

---

1 All reported side effects of reading my prose, actually.

2 Also—you guessed it—a reported side effect of reading my books.

3 I've tried this. Do not recommend.

*number two when it comes to Ways Your Writing Can Suck for Other People. . .too much/too little. . .As usual the latest Inner Swine was a fun read, all the writer stuff was grand. Plus, I really enjoyed Digital Plague. I wish you continued success beyond your wildest drunken imagination."*

Thanks, DB. Although, be warned: My drunken imagination is pretty damn wild. Though I usually don't remember much of it.

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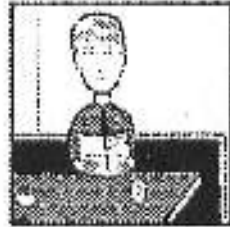
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*Pig In Shit #55*

# WOULD NOT JOIN ANY CLUB THAT WOULD HAVE SOMEONE LIKE ME FOR A MEMBER

*By Jeff Somers*

AH, to be young again. Not really. I'd saw my own leg off before I went back in time to relive some of my younger years. Don't get me wrong, I had a great childhood, a fun adolescence, and a fun and educational college experience. My first job was filled with drunken, *Melrose Place*-style drama, and my mid-to-late 20s were a blast. I enjoyed my youth, friends, and as a result I am pop-eyed horrified at any thought of traveling back to a time when I still thought a mullet was a good idea<sup>1</sup>.

No, I've always been pretty happy with whatever my age is at the moment. When I was ten, I *liked* being ten—I thought the lack of responsibility and the ability to run at full-on supersonic speeds for hours at a time was pretty cool. I used to win all the races in my neighborhood and even though I couldn't hit worth shit because of still-undiscovered farsightedness, I ran fast and so always got picked in wiffle ball just to be a designated runner. I *loved* being ten. When I was sixteen, I'd gotten fat and dopey, sure, and I was wearing a pair of glasses so large and thick they occasionally set my hair on fire



*Not kidding about the mullet. Unfortunately.*

when I wasn't paying attention out in the sun, but I still liked being sixteen. I could drive, for one, had recently discovered alcohol, which would of course turn into the second most important love affair of my life, and I had a group of friends who made me laugh constantly. When I was twenty, I was rocking college, and even though I'd temporarily given up booze and didn't get laid nearly as much as I'd expected

---

1 *When I went off to college at 18, I let my hair grow. And grow. But I was too cool to groom it in any way, so it just became this mess of hair on my head. When I went home for spring break I decided to get a trim to at least be able to see. My Italian barber at home was delighted to see me at first, because he thought I was going to cut my hippie hair. When I told him a 'trim', his face darkened, and he proceed to cut an inch off my bangs and on the sides, mutilating me. He then stepped back (after all of fifteen seconds of cutting) and charged me ten bucks.*

(movies, in short, had lied to me), I still had a great time. When I was twenty-five, I'd come into my own, spending most nights in a bar getting drunk with friends, and finally able to afford things because of my tiny publishing industry salary<sup>2</sup>.

A few years later I got married, bought a house, and sold a novel.

So, you see, I have no reason to go back. Sure, there was a lot of fun to be had, and, frankly, I had a newer body in better shape and with fewer malfunctions. But I also didn't know as many things back then. I didn't know how to drive a standard-H stick shift<sup>3</sup>. I didn't know how to play *Bring it On Home* by Led Zeppelin on guitar<sup>4</sup>. I didn't know how to hang drywall, or what good Scotch was, or that wearing Converse Chucks every day of your life can result in a severely mangled big toe.



*Artist's Conception  
of Jeff Today*

That's the trade-off in growing older. You lose your jumpshot and you gain a gut, but you also learn so much goddamn trickery and wisdom you're like three times as powerful as you were back in *The Day*. For me, it's much more trickery than wisdom, but still.

Of course, if I could travel back to when I was 18, say, *with* my trickery and wisdom intact, then, damn, I could probably rule the world like some sort of supervillain.

The reason this comes up in conversation is because I've been pondering movies recently (obviously) and contemplating the fact that I haven't been to an opening weekend of a movie in about 7 or 8 years. When I was in high school and college, I think I saw just about every major film release the weekend it came out, usually with the same people. Even in my 20s and early 30s there were plenty of movie openings—I no longer caught every damn movie, ever, but the big ones I still caught right away. Now that I'm old and cranky, however, the desire to be there on opening night is simply gone. There's just no upside.

There are three reasons for this: One, opening weekends are filled with people just like me when I was sixteen; two, there hasn't been a movie *worth* the effort (with the sole exception of *The Dark Knight*) in forever; and three, it doesn't fucking matter, because everything ends up on cable anyway and someday I'm going to die and there will be thousands of movies released after I am dead, so who am I kidding, anyway?

- 
- 2 *Not to mention being constantly delighted to discover I had not yet killed myself with booze.*
  - 3 *According to The Duchess, I still don't. She is mean.*
  - 4 *According to my guitar teacher, I still don't. He is mean.*

OPENING WEEKENDS ARE  
FILLED WITH PEOPLE JUST  
LIKE ME WHEN I WAS  
SIXTEEN

Kids are terrible people. I know; I was a kid once, and I was terrible. My friends were all kids once, and *they* were all terrible. Something happens to human beings when they grow out of the shallow end of childhood and get into the double-digit numbers: They invariably become assholes. This is a natural process. We all go through it to some extent—yes, *you*—and most of us grow out of it to some extent. Some people, sure, stay assholes their whole lives, but for most of us Asshole is just a phase. A phase you go through when you're between the ages of ten and twenty, generally.

Now, when I was a kid me and my asshole friends would go to movies all the time. It was one of our favorite things to do on the weekends—we saw *everything*. If a movie was sold out, we saw the next available thing. Which is why I think I am one of about thirty people in this world who can say that he saw the film *Who's Harry Crumb?* in the theater on its opening night.

*Who's Harry Crumb* ranks as #2 on *The Inner Swine's* Worst Films Evah list, right behind *Boxing Helena*<sup>5</sup> and right in front of *Hook*<sup>6</sup>. I don't recall what we wanted to see that night, but it was sold out, and instead of just finding something else to do, we opted to see *something*. Bad decision.

Anyway, when you're sixteen and going to movies, you like to have a good time, and that generally includes making jokes, moving around a lot, and trying to guess the twists in the plot waaay before anyone else,



You thought I was making this up.

- 5 *Boxing Helena* inspires TIS Security Chief Ken West to tell the same story every time it's mentioned: At the end of the screening we attended, when all was revealed, there was a moment of stunned silence and then from way back in the theater some guy shouted "This is **bullshit!**" and everyone laughed. Ken tells it better.
- 6 Let me tell you, when Robin Williams found his Happy Thought in this movie, I wanted to go kill someone. To this day my reactions to movies are measured by *The Inner Swine Inner Circle (TISIC)* in terms of *Hook*.

and then announcing such. Sure, there were occasional movies so damn good we sat there in stunned silence, but for the most part, we were assholes. And thus as I get older and drift further and further away from that age, I can't stand sitting in theaters with kids any more. I have a mortgage, dammit. I can't do it.

THERE HASN'T BEEN  
A MOVIE WORTH  
THE EFFORT IN FOREVER

This is debatable, of course, but I can't think of a movie in recent years, and retroactively considering movies of my past, that were actually worth being there on opening night. Except for *The Dark Knight*, which married hype with awesomeness in a way that doesn't happen often<sup>7</sup>.

But I digress; one exception does not disprove the rule.



*This is the time on Sprockets when we dance.*

Most movies are giant, colossal, epic fails when it comes to the distance between their trailer and buildup and the actual movie on the screen. I remember going to see *Spiderman* back a few years ago (the first Raimi version). That movie was a lesson in how to hype a blockbuster summer movie, and sure, it got me into the seat. And *Spiderman* remains a terrible movie, a movie that made me angry to have been duped into paying for it. A lot of people I know don't agree with my assessment of the movie, and that's fine. For me, it sucked. The sequels sucked too. The *Spiderman* franchise will not

be remembered fondly in years to come, I don't think, but then I'm wrong about everything.

If my *Spiderman* experience was unusual that would be one thing, but it pretty much always happens. If we Americans put the same energy, smarts, and budget into, say, medical science that we currently inject into marketing and advertising, we'd cure Death in a matter of weeks. They just have ways of making every movie look like a breathless, unbelievable sensory experience, the sort of thing that you simply *must* experience or else risk being the one lame loser in the world who doesn't get all the new jokes and references<sup>8</sup>.

7 *The opening sequence of The Dark Knight still catches my attention every time it pops up on cable.*

8 *Evidence: Despite despising the first Spiderman movie, I have seen both sequels in the theater. I am Marketing's bitch.*

Then you go see the movie and. . .it's a movie. Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of good movies made every year and I enjoy a lot of them, but so far there haven't been any religious conversions for me while watching a film, and I doubt that will ever be the case. There simply hasn't been a movie made that I would regret waiting a few months to see. Unless of course I died during those few months, which would suck. But not as much as sitting in the front row on Friday night while kids throw popcorn at my head.

## IT DOESN'T FUCKING MATTER

In general, there's no benefit to being there on opening night. Or opening weekend. Or opening *week*. These days, everything ends up on cable or DVD eventually—when I was a kid, my friends, it was different. A movie came out, was in the theaters for a while, and then disappeared for fucking ever. If it was a huge hit and you were lucky it might end up on TV one night five years later, but that was the best you could hope for. These days, though, nothing ever disappears, not really. So, why bother fighting the crowds?

I suppose it's the excitement of the crowd, which I suppose counts for something, sure. Except I don't really like people enough to want to share an experience with them, so that just doesn't work for me.

When I contemplate my own mortality<sup>9</sup>, I lose whatever residual energy there was for being the first in line for things. Eventually, there will be movies and books and songs released that I will not hear, so why bust my ass to be first in line now? I don't have any burning desire to be so damn cool that I know things before everyone else. Back in high school I always wanted to be into the Next Big Thing first. These days, I don't really give a fuck. If something needs to be current and cool in order to be fun and interesting, then it really isn't fun and interesting, it's just cool. Things that are truly fun and interesting remain so for decades, for centuries. Everything else is just amusement for the moment, and there will be another dollop of amusement coming along in a minute.

Wow, I just re-read that and I sound like a really angry old bastard, don't I? Get out of my theater, you damn kids.

---

9 *Every Friday night, around 3AM, in the bathroom with my head jammed in the toilet.*

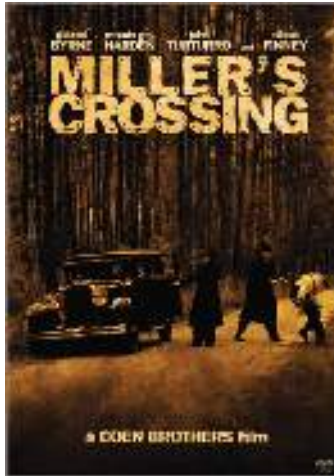


NATTERING

# THE GREATEST MOVIE EVAH

*Miller's Crossing Will Eat Your Mind  
and Steal Your Knowledge*  
by Jeff Somers

FRIENDS, let us consider the great movies of history. You've heard of *The Godfather*? *Casablanca*? *Star Wars*? Yes? Morons, all of them. The greatest movie ever made is *Miller's Crossing*, 1990.



Now, I realize I may be alone in this, but I am very used to being alone in Matters of Genius and/or Truth, so that's okay. You can have whatever little movie you like as your personal favorite, and I'll sleep the Sleep of the Just at night, knowing you are wrong. Plus, I can basically steal the entire script of this movie and use it as dialogue for my own novels, and still have enough left over for regular conversation. Plus, it stars the first man-crush I ever had: Gabriel Byrne.

**Tom Reagan: All in all not a bad guy - if looks, brains, and personality don't count.**

**Verna: You better hope they don't.**

The reasons for *Miller's Crossing's* greatness are twofold. One, it has one of the best scripts for dialogue that have ever been written. I



*Gabriel Byrne: A damn fine looking man.*

could literally write an entire book just by stealing lines from this movie, and someday, if I live long enough, I'm going to do it. It will be a huge bestseller and I will lose all the proceeds in a famous lawsuit, but fuck it, it'll be worth it. The Coen Brothers have made better-known films, films that have won Academy Awards and

such, but they hit their peak as writers with *Miller's Crossing*, bubba.

The dialogue is jammed with the sort of self-conscious slang that would be precious and annoying if it wasn't handled so well. This is accomplished through two expert decisions: One, they dive right into the slang from the very first lines of the movie, and two, they commit completely, without doubt or hesitation. They don't attempt to explain anything, they just let you float along with the context and figure it out as you go—they trust their audience.

**Hitman at Verna's: If I tell you, how do I know you won't kill me?**

**Eddie Dane: Because if you told me and I killed you and you were lying I wouldn't get to kill you \*then\*.**

The second aspect of *Miller's Crossing* that elevates it beyond mortal films into the Greatest Movie Evah is the characters. The plot is nice and twisty, of course, though largely based on a few of Dashiell Hammett's books (notably *The Glass Key*, which serves as pretty much a blueprint for the whole damn story), but the story isn't the main course. The story is there so the characters can interact and speak that dialogue and look good in the period clothes.

And the characters are awesome. I don't use that word often, as it's overused and near-meaningless these days, but the characters in *Miller's Crossing* are organic creatures of their universe. This is important, because so many movies (and stories in general) have characters which exist solely because the author thought they were cool, or because the plot demands it (for example: *Convenient Science Guy Who Can Hack Any Computer*). The characters in *Miller's Crossing* could kick your ass. *All of them*. The women, the kid who steals Rug Daniels' toupee in

the alley, *the kid's fucking dog*, they could all beat you down while calling you names and you would have no choice but to like it.

That's why this movie rocks. You believe these people existed—at least back in 1927—and you're glad they must be dead by now. You're also glad that someone thought to write down every thing they said.

Or you aren't, in which case you're dead to me. Go watch *Con Air* or something.

**Eddie Dane: How'd you get the fat lip?**

**Tom Reagan: Old war wound. Acts up around morons.**

Naturally, a movie's script and direction are the fundamentals on which greatness rests, but of course you have a host of people involved on whom greatness depends as well. This is why Jeff is an author of books and not a filmmaker; he does not play well with others, and likes to mutter to himself in a dark room while creating instead of taking endless meetings and dealing with, of all things, *actors*.

The writers and directors get a lot of credit, of course; The Coen Brothers wrote the damn thing so I've already given them plenty of credit. The actors, many of whom gave their greatest performances here, are the meat and potatoes of this movie, and they are tasty. Back in 1990, I had never heard the phrase *Man Crush*, but I now recognize Gabriel Byrne as my first ever Man Crush, a man I would enter into a sexless marriage with if only he would agree to record my answering machine message.

Today, this award goes to Clive Owen, but I digress.

Byrne plays Tom Reagan, the main character and the focus of the story; he appears in just about every scene. He's surrounded by fantastic actors: Albert Finney, John Turturro, John Polito, Marcia Gay Harden—these are heavy hitters, and they don't just hold their own. Finney in particular manages to make Leo the crime boss simultaneously stupid and brilliant, malleable and tough as nails, and both he and Byrne handle the so-subtle-it-may-be-my-personal-issue homosexual subtext like ballet dancers.

Boiling it down: You want to *be* Tom Reagan, even as Byrne does an excellent job of making you feel every cut, broken bone, and bloody nose. The man takes a beating, but he does it with such style you still wish you were him.

**Verna: You think you've raised hell.**

**Tom Reagan: Sister, when I've raised hell, you'll know it!**

Now, I realize this essay lacks a lot of things some of the snottier

bastards out there might term *evidence*. I've basically just told you that I think this movie is cool for a few hundred words and hope you just accept it and move on. For that is the way *The Inner Swine* rolls, my friends: Maximum bullshit, minimum research and/or evidence.

**Verna: Shouldn't you be doing your job?**

**Tom Reagan: Intimidating helpless women is my job.**

**Verna: Then go find one, and intimidate her.**

Yeah.

---

---

great movie quotes jeff wishes he wrote:

"They've done studies, you know. 60% of the time it works, every time."

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REAL-LIFE ADVENTURE

# FREAKS of the INDUSTRY

*Two Days in the Uncanny Valley  
of New York Comic Con  
by Jeff Somers*

MY NAME is Jeff Somers and I'm a writer.

I've written a lot of things you almost certainly have never ever heard of but currently I'm most known for the Avery Cates series published by Orbit Books. People think that being a published author is a glamorous life filled with champagne and solid gold toilets but let me set you straight: I spend my days with four cats wandering my house in a tattered bathrobe clutching a bottle of booze to my chest and muttering.



Since the Avery Cates books are Science Fiction novels and are by the way the greatest novels ever written in the English language and if you don't buy copies IMMEDIATELY you will suffer from cultural illiteracy and be mocked at parties, it was decided that I should attend this year's New York Comic Con as a Literary Guest, where I would attempt to charm and bamboozle the good, pious fans of the Earth into paying some small attention to me. So I gathered my courage, put on some pants, and with my wife The Duchess in tow and we headed off to Two Days in the Uncanny Valley of the Javits Convention Center in New York.

The thing about Comi Con is, it's frickin big. The sheer number of people in front of you as you enter the place is mind-boggling, and fighting your way through it all is something like living in a zombie movie: A lot of slow-moving, odd-smelling people shuffling about while you fight the urge to hack away at them with whatever weapon may be at hand. In the end, just like in the movies, the zombies win and you have to adjust your pace to something close to a dead elephant and just sort of be carried along.

## DAY ONE

The plan for our first day was simple enough: Somehow locate and present ourselves at the publisher's booth at 3pm where I would sign

books and make friends with everyone on earth in a vain attempt to sell scads of books. Deceptively simple plans like this never seem to take into account the most powerful force in the universe, a force that has destroyed corporations and individuals the world over: MY INCOMPETENCE. More on this later.



*Graphic Representation  
of My Incompetence*

Somehow despite the crush of babes dressed as Princess Leia and the Stormtroopers who always seemed to have innocents on their knees while the cruel crowds stood around grinning, we did indeed manage to show up on time, and a signing commenced, which went really, really well, with a lot of people and very few awkward moments. So well in fact that I knew FATE would need to restore balance to the universe with something really humiliating for me, but I'm haunted by this conviction on a regular basis and have come to live with it.

After the signing my wife and I opted to wander the floor a bit instead of making any sort of rational plan for Day Two, like where we were supposed to be or any rubbish like that, preferring to allow my aforementioned incompetence to take me by the nipples and drag me wherever it wished, but more on that later too. At one point my wife left me by myself to go look for more things to buy with the promise of being back in a jiffy and proceeded to leave me standing by myself for what seemed like six or seven HOURS. The thing about being left alone like this at Comic Con is that it's like having a slight flesh wound in the Amazon River: You get swarmed and eventually consumed by marketing drones who want to hand you cards, free comics, live eels—whatever their corporate masters are trying to sell. By the time The Duchess returned I was weeping softly inside a trashcan.

## DAY TWO

The plan for Day Two was also simple: Show up for a panel at 1:30PM, then do an hour at the autograph area from 3pm to 4pm, then go out and drink in celebration. Again, none of this planning took into account MY INCOMPETENCE, which saw us arrive at the Javits center at approximately 1:25pm, spend an eternity fighting our way to the publisher's booth, only to learn that the only person who had actually taken the time to find out where in bloody hell the panel was being held had already left to attend the panel and was now sitting there, miles away, chewing his fingernails and wondering if today was the day the prophecy came true and I single-handedly destroyed Orbit Books. With nothing else for it, it was decided that I would run for the panel room—approximately as far away from us at that moment as

Mars is from the Earth—and hope I could make it.

## JEFFREY'S RUN

Now I am not what you might charitably call *in shape*; to be perfectly blunt I have spent the last few years drinking whiskey and speculating what exercise might be like if I ever one day tried some so sprinting through the zombie-like crowd at Comic Con was doomed from the get go, though I made the best of it. The saving grace of it all was the fact that everyone else was so tightly packed in that I could push, shove, and curse everyone freely and no one had the ability to extricate themselves from the crowd quickly enough to punish me. Sweaty and panting, I burst into the panel room a good ten minutes late, looking, as usual, like a jackass.

As a final kick in the ass, when you arrive to a panel late, you get the last available seat at the table, directly behind the monitor so no one can see you. The good news is you can hide your trembling as your body rebels against the first good run it's had in years. The bad news is that after the panel is over no one ever knows you were there although when you spent the whole panel sweating and trembling this may not be such a bad thing.

## HULK SMASH

The autographing went rather better as we had a half an hour to fight our way back and I am much better at sitting in one place making chitchat than I am at sprinting through crowds requiring Olympian levels of coordination and speed. As I shook hands, posed for photos, and signed all manner of books presented to me, the only glitch was that we were right next to Lou Ferrigno, also known as the Incredible Frickin' HULK and still quite alarmingly huge, who defended his territory fiercely and twice growled at my wife to stay off his spot, making me tremble all over again at the thought of making the news as the famous sci-fi author pummeled by an enraged Lou Ferrigno. Though Lou and I were wearing the same shoes, which pleased me in an obscure way I don't have to explain to you.

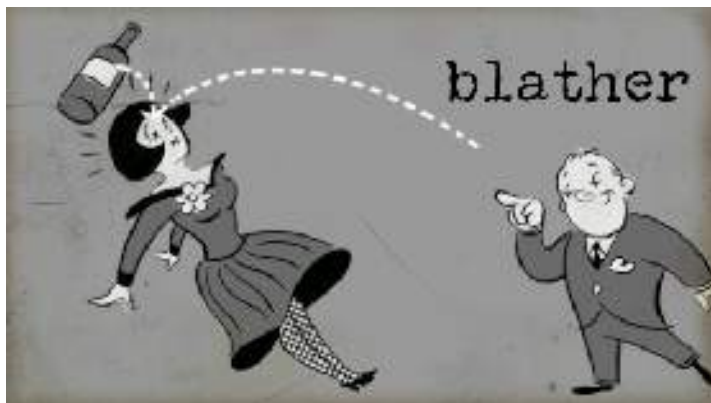


## SWEET ALCOHOL

Finally, we were done, and it was off to a bar to celebrate my triumph. And it was indeed a triumph: I got to meet some fans I'd only previously known through my blog and such, I met a lot of new people and I think I convinced at least some of the suspicious strangers I met to at least read my book, especially as they were given away free. As people bought me drinks and my heart rate returned to normal, I realized that the thrill of Comic Con is being in one place with so many people who feel just like you do about Sci-Fi in general, not to mention the fact that I now know the one thing I have been missing in all of my public appearances is a cape. You simply have to take men in capes seriously.

*NOTE: This is actually the transcript of narration to a video about the NYCC I made and posted to YouTube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Z\\_lclRxm8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Z_lclRxm8)*

### ADVERTISEMENT (S)



Y'know, I once wrote entire essays about how I'd never write a blog because I was waaaay too cool for the hype. As usually happens in these situations, I have come crawling back to drink from the brakish waters of my own desperate hypocrisy. And a Blog is born!

**[www.jeffreysomers.com/blather](http://www.jeffreysomers.com/blather)**

Updated infrequently, generally dull, and filled with the sort of personal in-jokes so damned in I'm the only one who gets them—what's not to love! Come on by and heckle me in the comments.



# The Doom of Men

*I've Used This Title Before*

*by Jeff Somers*

IT IS THE DOOM OF MEN THAT THEY FORGET. Ah, there is much that the movie *Excalibur* can teach us, isn't there? Perhaps you have not seen the movie, in which case I don't understand you, but that's beside the point—I don't understand most people, and spend my life terrified and suspicious. Don't judge me; you bastards prove me right so often it's ridiculous.

Anyway, I am not here to bemoan the way you all frighten me with your slang, musky odors, and political beliefs—lord knows I've written that article before, several times, and will write it again. No, I'm here to tell you about the time I went to see *Batman*. No, not the new *Batman*. The first *Batman* movie that changed entertainment as we know it, the one starring Michael fucking Keaton (twenty goddamn years later and I still can't believe it) and Jack Nicholson.



*That's Mr. Merlin to You*



*SUCK IT, NICHOLSON.*

So, it's 1989. I'm between high school and my first year of college, my liver is still normal-sized and I still know several dozen folks I haven't spoken to *since* 1989, and I don't know several people I know now. Which makes no sense, but let it drift.

*Batman* was the big movie

that summer; I think every kid I knew was at the theater that night. The place was a madhouse. People had brought beach balls, which were tossed around the theater. Half of us were drunk, which is of course a scandal—that it was only half (I am personally committed to endrunkening the world, as I am convinced this will lead to world peace, the singularity, and my own independent wealthiness). There was a buzz of energy in the air, like we were all expecting to be sucked up into the air, like the rapture was about to happen.

There is a peculiar moment in life when you're seventeen, eighteen years old and you actually believe that the swirl the entertainment industry is serving you *means* something aside from extracting a few dollars from your pocket and even more for their craptacular snacks. You think it's an event that will resonate throughout time, or at least throughout your own existence. Decades later, you imagine you'll be stopped in the street by reporters who want to know where you were when *Batman* came out.

Ah, youth.

Anyway, it was a party. The movie started and we cheered and afterwards the concensus was that this was the greatest movie evah.

Looking back on the movie twenty years later, you gotta ask if part of that reaction was hype, was feeling like you'd just taken part in a shared chunk of awesomeness. The answer: Absolutely. I saw the 1989 *Batman* again recently, and that is one fucking awful movie.

Even taking into consideration my expanded movie lexicon, maturity, and the fact that I now have a gleeful Heath Ledger in my brain, the *Batman '89* is a mess, ruined by Tim Burton's hyper-artificial set design, Jack Nicholson's fey over-acting, and Kim Basinger's gravity well of talentlessness. I may be in the minority here, but if I could travel back in time and change one thing, I think I'd skip this movie.

Maybe kill Hitler. But most likely skip *Batman '89*.



*What if I kill Hitler and as a result I'm never born?*

## NOTHING LASTS

It's funny how time erodes everything down to its core. If the core is good, it'll survive. If the core sucks, it's history, or grist for a remake or "reboot". *Nothing lasts*. The shelf life of a movie these days is about ten years, which is roughly the time it takes for the next generation of snot-nosed kids to age into ticket-buying, at which point anything that predates their own existence is considered lame until they turn about thirty-five, when suddenly some of them will discover otherwise. And since Hollywood ran out of new ideas the day *Star Wars* was released, the only thing that matters now is whether they can convince you to pay \$10 for the ticket. A movie you've seen fifteen times, own on DVD, or consider a lame relic from your parents' day? Probably not gonna happen. A remake starring Angie Jolie's tits and a soundtrack by Trent Reznor? Giddy-up.

Science-Fiction movies are all the rage on the 'reboot' merry-go-round these days, possibly because for decades Sci-Fi movies were

treated like something Hollywood stepped in and couldn't scrape off its shoe, leaving us with dozens and dozens of movies with great ideas and terrible low-budget excuses for sets and costumes. These kinds of films are easy enough to remake, and there's added value in it for people, too, because they get to see the story done "properly", with effects and A-list actors and all that. Add to that the possibility of drawing in older fans who don't go to movies much but who might recall the originals with nostalgia, and it's a workable formula. Workable because the collective memory of the movie-going public wipes itself every ten years.

As a result, whatever movie you just saw that rocked your world, forget it. You will. Eventually it will be remade with younger, fresher actors *who have just been born* and a revamped script, more recent pop-culture references and era-appropriate technological devices as props. You'll be sucked into attending a screening because of a relentless marketing campaign that reminds you of how great you *think* the original was, as your memories are vague, and before you know it the only version of *Casablanca* you can remember is the 2017 version starring Macaulay Culkin in his big comeback. Because it is the doom of men that they forget.



*You Will See him Rise. I Warn You.*

## REBOOT HELL

Of course, what happens to a culture when it stops creating new material and just rehashes existing plots, characters, and tropes? What happens when we stop creating *Star Trek*, *The Original Series* and settle for *Star Trek by That Guy Who Created Lost*? Which might be a fine movie, who knows. One could argue that we've all been remaking the same plots for thousands of years anyway, with the same basic characters, and all that's ever changed are the names, the props, and the settings, and possibly some of the mechanics as technology and culture change. In one sense, sure—everything's either a story about murder, theft, unrequited love, requited love, war, god, or zombies. Mostly zombies.

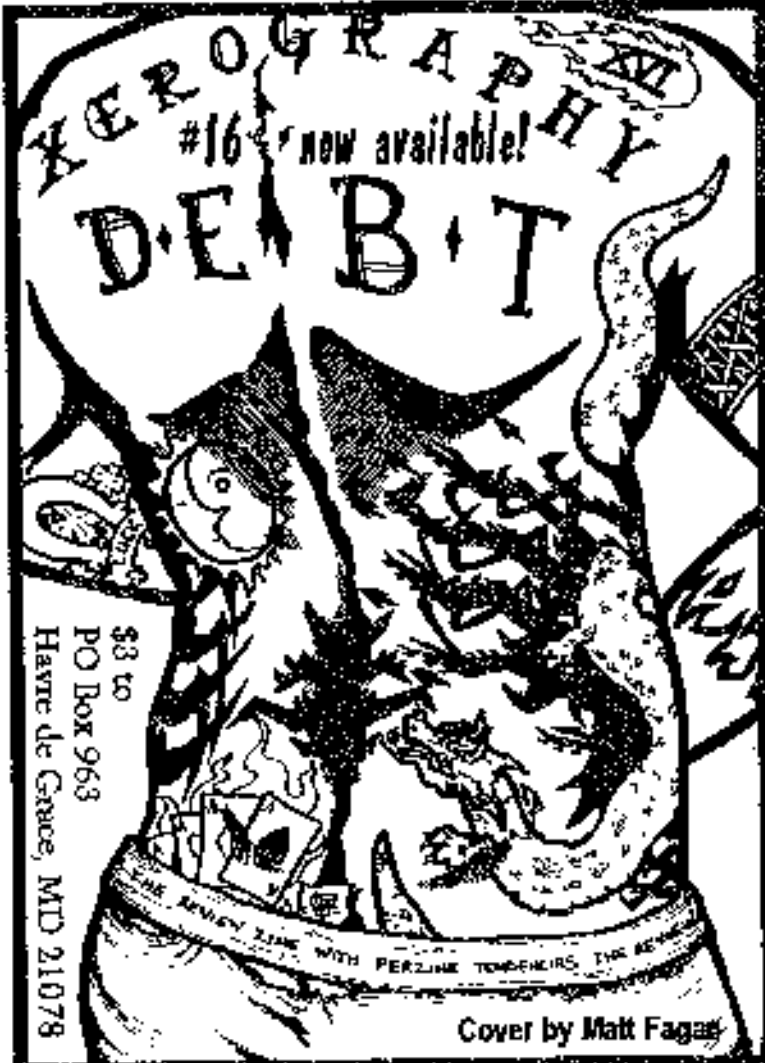
I think the safety net here is the tendency for folks to create their own counter-programming. Big Entertainment has to keep churning out the goods to keep fannies in the seats, but there will always be a disaffected group of folks who can't swallow it and who therefore create

their own media to entertain themselves. And thank god for them, because they're laying the foundation for the future reboots of the world. Damn kids.

great movie quotes jeff wishes he wrote!

"Look at 'em, ordinary fucking people. I hate 'em."

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HIDEOUSNESS

# DON'T LOOK AT ME

I'M HIDEOUS

*Being Socially Awkward in the Public Age*

by Jeff Somers

PIGS, despite my superstar good looks and obvious gifts, I've never been a gadfly. When I was a kid I was kind of shy and nerdy (shocking! I know); although I have very few horror stories from my childhood to scar me. According to Hollywood movies I should have been the Piggy character in my own story: Glasses, chubby, uncoordinated, and permanent squint from reading too much in the dark. Somehow, though, I had a great childhood. I am walking evidence that Hollywood cliches are not always based in truth—if you believe all the movies and TV shows, high school is a Thunderdome of Nerds Vs. Cools, with the Nerds emerging broken and traumatized to enter into decades of therapy and the Cools emerging into comfy CEO positions. Sure, my high school had cliques and I had a few painful incidents<sup>1</sup> in my youth—who hasn't?—but nothing too damaging.



*Gaze Upon Me and  
Despair*

Or maybe I'm in denial and I've repressed memories so deep they've disappeared, because I *did* emerge from my childhood with a healthy distrust of all of you and a conviction that everyone makes fun of me the moment I leave the room. Aside from the fear of mockery, I also fear violence, convinced that strangers on the street are going to lunge at me suddenly and attempt to garrote me or stab me with their ballpoint pens, probably while screaming gibberish at me. Or maybe screaming

---

1 *There was The Fly incident when I was in Boy Scouts. My Boy Scout Troop was filled with delinquents and freaks and we were more like the World's Most Dysfunctional Boys Club than a troop. While driving to a campground one night, we stopped for hamburgers and by chance I ended up having to sit alone at a table. In my efforts to act very, very nonchalant about this turn of events, I kept trying to seem interested in the decor on the walls and the people around me, and my fellow scouts noticed me looking around like a myopic madman and began narrating my sudden friendship with a fly. "Oh Mr. Fly," they whispered, "you are my only friend." I was of course gifted with a hilarious and detailed transcript of this when we were all back in the van, and had to spend the rest of my Boy Scout career acting like The Fly was a cool nickname.*

something about owing them money, which I get a lot of.

Either way, I fear all of you.

So, whenever someone suggests I meet them for a drink I am immediately uncomfortable and suspicious. This is now exacerbated by the fact that I actually have, for want of a better term, *fans* these days—people who have never met me, but who have read my work and enjoyed it. Sometimes folks think it'd be cool to meet me and see if: a) I really drink as much as I say I do<sup>2</sup> (often accompanied by sternly organized competitions), and b) if I'm as fucked-up as my writing would suggest.

Recently, for example, I met a few folks for drinks—people I'd never met before, people who only knew me through my writing or other authorial-type connections. I always regard such invitations with suspicion, which possibly translates to rudeness or simply Batshit Crazy to other people, but I can't help it. I *know* myself, and I am not that interesting. People insisting otherwise who are not related to me in some way just seem. . .misinformed.

Still, to reject such invites would: a) make me look like even more of a goon, as the first step down the Howard Hughes Path of Darkness is social isolation<sup>3</sup>, and b) deny me the sincerely enjoyable experience of meeting folks. For me, meeting people is like travel: I hate the idea of it, resist until the end, and then once I'm there I usually enjoy myself. Then, once I'm ensconced in the Lair again, I forget how enjoyable it was and revert to my spiderish existence, squinting suspiciously at people and refusing to leave my room.



+ ? =



Part of the reason for my poor attitude, of course, is my instinctual allergic reaction to any sort of public social activity—imagine for a

---

2 Answer: *It's a marathon, friend, not a sprint.*

3 Hell, I'm already wearing tissue boxes on my feet as 'shoes'.

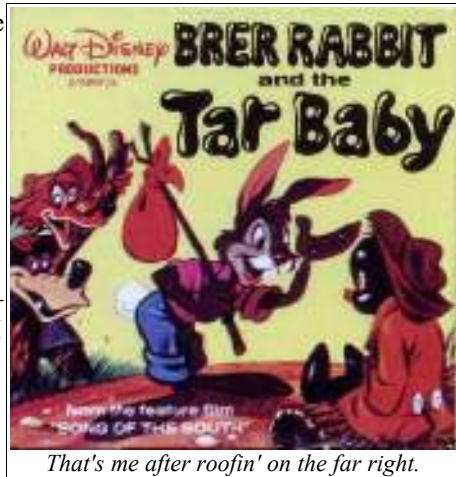
moment a food allergy, wherein a single microbe of peanut can make your head expand to four times its natural size, except instead of food its socializing. It just *happens*.

For example, I recently met a reader of my books for a drink. Well, it ended up being several drinks, but that's the way it goes. The actual meeting was great—he was an interesting, kind-hearted guy who just seemed friendly, and after a few beers I quickly relaxed and we had a great conversation. *Getting there*, on the other hand, was a farce.

The night before, while relaxing in the living room during a heavy rainstorm, a small piece of the ceiling dropped into my lap, quickly followed by a steady, horrifying stream of water. Whoo-hoo, roof leak! Nothing like it in the world. So, naturally, the next morning, instead of calling a roofing professional, I took my slightly rusted can of Stop-Leak to the deck and started prying up deck boards. Because why can't I figure it out? I'm smart. Now, sometimes, with a rubber roof, you can literally see a puncture or tear that can be easily tarred over and you sleep easy. But this roof had a fucking *deck* on it. We didn't build the deck. It was here when we got here, and it was *old*—I couldn't see the roof, but the deck itself was a disaster and we've been cheaply trying to eek out a few more years from it ever since, and I thought boldly that perhaps I might dodge another bullet this time. So I revved up the power drill and started pulling up planks to see what was under there.

<time passes>

Now I'm rushing to make my appointment with the guy. My hands are covered in tar, and I stick to everything. I feel dirty, I'm slightly sunburnt, and I *stick to everything*. A small yapping dog, an empty Dunkin' Donuts cup, a bitter and unpleasant old woman—they have all stuck to me as I race along, and I cannot scrape them off no matter how hard I try. This is how I burst into the bar: Panting, wild-eyed, and sticky.



Thankfully, alcohol has a calming effect on me, so by the time my new friend arrived I appeared at least moderately sane and collected. All it takes is liquor.

Another example that occurred recently: Another author with whom I've shared a chuckling email or two over the years, suggested we have a whiskey somewhere. My insatiable desire for whiskey was immediately at odds with my aforementioned fear of everyone in the universe who isn't me, and finally whiskey won. As usual. Actually, whiskey walked in with some sort of futuristic ray gun and turned fear into one of those cartoon outlines of ashes before disintegrating.

We decided to meet at a bar I'd heard a lot about, known for its whiskey, and this time I felt very put-together. I left on time, I wasn't deliriously sticky, and I felt vaguely interesting. Naturally, the one thing I neglected to do was write down the address of the bar.

I knew more or less where it was, but not the exact location, so naturally despite being generally early, I had to wander around in an increasingly sweat-stained panic, dodging cars and muttering curses at myself. When I finally did locate the place, I paused at the door to read a blunt sign:

**PROPER ATTIRE  
REQUIRED  
NO SHORTS  
OR SNEAKERS**

And looked down at my scuffed black sneakers, feeling like a jackass.

Once again, when I arrived at the bar booze's healing powers restored me and I managed a decent performance, but the fact remains I managed to take a simple social meeting and make it into a personally awkward moment. This is a rare talent, which will increasingly impact me as time goes on, I think. Unless I decide to pull a Salinger and become a recluse, which only really works if the general opinion of the world is that you're a genius, which I'm scheduled to achieve some fifty or sixty years after my death, when the French lead the way in appreciating me.



*Keeping Jeff Calm is  
Easy-Peasy*

---

*great movie quotes jeff wishes he wrote:*

"Ernest Hemingway once wrote, 'The world is a fine place and worth fighting for'. I agree with the second part."



# ITALY IN 25 WORDS OR LESS

*Jeff and The Duchess' Eating tour of Tuscany*  
by Jeff Somers

## TRAVEL

sucks, as I've said before. Travel is a terrible, terrible, terrible way to spend hours of your life. The destination may be lovely, educational, vibrant and exciting—but the flight there will be cramped, stressful, and filled with **man-eating bears** that leap out at you from nowhere.

Okay, so not really about the bears. But still. About an hour into any trip I am knee-deep in little airplane bottles of hooch, muttering to myself and glancing nervously at the bathroom. Because **Travel Horror** really just boils down to **Bathroom Paranoia**, you ask me. Getting into the bathroom when you need to, and the condition you're going to find that bathroom in when you finally get there, become huge, overarching concerns when you travel. You lose control of that aspect of your life, and it's horrifying. Not only do you shut yourself up in an aluminum tube where uniformed bastards tell you when you can and cannot go to the bathroom, you also find yourself in Florence one night standing in a bathroom that has no *toilets*, just a **porcelain hole** in the floor.

True story. Ask The Duchess, she'll go on about it at length. She was ready to burn that bar down.

This particular trip to Italy began with a taxi that never showed up and me and The Duchess standing on a street corner in Hoboken with our bags like a pair of homeless people, muttering darkly to ourselves and giving the passersby the evil eye as if we suspected they might try to steal our treasures. This, naturally, put The Duchess in a sprightly



*We saw this.*

mood, and when The Duchess gets sprightly I try to feign unconsciousness or autism. Since I was already standing upright with a huge backpack strapped to my booze-hollowed frame, I decided autism was the best choice, and spent the next few hours pretending I had no comprehension whatsoever of anything.

This is the other **horror of travel**: The schedule. Suddenly our entire lives, our happiness, and continued existence depended on us getting to the airport within the hour. Otherwise a nightmare of failure and recrimination awaits you.



When we finally did make it to the airport, only a few minutes off schedule, The Duchess had sunk into an unreasonable gloom, and in response to any reasonable question from me (“Do you think we’ll have enough time to make it through security?” or “Can I put some underwear into your bags to make room for bottles of liquor?” or “Is it still illegal to bring **munitions** onto a commercial jet?”) all she would do was throw out her arms and cry ‘Who *knows*?’. This quickly became our motto and rallying cry, and days later, in happier times, we would cry out *Who knows?* in response to a variety of situations.

Once on the plane, of course, the true horror begins. There is the aforementioned bathroom anxiety. There is food delivered to you not-quite-hot in plastic wrapping, clumpy, and suspiciously firm. There are your fellow travelers, **beefy and odiferous** and easily annoyed. There are the flight attendants, irritated and despising. There’s turbulence, which makes you briefly reconsider your stance on god and whether He exists, and the immediate shame following as you consider the fact that you mentally used a capital “H” when thinking of him because you were currying favor. There’s **bloating from gas** because you’ve eaten that terrible food and remained seated for six hours. There’s the tabloid magazines your wife brought that you turn to in desperate need of entertainment (when *will* Jennifer Aniston find love? WHEN GODDAMMIT?!?). There’s a sore back from being stuck in the exit row with seats that don’t recline, and there’s anxiety about your connecting flight.

Travel: What’s not to like?

## QUI

is the only word you absolutely need in Italy. Like the towels in *The Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy*, it has many uses but is simple and easily remembered. It means “here”, and you can use it in so many situations, combined with some slight miming, that it might be the only word you need, ever. As a matter of fact, I think you could possibly learn the word for *here* in every language in the world and do just fine wandering around the globe.

When we arrived in Italy, we followed the weary signs to the taxi line and immediately acquired a friendly driver. All I had to do was produce the printed receipt of our hotel reservation, point to the address, and say “Qui!” (pronounced *key*), and he nodded cheerfully and whisked us away. You can also apply this principle to: 1) locating bathrooms, restaurants, attractions, hospitals, and police stations; 2) determining your present location by shrugging as you speak the word and miming looking around mystified; 3) locating liquor supplies by holding up your empty bottle and saying it, and all manner of other ingenious uses. Trust me. *Qui* is the one word you absolutely *must* have.



*We saw a lot of churches. A LOT of churches.*

Our hotel was delightful. The ceilings were frescoed, the owner was a cheerful, energetic, wonderful guy named Mario who had a sincere desire that we enjoy our stay and loved Florence. He spoke perfect English and yet tolerated and played along with my pidgin Italian as best he could, rewarding me with a grin whenever I got it right—unlike the older woman who was often in attendance, who seemed to think I actually knew how to speak Italian and prattled on at me for minutes at a time. We were grimy and tired, but set out immediately to wander the city.

Florence is beautiful, of course. With narrow, winding streets and huge, open squares, it has charm to spare and plenty to see, and every street is packed with restaurants of all kinds and bars filled with uproarious activity. And tourists. MY GOD THE TOURISTS. Now, I know that The Duchess and I were tourists too, but I flatter myself that at least we were inoffensive in our tourism. We were not, for example, the size of baby elephants, ponderously stomping around in ridiculous denim shorts which could be transformed into a tent for three normal-sized people. We were not carrying four bags strapped around our

barrel-chests, containing all sorts of supplies necessary for life as you casually wandered a first-world city. We were not wearing immense, ridiculous hats that protected our sensitive skin from the killing sun, and we did not shout English words at the natives imperiously. And also too we were not eating all the time, just continuously walking around grazing.

Sweet lord, I *hate* tourists.

The Duomo was our first stop, almost by default as it's in the center of things and was only a few blocks from our hotel. Well, technically the San Lorenzo street fair was our first stop, as The Duchess needed to start shopping for fine Italian leather goods and shoes immediately. And damn if she didn't buy a pair of shoes within fifteen minutes of our stepping out of the hotel. This Shoe Happiness didn't last, however, as we shall soon see. Shoe Happiness turned to Shoe Horror in a day or so. But let that drift for now.

The Duomo is the cathedral, and it's immense. I'm a poor Catholic, but this was impressive. What isn't impressive are the beggars outside the Duomo, women dressed in white with white makeup on their faces, carrying flowers. They would walk up to you and blow you a kiss and thrust their pan of change at you. If you refused, they would scream in your face and walk off. As I stood there wondering what kind of fucked-up culture would produce something like that, I couldn't know that a few nights later I'd be walking along the Borgo Pinto and I'd see one of these ladies in white just walking home, as if she had a real job, as if wearing white pancake makeup after a day spent screaming at tightfisted tourists was perfectly normal.

## CALDO

means *hot* in Italian, and that word, along with *freddo* for cold and *stanko* for tired is really all you need for smalltalk, if you wish to make any. Throw in *sonno*, which means "I am" and you're set for any polite exchange you encounter. It was unusually warm in Florence while we were there, with every day reaching the nineties, so you could answer any polite inquiry with the simple *Sonno caldo*, or more simply *caldo!* to describe the general situation. Four words and you could have all sorts of tiny conversations with bartenders, shopkeepers, people in line, police as they beat you with nightsticks, and the perfectly nice woman at the hotel who responds to your simple *sonno stanko* with a five-minute oratory about god knows what.



*We went here.*

And it was hot. We hit the museums of Florence—to see Michelangelo's *David* and Botticelli's *Birth of the Venus* and such—and if you don't have a ticket you have to stand in line. We were warned to buy tickets ahead of time, and we did for one museum, but we're lazy and

disorganized so we just stood in line for the others, and that meant standing in the sun. A lot. I have never been so continuously sweaty in my life. When planning the trip (or, more accurately, when half-listening with mounting horror as The Duchess planned the trip) I had mild fantasies of appearing continental to casual observers: I would wear trousers and white cotton button-down shirts, shoes with no socks, and at a glance people would think I was Italian, or at least European, especially after I tossed off a carefully minted phrase or two. Why we Americans have these fantasies of being taken for Europeans is a fascinating psychological topic, but there you have it.

In reality, I was so damn hot I immediately tossed the pants aside and wore T-shirts and shorts the rest of the way, looking like some sort of American vagrant.

Naturally, since it was so hot, we decided one day we would hike to a small town outside of Florence called Fiesole. There wasn't much there, actually; it's a pleasant little town with a church and monastery, some shopping and restaurants, and apparently Herman Hesse lived there for a while. But it wasn't about the town actually, it was about the idea of striking out on foot and walking there. Mario at the hotel was kind enough to map out a route for us, which we followed for a while and then abandoned when the moment seemed right.

And it was *hot*. *Molto caldo* indeed. We wound our way through the old city, hitting the more modern outskirts, and then we were out in the country, picking our way along the sides of narrow roads barely wide enough for cars, much less us. At one point we found ourselves on what could only be described as a mule track, and when we encountered a puzzled local in what appeared to us to be a private backyard, my 25 words of Italian failed us utterly and I was reduced to stabbing at the map and shouting *Fiesole!*, which did at least get a smile and a nod in

the right direction in response.

Ah, the map. I was the Map Master, and for a while I was able to call myself Master of Florence without any objection from The Duchess, who usually reacts badly whenever I give myself titles with words like *master*, *lord*, or *captain* in them. This unusual deference was due to our first night in Florence, which happened to be our anniversary. We'd made no real plans, no reservations or anything, thinking we'd just be happy to wander the streets of Florence. But as dinner time approached there was some anxiety, and The Duchess feared we'd end up eating at McDonald's or something unless we could find a small restaurant we'd noticed earlier in the evening, but passed by. I don't know if you've ever tried to navigate a medieval city armed with just a tourist map, a bellyful of wine, and a vague sense that if you fail your marriage is likely over, but I don't recommend it one bit.

However, I triumphed, leading us back to the tiny restaurant somehow, where we ordered the local specialty: Bistecca di Fiorentina, which is basically a very large, very rare, and very delicious steak on the bone. We ate about forty-seven of these things while in Florence, and it damn near killed us. Once, The Duchess spied a "personal steak" on a menu and decided to go for it. It was basically the steak they serve Fred Flintstone at the beginning of each episode.

## QUANTO

means *how much*, which is very useful when trying to sound literate in shops and businesses—assuming you're willing to just nod and smile at the response, pretending that you understand, sort of like this:



**ME:** (holding up a pack of gum) *Quanto?*

**Salesperson:** (in Italian, sarcastically noting my dopey American demeanor) Five thousand pounds of Spanish gold.

**ME:** (smiling inanely) *Grazie!* (Holds out five-Euro note hopefully)

Of course, I hate traveling, as is well known, and yet am always cajoled into trips by my lovely and powerful wife, who wishes to see the world. Although I sometimes wonder why, since the main thing she likes to do when we travel is sit in stores deliberating over purchases for hours at a time.

You think I am kidding. I am not. Let us discuss The Shoe Horror.

It started off innocently enough; there is a famous shopping area in Florence where jewelry stores line a bridge across the Arno river, and not far from there was a shoe store I'd never heard of but which made The Duchess' heart pound with covetous passion. I should have known better, but my senses were numbed by a day of walking, so when she told me she just wanted to see what they had I just nodded and cheerfully put on my Master of Florence crown and guided us straight to it.

Supposedly, shopping is something The Duchess enjoys. This is what she tells me, and I have pretty much accepted it as the truth. But I'm starting to wonder. Because that afternoon in the shoe store in Florence, Italy was the longest afternoon of my life. You might think that a woman on vacation who finds two pairs of shoes that she likes would be a happy woman, but The Duchess began having what can only be described as a nervous breakdown. The shoes were pricey, and she felt she couldn't justify buying both, resulting in a paralysis I've never seen before: The Duchess literally trying on two pairs of shoes 500 times each, walking around, biting her lip, and muttering to herself.

After about fifteen minutes I decided I was willing to lose the house and all of our cats just to get out of that store, so I crunched some numbers and informed The Duchess we could just buy both pairs. After all, who needs health insurance?

Instead of the ecstatic and grateful response I expected, however, this only sank The Duchess deeper into a paralyzed depression. I was then willing to consider cutting off a toe or a finger in exchange for my freedom—I had now spent more time in this store than I had spent anywhere else, ever, in my entire life. Instead, I broke into sobs and collapsed onto the floor, and soon had a group of saleswomen comforting me, which had the intended result of snapping The Duchess back to her senses with rage, and she hustled me out of there pronto, sat me down at an outdoor cafe, and ordered me two beers immediately.

We've got a system going, see?

I thought perhaps I'd broken the spell and dodged the shoe bullet, but no such luck: Once The Duchess was sure I was safely boozing away from comely female salespeople, she excused herself and went right back to the store, where she did finally purchase both shoes. As

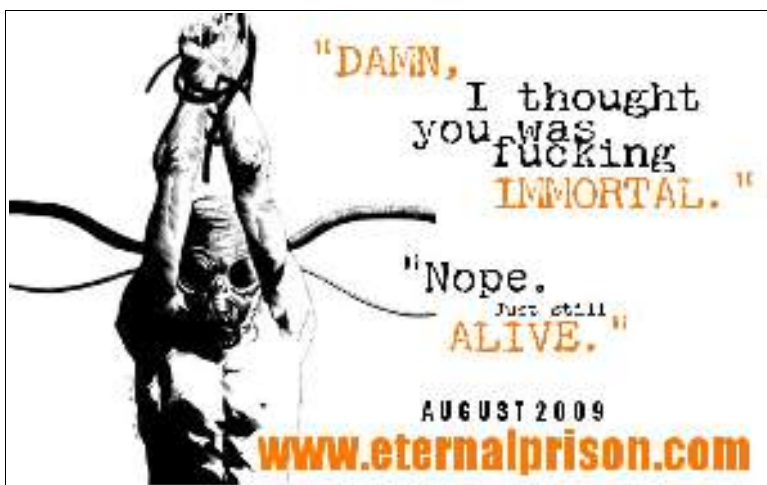
usual, my presence proved to be the complicating factor in The Duchess' shopping, which begs the question of why she always insists on bringing me along, when all I do is nap and weep and occasionally become so bored I start fires with just my mind.

## MISCELLANIA

And that was our trip. I may have forgotten what we actually did, like see the Leaning Tower in Pisa, or what we found in Siena, or viewing the rather large statue of David—but hell, that's what *everyone* does when they travel, right? No need for me to tell the same damn story about rounding the corner in Pisa and there's the tower, looking about ready to fall over at any moment. I mean, damn. I could also consider our incompetence—like me leaving a bag filled with gifts at security in the Florence airport, The Duchess somehow forgetting to book us a return flight from Florence to Paris and then berating an airline rep for her own mistake—but who wants to read that?

Until next time: *Ciao, grazie!*

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FICTION

FICTION

# THE VERY MERRY PRANKSTERS

*Part One*  
*by Jeff Somers*

## I

Henry stared at the coffin, and thought about killing his wife.

The room, perfumed and stuffy, was filled with the blurry sound of chat, a hundred polite conversations going on simultaneously. Ted the Infinitely Wealthy had passed away suddenly, shockingly, and his death seemed unreal to everyone in the room, one of Ted's famous pranks, and everyone half-expected Ted to pop out of the coffin with a bottle of champagne and demand that everyone dance. The closed coffin added some weight to this delirium, as everyone secretly wondered if it was maybe filled with sand, or someone else's body entirely. It was a meme that jumped from person to person without being spoken, mysteriously, and the whole room was making idle chatter while thinking, ashamed of even the thought, that maybe Ted the Infinitely Wealthy had not died of a sudden aneurysm after all,

that maybe he was hiding somewhere, watching them all on closed-circuit TV, laughing.

Ted had done similar things in the past. Henry put his wife out of his mind for a moment, recalling some of the pranks. He'd never found them very funny, personally; pranks always seemed mean-spirited to him, as if it wasn't bad enough that Ted the Infinitely Wealthy *was* so infinitely wealthy, he had to treat everyone around him like they were players in his personal troupe, entertaining him with their antics. To Henry's thinking, the frequency and complexity of Ted's pranks had increased in direct proportion to how ruined by money he'd become. Ted had always been rich, born rich, but as a kid his terrible home life—a nasty divorce, a father who'd kept his mother and Ted in near-poverty as they sued and counter-sued each other over support—had made him a moody, melancholy, but grounded individual. When he'd finally come into infinite wealth on his eighteenth birthday, it hadn't seemed real for some years, and he lived simply, Henry remembered, for some time after that. Slowly, though, the money had crept into his life. The pranks had begun as good clean fun, an acknowledgment that Ted was rich and could do amazing things if he wanted. As time went on, though, Henry had detected a streak of meanness in the pranks, and in Ted.

Faking his own death, Henry thought suddenly, actually wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

He went back to staring at the coffin and thinking about killing his wife.

The coffin sat on a raised dais, surrounded by flowers. A large picture of Ted the Infinitely Wealthy was displayed on a stand, a smiling, tanned young man with thinning hair and a growing paunch, dressed casually. Henry couldn't tell where the picture had been taken, but it looked recent, and gave the impression that Ted had been caught by surprise, turning suddenly and smiling reflexively when he saw the camera. The effect of pleasant surprise was so perfect, Henry thought it gave credence to the idea that the whole death and funeral business was faked, that the photo had been taken a week ago in preparation.

Henry glanced down at his hands, which he'd cupped soberly so he wouldn't have to worry about them.

Behind him, he could hear the soft whispering of his wife and Gina Gerrano, usually referred to as The Tart—another in a long series of silly nicknames acquired during college and never abandoned, Henry thought, despite their advancing middle-age

and the sheer ridiculous weight of them. He could still refer to The Tart in the company of old college cronies and be instantly understood, just as he could refer to TIW and everyone knew he was referring to Teddy. The origins of these names were sometimes famous stories, recounted endlessly, and were sometimes lost to memory. Henry himself was known as The Hick. He'd never liked the nickname, though he'd pretended to for many years. He'd launched a campaign to discourage its use, but no one took him seriously about it.

His wife, who'd gone to a different college and didn't like many of his friends, thought the whole nickname thing was silly and didn't hesitate to tell him so. Her name was Miranda. All of Henry's friends called her The Shrew when she wasn't in the room. Henry had taken to thinking of her as The Shrew, and when he spoke about her to his friends he called her by that nickname.

The Shrew and Gina were gossiping, soft whispers followed by giggles. He could just make out that they were discussing the Frank Malarchy incident, which was still fresh in the air. Henry hadn't known Frank in college, so Frank had no nickname, and was known simply as Frank, or, sometimes, Malarchy. For the past few weeks, he'd been dubbed The Secret Millionaire by the secret committee on nicknames. Henry sighed. He'd discussed Frank Malarchy's situation so often, he couldn't bear to even think about it.

The coffin was a rich, dark wood, varnished and buffed until it shined. Henry thought it was a waste of effort to spend so much money and time making a coffin so beautiful, only to burn it into cinders. Better to just have a plywood box painted up nicely.

He was hot and sweaty; in order to get to the viewing on time he'd raced straight from work, after having worn an appropriately somber suit all day, broiling out in the lunchtime sun. He felt like he'd generated enough heat to begin a sustainable chain reaction, and that he'd never be cool again. Sweat lay on his forehead permanently, reappearing immediately whenever he summoned the strength to wipe it away. It felt like the coffin was already on fire, burning merrily away just a few feet from him. Then he thought about turning away and asking Miranda if she was as hot as he was, but didn't. He knew she wouldn't be. And with Gina sitting there in her tiny skirt that was really inappropriate for a wake, she'd feel the need to make it sound like he was insane for asking. And then he'd spend the rest of the evening straining to hear their whisperings, to make sure he couldn't hear his own name mixed in

there.

He thought again about life without her.

He tried to be reasonable and practical in his daydreaming. He tried to imagine the advantages of a dead wife and the disadvantages. Aside from an initial social awkwardness with mutual friends, the only real disadvantage he could think of was incarceration, which loomed large enough to pretty much be the entire category. The advantages were not dramatic. They did not include a new lover—a younger, flashier model; the thought alone made him weary. They did not include travel, or expansive living, or, in fact, any real changes to his social life or pattern of existence outside of dropping a few acquaintances he regarded as strictly Miranda's. There was only one advantage he thought about: Time.

He thought about his life. Ten hours a day at work, including commute. At home, it was all Miranda, all the time. The moment he walked through the door, she had his time planned out. There were dinners with friends he'd rather not go to, chores he thought could be postponed, a million social occasions he didn't care about, and television shows he didn't want to watch. He ran through it in his mind: It wasn't that she forced him, really. She never commanded or got angry—it was mysterious, and as he sat staring at the coffin, his face took on an expression of wonder. He couldn't explain how it happened. He couldn't point to anything she did or said to force him into devoting every second of his life to her, but somehow she did. The proof was in the result: He hadn't had a complete thought in months, if not years. Every time he started to have a complete thought, something would happen and she would burst in on his thoughts, demanding attention, demanding thought, demanding *time*.

He'd tried to steal back time by staying up late and getting up at odd times, in order to sit and just exist during a time when she wasn't there, intruding on his every perception. But that hadn't worked. He was sleepy and disjointed, and the world was too quiet and too deserted at three in the morning. The feeling that he had to tip-toe around and be insulated against noise drove him crazy, and he spent most of those experiments sitting at the kitchen table drinking bourbon, terrified to move. And Miranda was a light sleeper, and more often than not woke up the moment he tried to creep from bed, and complained about his thoughtlessness.

If he killed her, he thought, he'd instantly get every non-work hour back. He'd have hours and hours to himself, reclaimed on the

battlefield.

Having justified the cause to himself, Henry began pondering the method. The morality of murder never worried him, but by his own admission he hadn't had a complete thought in years. How could he plot a murder of any quality?

He thought Stanley Morgan would help him. He'd known Stanley since school and Stanley was usually the one who gave people nicknames. He had a fetish for nicknames, and generally dubbed everyone he met with one within hours of meeting them, always enthusiastically and publicly. Stanley was, Henry thought, completely amoral and wouldn't be opposed to murder in any philosophical sense, and Stanley hated Miranda. Stanley had, in fact, advised him not to marry her.

Sweating, Henry twisted around and searched the room for Stanley, finding him near the exit, slightly overweight and ruddy-faced, but in a way that seemed prosperous instead of gluttonous, a fleshy blond man with shining blue eyes who always seemed damp. Henry thought Stanley had a lot of physical qualities against him, from a social perspective, and yet he was usually the most popular man in the room. Or hated fervently, which was almost the same thing.

He looked back at the coffin, pushing his hands through his damp hair, which was long. His wife's words brushed against his back, kitten's claws. It felt to him like she was pushing him gently towards the coffin, as if she wanted him in it, and he thought, dammit, if Ted the Infinitely Wealthy was planning to emerge triumphantly from the coffin amidst confetti and a brass band, he should do it now, immediately.

He stared. Nothing happened. The soft cloud of chatter still enveloped him.

The fact that even at Ted the Infinitely Wealthy's wake Miranda ran him was irritating. He wanted to stand up and go over to where Stanley and some of the other men were talking, but he felt her behind him, felt her glances in his direction stabbing into his back. He knew she would say something if he stood up, knew she would criticize him. He could hear her voice in his mind, snapping and sharp, a joke muttered to Gina, who would laugh, covering her mouth, her eyes darting to him and then away.

He pushed his hands through his hair again, and imagined the scene without her: The same wake, the same people, but no Miranda. He imagined himself moving through the room easily, free, smiling at people and shaking hands, flirting a little. He

would go out to the parking lot whenever it struck him to and smoke a cigarette. He would go out with everyone afterwards and have coffee and cake at a diner, laughing about some of Ted's past escapades. He would go home and strip down to his underwear and have a beer, and just luxuriate, just sit and relax, soaking in the lukewarm air of his apartment, floating, happy.

“Gathering wool, Hank?”

Henry started and glanced over at Stanley, who seemed to have just materialized in the seat next to him. Stanley, rosy-cheeked, was smiling. He always looked like he'd just run a short distance, Henry thought. Always red and damp, slightly out of breath. He had a long face with a long, pointed nose, and had appeared to be about sixteen years of age since he'd been ten.

Henry shook his head and sat up straight. “Contemplating death.”

Stanley glanced at the coffin. “Ted? In a better place. No one should be allowed to just waste their money like that.”

“He lived pretty well.”

Stanley snorted. “Listen, Hickie, living well isn't the goal. Some people endow universities, cure cancer, change the course of world events with their immense riches. Teddy played games and blew out an artery at thirty-four. Fuck him.”

Henry shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.”

He could feel Stanley's eyes on him. “Listen, Hickie, we're all going out to Pirelli's later to discuss Ted's lack of wisdom and general good health. You should come, or else you'll probably end up as the secondary comic relief subject of the evening. If you're there we'll bust your chops, which is a lot more dignified.”

Henry frowned, aware that Miranda was right behind him and no doubt listening. To his horror, Stanley suddenly twisted around in his seat and laid a hand on Miranda's knee. Henry turned awkwardly with him.

“Sorry to interrupt—hey Gina—but it's okay with you if Hank stops off for some coffee with the men afterward, right?” He smiled boyishly. “We're going to remember Teddy and tell some embarrassing stories about everyone that tangentially involve Teddy. Old school chums and all that.”

The two women glanced at Stanley, at each other, and then back at Stanley. “Is there some sort of homoerotic ceremony involved?” Gina said, snapping gum enthusiastically. “Loincloths? Wrestling?”

Stanley grinned, his smile a wide, wondering expression that implied he'd just discovered something amazing and was wondering whether to share it or keep it to himself. "There may be some singing. The evening might end with some hugs."

"Any grab-ass?"

Stanley winked. "Only if Hank here comes." His eyes, bright, clear, and steady, swiveled to regard Miranda. "What do you say, Mir?"

Henry flashed an awkward, uncomfortable smile.

"Jesus, Stan, Hank can do what he wants," Miranda said brightly. "I figured you boys might want to go out and do something like that." She looked at Henry. "You should go."

"Okay," Henry said. He didn't look at her. She studied him for a second, and then smiled at Stanley.

"Don't get him into trouble," she said with a smile that Henry thought was probably the most frightening thing he'd ever seen. Stanley seemed unaffected, nodding amiably and slapping Henry on the shoulder as he stood up. "See you later, buddy. Ladies."

Henry turned back towards the coffin slowly, waiting for Miranda to say something. But she didn't, and after a moment he slumped down a little and stared again, thinking: sleeping until noon. Beer for breakfast. Baseball games on every TV in every room, different games. Pornography. Other women. Having the guys over for poker or pornography or the game on TV. Waking up every day and knowing that every minute of every hour was yours to decide what to do with.

After a moment he realized he was smiling, and quickly sobered himself.

All of it, just beyond Miranda. He closed his eyes and listened to her soft whispers, unintelligible. He was reminded of the way she would whisper to him in bed years before, right after school when they'd first met. A blind date he hadn't known he was being fixed up on, and there she was, pretty, confident, and he was flattered that she was interested in him, that she wanted to talk to him and that she gave him her number. And he loved fucking her, when they got there two weeks later, on an evening filled with Saki and a light summer rain and her demonstrating her skill at removing her bra under her shirt, and when he'd first held those cold breasts in his hands, the little hard nipple in each palm, he thought he'd finally become a man after years of feeling awkward and stupid around women, and here was his reward. And in bed

with him, late at night, sweaty and exhausted, she would whisper to him, a sleepy, rambling speech that would trail off into soft snores.

Henry now knew that he hadn't liked her much, even then. He'd liked *sleeping* with her, but that wasn't really the same thing.

The coffin came back into focus. That's where it all ends, he thought. We're all just beetles tied by thread to pins, walking around and around, staggering around blindly, not realizing that every step brings us closer to the center, where we're wrapped up and trapped, wriggling, helpless. He pictured it, his own death, or tried to; the best he could do was a sudden, unexpected blackness. But that was bullshit. He considered it for a moment; there had to be a slight delay between something happening and the information being transmitted along the rusted, twisted bundle of nerves that was his body. He decided to call that delay one second. He figured he was living his life one second in the past—that everyone was. Like light from the sun being delayed eight minutes. If the sun exploded, it would be eight minutes before anyone knew it on Earth—his life was like that. If he stepped on glass and cut himself, it was one second before that info reached his brain—it *happened* on 9:05:05, say, but he didn't *feel* it until 9:05:06.

Sitting hunched on the uncomfortable metal folding chair with the frayed padded vinyl seat, Henry made fists with both hands.

Every second that he perceived meant that he hadn't died, which meant that if he was still perceiving moments, he was still living one perceived moment from then. As far as Henry could tell, this meant he was immortal. And the idea of being married to Miranda forever frightened him.

There was a sound from the coffin.

Henry went still, staring at the oblong box, the flowers, the picture of Teddy smiling back at him. A...scratching sound, prolonged and muffled. A scratching sound. For a few moments Henry sat very still and waited, the only part of him in motion his eyes, which roamed over the coffin, searching for some hint as to what the sound had been. Nothing seemed amiss. Nothing obvious appeared. The lid of the coffin did not lift up, revealing Teddy and a bottle of champagne.

He closed his eyes and thought: I could quit my job, live off my savings for a year, and no one would complain. I could rearrange all the furniture in the apartment. I could wear black socks and sneakers and shorts.

He paused. Slowly, he turned in his seat, far enough to see most of the room, but not far enough to include Miranda in his view. He scanned the familiar faces around, most of which he knew to some degree or other. His eyes jumped from face to face.

There was Deidre, recently emancipated from another Henry, looking a little weathered, but she'd had a hard time of it and he thought she'd be one you had to get drunk first. Get drunk first and then she'd attack you, starved for affection, and it would be angry and heated and afterwards she'd be pissed off and quiet and you'd feel like she wanted you to leave, but if you started to make noises about leaving that would just make it worse. She was wearing a simple dark dress, her hair up in a complex way, long earrings dangling against her neck. He'd always thought Deidre was pretty hot, even here, a few years older and a little heavier than he remembered. She always looked to Henry like a girl who was just comfortable in her skin, no matter what, a girl who woke up, tossed on whatever was handy, and ran.

He shifted past the empty seats around Deidre and settled on Adrian, tall, slender girl. Scuttlebutt was that it wasn't all that hard to nail Adrian Parker; she was thirty-six and still working as a waitress, wore short skirts and got drunk frequently. Henry summoned a short fantasy sequence: He appears in her bar, a sad but stoic man who's wife has recently died. He orders drink after drink and she is solicitous, concerned, her large green eyes fixed on him worriedly. After her shift is over she joins him, listening sympathetically as they do shots, her knee, encased in dark nylons, brushing his. When they get back to her place, it is a mess, and she gets high while he makes himself at home, and she leads him to the bedroom gently, being careful, slow, intense.

He blinked and studied her for a moment. She wasn't a kid any more, but she still had an innocence about her. She had the largest handbag he'd ever seen clutched to her side, and kicked one leg nervously. She was skinny and didn't look altogether healthy, but something about the too-thin face and dark bags under her eyes gave her a trashy look he found appealing.

He moved his roaming eye to the wives. There were a lot of wives, these days; a period Henry thought of as wasted time had culminated in a spasm of weddings. At one point, he'd thought people were just marrying whoever happened to be still single, or maybe just marrying for the gifts. When he and Miranda had gotten hitched, it had been a novelty; he'd been one of the first. All he could remember about his own wedding was a numbing

amazement that a woman as beautiful as Miranda would agree to marry him. He'd stood in the bathroom at his parents' house the morning of the wedding and stared into the mirror, trying to see what she saw in him, what was attractive about him. He hadn't been able to answer the question, and had spent the whole wedding sweating and staring at his new wife, floating about in a backless wedding gown she somehow managed to make dissolute.

It wasn't a novelty any more. Everyone was married. This despite the fact that it was patently ridiculous that the men and women he'd gotten drunk with were now joined by matrimony and, god help him, contemplating babies.

He glanced at Susan and Bob, upright citizens dressed in suits, stiff-backed, eyes forward, sitting next to each other but always with a shiver of air between them. Bob was getting chunky and jowly and had taken to better-tailored suits to hide it. Susan was getting plump, too, a tall, big girl who'd always been the tallest girl in her class, who'd always been a little fleshy. Henry had a clear memory of Susan, Bob's new girlfriend, sitting on his dorm room floor, flushed and sweaty from a run, knees together and hair pulled back in a ponytail. He imagined her that way now: Heavier, older, but still long-legged and gawky, red-cheeked, healthy. He would be spending time over their house a lot—everyone would invite him over, trying to keep him in motion, keep his mind off his dead wife. Bob would be away on business, and Susan would come home from a run, fresh, tired, smelling of good sweat and shampoo. They'd begin talking about school, about old times, and they'd admit there'd always been a mutual attraction, a curiosity, and without warning they'd end up on the kitchen floor. He imagined her skin, slimy with sweat, and the way her hair would spill out onto the floor tiles when she released it.

Henry shifted in his seat and crossed his legs to hide the inappropriate erection he'd generated.

Susan suddenly looked up and their eyes locked. Without thinking, Henry looked away in instant consternation, and burned in embarrassment. He knew he should have smiled, played it off, been cool. He turned back to the coffin and stared at it again, feeling Susan behind him. He'd always imagined something could have happened with Susan if he'd met her before Bob. Which only made him certain she knew what he'd been thinking.

Miranda's hand on his shoulder made him jump.

"We're going out for a smoke, jumpy," she said as she and Gina stood up.

Henry watched them go, still stunned, after years, at how attractive his wife was. He saw the other men glancing after her, and wondered if she'd ever had an affair. It must be hard, he thought, to be so desired all the time. It wouldn't surprise him. He thought suddenly that discovering her in bed with another man would maybe be a good motive for killing her. A crime of passion. He liked that idea: Passion. Getting worked up and swearing and going out with Stan and Bob and getting shitfaced and then claiming the next day that he couldn't remember a thing. He didn't know if that would get him out of prison, but he thought it was worth thinking over.

He looked back at the coffin. And thought that Teddy was lucky.



“What's up, Hickie?” Stanley panted. “Teddy would have been aghast at your unfashionably somber attitude at his funeral.” He glanced at his watch, squinting in the dim light. “Actually, he still has two minutes to make a jolly appearance and save this whole social disaster.”

Stanley had thickened over the years, but he carried it well, like a man born to be fat and enjoying the ride. He walked with a spread-legged posture, giving the impression that every step was effort, that his natural inclination was sitting down—as if he had sharp stones in each shoe. He'd removed his tie upon hitting the night air and suggested to Henry that they walk to the diner, since it was a cool, glorious evening.

Henry kicked at a stone. They were walking in the breakdown lane of the highway, cars speeding by every now and then, a sweep of headlights and the roar of an engine, Henry was keenly aware of impending death, and hugged the curb as much as possible.

"I dunno. Call it existential malaise."

"All right," Stanley said immediately. "It's existential malaise. Glad we could clear that up."

"You know what I mean?"

"Not really."

"Because *I* don't even really know what that means."

"All right," Stanley said, breathing heavily. "Let's back up and start by stipulating that something's up with you, yes? You sat at poor Teddy's viewing like, well, like you gave a fuck that Ted the Infinitely Wealthy was dead. Which I am pretty sure you don't." He looked slantwise at Henry. "Do you?"

Henry shrugged. "He died young."

Stan nodded. "God rest his eternal soul, which is probably doing good drugs with Jesus in heaven right now. I hope he wasn't a secret sinner and in hell, because Teddy wouldn't be able to hack hell. Okay, so it's not Teddy. Like the rest of us, you're probably too giddy with the thought that you might be in that cocksucker's will to be depressed about it, yes? Yes. Well." He raised both eyebrows and spread his arms, palms up, in a gesture familiar to Henry, who estimated he'd seen it performed a million times since he'd met Stanley fifteen years before. "Okay, it isn't the untimely demise of the richest man we knew. Hmmm. Me? Is it me? Have you found out about something I did to you years ago and covered up?"

Henry didn't answer right away, but stared at the shards of glass and mysterious gray dust collected on the side of the road for a few steps. Then he looked up suddenly. "What? Uh, no. No. Listen, it's—"

Stan held up a hand. "Please. The Master is at work and would like to guess."

"—Miranda. It's Miranda."

"And The Master guesses Miranda. Ah."

They walked in silence for a moment. A green van whipped past them at high speed. Henry tried to inch closer to the side, while maintaining what he hoped was a casual outward attitude.

"I'm disappointed, Hickie," Stan said with an explosion of breath. "I mean, that's so obvious. You've been married seven years now. Do you realize what a statistic you are now? Seven years in and starting to think you've made a terrible mistake? I mean, it's common."

“Jesus, Stan.”

Stan put his palms up and shook his head. “I’m not trying to be insulting—”

“It just comes naturally?”

“—but I mean, come on. Next you’re going to tell me you’re banging the checkout girl or something.”

Henry frowned. “What checkout girl?”

“That one, in the supermarket near your house. The tall brunette one, legs like a fucking racehorse. Always wears pink sneakers.”

“Why the hell are you going to the store near my house? You live fifteen minutes away?”

Stan made a whirling gesture with his hand. “Because of the checkout girl, of course. Let it drift. I’m single—I can bang all the checkout girls I can get drunk enough to dig me. You’re married and you tell me that Miranda is why you’re moping about what is likely the social occasion of our year—Teddy’s funeral. This doesn’t surprise me. That woman was born to ruin men. She’s gorgeous, and a shrew. You never had a chance.”

Henry kicked at a stone again. “I don’t even know why she married me. She acts like she’s exasperated with me all the time.”

“She was slumming, that’s why she married you. Thought she wanted a common man, someone to ground her. You were so pure, so honest, so fucking boring, Hickie, that she thought you’d be the anchor to keep her in the darkest depths of the ocean, safely pressurized, keep her from floating up towards the light too fast and exploding.”

Henry looked at Stan’s shoes as they walked. “So basically, I’m boring.”

“Not any more. You *were* boring. Right now I find you fascinating, because I can tell there’s something you want to get off your chest. Tell Uncle Stan. He can make it all better.”

“I doubt that.”

“Try me. What have you got to lose? If you don’t tell me I’m just going to make something up and truck it around to everyone as true gossip, so you might as well just tell me.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Henry waited for Stan to explode back into noise, demanding attention and information, but nothing happened. They plodded along, and three cars had torn by before Henry sucked in a deep breath and spoke

again.

“I've been thinking, a lot, lately, that I wish I wasn't married any more.”

A few steps of silence.

“That's it?” Stan said, turning his head to stare at Henry as they walked. “Jesus, maybe you *are* that boring. Divorce isn't anything to bellyache over. You don't have any money, so no worries there. No kids. A few awkward meetings with lawyers and you can get on with acquiring cats and dying alone over decades.”

Henry began shaking his head, watching his shoes moving.

“Now, Miranda, on the other hand,” Stan continued brightly, a smile, “is saucy, and I predict a quick descent into debauchery. Or perhaps I merely imagine it, with a deep level of detail. Doesn't matter. The details are unimportant, actually, the point is, the divorce'll go like this: You, in your underwear, drinking cheap beer and crying as you watch pay-per-view pornography; her in a nightgown with a champagne glass, looking hot to trot. There, I just saved you some time and money, not to mention extreme embarrassment. Now let's go eat some crappy diner food and drink coffee until we're pissing our pants.”

Henry kept shaking his head. “I can't divorce Miranda.”

“Damn straight. You're too frail.”

“No, I mean—there is no such thing as divorce with her. She'd fucking stalk me until my dying day. She wouldn't even care about keeping us together. It would be the *principle* of it. That I would dare suggest she wasn't the most wonderful woman in the world.” He stopped shaking his head and looked up; the neon sign of Pirelli's Diner, blinking drunkenly and soaring up majestically into the night, raised up by decades-gone optimism, was just ahead of them. “No, Stan, I'd have to kill her.”

Having said it out loud, Henry was amazed to discover it did not sound completely ridiculous. He liked the somber way it had emerged, dry and matter-of-fact, without hysteria or self-consciousness. He wanted to say it again, just to experience saying something like that in public.

Stanley laughed. “Let me get this straight, Hickie,” he said, panting slightly. “You're afraid to initiate *legal proceedings* against Miranda, but you think you could *kill* her?”

Henry was still staring up at the ancient, dimmed sign that read PIRELLI'S DINER, FINE FOOD AND DRINK. He shook his head slowly, his eyes fixed on the sign. “Or have her killed.”

“Now you're hiring desperate underworld types to lure her to a remote location and beat her to death. Henry, I don't think you're being honest without yourself, vis-a-vis your ability to plan, commit, and cover-up crimes.”

Henry wasn't paying attention. He watched the sign bobbing gently in the night as he approached it. It seemed like every step her took had no effect on the distance between him and the sign. As if the distance were infinite, the sign always there, always dilapidated, fading but never completely gone.

He imagined that Stan grew serious, and stopped, and they sat on the curb watching the cars speed by while Stan said “Look here, you're serious? Okay, here's how you do it” and sketched out a brilliant, unexpected plan. He imagined they stayed out late, drinking and plotting, and that when he returned home in the morning, scruffy and boozy, he reacted to Miranda's unhappy remonstrances with grins, calm, and apologies. He imagined waking up the next day, calling in sick from work, and sitting around in his pajamas, eating a leisurely breakfast, drinking coffee with abandon.

Henry looked over at Stan suddenly. “What?”

“I said,” Stan panted with some effort, “all this talk of murdering your wife is making me hungry.”

Henry smiled and looked from Stan's red face to the Pirelli's sign. “Me too.”



Henry stared down into his coffee, and thought about killing his wife.

It was funny. He could sometimes go hours without thinking. Just moving mechanically, exercising, everything inside him clicking and whirring in harmonious movement, outwardly responsive and attentive, but inwardly just static, blank space. He would snap out of it suddenly, without warning, and have no

memory of the preceding hours aside from a vague impression. Usually it was at work, sitting at his desk. Sometime after his coffee and before lunch, it was as if he were opening his eyes but they were already open, and he'd find his hands moving, his work done, everything as it would have been had he been awake.

Now he stared down into his coffee and couldn't stop thinking, his mind racing with ideas. He suspected Miranda would be irritated at him—was probably already irritated at him—for staying out late, but he couldn't bring himself to worry over that. He felt numb, cocooned somehow, impervious to feeling.

Stan sat across from him in the crowded booth. Henry glanced up as he sipped his coffee and studied Stanley, their Chairman, a benevolent figure who hadn't changed much since school—he was chubby, flushed, and saw humor in everything, his laugh a dry rasp that sounded more like a choke, trailing off into a hissing noise as he shook his head vigorously, his whole body moving, fingers wiggling, toes tapping, torso shaking. Henry loved to make Stan laugh, and worked hard at it because watching it happen was so entertaining.

Stanley was telling the story of Frank Malarchy to those at the table who didn't know it.

“Y'all recall how Frank was dating Sheila Rohm up until about six months ago? And yes, the consensus was that he was way out of his league. Sheila's hot, Frank's a shlub, this is public domain. For a while though it seemed to work—something about Frank's slope-shouldered shlubiness seemed to heat Sheila up. My sources tell me for a while there the two were slutting it up all over the place, usually in public.”

“That's true,” Bob Mellon interrupted, waving his cigarette around. “They did it in the spare room at Teddy's that weekend we all stayed over—with me and Suze sleeping in the next bed.” He looked around, sucking deeply on the cigarette his wife wouldn't have allowed him to have. He cocked his head. “Well, not really sleeping, actually. Who could sleep with Sheila making noise like a chipmunk over Frank's smoker's gasp?”

Everyone laughed, except Henry.

“Right,” Stan continued. “So anyway it was the luckiest three months of Frank's lackluster life. She finally wised up a few weeks ago, and dumped him. Something ugly happened between them—no one knows what. We're working with threads and rumors, and some imagination. All we know is, they both showed up at Teddy's party last month with chips on their shoulders, out for

blood. You guys remember, the night of the storm? Fucking horizontal rain, streets flooded, all that shit? Only the promise of Teddy's legendary open bar and buffet lured people there.

“Sheila arrived in full-on slut wear, if you recall, already pre-chemicalized by some blessed soul—she was obviously bent on making Frank suffer all night by shaking her tits in his face and then probably having public sex with some random guy to rub it in. Not to be outdone, Frank imbibed enough liquid courage to kill an elephant and began saying terrible things about her.” Stan shook his head, lighting a cigarette. “Terrible, terrible things.”

Henry thought back to that night, and remembered that Sheila, a short, baby-fat blond with nice curves, had actually talked to him quite a bit. She'd been very, very inebriated, with pupils like pinpricks, and was wearing a cut-off T-shirt and no bra. All he really remembered, he realized, was that she wore no bra and had an outie bellybutton. He remembered being vaguely aware that she was flirting with him, drinking something clear out of a plastic cup and slurring her words so badly he wasn't sure what she was saying. He remembered that she'd suggested they go somewhere “and talk” and that, aside from being surprised at her sudden interest in him—even if it was adequately explained by brain-damaging drug abuse—he'd felt Miranda moving around the place like a small sun orbiting him, and resented the fact that he had to move away from her as fast as possible, that he couldn't even enjoy flirting.

“So around midnight, after consuming lord-knows what with the blessing of Ted the Infinitely Wealthy—may he rest in peace—Sheila decided that enough was enough and she was going to squash Frank like a bug. So she tottered into the living room—the all-white one, you know, with the big round sofa in the middle, and jumped up onto the sofa, miraculously kept her balance, and announced that she had something to say. Now if, say, Bob here had done that, sweaty with shirt tails untucked, no one would have paid any attention. But Sheila was a hottie in a shirt that promised to reveal her tits at some point in the evening, and even the girls were fascinated. So everyone shuts up, and fuck if she didn't launch into a speech entitled '10 Reasons Frank Malarchy was a Shitty Boyfriend'.”

Bobby had always been fat and his hair was receding from his face, giving the impression that his head was growing, swelling. He'd always worn overlarge, flowing clothing in order to maintain a comfort level despite his heft, and his dark suit looked to Henry

like a black hole, a huge floating body sucking all light towards it.

“You're fucking kidding,” Bob said, laughing, his whole face jiggling. I was *at* that party. Where the fuck was I when this happened?”

Stan nodded. “You were wedged into the fridge trying to reach a sandwich in the back, you fat fuck,” he said without hesitation. Over the wave of genial laughter this incited, he waved a hand and continued. “Anyway, there she is, so high she's probably not even breathing any more, and she starts publicly cutting Frank's balls off. I mean, at first we all just stared at her as she jumped up and made this announcement and started shouting her list. We just ignored her, politely, you know? And so she starts--Uh-oh, everyone; we've lost Henry again.”

Henry looked up and blinked. “Sorry! Sorry,” he said, feeling hot and sweaty. He'd always drifted, his whole life, and his friends laughed at the familiar sight of The Hick lost in thought again.

He'd been constructing an elaborate sexual fantasy involving Sheila as he remembered her from that party and himself, and any of the other sundry girlfriends, wives, and single women he knew who happened to stumble into his thoughts, usually besotted and wearing lingerie. He realized that the Henry starring in these fantasies were not actually him, but some sort of UberHenry who could actually cheat on his wife, throw caution to the wind, and wreak havoc on his social life, and, of course, actually attract all those women. He wondered if UberHenry actually existed somewhere, in some alternate universe, if there was a version of him sleeping with every woman he'd ever met, whenever he wanted.

He liked the idea. And assumed that UberHenry had met Miranda at some point in their lives, slept with her, and then kept walking.

“And so she starts shouting out her reasons,” Stan continued, his voice raspy. “TEN!” she shouts, and then—I swear, I could have married the girl—she pauses for a dramatic moment, and we're all just starting to pay attention to her. So she says, softer, ‘He's a lousy lay!’. *That* got our attention, you bet. She just barrels on. ‘NINE!’ she shouts. ‘He listened in on my phone conversations!’”

“Shit,” Bobby muttered, rubbing a hand over his face.

“You said it,” Stan agreed. “Now suddenly we're all paying attention and getting into it. It's not every day you see someone

you know publicly eviscerated like that. So she holds up another finger, swaying up there on the round couch like she might puke and fall over at any moment, and hits us with *numero eight*: 'He reads at what appears to be a third-grade level!'" Stan was lost to a momentary spasm of giggles at the memory, and held up a hand to forestall any argument. "I . . . swear . . . to God!"

Bob looked around, his jowls quivering. "I think I *did* see him moving his lips while reading the paper, once."

Stan jumped back in, cigarette waving from the corner of his mouth as he waved his hands and struggled for breath. "Okay, okay! So now we're all into it, and when she starts on number seven we all beat her to the punch, so the whole fucking room shouts SEVEN! and people are starting to drift in from other parts of the house. We've all been at Teddy's for hours, soaking him for every penny he's got, and here's the best entertainment we've had in years. So we're all shouting, and she starts getting buoyed up by the energy, because we're all so fucking delighted to be tearing Frank's heart out like this. So, four, she says 'He's one hell of a momma's boy!'"

Bob burst into laughter. Stan stared at him with a half smile on his face, his eyes bright and excited. "I swear," Stan said into the gale of laughter, "I swear, see, that this is word-for-word what she said. I am not making any of this up.

"So now we're all shouting the countdown, the whole place, just roaring, and it goes like this."

Stan took his cigarette out of his mouth and half stood, leaning over the table, arms out. Henry, startled back into the present, thought about what it must be like to be Stanley. Stanley said whatever he wished, and did whatever he wished. He'd never been close to Stan, but he'd spent thousands of hours with the man over fifteen years and he thought he'd learned a few things about him. He wondered if maybe Stan was really the UberStan, and what, exactly, the UberStan did with his time. Gambling? Drinking? Drugs?

"SIX!" Stan mock-shouted, his voice rising into a quavering falsetto. "He pressured me into having sex with him that night at Mario's I drank too much and threw up for three hours!

"FIVE! He drinks too much!"

"Jesus!" Bob interjected, and everyone laughed. Henry noticed a second later and joined in without knowing what they were laughing at.

“FOUR! He never took my side against his friends!”

“That's because we're always right!” George The Greek said in a cloud of smoke, his light accent thickening with the night.

“Bullshit—none of us were Frank's friend!” Bob argued, and everyone laughed. Henry was careful to be on time with his guffaw.

“THREE! He dresses like he's thirteen years old!

“TWO! He makes less money than *anyone else in this room!*”

“Ouch!” Bob laughed, shaking his head.

Stan was bright red and sweating freely, and Henry thought he looked a bit like Richard Nixon: Sharp, long nose, bags under his eyes, sweaty and shifty. “ONE!” he panted, straightening up. “And this one really killed us all, because it's so fucking sad. She lowered her voice and said, *he always backs down from a fight, because he's such a fucking coward.* And everyone turns, like we're suddenly collectively psychic—the hundredth monkey in the room or something—and there's Frank. Already shitfaced, and now he's fucking terminally humiliated.”

The table grew momentarily somber as the men contemplated such a level of humiliation. George, who chain-smoked, sniffed at his coffee and wrinkled his nose, eternally dissatisfied with the weak, sugary stuff Americans called coffee. Bob drained his own cup and stared sadly into it, always sad when something good was gone. Henry stared at the others in turn, thinking their nicknames as he did so: Peter, The Mystery; Benny, The Outstanding Negro; and Chauvik, The Prince. He thought suddenly that it was ridiculous that they were all grown men and he knew them better as nicknames than people.

He wondered what they were thinking, if they could tell he was sitting there with murder in his heart, if it gave off some sort of radiation that was palpable.

“So Frank starts drinking seriously. And everyone's helping him. I mean, as entertaining as Sheila's outburst had been, we all felt a little guilty about having taken part in it and everyone wanted to have a shot with Frank to reestablish good relations, you know? So Frank is so fucked up he's puking, he's passing out, he's crying in the bathroom. Between wishing for death because he's puking up a lung in Teddy's bathroom, he's weeping over his broken heart, and Sheila is either the One that Got Away or a complete she-bitch, depending on how recently Frank's puked. He mercifully passed out around two in the morning, and by then

everyone was fucking bunking down. I mean, it was *howling* outside. Horizontal rain, lightning, shit, *no one* was going home. Poor Ted had fifty people to put up, most of whom were drunk as hell and rowdy. Some time about three in the morning, as best we can figure, Frank wakes up, goes outside in his bare feet and no jacket, gets in his old beater of a Nova, and tries to drive home.”

There were whistles all around, appreciative of the risk Frank had taken. Henry recalled that Saturday night, he remembered not being able to sleep, Miranda snoring softly next to him in the bed. When it had become apparent that no one would be wise to drive home that evening, she'd found a spare bedroom upstairs in Teddy's Party House—a modest townhouse he used mainly to host parties—and claimed it as their own. It had smelled dusty and damp, but had sported a bedframe with a mattress, and with their coats as blankets it wasn't too bad. He'd lain awake anyway, heart pounding from too much booze and cigarettes, cadged without Miranda's approval, and stared out the window at the awesome amount of rain being dumped everywhere.

“Fucking moron's blitzed and the roads are flooded. He gets down onto Route One and right around that big traffic circle he hits an ocean of water, floods his engine, and stalls right there. Moron promptly passes out, sitting there in the middle of Lake Highway.”

“Fucking Frank, man!” Chauvik, plump and tan, said loudly, waving his manicured hands in fluttering half-circles, “He's so fucking stupid! Just pass out, sleep it off!” He laughed a little nervously.

Henry silently disagreed, and marveled at the pristine condition of Chauvik's fingernails, which gleamed perfectly. He understood the urge to just get away, the claustrophobic feeling that closed in when you'd been humiliated. Chauvik, he knew, had often been humiliated in public, so it surprised Henry that he didn't understand this.

“Anyway,” Stan said, glancing down at his hands as he transferred some ash from his cigarette to the ashtray. “While all this is going on, while we're all fucking sleeping in Teddy's house, somebody is robbing ATMs downtown, driving a stolen BMW. Stole, what, seventy-five thousand dollars or something? Seventy-five, eighty grand in the trunk, and what does this Nobel Laureate do too? That's right, drives into Lake Highway right behind Frank, except the stupid motherfucker does it at like eighty miles per hour, spins out, slams into the divider—and here's where stories

differ.”

Henry marveled at the way everyone hung on Stan's words. He knew Bobby and George had *been* there, and he thought most of them had already heard the story, at least. Yet they stared at Stan and listened attentively. He'd seen the girls do it too, the easy way Stan opened his mouth and made them laugh, made them interested. He wondered if Stanley had had any affairs with the girls he knew. He wondered, for a moment, if Stanley and Miranda had ever been more than unhappy acquaintances, if maybe—the horrible thought flooded him with a warm wave of adrenaline—their antipathy was *feigned*, if maybe Miranda spent happy hours listening to Stan, secretly, and acted like she hated him in order to throw him off.

Henry stared down into his coffee and stirred it listlessly.

“What everyone agrees on,” Stan continued, “is that Frank showed up at the Congress Street police station several hours later, drenched and hungover, and reported that his car was stalled in the middle of the highway, and that a black BMW had crashed nearby and the driver appeared to be dead. When the police arrived, they found both cars, identified the black BMW as the vehicle used in the ATM thefts, pronounced the driver dead, and immediately began to wonder where in fuck the seventy-five grand was.”

“Now wait a sec,” Bobby said, clearing his throat in a phlegmy way that Henry associated with fat people. “Do we really think Frank Malarchy stole seventy-five grand?”

“Why not!” Chauvik said excitedly. “Why not!”

“Wait a second!” Bobby protested, leaning forward over his coffee. “Do we really believe that stupid fuck wakes up, still half-shitfaced, sloshes through the lake of water during a terrible storm, finds a dead guy in a crashed car, somehow decides to *search* the goddamn car, finds seventy-five grand in loose bills—fucking heavy, my friends—walks it home through the storm, and isn't *seen* by anybody, then walks all the way back, and isn't seen *again*? Let's all take a moment and picture Frank in our minds. Is that man this type of hero?”

“No one saw him, this is true,” George said in his ponderous, thick English. “And no one has been able to find the money.”

“That's the story, anyway,” Stan said, leaning back and waving genially at the waitress. “Our Frank's either a sad, alcoholic loser, or a criminal genius. From what I hear the cops have had a guy following him around for weeks.”

Henry considered seventy-five thousand dollars. It wouldn't change his life. He sat and stirred his coffee fitfully and calculated how long he could live off of seventy-five grand. He posited a scenario wherein he murdered Miranda and got a life-insurance payout or something similar, or seventy-five thousand dollars after taxes. Even assuming he moved to a cheaper, smaller apartment—maybe even to a cheaper, smaller place to live, to avoid the sort of endless speculation he saw Frank afflicted with, the did-he or didn't-he bullshit—he didn't think seventy-five grand would last him more than a year or two. At best. He saw himself driving cross-country, a simple bag of clothes and possessions, a few dogeared books, and a sack full of cash, augmented slightly, perhaps, by the sale of everything he owned and the liquidation of a few accounts. He'd be mysterious, sticking to back roads and staying in local hotels, the sad young man who kept to himself, tipped well, and paid in cash for everything. And who carried a gun. Henry thought he would definitely need to carry a gun, with tens of thousands of dollars in a bag next to him in the car.

The key, of course, would be to not let anyone see the cash. No one would try to steal what they didn't know was there.

He found this idea interesting, and kept the fantasy going, seeing himself moving in and out of America's forgotten small towns, exciting interest. Saw himself sitting at a bar drinking bourbon after bourbon, and the sad, good-looking waitress would keep trying to get him to talk, and he'd just smile sadly and answer evasively.

Henry liked this image so much he kept toying with it, adding details and expanding the cast of characters, until he suddenly realized that his name was being repeated.

“Hank...Hank....Hank...” Stan was saying, and everyone was staring at him, smiling. “Ah, he's back again, kids!”

“Sorry,” Henry said, hurriedly sipping his coffee. It had gone cold and he fought a grimace as he choked it down. The whole table laughed.

“I swear,” Bobby said, grinning widely, “sometimes we could all just get up and leave and Henry would just sit there, staring.”

“He's borderline autistic,” Stan reminded everyone sagely. “I diagnosed him myself back in school, after that time he sat staring at a fly for a fucking hour in the cafeteria.”

Internally, Henry grimaced. he'd been known as The Fly for weeks after that, and it had threatened to become his permanent

nickname.

“I remember that!” Chauvik said loudly, waving his hands. “I remember we were all sitting at the next table, watching him, and you were like, *Don't go, Mr. Fly, you are my only friend!* Ha ha!”

Henry blinked stupidly in shock at the fact that he was being made fun of by Chauvik, who had long held the title of Most Easily Abused. He fell back on the only defense he could think of. He extended his middle finger, in general, towards them. Bobby made a face and an ominous moaning sound, and everyone laughed and returned to the conversation.

Henry started stirring his coffee again, unnoticed, and imagined what sort of new friends he'd make, in his new life.

to be continued

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*I think I ate too many of those donuts.*

# NO FUTURE

## The Next Issue, Sort-of Anticipated

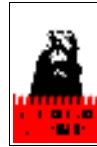
Well, here we are at the end of the zine. The end of the *last* quarterly issue, actually, how exciting. This is history you're holding in your hands—wait, don't throw it away—crap, you threw it away, didn't you, you uncaring bastards. Now I have to go eat a tub of ice cream. Since we're gearing up to go to our first wedding in ages, the next issue will have *weddings* as a theme, including the first *American Wedding Confidential* in years! So, until

December, friends, I remain Your Humble Editor.

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